

Why a human image is better than a human illustration in social media advertising

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ABSTRACT

Retailers rely on human depictions in social media advertising (SMA), yet it remains unclear how different forms of human representation shape consumer responses. In particular, brands frequently choose between real human images and human illustrations, despite limited empirical guidance on the consequences of this choice. This study examines how using a human image (vs. a human illustration) influences key emotional responses (interest and enjoyment) and credibility perceptions (attractiveness and trustworthiness), and how these ad-triggered responses subsequently affect attitudes toward the ad and brand, as well as purchase behavior. Across five studies (one pre-study, three experiments, and one ad-based survey; total $N = 1210$), we demonstrate that a human image in SMA generates greater interest and credibility than a human illustration, whereas the latter produces higher levels of enjoyment. Moreover, we document that both enjoyment and trustworthiness mediate the paths from ad type to attitudes toward the ad and brand, while interest and attractiveness solely mediate the relationship between ad type and attitudes toward the ad. Lastly, we reveal that customers' interest and trustworthiness predominantly enhance purchase intention and that human-image-based ads (compared to human-illustration ones) not only augment purchase intention but also translate it into actual buying behavior. Based on these findings, we identify the optimal situations for using each type of advertising and offer strategic insights for designing more effective and profitable SMA.

1. Introduction

In social media advertising (SMA), visual design choices play a central role in shaping how consumers interpret and respond to brand messages (Abell et al., 2024; Bashirzadeh et al., 2022). One increasingly salient visual choice concerns how humans are represented. In practice, brands rely on two dominant ways of depicting humans in SMA: real human images and human illustrations. Rather than reflecting a short-lived trend, these two styles have become stable and widely adopted approaches to human representation in contemporary SMA. For example, brands such as *Tesco* and *Walmart* largely feature real human images in their social media posts (e.g., *Tesco*, 2024, 2025; *Walmart*, 2024, 2025), whereas *Cora* and *Kroger* frequently rely on human illustrations (e.g., *Cora*, 2023a, 2023b; *Kroger*, 2024, 2025). Despite the

widespread use of both formats, little is known about whether – and why – these alternative forms of human representation lead to different consumer responses and firm-beneficial outcomes.

Prior research demonstrates that including humans in advertising enables firms to leverage social cues and interpersonal relevance, thereby enhancing engagement and advertising effectiveness (Bünzli et al., 2025; Li and Xie, 2020; Wu and Chen, 2022). However, existing research offers limited guidance regarding how different visual renderings of humans – human images versus human illustrations – shape consumer responses, particularly in SMA contexts.

Two related streams of research are informative but incomplete. The first stream compares real versus illustrated advertising stimuli and shows that illustration style can influence outcomes such as advertising effectiveness, purchase likelihood, and willingness to pay (Septianto

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et al., 2019). However, this work primarily focuses on product depictions rather than on human representations, which carry unique emotional and credibility-related meanings that extend beyond object-based imagery (Elmashhara et al., 2024a; Poirier et al., 2024). The second stream examines different types of human representations, most notably human versus virtual influencers (e.g., Xie-Carson et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). This literature emphasizes perceived authenticity and parasocial interaction in influencer-mediated contexts. However, it does not address brand-generated SMA, where firms communicate directly with consumers and human figures function as visual elements rather than identifiable endorsers. Influencers are typically recognizable public figures who elicit parasocial relationships (Cheung et al., 2022; Mrad et al., 2025), whereas the present research focuses on anonymous human representations embedded within brand-generated content. As a result, the underlying mechanisms shift from source-related processes (e.g., parasocial interaction) to perceptual and social-cognitive responses to visual form.

Consequently, despite the growing prevalence of both human images and human illustrations in SMA, research has not systematically examined *when* and *why* these two forms of human representation produce different emotional, credibility-based, and behavioral responses. Addressing this gap is critical for advancing theoretical understanding of visual persuasion in SMA (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022) and for helping advertisers align visual design choices with campaign objectives (Thakur and John, 2024).

To address this issue, the present research investigates the effects of using a human image (vs. a human illustration) in SMA on consumers' emotional states (interest and enjoyment) and credibility perceptions (attractiveness and trustworthiness). These responses capture both affective (Jin, 2003; Wu et al., 2022) and evaluative (Aribarg and Schwartz, 2020; Schnurr et al., 2017) mechanisms that are central to persuasion and advertising effectiveness. We further examine how these ad-triggered responses influence attitudes toward the ad and the brand, purchase intention, and ultimately, actual purchase behavior. Purchase intention is particularly relevant in SMA, as it signals movement toward conversion and click-through behavior (De Cicco et al., 2025), while actual purchase behavior represents the most consequential firm-beneficial outcome (Atalay et al., 2023; Elmashhara and Soares, 2022).

To test our framework, we conducted five empirical studies in collaboration with *Mercadão*, a digital grocery marketplace owned by *Glovo*. Three studies involved real *Mercadão* customers, one used a *Prolific* sample, and one pre-study relied on participants from our extended social networks to validate the manipulation. Studies 1a, 1b, and 2 tested the proposed hypotheses, while the final study extended the model by bridging the intention-behavior gap (Hulland and Houston, 2021; Viglia et al., 2021), demonstrating that human representation in SMA influences not only intentions but also actual purchase behavior. Our findings show that human images are more effective when the objective is to enhance interest, credibility, brand attitudes, and purchasing outcomes, whereas human illustrations are better suited for eliciting enjoyment and entertainment-oriented responses.

This research makes several important contributions. Theoretically, it extends the advertising and social media marketing literature by clarifying *when* and *why* different forms of human representation in SMA produce distinct consumer responses. In doing so, it enriches understanding of the emotional and credibility-based mechanisms through which visual design choices shape consumer responses across the advertising funnel. Managerially, it offers actionable guidance for retailers and social media managers on selecting the most appropriate form of human representation to align with campaign objectives and enhance SMA performance.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses development

2.1. Theoretical foundation: realism and stylization in human representation

In SMA, brands increasingly rely on depictions of human figures to capture attention and foster interaction (Delbaere et al., 2011; Xi et al., 2024). Although human figures can be portrayed in many ways, a widely used distinction in visual communication and psychology concerns the degree of realism versus stylization in a depiction (Arnheim, 1974, 2003; Auernhammer and Roth, 2021). In this research, we adopt the realism-stylization distinction as the core theoretical lens to conceptualize two prevalent formats of human representation in SMA: real human images and human illustrations. This distinction applies not only to endorsement contexts but more broadly to how any human figure is visually constructed and perceived within advertising. Even when characters are anonymous and not positioned as endorsers, their level of realism shapes how viewers interpret and respond to them (Arnheim, 1974; Bünzli et al., 2025).

Realism refers to portrayals that preserve naturalistic detail and perceptual fidelity, whereas stylization involves simplified or abstracted representations that intentionally depart from photographic accuracy (Bünzli et al., 2025; Zeegen, 2009). This distinction does not describe characteristics of the human figure itself, but rather captures fundamental visual properties of the representation that shape how viewers process and interpret human depictions. Thus, realism and stylization function as a theoretical framework centered on visual representation, rather than on the role of the depicted individual (e.g., as an endorser), making it particularly appropriate for brand-generated SMA where human figures serve as elements of the visual design (Cyr et al., 2009; Gammoh et al., 2018). As such, realism and stylization provide a coherent framework for understanding how different visual executions of humans may elicit systematically different consumer responses.

Differences along the realism-stylization continuum are especially consequential for two classes of responses that are central to advertising effectiveness: emotional reactions and credibility evaluations. Emotional responses reflect immediate experiential reactions to visual cues, whereas credibility evaluations capture viewers' assessments of the depicted individual (Bashirzadeh et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025). Prior research consistently shows that these responses are particularly sensitive to variations in perceptual realism versus abstraction, making them theoretically appropriate mechanisms through which human representation is likely to exert its influence in SMA.

Emotional responses vary depending on whether a stimulus conveys rich, realistic social information or more expressive abstraction. Realistic human depictions enhance recognition, draw attention through familiar facial cues, and support confident person perception (Franke et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). These properties make them particularly effective at eliciting interest, an emotion associated with alertness and attentiveness (Silvia, 2008). In contrast, stylized, illustrated human depictions can evoke playfulness and lessen discomfort sometimes associated with viewing real human faces – especially in online contexts (Deng and Jiang, 2023). Stylization also foregrounds aesthetic and symbolic expressiveness, which can enhance hedonic responses (Das et al., 2019). Together, these qualities make human illustrations particularly conducive to eliciting enjoyment, a comfort-oriented emotional state central to positive media experiences (Elmashhara et al., 2026; Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022).

Differences in realism and stylization also shape credibility judgments, although here the effects align more consistently in one direction. Realistic human depictions provide diagnostic facial cues that facilitate social judgment and reduce perceptual ambiguity (Franke et al., 2023). Their visual richness supports more confident evaluations related to attractiveness and trustworthiness, two core dimensions of credibility in advertising (Ohanian, 1990; Wang et al., 2025). Stylized depictions, while expressive and creative, intentionally omit detail that is often

necessary for forming strong credibility judgments, which can constrain evaluations along these dimensions.

Taken together, the realism-stylization distinction offers a clear theoretical foundation for predicting why human images and human illustrations should differentially influence interest, enjoyment, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. However, existing research provides limited insight into these mechanisms. Studies comparing real versus illustrated stimuli have primarily focused on product depictions rather than human representations (e.g., [Septianto et al., 2019](#)), while research contrasting human and virtual influencers centers on endorsement and parasocial processes that do not apply to brand-generated SMA ([Belanche et al., 2024](#); [Zhao et al., 2024](#)). This distinction is critical, as influencer-based research focuses on source-related mechanisms (e.g., identification and parasocial interaction) ([Cheung et al., 2022](#); [Mrad et al., 2025](#)), whereas the present framework focuses on how the visual rendering of human figures shapes responses independent of endorsement roles. As a result, the emotional and credibility implications of real versus illustrated human representations in SMA remain underexplored.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the following subsections develop hypotheses concerning the emotional (interest, enjoyment) and credibility-based (attractiveness, trustworthiness) pathways through which human images and human illustrations shape consumer responses in SMA.

2.2. Emotional responses to human representation

Building on the realism-stylization distinction outlined above, different human representations are expected to elicit distinct emotional reactions depending on the type of perceptual information they provide. When designing advertising campaigns to promote products or services, firms endeavor to evoke positive emotions in the target audience, since positive emotional states are expected to lead to desired outcomes such as advertising effectiveness ([Kemp et al., 2020](#); [Mehta and Purvis, 2006](#)) and positive attitudes and buying behaviors ([Bakalash and Riemer, 2013](#); [Ng et al., 2021](#)). However, different positive emotions may yield varying degrees of ad evaluation and outcomes ([Bagozzi et al., 2016](#); [Fasseur and Geuens, 2006](#)). Therefore, it is crucial to establish the link between triggered emotional states and different customer responses. By doing so, strategies can be developed to prioritize eliciting emotional responses that are likely to generate and enhance the desired outcomes ([Poels and Dewitte, 2019](#)).

The customer experience can be comprehended within the media context as a sequential series of emotional states. Particularly, customer interest and enjoyment surface as the predominant positive emotions that arise when individuals engage with media content ([Demmers et al., 2020](#); [Tan, 2008](#)). Interest is an emotion that is linked to curiosity, learning, concentration, attentiveness, and alertness ([Izard, 1977](#); [Silvia, 2008](#)). Interesting subjects generally increase engagement with the environment, while interesting individuals, in addition to engagement, may lead to more positive outcomes such as purchase interest ([Tavassoli and Visentin, 2022](#)). On social media platforms, the presence of human faces heightens engagement ([Li and Xie, 2020](#)) and enhances the efficacy of website design and online advertising ([Cyr et al., 2009](#); [Xiao and Ding, 2014](#)). Human presence is more likely to elicit interest compared to other types of images, given that individuals tend to be more intrigued by other humans ([Butler, 1992](#)).

However, considering the different human representations, we argue that human images (compared to human illustrations) trigger higher levels of interest for the following reasons: (1) Human images, particularly within a positive emotional context ([Zhang et al., 2021](#)), foster a profound connection with viewers, thereby conveying authenticity and enhancing interest ([Vaitonytė et al., 2021](#)) and doing so through the higher perceptual fidelity associated with real images ([Bünzli et al., 2025](#)). (2) Humans are inherently social beings and naturally drawn to faces for social cues and recognition ([Franke et al., 2023](#)). This inclination toward facial stimuli is further highlighted in media content,

where the portrayal of real human faces triggers social cognition processes, consequently enhancing viewer interest ([Li and Xie, 2020](#)). Taken together, these arguments suggest that realistic human depictions are more effective in eliciting interest than their illustrated counterparts. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1a. In social media advertising, using a human image (vs. a human illustration) increases customer interest.

While individuals may be drawn to media content for diverse reasons that capture their attention and interest, such engagement does not ensure their enjoyment of the content ([Reeve, 1989](#)). The perception of enjoyment in media refers to the sense of happiness and pleasure that arises from consuming media items ([Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022](#)). While some individuals may enjoy the presence of other humans in an online environment ([Weibel et al., 2008](#)), others may experience displeasure or discomfort due to personal or discriminatory factors ([Chiu et al., 2001](#); [Qualls and Moore, 1990](#)). In this vein, [Deng and Jiang \(2023\)](#) demonstrated that the presence of real human images on social media, in contrast to virtual human images, may lead to increased levels of anxiety and decreased comfort. Building on this and the empirical evidence indicating that visual elements, such as emojis, enhance the enjoyment and happiness elicited by advertisements ([Das et al., 2019](#)), as well as the finding that aligning illustrations with altruistic themes enhances enjoyment ([Septianto et al., 2019](#)), we argue that employing human illustrations as visual stimuli could mitigate biases and alleviate discomfort often associated with human presence. Based on the above, we hypothesize:

H1b. In social media advertising, using a human image (vs. a human illustration) reduces customer enjoyment.

2.3. Credibility dimensions of human representation

Source credibility refers to the positive traits of a communicator that influence how the message is received, shaping not only the immediate impact of the message but also its long-term effects on attitudes and behaviors ([Pozharliev et al., 2022](#); [Ohanian, 1991](#)). In marketing and advertising research, credibility is a well-established construct with multiple dimensions, including attractiveness and trustworthiness ([Ohanian, 1990](#)). This study specifically focuses on these dimensions, as they can be shaped by various advertising elements ([Aribarg and Schwartz, 2020](#)), including visual presentation ([Fajardo et al., 2016](#); [Huang et al., 2023](#)).

The credibility of an ad varies depending on factors such as its intended purpose, the subjects involved ([Baek et al., 2019](#)), and the individuals depicted within the advertisement ([Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018](#)). In this vein, [Ozdemir et al. \(2023\)](#) show that leveraging human influencers, rather than virtual ones, enhances perceived credibility. Building on the theoretical foundation in Section 2.1, realism plays a central role in these evaluations, as human images convey richer and more diagnostic cues than illustrations ([Franke et al., 2023](#); [Wang et al., 2025](#)).

We further elaborate on this discussion, centering on the credibility dimensions of attractiveness and trustworthiness. Regarding attractiveness, humans are naturally drawn to real human faces from a young age ([Wolf et al., 2023](#)). Familiarity with human physiognomy leads to a preference for real images over stylized renderings (illustrations), contributing to higher perceived attractiveness ([Torres et al., 2019](#)). This aligns with the notion that perceptual fidelity enhances person-perception fluency ([Bünzli et al., 2025](#)), allowing real human images to generate stronger attractiveness evaluations than illustrations. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1c. In social media advertising, using a human image (vs. a human illustration) increases attractiveness.

Regarding trustworthiness, authentic depictions facilitate

transparency by showcasing individuals in their natural, unaltered state (Yen and Chiang, 2021). Realistic facial detail enables viewers to make more confident and less ambiguous social judgments, consistent with research highlighting the role of realism in strengthening credibility perceptions (Hussain et al., 2020). Consequently, viewers are more likely to trust depictions they perceive as genuine, leading to greater trust in human images than in human illustrations. Building upon this premise, we hypothesize:

H1d. In social media advertising, using a human image (vs. a human illustration) increases trustworthiness.

2.4. Human representation and firm-beneficial outcomes

Previous research has consistently shown that positive emotional reactions toward advertising content contribute to favorable attitudes toward both the ad and the brand (Batra and Ray, 1986; Belanche et al., 2017). Accordingly, interest and enjoyment elicited by different human representations in SMA are expected to mediate the effects of ad type on attitudinal outcomes. Similarly, Ohanian (1990, 1991) suggests that credibility dimensions enhance attitudinal evaluations. Thus, when advertising characters are perceived as more attractive or trustworthy, more favorable attitudes toward the ad and brand should emerge (Atkin and Block, 1983; Petty et al., 1983). Taken together, these arguments suggest that emotional and credibility-based responses constitute key mechanisms through which human representation influences attitudinal outcomes. Based on this reasoning, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2. (a) Interest, (b) enjoyment, (c) attractiveness, and (d) trustworthiness mediate the relationship between ad type and attitudes toward the ad.

H3. (a) Interest, (b) enjoyment, (c) attractiveness, and (d) trustworthiness mediate the relationship between ad type and attitudes toward the brand.

Although firms may engage in SMA for various reasons, such as enhancing brand image or generating positive referrals (Swani and Labrecque, 2020; Zollo et al., 2020), their primary objective is to increase sales and generate profitable returns (Kumar et al., 2016). Consequently, SMA strategies often aim to elevate consumers' purchase intention (Wang et al., 2012), ultimately fostering actual buying behavior (Atalay et al., 2023; Elmashhara et al., 2024b).

Prior research suggests that improving consumers' positive emotional states (Kowalczyk et al., 2021) and increasing perceived credibility (Hsieh and Li, 2020) contribute to stronger purchasing behaviors. Therefore, the extent to which human representation shapes these responses is expected to directly influence consumers' likelihood of purchase. Building upon this discussion, selecting an appropriate form of human representation – one that effectively enhances emotional or credibility-based responses – should therefore strengthen purchase intention. Therefore, we propose:

H4. (a) Interest, (b) enjoyment, (c) attractiveness, and (d) trustworthiness triggered by social media advertising increase purchase intention.

3. Overview of studies

To test the proposed model, we conducted five studies: one pre-study, three experiments (Studies 1a, 1b, and 3), and one ad-based survey (Study 2). The pre-study was designed to validate the experimental manipulations and to rule out potential stimulus-related confounds before the main experiments.

Study 1a provides an initial test of the core framework. Its objective was to establish that the use of human images in SMA elicits higher levels of interest and perceived credibility (attractiveness and

trustworthiness), whereas the use of human illustrations generates greater enjoyment (H1). In addition, Study 1a examines whether interest, enjoyment, attractiveness, and trustworthiness mediate the effects of ad type on attitudes toward the ad and the brand (H2 - H3). Study 1b serves as a direct replication of Study 1a (H1 - H3), while introducing systematic variations in the number of actors and the interpersonal composition of the depicted characters. By replicating the original design under altered visual conditions, this study helps rule out stimulus-specific explanations and strengthens confidence that the observed effects are driven by the type of human representation rather than incidental visual features.

Study 2 extends the investigation to firm-beneficial outcomes by examining how interest, enjoyment, and credibility dimensions influence purchase intention (H4). This study is intended to deepen understanding of which ad-triggered responses are most consequential when SMA campaigns are designed with profitability-related objectives in mind.

Finally, Study 3 addresses the intention-behavior gap by demonstrating that the type of human representation influences not only consumers' stated purchase intentions but also their actual purchasing behavior.

Fig. 1 summarizes the research framework.

4. Pre-study

Across all our experiments, we manipulated the human representation type (human image vs. human illustration). To ensure the validity of this manipulation and to rule out potential stimulus-related confounds that might inadvertently influence participants' responses, we conducted a two-stage pre-study combining qualitative stimulus evaluation and quantitative pre-tests.

4.1. Qualitative stimulus assessment

We first held a preliminary qualitative discussion with six volunteers, including two professional social media designers. This step aimed to confirm that the two advertising stimuli (image vs. illustration) in each experiment were comparable across all dimensions except the intended manipulation. The discussion focused on identifying any noticeable differences that could unintentionally affect participants' perceptions, including actor size and prominence, actor position and posture, facial expressions, visual style (other than realism/stylization), color composition, presence and placement of text and logo, overall ad realism, product placement and display, familiarity and match with ad content, and clarity of the call-to-action. We also considered the overall layout and presentation of the advertisement to ensure consistency in how the content would be perceived across conditions. These discussions confirmed that the two formats were realistic and largely equivalent. However, to optimize experimental rigor, we carried forward two variables (perceived ad realism and actor size) to the quantitative pre-tests for empirical verification.

4.2. Quantitative pre-tests

We conducted three pre-tests (A, B, and C), each corresponding to one of the three sets of ad stimuli later used in our three experiments (Studies 1a, 1b, and 3). These pre-tests served to validate the manipulation (the human representation type; human image vs. human illustration) and confirm the absence of systematic differences in key control variables (perceived ad realism and actor size).

4.2.1. Participants, procedure, and measures

We recruited individuals from our extended social networks and invited each person to participate in only one of the three pre-tests. Participants were randomly assigned to either the human-image or human-illustration condition. Sample size and demographics for each

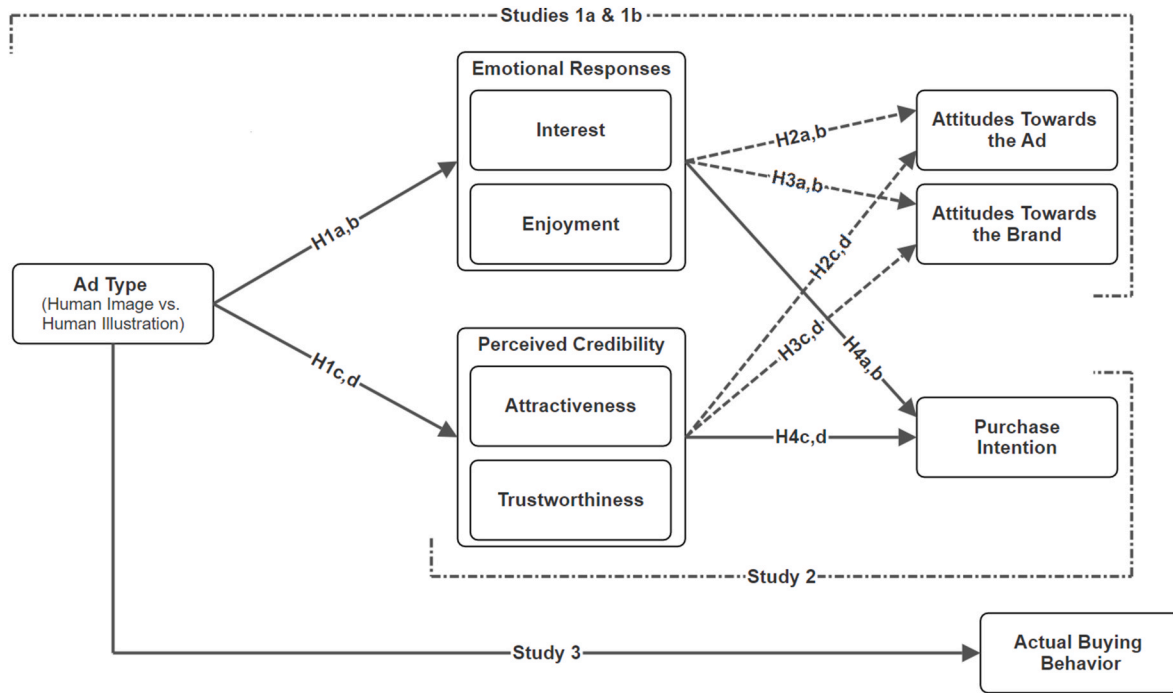


Fig. 1. Research framework.

pre-test were as follows: Pre-test A ($N = 63$; 31 in the human-image condition, 32 in the human-illustration condition; $M_{age} = 31.48$; 60.3% female), Pre-test B ($N = 64$; 33 vs. 31; $M_{age} = 32.20$; 54.7% female), and Pre-test C ($N = 60$; 30 vs. 30; $M_{age} = 29.12$; 56.7% female).

Immediately after reviewing the ad, participants first completed a manipulation check assessing the perceived human representation type. We adapted adjectives from [Arsenyan and Mirowska \(2021\)](#), including “genuinely human”, “cartoonish”, and “illustrated” (the latter two reverse-coded), measured on 5-point scales (1 = “not at all”; 5 = “extremely”). Participants then evaluated two control variables. First, ad realism was measured using a single item adapted from [Essiz et al. \(2025\)](#): “Indicate the extent to which the ad looks realistic” (1 = “not at all”; 5 = “very much”). Second, actor size was assessed using a custom item: “How large did the person in the ad appear on the screen?” (1 = “very small”; 5 = “very large”).

4.2.2. Results

Across the three pre-tests, the two conditions did not differ significantly in participants’ age or gender. As expected, the manipulation

check confirmed a robust difference in perceived human representation type: in all pre-tests, participants rated the human-image condition as significantly more “genuinely human” (and less illustrated) than the human-illustration condition. For the additional checks, no significant differences emerged between conditions for ad realism or perceived actor size in any of the three pre-tests. Full test results are presented in [Table 1](#).

5. Study 1a

5.1. Data collection

Study 1a was conducted using data gathered from actual customers of *Mercadão*, an online marketplace recently acquired by *Glovo*. *Mercadão* provides delivery services on behalf of prominent brands such as *Pingo Doce*, one of the biggest supermarket chains in Portugal, operating 497 stores nationwide ([Jerónimo Martins, 2025](#)). To ensure eligibility, only customers who had consented to receive email communications were reached. A free delivery coupon was offered as an

Table 1
Pre-tests results.

Variable	Pre-Test A			Pre-Test B			Pre-Test C		
	Human Image	Human Illustration	$t(df), p$	Human Image	Human Illustration	$t(df), p$	Human Image	Human Illustration	$t(df), p$
	$M - SD$	$M - SD$		$M - SD$	$M - SD$		$M - SD$	$M - SD$	
Age	31.68 – 7.28	31.28 – 7.78	$t(61)$ $p = 0.84$	31.76 – 7.04	32.68 – 5.31	$t(62)$ $p = 0.56$	28.33 – 6.59	29.90 – 6.76	$t(58)$ $p = 0.37$
Gender	—	—	$t(61)$ $p = 0.72$	—	—	$t(62)$ $p = 0.13$	—	—	$t(58)$ $p = 1.00$
Human Presentation Type (Manipulation)	4.51 – 0.32	1.48 – 0.32	$t(61)$ $p < 0.001$	4.44 – 0.26	1.46 – 0.27	$t(62)$ $p < 0.001$	4.40 – 0.30	1.50 – 0.29	$t(58)$ $p < 0.001$
Ad Realism (Control)	4.32 – 0.48	4.34 – 0.60	$t(61)$ $p = 0.88$	4.55 – 0.51	4.39 – 0.62	$t(62)$ $p = 0.27$	4.57 – 0.50	4.43 – 0.73	$t(58)$ $p = 0.41$
Actor-Size (Control)	3.74 – 0.77	3.97 – 0.82	$t(61)$ $p = 0.36$	4.00 – 0.79	3.90 – 0.75	$t(62)$ $p = 0.62$	3.83 – 0.83	4.03 – 0.85	$t(58)$ $p = 0.36$

Notes: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; t = t -Value (Test Statistic of the t -test); df = Degrees of Freedom; p = p -value.

incentive to increase response rates. To prevent duplicate submissions and participation in multiple studies, an email marketing platform, *Braze*, was used to distribute the survey evenly among eligible *Mercadão* clients. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: a human image or a human illustration. Specifically, they were shown one of the two *Facebook* posts used for this study (Fig. 2; Panels A & B) and then completed a questionnaire reflecting on the post they had viewed.

5.2. Scales and manipulation check

Validated scales from prior literature were adapted (see Table 2 for items and sources). Interest (3 items; Izzard, 1977), enjoyment (3 items; Izzard, 1977), and attitudes toward the ad (4 items; Homer, 1995) were measured using 7-point Likert scales (1 = “Strongly Disagree”; 7 = “Strongly Agree”). Attractiveness (3 items; Ohanian, 1990), trustworthiness (4 items; Ohanian, 1990), and attitudes toward the brand (3 items; Sengupta and Johar, 2002) were assessed using 7-point semantic differential scales (e.g., 1 = “unattractive”; 7 = “attractive”). Two attention-check questions were included to exclude inattentive responses. Additionally, two manipulation-check items ensured that participants correctly identified the *Mercadão* brand and recognized whether the post contained a human image or a human illustration.

5.3. Data analysis procedures

We first assessed the robustness of the measurement model. Subsequently, a series of *t*-tests was conducted to examine the proposed direct effects (H1). Mediation hypotheses (H2 and H3) were tested using Hayes’ PROCESS Model No. 4 with 5000 bias-corrected bootstraps (Hayes, 2017).

5.4. Sample characteristics

Several criteria were applied to exclude participants who (1) reported not using social media platforms, (2) failed the two attention-check questions, (3) answered excessively quickly, or (4) were identified as multivariate outliers based on the Mahalanobis *d*-squared test. After applying these criteria, the final sample consisted of 206 (104 in the human image condition; 102 in the human illustration condition). Females represented 72.3% of the sample. Participants with education levels above high school accounted for 77.7%, and 30.6% were single (never married). Age information was not collected due to *Mercadão*'s

policies.

5.5. Assessment of the measurement model

To evaluate the measurement model, we conducted a series of statistical analyses. First, internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's α . Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were computed to assess scale reliability and convergent validity. All values exceeded recommended thresholds (Cronbach's α and CR > 0.70; AVE > 0.50) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Netemeyer et al., 2003) (see Table 2).

Second, Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values indicated no multicollinearity concerns. The calculated values adhered to the recommended thresholds: exceeded 0.1 for tolerance values and remained below 5 for VIF values (Hair et al., 2011). Third, discriminant validity was evaluated using the criterion established by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The results demonstrated that the square root of each AVE was greater than its corresponding correlations, providing evidence of discriminant validity. Detailed information on multicollinearity statistics and discriminant validity can be found in Table 3.

5.6. Results

To evaluate the direct effect of ad type on interest, enjoyment, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, a set of independent sample *t*-tests was conducted. Interest was significantly higher in the human image condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.25$) than in the human illustration condition ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(204) = 2.37$, $p < 0.05$. Therefore, H1a was supported. Enjoyment was significantly lower in the human image condition ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.39$) compared to the human illustration condition ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.77$), $t(204) = -3.18$, $p < 0.05$. Thus, H1b was supported. Attractiveness was significantly higher in the human image condition ($M = 4.76$; $SD = 1.37$) than in the human illustration condition ($M = 4.33$; $SD = 1.56$), $t(204) = 2.09$, $p < 0.05$. Therefore, H1c was supported. Trustworthiness was significantly higher in the human image condition ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.17$) than in the human illustration condition ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.65$), $t(204) = 3.79$, $p < 0.001$. Thus, H1d was supported.

Regarding the mediating hypotheses H2 and H3, we used Hayes’ PROCESS Model No. 4 with 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017). The results indicated that interest did not mediate the relationship between ad type and attitudes toward the ad ($b = -0.0305$, $SE = 0.0481$, 95%CI [-0.1447, 0.0531]), while enjoyment positively mediated this



Fig. 2. Photos of the four posts used across Study 1a, Study 1b, and Study 2.

Table 2
Scale Items, Item Loading, Cronbach's α Values, AVE, Composite Reliability, and Scale Sources.

Constructs/Items	Factor Loading			Cronbach's α			AVE			Composite Reliability			Scale Source
	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	
Interest – Seeing this ad made me feel:				0.91	0.90	0.88	0.76	0.83	0.81	0.91	0.94	0.93	Izard (1977)
INT1: attentive	0.86	0.90	0.91										
INT2: concentrating	0.90	0.94	0.91										
INT3: alert	0.86	0.91	0.88										
Enjoyment – Seeing this ad made me feel:				0.93	0.93	0.93	0.82	0.87	0.87	0.93	0.95	0.95	Izard (1977)
ENJ1: delighted	0.87	0.93	0.92										
ENJ2: happy	0.97	0.94	0.95										
ENJ3: joyful	0.87	0.93	0.94										
Attractiveness – I think this ad is:				0.92	0.90	0.91	0.80	0.83	0.85	0.92	0.94	0.94	Ohanian (1990)
ATR1: unattractive/attractive	0.85	0.92	0.93										
ATR2: ugly/beautiful	0.96	0.91	0.93										
ATR3: plain/elegant	0.86	0.91	0.90										
Trustworthiness – I think this ad is:				0.96	0.94	0.92	0.86	0.85	0.82	0.96	0.96	0.95	Ohanian (1990)
TRT1: dishonest/honest	0.90	0.88	0.87										
TRT2: not trustworthy/trustworthy	0.95	0.96	0.94										
TRT3: not believable/believable	0.96	0.96	0.95										
TRT4: unconvincing/convincing	0.88	0.89	0.86										
Attitudes towards the Ad – I think this ad is:				0.92	0.89	-	0.76	0.75	-	0.93	0.92	-	Homer (1995)
ATA1: interesting	0.88	0.90	-										
ATA2: informative	0.75	0.79	-										
ATA3: well-designed	0.89	0.87	-										
ATA4: attention-getting	0.95	0.90	-										
Attitudes towards the Brand – In this ad:				0.93	0.93	-	0.83	0.86	-	0.94	0.96	-	Sengupta and Johar (2002)
ATB1: I think <i>Mercadão</i> is very good	0.87	0.93	-										
ATB2: I think <i>Mercadão</i> is very useful	0.96	0.95	-										
ATB3: In my opinion, <i>Mercadão</i> is very favorable	0.90	0.94	-										
Purchase Intention				-	-	0.97	-	-	0.91	-	-	0.98	Oliver and Swan (1989)
PIN1: unlikely/likely	-	-	0.95										
PIN2: improbable/probable	-	-	0.97										
PIN3: impossible/possible	-	-	0.96										
PIN4: no chance/certain	-	-	0.95										

relationship ($b = 0.2552$, $SE = 0.0970$, $95\%CI [0.0858, 0.4668]$). This suggests that transitioning from the human image to the human illustration condition increases enjoyment, which subsequently enhances attitudes toward the ad. Hence, **H2a** was not supported, while **H2b** was supported. Moreover, attractiveness negatively mediates the path from ad type to attitudes toward the ad ($b = -0.1472$, $SE = 0.0900$, $95\%CI [-0.3514, -0.0004]$). This suggests that transitioning from the human image to the human illustration condition reduces attractiveness, which subsequently enhances attitudes toward the ad. Thus, **H2c** was supported. However, trustworthiness did not significantly mediate this relationship ($b = -0.0688$, $SE = 0.0474$, $95\%CI [-0.1775, 0.0116]$). Hence, **H2d** was not supported.

Concerning the hypotheses positing mediation effects between ad type and attitudes toward the brand, the findings demonstrate that interest did not mediate the relationship ($b = 0.0016$, $SE = 0.0449$, $95\%CI [-0.0938, 0.0928]$). Therefore, **H3a** was not supported. Enjoyment positively mediated the relationship ($b = 0.1780$, $SE = 0.0826$, $95\%CI [0.0443, 0.3632]$). Thus, **H3b** was supported. Attractiveness did not mediate the relationship ($b = -0.0578$, $SE = 0.0563$, $95\%CI [-0.1798, 0.0364]$). Therefore, **H3c** is not supported. Trustworthiness negatively mediated the relationship ($b = -0.1921$, $SE = 0.0744$, $95\%CI [-0.3550, -0.0702]$). Thus, **H3d** was supported.

6. Study 1b: repeated evaluations

Study 1b was conducted as a direct replication of Study 1a to assess the robustness of the findings under altered visual conditions. While preserving the theoretical framework, measures, and analytical strategy, Study 1b systematically varied the number of actors and the interpersonal composition of the depicted characters (Fig. 2; Panels C & D). This design enables us to rule out stimulus-specific explanations and to determine whether the observed effects are attributable to the type of human representation rather than incidental visual characteristics.

6.1. Data collection, procedure, sample characteristics, and assessment of the measurement model

Data were collected from *Mercadão* customers using the same recruitment procedure described in Study 1a. Participants were randomly assigned to the human image or human illustration condition and completed the same questionnaire after viewing the corresponding Facebook post.

After applying the same exclusion criteria used in Study 1a, the final sample consisted of 319 participants (158 in the human image condition; 161 in the human illustration condition). Females represented 66.1% of the sample. Participants with education levels above high school accounted for 71.2%, and 25.4% were single. As in Study 1a, age data were not collected due to *Mercadão* policies. The measurement model assessment information for Study 1b is reported in Tables 2 and 3

6.2. Results

Interest was significantly higher in the human image condition ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.36$) than in the human illustration condition ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(317) = 3.01$, $p < 0.05$. Therefore, **H1a** was replicated. Enjoyment was significantly lower in the human image condition ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.40$) than in the human illustration condition ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.35$), $t(317) = -3.33$, $p < 0.05$. Thus, **H1b** was also replicated. Attractiveness was higher in the human image condition ($M = 5.01$; $SD = 1.35$) than in the human illustration condition ($M = 4.88$; $SD = 1.36$), but the difference was not statistically significant, $t(317) = 0.85$, $p = 0.397$. Therefore, **H1c** was not supported by the results from Study 1b. Trustworthiness was significantly higher in the human image condition ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.16$) than in the human illustration condition ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(317) = 4.35$, $p < 0.001$. Thus, **H1d** was replicated.

Regarding the mediating hypotheses **H2** and **H3**, interest negatively mediated the relationship between ad type and attitude toward the ad ($b = -0.0313$, $SE = 0.0829$, $95\%CI [-0.1336, -0.0128]$). **H2a** was

Table 3
Collinearity diagnostics and discriminant validity analysis.

	Collinearity Statistics						Discriminant Validity Analysis												
	Tolerance		VIF		INT		ENJ		ATR		TRT		ATA		ATB		PIN		
	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	S1a	S1b	S2	
INT	0.46	0.49	0.34	2.19	2.05	2.98	0.87	0.91	0.90										
ENJ	0.68	0.47	0.46	1.47	2.11	2.17	0.22*	0.53*	0.69*	0.94									
ATR	0.33	0.35	0.37	2.90	2.89	2.66	0.73*	0.67*	0.73*	0.89	0.91	0.92							
TRT	0.54	0.65	0.42	1.84	1.55	2.37	0.52*	0.42*	0.57*	0.65*	0.53*	0.74*	0.93	0.92	0.91				
ATA	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.47*	0.66*	—	0.59*	0.79*	—	0.38*	0.51*	—	0.87	0.87	—	—
ATB	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.32*	0.50*	—	0.42*	0.56*	—	0.39*	0.51*	—	0.73*	0.58*	—	—
PIN	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.36*	0.34*	—	—	—	0.43*	—	—	0.59*	—	—	—	0.96

Notes: VIF = Variance Inflation Factor; INT = Interest; ENJ = Enjoyment; ATR = Trustworthiness; TRT = Attraction; ATA = Attitudes towards the Ad; ATB = Attitudes towards the Brand; PIN = Purchase Intention; For Discriminant Validity Analysis, *p < 0.01 (two-tailed) tests, the bold elements are the square root of each AVE, and the non-bold elements are the correlations between constructs.

supported in this replication. Enjoyment positively mediated this relationship ($b = 0.3069$, $SE = 0.0363$, 95%CI [0.2355, 0.3783]). Thus, H2b was replicated. Moreover, attractiveness did not mediate the relationship between ad type and attitude toward the ad ($b = -0.0524$, $SE = 0.0621$, 95%CI [-0.1730, -0.0715]). Trustworthiness negatively mediated the relationship ($b = -0.0700$, $SE = 0.0351$, 95%CI [-0.1444, -0.0072]). Hence, H2c was not supported, while H2d was supported in this study.

Concerning the hypotheses positing mediation effects between ad type and attitudes toward the brand, the findings demonstrate that neither interest ($b = -0.0557$, $SE = 0.0382$, 95%CI [-0.1442, 0.0061]) enjoyment ($b = 0.0168$, $SE = 0.0321$, 95%CI [-0.0479, 0.0825]), nor attractiveness ($b = -0.0386$, $SE = 0.0479$, 95%CI [-0.1394, 0.0497]) played a significant mediating role. Therefore, H3a, H3b, and H3c were not supported. Finally, trustworthiness negatively mediated the relationship ($b = -0.1367$, $SE = 0.0534$, 95%CI [-0.2506, -0.0417]). Thus, H3d was replicated.

7. Discussion of studies 1a and 1b

Although some mediation effects differed across Studies 1a and 1b, the overall pattern provides support for the proposed emotional and credibility mechanisms. Across both studies, human images generated higher levels of interest and trustworthiness, whereas human illustrations elicited greater enjoyment. Study 1b further demonstrates that these effects are not driven by a specific stimulus configuration, thereby reinforcing the robustness of the realism-stylization account.

The mediation results indicate that enjoyment consistently explains the effect of ad type on attitude toward the ad, and trustworthiness plays an important role in shaping brand attitudes. Other indirect effects emerged in only one of the two studies, indicating some variability in the mediation patterns. Such inconsistencies may be attributed to differences in stimulus composition introduced in Study 1b, which could influence how participants process emotional and credibility cues. In addition, these variations may reflect the context-dependent nature of emotional and credibility mechanisms, as well as sample-specific sensitivities.

While Studies 1a and 1b clarify how different forms of human representation influence attitudinal responses, they do not establish which of the studied variables ultimately generates stronger purchase-related outcomes. To address this question and assess firm-beneficial outcomes more directly, we conducted Studies 2 and 3.

8. Study 2

8.1. Data collection, scales, and data analysis procedures

In Study 2, participants, who were also actual customers of *Mercadão*, were assigned to the condition depicted in Fig. 2 (Panel C). We followed the same procedures for sampling, data collection, and scales as in Studies 1a and ab. Additionally, only customers who did not participate in Studies 1a and 1b were eligible to take part in Study 2. Finally, purchase intention was measured using four items from Oliver and Swan (1989), utilizing a 7-point semantic differential scale. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to evaluate H4.

8.2. Sample characteristics

We implemented the identical data cleansing criteria as in Studies 1a and 1b. Following the application of these criteria, the resulting sample consisted of 346 participants (65.9% female; 73.1% with an education level higher than high school; 26.6% single, never married).

8.3. Assessment of the measurement model

The measurement model in Study 2 was evaluated using the same set

of statistical analyses employed in Studies 1a and 1b. Factor loadings, Cronbach's α , AVE, and CR values are presented in Table 2. Multicollinearity statistics and discriminant validity analysis results are provided in Table 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the model fit. The CFA results indicated satisfactory fit indices based on the criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999); $\chi^2 = 478.324$, $df = 220$, $\chi^2/df = 2.174$, CFI = 0.973, TLI = 0.966, IFI = 0.973, SRMR = 0.0327, RMSEA = 0.058 [90% CI = 0.051; 0.065].

8.4. Results

The results from SEM analysis indicate that only interest ($b = 0.191$, $SE = 0.098$, $CR = 1.963$; $p = 0.048$), and trustworthiness ($b = 0.384$, $SE = 0.104$, $CR = 3.698$; $p < 0.001$) have a significant positive direct impact on purchase intention. However, enjoyment ($b = -0.052$, $SE = 0.056$, $CR = -0.934$; $p = 0.350$), and attractiveness ($b = -0.218$, $SE = 0.108$, $CR = -2.025$; $p = 0.055$) do not show significant effects. Therefore, H4a and H4d are supported, while H4b and H4c are not supported. Table 4 presents the regression weights from the SEM analysis.

8.5. Discussion

The findings of Study 2 indicate that among the emotional states and credibility dimensions examined, only interest and trustworthiness have a significant direct positive influence on purchase intention. Therefore, when aiming to enhance buying behaviors through SMA, advertisers should prioritize factors that make the ad more interesting and trustworthy. Drawing from the findings of Studies 1a and 1b, this prioritization can be achieved by employing human images instead of human illustrations.

The insights provided so far offer valuable information on the effectiveness of ad types in eliciting interest and perceived trustworthiness and shed light on the underlying mechanisms that contribute to maximizing profitability. Importantly, the non-significant effects observed for enjoyment and attractiveness suggest that not all positive responses translate into purchase intention, reinforcing the distinction between affective experience and goal-directed behavior.

9. Study 3

Managers typically prioritize research that goes beyond merely testing intentions as an outcome. They prefer studies that bridge the intention-actual behavior gap and address tangible outcomes (Hulland and Houston, 2021; Viglia et al., 2021). Building on this premise, Studies 1a, 1b, and 2 demonstrate that SMA employing human images (as opposed to human illustrations) yields more favorable outcomes, including increased purchase intention. However, it is crucial to establish that this preference for human images not only boosts purchase intention but also translates into actual behavioral responses, such as decision-making.

Table 4
SEM regression weights (H4).

Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p Value	Results
Interest → Purchase Intention	0.191	0.098	1.963	0.048	S
Enjoyment → Purchase Intention	-0.052	0.056	-0.934	0.350	NS
Attractiveness → Purchase Intention	-0.118	0.108	-2.025	0.055	NS
Trustworthiness → Purchase Intention	0.384	0.104	3.698	***	S

Notes: S.E. = Standard Error; C.R. = Critical Ratio; S = Supported; NS = Not Supported.

9.1. Study design

Two Facebook posts were crafted, differing solely in the use of either a human image or a human illustration (Fig. 3). These posts were created to promote an imaginary new grocery delivery service named "Orange Delivery", inviting individuals to explore its website and avail themselves of its services. Emphasizing an incentive in the form of a one-month complimentary delivery service, the posts aimed to stimulate prompt clicks.

Following the establishment of experimental parameters, 152 participants ($M_{age} = 39.22$; 48% female, 86.6% with an education level higher than high school; 38.8% single, never married), who are active Facebook users and regular consumers of online delivery services, were recruited through Prolific. They were briefed on encountering a Facebook post advertising a novel grocery delivery service representing all supermarkets within their locality. Following random and equal exposure to one of the posts (76 participants each), participants were asked if they wanted to visit the brand's website to get a one-month free delivery offer. Employing a binary scale method, similar to Elmashhara et al. (2024b) as well as Holthöwer and Van Doorn (2023), participants articulated their decision by selecting either "Yes, I am interested in visiting your website for additional details on the one-month free delivery promotion" or "No, I am not interested in visiting your website for additional details on the one-month free delivery promotion". Participants were subsequently informed that their interactions and decisions constituted participation in an academic research endeavor.

9.2. Results

We performed a binary logistic regression analysis with the post condition (utilizing either a human image or a human illustration) as the predictor variable, and the decision to visit the website (coded as 1 for "Visited the website" and 2 for "Did not visit the website") as the dependent variable. The findings indicate a significant interaction effect ($b = -0.35$, $SE = 0.17$, Wald $\chi^2 = 9.91$, $p = 0.036$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.71$). Specifically, the results showed a greater number of "clicks" to visit the website when using an SMA with the human image (71.1%; 54 out of 76) compared to using an SMA with the human illustration (46.1%; 35 out of 76); $b = 1.06$, $SE = 0.34$, Wald $\chi^2 = 9.54$, $p = 0.002$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.88$. This result indicates a significant difference in consumer actual behavior.

9.3. Discussion

Our first three studies demonstrated that using human images (compared to human illustrations) in SMA leads to better outcomes, including increased purchase intention. To bridge the intention-actual behavior gap, Study 3 shows that utilizing human images in SMA also significantly increases actions strongly related to purchase, such as the decision to visit the website and benefit from the delivery service. This "click" decision serves as a link between purchase intention and actual purchase.

10. Conclusions

Incorporating humans into SMA can take the form of either real human images or human illustrations. However, the specific conditions under which one form of human representation produces superior firm outcomes have remained unclear. Building on the realism-stylization distinction, our research demonstrates that these two forms of depiction are not interchangeable but instead activate distinct psychological pathways with different downstream consequences.

Across five studies, we show that human illustrations trigger greater enjoyment, consistent with the affective responses associated with stylized and expressive visual cues (Deng and Jiang, 2023; Vaitoniyte et al., 2021). Prior research similarly indicates that illustrative elements heighten enjoyment (e.g., Das et al., 2019) and may reduce discomfort

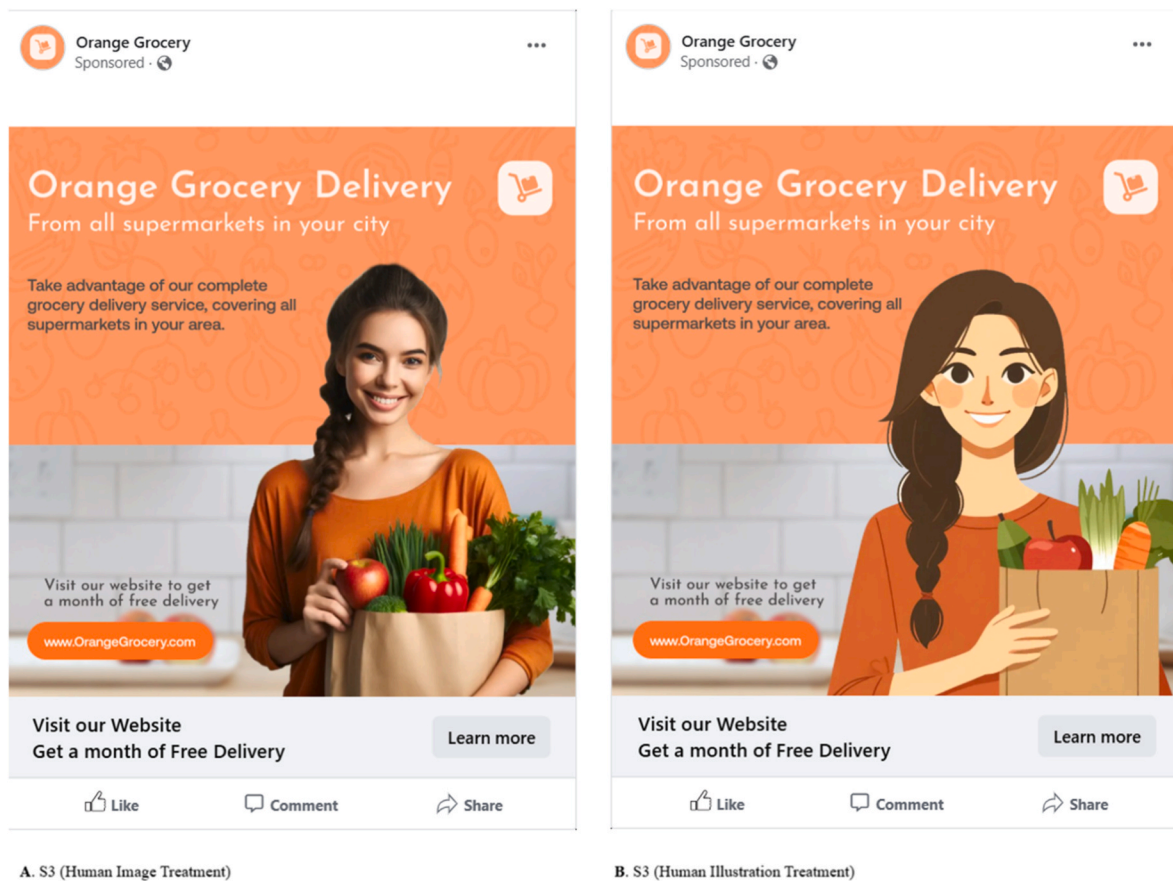


Fig. 3. Photos of the two posts used in Study 3.

associated with real human faces (Chiu et al., 2001; Qualls and Moore, 1990). However, our findings reveal that this heightened enjoyment does not reliably translate into more favorable brand attitudes, purchase intention, or actual purchase behavior. This pattern also helps explain why certain hypothesized effects involving enjoyment were not consistently supported across studies.

In contrast, human images generate higher levels of interest, perceived attractiveness, and trustworthiness – responses consistent with the richer perceptual detail and enhanced social-cognitive processing afforded by realistic depictions (Wang et al., 2025). Importantly, interest and trustworthiness contribute to more favorable brand evaluations and stronger purchase-related outcomes. Moreover, SMA featuring human images not only strengthens attitudinal responses but also increases actual purchasing behavior, demonstrating that realism-based depictions have tangible behavioral consequences.

Together, these findings suggest that human images are more consequential for firm-beneficial outcomes than human illustrations that primarily enhance affective enjoyment. This pattern aligns with our theoretical argument that interest, as an alertness- and engagement-based emotion linked to perceptual realism, is more likely to translate into goal-directed behaviors (Zhu et al., 2019), whereas enjoyment – often associated with stylization – may be more experiential and less consequential for firm desirable outcomes. This interpretation echoes prior research showing that highly entertaining or affectively gratifying content can divert consumers from the purchase process (Elmashhara et al., 2024b; Grewal et al., 2019; Wolf et al., 2020). Similarly, the central role of trustworthiness in driving purchase-related responses aligns with evidence that higher perceived trustworthiness strengthens purchasing behavior (e.g., Hsieh and Li, 2020).

10.1. Theoretical implications

Theoretically, our research makes three primary contributions. First, we advance research by explicitly situating human representation effects within the realism-stylization framework (Arnheim, 1974; Auernhammer and Roth, 2021). Prior studies have examined human versus cartoon spokespersons (Heiser et al., 2008) or illustrative versus non-illustrative product depictions (Septianto et al., 2019), yet they have not clarified *when* and *why* different forms of human portrayal produce distinct downstream consequences in SMA. By demonstrating that realistic depictions enhance perceptual engagement and diagnostic cue processing, whereas stylized depictions primarily heighten affective enjoyment, our work provides a theoretically grounded explanation for performance differences between human images and human illustrations. This moves the conversation beyond categorical comparisons toward mechanism-based understanding.

Second, we contribute to consumer emotion theory by disentangling the differential behavioral relevance of interest and enjoyment in advertising contexts. While both emotions are positively valenced and frequently examined in prior research, our findings indicate that they do not play equivalent roles in shaping firm-beneficial outcomes. Specifically, interest – an engagement-oriented emotion associated with attentional focus and information processing – proves more consequential for purchase intention and behavior than enjoyment, which appears more experiential and less action-oriented. By demonstrating that distinct emotional states translate differently into downstream outcomes, our research refines the understanding of how specific affective responses operate within SMA environments.

Third, we extend credibility literature by clarifying how realism influences the formation and consequences of credibility perceptions. Although prior research shows that human presence can enhance

attractiveness and trustworthiness (e.g., Torres et al., 2019; Yen and Chiang, 2021), it has not distinguished between realistic and stylized human depictions. Our findings indicate that human images more effectively support credibility judgments than human illustrations, and that trustworthiness, in particular, plays a central role in shaping brand attitudes and purchase-related outcomes. This highlights realism as a boundary condition for credibility formation and deepens understanding of how perceptual cues translate into economic consequences.

10.2. Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, our research provides actionable guidance for retail professionals, advertisers, and social media managers seeking to select the most effective human representation format for SMA. Our findings suggest that human images, compared to human illustrations, generate greater interest and enhance credibility – particularly in terms of attractiveness and trustworthiness. This, in turn, can have a positive impact on attitudes toward the brand and buying behavior. Therefore, if the primary goal of the firm is to promote the brand or increase purchase intention, using a human image is recommended. Along these lines, SMA incorporating brand-specific or purchase-oriented calls to action would benefit from the inclusion of genuine human portrayals.

In contrast, when the objective is to enrich customer enjoyment or create a more playful brand atmosphere, human illustrations may be more suitable. However, consistent with our findings and prior literature (Elmashhara et al., 2024b; Grewal et al., 2019), managers should recognize that the hedonic appeal of human illustrations may not necessarily translate into monetary outcomes. Accordingly, illustrations may be best deployed in SMA content centered on storytelling, highlighting product craftsmanship, or offering gamified interactions such as Q&A sessions, quizzes, or interactive challenges, especially when enjoyment and engagement with the brand's social media platform, rather than conversion, are the primary goals.

10.3. Limitations and future research

Gammoh et al. (2018) examined human-based versus avatar-based video ads, and in line with our realism-stylization perspective, we encourage extending this inquiry by comparing human-based versus illustration-based video executions. While our studies focus on static visual advertisements, future research could examine whether realism-stylization effects persist or evolve in dynamic SMA formats, such as short-form videos, reels, or stories, where motion, narrative pacing, and audio cues may interact with human representation. We also recommend a deeper examination of ad-triggered enjoyment and its relationship to firm profitability, acknowledging that affective gratification may – under certain conditions – dampen consumers' goal-directed behavior (Elmashhara et al., 2024b; Grewal et al., 2019).

Our reliance on data from real shoppers and the practical need for concise surveys limited our ability to incorporate additional variables into the model, including potential moderators. Accordingly, future research should replicate our model with an expanded set of variables and in additional contexts. For example, examining purchase-risk conditions (high vs. low) could offer important insights, given that our empirical setting predominantly involved low-risk grocery products. In addition, our studies capture consumers' immediate responses following a single ad exposure; future work could investigate whether repeated exposure to human images versus illustrations produces habituation or cumulative effects that alter emotional and credibility responses over time.

Additionally, our studies were conducted with participants from Western markets, which may limit the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. Preferences for human representation styles are culturally embedded, and societies differ in their historical exposure to and normative acceptance of stylized versus realistic visual forms (Shimizu

et al., 2025). Future research employing cross-cultural or multi-country designs could examine whether realism-stylization effects vary across cultural contexts, thereby enhancing the global applicability of our findings. Furthermore, our sample was drawn from a specific consumer context, with a gender distribution skewed toward female participants and without age information due to data collection constraints. While these characteristics do not threaten the internal validity of our findings, they may limit their generalizability across demographic groups (Serravalle et al., 2022). Future research could therefore examine whether the observed effects vary across different demographic segments, including age and gender, to further establish the boundary conditions of our results.

Finally, future work could investigate whether realism-stylization effects generalize beyond retailing to other SMA domains, where campaign goals and audience expectations may differ. Such extensions would further enrich understanding of when and how human representation shapes emotional and credibility pathways across broader advertising contexts.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Maheer Georges Elmashhara: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sofia Salgado Pinto:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Investigation. **Yasmine Nabih:** Writing – review & editing. **Leonor do Nascimento Rocha:** Investigation.

Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors used *Grammarly* and *ChatGPT* to enhance the manuscript's readability and language. Following their use, the authors thoroughly reviewed, verified and edited the text as needed.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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