

2023

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Recommended Citation

Trinh, Can (2023) "Images In Service Marketing: Does Presentation Style Matter?," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 12: No. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol12/iss1/1>

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Cover Page Footnote

The author thanks Dr. Jonathan Hasford at The University of Tennessee for his support and advice in collecting data for this research.

Images In Service Marketing: Does Presentation Style Matter?

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Abstract – This research presents a pioneering attempt to examine whether the use of abstract images would be more effective than the use of concrete images in the case of service marketing. Based on construal level theory, we hypothesize that relative to the use of concrete images, the use of abstract images in service marketing will better match the intangible nature of services and will thus increase communication effectiveness. Two studies in this research provide evidence to support these propositions by showing that relative to the use of concrete images, the use of abstract images can enhance ad visuals, which in turn increases purchase intentions in the case of service marketing.

Keywords - Service marketing, construal level theory, abstraction, imagery, experiment

Relevance to Researchers and Practitioners – This research extends both the service literature and the construal-level theory literature by providing empirical evidence that the use of abstract images (relative to the use of concrete images) can help enhance communication effectiveness in the case of service marketing. In doing so, this research reveals novel insights into how construal levels can interact with visual stimuli to shape consumer perceptions and evaluations of services. The findings in this research also provide practical implications for service marketers to craft better communications to enhance the appeal of services.

Introduction

Service has always been an important part of any economy, but in this day and age, the role of service has become even more essential than ever (Rust & Huang, 2014). According to estimates by World Bank, in 2021, the service sector contributed up to 77.6% to the total GDP of the U.S. and 64.4% to the total GDP of the world (World Bank, 2021). Such numbers highlight how important it is for countries to keep strengthening the growth of service businesses. An important reason for the rise of services in the economy is the advancement of information technology, which has given rise to an unprecedented variety of new services in the marketplace (Rust & Huang, 2014). From accommodation (e.g., Airbnb), transportation (e.g., Uber), shopping (e.g., Instacart) to monetary management (e.g., Mint), new businesses empowered by updated technology have become more widespread and thus have occupied significant roles in consumer lives and each economy. Moving forward, with the rise of newer, better technology, we can expect both the emergence of new services and the improvement of current ones. Rust and Huang (2014), for example, suggested that “the service revolution and the information revolution are two sides of the same coin” such that when we see the rise of one, we can be sure that the other has come into existence.

Given such background, it is not surprising that companies have paid increasing attention to their services, and service transformation has become “a strategic focus for firms in different

industries” in this and the upcoming decades (Zaki, 2019). Even companies with long-established brands that offer physical products (e.g., grocery items, apparel, electronic devices) have been trying to enhance their business offerings via attempts to improve associated services to their customers (Zeithaml et al., 2018). Recent business philosophies suggest that all companies in this day and age are essentially service providers whose primary function is to generate values for customers based on a reciprocal, value-co-creating paradigm (Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014). Given that the internet and continuous communication exchanges have enabled more transparency in information, firms have come to the realization that any tangible aspects of their businesses (such as physical products) can easily be replicated and/or improved upon by competitors, leading to fierce competition that can significantly reduce competitive advantages and profit margins. In attempts to build more sustainable competitive advantages and increase differentiation, companies have been trying hard to enhance their offered services to cultivate meaningful, long-term relationships with customers (Zaki, 2019). For example, phone manufacturers realized that customers want more from their products than just the ability to talk to someone who is not close by: phones must enable people to get access to the internet; provide multiple types of entertainment from music to movies to games; help with educational purposes via various apps with different functions. As consumer expectations keep escalating, firms find themselves driven by the constant need to make improvements and introduce innovations in services to stay competitive (Zaki, 2019).

Given the strategic role of services, the job of service marketing is to help consumers perceive the values that services offer, and this is an important task since if customers do not perceive any value from a service, they are unlikely to use that service (Grönroos, 2006). However, the task of communicating values to customers in service marketing is not easy, especially when many services are powered by technological advances and therefore their concepts are either too abstract or too technical for customers to understand what they are, let alone how they can bring important values to customers. Scholars in the field of service marketing have suggested that marketers should incorporate imagery in their communication to help customers better understand the services offered (e.g., Laroche et al., 2001). Such suggestions seem reasonable given that marketing is the field that has been known for its ability to create creative and powerful images that can shape consumers' attitudes and behaviors. In the case of service marketing, the power of imagery is especially pertinent because the intangible elements of services may make it harder for consumers to form impressions, judgments, and evaluations toward the advertised services. And even though service marketers have come up with different ways to leverage imagery in their communication, research into how such different approaches might influence communication effectiveness in the case of service marketing is still very limited. This is such an important theoretical gap to address because a thorough understanding of that area will equip marketing practitioners with better insights to fine-tune communication about their services and to help customers better understand and appreciate the values that firms may offer through their services (Akaka et al., 2013).

In this research, we aim to help fill in this significant gap by examining the specific question of whether the presentation style of images in service marketing would influence communication effectiveness. Specifically, we focus on one presentation style: whether an image is displayed abstractly or concretely (see Figure 1 for examples of the abstract/concrete presentation style) and explore whether the use of abstract images (relative to the use of concrete images) in service marketing would help enhance communication effectiveness. We next present the theoretical background upon which we establish our hypotheses below.

Figure 1: Examples of Abstract & Concrete Images in Real life



Literature Review

There exists a variety of definitions of service in the marketing literature. For example, Vargo and Lusch (2004) defined service to be “the application of specialized competences (skills and knowledge), through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (p. 326), whereas Grönroos (2006) considered service to entail “processes that consist of a set of activities which take place in interactions between a customer and people, goods and other physical resources, systems and/or infrastructures representing the service provider and possibly involving other customers, which aim at solving customers’ problems” (p.6). More recently, Rust and Huang (2014) defined service to be “any direct provision or cocreation of value between a provider and a customer”, and Zeithaml et al. (2018) suggested that service includes “all economic activities whose output is not a physical product or construction, is generally consumed at the time it is produced, and provided added values in forms (such as convenience, amusement, timeliness, comfort or health) that are essentially intangible concerns of its first purchaser”. Despite the polymorphism of definitions, scholars in service marketing tend to converge on the importance of service marketing and the idea that service marketing needs to help customers understand and appreciate the values of firm offerings (Grönroos, 2006). This means that communication in service marketing, including the choice of advertising images, should facilitate value perception among consumers.

An image is broadly defined as “the total impression that an entity makes on the minds of others” (p. 75, Dichter, 1985). Images in marketing are powerful in that they can shape consumer perceptions of, attitudes towards, and preferences for a product, brand, or company (Kim, 1992; Pieters et al., 2010). Visual images not only increase product attractiveness but also help to facilitate conceptual and comprehension fluency, enabling consumers to better understand marketing communication (Chang, 2013; Kim & Perdue, 2011). Furthermore, visual images can affect long-term memory (Brandimonte et al., 1992), helping to enhance brand awareness in the long run (MacInnis et al., 1999). Images in marketing can be presented in either a concrete manner or an abstract manner. Concrete images are those in which viewers can easily identify the focal subjects, whereas the focal subjects are “not as easily identifiable” in abstract images (Zhou et al.,

2021). Abstract images are therefore considered to be more conceptual than concrete images (Zhou et al., 2021). Even though it may appear on the surface that whether an image is presented abstractly or concretely does not matter, established works in construal level theory (CLT) suggests that in the case of service marketing, the use of abstract images may be more effective than concrete dynamic images in enhancing communication effectiveness.

CLT proposes that the perceived psychological distance of a subject will influence the construal level at which that object is construed in people's mental representations such that more abstract objects tend to be processed at a higher construal level, whereas more concrete objects tend to be processed at lower construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Moreover, the relationship between psychological distance and construal level is a two-way street such that psychological distance can impact construal level and vice versa (Trope & Liberman, 2010). When it comes to visual perception, for instance, the theory proposes that construing an image at a higher level would lead to more abstraction of the images and more focus on the gestalt of the image rather than its details (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Conversely, an abstract image is more likely to encourage viewers to look at its gestalt rather than its fragmented details (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Based on such propositions of CLT, we propose that in the case of service marketing, the use of abstract images would be more effective than the use of concrete images in influencing communication effectiveness because abstract images would facilitate a higher construal level, which is more in line with the mental intangibility nature of services.

To elaborate, a characteristic of service is its intangibility, which entails physical intangibility and mental intangibility (Laroche et al., 2001). Whereas physical intangibility refers to elements of services that do not have palpable forms, mental intangibility refers to "the degree to which a product can be visualized and provide a clear and concrete image before purchase" (McDougall & Snetsinger, 1990). Zeithaml et al. (2018) argued that even though there exist few products that are purely tangible or purely intangible, intangibility is a key determinant of whether an offer is a service or not. Akaka et al. (2013) suggested that the intangible elements of services could be integrated with different resources to create new resources and unique values for customers, building certain competitive edges for firms. Previous research has shown that there exists a relationship between mental intangibility and construal level such that people with a high construal level tend to rely more on intangible attributes of an offer in service evaluation (Ding & Keh, 2017). Thus, it is possible that in comparison with the use of concrete images, the use of abstract images in service marketing would be more effective in enhancing communication effectiveness because they facilitate a higher construal level, which matches the intangibility nature of services and helps consumers better understand the perceived values from the focal services. Because of this match, viewers will be able to better understand their communication and thus the communication effectiveness will increase. Previous research supports this notion by showing that when there is an alignment between perceived psychological distance and construal level, consumers tend to have more positive feedback toward communication and increase behavioral intentions accordingly (Macdonnell & White, 2015). Furthermore, there is evidence that abstract thinking can promote better self-control (Fujita & Carnevale, 2012), facilitate a growth mindset (Crouzevialle et al., 2022), increase positivity, and enhance evaluation for both positive and negative experiences (Williams et al., 2014). In addition, a meta-analysis that summarizes findings from 106 papers reveals that psychological distance indeed has a considerable effect on construal level and thus influences downstream consumer behavior (Soderberg et al., 2015).

In summary, we predict that in service marketing, relative to the use of concrete images, the

use of abstract images will help to enhance ad appeal, which then consequently increases purchase intentions. Formally put:

H1: In the case of service marketing, the use of abstract images is more effective than the use of concrete images in enhancing ad visual appeal.

H2: In the case of service marketing, the use of abstract images is more effective than the use of concrete images in enhancing purchase intentions by enhancing ad visual appeals.

Methodology

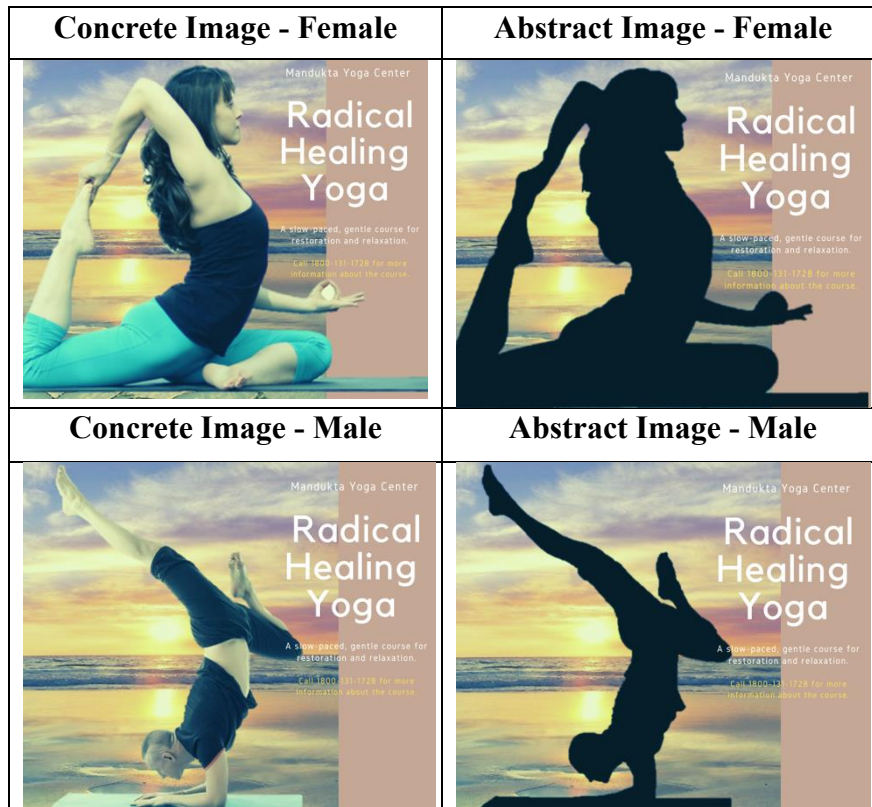
To examine the hypotheses in this research, we have conducted two experiments (hereafter referred to as studies), which are presented in the next sections.

Study 1

Method

The objective of this study is to seek initial evidence that in comparison with the use of concrete images, the use of abstract images helps enhance ad visual appeal, leading to higher purchase intentions. We recruited four hundred and eighty Amazon Mturk participants for this study (55.8% Female, $M_{Age} = 39.68$ years). After reading and agreeing with the consent form, participants were asked to carefully look at one of four ads, which were randomly assigned among participants (see Figure 2 for the stimuli in this research).

Figure 2: Ad Stimuli in Study 1



The ads in this study are about a hypothetical yoga center. The image of the model in the ad is presented in either a concrete or abstract manner. We employed both female and male models in this study to examine whether the gender of the model may be a potential confound that impacts the effect of image type for exploratory purposes. After seeing one of the four ads, participants indicated their opinion of the ad's visual appeal (“To what extent do you think that the ad has good design?” on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) point scale) and their enrollment intentions (“To what extent do you feel like you want to enroll in the yoga course mentioned in the ad?” on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) point scale; “How willing you are to pay for the yoga course mentioned in the ad?” on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) point scale; “How likely are you to enroll in the yoga course mentioned in the ad?” on a 1 (not likely at all) to 7 (highly likely) point scale; 3-item $\alpha = .97$). At the end of the survey, participants responded to demographic questions (age and gender) and manipulation check questions about the image that they saw (concrete or abstract; male or female model).

Results

Manipulation checks. The manipulation in this study worked as intended: participants in each image condition confirmed that they saw the respective image assigned to that condition (concrete vs abstract dynamic image ($\chi^2 (3, N = 480) = 177.39, p < .001$), and male vs female model image ($\chi^2 (1, N = 480) = 290.31, p < .001$)).

First, an ANOVA was performed to examine whether the model gender would influence the effect of image type on participant responses. The results showed that there was no interaction

between model gender and image type on ad visual appeal ($F(1, 476) = .27, p = .60$). This insignificant interaction suggests that model gender did not influence the effect of image type in this study, and therefore, the model gender conditions were collapsed in subsequent analyses in this study and model gender is not discussed further in this research. Next, another ANOVA was performed to examine the main effect of image type on ad visual appeal. We found that the abstract images significantly increased ad visual appeal in comparison with the concrete images ($M_{\text{Concrete}} = 4.62; M_{\text{Abstract}} = 5.04; F(1, 478) = 8.64, p = .003$). In addition, using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017), we found that in comparison with the concrete images, the abstract images significantly increased ad visual appeal, leading to higher purchase intentions (Indirect effect = .26; 95% CI [.0877, .4366]). This result suggests that ad visual appeal fully mediated the effect of image type on purchase intentions.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence to support the hypotheses in this research. Specifically, Study 1 shows that relative to the use of concrete dynamic images, the use of abstract dynamic images enhances ad visual appeal, leading to higher purchase intentions in the case of service marketing. In addition, Study 1 provides evidence that this effect does not depend on the gender of the model. Based on the findings in Study 1, we conducted Study 2 to replicate the results with a different set of stimuli.

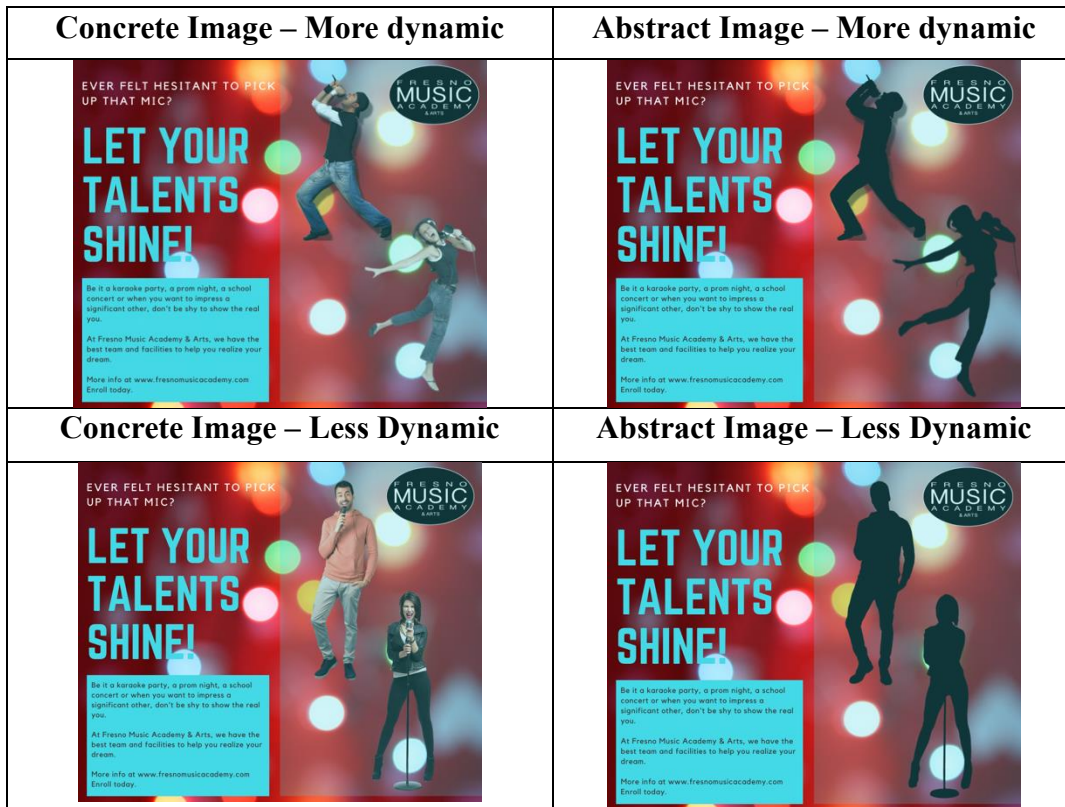
Study 2

Method

Study 2 has two major objectives. First, we wanted to replicate the finding in Study 1 by using different stimuli to extend the generalizability of our findings. Second, we wanted to examine whether the level of perceived dynamism in visual stimuli would impact the effect of abstract images for exploratory purposes. The reason is that previous research has shown that more dynamic images can enhance ad evaluation (Cian et al., 2014, 2015) and therefore the perceived dynamism level of an image may interfere with the effect of abstract images. As a result, this study has a 2 (image type: abstract vs concrete) by 2 (perceived dynamism level: more dynamic vs less dynamic) between-subject experimental design.

Two hundred and forty-nine students from a public university in the United States participated in this study (31.9% Female, $M_{\text{Age}} = 21.32$ years). After reading and agreeing with the consent form, participants were asked to carefully look at one of four ads, which were randomly assigned among participants. The ads in this study are about a hypothetical music center that offers singing courses. Similar to Study 1, the image of the models in the ad is presented in either a concrete or abstract manner, and we also varied the level of dynamism of the images (see Figure 3 for the stimuli in this study).

Figure 3: Ad Stimuli in Study 2



After seeing one of the four ads, participants indicated their opinion of the ad visual appeal (“I like the way the ad looks”, “The ad is visually appealing”, “I like the overall design of the ad” on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) point scale; 3-item $\alpha = .95$), and their enrolment intentions (“If you don’t have financial and other specific constraints, how likely are you to enroll in the course mentioned in the ad?” on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) point scale; “To which extent do you want to try out the course mentioned in the ad?” on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) point scale; “I think I would enjoy taking the course mentioned in the ad” on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) point scale; “I think the course in ad will be a good choice” on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) point scale; 4 items, $\alpha = .92$). At the end of the survey, participants responded to demographic questions (age and gender) and manipulation check questions about their perceived dynamism of the images (“How much did the models appear to be moving in the ad?” on a 1 (no movement at all) to 7 (a lot of movement) point scale; “How dynamic do you think the models’ movement was?” on a 1 (not dynamic at all) to 7 (extremely dynamic) point scale; “The models in the ad appeared to be moving quickly” on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) point scale; 3 items, $\alpha = .93$).

Results

Manipulation checks. The manipulation in this study worked as intended: participants in the more dynamic image conditions perceived the images to be more dynamic than those in the less dynamic conditions ($t(247) = 7.23, p < .001$).

First, an ANOVA was performed to examine whether perceived dynamism in images would influence the effect of image type on ad appeal. The results showed that there was no interaction

between perceived dynamism and image type on ad visual appeal ($F(1, 245) = .31, p = .58$). This insignificant interaction suggests that perceived dynamism did not influence the effect of image type and therefore, the perceived dynamism conditions were collapsed in subsequent analyses in this study. Next, another ANOVA was performed to examine the main effect of image type on ad visual appeal. We found that similar to Study 1, the abstract images significantly increased ad visual appeal in comparison with the concrete images ($M_{\text{Concrete}} = 3.37; M_{\text{Abstract}} = 3.86; F(1, 247) = 6.60, p = .01$). In addition, using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017), we found that in comparison with the concrete images, the abstract images significantly increased ad visual appeal, leading to higher enrollment intentions (Indirect effect = .19; 95% CI [.0394, .3507]). This result suggests that ad visual appeal fully mediated the effect of image type on enrollment intentions.

Discussion

Study 2 provides more evidence to support the hypotheses in this research. Specifically, Study 2 replicated the results in Study 1 that relative to the use of concrete images, the use of abstract images enhances ad visual appeal, leading to higher purchase intentions in service marketing. In addition, Study 2 revealed that this effect does not depend on the level of perceived dynamism of images. Furthermore, using a different set of stimuli for a different type of service, Study 2 extended the generalizability of this research.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present research explores whether the presentation style of images matters in service marketing. Two studies in this research reveal that relative to the use of concrete images, the use of abstract images can increase ad visual appeal, leading to higher purchase intentions for services. This effect is independent of model gender and the level of perceived dynamism of images. Together, these findings provide meaningful theoretical and practical implications.

First, this research extends the CLT literature by examining the effects of abstract images in consumption contexts that involve higher construal levels. Even though marketers use abstract images in marketing communications regularly, empirical evidence related to whether and how these images interact with mental representations of a product and consequently influence behaviors is still limited and there have been calls for more research in that area (e.g., Zhou et al., 2021). This research responds directly to such calls and provides novel evidence that the presentation style of images indeed can influence consumer perceptions and evaluations of marketing stimuli in the case of services.

Second, this research contributes to the service marketing literature by showing how the intangible elements in services can influence how consumers respond to visual stimuli in service marketing. Even though previous research has documented the power of images in influencing consumer attitudes and behaviors in marketing contexts, research into the use of imagery in services is still limited. Against this backdrop, this research provides evidence that in the case of service marketing, the presentation style of images can be used as a cue for imagery evaluation and behavioral intentions.

Third, this research enriches the understanding of the consumer decision-making process. Specifically, this research illustrates that marketing images do not necessarily influence behavioral intentions directly, but instead indirectly through intermediary means. These findings suggest that marketing researchers who attempt to investigate the effect of marketing stimuli on behavioral

intentions may be puzzled if their theorizing focuses on the direct path between marketing stimuli and behavioral intentions without considering intermediary means.

Fourth, this research also yields practical implications for marketing practices. Specifically, an important takeaway from this research is that service marketers can consider using more abstract images to enhance communication effectiveness. In this day and age, not only has the role of service become more important but technological advancement has also given rise to new types of services. Concepts such as blockchain, cloud computing, AI, etc. still sound foreign to many people, and the services based on such technology may sound too abstract and hard to understand for those who are not familiar with such technology. Thus, marketers who aim to promote such services to the general public can consider using abstract images in their communication to help increase the appeal of the services and increase adoption. Of course, we do not suggest that the use of imagery can replace the need for clear, thorough, customer-friendly product explanations, but the use of proper images in the case of services can help to make customers more amenable to at least trying out the new services.

Limitations and Future Research

While we made our best efforts in conducting this research, we do acknowledge its limitations, which also suggest ideas for future research.

First, we recruited participants in the United States and observed the consistent effect of the presentation style of images on ad evaluation and purchase intentions, but it is possible that this effect may not hold for participants in diverse cultures. Thus, future research can extend this research by considering replications in different cultures.

Second, whereas this research shows that the effect of image presentation style on ad evaluation and purchase intentions does not depend on model gender and the level of perceived dynamism, it would be insightful to explore the boundary conditions in which this effect may hold or not hold. Future research can extend this research by identifying the factors that moderate the effect observed in this research.

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