Visual Marketing Elements in Digital Media: A Tool for Planning

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Abstract: This paper aims at identifying and classifying the visual marketing elements most frequently used in digital media. State of the art scientific articles and blog posts serve as an information base for analysis and synthesis in order to identify different types of digital design elements such as images, infographics, data visualizations, visual quotes, memes, and Gifs, emojis, etc., and further to classify them into logical groups according to their format and function. As a result, a classification tool is developed which can be used by both researchers and practitioners to plan further investigations of business practices and customer preferences, as well as to plan visual communications avoiding clutter and inconsistence.
Key words: visual marketing, design elements, types of visual content in digital media
JEL: M31, M37

Introduction

Digital media creates a complex environment in which electronic devices are used to deliver content to various audiences. Each piece of content competes with hundreds and thousands of others for the attention, engagement, and conversion of targeted customers. In this context, visual marketing is a content marketing strategy which is gaining growing popularity in the recent years. A search by the key word "visual marketing" in the Scopus database reveals 71 articles, published from the year 2003 up to now, 71% of which are published after the year 2017. The combination of the key words "digital marketing" and "visual" results in 80 articles and 93% of them are published after the year 2017.

In an early article on the topic, published in the Journal of Marketing, Gerald Stahl (Stahl, 1964) argues that, because of lack of planned identification and visual communications, many companies suffer from inconsistent, inappropriate and indistinctive presence on the market. This leads to confusing and even negative corporate reputation, instead of favourable recognition of the company's brands and offers. In a recent study (Bashirzadeh, Mai and Faure, 2022), it was proved that although different visual design elements can create perceptions of enrichment with additional layers of meaning when used separately, they can evoke perceptions of clutter when used in a combination. This is explained by the fact that different types of visual design elements require different cognitive and emotional resources to be processed.

A key challenge for a marketing and branding specialist is to maintain consistency (Melewar, Saunders and Balmer, 2001) when communicating the brand and its offers across all the different marketing channels with the whole variety of the content formats. The decision about what type of visual marketing elements to be used and how to be aligned to the textual narrative, to one another, and to the media context requires extensive knowledge about all types of such elements and their functions.

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Taking into consideration the above mentioned, this paper aims at answering the question: How can visual marketing elements in digital media be classified according to their format and functions? This question was provoked by a knowledge gap in the literature on visual marketing about the typology of visual design elements that are normally used in digital environment.

Literature review

Visual marketing includes all the visual design elements in the marketing and branding strategy of an organization, or all visual identifiers of a brand that the audience can see with their eyes (Wedel and Pieters, 2008; Langton and Campbell, 2011; Diamond, 2013). The continuously growing volume of digital content, delivered through electronic devices leads to shortening attention span and shift from text-based to visually-oriented experiences (Schroeder, 2002, 2004; Li and Xie, 2020; Liu, Dzyabura and Mizik, 2020), because visuals can turn complex and ambiguous concepts into messages that are easy to understand, to believe and remember (Pavel, 2014).

Adding visual design elements to a textual content is believed to enrich it (Wedel and Pieters, 2008; Pavel, 2014), providing more value for the targeted audience. The added value can be both cognitive and emotional (Yun Yoo and Kim, 2005). First, visual marketing elements are meant to simplify complex concepts, making them clear and easier to understand, to guide the viewer throughout the content, to clarify the context, to augment the meaning, and to improve readability as the human brain processes visual data much faster than text. Second, some visual elements deliver humor, excitement, and joy, contributing to better emotional experience and evoking feelings that words alone cannot do. As the saying goes: "A picture tells a thousand words" - people have natural psychological predisposition to viscerally perceive visual information, especially when it resonates with them.

From a company perspective, adding visual elements to a text-only content can help it stand out and appeal to more viewers, resulting in higher values of customer journey success metrics, as well as to higher awareness, recognition, recall and reputation of the sponsoring brand (Stahl, 1964; Wedel and Pieters, 2008; Ladeira et al., 2019). As to the short-term results, it has been proved that a piece of content with visual elements provides better results compared to a piece of content without visual elements (Muñoz-Leiva, Liébana-Cabanillas and Hernández-Méndez, 2018; Yousaf et al., 2021; Bashirzadeh, Mai and Faure, 2022). Also, if visuals are processed much faster than words by the human brain, then visual elements have the power to exert high influence on the first impressions in the minds of the viewers.

Although visual marketing elements can be beneficial for both customers and companies, they can cause harm if they are badly designed and chaotically delivered to the target audience without proper integration (Stahl, 1964; Im, Ju and Johnson, 2021; Bashirzadeh, Mai and Faure, 2022). This means, when planning the visual marketing communications, to consider three main types of visual design elements: brand identity design elements, visual marketing elements for analogue (traditional) media, and visual design elements for digital (new) media. *Brand identity design elements* include brand logo, colors, typography (fonts), lines, shapes, textures, brand characters (if any), style of images (photographs and illustrations/icons), brand tone (of voice), brand story (Stahl, 1964; Melewar, Saunders and Balmer, 2001; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Phillips, McQuarrie and Griffin, 2014). These elements ensure unity of the brand and make it possible for all visual elements, that are in line with them, to contribute to the synergic effect of

better visibility, awareness and recall of the brand. They make the brand narrative cohesive and memorable. Among the *visual marketing design elements for analogue (traditional) media* are business collateral, buildings, vehicles, print, outdoor, and TV ads, uniforms, signs, brochures, flyers, product packages and labels, catalogues, etc. (Stahl, 1964; Wedel and Pieters, 2008). *Visual marketing design elements for digital (new) media* comprise of multimedia design elements, used to enrich text-based content distributed through electronic devices and include images, animations, videos, virtual tours, interactive elements, presentations, websites, landing pages, and ultimately augmented reality and virtual reality (Liu *et al.*, 2021; Bashirzadeh, Mai and Faure, 2022; Sripathi and Bhuvaneswari, 2022).

The existing literature on visual marketing addresses topics such as tracking of eye movements (Wedel and Pieters, 2008; Ladeira *et al.*, 2019; Im, Ju and Johnson, 2021; Yin, Jia and Zheng, 2021), effects caused by different visual stimuli (Liu *et al.*, 2021; Yin, Jia and Zheng, 2021; Yousaf *et al.*, 2021; Bashirzadeh, Mai and Faure, 2022), research on separate visual design elements (Shomova, 2020; Kadry, 2021), visual perception (Sample, Hagtvedt and Brasel, 2020), and visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002, 2004). One typology is identified (Saura, 2020), but it classifies different types of fakers or users who publish fake content on the Internet. A literature gap is identified related to the existence of a comprehensive classification of the different types of visual marketing elements in digital media. Such classification is needed to help marketers and brand

managers avoid the negative effects of visual clutter by carefully planning and executing coordinated visual marketing strategies. The decision about what type of visual marketing elements to be used for each stage of the customer journey and for each digital media platform, requires extensive knowledge about all types of such elements and their functions.

Methodology

In order to identify as many as possible visual marketing elements used in digital media and to classify them according to their format and functions, the following procedure was followed:

With Google search of the key word "types of visual marketing" 10 blog posts, written by marketing professionals, were selected, considering the google ranking, the reputation of the publisher and the relevance of the content.

Through content analysis of the above-mentioned articles the main types of visual marketing elements were identified and explained in terms of formats and functions.

The approach, explained it step 1, was applied for every visual design element identified. For example, "types of infographics", "types of videos", "types of data visualizations", "types of display ads", etc. This was repeated until individual design elements were identified within categories and subcategories. The final selection included 227 blog post articles.

The content of the first 10 articles was used to create the classification of the visual marketing elements, and the rest - to identify the variety of visual elements in digital media.

Table 1. Data sources, based on Google search of "types of visual marketing"

Keyword "types of visual marketing"	Autor	Author profile	Publisher	Publisher profile	Company city	Company country	Article	Aticle URL
	Alexander Santo	Writer	Brafton	Content marketing services and	Washington	USA	14 Types of Visual Content To Use in Your Content Marketing Strategy [Infographic + SlideShare]	https://bit.ly/3WokVoV

			technology solutions.				
Lucien Joyce	Lead Copywriter	Nail Patel	Advertising & Marketing	London	UK	6 Types of Visual Content You Need to Use in Your Marketing Campaigns	https://bit.ly/2RB5Gkg
Molly McGuane	Digital content specialist	Terakeet	Marketing agency	Syracuse, NY	USA	15 Ways to Use Visual Content Marketing to Capture More Traffic	https://bit.ly/3uYed5u
Sergey Aliokhin	Marketing Specialist	Visme	Platform for creating visual content	Rockville, Maryland	USA	A Comprehensive Guide on Visual Marketing	https://bit.ly/3BMrgea
		Simplilearn	Provider of online training for Digital Marketing	San Francisco, CA	USA	The Ultimate Visual Marketing Strategy 2022	https://bit.ly/3FZZQ76
		Canva	Design and publishing tool	Surry Hills, NSW	Australia	Your ultimate guide to visual marketing strategy	https://bit.ly/3G313dV
Robert Katai	Content marketing strategist and product marketer	Content Marketing Institute	Content marketing	NY City, NY	USA	12 Types of Awesome Visual Content You Can Use in Your Blog Posts	https://bit.ly/3Gc9945
Ishaan Dua	Content specialist	Surfly	Web technology for online interactions	Amsterdam	Netherlands	4 types of visual engagement to enhance visual marketing campaigns	https://bit.ly/3BG3y3d
Tricia Lim	Digital marketing specialist	Medianetic	Digital solutions	Petaling Jaya, Selangor	Malaysia	Visual Marketing Content Types You Need To Use in 2022	https://bit.ly/3HI3GmF
		CloudApp	Screen recording, screenshots, and GIF creation	San Francisco, CA	USA	Visual Content Marketing: 8 Types to Grow Your Business	https://bit.ly/3hz968R

Results and discussion

Following the methodological procedure 874 different visual marketing elements are identified, classified into 14 categories (types of visual elements). The categories of user generated content (UGC), animation, website, landing page, virtual tour, augmented and virtual reality (AR and VR) are not included in this classification as they are not discussed in the studied articles.
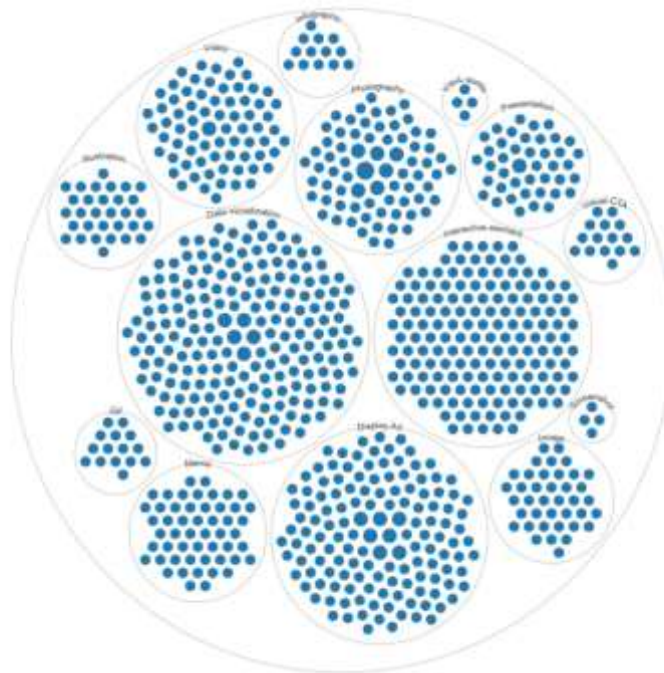
Figure 1. Types of visual marketing elements in digital media

As it can be seen from Figure 1., data visualizations (23%), interactive elements (18%), display advertisements (17%) dominate in terms of variety of visual elements. Photography (9%) and video visuals (8%) are the next largest group, followed by memes, presentations, images, illustrations, GIFs, visual CTAs, infographics, screen shots, and visual quotes.

Table 2. Typology of visual design elements in digital media based on their format and function

Type	Description	Function
Text-based		
Visual quote	The focus is on the text, which conveys powerful meaning. It can be placed as annotations on white or colored background or over photos, screenshots, and videos. Also, a visual quote can be pulled out of a block of text to highlight important thought or concept.	Provides motivation and inspiration Highlights customer testimonials Attracts attention to an important message Lightens up a text-heavy article
Image-based		
Data visualization	The focus is on the visual representation of complex data, gathered through surveys or other types of research. It takes the form of a graph, chart, diagram, table, timeline, histogram, flow chart, plot, map, calendar, correlation matrices, etc. The visualization serves well, if it does not obscure the information, providing some context for different meaning.	Turns complex data into intuitive and easy to understand piece of content Visualizes relationships and trends Improves brand credibility Influences consumer trust Adds visual interest

Infographic	It represents complex data and concepts in a compact, easy to read and understand visual format. This element can add excitement and other emotional states to otherwise boring information. Infographics include design elements such as minimal texts (for headlines, subheads, enlarged callouts, and body copy), shapes, lines or arrows, colors, illustrations (icons, charts, graphs), and in some cases, motion and interactive features are added. Depending on the available space, the infographic may appear in a horizontal or vertical layout. The infographics grab the viewer's attention by one central topic, around which the whole content is organized. This main topic determines the infographic type.	It is used to attract attention and increase engagement It can be considered a tool for strategically positioning a company as more creative and versatile Visualizes research results, processes, comparisons, complex information, timelines Provide instructions how to do something Visualizes trends Breaks up large blocks of texts Makes complex concepts and statistics-heavy content easy to read, understand, and remember
Screenshot	It takes the form of a screenshot, screen capture, animated GIF or screencast, and reveals certain characteristics and functions of complicated products or processes. It also can capture customer/influencer reviews and/or testimonials. Arrows, shapes, and texts are used to annotate important things	Explains how something is constructed Explains how something works Provides proof and increases credibility Displays digital products Supports backing up claims Builds trust
Illustration	It takes the form of an icon, cartoon, comics or illustrated picture, giving more control of the marketer over the "look and feel" of the image. Illustrations also simplify information, but can be more emotional than data visualizations, infographics, and screenshots. Custom illustrations are used as brand identifiers or brand identity visuals.	Simplifies excessive information Gives more control over the content Emphasizes the uniqueness of a brand Adds emotional meaning
Photograph	Digital marketers use stock photos or original images that add realism, authenticity to the narrative. There are many types of photography – product, people, nature, sports, corporate, still life, art, drone, commercial, documentary, travel, portrait, etc. High-quality images that match the theme and the style of the brand are used.	Adds authenticity to the brand Evokes emotions Conveys mood and feelings Provokes thoughts
Display ad	Display ads are distributed through the display networks of Google, Tweeter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Tik Tok. They can take the form of event ads, carousel ads, collections, display banner ads, native ads, pop-up ads, skyscrapers, stories, branded emojis, etc.	Extends the reach of the brand to new customer segments Retargets prospects that have already been exposed to a brand message Builds desired image
Visual CTA	Visual call to action (CTA) can appear in the form of a button alone, or accompanied by other visual elements.	Drives customers along the buyer's journey Directs the customer to different pages on the website
Meme	It includes an image from daily life or popular culture, overlayed with humorous captions.	Evokes positive emotions/humor Helps spread brand awareness
GIF	It is an animated image by which inside jokes and fun topics are delivered to their target audience	Evokes positive emotions/humor Helps spread brand awareness
Multimedia-based		

Presentation	A presentation includes multimedia objects, such as text, images, videos, and interactive elements. It is easier to scan than video and provides more detailed and extensive information than an infographic. It can be shared through SlideShare and downloaded for future use. There are different types of presentations - storytelling, problem-solving, elevator pitch, report, research, persuasive, training session, etc	Tells a story Solves a problem Sells a product Simplifies and explains complex data Persuades Improves brand image Evokes positive emotions
Video	It is a short form to deliver information that otherwise will take longer to digest. It can appear in various formats – how-to video, behind-the-scenes, case study video, comedy show, onboarding video, product demonstration, unboxing video, live streaming video, customer testimonials, etc. It can include different types of visual elements such as texts, photos, motion graphics, music, movement, etc.	Saves time Teaches how to solve a problem Tells a story Entertains Explains complex topics
Interactive element	The interactive element can take to form of a quiz, survey, poll, interactive e-book, calculator, planner, game, checklist, interactive life streaming, contest, etc. – any visual that "invites" the viewer to do different thigs.	Evokes deeper thinking and decision making Stimulates customers to share knowledge and participate in the exchange process

Source: Author

The results from this initial research show that digital marketers are handed with a great diversity of visual design elements that can be used when planning their visual communications. The variety of information-based visuals prevails the variety of emotion-based visuals. This can be explained with the communication overload in the digital environment, in which clarity and simplicity are valuable and the market provides more and more tools to achieve them. The image-based elements dominate the digital landscape. By adding movement or interactive elements to them, they can be transformed into animated or interactive elements.

Further similar research is need about the typology of every visual element identified so far. It can explore the similarities and differences of the elements from one category and explain how they can "work" in combination with other text-based or visually-oriented content.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to answer the question "How can visual marketing elements in digital media be classified according to their format and functions?" by providing a comprehensive classification tool that can guide marketers when they prepare visual marketing plans to build reputable brand and avoid visual clutter. A broad typology of elements is created and an approximate number (874) of individual units is identified. This signals for visual density of the digital environment where probably the next competitive edge will come with simplicity and minimalism. Further research needs to dig into the details of each of the groups of visual elements and find out the approaches and techniques that are considered best for companies, clients, and stakeholders.

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