Driven by advances in technology, the Internet has become an increasingly visual medium, which has had consequences for the role the Internet has come to play in the everyday lives of consumers. The screen has become an important window on the world, a glass or lens through which we view places, people, and things, or, perhaps more accurately, a looking glass that reflects images of those places, people, and things back to us. As many of our interactions, be they with brands and products or with other people, are now taking place through the screen, what we see there is likely to have a profound impact on our behavior as consumers (Schroeder, 2002). The aim of this dissertation research was to study the effects of some of the visuals we encounter online.

The first part of the dissertation research focused on brand-generated imagery in the form of product visualizations in online stores. An important challenge brands and retailers face online is how to present three-dimensional products on a two-dimensional screen in an attractive and persuasive manner. In offline shopping environments, direct, tactile interactions with products are an important part of consumers’ product experience (Hamilton & Thompson, 2007), but online, consumers cannot physically inspect, touch and try products before buying them. Product visualizations, therefore, provide an important substitute for direct product experience, and various technologies have been developed to improve online product visualizations and provide consumers with a more naturalistic product experience.

Two studies tested how such product visualization technologies affect consumer behavior. The first study (Chapter 2) zoomed in on the psychological mechanisms underlying product visualizations, by introducing and testing the concept of local presence. Drawing upon the research on media technology and human-computer interaction (e.g., Benyon, 2012; Floridi, 2007) local presence was defined as the perception of an individual experiencing physical things presented online (e.g., objects, activities, persons, oneself) as actually being there in one’s offline environment. An online experiment showed that different product visualization formats varied in the extent to which they were able to elicit perceptions of local presence, with virtual mirrors making products seem significantly more locally present compared to 360-spin and still picture formats. The results, furthermore, demonstrated that local presence strongly affected participants’ online product experiences; it made products more tangible and likable, which, in turn, increased participants’ intentions to purchase.

Building on the results of the first study, the second study (Chapter 3) developed and validated a model relating consumers’ perceptions of online product presentations to impulsive online purchase behavior. Impulse buying is of particular interest in the context of product visualizations, as direct, physical interaction with products seems to be an especially important factor in triggering impulsive purchases (Hostler et al., 2011; Sharma, Sivakumar, & Marshall, 2010). The sensory aspects of shopping are less salient and varied online, which means that consumers may rely strongly on product visualizations to get a first impression of products. We hypothesized that
consumers who experienced products presented online as more locally would be more likely to have an urge to buy impulsively.

The results of an online experiment showed that visualization formats that provided a highly vivid and interactive product experience generated a stronger feeling of the product being there with participants in their own environment. As hypothesized, such increased perceptions of local presence increased participants’ positive emotional response to the product, which made them more likely to buy impulsively. Perceptions of local presence also influenced participants’ perceptions of risks associated with the purchase. Interestingly, however, product risks did not affect the urge to buy impulsively, indicating a limited impact of relatively rational-risk considerations on the impulse buying phenomenon.

Together, these two studies emphasized the value of adopting a view on online product experiences that focuses on visual aspects, and includes factors traditionally associated with the limitations associated with computer-mediated communication. They show that product visualization technologies can provide important substitutes for direct, physical product interaction, by making products seem more locally present. This may help consumers to better evaluate products, as well as allowing products to be experienced emotionally. This can ultimately increase purchase intentions, as well as impulsive purchase behavior.

The second part of this dissertation focused on consumer-generated imagery on social media. Over the past 10 years, social media have become more visually oriented, as illustrated by the popularity of platforms such as Instagram and Youtube. Combined with advances in digital and mobile photography, and facilitated by easy-to-use editing software and in-app filters, photography has become one of the preferred ways for consumers to express their identity online (Van Dijck, 2008), which is often done with the intention to make a positive impression on others. Prior research suggests that brands are often used in online self-presentation, with consumers trying to leverage the symbolic meaning and status associated with brands to make themselves appear rich, successful or attractive.

The second part of this dissertation investigated how consumers use brands to visually present themselves on social media, as well as on the effects such images may have on other consumers. Drawing on literature on status brands (O’Cass & McEwen, 2006) and self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), the research was one of the first to explore the phenomenon of online self-presentation both for the sender (“poster”) and the receiver (“audience”).

First, looking at the sender, a content analysis of images posted on Instagram showed that consumers strategically displayed brands on social media. Images featuring high status brands were more brand-focused, meaning the brand featured more prominently in the image, more staged, indicating that individuals who posted about high status brands made more of an effort to make their posts appear visually attractive, and more positive
about the brand, compared to posts featuring low status brands. These findings suggest that high status brands were more likely to be used for self-presentation online than low status brands, and that posters made efforts to display these brands in an attractive and positive manner.

As a first examination of the relation between posted content and the audience’s evaluation of the sharer, the same Instagram posts were also evaluated by a group of other consumers. The results showed that posts containing high status brands were more likely to be perceived as bragging, especially when the brand was prominently displayed and the image highly staged. Two experiments further assessed the responses of the audience, showing how other consumers interpret and respond to self-presentation visuals. The first experiment showed that participants were more likely to perceive posters as bragging when their Instagram posts contained a high (versus) status brand, and when posts featured the brand highly (versus lowly) prominent. These perceptions were paired with less favorable attitudes toward the poster. The second experiment demonstrated that both brand prominence and staging increased perceptions of bragging, and lead to less favorable attitudes towards the sharer.

In conclusion, the results of these studies show that social media users tend to be strategic in the kind of brands they display, as well as in the way they display them, arguably with the aim to positively impress others. However, the audience seems to be aware of these tactics, interpreting various visual cues in social media posts as a signs of bragging, which results in a negative evaluation of whoever shared it. With these findings, the research extends literature on self-presentation and conspicuous consumption into the domain of social media.

**General conclusions**

Consumers frequently rely on images to make purchase decisions and form impressions of others online. Although visuals have come to dominate both websites and social media, they often provide an imperfect, partial or altered version of reality. The results of this dissertation research showed that such visuals are powerful tools to communicate online, but also that their effects are not always as intended, depending largely on the audience’s interpretations. As such, this research is one of the first to empirically address visual aspects of consumers’ online experiences, thereby contributing to the nascent visual consumption literature.
References


