Leveraging Instagram: Exploring the Impact of Visual Imagery and Follower Counts on Small Businesses Brand Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Due to wide usage and fast adaptation of social media, many businesses and brands have turned to the world of social media to market and advertise to their new and existing customers. While all businesses have implemented social media marketing departments and measures to their business model, SMEs are especially influenced by this shift. SMEs are known to have low budgets, and often SME owners wear many hats in the business taking over all departments, such as marketing, finances, and sales. Social media marketing has allowed SME owners to build up their business through low entry and high reach platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. However, with the fast-changing social media environment and overload of information, SME owners are often clueless when it comes to building up a useful social media presence. With a focus on Instagram, this paper studies the effects that visual images have on a new customers' perception of an SME. Additionally, this study analyzes the impact that a low v. high follower count has on customer perceptions. Using brand identity studies and following the hierarchy of effects model this experiment created three content categories customer-centric, employee-centric, and product-centric images. A control condition was used to compare brand identities against. The customer perceptions studied were image likability, brand attitude, and brand trust. Additionally, end behavior was tested with questions about purchase and visit intentions. In order to create a connection between visual images and end behaviors, correlation between the customer perceptions and end behaviors was tested. The experiment was conducted through an online study. The results showed that employee-centric images scored higher on brand attitude and brand trust than the control conditions, while customer-centric images showed no significant differences when compared to the control. Product-centric images also held significance over the control condition for brand attitude but not brand trust. Regarding image likability, product-centric images were more likeable than customer-centric images. There was a significant correlation between all three customer perception factors tested and end behavior. However, the results indicated that there was no influence from low vs. high follower counts on either customer perception or end behavior.

KEYWORDS: *Social media marketing, SME, Instagram, brand identity, follower counts*

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1. Introduction

According to Guidant Financials, over 90% of small business owners in the USA are over 35, and 46.5% belong to Generation X (those born between 1965-1980; see Dimock, 2022). Although quite capable of generating a profitable business, this generation is new to modern social media trends. Part of the reason is the excessive information available on the internet. A simple Google search using the query "How to grow your business on social media?" yields overwhelming results, with over 610,000,000 entries generated. Understandably many small business owners feel strained by the challenges of initiating their social media efforts and experience external pressures from customers and competitors to establish a social media presence (Jones et al., 2015). About 66% of small business owners agree that having a business social media account is essential. However, only about 37% felt competent enough to manage social media, and 32% said they needed more training (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014)**.** There is a noticeable gap between social media knowledge and the small business owner's population (Jones et al., 2015).

Social media marketing has transitioned the way consumers and businesses communicate. The emergence of Web 2.0 in 2004 marked a shift in how people interact online. What facilitated this growth was the technical infrastructure that enabled consumers to generate and upload their content (Berthon et al., 2012). The introduction and fast adaptation of Web 2.0 globally gave rise to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, shifting consumer behaviors from passively receiving media to collaborating and creating content (Ceyhan, 2019; Appel et al., 2020). As audiences shifted from traditional media channels to social media platforms, marketers and advertisers adjusted their practices accordingly (Jones et al., 2015). Previously, marketing practices were held in the power of the business, but with the emergence of Web 2.0, the locus of power shifted from firm to consumer (Berthon et al., 2012). This prompted business owners to prioritize creating positive customer perceptions and focus on relationship building. As consumer-generated content became the driving force of media, owned social media content became essential in marketing practices (Berthon et al., 2012). Notably, with over 2 billion active monthly users, Instagram has become one of the most used social media platforms to keep up with their favorite brands (Newberry, 2023). As of 2023, there are over 200,000 million business accounts on Instagram, and over 90% of Instagram users follow at least one business profile (Newberry, 2023).

Previous research on how consumers use social media found that people expect more transparency and relationship-building from businesses and how they communicate with their audiences (O'Brien, 2011; Piccinini et al., 2015). While all businesses turn to social media, this paradigm shift has especially influenced and awarded small businesses. With significantly lower budgets, small and medium-sized enterprises (from now on referred to as SMEs) used to be limited to broad and expensive forms of marketing, with little way of tracking whether or not they were reaching their target audiences (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Social media has facilitated the growth of many SMEs as it gives owners an affordable way to build brand awareness and market their businesses (Jones et al., 2015). Knowing what kind of imagery to post on their profile would be helpful for small business owners, and this subtopic is at the heart of the current investigation. A practical starting point to investigate what kind of visual imagery to use lies with the research of Zhou and Xue (2021), who created four categories of visual images (i.e., customer-centric, employee-centric, product-centric, and symbolic-centric) and investigated the effect of the images on users' attention (i.e., fixation and duration) through Instagram. Symbolic-centric images, which showcase the brand's values, yielded little attention and significance and will therefore be removed from this study. However, for the three remaining types of images (i.e., customer-centric, employee-centric, and product-centric), this study aims to explore which have the highest impact on an SME's customers' perceived image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, purchase intentions, and visit intention.

RQ1: How do respondents exposed to an SME's Instagram account images (i.e., customer-centric, employee-centric, or product-centric images) compare to those not exposed in terms of image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase/visit intentions?

Additionally, Instagram profiles are becoming vital for first impressions, as people tend to form attitudes based on minimal information (Bacev-Giles & Haji, 2017)**.** Like Zhou and Xue (2021), who used a second factor, first and third-person perspectives, in their research to add depth to their findings, this study incorporates a second experimental factor. Metrics such as the number of Instagram followers have positively influenced brand attitude (Dias, 2021). However, the existing literature also states high follower count may seem exaggerated and result in lower perceived credibility (De Vries, 2019). This aligns with previous research on niche marketing,

stating that SMEs could significantly benefit from focused marketing, narrowing in on a targeted community of loyal customers to strengthen their local influence (Besser & Miller, 2004; Akbar et al., 2017). Thus, this paper aims to discover if the number of followers functions as a catalysator or bumper for the effect of the Instagram conditions:

RQ2: Are respondents' brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase and visit intention in the experimental conditions influenced by the number of followers an SME's Instagram account has?

As SMEs have limited marketing budgets, understanding if Instagram followers affect profitability can aid in deciding whether investing in growing a larger following is worthwhile (Jones et al., 2015).

For the purpose of this study, the sampled population was exposed to the Instagram profile of an existing SME. They were then shown the stimuli from one of seven experimental conditions. Aside from the control condition, which consisted of a general introduction followed by an image of the building of the chosen SME, respondents were exposed to two manipulated factors. The first factor was content categories, with the photos from the SME Instagram profile emphasizing either customer-centric, employee-centric, or product-centric brand identities. The second factor was follower count, which was either low or high. After exposure to the stimulus material, their image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and visit and purchase intentions were measured.

1.1 Academic and Societal Relevance

Previous research has been conducted on how social media has transformed consumer-producer relationships by leveraging the importance of brand communities, brand trust, and brand attitudes concerning a business's owned content, but are not exclusive to SMEs (Laroche et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2014; Piccinini et al., 2015; Ceyhan, 2019; Zhou & Xue, 2021; He et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). The studies on social media and brand communities confirmed the positive influence of social media brands on consumers' perceptions, such as brand loyalty, brand trust, and brand attitude (Jung et al., 2014; Laroche et al., 2012). These studies, however, focused on larger, more established brands. Additionally, research about the effects of visual imagery on social media and its influences on customer perceptions has also been studied; however, they are

not specific to SMEs (Ceyhan, 2019; Zhou & Xue, 2021; He et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Other research focused on case studies of social media practices with SMEs but lacked metrics on the consumers' perceptions of these practices through quantitative studies (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014; Jones et al., 2015). In an attempt to advance the field of social media marketing in SMEs and contribute new knowledge to existing academic literature, this research focuses on customer perceptions of an SME Instagram account. Specifically, the study investigates the impact of different types of content an SME uploads on customers' perceptions of image likability, brand attitude, and brand trust. In other words, to what extent can different types of content created by an SME influence customer perceptions. Additionally, the study considers the influence of follower counts on consumer perceptions and their purchase and visit intentions toward the SME.

The rationale for the emphasis on small businesses stems from their significance as key drivers of economic growth within the specific context of the United States of America, which serves as the focal point of this study. According to a 2019 SBA report, small businesses make up 44% of the US economic activity and act as a catalyst for innovation in economic growth (Rowinski, 2022). Additionally, from 1995 to 2020, small businesses created 62% of new jobs, 12.7 million, compared to 7.9 million by larger businesses (Rowinski, 2022). Small businesses influence the economy and GDP and continue to shift consumers towards purchasing locally. As seen in a report by the US Chamber of Small Businesses (2019), about 9 out of 10 people say that they prefer to shop local as it gives them a sense of neighborhood pride and gives back to their community. The relevance of this study is further emphasized by the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which witnessed a surge in small business applications, with nearly 1.4 million applications filed in the US alone (Rowinski, 2022).

Small businesses strongly influence the US economy and, with this transition into social media marketing, are given an advantage unlike before. The focus of marketing shifted toward customer relationships and building up customer perceptions through social media (Jones et al., 2015). This paper aims to develop a universal social media strategy that SME owners can implement best to build positive customer perceptions of their brand.

2. Theoretical Framework

With a focus on SMEs, this framework explores how social media marketing began influencing marketing and advertising techniques. It also examines how brand identities can be built and strengthened through image-based content on Instagram. The study follows the hierarchy of effects model, extending its applicability to social media marketing. Lastly, this framework aims to identify the influence of follower count on customer perceptions of brands.

2.1 Rise of Social Media Marketing

As the use of traditional media is decreasing, many businesses have been prompted to follow the shift toward social media marketing as a new form of advertising (Aral et al., 2013; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). Given that consumers spend more time online, the social media digital space is especially attractive to advertisers aiming to connect and reach their target audiences (Appel et al., 2020; Eid et al., 2020; Tuten, 2008). This movement is notable since businesses have begun allocating greater proportions of their advertising budgets to social media initiatives (Knoll, 2016). Similarly, social media marketing is attractive to businesses due to its low entry cost and strong interactivity between customers and the brand (Jones et al., 2015; Michaelson et al., 2011)**.** Part of the success of social media marketing is the increased availability of branded social media profile pages that businesses can utilize to cultivate communities and expand their social following. By creating and maintaining these brand pages, businesses can sustain and foster customer relationships and build brand loyalty (Alnsour & Al Faour, 2020). Once an individual follows a page, they can be reached continuously as the brand's advertisements are placed directly on their audiences' social media feeds (Knoll, 2016; Jones et al., 2015). Social media marketing offers a unique opportunity for customer engagement by fostering interactions between customers and a brand; in turn, these interactions enhance the customers' emotional connection with the brand (Alnsour & Al Faour, 2020; Yang & Kankanhalli, 2014). However, for brands to benefit from this, they must actively cultivate customer engagement with the content and advertisements they create (Alnsour & Al Faour, 2020; Laroche et al., 2012; Tuten, 2008). These interactions with the brand have also revealed increasing customers' perceived usefulness, leading to higher purchase intentions (Knoll, 2016). In other words, for social media to be of value to a business, they must be intentional with the content they create.

For this study, as stated by previous research, social media advertising and marketing is not limited to paid advertisements but encompasses any content posted and uploaded onto the brand's social page (Knoll, 2016; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011; Tuten, 2008). Advertising in social media marketing has been beneficial to SMEs who previously lacked the finances for marketing budgets. Despite their significant economic role, SMEs are typically known to have limited means to adopt new technology (Dahnil, 2014). Compared to larger corporations, most SMEs perceive the barriers to implementing new IT into their business operations as an expensive initiative (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014; Dahnil, 2014). Nonetheless, the shift in communication channels has resulted in a paradigm shift in how consumers and businesses interact. This transition gives SMEs equal, if not more, opportunities, for instance, access to targeted messaging, a low barrier to entry, and increased business exposure. These benefits are especially important for small businesses since the owners often wear many hats and have limited financial budgets to hire marketing consultants to help grow their brand (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). In other words, social media marketing does not always have to lead to behavior change but is used to develop customer relationships over time (Jones et al., 2015). Social media, which has shown dramatic growth over the past few years, is essential for small businesses because it can be utilized to grow relationships with audiences in an affordable and targeted manner (Jones et al., 2015).

2.2 Focus on Instagram

One of the social media platforms that has increased in popularity since its origin in 2010 is Instagram. With over 2 billion monthly active users, Instagram is sneaking up on its parent brand Meta as one of the most-used social media sites (Newberry, 2023). The success of Instagram can be largely attributed to its focus on visual content and images as a communication tool (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram was initially launched as a minimalist social app to share mobile photos, allowing users to add filters and like others' images (Blystone, 2023). Following the quick success of Instagram, in 2012, Meta purchased Instagram for one million dollars cash. Ever since its acquisition, Instagram has seen a rapid ascent in its popularity and user base. As mentioned, social media is constantly evolving, and the digital social space is highly influenced by how users interact with specific platforms. Notably, in 2016, Instagram users began using the platform to leverage their Instagram profiles and feeds as self-promotional platforms (Manovich,

2017). The use of Instagram began to evolve from a social app to a space where creators could grow a following by creating their own brand identities through Instagram's platform (Verma, 2017). Due to this change, the photos shared through Instagram shifted from pre-installed filters and began to focus on curated themes and design elements in photography. The transition resulted in the popularity of aesthetically pleasing grids built on visual sophistication (Manovich, 2017). 'Grid' in Instagram refers to the 3 x 3 photo display followers see when they view an individual's profile. Shortly after, businesses caught on to the trend and started creating branded Instagram business profiles. Following the type of content uploaded on Instagram, brands faced the challenge of curating their business grids to mimic the user-generated content already in existence. Since popular Instagram pages acted as personal brand identities, businesses transitioned into creating brand identities through their Instagram profiles. Recently, the number of business accounts on Instagram surpassed 200 million, showcasing the platform's success as a business marketing tool (Newberry, 2023).

As Instagram grew, so did the overlap between communication and commerce through the platform (Leaver et al., 2020). With the creation of Instagram business profiles, businesses were offered new ways to grow their businesses, with insights on the engagement of posts, follower demographics, and the ability to schedule out content. Meta business suite, an integrated marketing and advertising platform for Meta and Instagram, constantly updates its business feature to adapt to the fast-changing social media environment (Meta, 2023). Social media platforms need to adapt and innovate within their business model to stay competitive in this market space. One of the reasons that Instagram has remained popular is due to its ability to stay competitive and openness to adopting and implementing new trends in the social media world (Leaver et al., 2020). This was evident in 2018 when Instagram added its 24-hour stories feature, mimicking Snapchats unique update (Cakebeard, 2017). Within a year of Instagram stories, over 250 million Instagram users were uploading stories daily, which surpassed the total number of Snapchat users (Leaver et al., 2020). More recently, after the launch of TikTok in 2018 and its significant market takeover in 2020, Instagram rolled out its competitive feature of reels (Alexander, 2020)**.** With frequent updates and changes to the features on the platform, it has become even more difficult for SME owners to stay up to date on the fast-paced trends and usability changes in social media marketing, especially through Instagram.

Out of all features available for businesses on Instagram, the choice was made for this study to focus on the visual content that small businesses post on their grid. These images appear on their existing followers' feeds and create a brand identity on their profile grid. This is important as new audiences tend to evaluate a profile exclusively based on the branded Instagram grid (Morales, 2022). Consumers use the overall profile to form an attitude toward the brand, and a good first impression will influence their current and future behaviors. Direct online behaviors through Instagram can be a follow, engaging with content, visiting the brand's website, shopping online, and more. Future behaviors can be visiting the store, the intention of purchasing the products, and the opportunity of word of mouth - be it electronic or in real life. As previously noted, once users opt to follow an Instagram profile, they are consistently presented with that brand's content for as long as they remain a follower (Knoll, 2016; Jones et al., 2015). For this reason, it is advantageous for businesses to grow their Instagram following to reach more people. In the ensuing discussion, after the introduction of different types of brand identity and the hierarchy of effects model, this study will explore whether the number of followers influences customers' attitudes and future behavior toward SMEs.

For the stimulus material, it is decided to use an existing small business's Instagram account unknown to the tested audience. The stimulus material includes the Instagram business profile grid followed by three images uploaded by the SME. See Appendix B for stimulus material.

2.3 Building Brand Identity Through Images

The concept of brand identity is relevant to businesses, as it facilitates a relationship between the brand and its customers that goes beyond the functional benefits of the product. Brand identity can be described as a unique set of brand associations that brand strategists aspire to create or maintain (Aaker, 1996). Developing a strong brand identity is imperative to the success of a business and is regarded equally, if not more significant, than the quality of the product or service provided (Bernarto, 2020). For instance, Aaker (1996) states that overemphasizing product attributes over brand identity can be erroneous for the business. This downfall occurs when the business becomes too involved in its product features and cannot create an emotional connection with its audience, ultimately losing the edge of distinguishing itself from the competition. In particular, SMEs that seek to create an emotional bond or

relationship with their audience recognize the criticality of brand identity (Park & MacInnis, 2018). In Aaker's (1996) brand identity model, he breaks brand identity into four attributes: brand as a customer, brand as an organization, brand as a person, and brand as a symbol.

Firstly, this study created the stimulus of a brand as a person. While some research on this brand identity attribute focuses on brand personality, this research focuses on the brand-customer relationship created through brand as a person. Following Zhou and Xue's (2021) model of brand as a customer, images of customers were used to showcase the brand identity of the personalities portrayed by the customers. Then, with brand as an organization, branded content is focused beyond the product. In this study, the organization was portrayed through the employees and the culture created within the brand. Brand identity through organizational attributes is more resistant to competition, as copying a product is easier than mimicking an organization's unique values and culture (Aaker, 1996)**.** Finally, for brand as a product, the brand identity focuses on product attributes and functions. While important, as mentioned earlier, overemphasis on product attributes can strain the emotional identity of a brand (Aaker, 1996). Nonetheless, product features are still an important aspect of a brand and remain stimuli in this study. Furthermore, based on previous research by Zhou and Xue (2021), who found that the brand as a symbol received the least visual attention across all four brand identities, this study removes the brand as a symbol from its stimuli. Using eye-tracking technology, Zhou & Xue (2021) examined how brand identities on Instagram affect fixation frequency and its further influence on brand attitude. They concluded that product and customer-centric images drew the most attention with the longest fixation frequencies.

On Instagram, brands post different images to establish an effective brand identity on social media (Zhou & Xue, 2021). To stay connected with their audiences, which is important for SMEs who do not have the budget for traditional advertising, understanding which visual imagery to post would bring value to small business owners. SME owners want to build customer relationships and attempt to use social media networks to establish their brand identity. As stated by Aaker (1996), brand identity "is something that gets customers to buy the product or service because of how they perceive the brand." Thus, the SME's social media marketing goal is to create their brand's external identity through images and videos. Following the rationales of the hierarchy of effects in the (C-A-B) cognitive-affection-behavior model, a customer's cognitive responses to visual imagery associated with a brand might influence their emotional

attitudes towards the brand (Huang, 2017; Wijaya,2015; Poh & Adam, 2002)**.** Using the influence of Aaker's (1996) brand identity model, and previous research conducted by Zhou & Xue, this study created three visual stimuli for an SME's Instagram account.

1. Brand as a person (Customer Centric) - imagery focusing on interpersonal relationships with the targeted consumer.
2. Brand as an organization (Employee Centric) - imagery showcasing employees and community aspects.
3. Brand as a product (Product-Centric) -imagery of the utilization and capabilities of the product/service.

2.4 Hierarchy of Effects Model

This study follows the hierarchy of effects model in advertising which states that there is a systematic, psychological approach to how consumers respond to advertising, otherwise explained as the (C-A-B) cognitive-affect-behavior model (Huang et al., 2019, Holbrook & Batra, 1987). This model, while older, has been widely accepted and studied by academic researchers and advertisers for more than a century and continues to be relevant in today's digital world (Rehman et al., 2014; Weilbacher, 2001; Barry & Howard, 1990). The first state a consumer goes through when exposed to an advertisement is their cognitive response. This initial mental activity is reflected by the extent to which a consumer can recall a brand recall from the advertisement **(**Rehman et al., 2014; Wijaya, 2015). Subsequently, the consumer has an affected response, or an evoked emotion, from the advertisement (Huang et al., 2019). This component of the model is critical for success in advertising since an effective advertisement must create mental change in the consumer; he or she must have a changed opinion towards the brand, preferably an improved opinion **(**Eid et al., 2020; Wijaya, 2015; Rehman et al., 2014; Weilbacher, 2001). Finally, a consumer's final action toward the advertisements ends in a behavior or an intention to perform a behavior (Huang et al., 2019; Wijaya, 2015; Lukka & James, 2014).

In this study, the affective and behavioral elements of the model are tested in the forms of image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase and visit intentions. The cognitive element is not tested since the participants were directly introduced to the branded advertisement. It is important to note here that image likability, brand attitude, and brand trust fall into the

affection/emotional triggers of the model, and purchase and visit intentions fall into the behavior factors. The factors tested relate to each other as image likability and brand attitude are proven to be correlated to purchase and visit intention (Castaneda et al., 2009; Poh & Adam, 2002). The ultimate role of advertising is to transform a consumer's attitude toward the brand into a more informed and favorable perception (Wijaya, 2015; Aaker, 1996).

Through the ideology of the hierarchy of effects model, the AIDA model was additionally created and referred to the theory of communication in a four-step formula: Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. AIDA outlines how businesses must attract attention, maintain interest, and create desire in order to be a market leader, and finally influence an action, whether it be positive or negative (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Lukka & James, 2014; Rehman et al., 2014). This model has maintained relevance in advertising across the various digital transformations and paradigm shifts businesses and society have gone through. Despite communication channels digitalizing and the way advertising is communicated changing, consumer behavior continues to follow the AIDA model (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011).

More recently, the theory of the AIDA model has been further applied in advertising in various forms of digital media, including social media (Rehman et al., 2014). For example, a study by Lukka and James (2014) tested users' attitudes and behaviors in Facebook advertising. Understanding the importance of a user's attitude, Lukka and James (2014) began by testing a participant's attitude towards advertisements through Facebook. This resulted in three distinct clusters, which were then analyzed based on their attitudes and end behavior to the Facebook advertisements shown. Their results confirmed the applicability of the AIDA model in social media marketing since the model states that consumers first become aware of a product before creating any attitude and, in turn, behavior about the brand. In the clusters that had positive or neutral attitudes towards Facebook ads, Lukka and James (2014) found that these individuals would be willing to engage with an advertisement from a brand they know or follow.

Hassan et al. (2014), attempted to model the AIDA marketing strategy for social media usage in small businesses specifically. Their study aimed to create strategies for each step of the AIDA model, specifically for SME owners. Their findings confirmed that the AIDA model can extend to social media marketing. However, a limitation was that Hassan et al.'s (2014) study focused on qualitative interviews and lacked implementation of the proposed strategies.

Therefore, this current study approaches the problem quantitatively, testing different SME stimuli across the studied sample. This study uses the hierarchy of effects model to explain the responses to brand identity through social media marketing and how consumers react regarding their purchase and visit intentions. It is used to determine whether the type of visual images an SME posts on Instagram influences the affection and behavioral phase of the model, This was done by first measuring consumers varying levels of image likability towards the three different types of stimuli (H1) and subsequently whether image likability to a predictor of brand attitude and brand trust (H2). Following those measurements, the affective responses of a consumer was done by measuring whether exposure to the three different types of stimuli will influence a consumer's level of affection in terms of brand attitude (H3) and brand trust (H4). Next, the relation between brand attitude and trust towards the targeted behavior, purchase, and visit intentions was measured (H5 +H6). The final tests analyzed low v. high following on Instagram profiles and the affection and behavior responses towards them (H7 + H8); attitude and trust are higher with a high following, and purchase and visit intentions are higher with a higher following.
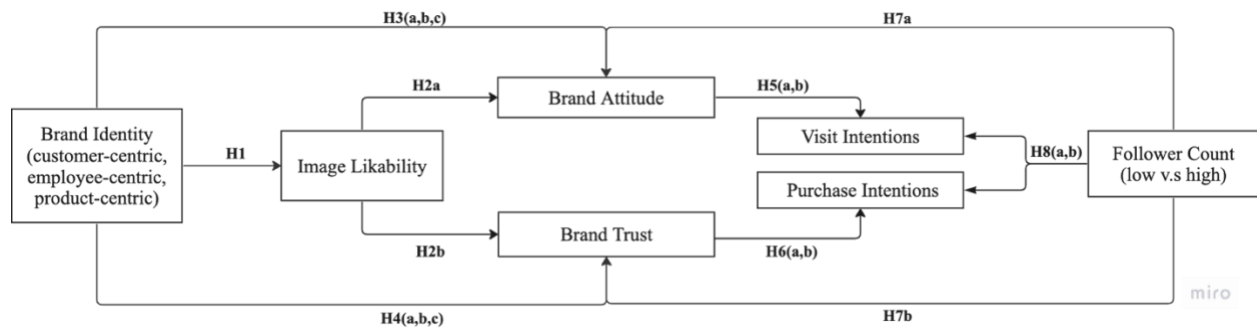

Figure 1: *Framework for studying the effect of brand identity and follower count on image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase and visit intentions.*

2.5 Theoretical Model

2.5.1 Image Likability

It is understood that images play a large role in social media marketing, especially through platforms such as Instagram. Therefore, image likability is likely to influence a consumer's brand perception. In this study, the term image likability is used synonymously to ad attitude. This is because current research has accepted branded social media images as a form of advertisement (Knoll, 2016; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011; Tuten, 2008). Ad attitude can be described as a predisposition to act favorably or unfavorably towards the advertisement shown, or in this case, the image (Sallam & Algammash, 2016). In studies by Poh and Adam (2002), they have found that while likeability is not a guarantee for customer behavior, it highly reinforces the effect of the advertisement. Creating likable content is challenging for SME owners who are still building up their brand identities and are unsure what content consumers like most, therefore we then hypothesize that:

H1: Differences in image likability can be observed between respondents in the customer-centric, employee-centric, and product-centric imagery conditions.

Also, image likability can influence a consumer's affective responses to brand attitude and brand trust. When a consumer is effectively affected by the image shown, then the action response of the consumer can be either positive or negative (Sallam & Algammash, 2016). When consumers perceive an image in favor, they are more likely to respond positively to the brand (Sallam & Algammash, 2016). However, if a customer perceives the advertisement as irritating, this can influence their future actions and emotions toward the brand (Ogba et al., 2012). This study hypothesizes that:

H2a: Image likability has a positive effect on brand attitude
H2b: Image likability has a positive effect on brand trust

2.5.2 Brand Attitude and Brand Trust

It is known that brand identification facilitates the formation of a bond between the consumer and the brand, thereby promoting a favorable attitude toward the brand that eventually leads to brand trust (Arghashi et al., 2021). As research previously states, brand attitude is a consumer's level of affection towards a brand and its product or service (He et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2014; Poh & Adam, 2002). Images, in particular, as a means of advertising, require less processing time than messages, enabling them to evoke emotional responses effectively (Huang, 2017). In social media marketing, carefully curated brand pages can influence a potential customer's first impression and create a positive attitude toward the account (Morales, 2022). As highlighted in the hierarchy of effects model, brand attitude can be derived as an effective response to the advertisement, or in this case, branded content an SME posts on Instagram (Eid, 2020). To test the impact social media marketing content has on a customer's brand attitude, the three proposed stimuli are tested against the control condition with no stimuli presented. This model has been further applied in social media in various studies, therefore this study hypothesis that:

H3a: Compared to respondents who are in the control condition, respondents who have been exposed to customer-centric imagery have a more positive brand attitude
H3b: Compared to respondents who are in the control condition, respondents who have been exposed to employee-centric imagery have a more positive brand attitude
H3c: Compared to respondents who are in the control condition, respondents who have been exposed to product-centric imagery have a more positive brand attitude

Additionally, an image has the potential to evoke an emotional response in the viewer, which can increase a feeling of brand trust. This study follows Delgado-Balster et al. (2003, page 11) definition of brand trust as "a feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand that it is based on the perceptions that the brand is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer." Prior studies in social media and brand trust have also adopted this definition (Huang, 2017; Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Li et al., 2008). Following the hierarchy of effects model, the affective responses to the visual imagery stimuli may influence the consumer's trust in the brand, thus hypothesizing:

H4a: Compared to respondents who are in the control condition, respondents who have been exposed to customer-centric imagery have a more brand trust

H4b: Compared to respondents who are in the control condition, respondents who have been exposed to employee-centric imagery have a more brand trust

H4c: Compared to respondents who are in the control condition, respondents who have been exposed to product-centric imagery have a more brand trust

2.5.3 Purchase and Visit Intentions

It has been stated that there exists a causal relationship between attitude and behavioral intention (Jung et al., 2014, Sallam & Algammash, 2016; Dam, 2020). Conceptually, if consumers have a positive attitude toward the brand, they may be more willing to purchase it. Another behavioral intention that may be influenced by a consumer's attitude toward a brand is their intention to visit the physical store (Alnsour & Al Faour, 2020). This study extends the influence of brand attitude on behavioral intentions and hypothesizes as follows:

H5a: Brand attitude has positive effects on purchase intentions

H5b: Brand attitude has positive effects on visit intentions

Using the same logical path of the hierarchy of effects model, we can associate brand trust as an affective element on how a consumer processes the effects of advertising or, in this study, social media images (Huang, 2017). Brand trust can be referred to as the customer's perception of a sense of security and the diminished risk they feel in association with the brand (Huang, 2017; Budiardjo, 2016; Laroche et al., 2012; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). If the consumer feels more confident about the future behaviors of the brand, this may influence their future purchase and visit intent. Thus this study hypothesizes that:

H6a: Brand trust has positive effects on purchase intentions

H6b: Brand trust has positive effects on visit intentions

2.5.4 Low v. High Following

      SMEs have a strong community element, so the SME brand needs to have a strong association with their city or region as it will build up credibility amongst the population (Aaker 1996). To stay competitive against larger businesses, SMEs focus on specific communities and build a loyal customer base, resulting in higher customer retention and profitability (Akbar et al., 2017). It is known that consumers quickly assess a brand's social media based on cues from their profile, including the number of followers (Dias, 2021). While a high follower count is the goal for many businesses, there is reason to believe that the number of followers does not automatically translate to higher conversations from consumers (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014). A study by Dias (2021) found that a higher number of followers influenced brand trust; however, a larger number of followers did not influence a brand's perceived quality and purchase intention. Additionally, Dias (2021) states that more research needs to be conducted to understand better the influence of follower count on brand attitude. Following this reasoning, this study aims to test the influence of a high vs. low number of follower counts on consumers' affective and behavioral factors toward the brand. Through previous research on niche marketing, there are indications that a smaller and targeted follower count on Instagram could positively influence a consumers attitude and trust of the SME and, subsequently, their purchase and visit intention (Akbar et al., 2017; Parrish, 2003) resulting in the hypotheses that:

H7a: Brand attitudes are higher for an SME with a lower number of followers when compared to one with a higher number of followers
H7b: Brand trust are higher for an SME with a lower number of followers when compared to one with a higher number of followers

H8a: Purchase intentions are higher for an SME with a lower number of followers when compared to one with a higher number of followers
H8b: Visit intentions are higher for an SME with a lower number of followers when compared to one with a higher number of followers

3. Research and Methodology

Using the theory and framework discussed in the previous section, the following chapter will outline the development and structure of the experiment. The experimental design and the conditions, stimulus, and reasoning for the chosen SME will be introduced first. Then, the sampling methodology and criteria will be detailed, as well as the procedure for data collection. Finally, this chapter will provide an overview of each set of questions asked to the respondents: brand attitude, brand trust, image likability, and purchase and visit intentions.

3.1 Experimental Design

This quantitative study assesses the effects of the three forms of visual imagery on consumers' perceptions of image likability, brand attitude, and brand trust, as well as the extended relationship between purchase intentions and visit intentions. Additionally, this study explores the relationship between the former variables and follower counts on Instagram for SMEs. A 3 (customer-centric, employee-centric, and product-centric) X 2 (high follower count vs. low follower count) between-subject factorial survey experiment is created with a control group. Therefore, seven conditions were used, and participants were randomly assigned to one condition. Within the control group, the participants were introduced to the SME similarly to the manipulated conditions. However, in the manipulated conditions, the participants were prompted to take time to view the SME's Instagram profile. In the control condition, this prompt was omitted. The two prompts will be provided when the researcher details the procedural steps of the experiment. To create the stimulus material, the researcher sampled fifty SME Instagram accounts to estimate the number of followers to test. With a lower quartile of 2,452 followers, a median of 6,611, and an upper quartile of 12,300, this study proposes to create a 'low' follower count profile of 2,452 followers and a 'high' follower count profile with 12,300 followers.

3.1.1 Selection of SME

For the stimulus material, existing images from the chosen SME were selected. The author selected Wyatt's Coffee since it fit the criteria of being an SME with considerable community influence and an active social media presence. Additionally, Wyatt's Coffee was selected because the brand was unknown to the sampled population.

Many industries fall under the scope of small businesses; however, the coffee shop industry is a viable market to study. This is because of the broad audience of coffee shop culture. The concept of coffee shops has become more than just a place to eat and drink, transitioning to an important urban social space for gathering and constructing communities within modern society (Cowan 2005 as cited by Ferreira et al., 2021). Marketing, especially through social media, for coffee shops has shown that consumers select coffee shops using rational decisions (Jang & Lee, 2019). This furthers the research method of the hierarchy of effects model, which assumes that consumers react rationally to advertisements. A consumer selects a given coffee shop based on the connection to the brand and the brand loyalty created through the positive relationships created through the brand image (Jang & Lee, 2019; Park & Namkung, 2022). Additionally, coffee shops create a strong community that tends to influence people's decisions to visit based on word of mouth, community ties, and social media presence. Coffee brands also have a plethora of content to use for their social media sites and can use this content to show how their customers' lives are positively impacted by the brand (Park & Namkung, 2022). Additionally, data reveals that the coffee shop industry in the US is projected to grow and reach 237.6 billion dollars by 2025 (Park & Namkung, 2022). Apart from being a growing market, recent research shows that coffee shops in shopping streets boost the foot traffic and economy of neighboring stores (Wrigley, et al., 2015). While expanding, the market is becoming saturated, so research on how best to build positive customer perceptions in the coffee shop market is vital (Jang & Lee, 2019).

3.2 Sampling

The experiment was designed and programmed in Qualtrics. It was created in English as the targeted group is from the USA. The questionnaire was distributed online from April 16th until May 11th. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling through social media allows the researcher to widen the sample to those who may not be in their convenience sample (Leighton et al., 2021). Using social media was especially useful in this study since a criterion for participation was having an active Instagram account. Therefore individuals who were reached out through Instagram or found the survey through Instagram already fit the sampling criterium. Snowball sampling was conducted by specifically asking people that met the criteria to participate in the experiment and asking

them to distribute the survey to their respective networks. The researcher and peers sent the survey link via several online platforms, such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and personal messaging. In snowball sampling, it is important to keep the snowball active, meaning the researcher had to repeatedly post and share the survey across all forms of social media (Leighton et al., 2021). After a month, all seven conditions contained a satisfactory number of responses. Therefore, data gathering was complete, and the survey was closed.

The eligible respondents to participate in the experiment were individuals aged 18-58 who use Instagram and live in the United States of America. Approximately 77% of all Instagram users fall between the age range of 18-58 (Zote, 2023). The cut-off of 58 was chosen as the researcher used generational age ranges to group the most active Instagram users. The research chose to include individuals belong to Generation X, Millennial, and upper end of Generation Z. For this reason, the sampling age was between 18 and 58. The minimum requirement of each condition was 25 responses, adding up to a minimum of 175 participants. After data collection was completed, a total of 400 people started the survey and agreed to participate in the study. Of these 400 respondents, 352 fit the age range of 18-58 years old. Then, of the 352, 331 answered 'yes' to having an Instagram account. In the end, a total of 246 respondents completed the entire survey - these comprise the valid sample on which all subsequent analyses are performed.

Of the 246 complete responses, the observed age range was between 18-58. 18.3% of respondents were between 18 and 26, 66.3% were between 27 and 42, and 15.4% were between 43 and 58. In the sample, 167 were female (67.9%), 73 were male (29.7%), 4 were non-binary (1.7%), and two respondents preferred not to say.

3.3 Procedure

After the first version of the survey was created, it was pre-tested by twenty respondents. The responses were not included in the analysis of the data. The purpose of this pretest was to test the data collection in SPSS—the changes made after the pre-tests were recoding Likert scale values for questions to ensure the numbers programmed in the data aligned with the numbers asked in the questions. After the completion of the pre-tests, the data collection began. The survey was distributed online for one month.

Participants were asked for consent to participate when they first entered the experiment. They were informed that they could exit the survey at any point and were given a point of contact if they had any further questions or concerns. Then respondents were asked screener questions to ensure they fit the criteria. If they did not, the survey would end. The first screener question asked about age range (Under 18, 18-26, 27-35, 46- 43, 44-58, 59 +), then they were asked gender (male, female, non-binary, prefer not to say), they were then prompted to fill in what city they currently live in. Finally, they were asked whether they had an active Instagram account (yes, no). If the participant met all the requirements, they were prompted to the stimulus material.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the seven stimulus groups or the control condition. If the participant was part of the stimulus conditions, they were introduced to the SME with this prompt scenario:

Scenario:
Wyatt's Coffee is a locally owned cafe that opened a year ago in your neighborhood. Imagine you hear about Wyatt's Coffee through a friend, and you then go to check out their Instagram page. Take some time to view Wyatt's Coffee's Instagram profile page and the following photos provided as if you were deciding to visit this cafe.

The stimulus material consisted of an Instagram profile page with either a low or high number of followers, followed by three images from one of the three brand identity categories stated earlier. The three categories tested were customer-centric, employee-centric, and product-centric images. The control group was exposed to a different scenario prompt:

Control Scenario:
Wyatt's Coffee is a locally owned cafe that opened up a year ago in your neighborhood. You have heard about the cafe before through some friends but haven't been to check it out yet. Continue to view Wyatt's Coffee.

In the control group, the only image shown was a photo of the outside of the SME tested.

The first questions that followed the stimulus material asked about the attitude towards the brand. Followed by questions about trust in the brand and image likability. Lastly, questions about purchase and visit intention regarding the SME were posed. The survey ended with unrequired questions about marital status and education level. These questions were deemed irrelevant to the study's outcome and were not analyzed further.

3.4 Measurements

The complete survey is included in Appendix A. The main variables measured and analyzed were (1) image likability, (2) brand attitude, (3) brand trust, and (4) visit and purchase intention. A factor analysis and reliability test was conducted for all variables. This was done to prepare the variables for hypothesis testing.

3.4.1 Image Likability

Image likability was measured on a 4-item, 7-point Likert scale adapted from Poh & Adam (2002). This scale measures participants' attitudes toward the ad; however, the questions were adapted, replacing the term ad with images since social media content has been attributed as a form of advertisement. The likability towards the images was measured by asking the following questions with choices of (1= 'strongly disagree' to 7= 'strongly agree'): (1) How would you describe your attitude towards these images, (2) how favorable do you find these images, (3) how irritating do you find these images, (4) how interesting do you find these images. A reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha =.91. A new variable was created for image likability based on the mean of all four items. The new variable created scored $M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.37$, with a minimum score of 1.50 and a maxim score of 7.00.

3.4.2 Brand Attitude

Respondent's brand attitude was measured on a 4-item, 7-point Likert scale adapted from He et al. (2021). This scale measures participants' attitudes towards a brand by asking the following questions with choices of (1= 'strongly disagree' to 7= 'strongly agree'): (1) This brand is desirable, (2) I have a positive attitude toward the brand, (3) this brand is attractive, (4) I like this brand. The four items, which were Likert-scale based, were entered into a factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues, KMO =

.839 chi-squared ($N = 246$, 6) = 775.68 $p = $ <.001. A reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha =.93. A new variable was created for brand attitude based on the mean of all four items. The new variable created scored $M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.21$ and a minimum recorded score of 1.00, and a maximum of 7.00.

3.4.3 Brand Trust

To measure respondents' brand trust, scales based on Delgado-Bastella (2003) and Jung (2014) were combined and measured on a 9-item, 7-point Likert scale. The first four questions were based on the scale by Jung (2014) and measured on a scale of (1= 'strongly disagree' to 7= 'strongly agree'): (1) This brand meets my expectations, (2) I feel confident about this brand, (3) This brand will not disappoint me, (4) this brand guarantees satisfaction. The remaining five questions were based on Delgado-Bastella's (2003) 8-question scale. The first set of questions in Delgado-Bastella's (2003) scale is based on the fiability dimension of brand trust or the perception that a brand can fulfill a customer's needs. This scale was marginally adapted for use in the present study, with the omission of several questions that were not relevant. As with the scale used by Jung (2014), all brand trust questions were measured by (1= 'strongly disagree' to 7= 'strongly agree'): (5) with this brand, I obtain what I look for in a product/service. The second part of Delgado-Bastella's (2003) scale was based on the intentionality and emotional security of brand trust: (6) This brand would be honest and sincere in addressing my concerns, (7) this brand would make any effort to satisfy my needs, (8) I could rely on this brand to solve any problem with the product/service, (9) this brand would be interested in my satisfaction. The nine items which were Likert-scale based were entered into a factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues, KMO = .928 chi-squared ($N = 234$, 36) = 1899.44, $p = $ <.001. A reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha =.95. A new variable was created for brand trust based on the mean of all nine items. The new variable created scored $M = 4.76$ $SD = 1.11$ and a minimum recorded score of 1.00, and a maximum of 7.00.

3.4.4 Purchase and Visit Intentions

Purchase intentions was measured on a 3-item, 7-point Likert scale as adapted from Faircloth et al. (2001). This scale measures participants' purchase intentions by asking the following question "How would you describe your purchase intentions towards this business"

based on three responses in a seven-point three-item scale: (1) unlikely/likely, (2) improbable/probable, (3) impossible/possible. A reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha =.96. A new variable was created for brand attitude based on the mean of all four items. The new variable created scored $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.54$, with a minimum score of 1.00 and a maximum score of 7.00.

The same set of questions was then applied to visit intentions, which were measured using the same scale adapted from Faircloth et al. (2001). This scale measures participants' purchase intentions by asking the following question "How would you describe your visit intentions towards this business" based on three responses in a seven-point three-item scale: (1) unlikely/likely, (2) improbable/probable, (3) impossible/possible. A reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha =.92. A new variable was created for brand attitude based on the mean of all four items. The new variable created scored $M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.48$, with a minimum score of 1.00 and a maximum score of 7.00.

4. Results

After the experiment was conducted, the researcher used SPSS to sort, format, and run statistical tests to discover significance across the stated hypotheses. The following chapter provides insights into the tests conducted.

4.1 Data formation and statistical tests

SPSS was used to analyze the data and to either accept or reject the previously formulated hypotheses. The results found after the analysis are presented in the following section. The main variables used were image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase and visit intention. Besides that, comparisons were made between the various conditions (type of content and low v. high follower counts). See Table 1 for Stimuli conditions.

Table 1: *Stimuli conditions*

Conditions	1	2	3	4
	Customer-centric	Employee-Centric	Product-Centric	Control
Low	C1	C2	C3	C7
High	C4	C5	C6	

Image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase and visit intentions were measured on a continuous level. The conditions (type of content and low v. high follower counts) are represented by categorical variables. For hypotheses H1, H3, and H4 the independent variable was one of the categorical variables, and the dependent variable was continuous. Since four categories were simultaneously compared (C1, C2, C3, and C7), one-way ANOVA tests were conducted. To gauge whether the difference in means between conditions is large, we used Cohen (1988) guidelines for interpreting eta squared: Values can either refer to small (0.01-0.05), medium (0.06-0.13), or large (>0.14) differences. For hypotheses H2, H5, and H6, both the independent and dependent variables were continuous, and regression analyzes were conducted. For regression analysis, the following scales were used to determine correlation effects:.10 to .29 is small; .30 to .49 is medium; .50 or higher is strong (Pallant, 2020). For H7 and H8, the independent variable was one of the categorical variables, and the dependent

variable was continuous; therefore, since only two categories were simultaneously compared, independent t-tests were conducted.

4.2 Image Likability

The first hypothesis was to see if the brand identity category respondents were exposed to produced different levels of image likability. There was a statistically significant difference between groups determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(3,242) = 2.79$, $p = .041$). An LSD post hoc test revealed that respondents that were exposed to product-centric images ($M= 5.32$, $SD = 1.38$) had a statistically significant higher image likability than compared to customer-centric ($M = 4.79$, $SD =1.36$), $p = .020$. The effect size was small ($n^2 =.03$). From this outcome, it can be concluded that there does exist a difference in respondents' likability towards the images shown between product-centric images and customer-centric images exists. There was no statistically significant difference between the other categories. For full results see Table 1.

After that, a regression analysis was conducted to test the second hypothesis. The hypothesis stated that a high score on image likability would lead to a high score on brand attitude. Linear regression was conducted with brand attitude as a criterium. The predictor was image likability. The model was found to be significant $F(1,244) = 327.36$, $p = <.001$, $R^2=.571$. The explained variance of the model was 57.1%. Image likability statistically significantly predicted a respondent's brand attitude. Image likability was found to be a significant and strong predictor for brand attitude ($\beta =.66$, $p = <.001$). From this outcome, it can be concluded that a respondent's score on image likability is a significant predictor of their brand attitude, therefore accepting H2a.

Next, the hypothesis stated that a high score on image likability would lead to a high score on brand trust. Linear regression was conducted with brand attitude as a criterium. The predictor was image likability. The model was found to be significant $F(1,244) = 196.20$, $p = <.001$, $R^2=.44$. The explained variance of the model was 44.3%. Image likability was found to be a significant and strong predictor for brand trust ($\beta =.54$, $p = <.001$). Image likability statistically significantly predicted a respondent's brand trust, the two factors are positively related. H2b is accepted.

4.3 Brand Attitude and Brand Trust

The third hypothesis stated that it was expected that respondents who were not in the control condition would report a more positive brand attitude toward the SME. There was a statistically significant difference between groups determined by one-way ANOVA $(F(3,242) = 2.92, p = .035)$. An LSD post hoc test revealed that the brand attitude of respondents that were exposed to employee-centric images ($M = 5.25, SD = 1.11$), $p = .010$) and product-centric images ($M = 5.27, SD = 1.18$), $p = .009$) had a significantly higher brand attitude than respondents who were in the control condition ($M = 4.55, SD = 1.11$). The effect size was small ($n^2 = .03$). Still, it can be concluded that exposure to images in the employee-centric and product-centric categories led to a higher brand attitude than respondents who were not shown brand identity images, accepting H3b and H3c. There was no statistically significant difference between customer-centric brand attitude and the control condition $p = .109$. H1a was therefore rejected.

The fourth hypothesis stated that it was expected that respondents who were not in the control condition would report more brand trust toward the SME. There was a statistically significant difference between groups determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(3,242) = 3.59, p = .014$). An LSD post hoc test revealed that there was significantly higher brand trust in respondents that were exposed to employee-centric images ($M = 5.07, SD = 1.04$), $p = .010$) than compared to the control condition ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.06$). The effect size was small ($n^2 = .04$). From this outcome, it can be concluded that respondents who were shown employee-centric images compared to no brand identity images had more trust in the brand, accepting H4b. There was no statistically significant difference between customer-centric, product-centric brand trust and the control condition $p = .190$, and $p = .125$; H4a and H4c were therefore rejected. Interestingly, there was also a significant difference between employee-centric ($M = 5.07, SD = 1.04$) and customer-centric categories ($M = 4.66, SD = 1.24$), $p = .023$. This indicates that respondents had a higher trust in the brand when shown images of employees over images of customers.

Table 2: Results ANOVA analyses for image likability, brand attitude, and brand trust.

	M (SD)	*p* for difference with			
		(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
Image likability					
(1) Customer-centric condition	4.79 (1.36)	n/a	.104	**.020**	
(2) Employee-centric condition	5.15 (1.35)	.104	n/a	.460	
(3) Product-centric condition	5.32 (1.38)	**.020**	.460	n/a	
Brand attitude					
(1) Customer-centric condition	4.99 (1.31)	n/a	.180	.164	.109
(2) Employee-centric condition	5.25 (1.11)	.180	n/a	.940	**.010**
(3) Product-centric condition	5.27 (1.17)	.164	.940	n/a	**.009**
(4) Control condition	4.55 (1.11)	.109	**.010**	**.009**	n/a
Brand trust					
(1) Customer –centric condition	4.66 (1.12)	n/a	0.23	.752	.190
(2) Employee-centric condition	5.07 (1.04)	**.023**	n/a	.053	**.003**
(3) Product-centric condition	4.71 (1.12)	.752	.053	n/a	.125
(4) Control condition	4.33 (1.11)	.190	**.003**	.125	n/a

Note. Significant p-values are flagged by using a bold font.

4.4 Purchase and Visit Intentions

The fifth hypothesis explored whether brand attitude would predict respondents' scores on visit and purchase intentions. A positive relationship between the variables was expected. For H5a, linear regression was conducted with visit intention as a criterium. The predictor was brand attitude. The model was found to be significant, $F(1,244) = 117.32$, $p = <.001$, $R^2 = .32$. The explained variance of the model was 32.5%. Brand attitude was found to be a strong and positive significant predictor for visit intentions ($\beta = .69$, p = <.001). The outcome explains that brand attitude would significantly predict a respondent's visit intentions. H5a is accepted.

For H5b, linear regression was conducted with purchase intention as a criterium. The predictor was brand attitude. The model was found to be significant $F(1,244) = 121.24$, $p = <.001$, $R^2 = .33$. Brand attitude was found to be a significant predictor for purchase intentions ($\beta = $

.73, p = <.001). The outcome explains that brand attitude significantly predicts a respondent's purchase intentions, H5b is accepted.

The sixth hypothesis stated that brand trust would predict respondents' scores on visit and purchase intentions. A positive relationship between the variables was expected. For H6a, linear regression was conducted with visit intention as a criterium. The predictor was brand trust. The model was found to be significant, $F(1, 244) = 142.65$, p = <.001, R^2 =.36. The explained variance of the model was 36.9%. Brand trust was found to be a significant predictor for visit intentions (β =.81, p = <.001). The outcome explains that brand attitude predicts a respondent's purchase intentions significantly, and H6a is accepted.

For H6b, linear regression was conducted with purchase intention as a criterium. The predictor was brand trust. The model was found to be significant $F(1, 244) = 142.65$, p = <.001, R^2 = .36. Brand trust was found to be a significant predictor for purchase intentions (β = .81, p = <.001). The outcome explains that brand attitude significantly predicts a respondent's purchase intentions and H6b is accepted.

4.5 Low v. high follower

The sixth hypothesis stated that respondents who were exposed to an Instagram profile with a low follower count would score higher on brand attitude and brand trust than respondents exposed to an Instagram profile with a high follower count. The independent-samples t-tests showed no significant difference found in scores for respondents in the low follower category (M= 5.08, SD =1.23) than respondents in the high follower category (M = 5.13, SD =1.17) and their brand attitude t(244) = -.28, p = .515. Additionally, the independent samples t-tests showed no significant difference found in scores for respondents in the low follower category (M = 4.74, SD =1.08) and high follower count (M = 4.79, SD = 1.13), for brand trust t(244) = -.28, p = .742. As there was no significant difference between low and high followers, it can be concluded that follower count does not have and effect on respondents' brand attitude or brand trust. H6a and H6b were rejected.

The seventh hypothesis stated that respondents who were exposed to an Instagram profile with a low follower count would score lower on visit and purchase intentions than respondents exposed to an Instagram profile with a high follower count. The t-tests showed that respondents in the low follower category did not score significantly lower on visit intentions (M = 4.94, SD =

1.49) or purchase intentions (*M* = 4.89, *SD* =1.53) than respondents in the high follower category respectively, *M* = 4.93, *SD* = 1.47, t(244)=.04, *p* = .487 for visit intentions; *M* = 4.92, *SD* = 1.56, t(244)= -.13, *p* = .769 for purchase intentions. As there was no significant difference between low and high followers, it can be concluded that follower count does not have an effect on respondents' visit or purchase intentions H7a and H7b were rejected.

5. Conclusion

Based on this study's findings, an answer to this study's research questions: "*How do respondents exposed to an SME's Instagram account images (customer-centric, employee-centric, or product-centric) compare to those not exposed in terms of image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase/visit intentions*" and "*Are customer perceptions of brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase/visit intentions influenced by an SME's Instagram follower count?*" can be formulated. Per reminder, the hypothesized model is depicted again below.
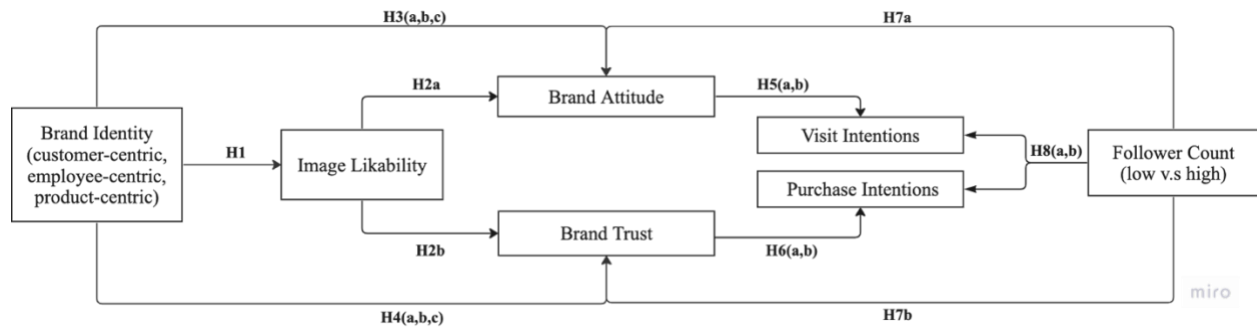
Figure 1: *Framework for studying the effect of brand identity and follower count on image likability, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase and visit intentions.*

The conclusion regarding the second research question is short: The follower count of an Instagram profile did not influence customer perception and behaviors. Neither of the predicted effects of the follower count (i.e., H7 and H8) were significant. The answer to the first research question is more nuanced, though: The outcomes showed that differences in customer reactions existed, depending on which type of content respondents were exposed to. Respondents found product-centric images to be more likable when compared to customer-centric images (H1). Furthermore, image likability was a significant and positive predictor of brand attitude and brand trust, respectively (i.e., H2a and H2b).

The other hypotheses that were tested and which showed significant results were hypotheses formulated about customer perceptions of the brand based on exposure to (customer-centric, employee-centric, or product-centric images) and the control group. Two significant results were regarding respondents' brand attitudes after exposure to employee-centric and product-centric images (H3b and H3c). Both stimuli resulted in a higher brand attitude when compared to respondents in the control group.

Similarly, two significant results found were regarding respondents' brand trust. The first finding was that respondents exposed to employee-centric images exhibited higher levels of brand trust when compared to the control group (H4b). It was additionally discovered that respondents had a higher level of trust in the brand when exposed to employee-centric images compared to customer-centric images. The final two results that showed to be significant were for customer behaviors. Both purchase and visit intentions were significantly predicted by brand attitude and brand trust, meaning respondents who scored higher on brand attitude and brand trust scored higher on both purchase and visit intentions (H5 and H6).

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Customer perceptions across forms of brand identity

Of the three content categories studied, employee-centric images produced the highest scores on customer perceptions of brand attitude and brand trust toward the SME. This finding aligns with Aaker's (1996) identification of brand as an organization as one of the most resistant to competition. Brands that focus on brand as an organization can share their organization's unique values and culture, which helps cultivate a sense of outward identity toward customers (Aaker, 1996). In general, SME owners have stated that part of the success of their businesses is the family aspect created with the team and the community (Bonsu & Kuofie, 2019). Community aspects are essential in SMEs since they strongly influence the local community where they exist (Besser & Miller, 2004). Although the faces of the employees shown to the respondents were unfamiliar, the actions shown in the employee images — handing over a coffee or making an espresso shot, showcase the culture and community values of the SME. Customers who know the brand would feel strong emotions when seeing an image of an employee they have a relationship with, and future customers can identify with the employee interaction. While especially true in coffee shop culture, the positive influence of employee-centric images can be applied across any industry.

Regarding the two remaining content categories: customer-centric and product-centric. Interestingly, customer-centric images showed no significance on consumer perceptions of brand attitude and brand trust. Therefore, this study states that customer-centric images do not influence a customer's perception of a brand. Future customers might want to make an impression of the brand instead of being shown the smiling faces of individuals they cannot

connect with. On the other hand, product-centric images positively influenced brand attitude but not brand trust. As stated earlier, brand as a product creates a weaker brand identity since products are more easily replicated. While consumers might view product-centric images in good favor, the product itself does not convey enough emotional change to influence the level of brand trust.

To summarize, employee-centric images exhibited the greatest influence on customers' perceptions. This might be because employees hold a more authentic identification with a brand. While faces typically produce a higher level of engagement from users, customer-centric images held no significance in customer perceptions. Lastly, product-centric photos were semi-influential on consumer perceptions, creating a higher brand attitude but not brand trust.

To further elaborate on the study's first research question, the following section develops the relation between images and the affective responses of advertisements in image likability, brand attitude, and brand trust. In the hierarchy of effects model, the affective response is the advertisement's ability to create a changed emotional state in the consumer (Eid, 2020; Wijaya, 2015; Aaker, 1996). The changed emotional state tested in this study are the variables of image likability, brand attitude, and brand trust. The results showed; indeed, certain types of images evoked more emotions towards the brand than others. Respondents that had been exposed to product-centric images scored higher on image likability than those who had been exposed to customer-centric images (H1).

Interestingly, this goes against the theory that images that contain faces create more engagement on Instagram (Yang et al., 2021; Bakhshi et al., 2014). Although in another study, Li and Xie (2020) found that faces increased engagement on Twitter posts but not on Instagram. A reason for this outcome may be that the faces were unfamiliar to the audience, and in fact, photos of the product gave a better impression of the brand. The product-centric images showed consisted of various menu options available at the coffee shop, whereas the customer-centric images were of people posing. Therefore, consumers might have found it easier to like product images instead of photos of strangers. No other significance was found across the remaining interactions amongst the stimuli and image likability. Subsequently, image likability was positively and significantly associated with brand attitude and trust (H2a & H2b). Hence, a high score on image likability means that overall, people have a more positive attitude towards the

brand and higher trust in the brand. This outcome follows similar studies (Sallam & Algammash, 2016; Mukherjee & Banerjee, 2019).

Additionally, this research studied the relationship between Instagram images and their influence on customer perceptions — brand attitude and brand trust. As previously stated, brand attitude is a consumer's level of affection towards a brand and its product or service (He et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2014; Poh & Adam, 2002). The respondents in the experiment were only shown the Instagram profile of the tested SME and the following stimuli images (customer-centric, employee-centric, and product-centric) to form an attitude toward the brand. Therefore, any significant differences in brand attitude across the stimuli can be inferred to be due to the different affective responses the images create. Compared to the control study, both employee-centric and product-centric images were significantly higher in brand attitude (H3b & H3c). This is aligned with the reasoning that having an active social media presence, such as an Instagram profile, will impact a customer's perception of brand attitude (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Additionally, brand identity increases a consumer's ability to form emotional responses toward a brand (Park & MacInnis, 2018). This study concludes that product-centric and employee-centric images hold a strong brand identity through Instagram. In contrast, customers-centric images did not show significance in an affective response. This could be because customers do not represent the brand enough for people to have an evoked emotion towards the brand it represents.

Next, the researcher tested the levels of brand trust in respondents. Brand trust is defined in this research as "a feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand." Brand trust is important for business as it keeps the customer returning and eventually becomes brand loyalty (Bernarto et al., 2020). While brand trust is also built over time, the first impression of a brand, especially through photos, is influential to a consumer's initial trust (Xia et al., 2020). Only employee-centric images in the variable brand trust showed significantly larger scores than in the control study. Respondents exposed to employee-centric images had a significantly higher brand trust than those exposed to customer-centric (H4). As brand trust is the trusted interaction with the business, it makes sense that employee images evoke a higher emotion of brand trust.

Lastly, this study analyzed the end behavior of a consumer. Following the hierarchy of effects model, future customer behavior was tested in the visit and purchase intentions factors. It was found that brand attitude and brand trust were significant predictors of customer end

behavior (H5 and H6). The results follow that behavior is created when the advertisement, or in this study, the Instagram images, evokes an emotional response in the customer. Since the ultimate goal of social media marketing is conversion and sales, the most profitable use for an SME to utilize Instagram is to build up a positive customer perception (Wijaya, 2015; Aaker, 1996).

5.1.2 Customer Perceptions in low vs. high follower count

The following section will provide more insights into this paper's second research question. The final aim was to test the influence of follower counts on customer perceptions and behaviors. Previous research showed no conclusive study on whether or not follower counts, especially for an SME, showed any effect (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014; Dias, 2021). Unsurprisingly, this study showed the same. Since no significance was found in low vs. high follower counts, this study can confirm that follower count does not immediately influence a customer's perception of an SME (H7 and H8). Using these results, SME owners can choose to invest their limited resources into different aspects of social media marketing apart from follower growth.

However, the insignificant results do not conclude that follower count is not an important metric when building an Instagram business page. While the follower count might not influence new customers, the SME has other advantages in growing a following on Instagram. For instance, the larger the following, the more reach an SME has. As stated earlier, once a user follows a brand page, they will be continuously shown posts from that brand, increasing brand awareness (Knoll, 2016; Jones et al., 2015). This is a vital part of social media marketing, as building and maintaining customer relationships are becoming imperative to a successful business (Jones, 2015). Although, there is a caution that SME owners should avoid exaggerating a large follower count, as these numbers can be seen as less credible (De Vries, 2019). While this study found no significant impact of follower counts on customer perceptions, it is important to recognize that follower count remains a valuable metric for other goals in social media marketing.

5.2 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

5.2.1 Limitations

As with most studies, this thesis also suffered some limitations. One of the methodological limitations is related to the experiment's lack of manipulation check. Although the images shown had clear distinctions between content types, there was no check to see if the respondents clearly identified which type of stimuli (customer-centric, employee-centric, or product-centric) they were shown. Additionally, the follower count was purposely not called attention to. This was put in place to see if follower count was even a factor that respondents used to create a perception of a brand. However, since the Instagram profiles were shown as images through Qualtrics, it is possible that respondents did not look at the follower count as much as if they were scrolling through an actual Instagram page. Therefore, the distinguishment between follower counts should have been clearly stated in the introduction to the SME. A manipulation check for follower count could have also been used to ensure the respondents were aware of the stimulus material tested.

Another limitation this study faced was the prejudgment some respondents might have felt toward coffee shops. While the research to select coffee shops indicated why this type of SME was one of the most universal among individuals, a respondent's affinity to or against coffee shops could have persuaded their responses apart from the stimuli shown. Some respondents gave feedback that while they enjoyed the survey, they were not a fan of coffee and felt that their answers would not represent the brand well. Regarding this study's focus on SMEs, a limitation exists. This study did not consider the different perceptions individuals may have toward SMEs. For instance, some respondents may have an existing affinity with supporting local businesses, while others may opt for a large franchise's convenience. This could have been monitored with a manipulation check to see whether or not respondents had any preexisting emotional affliction towards supporting SMEs.

Additionally, there was a much greater percentage of female respondents than male respondents. A more diverse gender sample could have resulted in different results. However, research and available Instagram usage statistics have shown that there is a larger percentage of females on the Instagram app than males. At the beginning of the data collection, the original aim was to observe individuals over 35. However, upon further research into social media users' stats, the researcher extended the age range to include respondents aged 18-58. However, since

several respondents who were under 35 during the initial round of data collection were exited from the experiment, there could have been more data for this experiment.

5.2.2 Future Research

While this research collected enough responses to fill the criterium, future research could benefit from enlarging the sample. By doing this, the sample could include a broader range of customer perceptions, such as brand loyalty and word of mouth. Besides that, more insights into this topic could be gained by creating a stronger association with SMEs. Future research could benefit by conducting in-person studies where users are given time to scroll through several different SME Instagram profile pages. Using eye tracking and time duration for each respondent, future research could discover which parts of the Instagram profile most influence consumers. As stated, there was a shift towards social media sharing images in 2016; however, social media culture is constantly evolving. Future research could further apply the same brand identity methodology to short-form videos.

Additionally, it is understood that a mix of content should be uploaded onto a business's Instagram account. Future research could create a mix of content categories to discover which assortment of (customer-centric, employee-centric, and product-centric) images influences the highest level of positive customer perceptions.

5.3 Practical Implications for SMEs

This study offers important practical implications for social media managers and SME owners. First, the heart of this investigation was to determine what kind of images SME owners should post on Instagram. The results showed that employee-centric images created the most positive customer perceptions throughout all other stimuli. This is a unique insight for SME owners. As mentioned, there is an overload of information on the internet about how to build a business through social media. By understanding that employee-centric images influence customers, SME owners can prioritize highlighting strong team culture and a strong employee-customer relationship in their Instagram grids. The author wants to emphasize that even though employee-centric images hold high significance, it is essential to diversify Instagram images. This paper only serves as a recommendation as to what images hold the most influence. For

instance, a mix of employee-centric and product-centric images could be used as a starting point for an SME when building up its social media presence.

Secondly, it is shown that investment in building and maintaining a solid customer perception is more influential than growing a large following. The strong image likability and customer perception relationship show that images highly influence customers. Unlike traditional forms of marketing, social media marketing is heavily built on continuous relationship building. This means there must be a steady stream of visual content created for SME owners to utilize platforms such as Instagram best. While there are many tips on building a social media presence, this research suggests the following through the results found. The most useful way to use Instagram for business is to build a brand identity visually. Most SME owners stated they understand that social media presence is essential but do not know where to start. Building up a brand identity will positively influence customer perceptions. This research shows that employee-centric and product-centric images foster the most positive customer perceptions and that strong customer brand perceptions lead to increased purchase and visit intentions.

6. References

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Appendix A: Survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey for my Master's Thesis Research project; your time is greatly appreciated.

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT: Tatiana Radulovic, 658663tr@student.eur.nl

DESCRIPTION You are invited to **participate in research about small businesses and social media marketing**. The study aims to understand how consumers perceive Instagram content for small businesses. Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to participate in a survey. In general terms, my questions will be related to small businesses and social media marketing. I will use the material from my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS There are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. Participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc. You are free to stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT **Your participation in this study will take approximately 5 -7 min**. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish—the research author: Tatiana Radulovic, 658663tr@student.eur.nl; or supervisor: Suzanna Opree, sopree@eshcc.eur.nl If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate in this study, click on the "I agree" button below to start the questionnaire.

Q1 If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate in this study, click on the "I agree" button below to start the questionnaire.

○ I agree (1)

○ I disagree (2)

End of Block: Disclaimer for taking the survey

Start of Block: Screener

Text Before we begin, please fill out some pre-survey demographic questions to determine whether you are eligible for this study.

Q2 What is your age?

○ Under 18 (1)

○ 18-26 (2)

○ 27-42 (3)

○ 43 -58 (4)

○ 58 -75 (5)

Q3 What city do you currently live in?

_____

Q4 What is your gender?

○ Female (1)

○ Male (2)

○ Prefer not to say (3)

○ Non-binary (4)

Q5 Do you have an Instagram Account?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

End of Block: Screener

Start of Block: Low Follower_Customer

Start of Block: Attitude Towards the Brand

Brand Attitude Thank you for viewing the scenario, next you will be asked questions about your attitudes and intentions towards Wyatt's Coffee.

You will now be asked about your **attitude towards the brand**: Wyatt's Coffee

Q6 This brand is **desirable.**

○ Strongly disagree (1)

○ Disagree (2)

○ Somewhat disagree (3)

○ Neither agree nor disagree (4)

○ Somewhat agree (5)

○ Agree (6)

○ Strongly agree (7)

Q7 I have a **positive attitude** toward the brand

○ Strongly disagree (1)

○ Disagree (2)

○ Somewhat disagree (3)

○ Neither agree nor disagree (4)

○ Somewhat agree (5)

○ Agree (6)

○ Strongly agree (7)

Q8 This brand is **attractive**

○ Strongly disagree (1)

○ Disagree (2)

○ Somewhat disagree (3)

○ Neither agree nor disagree (4)

○ Somewhat agree (5)

○ Agree (6)

○ Strongly agree (7)

Q9 I **like** this brand

○ Strongly disagree (1)

○ Disagree (2)

○ Somewhat disagree (3)

○ Neither agree nor disagree (4)

○ Somewhat agree (5)

○ Agree (6)

○ Strongly agree (7)

End of Block: Attitude Towards the Brand

Start of Block: Brand Trust

Q10 You will now be asked about your **trust** in the brand: Wyatt's Coffee.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neutral (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
This is a brand that meets my expectations (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident about this brand (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This brand will not disappoint me (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This brand guarantees satisfaction (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
With this brand I obtain what I look for in a product/service (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This brand would be honest and sincere in addressing my concerns (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This brand would make any effort to satisfy my needs (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I could rely on this brand to solve any problem with the product/service (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This brand would be interested in my satisfaction (9)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

AD ATTITUDE You will now be asked about your **attitude** towards the **images** you previously viewed about the brand: Wyatt's Coffee

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Q11 How would you describe your **attitude** towards these images?

○ Extremely bad (1)

○ Moderately bad (2)

○ Slightly bad (3)

○ Neither good nor bad (4)

○ Slightly good (5)

○ Moderately good (6)

○ Extremely good (7)

Q12 How **favorable** do you find these images.

○ Extremely Unfavorable (1)

○ Moderately Unfavorable (2)

○ Slightly Unfavorable (3)

○ Neither unfavorable or favorable (4)

○ Slightly favorable (5)

○ Moderately favorable (6)

○ Extremely favorable (7)

Q13 How **irritating** do you find these images?

○ Extremely Irritating (1)

○ Moderately Irritating (2)

○ Slightly Irritating (3)

○ Neither irritating or nonirritating (4)

○ Slightly non irritating (5)

○ Moderately non irritating (6)

○ Extremely Non irritating (7)

Q14 How **interesting** do you find these images?

○ Not interesting at all (1)

○ Moderately non interesting (2)

○ Slightly non Interesting (3)

○ Neither Interesting or non interesting (4)

○ Slightly interesting (5)

○ Moderately interesting (6)

○ Extremely interesting (7)

End of Block: Attitudes towards the Images

Start of Block: Purchase/Visit Intentions

INTENTIONS You will now be asked about your **visit** and **purchase** intentions towards the brand: Wyatt's Coffee

Q15 How would you describe your **visit** intentions towards this business?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Extremely unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely likely
Extremely improbable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely probable
Extremely impossible	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely possible

Q16 How would you describe your **purchase** intentions towards this business?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Extremely unlikely	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely likely
Extremely improbable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely probable
Extremely impossible	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely possible

Demographics Thank you for participating in this survey, below are some final questions for further analysis, however these are not required.

Q17 What is you marital status?

○ Married (1)

○ Widowed (2)

○ Divorced (3)

○ Separated (4)

○ Never married (5)

○ Prefer not to say (6)

Q18 What is your highest level of education?

○ Less than high school (1)

○ High school graduate (2)

○ Some college (3)

○ Associates Degree (4)

○ Bachelors Degree (5)

○ Masters Degree (6)

○ Doctorate (7)

Thank You Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey for my Master's thesis research project. Your time is appreciated!

Appendix B: Stimulus

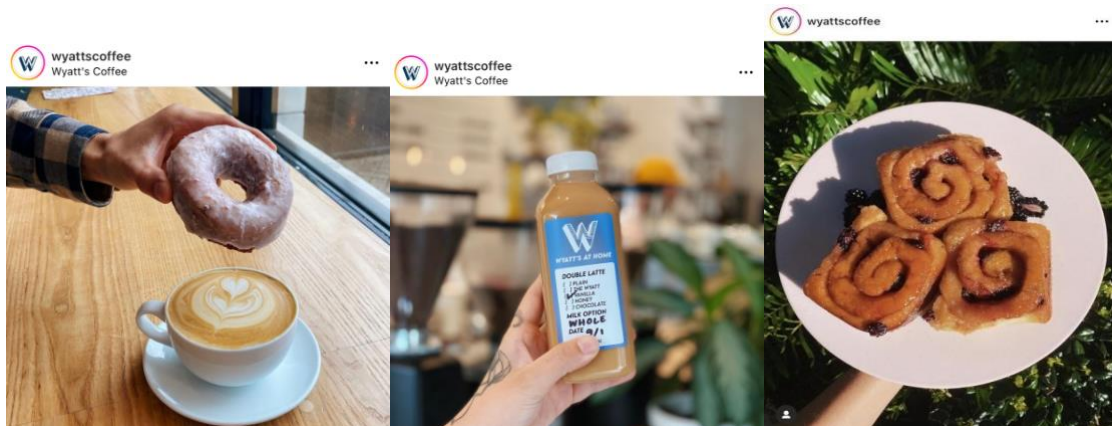Low vs. high follower counts

Customer Centric Condition Images

Employee Centric Condition Images

Product Centric Conditions Images

Control Condition Image