

# Emotional Selling on Social Media: The ‘Punctum’ of Personality and Photographs

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**Abstract.** Instagram marks a shift in operation from a collection of in situ photography towards a mode of engagement for small home-based businesses to promote their products. We unfold two significant aspects that influence customer engagement on Instagram: photographs and personality. Photographs with ‘punctum’ often capture users’ attention and engage them. Findings from this study also suggest that negative emotions influence user engagement through provocation, sarcasm, and frustration, but do not necessarily promote buying behavior.

## 1 Introduction

This paper presents a case study of an entrepreneur who uses social media for her home-based baking business. The study utilized a qualitative research methodology to understand the experience, values, and ideas related to the effectiveness of social media to the home-based business operation. Different qualitative tools were exploited to ensure the validity of the findings. In this exploratory study, we unfold two important factors that influence user engagement on Instagram and thereby help business growth. These two factors are photographs and personality of the seller. Specifically, this paper explains the type of photographs that most effectively captures user attention and the kind of personality that may engage customers.

On Instagram, photographs play a major role in capturing customers’ attention. Apart from photographs, the merchant’s personality is a brand by itself. Although these factors are very important in social media marketing, especially on Instagram, to our knowledge there is hardly any research done on this topic. It is also our belief that much less attention has been given to date to research on Instagram compared to Facebook [1], Twitter [2] and blogs [3]. Thus, our research hopes to fill this gap in the literature.

In contrast to previous studies conducted on Instagram [4, 5], our research employed the case study method as the main approach. A case study provides careful insight and rich information on the issue being studied. In this study, we focused on a small home-based baker who uses social media applications to market her products and services. For the purpose of this paper presentation, the entrepreneur’s name is under a pseudonym.

The owner, Nancy, holds a postgraduate degree in Corporate Communication and worked in the industry for three years upon graduating. However, the corporate sector

did not give her much satisfaction, which led to her decision to quit her job and run her own business. The business, which began with chocolate-making, has progressed successfully to baking, pastry making, and culinary training. Most of her classes are conducted at her residence. Prior to using Instagram and Facebook for her business, she was an avid blogger who wrote about interesting places she had visited. Her blog was also used as a space to promote her products and services to her followers. Now, Nancy uses various social media platforms, including Facebook, her blog, Twitter, and Instagram, to promote her business and build relationships with her customers.

## 2 Background of Study

According to Barthes [6], photographs have two different effects on the viewer: ‘studium’ and ‘punctum’. A ‘studium’, or informational and aesthetic value, is available to anyone. However, a ‘punctum’, which is a shock, thrill or emotion elicited by the photograph, is specific to the individual. A photograph that touches a viewer’s heart and influences his or her action is said to have a ‘punctum’ on the viewer.

In business, photographs are used to communicate ideas, beliefs, and feelings associated with products and services. For example, photographs in the tourism industry are used as representations of destinations [7]. In HCI, many studies on photographs have focused on different subjects such as self-presentation [8], community building [9], preserving heritage [10] and photo-sharing for the elderly [11].

Apart from photographs, the personality of a seller could influence user engagement and buyer purchasing behavior. Seller personality is important for initiating trust and building long-term relationships [12]. A seller’s personality on social media is expressed through his or her interaction with others in the space and through self-representation in his or her photographs. The emotions that sellers portray here have multifaceted impacts. Emotions influence strategic decisions [13], shape buyer-seller interaction [14], and help both parties achieve their objectives [15]. In business, there is a reciprocal linkage between positive emotions and business gain [12]. On the contrary, it is also true that negative emotions influence user engagement with certain brands through provocation, sarcasm and frustration, but do not necessarily promote buying behavior.

## 3 Research Methodology

This research focuses on a case study of a small home-based business. The tools for data collection include an in-depth interview with the business owner, online observation of the owner’s social media pages, and content analysis of photographs posted, comments published, and “likes” given on these social media pages. The interview method was selected as the primary tool due to its proven ability to investigate issues in depth. Discovery of an individual’s personality and how he or she thinks and feels about a topic can be explored during an interview. The merchant’s interaction on Instagram was observed for a period of three months. Photos posted, comments published and “likes” given over this duration were quantified and analysed.

## 4 Findings

This section presents findings based on our interview, online observations, and content analysis.

### 4.1 Photographs on Instagram

Nancy started her Instagram account in November 2013. Prior to that, she had utilized two Facebook accounts to promote her products. However, her inconsistency in posting had made Facebook an ineffective tool for marketing. She found Instagram to be more user friendly and very responsive. Within five months of registering on Instagram, she had 2383 followers with a total of 503 pictures posted. During our 3-month online observation period, Nancy posted 50 photos and received 256 comments. We used this total as our sample for content analysis.

Fifty-eight percent (58 %) of the photos posted during the 3-month period were about her products. The rest of the photos were about her personal activities. Nancy took great efforts in presenting her photographs on Instagram. Figure 1 below shows an image of her dessert product with various hues and tones, such as yellow pastry, red strawberry, and dark chocolate, which immediately make this an enticing image. The addition of the dark chocolate on the white cream (punctum) draws more attention from the viewer and may increase the temptation to buy.

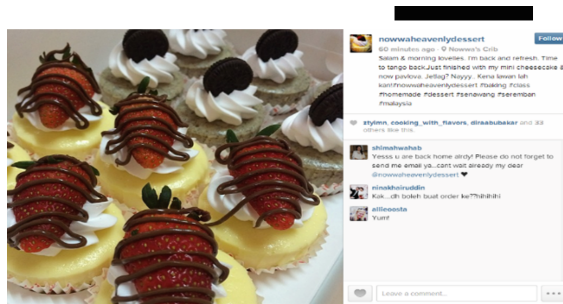
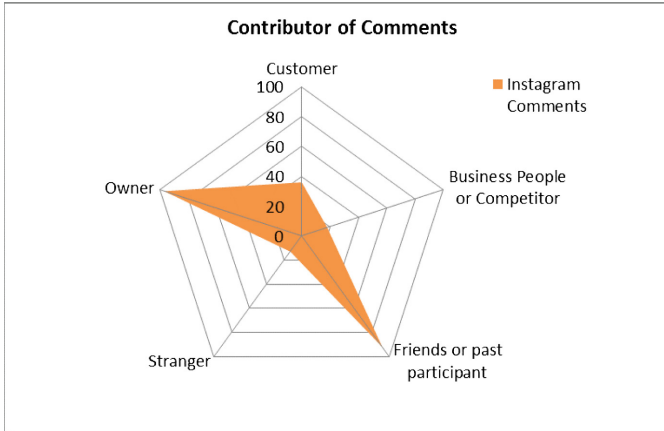


Fig. 1. Enticing photo of product

In comparing the two types of photos posted by Nancy, the audience appears to value photos of products more than photos of personal activities. This is established from the “likes” and comments received for each post. There are around 28 to 67 “likes” for photos that show products, which is higher than the range of 13 to 53 “likes” obtained for personal activity photos posted on the account. Photos of products also engaged more comments. We divided the comments received into 4 categories as shown in Fig. 2 below:

Ninety-three (93) out of the 256 comments received for her photos discussed business information and solicited explanations. Various types of comment contributors voiced out inquiries or requested clarification on business information. Some of the



**Fig. 2.** Contributor of comments

inquiries involved booking orders of the product or baking class schedules. For every order requested by the audience, the owner diverts the order to a private phone number for in-depth discussions. Meanwhile, 60 out of the 256 comments discussed motivation and support to the business.

The highest contributor of comments was the owner herself, showing that engagement with content can solicit good feedback for businesses. Customers can freely interact with the owner to clarify any piece of information. Also, the engagement of friends or previous customers who shared their baking class experiences and product appearances is an indicator that the business receives good support from the audience.

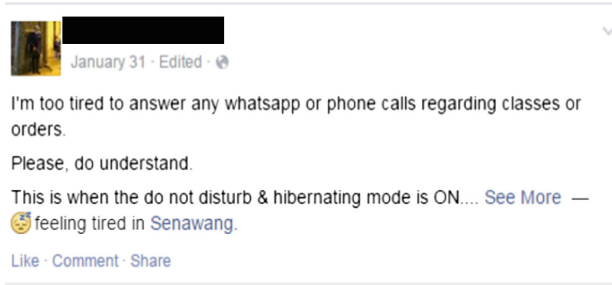
#### 4.2 Personality

Based on our interview session and online observation, Nancy appears to be an extrovert with an outspoken and firm personality. She takes punctuality seriously in her business, avoids being bias, and maintains pre- and post-support for her clients at all times. It is interesting to observe how she spends a lot of time building her business image through her personality. Descriptions or captions that she writes to accompany her photographs on Instagram are not just about the products but also include ramblings on her customers’ and students’ attitudes, as shown in an example below:

*“One thing you should know about online students, some of them are really too pushy, lazy to google up and expect I’m gonna be the one who provide everything. Even lazy to scroll up....Stop saying I have an easy job”- Instagram, April 2014.*

Sometimes, she shares her feelings in her personal Facebook account about certain incidents between her and her customers, as exemplified in Fig. 3 below:

Expressing her negative emotions on Instagram or Facebook could escalate to a vicious relationship with her customers. Although this is true, based on our findings, there are some customers who admire her courage and honesty in expressing her feelings. Being oneself is very important in engaging customers to one’s business. Contrary to traditional marketing styles where negatives vibes are hidden to avoid



**Fig. 3.** Expressing feelings in personal Facebook account

unfavorable consequences with customers, being transparent with one's feelings could actually attract customers in social media. On this platform, business owners are not just selling products, but are also marketing their personalities. Anger, frustration, joy, and happiness give multidimensional impacts to customers when these emotions are translated into comments, posts and photographs. People who admire this type of personality and attitude will become loyal customers, while those who feel badly affected will move away.

## 5 Conclusion

Businesses that use social media in their marketing mix know the importance of user engagement to their posts. User engagement could help build a long lasting relationship with customers. At the time of writing this paper, Instagram is yet to have its own user engagement formula. Although statistical revelations of user engagement are important, the factors influencing these numbers are also significant. In this exploratory study, we have revealed two important factors that engage users: photographs and personality of the seller.

For home-based business owners, photographs are choreographed in different angles, filtered, enchanted with wordings, and published to the public using their mobile phones or digital cameras. The photographs are posted over regular intervals hoping to gather as many views as possible and promote sales. Photographs in social media have shifted our expectations of images and everyday aesthetic [16]. The ephemeral of photographs in social media is different; they are about realism, urbanization, attention to detail, and creativity. In this study too, the business owner showed her solid determination to promote her items by constantly improving her marketing style and choosing different platforms to draw the attention of the social media community. Her bubbly personality, coupled with her talent to evoke both positive and negative feelings through her photos and wordings, have managed to captivate and charm many loyal supporters, thus bringing her competitors to shame.

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