Words Meet Photos: When and Why Visual Content Increases Review Helpfulness

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Paper from the 51st Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 24-27, 2022

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Abstract

Do consumers find communication more helpful when photos and text convey similar or different information? This paper examines the effect of photo-text similarity on review helpfulness and its underlying drivers. Using a dataset of 6.8M reviews including 3.3M photos from Yelp and applying state-of-the-art machine learning algorithms, we quantify the similarity of the content between text and photos. We find that it is not only the mere presence of a photo that increases helpfulness but also the similarity between the photo content and the review text. We replicate our main findings and examine the underlying mechanism in the lab. When photos and text convey similar (vs. dissimilar) information, consumers find the review more helpful because the information in the review becomes easier to process and comprehend. Notably, this is true despite the greater similarity between text and photo conveying less information.