Mismatch Magic: Exploring the Influence of Text-Visual Mismatch on Audience Engagement

Ye Zhang
Koc University
Ayşegül Özsomer
Koç University
Fahri Bagir
Istanbul Atlas University

Mismatch Magic: Exploring the Influence of Text-Visual Mismatch on Audience Engagement

Abstract

In this paper, we examine text-visual mismatch posts on social media, focusing on how the mismatch between text and visuals affects audience engagement in digital marketing. As brands increasingly use posts with mismatched text and visuals to capture their audience's attention, it's important to analyse the factors driving this trend and its impact on consumer response. Supported by congruence theory, we propose that the mismatched posts arouse different emotional responses, finally affecting audience engagement. Also, we incorporate the moderating effect of brand reputation, indicating that trustworthy brands can generate positive engagement using mismatched posts, while less well-known brands are at risk of negative influences due to credibility concerns caused by the mismatched posts. Furthermore, we are the first to introduce a classification framework of mismatches into subtle and overt based on the magnitude, with subtle mismatches encourage viewers to think deeply and spark curiosity to discover the deeper meaning of the post, while overt mismatches immediately grab attention and stimulate strong emotional reactions. Finally, our study improves the understanding of audience engagement of mismatched posts on social media and provides applicable insights and innovative guidance for marketers to leverage these strategies while inspiring social media content.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the main form of social media content has shifted to photos and videos (Wang et al., 2022). To enhance communication, posts often combine text and visual elements to contextualize, clarify, and distribute messages (Anjomshoae, Omeiza, & Jiang, 2021; Kujur & Singh, 2020). Often, text adds explanation and provides additional information for visuals. At the same time, visuals play a vital role in creating excitement, emphasizing context, and accelerating the audience's understanding of concepts. The connection between text and visuals allows marketers to successfully communicate messages with deep meaning and impactful visual presentation that improves brand performance, leaves an unforgettable impression on the audience and inspires the required engagement (Kujur & Singh, 2020). However, there's an interesting twist: some highly engaging posts feature visuals that appear unconnected to the accompanying text, generating mismatches between textual and visual elements in the same posts.

In this article, we describe text-visual mismatch posts as the type of social media content that disconnects text and visuals, creating surprise or curiosity to capture the audience's attention. Effective use of these posts can create a strong emotional response and inspire deeper engagement by combining unusual visuals with unexpected text. For instance, Red Bull humorously combines light-hearted visuals with vibrant text, while Danny pairs a photo of a generic pancake with the caption, "Live Laughter Love Turns into Pancakes." These mismatches can inspire fans to pause and explore the deeper meaning of the unexpected pairings. The curiosity and sense of accomplishment in identifying the underlying meaning of such posts also helps generate higher engagement. In this paper, we discover how these posts influence audience engagement, examine the role of brand reputation and emotions elicited. We categorize mismatches into subtle or overt types to allow for a more nuanced and precise understanding. We consider how different brands integrate these mismatches, weighing factors such as brand maturity, long-term value and audience preferences. We discover not only external factors such as brand reputation and customer emotions but also the mismatched posts themselves.

While many studies have explored the positive results of the congruence theory and the negative effects of incongruence or inconsistency, research on the positive effects of inconsistency theory and application is very limited (Chu & Kim, 2014). Despite extensive research on content marketing strategies, visual appeal, and textual communication, there is a gap in academic research on the increasingly popular trend of using text-visual mismatched

posts in promotional campaigns in a crowded social media feed. We find this to be an underexplored area, particularly in understanding the drivers of such posts from a consumer psychology perspective. Our study extends the existing literature by discovering the emotions initiated by mismatched posts, determining which types of emotions are most effective and ineffective in increasing engagement, and examining how brand reputation and customer preferences influence. Not all the mismatches work equally, which motives us to discover further and introduce a novel classification of mismatched posts (subtle & overt) for the first time. This classification not only enriches the existing literature, but also deepens our understanding of why the effectiveness of mismatched posts varies.

Theoretically, our study fills a noteworthy gap by identifying the trending mismatched posts in social media, as this post type has previously received limited attention. Our research contributes to a deeper understanding of the key logic and potential applications of mismatched posts in social media marketing by focusing on consumer sentiment and brand reputation. Furthermore, we focus on the types of emotions evoked by mismatched posts, which provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of different emotions on customer engagement in social media marketing. Through pioneering efforts in classifying mismatched posts based on the magnitude, we meaningfully expand theoretical knowledge on mismatch post classification. Lastly, we also explain how different types of mismatched posts influence audience engagement under different settings, such as targeting audiences pursuing thoughtful depth or playful joy and concentrating on long-term value or short-term attention.

Marketers can benefit from our findings by gaining insights into the strategic usage of mismatched posts in campaigns to drive effective audience engagement. Mismatched campaigns can achieve higher effectiveness, but they also carry the risk of damaging brand reputation. Using them appropriately within the correct context is essential. Our paper offers practical insights for marketers on striking the right balance when using mismatched posts. By understanding the emotional impact and different types of mismatches, marketers can craft more engaging social media content tailored to their brand's identity, marketing objectives, and audience preferences. Furthermore, we offer practical guidance from a brand perspective on how to use mismatched posts to stand out in crowded social media and attract audience attention. This approach ultimately improves the brand's competitiveness in reaching and engaging target audiences on social media platforms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Visual & text on social media marketing

Visuals and text are important components of social media marketing and communication strategies (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Maehle et al., 2022). Visuals (e.g. image or video) can quickly attract viewers' attention, convey message, and arouse emotions. We often believe that "a picture is worth a thousand words" (Martin, 2020), and visuals tell a story more effectively than words alone (Ali Mohamed Nada, 2023). In a crowded feed, appealing visuals can increase engagement, while text can complement visuals to provide context and add information, improving overall impact and SEO (Ye et al., 2018). The combination of the two is essential to attract attention, inspire immediate response and convey brand message (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Maehle et al., 2022; Batra & Keller, 2016). Brands often strive to produce consistent content across different social media to enhance messaging, smooth information processing, support customer decision making and drive engagement (Tafesse & Wien, 2018; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

2.2 Match-up hypothesis and text-visual mismatch

The match-up hypothesis, also known as congruency theory, states that when different elements of a message align well, it enhances the effectiveness of the message (Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994). For example, when the celebrity's appeal matches consumers' expectations, brand evaluations tend to be more positive (Lin & Zhang, 2019). Similarly, the greater the consistency between the speaker man and the product features, the more favourable consumers' attitudes toward the product (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Till and Busler (2000) also found that the match between physical attractiveness and expertise has a positive impact on brand attitudes and purchase intentions. It is well known, congruency theory recommends that text and visuals should be consistent, and consistency plays a fundamental role in delivering an impactful message (Till and Busler, 2000). Co-creating consistency between text and visuals encourages active engagement and maintains brand identity.

While matching concentrations on consistency, mismatching focusses on variety, creativity, and unexpectedness (Lin & Zhang, 2019). Researchers previously indicated that social media posts pair irrelevant images with irrelevant hashtags, which may disrupt information processing and generate lower engagement (Astikainen et al., 2008; Ha et al., 2020). Modern trends prove that consumers tolerate and even welcome inconsistent content on social media. Using mismatching effectively helps break traditional patterns, encourage innovative communication, spark curiosity and active engagement (Ha et al., 2020). It also allows brands to stand out, create a sense of uniqueness, and leave a lasting impression. Chu and Kim (2014) found that ads featuring non-stereotypical gender roles were seen as more

creative and resulted in higher interest, sales, and attention. This approach captures greater attention, induces curiosity, and raises superior engagement, such as likes, shares, and comments (Chu and Kim, 2014). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Mismatched posts in social media are positively associated with higher levels of audience engagement compared to matched posts.*

2.3 Brand reputation and mismatch hypothesis

Mismatch is a double-edged sword that can have different effects, both positive and negative. Brand reputation plays an important role. Brand reputation refers to consumers' collective insights and opinions about a brand, including factors such as reliability, trustworthiness, and overall image (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009; Drossos, Coursaris & Kagiouli, 2023; De Chernatony, 1999). Positive brand reputation can increase audience engagement, sharing, and advocacy (Ning et al., 2022; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). When a reliable brand shares mismatched content, audiences typically interpret the inconsistency as creativity rather than inconsistency (Chu and Kim, 2014). A weak or unknown brand may be criticized for mismatched posts, causing confusion and doubts about its reliability, thereby reducing engagement (Qian & Park, 2021). Brand reputation plays the role of a barrier or amplifier in the relationship between mismatched posts and audience engagement, affecting audience perception and response to content. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Brand reputation moderates the impact of mismatched posts on audience engagement. Specifically, brands with stronger reputations will experience higher levels of engagement from mismatched posts compared to brands with weaker reputation.*

2.4 Type of emotions aroused and customer reaction

Emotions have a significant impact on human behaviour (Elster, 2009). Emotions initiated by social media posts can encourage customer reactions, further engagement, and influence decisions (Dolan et al., 2019). In other words, content that triggers emotional responses tends to be more memorable because people are more likely to revisit it. Effectively leveraging emotions is very important to attract and retain audience attention in social media marketing. Brands should understand their audience's emotional motivations to create content that resonates and fosters stronger relationships, drives customer engagement and brand loyalty (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2002; Weber, 2019; Wrigley & Straker, 2019). Different types of emotions can stimulate different responses from audiences, influencing their perceptions of the brand, engagement, and overall satisfaction. According to Ekman

(1992), there are six basic emotions—sadness, fear, disgust, anger, surprise, and happiness—that include both negative and positive emotional states. Content that evokes strong emotions such as happiness, humour, or hope encourages audiences to engage and share, deepening their connection with the brand and increasing interaction (Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Nikunen, 2019). Conversely, content that evokes negative emotions such as anger or confusion may lead to reduced engagement, poor word-of-mouth, and brand avoidance (Nikunen, 2019; Giorgi, 2017). The emotional impact of content is critical because it influences audiences' perceptions of a brand and their motivation to engage with its content (Botha & Reyneke, 2013). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: *Emotions evoked by mismatched posts significantly impact audience engagement, with positive emotions leading to higher engagement, while negative emotions resulting in lower engagement.*

2.5 Magnitude of mismatch and customer engagement

In this article, we point out that the degree of mismatch is the degree of inconsistency or inconsistency between different elements in a post, especially text and visuals. Subtle mismatch contains slight incongruities that spark curiosity without causing confusion. However, overt mismatch involves more obvious contradictions that create a striking contrast, attract attention, and cause strong reactions, such as surprise, amusement, or frustration. Overt contradiction within a post may increase engagement in certain cases and its effects are generally unpredictable. Therefore, brands should use overt contrasts carefully, as they can lead to confusion or frustration (Germelmann et al., 2020). Here are some examples of mismatches. "Relax with our soothing herbal teas" could be paired with an image of a busy city street. "Show your natural glow" could be paired with an image of muddy person at a festival. "Fuel your workout with our energy drinks!" could be paired with an image of a person relaxing in a rocking chair. Similarly, "Join our fitness challenge!" could be paired next to an image of someone enjoying a piece of chocolate cake.

Striking the correct balance between innovation and consistency, brands can apply the power of total contrast to improve engagement with the target audience (Germelmann et al., 2020). If a brand prioritizes sophistication and deep engagement, its content is meticulously crafted (Ares et al., 2014). Audiences may come to expect a clear structure, as they are less receptive to changes and more likely to push back (Talke & Heidenreich, 2014). Subtle mismatches usually align with a brand's long-term values, capturing attention without overwhelming the audience. On the other hand, playful brands targeting younger, more

dynamic audiences may use more overt mismatches to evoke feelings of novelty, freedom, and playfulness. This approach helps them stand out in a crowded feed, especially during short-term campaigns. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: *Subtle mismatched posts are more likely to prompt positive audience reactions, foster depth of thinking, and promote long-term value creation, whereas overt mismatched posts are more suited to generating short-term, attention-grabbing responses.*

3. Conclusion

In this study, we examine posts containing text-visual mismatches in social media marketing and propose that different types of mismatches (subtle & overt) have distinct effects on audience engagement. We argue that consistency between text and visuals has traditionally been emphasized for effective communication, but using mismatches strategically can spark curiosity, humor, and emotional responses, ultimately increasing audience engagement. In this paper, we gain new insight on how to enhance audience engagement through content strategy by considering brand reputation, target customer and the types of emotions. In other words, we provide a more detailed framework of under what circumstances mismatched posts can generate more positive reactions and under what circumstances they generate negative engagement, not only from the perspective of brand reputation and customer sentiment, but also from the perspective of the mismatch itself.

Our research makes important contributions to social media content and customer engagement in digital marketing. By classifying text-visual mismatch posts into subtle and overt types, it enhances the theoretical understanding and provides a valuable framework or guidance for brands to develop more effective social media strategies. Our research also highlights the importance of emotion in different audience engagement. This provides marketers with actionable insights to optimize their content and increase engagement. We investigate the impact of brand reputation on the effectiveness of incongruent posts and show that established brands can leverage incongruence to build connections without risking negative perceptions. Our study provides a foundation for future research on audience engagement in a different of contexts. We encourage brands to embrace innovation, build deeper connections, and increase overall engagement through incongruent content while attuning to the emotional responses of their target audiences.

There are several limitations to our study. In this study, we define mismatched posts only from the perspective of visuals and texts, but some other elements in the posts can also

be studied, such as audio or sound. Also, we mainly focus on the brand reputation, other factors such as cultural differences, market trends, and individual consumer preferences may also influence the effectiveness of mismatched posts but were not addressed in our study. We only categorized the mismatched posts into overt mismatches and subtle mismatches, but we believe that future research can conduct more specific classifications to propose more applicable marketing strategies or guidance. Finally, the dynamic nature of social media platforms causes trends and behaviours to change rapidly, which may affect the applicability of our study. Future research could use longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of mismatched posts on audience engagement.

4. References

Anjomshoae, S., Omeiza, D., & Jiang, L. (2021). Context-based image explanations for deep neural networks. *Image and Vision Computing*, 116, 104310.

Ares, G., Mawad, F., Giménez, A., & Maiche, A. (2014). Influence of rational and intuitive thinking styles on food choice: Preliminary evidence from an eye-tracking study with yogurt labels. *Food Quality and Preference*, *31*, 28-37.

Ali Mohamed Nada, M. (2023). Content Criteria for Brands' Visual Storytelling Narratives on Social Media Platforms "An Experimental Study with Graphic Design & Branding Students". *Arts and Architecture Journal*, *4*(1), 182-207.

Ashley, C., & Tuten, T. (2015). Creative strategies in social media marketing: An exploratory study of branded social content and consumer engagement. *Psychology & marketing*, *32*(1), 15-27.

Astikainen, P., Lillstrang, E., & Ruusuvirta, T. (2008). Visual mismatch negativity for changes in orientation–a sensory memory-dependent response. *European Journal of Neuroscience*, *28*(11), 2319-2324.

Batra, R., & Keller, K. L. (2016). Integrating marketing communications: New findings, new lessons, and new ideas. *Journal of marketing*, *80*(6), 122-145.

Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral?. *Journal of marketing research*, *49*(2), 192-205.

Botha, E., & Reyneke, M. (2013). To share or not to share: the role of content and emotion in viral marketing. *Journal of Public Affairs*, *13*(2), 160-171.

Chu, K., & Kim, J. Y. (2014, July). A Study On The Effect Of Cross-Sexual Advertising On Consumer Evaluation. In *Global Marketing Conference* (pp. 444-457).

De Chernatony, L. (1999). Brand management Through narrowing the gap between brand identity and brand reputation. *Journal of marketing management*, *15*(1-3), 157-179.

Drossos, D., Coursaris, C., & Kagiouli, E. (2023). Social media marketing content strategy: A comprehensive framework and empirically supported guidelines for brand posts on Facebook pages. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*.

Dolan, R., Conduit, J., Frethey-Bentham, C., Fahy, J., & Goodman, S. (2019). Social media engagement behaviour: A framework for engaging customers through social media content. *European Journal of Marketing,* 53(10), 2213-2243.

Elster, J. (2009). Strong feelings: Emotion, addiction, and human behaviour. *mit Press.*

Ekman, P. (1992). Are there basic emotions?.

Germelmann, C. C., Herrmann, J. L., Kacha, M., & Darke, P. R. (2020). Congruence and incongruence in thematic advertisement–medium combinations: Role of awareness, fluency, and persuasion knowledge. *Journal of Advertising*, 49(2), 141-164.

Giorgi, S. (2017). The mind and heart of resonance: The role of cognition and emotions in frame effectiveness. *Journal of Management Studies*, *54*(5), 711-738.

Ha, Y., Park, K., Kim, S. J., Joo, J., & Cha, M. (2020). Automatically detecting image–text mismatch on Instagram with deep learning*. Journal of Advertising,* 50(1), 52-62.

Hollebeek, L. D., & Macky, K. (2019). Digital content marketing's role in fostering consumer engagement, trust, and value: Framework, fundamental propositions, and implications. *Journal of interactive marketing*, *45*(1), 27-41.

Kamins, M. A. (1990). An investigation into the "match-up" hypothesis in celebrity advertising: When beauty may be only skin deep. *Journal of advertising*, *19*(1), 4-13.

Kamins, M. A., & Gupta, K. (1994). Congruence between spokesperson and product type: A matchup hypothesis perspective. *Psychology & Marketing*, *11*(6), 569-586.

Kujur, F., & Singh, S. (2020). Visual communication and consumer-brand relationship on social networking sites-uses & gratifications theory perspective. *Journal of theoretical and applied electronic commerce research*, *15*(1), 30-47.

Lin, C. H., & Zhang, L. H. (2019). Match or Mismatch? The Influence of Brand-Celebrity Endorser Personality Congruity on Brand Evaluation: Fashion Brand as the Example. *Asian Journal of Economics, Business and Accounting*, *9*(3), 1-8.

Maehle, N., Presi, C., & Kleppe, I. A. (2022). Visual communication in social media marketing. *The SAGE handbook of social media marketing*, 291-306.

Martin, K. (2020). A picture is worth a thousand words. *Medical Writing*, *29*, 28-34.

Nikunen, K. (2019). Media, emotions and affect. *Media and society*, 323-340.

Ning, Y. M., Hu, C., Tu, T. T., & Li, D. (2022). Offensive or amusing? The study on the influence of brand-to-brand teasing on consumer engagement behavioural intention based on social media. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 966254.

O'Shaughnessy, J., & O'Shaughnessy, N. J. (2002). *The marketing power of emotion*. Oxford University Press.

Qian, J., & Park, J. S. (2021). Influencer-brand fit and brand dilution in China's luxury market: The moderating role of self-concept clarity. Journal of Brand Management, 28(2), 199-220.

Shahbaznezhad, H., Dolan, R., & Rashidirad, M. (2021). The role of social media content format and platform in users' engagement behaviour. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *53*(1), 47-65.

Sorensen, A., Andrews, L., & Drennan, J. (2017). Using social media posts as resources for engaging in value co-creation: The case for social media-based cause brand communities. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, *27*(4), 898-922.

Tafesse, W., & Wien, A. (2018). Using message strategy to drive consumer behavioural engagement on social media. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *35*(3), 241-253.

Talke, K., & Heidenreich, S. (2014). How to overcome pro-change bias: incorporating passive and active innovation resistance in innovation decision models. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, *31*(5), 894-907.

Till, B. D., & Busler, M. (2000). The match-up hypothesis: Physical attractiveness, expertise, and the role of fit on brand attitude, purchase intent and brand beliefs. *Journal of advertising*, *29*(3), 1-13.

Van Driel, L., & Dumitrica, D. (2021). Selling brands while staying "Authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers. *Convergence*, *27*(1), 66-84.

Veloutsou, C., & Moutinho, L. (2009). Brand relationships through brand reputation and brand tribalism. *Journal of Business Research*, *62*(3), 314-322.

Wang, K., Zhao, S. Z., Chan, D., Zakhor, A., & Canny, J. (2022, September). Multimodal semantic mismatch detection in social media posts. In *2022 IEEE 24th International Workshop on Multimedia Signal Processing (MMSP)* (pp. 1-6). IEEE.

Weber, L. (2019). *Authentic marketing: how to capture hearts and minds through the power of purpose*. John Wiley & Sons.

Ye, Z., Hashim, N. H., Baghirov, F., & Murphy, J. (2018). Gender differences in Instagram hashtag use. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, *27*(4), 386-404.