

Eat, pray, love... images. Measurements and measurement parameters in marketing processes

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Scientific research requires a tight connection with everyday life. If we consider marketing research, such connection apparently concerns the everyday life and experiences of users, consumers, and customers, as well as the everyday life of organizations involved in the development of market solutions (commonly defined as products) (Rispoli and Tamma, 2016).

Recently, an event having global relevance has taken place (largely unobserved): since the 2019 World Metrology Day (May 20), a new international measurement system (based on the seven basic measurement units: kilograms, meters, seconds, ampere, kelvin, mole and candela) (INRIM, 2019) has been introduced. This fact suggests that hard sciences like Physics need to constantly and cyclically adopt (à la Khun) new, solid measurement systems. Being aware of that, marketing scientists (structurally constructivist and functionalist by definition) are apparently urged to face the challenge of measurement as well, with the need to embrace a wider perspective with respect to what the past “revolutions” in marketing have done (often ending up being more evolutionary hybridizations than revolutions tout court) (Moretti and Tuan, 2014). Here, we are not talking about the relevance and superiority of certain measures over others (for instance, in qualitative and quantitative terms), but we are considering a wider operational perspective.

In the Editorial of the past issue of *Mercati & Competitività*, Borghini (2019) considered the topic of big data and highlighted the need to consider, as research starting point, real life problems, due to their multiple relevance: for the scientific field (and its functionality and existence); for researchers, which feed the process of knowledge analysis and production; for customers-users of such knowledge (both individual and collective; private and public).

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Measuring photos/video value in marketing could be this real life problem starting point.

In the contemporary debate on marketing measurements, the problematic relevance of image measurement is raising, especially in the light of the few measurement tools researchers have been able to develop so far (Pencarelli and Mele, 2019). This issue appears even more compelling if we consider the current status of images, which have become a major communication tool often carrying the most relevant individual and collective significances. We are writing less and less, and the few words we write down are often heavily mixed with images. Images used in communication often carry an idiosyncratic significance (e.g., related to the dyad, the triad, the group). The explosive diffusion of Instagram as one of the leading social networks epitomizes this situation, but at the same time it is just the most visible manifestation of a wider, deep, complex phenomenon involving the ways in which we conceptualize, structure, interact and communicate. The need to empirically verify such phenomenon represents a unique call for research.

In marketing, the study of images (not brand images but photo/video as source material) and of their ontologically connected dynamic structures are obtained either from psychological analyses (at an academic level) and from practical methods (e.g., of art directors or advertising photographers). However, the possibility of interpreting, with the same tools, materials newly produced by value co-producers appears more problematic.

We can identify at least three elements on which to focus:

- the potential, intrinsic significance structure of images;
- the underdeveloped relations between marketing and all the disciplines concerning the image (marketing and images are usually connected in terms of identifying and collecting image-related data and information);
- the digital availability of images, as well as their a-cultural and/or transcultural liquidity.

First and foremost, photographs and videos are characterized by significance structures which can be linked to the traditional ways of conceiving and analyzing specific significance processes, like: narration, historicization, description. These are all useful categories in the knowledge extraction processes applied to images. In the context of significance processes of textual materials, literary studies have well identified and structured the major figures of speech (similitude, antithesis, metaphor, allegory, metonymy, synecdoche, analogy, synesthesia, personification, hyperbole, oxymoron, litotes, euphemism); notably, in the image production, sharing and analysis processes such identification and structuring pattern has not occurred so far.

In the Gestalt psychology, some images convey movement through their structure, while others convey a still state. The way in which we recognize such images cannot be based on some kind of frequency measurement or classification mechanisms. As an example, consider image significance research in marketing. If electronic scanning processes only refer to the presence of common shapes (like cars) and to their enumeration to identify a certain interest for these shapes, and do not consider the frequency these shapes are present in the data collection contexts of such images and in individuals' everyday lives, the deep significance of images is lost. Accordingly, it becomes crucial to develop a deep effort concerning the development of a dialogue between marketing and the artistic and semiotic/rhetoric disciplines, to allow marketing researchers to be equipped with functional elements allowing them to develop proper image analyses.

A second, key element concerns the evolutionary research in marketing, which have recently seen the development of a tight relationship between concepts, measures and written codes (i.e., texts and numbers).

In the last decades, the possibility to channel alphanumeric data into concepts and information for marketing decision making purposes has been increasingly linked to the ability of researchers to develop novel, combined research approaches encompassing diverse analytical perspectives (e.g., from psychology, to sociology, to organization science). Such approaches, supported by proper technological tools (=software) and research frameworks, have allowed the transformation of texts into cognitive and conceptual maps, semantic networks, interpretive frameworks, and so forth.

The relationship between such methods and the logical categories produced by the disciplines examining images (both fixed and in motion) appears much more limited. An understanding of perceptions related to images connected to a proper analysis of their structuring content (e.g., consider the importance of number 3 for many cultures based on historical or cabalistic element) still appears not so diffused and structured.

A third, relevant component concerns the potential a-cultural and a-contextual (or trans-contextual) significance of the images created, generated and shared by co-producers. On the one hand, the extensive growth of measurement metrics for social networks (Pencarelli and Mele, 2019) allows to consider the way in which every single image has produced different behaviors from those subjects interacting with it (thus allowing segmentation processes). On the other hand, the cultural and contextual significance codes of single image components (e.g., a seaside sunset as a symbol of: love, holiday, nostalgia, end of life, the last light before the dark of the night, the represen-

tation of a superior entity, and so forth) can be produced within cultural communities which may not have apparent relationships measurable using tools traditionally employed by firms and researchers.

For example, the potential importance of the linkage between image georeferencing (as a proxy of the kind of cultural significance code provided by the subject producing the image) with the image producer profile (to define image significance) is lost when that image is shared and is liked by a wide number of users.

The description provided above aims to be a voice crying in the wilderness (and I challenge the readers to understand if this is a literal image and/or which kind of figure of speech it is), concerning the need to develop logical mechanisms, as well as measurement instrumentation and signification processes to examine images, which represent a massively diffused, but widely unexplored material. To measure image signification processes we do not only need big data, but we also (and particularly) need big ideas. To make a comparison, if we were in the field of corporate finance, the current situation may probably have been the one preceding the introduction of the Modigliani-Miller model, the basic component of the modern theory of capital structure.

We are waiting for a couple (or a triad) of authors able to develop a robust, resilient and frugal interpretive framework of images, with the potential to become a key tool for marketing decision makers. The title of the present editorial cites the title of a movie, whose plot is not focused on the single actions reported in the title itself, but rather on the journey people go through during their lives, as well as the significance of this journey, which is namely temporary, contextual and processual. These three adjectives make also sense in the production of knowledge value for marketing, for those studying marketing, and for marketers.

Reference

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