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**Debunking the myth of complete consistency: Examining which
features of brand messaging should remain consistent across
communication channels**

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Résumé

La cohérence en communication est un sujet largement abordé dans les manuels de marketing et parmi les professionnels, souvent considérée comme universellement souhaitable. Cependant, malgré ses bénéfices présumés, une grande partie des recherches qui la soutiennent repose sur l'analyse d'études de cas et l'intuition des chercheurs plutôt que sur des preuves empiriques. Ce manque de données soulève des préoccupations et souligne la nécessité de recherches supplémentaires. Cette étude comble cette lacune en utilisant une méthode d'analyse conjointe basée sur le choix, dans laquelle les participants sont exposés à des publications aléatoires sur les réseaux sociaux présentant différentes variations d'attributs. Cette approche nous permet d'identifier les aspects de la communication que les consommateurs privilégient en matière de cohérence entre les plateformes. Nous introduisons un cadre distinguant les variables reflétant la marque (par exemple, le logo et le message clé) des variables reflétant le contexte (par exemple, le ton et les visuels). Nos résultats montrent que la cohérence n'est pas aussi essentielle qu'elle est généralement présentée dans la littérature — seule la cohérence du logo a un impact positif sur les préférences des consommateurs. Ce travail apporte des données empiriques sur la cohérence inter plateforme, intègre des courants de recherche auparavant distincts et recrée l'exposition aux médias sociaux dans des conditions réelles. Enfin, nous fournissons aux marketeurs des recommandations concrètes pour gérer stratégiquement la cohérence sur les plateformes numériques.

Mots clés : IMC, Logo, message clé, ton, visuels, préférences des consommateurs, réseaux sociaux, identité de marque.

Méthodes de recherche : Analyse conjointe basée sur le choix

Abstract

Communication consistency is a widely discussed topic in marketing textbooks and among practitioners, often assumed to be universally desirable. However, despite its perceived benefits, much of the research supporting consistency is based on business case analyses and researchers' intuition rather than empirical evidence. This lack of data raises concerns and underscores the need for further research. This study addresses this gap by employing a choice-based conjoint method, presenting participants with randomized social media posts that vary in multiple attributes. This approach allows us to identify which aspects of marketing messages consumers prefer to be consistent across platforms. We introduce a framework distinguishing between brand-reflecting variables (e.g., logos and key message) and context-reflecting variables (e.g., tone and visuals). Our findings reveal that consistency is not as universally important as previous literature suggests—only logo consistency positively impacts consumer preferences. This work provides empirical insights into cross-platform consistency, integrates previously separate research streams, and replicates real-world social media exposure. Finally, we offer marketers actionable guidelines on how to strategically manage consistency across digital platforms.

Keywords: IMC, logo, key message, tone, visuals, consumer preferences, social media, brand identity

Research methods: Choice-based conjoint analysis

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Abbreviation list

IMC: Integrated Marketing Communications

Preface

Marketing textbooks and classrooms emphasize that consistency is key, urging brands to maintain uniform communication across all channels. Throughout my degree, I was taught this principle and never thought to question it. Thus, when my thesis director told me that no empirical data actually supported this widely accepted idea, I was both surprised and intrigued.

Determined to explore this gap, I dedicated my master's thesis to conducting empirical research in this field—not only to better understand consumer opinions but also to critically examine a concept that had largely gone unchallenged.

I am proud to have contributed to the literature and to provide data that supports new hypotheses. As social media continues to evolve, it is essential to question user preferences and gather empirical evidence that can inform more effective marketing and communication strategies.

Acknowledgment

I would first like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Holly Howe, for making me truly enjoy the research process. Her guidance over the past year has been invaluable—not only providing constructive feedback but also allowing me the autonomy to explore and develop my ideas. Her support and encouragement have made this journey both enriching and rewarding.

I am also incredibly grateful to my friends Ghita and Rym for turning this experience into something far more than just academic work. Our countless coffee chats, working side by side on our respective projects, made the process so much more enjoyable. I truly wouldn't hesitate to do it all over again.

To my family, thank you for your unwavering support and for giving me the opportunity to always pursue what I love.

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Introduction

Brand managers face an ongoing challenge when determining how to communicate their message across multiple social media platforms. Most of the literature sits in favour of consistent marketing communication over time – suggesting that it creates brand equity (Keller, 1993) and strong competitive advantages (Aaker, 1996). However, emerging perspectives argue that brands should tailor their messaging to fit the norms and expectations of each platform (Pelletier et al., 2020). For instance, consumers engage with brands differently on Instagram, where visually appealing and entertaining content is prioritized, compared to LinkedIn, where a professional tone is expected. For this reason, we argue that asking “is consistency important in marketing” is the wrong question. Some message features will likely benefit from staying consistent across platforms while others will not. We test which message features benefit from being kept consistent and which should be tailored to each platform.

Existing research studying consistency highly relies on business case analyses which showcases a lack of empirical data. Indeed, consistency is often described as “obvious” and “A no brainer” (Aaker, 1996) with no data supporting these claims. Furthermore, consistency emerges from the IMC theory, which also relies on researchers’ intuitions and business cases analyses. As described by Fill (2009): “The position remains that until there is empirical evidence to support a theoretical based upon which to build IMC strategy and operations, the phrase will probably continue to be misused, misunderstood and used in haphazard and inconsistent way.” Because little empirical research exists to study communication consistency, its practical implications are unclear and open to misinterpretation. Therefore, building on existing literature that emphasizes the importance of consistency, we propose to deconstruct what “consistency” really encompasses and to empirically test its relevance.

This work makes several contributions. First, we are one of the first empirical demonstrations of the (un)importance of consistency in marketing communications. Specifically, we empirically test how consistency across platforms affects consumer preferences for brand communication. Our findings reveal that consumers are generally

less sensitive to consistency than suggested in existing literature, as consumers showed a preference for consistency in only one message feature—brand logo. Contrary to expectations, maintaining a consistent key message did not influence choice, suggesting that consumers may be less attentive to message content than previously assumed. However, a consistent brand logo (colour and text spacing), which reflects the brand, positively affected consumer preferences. In contrast, consistency in context-related variables, such as tone and visuals, had no significant impact.

Our second major contribution is a framework that differentiates between brand-reflecting elements (such as logos and key messages) and context-reflecting elements (such as tone and visuals) to determine which aspects of a brand's communication should remain consistent and which can be adapted without negative consequences. Practically, it provides marketers with clear guidelines on where to prioritize consistency, helping brands balance cohesion with adaptability across social media platforms.

Finally, this study advances the literature by bridging previously separate research streams, examining multiple branding variables within a single experiment. Specifically, it considers both brand-related elements (key message and logo) and context-related elements (tone and visuals) simultaneously. By analysing these variables together, it better reflects the complexity of real-world social media interactions, where consumers engage with content that blends multiple features at once. This broader perspective enhances our understanding of brand communication as an interconnected process rather than a series of isolated factors, offering meaningful theoretical and practical insights.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We first offer an in-depth literature review, followed by a presentation of our experiment method and results. We finish with a general discussion of our contributions and avenues of research.

Literature review

Conceptual background

Consistency can be broadly defined as “The quality of always behaving or performing in a similar way, or of always happening in a similar way” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). In advertising specifically, consistency is used to describe the degree to which a brands’ messaging meets consumers’ expectations based on previous experiences with the brand (Mafael et al., 2021). Branding consistency encompasses both what a brand says and how it says it. The former is called strategic consistency, which implies sending similar messages relating to the brand’s strategic positioning, while the latter is called executional strategy and implies the use of similar tonal and visual cues (Chang, 2018).

Consistency in communications can be beneficial. Some scholars argue that sending consistent messages over time creates brand equity (Keller, 1993) and leads to strong competitive advantages (Aaker, 1996). These scholars also argue that consistent brand associations increase brand recall (Keller, 1993).

Empirically, very little work exists to support or refute the importance of consistency. Supporting the importance of consistency, one examination shows that keeping some message features (e.g., CSR appeals, celebrity spokesperson, relying on humor appeals) consistent over time leads to positive word-of-mouth for the advertising brand (Mafael et al., 2021).

However, a second body of literature suggests that the benefits of brand consistency are not universally positive. For example, moderately inconsistent messages can generate positive brand attitudes for well-known brands (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2012). Furthermore, high advertising consistency can even harm product sales for large businesses (Becker & Gijsenberg, 2023).

Given the inconsistent findings in prior literature, it remains unclear to marketing managers whether consistency benefits or harms their brands. We suggest that marketing

messages are made up of a variety of characteristics, some of which will benefit from consistency while others do not. In examining specific features of marketing messages that should (not) remain consistent within brands, we provide practical guidance to marketers while answering calls for empirical data studying the relative importance of message consistency (Becker & Gijzenberg, 2023).

In this thesis, we limit our scope to simultaneous cross-platform consistency. We do so for three reasons. First, brands must now communicate in a multi-platform environment: consumers engage with brands across multiple social media in a short timeframe, making simultaneous cross platform consistency a pressing research field. Second, little empirical research examines simultaneous cross platforms consistency. Thirdly, social media's norms are relatively stable in the short term, making it easier to hypothesize about how brand consistency influences consumer perception across platforms at the same time. Over time, norms shift due to evolving trends, algorithm changes, or platform updates, making longitudinal predictions more complex.

Brand communication is a product of both a brand's personality and a situation

We suggest that some aspects of marketing messages reflect who the brand is and should thus remain unchanged, while other aspects reflect the situation and should therefore vary depending on platforms' norms. Indeed, it can be hypothesized that brands are like humans – while they may speak differently at work vs with their friends, they have some core communication tendencies that reflect their personality, and these remain unchanged regardless of the setting.

Any message can be broken down into effects driven by the speaker and the situation. Indeed, a person's behavior (including their communication) is a product of both the person and their environment (Berger et al., 2022; Lewin, 1936). For brands specifically, communication theory suggests that brand communication is the result of both what the brand says and the way in which they choose to say it (i.e., specific words and images, specific media; Berlo, 1960; Fill & Jamieson, 2011). As such, brands may choose to convey the same key message or brand associations (i.e., speaker effects) using different linguistic and visual techniques depending on platform (i.e., context effects).

Personality-related behaviors (i.e., speaker effects) remain consistent across contexts, while (perhaps obviously) situation-related behaviors are expected to change with context. Indeed, psychologists find that any behavior linked to a personality trait (e.g., honesty, openness) remains relatively consistent regardless of situation (Sherman et al., 2015). Other behaviors, like formality, tend to be more situation dependent (Barcelos et al., 2018).

Given that consumers often anthropomorphize brands and interact with them as they would with other humans (Aggarwal, 2002; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017), we suggest that these same communication norms should apply to brands. That is, there likely exist some features of marketing communications that reflect “who” the brand is, that should not change across platforms. Other features of marketing communications reflect the context, and should benefit from changes across platform.

Elements that reflect a brand’s identity and personality should remain consistent

We argue that certain messaging elements reflect the brand and should be kept consistent. Brands have associated personalities and meanings (i.e., identities). Brand personality refers to “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p.1), while brand identity is defined as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain” (Aaker, 1996, p.68). Both contribute to how consumers recognize and relate to a brand, but they operate differently: brand personality reflects the emotional and human-like traits that consumers associate with a brand, whereas brand identity encompasses the strategic and visual elements that establish brand recognition and differentiation. Furthermore, people tend to use and prefer brands that align with their own personalities or who they aspire to be; they see the brands they use as a reflection of themselves (Aaker, 1997). Brands thus influence consumer behavior by reflecting and reinforcing aspects of their personality, often aligning with their self-concept (i.e., how they perceive themselves; Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

In this section, we argue that brand personalities and associations should be kept consistent for three reasons: (1) human social norms favor consistency in personality expression, (2) the use of inconsistent brand associations may confuse consumers, and (3)

consumers may find it easier to express their identities with brands when those brands have consistent associations.

We argue that message features that reflect the brand's personality and associations should be kept consistent. People are more trustworthy of peers who are consistent between their personal standards and behaviors (Rotenberg et al., 2024), and often tend to believe that entities' actions are based on underlying personality characteristics (Tetlock, 1985). It can therefore be hypothesized that, just as people expect individuals to behave consistently, they may also expect brands to maintain a stable personality and identity across social media.

Similarly, brand identity should be kept consistent as it is a key component of identification. Indeed, a strong identity is crucial for fast brand recognition and distinctiveness (Aaker, 1996). Therefore, inconsistent brand identity could contribute to the dilution of the brand and an increase sense of confusion (Hellberg, 2015; Freling & Forbes, 2005). Specifically, marketing experts believe that features that represent brand identity, which can include visual and linguistic associations, must remain consistent (Phillips et al., 2014).

Finally, both brand personality and identity should also be kept consistent for signaling reasons. Consumers often purchase from brands as a means to signal their own identity (Chan et al., 2012; Holt, 2002). Moreover, possessions can serve as an extension of the self (Ferraro et al., 2011). Consequently, brands are expected to maintain a strong and consistent identity; otherwise, consumers may stop using them to avoid sending mixed signals about their own identity (Berger & Heath, 2008). Therefore, if people choose brands to enhance their self-image and personality, they are likely to expect consistency from these brands. Any inconsistency could create dissonance, affecting not only how they perceive the brand but also how they perceive themselves.

Elements that reflect the setting should be adapted

We argue that other messaging elements reflect the situation and can benefit from being adapted to the platform. We first propose that brands can tailor their message

delivery without compromising who they are. Indeed, marketers have documented successful “chameleon” brands that adapt their communications to different situations (audiences and media) yet retain a core proposition that allows for continuity and recognition. (Fill, 2009). As such, we suspect that certain message characteristics can be adapted to different platforms without being detrimental to the brand. For example, humans shift their language style depending on the situation they find themselves in and the people they are with (Pennebaker, 2013). Often the point of this linguistic adaption is to better fit in with the current social group (Kovacs & Kleinbaum, 2020). In these situations, although they retain their core personality, a person’s environment influences how they speak. We suggest that this also applies to brands who can adapt the way they speak to meet certain situational (or platform) norms.

The need to adapt may be particularly pertinent to brands on social media. Social media platforms are social environments that have their specific norms that require adaptation (Pelletier et al., 2020). Consumers select the social platform they use in order to meet specific needs (e.g., Instagram is used when consumers want entertainment; Choi et al., 2023; Pelletier et al., 2020). As such, brands can and should adapt their content such that it matches consumers’ needs and expectations for the platform (Choi et al., 2023).

Conclusion

We highlighted in this first part that brand communication is a product of both a brand’s personality and the situation it finds itself in. We propose that brands are like humans: the way they communicate will retain some core elements reflecting their personality while their message delivery will still be tailored to the medium they use. This allows brands to preserve their equity while still offering relevant content to their customers. The next part of the literature review dives into presenting which variables specifically benefit from consistency and which benefit from being adapted to the social media used.

Hypotheses development

Features that represent the brand should remain consistent

Key message. The key message of a campaign is defined as “the intellectual and emotional information contained within a message” (Fill, 2009, p.929). We suggest that the key message reflects core features of the brand and should therefore be kept consistent across platforms.

We argue that the key message reflects the brand for three main reasons. First, brand associations are partly formed from the message that brands send, and the content of the key message affects consumers’ attitudes towards the brands (Sukma Wijaya, 2013). Second, consistently displaying the main features of the product/service in the key message is critical for creating a strong brand image (Keller, 1993). Third, consistent key messages influence consumers’ perceptions about a brand, enhancing perceived quality, reliability, and professionalism (Šerić et al., 2020). A consistent key message across all communication mediums creates synergy thus generating more positive brands attitudes (Chang, 2018) and leads to stronger brand associations in consumers’ minds, positively influencing brand recognition and equity (Keller, 1993). In addition, IMC theory suggests that consistent messages should be sent on all communications tools to ensure consumers’ understanding of the messages (Fill, 2009). We thus hypothesize that the key message should remain consistent across platforms.

Brand logo. We also examine the role of brand logos, which visually represent brands and can have varying degrees of features, shape, and text (Van Grinsven & Das, 2016). We argue that logos also reflect the brand, and should therefore remain consistent across platforms.

The brand logo is, by definition, a name or symbol that differentiates the brand from competitors (Aaker, 1997; Sukma Wijaya, 2013). A brand logo is a core element of a brand’s visual identity (Phillips et al., 2014) that influences the inferences consumers make about brands and that generates fast brand recognition (Jin et al., 2019).

For the purposes of this research, we divide the brand logo into three main components: color, shape, and text spacing. Below, we discuss how each component of the logo helps the brand build core associations, all of which should remain consistent over time.

We hypothesize that the logo's color should remain consistent across platforms. Color is a multifaceted concept, comprising brightness, saturation, and hue (Gorn et al., 1997). Among these different color attributes, hue seems to have the biggest impact on consumers' brand associations, so we have chosen to focus specifically on this attribute (Lichtlé, 2007). Within logo hue, blue and red have the most differing associations: blue evokes competence while red evokes liveliness (Lichtlé, 2007; Celhay & Luffarelli, 2024). Keeping the same logo color is key in avoiding sending contradictory messages about the brands' core personality and associations.

We also hypothesize that a logo's shape should remain consistent across platforms. Indeed, similarly to colors, shapes can generate opposite imagery in consumers' minds. For example, angular logos communicate hardness while circular logos communicate softness (Jiang et al., 2016). Therefore, changing the shape of a brand's logo depending on the social media can send different messages about a brand's identity, thus contributing to the dilution of the brand.

Finally, we argue that a logo's text spacing should also remain consistent across platforms. The spacing between text elements in a logo can vary, with compact logos featuring closely arranged components and minimal gaps, while spacious logos have more widely spaced elements with greater interstitial space (Gupta & Hagtvedt, 2021). We argue that because spacious and compact logos generate opposite associations in consumers' minds, using varying degrees of space in the brand logo could create negative perceptions (Gupta & Hagtvedt, 2021).

Therefore, keeping the logo's color, shape, and text spacing consistent across multiple platforms is essential to preserve brand recognition, equity and avoid contradictory messages.

H1: Participants will be more likely to prefer an image where the key message and brand logo are consistent with the reference image.

Features that reflect the communication style should follow platforms' norms

We analyze other variables that we argue reflect a brand's communication style.

Tone. First, we study a brand's tone of voice – which refers to the style and language a brand utilizes in its communications (Delin, 2005). The context, place and people we are with highly affect our choice of words and our language style (Pennebaker, 2013). Since social media immerse their users in vastly different environments, surrounded by different people, we hypothesize that brands should adapt their choice of words and level of formality depending on the medium used and its audience. For example, consumers visit Instagram to demonstrate sociability and show affection while Twitter is mainly used for brand identification and is widely used by brands with human personalities (Phua et al., 2017). This may mean that a more human tone is beneficial on Twitter where a sense of community is particularly important.

Given that tone is highly specific to context and situations, and considering the varied purposes of different social media platforms, it can be hypothesized that the formality of a brand's tone of voice should align with the norms of each platform.

Tone can be manipulated using different levels of formality: formal language, which relies on more rigid and impersonal phrases, vs colloquial language which is warmer and more causal (Pfeiffer et al., 2023). The formality of a tone can also be manipulated using paralanguage, such as emojis, whose benefits are proven to be context specific (Luangrath et al., 2023; Li et al., 2019). Finally, pronouns can be varied to alter the tone of a brand's voice ("we" vs "the brand"; Leung et al., 2023).

Formality. The adoption of a formal or informal tone largely reflects the communication context (Barcelos et al., 2018). Indeed, the formality of a message should be adapted to respond to varying contexts. In hedonic or low-involvement contexts, informal tone increases purchase intentions whereas in utilitarian or high-involvement contexts, informal tone decreases purchase intentions (Barcelos et al., 2018; Pfeiffer et

al., 2023). We therefore argue that marketers should adapt their choice of words and formality to the platform's norms and their users.

Pronouns. We also analyze the role of pronouns in a brand's tone of voice. Similarly to the formality, pronouns used in communications are highly context specific (Packard et al., 2018). Although pronouns can reflect a person's identity, their use usually shifts overtime and people naturally adapt their pronouns to the context in which they find themselves, including the medium they are using and their communication goals (Labrecque et al., 2020; Pennebaker, 2013). For example, the use of "we" generates a sense of closeness and warmth while "the brand" is more formal and distant (Sela et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2023).

Pronouns are therefore context specific and should vary depending on the platform and the communication goals. Because pronouns affect differently consumers' engagement on social media, their use should be tailored to the platform depending on the type of engagement desired by marketers (likes vs comments vs shares) and the nature of the platform (hedonic vs utilitarian; Labrecque et al., 2020). For example, using the pronoun "we" can create a warm, communal feel on platforms like Facebook, where community is important (Pelletier et al., 2020), while "the brand" suits the formality of sites like LinkedIn.

Visuals. We also study the effect of visuals on communications consistency. Visuals are commonly seen as complementary forms of communication that enhance written or spoken text, allowing viewers to grasp a message more quickly (Russmann & Svensson, 2017). In this experiment, we will manipulate the presence of a model (a human person) on a visual and its complexity by changing the background.

Model characteristics. We argue that the presence of a model on a post is context specific. The choice to use a model depends on product being sold (Lu et al., 2023) and the brands' communication goals (e.g., purchase vs. online engagement; Hartmann et al., 2021). Therefore, creating content that varies the presence of a model on different channels could accommodate varying products and communication goals.

Platform norms may also dictate the choice to include a model. Indeed, Instagram is increasingly used to generate more personal and relatable content, shifting the focus from products to the brand and the people behind it (Hartmann et al., 2021; Hellberg, 2015). Human presence on these posts might then be beneficial. Comparatively, consumers expect brands to be concise and deliver valuable information, like new product features, on Facebook (Hansson et al., 2013). As such, clear visuals featuring only products (no models) could be beneficial on Facebook.

Even within a platform, brands may benefit from inconsistency in model use. Consumers prefer for diverse visual content (model vs no model and clean vs cluttered) to keep their feeds interesting (Hellberg, 2015).

Visual complexity. Visual complexity refers the level of detail present on an image (Snodgrass & Vanderwart, 1980). To manipulate visual complexity, for example, one might add a consumption background, which places the product in a realistic setting where the usage could take place (Poirier et al., 2024).

The complexity of a visual on a post is also context specific. Indeed, minimalist and clutter-free visuals make it easier for consumers to focus on products, and to understand visuals and their signification (Hellberg, 2015). However, visual complexity, with background noise for example, generate more relatable content for consumers and may lead to more purchase (Hellberg, 2015; Min et al., 2024). Therefore, visual complexity has different effects depending on the context. For this reason, in line with previous recommendations (Min et al., 2024), we suggest that marketers should adapt the visual complexity to the platform's norms and their communications goals.

H2. Participants will be more likely to prefer an image that varies the tone of voice and visuals from the reference image.

Chapter 1

Methods

Participants ($N=401$) were recruited through Prolific. After removing participants who did not complete our dependant measure (i.e., ad choice) on at least one of the trials ($N = 52$), we were left with a final sample of 349 participants (151 men, 191 women, 6 non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.65$, $SD = 12.50$; 253 White, 11 Hispanic, 44 Black, 21 Asian, 4 Indigenous, , 1 Middle Eastern, 10 multi-racial , 4 self-described).

The study employed a choice-based conjoint methodology. This method involves presenting participants with a set of alternatives where multiple attributes of each alternative are varied systematically. The dependant variable is consumer's choice of which alternative they prefer. In this study, conjoint analysis was employed to understand how consumers prioritize brand consistency across various elements such as key message, brand identity (logo colour, shape, and spacing), tone of voice (formality and pronouns), and visuals (presence of a model and complexity) when exposed to brand advertisements on different social media platforms.

Specifically, participants were first exposed to a Facebook post of a fictional kitchenware brand where the logo (see Fig. 1), key message and tone of voice (see Table 1) and visuals (see Fig. 2) were randomized. They were then shown two different options for an Instagram post where the same variables were randomized and were asked to choose the ad that they preferred. As such, the participant made a choice between two Instagram ads that were (in)consistent with the Facebook post on a random number of features. They were asked to make this decision five times.

Finally, participants completed demographic information and reported if they had any issues with the survey.

Figure 1. Manipulation of brand logo

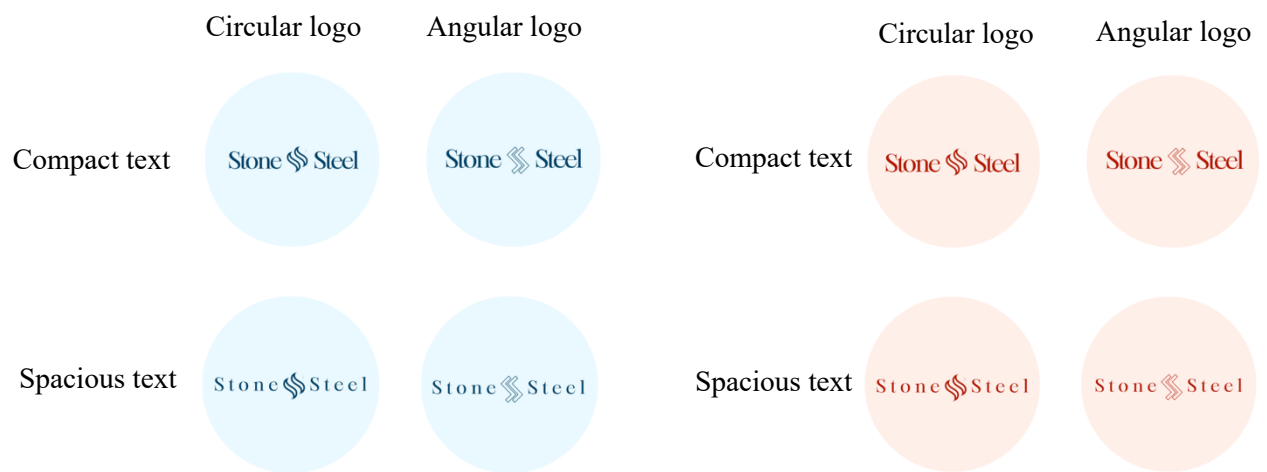


Table 1. Manipulation of key message

Key Message	Formality	Pronouns	Caption
Quality	Low	Brand	Stone & Steel makes cookware that lasts 50% longer than the leading brand 🔍. With 30-day returns, Stone & Steel knows you'll love the product! 🍷
	Low	We	We make cookware that lasts 50% longer than the leading brand 🔍. With 30-day returns, we know you'll love the product! 🍷
	High	Brand	Stone & Steel makes cookware that lasts 50% longer than the leading brand. With 30-day returns, Stone & Steel is confident you will love the product.
	High	We	We make cookware that lasts 50% longer than the leading brand. With 30-day returns, we are confident you will love the product.
Price	Low	Brand	Stone & Steel makes cookware that costs 50% less than the leading brand 🔍. With 30-day returns, Stone & Steel knows you'll love the product! 🍷
	Low	We	We make cookware that costs 50% less than the leading brand 🔍. With 30-day returns, we know you'll love the product! 🍷
	High	Brand	Stone & Steel makes cookware that costs 50% less than the leading brand. With 30-day returns, Stone & Steel is confident you will love the product.

	High	We	We make cookware that costs 50% less than the leading brand. With 30-day returns, we are confident you will love the product.
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Figure 2. Manipulation of visuals

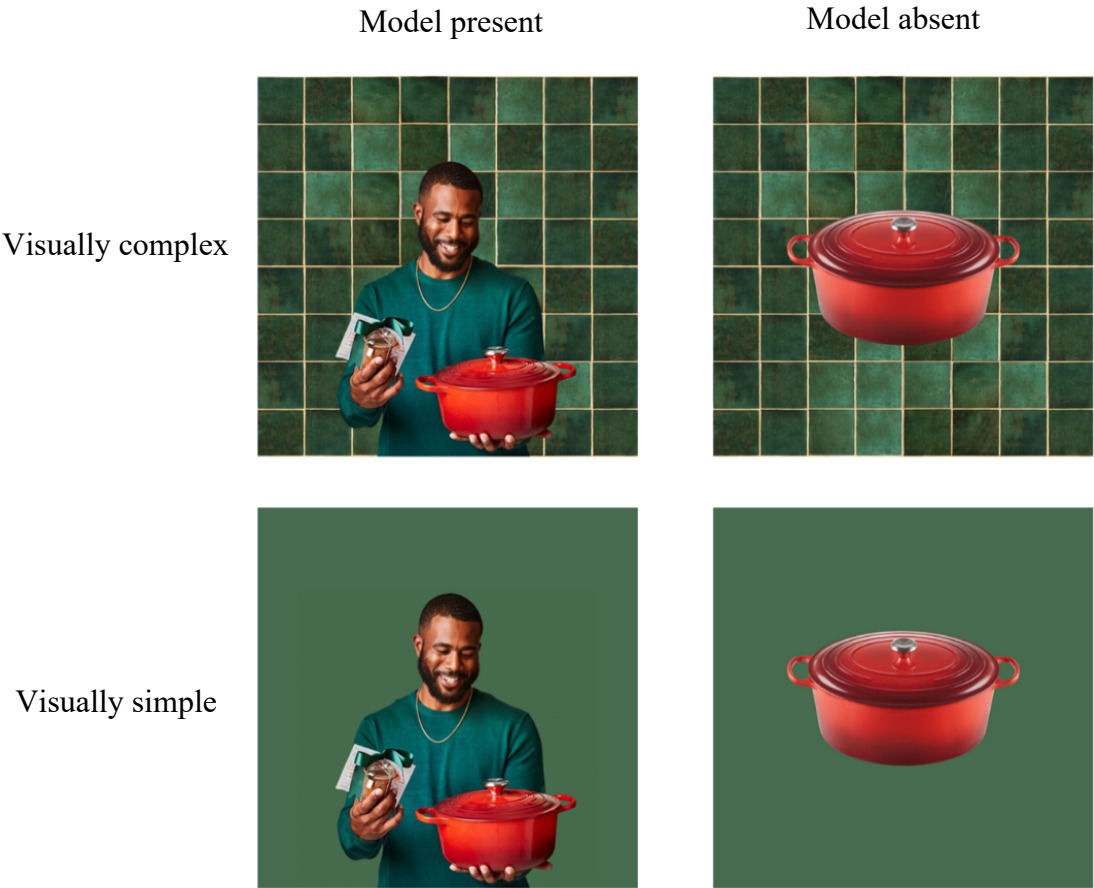
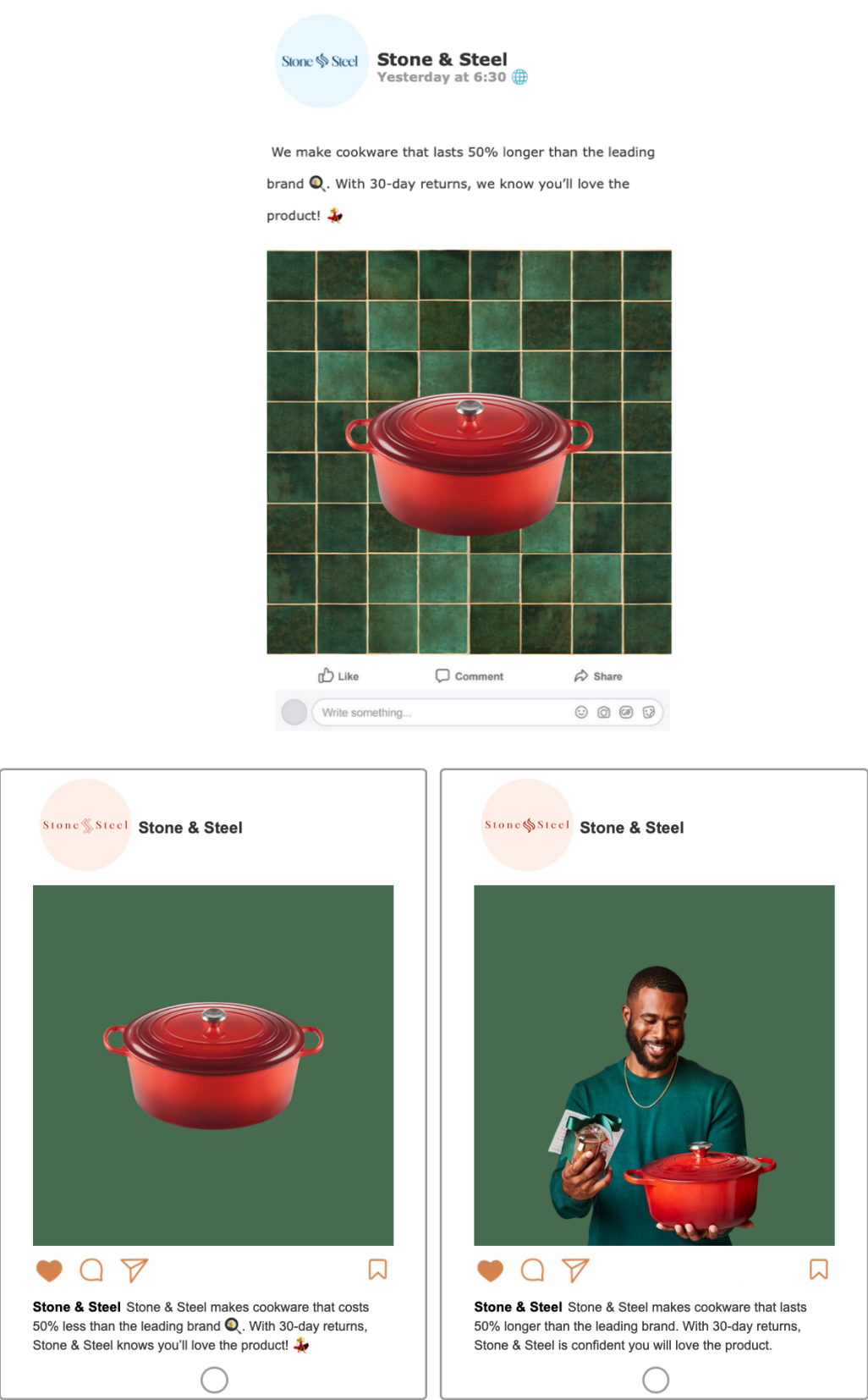


Figure 3. Example of a randomized question



Chapter 2

Results

We performed a conjoint analysis using the cregg program in R (Leeper, 2020) a program which follows the conjoint procedure detailed in Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014). The program was used to estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs, represented by b), which allowed us to examine how a change on a given attribute affected participants' likelihood of choosing that alternative, controlling for other attributes. Negative b indicates inconsistency is detrimental, while a positive b is beneficial.

Key message

The consistency of the key message between the Facebook and Instagram posts did not affect choice, $b = -.02$, $SE = .02$, $p = .36$.

Brand logo

Participants seemed most attuned to consistency as it pertained to the brand logo. For example, the consistency of logo spacing (i.e., distance between letters in the logo font), had a significant negative effect on the choice of ad, indicating a preference for consistent logo spacing, $b = -.05$, $SE = .02$, $p = .003$. Similarly, participants demonstrated a preference for consistent logo colour across platforms. Although this effect did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, $b = -.02$, $SE = .02$, $p = .21$, it is among the largest effect observed.

Consistency in logo shape, $b = -.004$, $SE = .02$, $p = .80$, did not affect choice.

Tone of voice

Neither consistency in formality, $b = -.02$, $SE = .02$, $p = .30$, nor consistency in pronouns, $b = -.01$, $SE = .02$, $p = .52$ affected choice.

Visuals

Neither consistency in image complexity, $b = -.016$, $SE = .02$, $p = .35$, nor consistency regarding the presence of a model, $b = .01$, $SE = .02$, $p = .68$ affected choice.

Chapter 3

General Discussion

This paper examined the effect of (in)consistency in message features across social media platforms on consumer preferences. We first show that overall, consumers are less sensitive to consistency than what is currently portrayed in the literature, as only one variable was found to be significant. Contrary to popular belief, a consistent key message across multiple social media did not affect choice. This implies that consumers are less sensitive to the content of the message than that was hypothesized by marketing researchers and practitioners. Next, we also demonstrate that a consistent brand logo (colour and text spacing), which is a variable that reflects the brand in our framework, does have a positive impact on consumer preferences. Finally, our data suggest that consistency regarding variables that reflected the context – tone and visuals – do not impact consumer preferences.

This paper contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, we provide empirical data studying the relative importance of consistency. Although consistency is a popular concept in marketing communications—in businesses and in the classroom—there is a concerning lack of empirical data to support practitioners' hunches regarding its importance. Indeed, available evidence for the importance of consistency is largely anecdotal (e.g., textbooks with no empirical support) or qualitative (e.g., interviews with marketing managers, cases). Furthermore, practical implications of this work are overly general, with no clear instructions as to which specific variables should remain consistent and which can vary (Fill, 2009; Aaker, 1996). We contribute to the literature by conducting empirical research on simultaneous cross-platform consistency and providing practical guidance on specific feature consistency.

We also provide a framework that categorizes whether a variable reflects the brand or the context. This framework is useful both theoretically and practically. Indeed, prior research often assumes that consistency is universally beneficial, but our findings suggest that benefits depend on the message feature being kept consistent. Our results challenge existing work by showing that consistency in context-reflecting variables does not impact

consumer preferences while consistent brand-reflecting variables do, specifically brand logo. This framework adds nuance to the role of consistency, allowing marketers to view it in a different light and to be more selective of the variables that can benefit from being kept consistent. Furthermore, this framework offers practical benefits. Indeed, we provide marketers with a clear guideline on where to prioritize consistency. Many brands struggle with the trade-off between remaining consistent and relevant on social media. This framework can help them tailor their content to each platform while maintaining components of their identity.

The results of this study offer valuable guidance for marketing practitioners managing brand communication across social media. First, the findings suggest that marketers should not aim for consistency across all variables, but rather prioritize consistency in brand-reflecting elements, such as logo design—specifically colour and spacing. These elements contribute to a coherent and recognizable brand identity, which consumers appear to value more than message repetition or uniform tone. On the other hand, flexibility in context-reflecting variables—such as tone of voice or imagery—can be strategically embraced to adapt to the norms and expectations of each platform without harming brand perception. This insight can alleviate the pressure many brands face to standardize every element of their communication, allowing them to focus efforts on what truly influences consumer preferences. Ultimately, this nuanced approach to consistency helps brands remain both recognizable and relevant in a platform-diverse media landscape.

Finally, we also contribute to the literature by integrating previously separate research streams, by examining multiple variables within a single experiment. Specifically, our study simultaneously investigates elements that reflect the brand (key message and logo) and elements that reflect the context (tone and visuals). By analysing how these factors interplay, we offer a more realistic approach that reflects the complexity of real-world social media exposure, where consumers engage with posts that combine multiple, overlapping elements. This holistic perspective represents a significant step forward, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how different aspects of brand communication function together rather than in isolation.

Limitations

Although we are confident in the robustness of our findings, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, our study focused solely on Facebook and Instagram, which limits the generalizability of our results to other platforms such as TikTok, LinkedIn, or X (formerly Twitter), where content expectations and engagement behaviours may differ. Second, while we measured ad preference, we did not assess other relevant consumer behaviours such as engagement (clicks, likes, shares), recall, or purchase intent, which could provide a more comprehensive view of communication effectiveness. Third, we focused on a specific set of variables that are commonly manipulated in branding but necessarily excluded others that may also play a role in consumer responses to brand consistency. Finally, we did not pre-test our stimuli to confirm that our intended manipulations—such as the use of informal language—were perceived by participants as intended, which may affect the validity of our findings.

Future Directions

Building on our findings, future research could expand in several key directions. First, while our study focused on Facebook and Instagram, future work could examine how brand consistency operates across a wider range of platforms, such as TikTok, LinkedIn, or X. Notably, the influence of context-specific variables, such as tone and visuals, may vary more significantly across these platforms. For example, LinkedIn favours a more professional and formal tone, whereas TikTok encourages a casual, trend-driven approach. Understanding how these differences affect consumer responses to brand consistency could provide deeper insights into cross-platform branding strategies. Additionally, future studies could investigate a broader set of branding variables beyond key message, logo, tone of voice, and visuals to capture a more comprehensive view of brand identity and context. Another promising avenue for research is exploring industry-specific applications, as the impact of cross-platform consistency may differ across sectors. For example, luxury brands may benefit from a more controlled, curated brand presentation, while fast fashion brands might prioritize adaptability and trend responsiveness. By addressing these areas, future research can further refine our

understanding of brand communication and its impact on consumer perceptions and preferences. Finally, another important avenue for future research is examining brand consistency over time. While our study focused on consistency across different platforms at a single point in time, consumer perceptions may evolve based on a brand's long-term communication patterns. Therefore, longitudinal studies tracking consumer responses over time are needed to provide empirical evidence on the long-term effects of brand consistency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study challenges prevailing assumptions about the role of consistency in brand communication across social media platforms. While prior research and industry practice emphasize the importance of maintaining consistency, our findings reveal that its impact varies depending on the specific branding elements involved. We demonstrate that consistency in brand-reflecting variables, specifically logos, positively influences consumer preferences, whereas consistency in context-reflecting variables, such as tone and visuals, does not impact consumer preferences. These insights contribute to both academic literature and practical marketing strategies by offering a more nuanced understanding of when consistency matters. Additionally, by introducing a framework that distinguishes between brand- and context-reflecting variables, we provide marketers with a valuable tool to optimize their cross-platform strategies.

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Appendix 1 - CER Approval Copy

HEC MONTRÉAL

Comité d'éthique de la recherche

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

This is to confirm that the research project described below has been evaluated in accordance with ethical conduct for research involving human subjects, and that it meets the requirements of our policy on that subject.

Project No.: 2025-6097

Title of research project: Brand consistency: the importance of consistency across platforms

Principal investigator: Alice Louis Victor

Date of project approval: November 05, 2024

Effective date of certificate: November 05, 2024

Expiry date of certificate: November 01, 2025



Maurice Lemelin
Président
CER de HEC Montréal

Signé le 2024-11-05 à 09:12

Appendix 2 – Consent Form

Brand consistency: the relative importance of consistency across platforms

The following pages contain an anonymous questionnaire, which we invite you to complete. This questionnaire was developed as part of a Master Thesis at HEC Montréal.

Since your first impressions best reflect your true opinions, we would ask that you please answer the questions included in this questionnaire without any hesitation. There is no time limit for completing the questionnaire, although we have estimated that it should take about 5 minutes.

The information collected will remain strictly confidential. It will be used solely for the advancement of knowledge and the dissemination of the overall results in academic or professional forums.

The online data collection provider agrees to refrain from disclosing any personal information (or any other information concerning participants in this study) to any other users or to any third party, unless the respondent expressly agrees to such disclosure or unless such disclosure is required by law.

Please note that the following is automatically collected by the survey software: Worker ID, IP address, approximate geolocation. Although it is not the intent of the research team to do so, collecting your Worker ID means that information you provide in this survey could be linked to other responses you provide in other surveys.

De-identified data from this experiment (i.e., data without personal identifiers like your Worker ID, IP address, approximate geolocation, or any additional identifying details you provide) may be published on open science websites.

You are free to refuse to participate in this project and you may decide to stop answering the questions at any time. By completing this questionnaire, you will be considered as

having given your consent to participate in our research project and to the potential use of data collected from this questionnaire in future research.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the student leading the project, Alice Louis-Victor or her advisor, Holly Howe, at the email addresses indicated below.

HEC Montréal's Research Ethics Board has determined that the data collection related to this study meets the ethics standards for research involving humans. If you have any questions related to ethics, please contact the REB secretariat at (514) 340-6051 or by email at cer@hec.ca.

Thank you for your valuable cooperation!

Alice Louis-Victor Student
HEC Montréal
Alice.louis-victor@hec.ca

Holly Howe
Assistant Professor
HEC Montréal
holly.howe@hec.ca

Appendix 3 – Study Survey

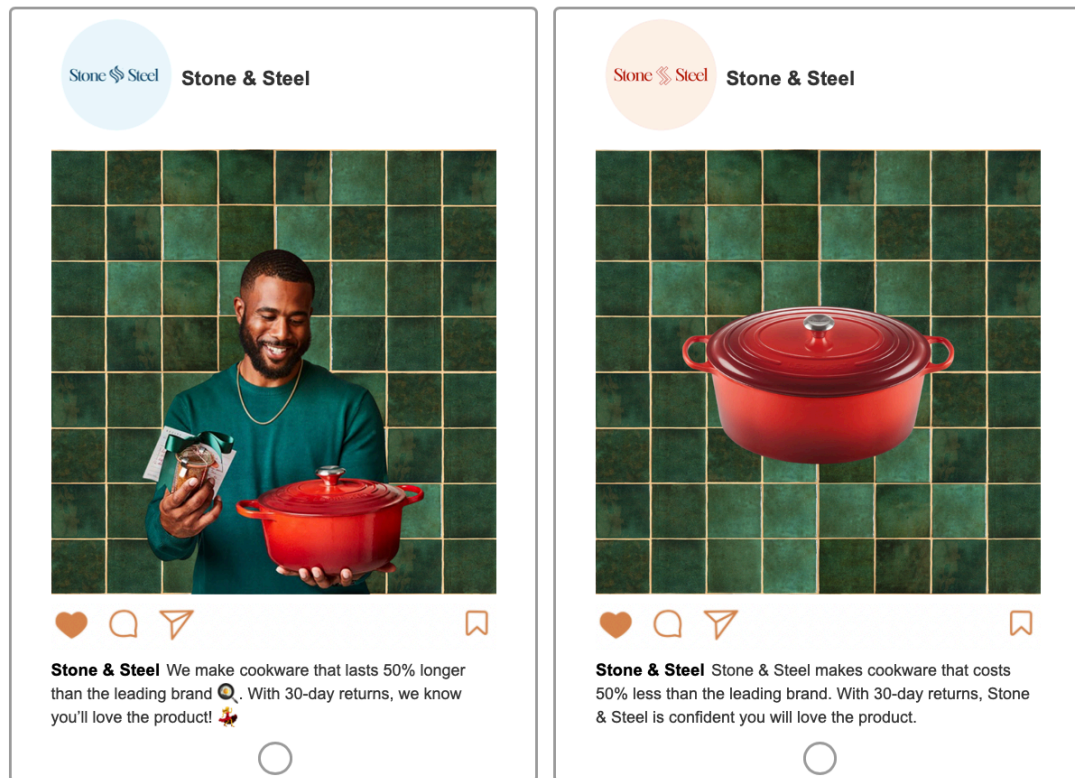
Introduction to task

In this scenario we want you to imagine you are browsing on social media. You see an ad for a company called **Stone and Steel** making kitchen hardware, but you have never purchased from them before. You see a first ad on Facebook, and you then go on Instagram, where you see two possible ads. Look carefully at each the element of the ads. Please choose which ad you would prefer to see. We will ask you to make this decision 5 times during this experiment.

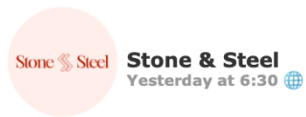
Scenario

Q1: You come across this Facebook post from a kitchenware brand. Please choose which Instagram post you would prefer to see afterwards.

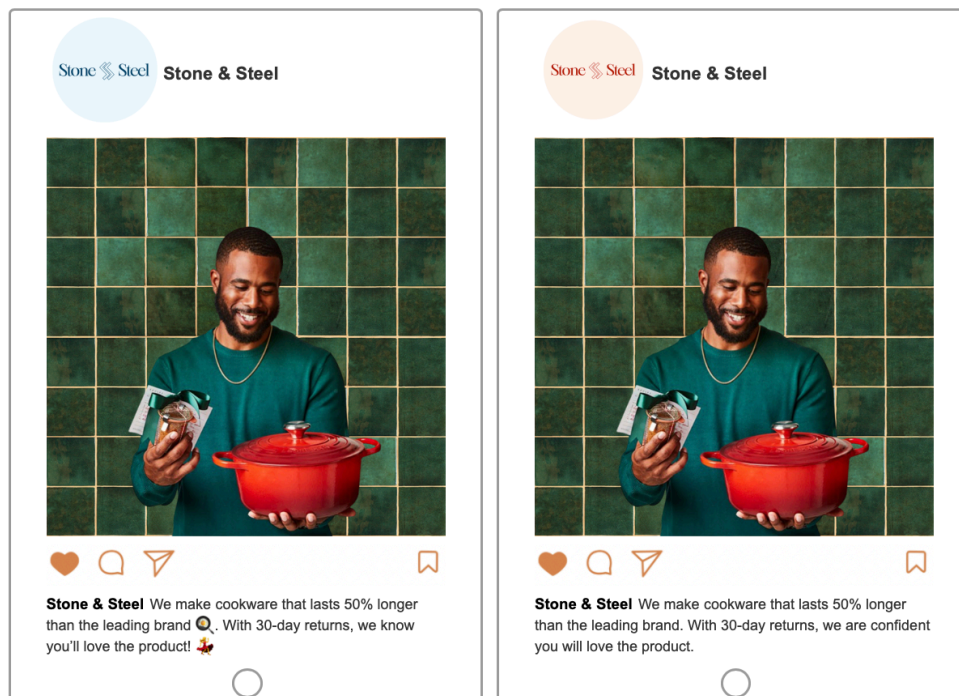
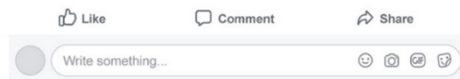




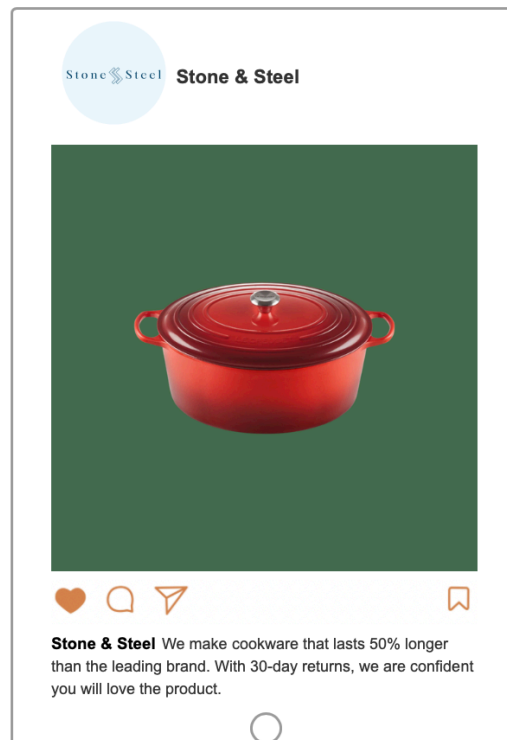
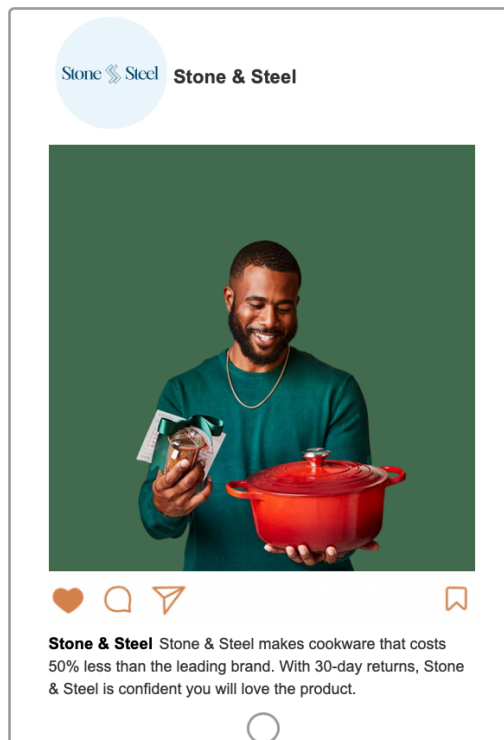
Q2: You come across this Facebook post from a kitchenware brand. Please choose which Instagram post you would prefer to see afterwards.



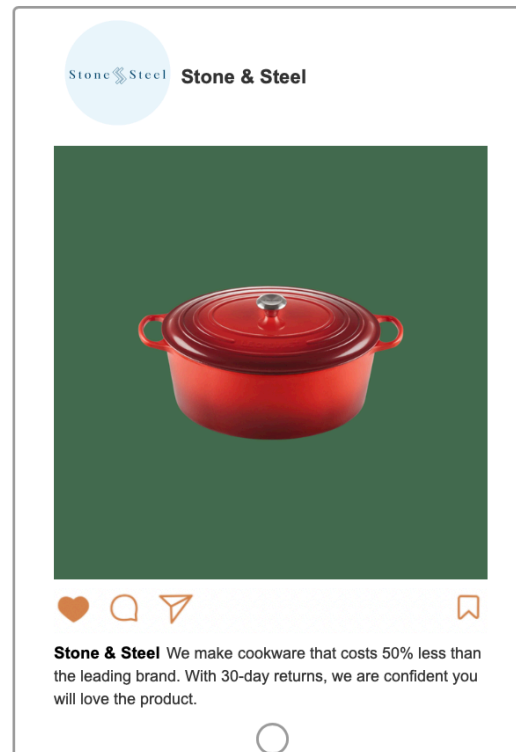
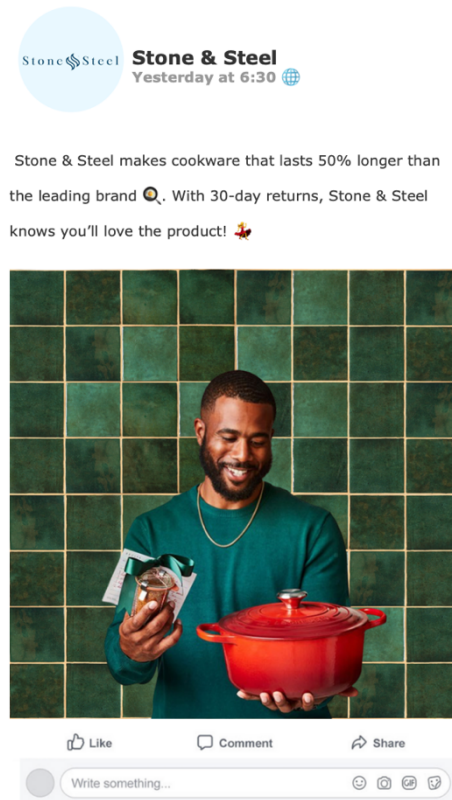
We make cookware that lasts 50% longer than the leading brand. With 30-day returns, we are confident you will love the product.



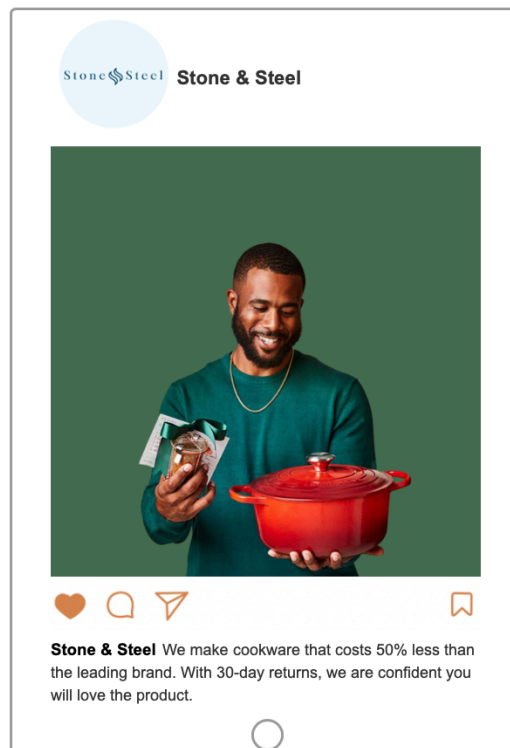
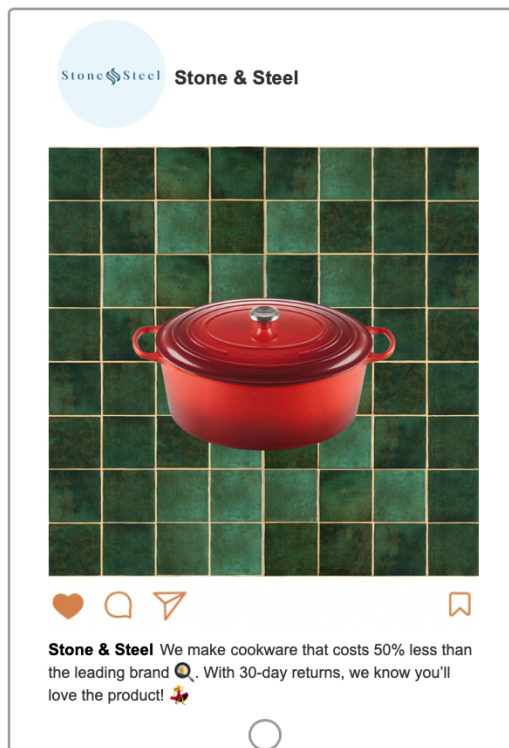
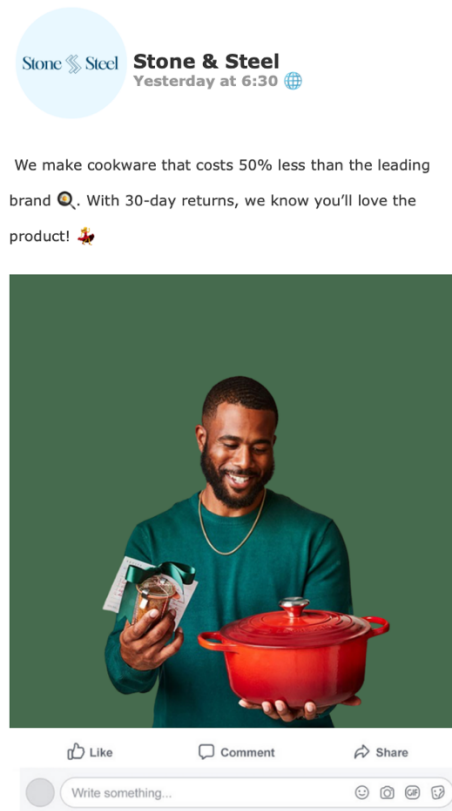
Q3: You come across this Facebook post from a kitchenware brand. Please choose which Instagram post you would prefer to see afterwards.



Q4: You come across this Facebook post from a kitchenware brand. Please choose which Instagram post you would prefer to see afterwards.



Q5: You come across this Facebook post from a kitchenware brand. Please choose which Instagram post you would prefer to see afterward



Q6: Gender - Which gender do you most identify with?

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

☐ Non-binary (3)

☐ Prefer to self-describe (4)

Q7: Age – What is your age in years?

Q8: Race – Which race do you most identify with?

- ☐ Hispanic or Latino (1)
 - ☐ Caucasian/White (2)
 - ☐ Black/African American (3)
 - ☐ Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander (4)
 - ☐ Native American or Indigenous (5)
 - ☐ Multi- or bi-racial (6)
 - ☐ Arabic and Middle Eastern (7)
 - ☐ Other or Prefer to self-describe (8)
-

Q9: Did you experience any problems with the survey?

- ☐ Yes, images did not load correctly (1)
 - ☐ Yes, another type of problem (please specify) (2)
-
- ☐ No problems (3)

Q10: Please leave any comments on the survey here (not required)

Appendix 4 - AI Declaration Of Use

As part of this project, I used artificial intelligence as an assistance tool for:

Translation clarity

AI was employed to assist in refining the quality of my translation. This step helped ensure the precision and clarity of my sentences, while maintaining my original ideas and personal writing style.

Code checking

AI was also used to help fix code bugs and issues when doing data analysis.

Improving sentences improve writing clarity for certain paragraphs

AI was used solely to clarify and improve the flow of specific paragraphs, ensuring better expression of my own ideas, but it was never involved in generating ideas.

Limits and responsibilities:

All ideas and final decisions were entirely my own. AI did not generate any ideas; it was used solely as a support tool and never as a replacement for my personal reasoning or critical analysis.