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Extended Abstract

There is no technical fix to trusting images: negotiating trust in visual social media use

Research objective

Images on social media are confronted with suspicion especially due to people's awareness of, and access to, the ever-growing technological possibilities of manipulating and creating images. Related research has proposed a range of technical solutions to 'fixing' manipulated content, for example, in the form of various forensic techniques and authenticating watermarks. Somewhat paradoxically, while most users are well aware of the possibilities for image manipulation, these images still affect how they think about themselves, social relationships, the environment, or their futures. In fact, visual social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) are reported to have negative mental health effects suggesting that social media images are a significant, and trusted, part of people's realities. This tension between trust and distrust calls for asking *how and why people trust in images in our current visual digital cultures*?

Methodology

This research is part of a larger international and multimethodological research project on trust and visuality in the context of health and wellbeing content. In this paper, we focus specifically on the data gathered in Finland during 2023. The data consists of 15 interviews with Finnish students of media and communications, aged 19 to 27. In the interviews the interviewees' phones played an important role as they helped to provide access to the lived visual realities of social media. Consequently, the data consists of transcribed interviews including screenshots of and links to social media contents. In our analysis we approach the data openly with a focus on how the interviewees talk about their experience regarding images and visuality, and what kinds of imagery they point at, with the aim of identifying relevant aspects of how and why those studied trust images.

Key findings

Our findings show that trust on social media does not fit one specific visual or technical solution, but that it is rather part of continuous, subtle, and complicated negotiations. Trusting specific images is not only about the image itself being considered technically trustworthy, but rather, images work as visual nodes in a complicated net of different social media actors (i.e., other images, users, content creators, commercial actors, and platforms). Hence, trust in images is notably also about trust in the specific complicated net within which visual messages are conveyed. Even though creation of technical tools for verifying the authenticity of images may provide some answers to questions of trust in visual digital environments, in the light of our data they do not play a central role in how social media users experience trust. Rather, our analysis reveals differing relations, considerations, assumptions, dissonances as well as visual cues that are all part of the experiences and negotiations of trust in images.

Often visual social media is consumed for amusement or for passing time, and as our analysis shows, in those instances trust in, or the truthfulness of, the consumed content is often considered irrelevant. However, when young adults see content that is personally relevant to them, when they search for information, or consume content for advice and support trust in images becomes pertinent. In particular, relationships between social media users and content creators influence trust in images. In our data the word trust is often used specifically in relation to content creators that the interviewees have prior experience with, through following or through recurring algorithmic recommendations. In these cases, the interviewees have often formed parasocial relationships with the content creators and the negotiations of trust take place as the relationship evolves. The interpersonal trust in these parasocial relationships provides for specific kinds of interpretations of and responses to images compared to images by content creators that are less known.

Although not always explicitly worded as considerations of trust or trustworthiness, our interviewees constantly and fluently check or compare content that they encounter. Specifically, they consider visual content in relation to other available information, that is visual, textual and aural. Textual elements (e.g., captions and hashtags) and context (e.g., genre) direct the way images are experienced, just as much as specific sounds or choices of songs might do.

Especially noteworthy for the interviewees are moments of incoherence: visual, textual and aural messages do not seem 'to fit' together, causing a dissonance. These kinds of tensions urge interviewees to take a closer look at images and are related to specific assumptions on how certain things (e.g., a body, an exercise) should look like. In a similar vein, images are considered in relation to other images from other content creators or the same content creator in the course of time. Further, images are not only considered in relation to

information on social media but also in terms of information provided by, for example, other media, friends, and family.

Although our data shows that trust cannot be evaluated solely based on technical or visual cues, at specific moments certain visual elements do work as cues that contribute both to the perceived trustworthiness of the content and the content creators. These visual cues of, for example, embodied competence (e.g., a person with muscular body being competent in advising others in building muscles), visual credentials (e.g., the use of visual signs of profession and education such as a doctors' jacket or anatomical images) and visual forms of authenticity (i.e., certain ordinariness of images that is interpreted from, e.g., lightning, backgrounds or facial expressions) take part in the complicated and fine-grained negotiations of trust together with other considerations.

Taken together, our findings show that there is no technical fix to trusting images, rather the practices of trusting specific content are lived out in sensing visual social media environments and negotiating situated forms of trust within them. We suggest that images should be understood rather as visual nodes in complex nets of different social media actors, a finding which resonates with recent discussions of photographies as networked images or softimages and allows for thinking through the relations that specific images provide for.

Keywords: Trust, visuality, photographic images, social media, health and wellbeing