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## **Applying Social Presence Theory: What Effect Does Lifestyle Imagery Have on Website Persuasiveness?**

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**Applying Social Presence Theory:  
What Effect Does Lifestyle Imagery Have on  
Website Persuasiveness?**

By

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A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Service  
Leadership and Innovation

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### Abstract

Website design is a crucial element to instantly evoke a customer's interest and communicate the desired message in the clutter of internet sites available. Various research to date indicates that design is most successful when it projects considerable social presence, social presence being the impression that an individual is a part of a communication process. According to Social Presence Theory, the larger the social presence in the medium the better the human connection, and thus the better the communication and understanding. This was tested on an actual web page in the realm of luxury hospitality marketing to see if by using lifestyle images (socially-rich content) as a large part of the design, the potential visitors would find the site more favorable and understand what the website offers. Using travelers of a very similar profile to the company' guests as respondents, and using mixed methods approach, the survey revealed that respondents preferred the image with human presence over the one without, while content analysis and coding indicated that they could more clearly identified what was the website's offering.

*Keywords:* website persuasiveness, social presence theory, lifestyle imagery

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## Introduction

It is no news that over the last decade, with the increasing role of the internet as a persuasion medium (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008), businesses have devoted significant funds to developing their commercial websites. But how many of them have succeeded in capturing the attention of today's-information-overloaded customer, and after that, how much of them have succeeded in conveying the desired message or influencing the desired behavior?

As a result this study focuses on understanding a website's persuasiveness - the ability to encourage favorable impressions and further interest (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008). The level of website persuasiveness is examined by applying Social Presence Theory to website design.

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) define Social Presence as the degree of awareness of another person in the interaction process. They state that its importance lies in the fact that the more involved the other person in the communication is, the better the psychological connection there is. As a result people develop larger intimacy, which increases individual's affective filters, further increasing the chance that the other person will understand the message communicated. Successfully conveying the message is exactly what designers and marketers are aiming to achieve, and how to do it is what this study tries to better understand.

Social presence, or how effective the communication would be, strongly depends on the communication medium through which it occurs (Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976). It is the strongest in face to face communications, and the weakest in written communication; websites therefore fall somewhere in the middle.

The study further focuses on website images, which are one of the most prominent website elements, as they have a significant influence on information processing and decision-making (Blanco, Sarasa, and Sanclemente, 2010). It tries to examine whether different type of images can project higher or lower social presence levels. Cry, Head, Larois

and Pan (2009) argue that with the use of human images as a part of design the user will be able to connect stronger, due to the feeling of human contact, which will make the website feel “visually appealing, warm, personal and sociable” (p.541).

Finding support for this theory will mean easing the designer’s job in trying to successfully frame the message.

In the next section the literature review will focus on finding support from previous studies and further understanding of components that influence website persuasiveness. The main emphasis was put on the studies that support the notion of the importance of first impressions and the visual design that influences it, because in the clutter of marketing messages, a single business has a small timeframe to make an impact.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework for Understanding a Website’s First Impression & Design**

Many studies in many disciplines have dealt with the concept of how people form first impressions, because first impressions affect immediate and sometimes even long-term behaviors (Tucha, Presslabera, Stocklina & Bargas-Avilab, 2012).

The first step in understanding first impressions was to see how fast it is formed. A study that looked into it, using websites as a platform to test it, was conducted by Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek and Brown (2006). Their participants were asked to rate the aesthetics of a set of websites after seeing them for 50 milliseconds(ms), 500 ms and as long as they wished. The results of aesthetic scores from all three viewings showed high correspondence, demonstrating that first impressions can be formed in as little as 50 ms (0.05 seconds).

This study’s methods and the time of 50 ms were used and tested several times by others who evaluated first impression using different variables (Tucha et al., 2012). Most recently, Google’s study which evaluated a website’s visual complexity took this time down to only 17 ms. Participants were still able to form an opinion of the site (Tucha et al., 2012).

What this means is that companies, or actually web designers, have very little time to make a good first impression, so they better make it count. It is significant because a good first impression influences further interest, which was the conclusion of another recent study that looked into a website's first impressions (Dahal, 2011). The more positive the impression the longer participants stayed on the webpage (Dahal, 2011).

Designers need to understand what triggers positive first impressions to be able to capture and hold someone's attention to the website. According to the Visual Perception theories this trigger is complex but universal for the whole population (Eristi, Izmiril, Izmiril, Firat & Haseki, 2010). Although varying in perception all theories state that people have an innate, pre-set way of perceiving the world around them (Eristi et al., 2010). Therefore understanding and applying these concepts to design can make a difference.

Before going into design specifics, several studies (Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Stanford, Tauber, 2002; Phillips & Chaparro, 2009; Tuch et al., 2012) have looked into whether the websites' design really was the main driver that influenced forming a positive first impression. In the website usability vs. design study Philipps and Chapparo (2009) found that participants favored websites of high visual aesthetics - product of good design. They had 160 participants evaluate websites on aesthetics (high and low) and usability (high and low). The first was done by rating them on the scale after a short preview. The second was measured by having the participants perform certain tasks on the page, and then report the usability rating and overall interest. The results showed that the most positive impressions were generated where both aesthetics and usability were high. Interestingly, pages with low visual appeal but very high usability still had very low overall interest rating, while pages of high appeal and poor usability still had a good overall interest rating. This shows that design (visual appeal) mattered more to the potential consumers.



One more study emphasizing the importance of design and visual appeal was conducted by Stanford University and the consumer association Consumers Web Watch in 2002 research. They did an extensive study on “How do people evaluate a websites’ credibility?” (Fogg et al., 2002). One task of the study was to rate randomly assigned websites as to which one was more credible. The second task was to leave a comment explaining the previous choice. Contrary to researcher’s expectations the study revealed that the large portion of comments were related to the design look (41.6%) and to information design and structure (28.5%), versus the actual content of the website which was the main focus of the study.

A study that was very close to the aim of the previous research was conducted by Kim and Fessenmaier (2008). They examined forming the positive first impression of the travel destination website based on elements such as informativeness, usability, credibility and inspiration.

The findings showed that inspiration through visual stimulus (a picture, a video of the destination) had the highest impact on the positive first impression, while the second was usability. Pictures are able to evoke strong feelings of beauty and superiority (Kim & Fessenmaier, 2008). These visuals supplement “the need for touch” (Blanco, Saransa & Sanclemente, 2010).

Understanding the role images have in designing a successful commercial webpage, this study will further examine whether manipulating different levels of Social Presence by using “human images” and “non-human” images as a part of the overall design, affects website persuasiveness.

### **Theoretical Framework Supporting the Research - Social Presence Theory Applied to Website Images**

To take it to the basics once again: Design and images as a part of the design are just the elements designers use to form a message they want to send across to the user (Cry, Head,

Larois & Pan, 2009). This is often referred to as visual rhetoric (Cry et al., 2009), rhetoric being the art of effective or persuasive speaking and writing (Merriam-Webster, 2013).

Today we can popularly call it Marketing, where designers and marketers have 17 ms to be good at it.

Short, Williams and Christie (1976) argue that visual rhetoric is strongly connected to Social Presence Theory, where social presence is defined as the degree of involvement and awareness of the other person in communication interaction. The presence and effectiveness of communication depends on the context and the medium where it occurs - it is the highest in face-to-face communication and the lowest in written text forms of communication (Short et al., 1976). The website as a medium would therefore fall somewhere in the middle.

According to the theory, the larger the social presence, the better the psychological connection there is between the participants, which creates a better chance that the other person will successfully communicate his or her message (Short et al., 1976). What this indicates is that by using the Human Presence in the website pictures, the user will be able to connect more, get the feeling of human contact, which will make the website feel “visually appealing, warm, personal and sociable” (Cyr et al. 2009, p. 541), which would influence further interest. Therefore the hypotheses to be tested in this study are:

**Hypothesis 1.** The application of human images on a commercial website results in more favorable impressions of the website.

**Hypothesis 2.** The application of human images on a commercial website improves understanding of the message that the marketer wants to communicate.

For what is here defined as human image, the marketing industry settled around the term “lifestyle imagery”. As Allen Murabayashi (2008) summarizes on his site, the goal for good lifestyle imagery is to capture a natural, fun atmosphere, as if the photographer does not exist and models are not aware of him even when looking directly at the camera. For the

lifestyle imagery to look real the key is to capture “a day in life”, those single special moments, the story that reveals behind them, the emotions they evoke and aspirations that arise.

## **Methods**

The study is a mixed method research, aiming to gain a holistic picture and the depth of understanding how lifestyle imagery, through projecting larger social presence, influences website persuasiveness.

Despite an exhaustive search of the literature, no study of this kind has been found. Hassainen and Head as well as Cry et al. (2009), have conducted several studies (Hassainen & Head, 2006; 2008; 2009), manipulating social presence levels in website design. In each study they assessed participant attitudes and impressions and each time they found that attitudes changed as the level of social presence changed. These studies found that websites with images using Human Presence, versus no Human Presence, influenced a higher perceived aesthetic and higher perceived social presence (“warmth”) which are elements that further induce interest (Cry et al. 2009).

In a way this study is an extension of the previous ones, but differing in the type of website used. Previous studies used pretend websites for online shopping while the aim of this study is to test the concept applied on the actual website in the realm of luxury hospitality marketing, using participants quite similar to actual guests of the company.

### **The website and the company**

To test the effect of different levels of social presence on the favorability-rating of a website, an actual website & photo campaign of an actual hotel company were used.

The company is 12-property hotel and villa chain in Dubrovnik, Croatia, with the portfolio being divided into three categories; Dream, Escape and Unwind, according to the hotel’s level of luxury, star-rating and offer, which further reflects on the prices and customers.

The photo used is one from the Dream collection new photo campaign. Hotels and villas included in this category are company's flagship properties, known for longstanding tradition of providing top class service and ultimate accommodation experience at the very edge of Dubrovnik Old Town. The campaign aimed to represent kind of experience they offer, rather than the properties themselves, by mirroring a "day-in-life" of an actual customer. The photo used from the campaign was carefully polished to once include the Human Presence and once not to, while preserving the same final high-quality look.

The two photos were then applied on the same website's homepage, where as part of the new website design, the photo dominates the whole layout. Each homepage was saved as a separate screenshot and incorporated into the testing platform. (Appendix A)

### **Testing Platform**

In order to carry out the test, the researcher used an online platform called UsabilityHub. It is tool especially designed to test the appeal and effectiveness of newly designed websites. The site offers several testing options, with the ones most effective for this case being the 5sec impression test and the click-test.

Once coming to the testing platform through provided link, the 5sec impression test presents a case or hypothetical situation, gives the participant 5 seconds to look at the image/design, and then asks custom-made questions intended to understand people's first impressions.

The click test presents a situation in the same manner, gives the respondent a task and then analyzes how long it took, and where on the page the respondent clicked to perform this task; additional questions are asked later. Its main idea is to review how users interact with interfaces.

To understand which one would better fit this situation a pilot test was conducted with 10 participants: college students who had no prior understanding of the purpose of the survey. The 5 second test proved to be more useful, as by limiting the time to only 5-seconds it truly

tested the first impression, whereas in the click test participants took a longer time to look at the design.

### **Participants**

UsabilityHub as a platform provides two options in regards to choosing participants; you can pay for a completely random, fixed amount of respondents or import your own mailing list. For the purpose of this research both options were used.

The first group of respondents were people of a similar profile to company's guests, generated through an imported mailing list. This profile is a quite broad one. Company's guests are people from all over the world, through primarily from UK, USA, Brazil, France and German markets, with an age span mostly from late 20's to late 60's, with higher incomes (paying room prices from EUR 400 - EUR 800), looking for cultural tourism and relaxation alike.

In this case it was not possible to use already existing company's customers mailing list. Although the images don't display the company name or logo, respondents could have recognized the image or the scenery being immediately biased. Instead similar profile of guests was used, one granted from an inbound, high-end Paris-based travel agency organizing cultural tours in Paris for individuals and groups alike. Out of the whole mailing list 200 participants were randomly selected to participate using the Research Randomizer online tool.

The same test was run on the UsabilityHub using a paid quota of 200 participants. Such a test randomly appears with other tests respondents choose to answer. Respondents are other UH users who by participating get credit for their own tests. They are designers and web-designers, companies, marketing agencies, students, artists ... Additionally, tests are displayed on other commercial websites, where by completing a test people get access to premium content such as news articles, research or videos; this provides a much wider profile of respondents.

**Test Design**

Testing of each hypothesis was carried out in two separate phases. In both cases the test were run completely online. Participants were able to complete it only once and they could access it at their own time, from any computer or tablet they had, thus having the process resemble as much as possible to their regular internet browsing experience.

**Phase 1.** Phase one included testing of the first hypothesis. A separate test was run on a sample of 100 travel agency participants and on 100 UsabilityHub users.

The test was quite simple in design. In the introductory page the respondents were presented with a hypothetical scenario of receiving/winning a summer vacation in Dubrovnik. They were in a situation of looking at the different hotel websites and had a hypothetical hotel accommodation budget of \$2,000, making each respondent a potential guest and thus reducing the chance of having a biased sample.

The instructions further stated that once they are ready they could click and look at the image for 5 seconds. The image consisted of two website screenshots - one with the Human Presence (number 1) and one without it (number 2) (Appendix A). When the time ran out the image was gone and the question appeared.

To test Hypothesis 1. *“The application of human images on a commercial website would results in more favorable impressions of the website”* the first question asked was: Which website homepage do you find more favorable, 1 or 2?

Thought it may seem quite simple it tested exactly their initial reaction. They saw the images, for only 5 seconds, limiting the reaction/response to just the first impression.

**Phase 2.** The 5-second test on UsabilityHub was also used as a testing platform for the second hypothesis. An introductory page explained the same hypothetical scenario of winning a summer vacation in Dubrovnik, with the task being looking for hotel accommodation. After this the image appeared for 5 seconds.

As previously, separate tests were run on 100 participants from both a travel agency sample and UsabilityHub sample, none of which had participated in the first test. Each group was further randomly broken down to 50 participants who saw only the image with social presence (Appendix A, Image 1) and 50 who saw it without (Appendix A, Image 2). This was done to be able to compare the reactions between the two conditions, as participant's responses were limited solely to the image they have seen.

To test the Hypothesis 2. *“The application of human images on a commercial website improves understanding of the message that the marketer wants to communicate”* the test question asked the respondent to list three words that immediately came to mind regarding the type of accommodation offered.

Though harder to quantify and much harder to interpret and report, the open-ended question was needed in this case as the researcher aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how the respondents felt about what they had just seen. Impressions are something very subjective and personal, and even gaining a very large range of impressions and associations still gives the researcher useful information as to the potential customers feel, who they are, and what they expect. Framing a close-ended question in this case would be „putting words into someone's mouth“ thus losing the deeper insight.

The type of question, to come up with the 3 words that first come to mind, was chosen as it provided several advantages. One advantage is that it gives a free range of answers presenting what the respondent really feels. Another one was that the respondents had to take a second to put some thought into what they have just seen, thus making sure that respondents don't just skim thought the question, tick something and move on, which is one of the disadvantages of having close ended questions (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, 2010). Additionally, with the list of 3 words, the answering process is quite fast, thus it prevents the

response rate from going down, which often happens with open-ended questions (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, 2010).

As stated before, this type of question seeks deeper understanding but may not give accountable results and conclusions as it is hard to interpret.

UsabilityHub does not leave this test without any analysis. The built-in algorithm evaluates how often certain words were used, and it compares the synonyms. Once processed, results are displayed so that the answers (words) are presented in a cluster, sort of in a cloud with often used words being displayed proportionately larger than others.

The hypothesis was further analyzed using coding which is a part of the content analysis process, which Berg (2007) describes as a useful technique to quantitatively analyze and present data from a qualitative research.

Overall, content analysis as a research method is most often used in social sciences, particularly in marketing and media studies to study the context of communication and identify the focus of an individual or a group (Eto and Kyngäs, 2008), which was the purpose of this study.

## Results

### Test 1.

Testing to see whether respondents react more favorably to the websites with larger social presence (hypothesis 1) gave quite easily interpretable results for both groups tested.

**Travel Agency Sample.** In the test run on 100 Agency participants, 68 people (68%) preferred the image with Human Presence and 32 (32%) preferred the image without it (Figure A1).

**Usability Hub Sample.** In this test, out of 100 participants, 59 people or 59% percent of respondents preferred the image with Human Presence. 38 (38%) of the respondents preferred the one without Human Presence and 3(3%) were indifferent (Figure A2).

### Test 2.



As stated earlier, the aim of the second hypothesis was to gain deeper insight into potential customer's preferences. This required open ended question that provides freedom of expression, yet has a way to be objectively analyzed and reported. Therefore content analysis and coding was used.

In a way it was no true content analysis. In content analysis, data (content) to be analyzed is drawn from a larger communication context including newspaper articles, journals, websites, blog posts or discussions on a particular topic. In this case, by the way the question was posed, the respondents already provided a refined content by expressing their thoughts in only 3 words. What this means is that the first step of coding was already complete.

To carry the analysis further it was needed to identify different categories that emerged from the answers provided. Though the researcher had some initial expectations of what might be the effect of the two different conditions (with Human Presence and without it), there were no predefined content coding categories as this was the first analysis of this kind.

In recognizing and defining different coding categories, the visual representation of the results provided by the UsabilityHub platform, where the most occurring words were presented proportionately larger than others, served as a great starting point as it provided instant insight in which direction the results were aimed (Appendix B).

Looking at all four tests, both with Travel Agency and UsabilityHub samples and With and Without Human Presence, it appeared that answers could be sorted into three major categories:

- **Physical Aspects:** Physical Aspects category clusters together the answers that describe the location or the type of property seen in the image. Given that the introductory page already explained that they are looking for a hotel

accommodation one part of the answers clearly identifies that it is about hotel, resort or villa. However the majority of participants focused on the actual place and scene where the image was taken, quite straightforwardly reporting what they saw.

Therefore this category is saturated with words like *beach, ocean, seafront, water or sun, sunny, sunset*.

- **Feel & Impression:** Unlike the first category which gathers quite tangible descriptions of the photo, the second one, the Feel & Impression category, collects answers which were geared towards describing the intangible aspects they believe the image represents. The answers in this category addressed the feel, the setting and the type of service they believed was offered, but they also addressed the theme or the type of holiday, therefore this category was further broken down into two subcategories: The Atmosphere and The Type of Holiday. The Atmosphere category mostly comprised of words like *luxury, luxurious, elegant, fancy and 5-star* while the Type of Holiday mostly had thematics like *relaxation, spa, wellness or romantic holiday*.
- **The Price:** The price category was quite easy to identify. It is a quite straightforward and homogenous one, quite often expressed through the word *expensive*.
- **Other:** The fourth category, which carried a small portion of overall answers that were in no way interrelated, was labeled as Other.

Looking generally, these categories in a way present the “Holy Grail of Marketing” or the Marketing 4 P’s which are Product, Place, Promotion & Price. The same categories appear throughout all four tests, but are represented to varying degrees .

**Results from Travel Agency Sample with No Human Presence Condition.** In the Test with No Human Presence and Travel Agency respondents, out of 150 possible answers

(as 50 participants were asked to list 3 words they associate with the image), 128 words were generated.

The most represented category was Physical aspects with 53.91% of all answers. The impression category had total of 39.62% generated words, which consist of 14.16% for Atmosphere and 25% for Type of Holiday. Price was addressed by 2.34% of the words and 4.68% of the generated words fell into the Other category (Figure B1).

Often occurring theme of this test was *beach hotel, sun, lake* with total of 31 words (24.22%). The same category was represented with words like *sun, sunny, sunset* which appeared additional 10 times. Another recognizable pattern or theme were words like *relaxing, serene, spa, restful* appearing 24 times (18.75%). The word *luxury* came up 13 times.

**Results from Travel Agency Sample with Human Presence Condition.** The respondents listed a total of 139 words, out of which the most represented category was the impression category with 69.78% of all answers. Out of those 49.64% were in the Atmosphere category and 20.14% in the Type of Holiday category. Physical aspects were addressed by 20.14% of the words, Price 7.91% and Other 2.16% (Figure B2).

The word *luxury* appeared 32 times and its synonyms like *high-end, 5-star* and *up-scale* an additional 14 times, making this 33.09% of all words listed. The second most mentioned theme was expensive (8 times) and pricey (1 time).

**Results from UsabilityHub Sample with No Human Presence Condition.** The test generated 130 words out of which the most represented category was Physical aspects with 56.15% of all answers. The impression category had 16.15% answers in the atmosphere subcategory and 23.08% in the type of holiday subcategory, making a total of 39.23 of overall answers. Price was addressed only once (0.77%) and Other 3.85% of the time (Figure B3).

In the Physical aspect category words like *sea, beach, ocean* were mentioned 39 times and *sun or sunny* 14 times. Compared to the results of Public Test with Human Presence, the words *luxury or high-end* appeared only 11 times, while the Type of Holiday included 20 words related to the concept of *relaxing, calm, wellness & spa*.

**Results from UsabilityHub Sample with Human Presence Condition.** This test generated 144 words.

The category most represented (80 words or 55.55% of the total) was the impression category, with atmosphere having 40.28% of overall answers and the type of holiday having 15.28%. 21.53% of answers were related to the physical aspects, 13.89% to the price and 9.03% to the Other category (Figure B4).

One of the words which most commonly appeared (19 times) was *luxurious*. Adding to that its other synonyms, like *high-end* or *first-class*, we get to a 28 words or 19.44 % of the overall answers. Other words from the same category cannot be classified as direct synonyms but they reveal similar meaning (*fancy, premier, unique, elegant, stylish ...*), representing a quite homogenous category.

The second word that appeared quite often (19 times) was *expensive*, which is 95% of all answers in the Price category.

## Discussion

A Website is in a way a company's online storefront. Its basic function is to tell the customer more about the product or service.

Unlike the physical store it does not have a baroque-influenced facade on the fancy address of the main city promenade and flashy lights. One cannot see the well-dressed crowds of people gliding through the aisles, or coming out with full bags, but most of all there is no smiling shopkeeper inviting customer to come inside and helping him make the decision.

The website misses out on this personal and social dimension, which it has to supplement, or try to communicate through great design. As the literature suggests, companies nowadays are trying to do so by applying the principles of social presence theory which suggests that, in web-context, it is possible to project human warmth and sociability by stimulating the visitors' imagination (Hassanein and Head, 2006). With a socially-rich text or picture context you can make him feel as a part of the interaction (Hassanein and Head, 2006) and in a way 'immerse him in the store'.

Hassanein and Head (2006) also suggest that enriching websites with social presence is crucial when your customers are shopping for products/services that offer experience rather than functionality. When looking for functionality, physical attributes like size or price matter, and once the customer knows them he can already expect what he is going to get. Those kind of websites need to be utilitarian and to the point. On the other hand, shopping for experience is based on intangibles, and thus is hard to get the sense of quality prior to purchase and prior to coming in direct contact with the product and service. That is why the process of shopping has to be a pleasurable, and a hedonistic one that at least gives the customer an idea of the experience he might get (Hassanein and Head, 2006). This is strongly affected by how beautiful and appealing the website looks (Fogg et al., 2002).

A new photo campaign by this company aimed to accomplish just that. Redesigning the website and moving towards lifestyle images rather than presenting the actual hotels and villas placed a strong emphasis on the type of experience offered rather than the functional side of service offered. It seemed like a step forward in profiling its properties as upscale accommodation, well suited to the modern well-educated traveler seeking serenity and unobtrusive service in one of Europe's most recognized cultural spots.

It seems that the campaign accomplished this task quite well. The test respondents from the Travel Agency sample, who are quite similar to average company's guest, for the

large part (69%) preferred the lifestyle image over the one without Human Presence, even though the setting was the same.

Thought somewhat lower than from the potential users, the lifestyle image found a good approval rate among the UsabilityHub users as well (59%). The lower rating can be explained by the fact that most of these users are people with design or marketing backgrounds who are probably well aware of the lifestyle imagery trend, making it harder to accomplish the WOW effect. As a professional hazard, some of them seemed to be unconsciously double rating on how appealing the image was, but in some cases also how well it blended into the overall design. This could be detected from a couple of answers in the second test where they described the image with design terminology like “*clear composition*” or “*uncluttered layout.*” Though this might be considered to be a limitation of the study, the results were not completely disregarded as this was evident in only in a couple of cases.

Not only did both groups of respondents prefer the With Human Presence image, but the second test showed that depending on the condition different answer categories prevailed. This indicates that the message communicated was different depending on the condition, just as the second hypothesis suggests.

When looking at the results of respondents similar to company’s guests (Travel Agency sample) they show that in Human Presence condition the Feel & Impression category is the dominant one (70% of all answers). Out of those answers the majority is in the Atmosphere subcategory (50% of all), which comprises of words like *luxury* (33% of all answers) or its synonyms like *elegant, classy, high-end, exclusive, etc.* These answers are supplemented with the price category which mostly lists the word *expensive* which is characteristic for this type of accommodation. This leads to the conclusion that potential customers were able to instantly recognize what was the type and category of accommodation offered. At the same time this was not evident with the same customers in the No Human

Presence condition who recognized it in only 10% of the cases. This supports the second hypothesis stating that application of human images on a commercial website improves understanding of the message communicated.

Strengthening this conclusion, the No Human Condition responses reveal that, customers, lacking the inspiration component, mostly focused on directly what they saw, which are the physical aspects of the image (54% of answers), making *sunset, sea, beach* (32% of all answers) the most occurring words. In this condition the Feel & Impression category was addressed too (40% of all answers) but often occurring words were *relaxing, spa, restful* and similar (25% of all answers). According to the answers it seems that No Human Presence image gave them the impression that this was a sun, sea and relaxation vacation spot in some remote area.

It is interesting to see that overall number of answers is lower in the No Human Presence condition (128 words) then in the Human Presence condition (144 words) from which it can be assumed that the Human Presence condition left a much stronger first impression. At this point this can only be theorized, but it would be interesting to see how many answers there would be in each condition if the respondents were not instructed to list 3 words as their answer.

The Price category was not highly represented in overall answers but it more often occurred in the With Human Presence categories ( 8% & 14%) vs. in the No Human Presence (2% & 1%). Additionally it was a homogenous one, represented with the word *expensive* indicating once again how the message was better understood in the With Human Presence condition.

Looking at the price category alone in the With Human Presence conditions it was interesting to see how it was highly represented in the UsabilityHub sample with 14% of overall answers (out of which 95% used the word *expensive*) while at the same time the

Travel Agency sample mentioned it only 7.1% of the time. One possible explanation is that this group of people is not as price-sensitive since they are more accustomed to staying in hotels like these, and the price itself is not a large decision-influencing factor.

### **Conclusion, Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Unlike existing research on this topic, this study examined social presence theory applied to a real website. Having a business devote funds for the new photo campaign and website redesign was already an indicator that the marketing team who did it strongly believed in the benefits it might bring, which are increased attractiveness and better message understanding at the very first glance of the site.

The results of this research, conducted primarily on respondents very similar to actual guests, to a large extent support the hypothesis. First test revealed that respondents for the large part preferred the website with human presence over the one without it.

Second test showed that in the Human Presence condition participant were able to more accurately identify what type of accommodation & experience was offered. Their imagination was stimulated and they were able to immerse themselves in the potential experience, which was evident from answers concentrated mostly in Feel & Impression category.

Quite oppositely, in No Human Presence condition the same profile of guest reacted differently. They focused on the tangible aspects to get the sense of what the image was about (responses most occurring in the Physical Aspects category), leading them to different perception of what the website offered.

This agrees with earlier Hassanein and Head's (2006) research conclusion which stated that when shopping for experience rather than utility, making the process more enjoyable through larger social presence helps the customers immerse in the experience.

This finding is relevant because if the customer can immerse himself in the experience this reduces his ambiguity of what to expect from the offering, which influences



his decision whether to stay on the website or leave. Staying on the website might not necessarily lead to immediate purchase, but if you evoke further interest to explore the site you as a marketer have larger chance to communicate the value of your offering.

### **Limitations to the study & Future Research Suggestions**

As one of the methods to test the hypothesis this research used qualitative approach of content analysis & coding. Categories that emerged were quite balanced; they were not too broad, yet they captured the different perceptions and thoughts on the two test conditions consistently with both groups. Generalizability and validity of findings seems quite high since the two conditions were tested twice; once on the similar type guests (Travel Agency sample) and re-tested on Usability Hub sample, and within each condition the answers were similar in both groups.

Yet what poses the limitation to this study is the lack of the second person to re-code the answers to see if same categories are identified, and thus reduce the chance for reliability issue.

69% of respondents who preferred the with human presence website is not a very strong absolute value, therefore to strengthen the conclusion it would be interesting to re-test the same hypothesis using one additional photo from the same campaign.

To further advance the understanding of the social presence impact on website persuasiveness the future research can be expanded in two directions.

First, it would be beneficial to examine whether the preference towards certain type of websites (with or without human presence) is biased to different factors such as gender or age. One could address whether the general stereotype that women respond better to websites that evoke emotions and men to clarity & utility is really true or just a stereotype? Further on, it would be usefully to see whether the favorability of websites with larger social presence is universal or market and culture specific. If the differences do exist, this understanding would

help web-designer better tailor the layout to targeted audience and thus hopefully make websites more persuasive.

Second, the research can focus on examining how potential customers react to different types of socially rich design elements such as videos, taglines, message-boards or human website assistance. This would assist the web designers to create the right mix that captures customer's attention and keeps him engaged.

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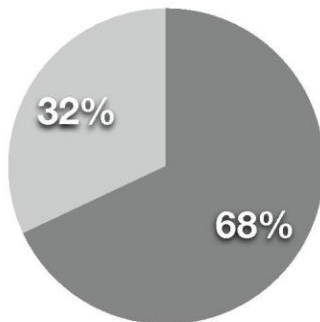
## Tables and Figures

Table A1

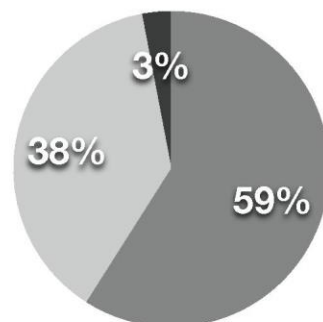
*Test 1 - Favorability Rating of Different Conditions*

	With Human Presence	No Human Presence	Indifferent
Travel Agency sample	68	32	0
UsabilityHub sample	59	38	3

- With Human Presence
- No Human Presence
- Indifferent



**Figure A1**  
*Travel Agency sample test results*



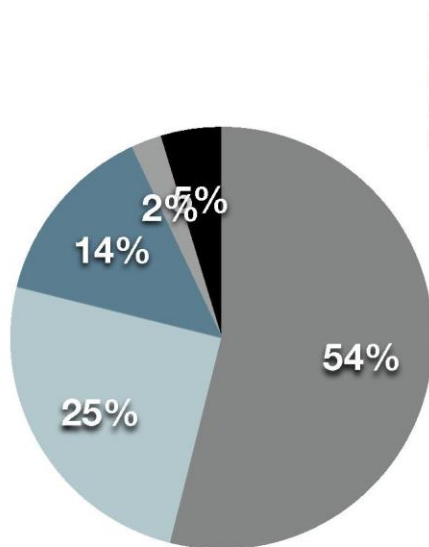
**Figure A2**  
*UsabilityHub sample test results*

## Tables and Figures

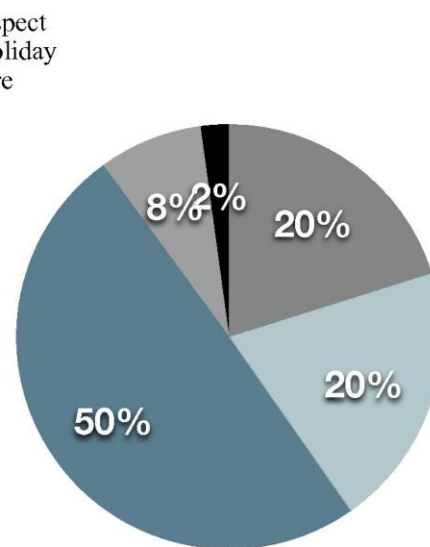
Table B1

*Coding categories comparison between two images and two participant groups*

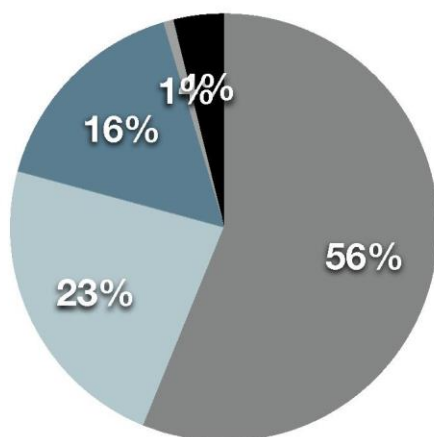
	Physical aspect	Feel & Impression		Price	Other	Number of answers
		Type of Holiday	Atmosphere			
Travel Agency Sample / NHP	69	32	18	3	6	128
Travel Agency Sample/ WHP	28	28	69	11	3	139
UsabilityHub Sample / NHP	73	30	21	1	5	130
UsabilityHub Sample / WHP	31	22	58	20	13	144



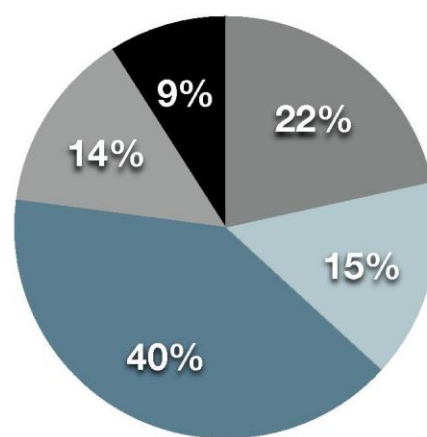
**Figure B2**  
*Travel Agency Sample / No Human Presence*



**Figure B3**  
*Travel Agency Sample / With Human Presence*



**Figure B4**  
*UsabilityHub Sample / No Human Presence*



**Figure B5**  
*UsabilityHub Sample / With Human Presence*

## Appendix A

Image A1

*Website screenshot used for With Human Presence Condition*

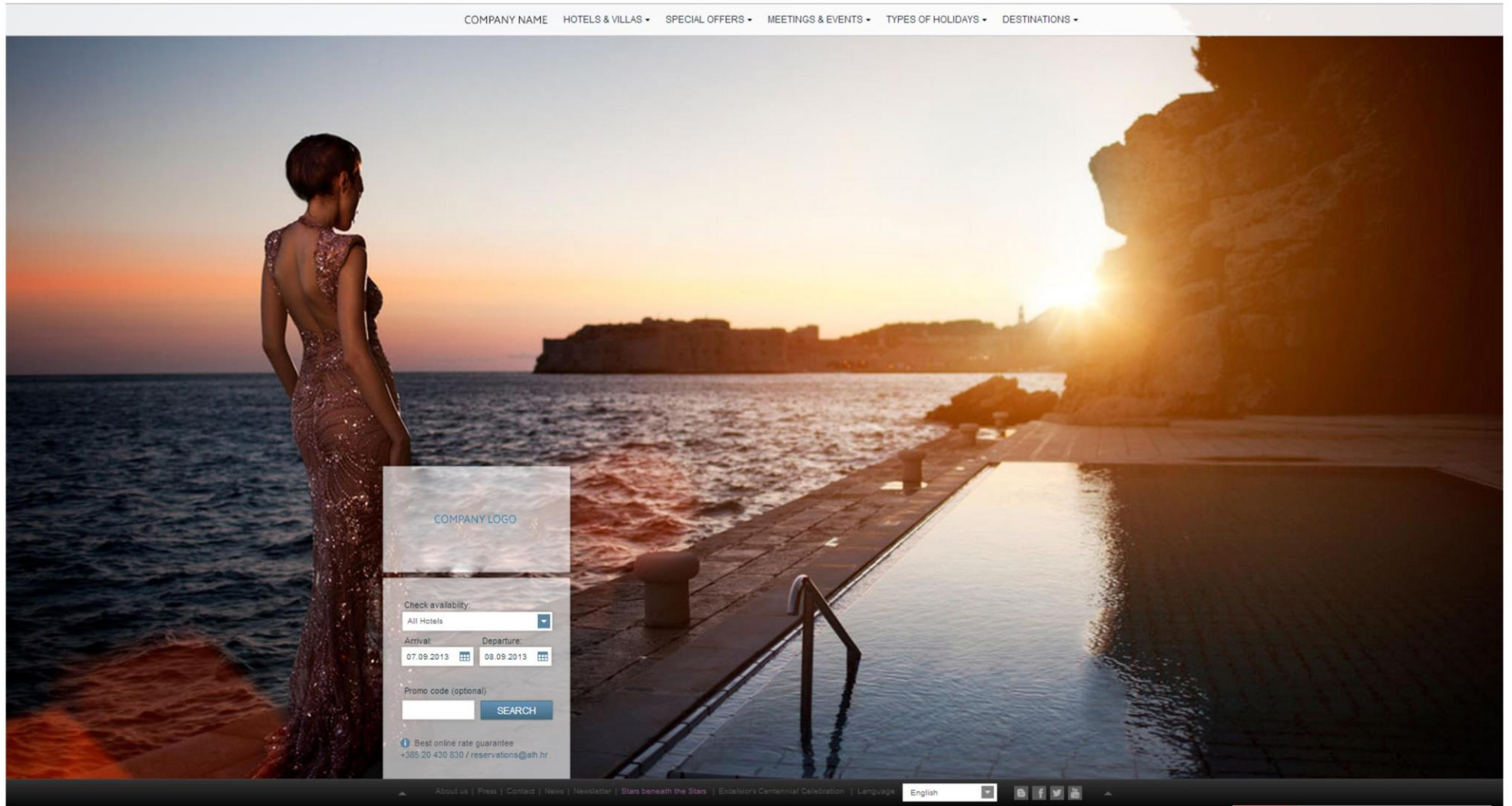
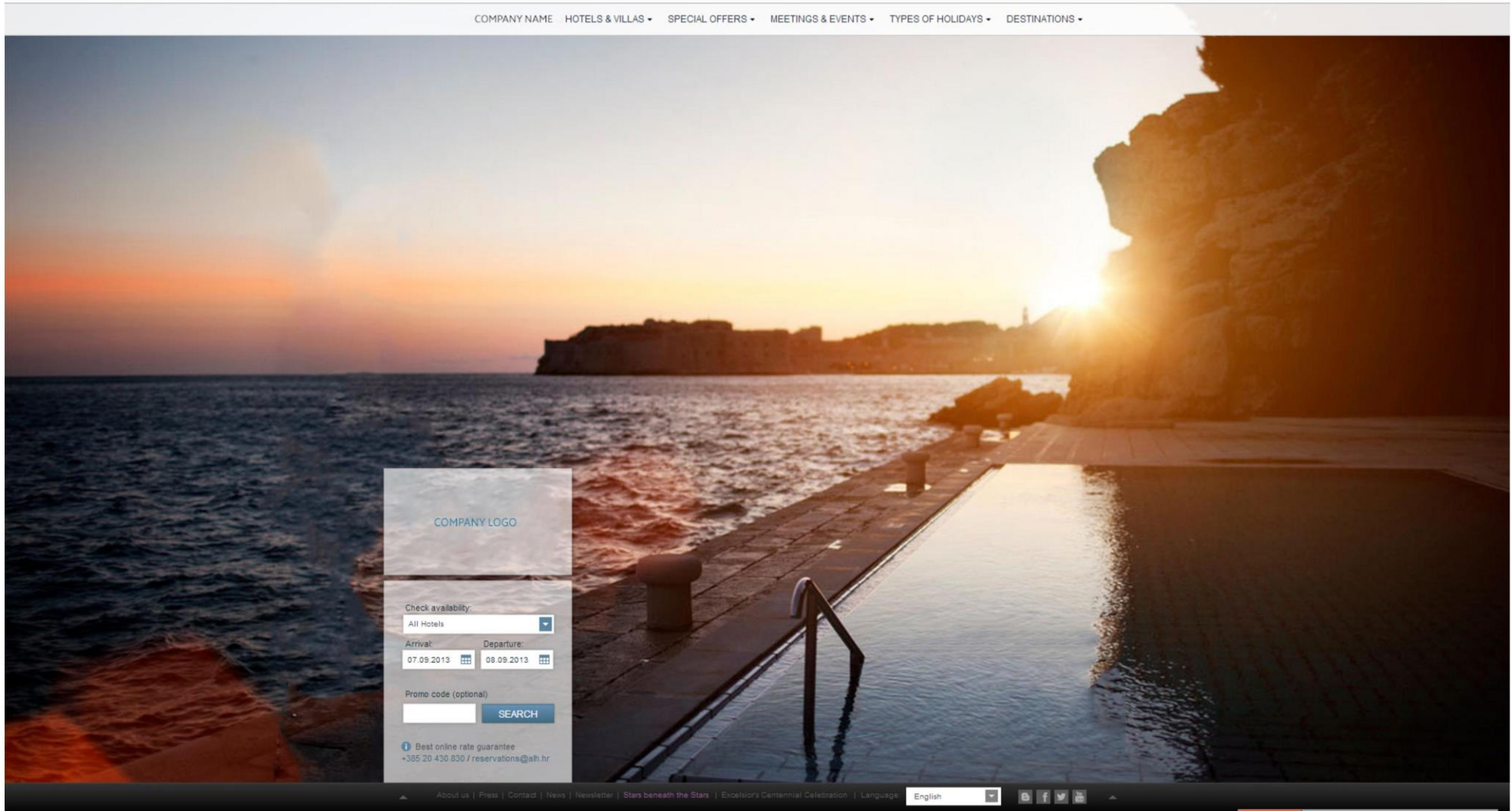




Image A2

*Website screenshot used for No Human Presence Condition*



## Appendix B

**Travel Agency Sample / No Human Presence**



**Travel Agency Sample / With Human Presence**



**UsabilityHub Sample / No Human Presence**



**UsabilityHub Sample / With Human Presence**



Image 3

*Usability Hub generated visual representation of impression answers*