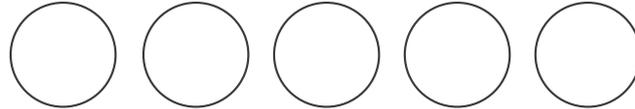


Raymond Dennis Lapeña Jun 5, 2018

## VisMin: The Philippines' country within a country

Digital marketing targeting the VisMin region can be immensely rewarding for brands, but marketers must realise the audience differs in significant ways from that in Luzon.



Cebu City, the primary city in the Vasayas region

A decade ago, shopping for a condominium in Cebu City, the Philippines' second major trading center and main domestic shipping port, meant choosing among three buildings. But in the last five years, horizontal development in the city began surging. Local brokers and agents harnessed social media and vertical search-engine marketing to sell Cebu real estate to neighboring cities. Cebu's heavy digital activity eventually infected the whole of VisMin.

VisMin, abbreviated from Visayas and Mindanao, covers two of the main island groups in archipelagic Philippines (the other one being Luzon, where Manila is located). Cebu City is capital of the Visayas, while Davao City is Mindanao's capital. Across the country's 7,600 islands, distribution of infrastructure and financial development is uneven. Progress is more concentrated in Manila, while VisMin remains largely rural and underdeveloped, always struggling to keep up with this more progressive neighbor in

the North.

However, VisMin continues to show promise. International BPO (business process outsourcing) companies are setting up shop in Cebu, and more global brands are entering VisMin for its cheaper manufacturing costs and increased consumer spending. In 2016, a Kantar Worldpanel study revealed that 42% of the Philippines' FMCG consumption comes from VisMin households. The combined consumption rates of F&B and household care in the area have surpassed that of the rest of the country.

Marketers looking to gain brand acceptance from this market must see VisMin as a country within a country. Successful digital campaigns directed at Luzon will not necessarily do well in the region. Mobile dominated digital ad campaigns in the Philippines last year, according to a 2017 Nielsen report, but brands targeting VisMin should temper their mobile ad distribution with on-ground knowledge of how this megasector operates. For one, even audiences in the region's big cities are limited by poor internet connections.

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Language dissimilarity can be an enormous barrier. In Visayas alone, there are six official languages. The national tongue Filipino, while understood, is seldom used. Brands should consider using Cebuano instead, since it is the most widely spoken Visayan language. And between Filipino and English, the latter is generally more preferred in the urban areas.

No one type of humour, a natural element in Filipino conversation, is easily appreciated across the islands. Cebuano jokes are slapstick in nature, and viral Cebuano content often relies on funny or embarrassing visuals to sell humour. Puns in Filipino tend to become dull when translated to Cebuano, and many of the slang expressions that are popular in Luzon don't necessarily work in VisMin.

As to media consumption, there is even more divergence across the VisMin islands:

- Wireless internet connection is generally not fast, even in the most urbanised cities, but urban dwellers still heavily use online services for food delivery, shopping, rides, and banking.
- Majority of the areas in VisMin do not have strong mobile phone signals. There are areas that have none at all.
- Radio is still the most widely used medium of advertising in far-flung areas, of which a lot don't have electricity.
- Local newspapers are slowly losing their foothold but continue to have steady readership among the older audience.
- Local influencers are watched via TV and mobile. National and international celebrities are also looked up to for beauty and lifestyle knowledge, but local influencers tend to be seen as more relatable because they have the same language and sense of humor.

While VisMin, in general, lags behind in development, its audience is quick to discern and understand real value. Value is something they're willing to spend good money on. Their burgeoning real estate industry is proof. Today, it attracts even the biggest names in international property—a far cry from the mere three establishments Cebu had 10 years ago.

If done right, digital marketing targeting VisMin can be immensely rewarding for brands. However, marketers should not rely solely on canned knowledge of the attitudes and motivations surrounding Filipinos habits in general. Nuances in language, barriers in culture, and geographical divide have to be considered alongside even more disparities in media consumption. Digital marketing know-how

should be combined with in-depth familiarity of local attitudes to ensure that brand messages are not lost in translation, value is underlined, and sensitive cultural codes are not offended.

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