

80 billion transactions have spoken: the visual economy has arrived

What can you learn from analysing a sample of more than 80 billion transactions per month that describe how visual media is created, managed, viewed, and consumed from more than 670 global customer brands?

The only study of its kind, Cloudinary's third annual *State of Visual Media report* provides a unique view into how global brands across ten industries are using images and video to engage their audiences and customers. As such, it revealed an undeniable truth: accelerated by the pandemic, the 'visual economy' has truly arrived. Now let's drill into all that data.

Video: a much-needed “gateway” to customers during lockdowns

The findings in this year's report gave us a fascinating set of insights into just how deeply brands around the globe have embraced visual media during the first year of Covid. This was driven by videos in particular, as these provided a needed gateway to a world outside our locked-down lives. During the first few months of the pandemic, total video bandwidth grew by more than 140% in Q2 2020. The average percentage of monthly bandwidth our customers used for video rose from 18.97% to 26.74% and video bandwidth grew overall by more than 140% in the last three months of 2020.

The data also showed big variations in video use across industries. Not surprisingly industries like elearning and food delivery saw video use double, and ecommerce rose by a full 20%. The travel sector's use was understandably reduced from 23% to just around 5%.

Working remotely – messaging and mobile

We also saw striking evidence of how our old work patterns changed during that period. As so many of us moved to working out of our home offices, people were sharing content literally around the clock. Tellingly, as the lines between work and life blurred, Slack usage increased between 6.00 and 7.00 am and also 5.00 to 7.00 at night. It also shot up from just the odd hour on Saturdays to about five.

We also found that mobile device adoption rose steeply during that period, varying considerably by country. During 2020, mobile devices generated 51.4% of all the traffic on our platform, accounting for a whopping 81.3% in India compared to only 47.7% in the US. This disparity shows that our data reflected, at least to some extent, how physically mobile each country's populations were during this period.

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Automating the image optimisation “heavy lifting” is crucial for businesses

In addition to growing their use of video, brands also became more sophisticated in how they use images this past year. The B2B and B2C brands in our customer base use images heavily for their digital outreach and are saving time and developer resources by automating the most routine transformations.

The data shows that brands are finding that optimising images and video to consistently deliver exceptional visual-first user experiences, at scale, is increasingly becoming basic ‘table stakes’. And as we move more and more into our new post-pandemic reality, superior visual content will emerge as more and more useful for communication and commerce alike.

Nearly all (99%) of the brands in our study, for instance, do basic resizing to

maintain the width-to-height aspect ratio—very useful, for example, when a 9:16 photo needs to be displayed as 1:1 square in a Facebook company profile’s feed.

The usage of cropping transformations that automatically remove parts of an image to either fit it into a required aspect ratio or to highlight a specific image area is also incredibly popular and used by most (63%) of the companies we considered for our study.

A clear majority (56%) of the brands whose data we analysed for our report, are harnessing the power of more advanced transformations, such as intelligent cropping, where detected subjects, like faces, are optimally positioned within an image crop.

Having said this, our data also showed that brands are really only starting to scratch the surface of what’s possible with AI and automation when it comes to optimising their visual media. This didn’t come as a big surprise. Given the sheer volume of content that brands have to manage, nailing the basics first is essential.

The inexorable rise of light-footprint image files

On image formats, the world seems to finally be starting to move on from JPEG. We saw a noticeable uplift in the range of image codecs used on websites. As of October 2019, 60% of our customers used three or more formats and by March 2021 that number had risen to 71%.

JPEG remains a reliable ‘lowest common denominator’ and displays well on all types of browsers and devices. As such, it’s still the most frequently used image format (95%); but PNG is a strong second at 73%. At 69%, the emerging WebP has grown in popularity since 2019 and looks to be on track to become JPEG’s main rival.

This trend towards light-footprint image files is about managing costs and resources while improving web performance and the user experience. The average WebP file is about 20% smaller than the size of the average JPEG. JPEG 2000 is also getting more airplay, shooting up from only 4.5% of usage pre-pandemic to nearly 25% in March 2021 – a massive 450% uplift. The increase in WebP and JPEG 2000 usage in the second half of 2020/first quarter of 2021 is also partially driven by brands gearing up for Google’s Core Web Vitals algorithm change, which began in June 2021.

The road to visual mastery

These findings are only part of what we found in our survey. For me, the top line is that our data tells a clear story about visual media usage being influenced by the global health crisis—but also that brands in multiple industries are beginning to understand just how much visual mastery they can gain by starting to take advantage of new tools and technologies.

And for sure, the Web is not about the written word now. It's about the image that tells your story for you.

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