Identification of Factors Influencing the Content Engagement Effect in Social Media Communication

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Abstract:

The increasing efforts of researchers to study content engagement in social media have led to insights regarding the configuration of content characteristics (e.g., topic and components such as photo or length). As practical recommendations based on the research efforts are frequently contradictory (e.g., should photo or video content be preferred), our research goal was to identify the major influencers of the content/engagement relation, and so we conducted both a literature and content analysis of N=45 articles to develop a framework of potential influencers in that area. The results identify factors originating from five main sources along the social media communication process: i) community, ii) context of the content, iii) medium, iv) receiver, and v) sender. Our work contributes to the body of social media research with a framework that guides future research and helps practitioners to better understand the communication process in social media.

1   Introduction

Engagement with content is a key indicator for success in social media marketing and has a positive effect on company success in aspects such as sales (e.g., Ha, Kankanhalli, Kishan, & Huang, 2016). Nevertheless, the social media agency Rival IQ reported a median of engagement (i.e., interaction in relation to the follower base) of only about 0.16% for Facebook and 0.046% for Twitter (Feehan, 2018). Marketers indicate that the creation of engaging content is very challenging (Content Marketing Institute, 2015).

The imbalance of invested resources (300 billion in 2019 according to Young, 2015) and attained engagement has initiated research to identify the content characteristics that positively influence content engagement (e.g., Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). Although the increased level of scientific investigations resulted in a great variety of insights, several findings in the academic literature are contradictory. This may have resulted in misleading conclusions regarding the content creation process. For example, some results indicate that photos are the best type of content to induce engagement (e.g., Kim, Spiller, & Hettche, 2015), while other findings report that video content is stronger (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012).

In this paper, we seek to identify the potential causes of these contradictory findings and address the following research question: *What are potential confounding factors that could explain the contradictory results of content success factors leading to enhanced content engagement in the context of a social media marketing communication?* Thus, identification of such confounding factors dissolves what appears as contradictory at first glance.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a theoretical foundation for content engagement and social media communication. Afterwards, Section 3 describes our literature review and analysis methodology, before the results are presented in Section 4. Finally, we will discuss our findings and their implications.

2   Theoretical Background

Content engagement. Syrdal and Briggs (2018) defined *engagement with social media content* as "psychological state of mind experienced when consuming social media content in which an individual is highly absorbed in the content and experiences a sense of excitement." Previous studies mainly investigated engagement by measuring the interaction behavior with content (e.g., a like of a post). It follows that the focus of conceptualization is behavior and not antecedents of behavior such as behavioral beliefs or attitudes. Most importantly, content engagement is an indicator of effective social media use.

Social media communication model. In general, the communication process addresses five basic questions in order to identify the main characteristics of a communication process: who, says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect (Lasswell, 1948)? In the context of the present study, we are interested in a corporate marketing communication (*sender*), in the context of social media (*medium*), leading to *engagement with content*. The communication addresses the target group (*receiver*) reflected by the social media community (e.g., fans following a social media page). When we refer to *content characteristics*, we address the remaining question "says what" and extend it by adding "in which *context*". Importantly, the feedback feature of social media platforms not only enables the community members to interact with content, but also makes responding engagements visible to the *community*. As such, the community's response (e.g., previous likes of users) acts as an indicator for its opinion and has an effect on the sales performance in social commerce (Lee, Lee, & Oh, 2016). The conceptual model in Figure 1. shows the components involved in the process of social media marketing communication.
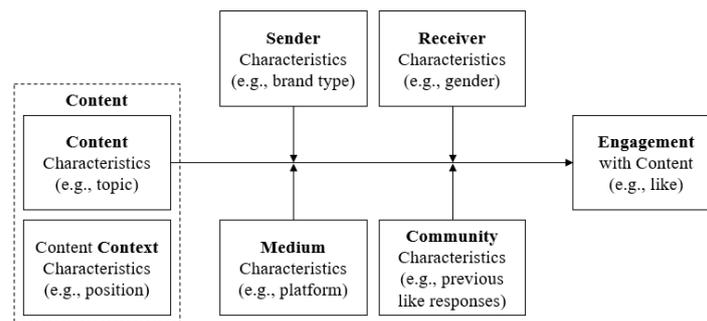

Figure 1. Conceptual model of social media marketing communication

3   Research Method

Our literature review considered the guidelines by Webster and Watson (2002) and vom Brocke et al. (2009). Our keyword list is based on landmark publications (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016; Dessart, 2017) that conducted literature reviews in specific domains of social media research. We combined our primary terms[1] (e.g., content engagement or content popularity)

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[1] Primary keywords: content engagement, content popularity, content interaction, content virality, content participation, content awareness, content rebroadcasting, emotional engagement, emotional popularity, emotional interaction, emotional virality, affective engagement, affective popularity, affective interaction, affective virality, marketing communication, content emotion, Facebook likes

with more general, secondary terms[2] (e.g., social media) to focus on social media and marketing contexts within our search results.

Using the keyword combinations, we conducted a literature search within 125 peer-reviewed journals and 6 peer-reviewed conference proceedings from Marketing, Information Systems and Psychology. Our initial search resulted in 4,746 records. In the first screening phase (title and abstract) we excluded 4,611 records and removed 85 duplicated records. Performing a full text analysis on 50 publications, we excluded another 31 due to missing focal constructs (e.g., Pagani & Mirabello, 2011) or their non-empirical nature (e.g., Panagiotopoulos, Shan, Barnett, Regan, & McConnon, 2015). Next, we conducted a backward and forward research recommended by Webster and Watson (2002) and identified another 26 publications which were relevant to our research context. Finally, we were left with a set of N=45 studies for our literature analysis (the full list of articles can be requested from the authors).

Our qualitative content analysis focused on the implication and limitation sections within the articles. First, we tagged thematic units with phrases using the MAXQDA software. Within iterative coding cycles we grouped the tags and developed sub-categories. Next, we assigned them to our classification scheme (see Figure 1), which involves the basic components of the communication model: (i) *sender*, (ii) *content context*, (iii) *receiver*, (iv) *medium*, and (v) *community*.

4   Results

Overall, the coding procedure resulted in 252 coding units of potential factors that could influence the content/engagement relation. Our analysis synthesizes these units into 24 sub-categories, which were assigned to the five main categories. The following section provides more details about the main categories and the most frequently mentioned sub-categories and influencing factors.

Table 1 shows the structure of the developed classification system involving the main categories and sub-categories. The numbers indicate the frequency of articles mentioning a potential influencer within a main or a sub-category.

This overview exhibits that sender (34), receiver (31), and context (30) of content are the most frequently mentioned, which indicates that these influencing sources are the more prominent in the extant literature. In contrast, factors belonging to the medium (21) and community (14)

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[2] Secondary keywords: social media, social network, marketing

category received less attention. Furthermore, several main categories comprise a broad portfolio of sub-categories, such as receiver (7). This indicates that these main sources are perceived to have a rather complex nature of impact. In short, a variety of source characteristics (e.g., culture) can moderate the relationship of content and engagement (see Figure 1). In contrast, main categories such as community (2) or medium (3) contain fewer sub-categories, and hence we conclude that these rather "simple" sources contain fewer moderators (e.g., platform type). However, it is also possible that having fewer sub-categories simply indicates less research attention in the past, a fact that, of course, should instigate future studies.

Main categories of influential sources																												
Community			Context of content								Medium				Receiver								Sender					
14 articles			30 articles								21 articles				31 articles								34 articles					
Sub-categories of influential sources																												
Visible community engagement	Impact of network and relations	Total	Popular content types & topics	Content/social media strategy	Emotional perception	Multichannel integration	Position	Seeding	Time	Total	Device type	Platform type	Ranking algorithm	Total	Content/receiver relation	Context of receiver	Culture	Customer attributes	Demography	Privacy	Psychological factors	Total	Branding factors	Content/sender relation	Invested resources	Origin	Sender/brand relation	Total
6	9	15	11	12	13	2	1	4	12	55	1	20	1	22	2	1	10	12	3	1	18	47	3	1	2	29	5	40
Number of articles																												

Table 1. Categorical system of potential factors that influence the content/engagement relation

The *community* category has received the lowest level of attention (14 articles in total) and comprises two sub-categories only. Previous research has argued that the strength of relations within a network structure can influence engagement behavior (Shehu, Bijmolt, & Clement, 2016). Similarly, the response from the community, such as user-generated content, can facilitate the user's engagement with content. As social contagion (e.g., user influencing each other) plays a role in this context, de Vries et al. (2012) showed that content with positive or negative comments received more behavioral engagement than neutral comments.

The *content context* category has received the highest amount of attention (55 articles in total) and contains a rather broad variety of sub-categories (7). An important example in this category is the emotional perception (13) of content that can play an essential role in the engagement behavior of users (e.g., Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2014). Similarly, content strategy (12) (e.g., Cvijikj, Spiegler, & Michahelles, 2011) aligning a stream of content elements as well as the time plans, (12) in conjunction with the adoption curve of a content element (e.g., Schultz, 2017), does impact the success of content engagement. Nevertheless, popular content topics

and types such as holiday greetings can lead to a decrease in engagement behavior due to saturated audience attention levels (Lee et al., 2014).

The *medium* category is comprised of three sub-categories. The highest level of research attention was given to the impact of social media platforms (20). For example, Coelho, Oliveira, and Almeida (2016) found that advertising-related content (e.g., promotional pictures) enhanced likes on Instagram, but not on Facebook. Depending on the intended purposes of a platform (e.g., Instagram focuses on visual content) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), the content/engagement relationship will also manifest itself differently with each platform.

The *receiver* category also contains a rather broad variety of seven sub-categories. Previous research frequently mentioned psychological factors (18) regarding the user's motivation (e.g., Luarn, Lin, & Chiu, 2015), involvement (Swani, Milne, & Brown, 2013), or trust (Ha et al., 2016) to have an impact on content engagement. Tsai and Men (2013) discovered that remuneration (e.g., expecting economic benefits), information (e.g., seeking for product information) and entertainment are the most common motivations to engage with a company's Facebook page. Furthermore, engagement behavior can vary along with customer attributes, such as specific user interests and social media usage (Kim et al., 2015), customer needs (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), or customer type (e.g, B2B or B2C customer) (Gavilanes, Flatten, & Brettel, 2018). Several studies have shown culture can have a moderating effect on content engagement (e.g., de Vries et al., 2012). For example, due to cultural habits, entertaining content has more impact on engagement behavior in Australia than in the USA (Khan, Dongping, Wahab, & Lewandowski, 2016).

The *sender* category comprises five sub-categories. Previous research put a high level of attention on the origin (29) of the sender. This sub-category involves i) industry type, ii) organizational dimension (e.g., small sized enterprises), iii) product type, iv) brand type (e.g., global brand), and v) presence on social media (e.g., community of a brand page) to act as a potential influencer of the content/engagement relation. For example, Schultz (2017) found that competitive content had a negative engagement effect in apparel retailing, while it had a positive engagement effect in the food industry. Effects have also been demonstrated within the sports industry (e.g., Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015), tourism (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016), the food and beverage market (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013), or even global brands (Kim et al., 2015).

5   Implications and Limitations

Our qualitative and explorative analysis has identified and classified potential confounders to the content/engagement relation. Our study revealed several research gaps and hence opens up potential avenues for future research.

The categories *community* and *medium* contain fewer sub-categories. We call for more research efforts to address these research gaps and identify more details and relations around those impacting sources. Further, we want to motivate research regarding community characteristics, as it has received little attention so far. As feedback is a key feature of social media communication, it would be valuable to provide a more detailed understanding about the effects of community response.

Regarding the *receiver*, we argue that the analysis of the behavior of an anonymous mass of receivers (as common in content analysis approaches) can lead to dubious insights. As common in the social sciences, control variables have to be specified beforehand that might influence focal constructs, such as demographic (e.g., country of origin) or psychosocial factors (e.g., attitudes and motivations), and related data has to be collected. We argue that, even if content analysis is a comfortable way to collect and analyze data, whether it can actually be the basis for rigorous research should be reconsidered.

In general, our conceptual model for the social media communication provides structure and guidance for researchers and practitioners. We want to point out that, in each of the areas, researchers should carefully argue for the choices related to their research design and consider their benefits and remedies. We call for more structure in future research. This will consolidate existing knowledge and improve our understanding regarding engagement with content, in particular to support practitioners. In addition to the sources involved in the communication process, future research needs to target the relations (e.g., content/sender or content/receiver fit) as well as the perception of content, such as emotion, when exanimating effects on content engagement.

Finally, we also want to highlight the limitations of our review. Although we included a large number of publication outlets, we cannot completely eliminate the potential of publication bias. Future research should, therefore, strive for a replication or extension of our review in other related fields (e.g., economics). In addition, for the sake of greater clarity in our research goals, we mostly used narrow definitions for our focal constructs.

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