

Revealing the Backbone of Shareable Brand Content on Twitter: A Fusion of a Systematic Literature Review and a Thematic Analysis

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Cite as:

Kapiri Maria-Eleni, He Hongwei, Chen Yu-wang (2019), Revealing the Backbone of Shareable Brand Content on Twitter: A Fusion of a Systematic Literature Review and a Thematic Analysis. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 48th, (9659)

Paper presented at the 48th Annual EMAC Conference, Hamburg, May 24-27, 2019.



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Abstract:

With the increasing popularity of Social Media, recently published work has urged academics and practitioners to identify new metrics that can signify success for brands. The “share” is one of such metrics, as it signifies endorsement, popularity, and advocacy. The content of the post plays a crucial role in the user’s sharing behaviour. Some studies have attempted to explore the content characteristics that can prompt sharing, however, the overall findings are quite fragmented. In an attempt to develop an integrated and comprehensive framework, we performed a systematic literature review followed by a thematic analysis of 428 highly retweeted Tweets created by brands from a diverse set of industries. We integrated insights from both previous work and additional empirical analysis and built a framework of content characteristics associated with highly retweeted content.

Keywords: *Tweets, Social Media Marketing, Content Characteristics*

Track: *Digital Marketing & Social Media*

1. Introduction

Social Media have empowered consumers to exchange opinions and influence each other regarding products or brands (Kim & Johnson, 2016). This phenomenon has attracted the interest of practitioners, who try to understand how they can leverage these voluntary online conversations to their benefits (Soboleva, Burton, Mallik, & Khan, 2017). However, their attempts are hampered by the limited control over what people say about brands online (Fournier & Avery, 2011). One way to compensate for the lack of control is by creating content which affects the users' intentions to forward the message within their networks. In fact, message characteristics are one of the very few elements that can both affect sharing intentions and be controlled by marketers (Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenhart, 2015).

Our aim is to examine the content of highly retweeted brand-originated tweets. The reasons for focusing on Twitter are the following. First, brand conversations are more prominent on Twitter compared to other platforms (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). Second, one of Twitter's fundamental functions is retweeting, which allows users to forward or share another user's (or brand's) tweets (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). Retweeting implies endorsement of the message (Lee & Hong, 2016), and has the power to transform users into brand advocates (Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Cañabate, & Lebherz, 2014). Therefore, retweeting can be considered an important metric when assessing the success of digital marketing attempts. Our specific objectives for this study are; (a) to systematically review all previous relevant work; (b) to assess the current state of knowledge; (c) to create a framework of content characteristics which are associated with highly retweeted content.

2. The Gap In Knowledge

Recent research has attempted to examine the relationship between different content characteristics and the number of retweets in many different business contexts. Although these attempts offer valuable initial insights, the extant literature appears to be quite fragmented. To begin with, several studies have focused on structural elements like URLs or punctuation while others have studied other dimensions of content based on theories and past research in communications. While these theory-based approaches can be an important first step, they can

have two potential caveats. First, they can miss certain content dimensions that have not been mentioned in previous literature. In fact, Araujo et al. (2015) acknowledged this as a limitation of their study and highlighted the fact that 8% of their sample did not include any of the characteristics they were testing. Second, because of the many different theories and positionings, the content elements are not consistently classified under the same abstract constructs. For example, elements of entertainment have been considered both as Emotional content (Araujo et al., 2015) and as Social content (Alwash, Savarimuthu, & Parackal, 2016). In summary, content has been conceptualised and operationalised in so many different ways that comparisons and extractions of conclusions have become challenging.

All the above highlight the fact that there is not a clear answer regarding the content characteristics that can predict retweeting. For practitioners, this means that guidelines for content creation suggested by academic literature so far are not clear enough to inform their strategic decisions. Therefore, the power of Social Media is not being leveraged to its full potential. Surprisingly, despite the compiling incoherent evidence and the popularity of the topic, no attempts have been made to address the existing fragmentation. This is the first attempt to systematically identify all the relevant studies, assess the evidence, and synthesise it under one coherent framework. Furthermore, we enrich the systematic review by conducting our own empirical research. We explore the content characteristics present in highly retweeted tweets and combine them with current knowledge in order to add more dimensions and strengthen our framework.

3. Research Methods

To achieve our objectives, we divided our research into two phases. In the first phase, we conducted a systematic literature review following the PRISMA Statement (Liberati et al., 2009). The eligible studies for inclusion were those that; (a) examine the relationship between brand-originated content and retweets; (b) use data extracted from real brand activity on Twitter; (c) are published in English on academic Journals or conference proceedings. The search was performed on titles and abstracts available on Scopus, EBSCOHost, ProQuest, JSTOR, Emerald Insights, Taylor & Francis, Science Direct, and Web of Science with the use of relevant keywords combined with Boolean operators. Moreover, a backwards search was performed to identify any

relevant work cited in the eligible studies. After the removal of duplicates and additional content evaluation, the number of eligible studies was 14. A data extraction sheet was created to include; (a) the brand-context and sample size; (b) conceptualisation and operationalisation of content variables; (c) coding procedures, statistical tests, and control variables. Finally, new content themes were built using content characteristics as building blocks.

In the second phase, we engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of highly retweeted brand-originated tweets in order to identify content themes. After performing several Google searches and observing Twitter feeds of various brands, we sampled 20 global brands from several industries that showed signs of high user engagement, such as retweeting, liking, and commenting. Our rationale was that such a purposeful sample is by definition more likely to provide us with highly retweeted tweets and therefore more appropriate in achieving our aim. Tweets were collected between March 2017 and March 2018 with the use of the online data collection tool called Twitonomy and the 20 most shared from each brand were analysed. This resulted in the analysis of 400 Tweets in total until saturation was reached. As the analysis progressed and in order to further establish saturation, an additional data collection took place. Google Search was used to identify commercial articles that mention the most shared brand-originated tweets in the years 2016 and 2017. Based on 5 commercial article sources, 28 Tweets originating from a variety of brands were included as critical examples of successfully retweeted content. Once we had created a framework from this phase, we revisited the findings from our systematic review in order to combine the analyses from both stages into one coherent framework.

4. Results

4.1 Phase One

Table 1 summarises the findings of all the existing studies. It shows which content dimensions or characteristics are positively associated with the number of retweets. In an attempt to synthesise the existing findings, we identified two ways of integration, namely, Morphology and Creative Appeal. This is a more comprehensive way to conceptualise content because it covers several dimensions proposed by different studies and offers a more holistic view. This way the existing knowledge can be integrated into one coherent framework.

Morphology refers to the presence of structural elements, such as images, videos, or URLs, which according to Table 1 can affect the number of retweets. Such elements can also indicate the level of Vividness and Interactivity of a message (e.g. De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012), which are two major factors that influence the effectiveness of computer-mediated communications (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005). Vividness refers to the number of sensory dimensions of the message and its ability to approximate reality (Liu & Shrum, 2002). Based on the number of senses stimulated, we consider plain text as the lowest level of Vividness, followed by images, and videos. Interactivity refers to the degree to which parties can act on each other or modify the medium (Liu & Shrum, 2002). We consider interactive elements any features that facilitate such actions such as are tags and hashtags, URLs, modification requests, and quizzes.

Creative Appeal refers to the specific responses or needs that content is designed to elicit or address (see Figure 1). The identified subthemes are the following; (a) Emotional, which involves rhetorics aiming at eliciting emotional responses, for example socioemotional content (Lin & Pena, 2011) or affective words (Araujo & Kollat, 2018); (b) Informational, which includes details about product specifics designed to appeal to cognition, for example practical information (Malhotra, Kubowicz, & See, 2012) or advice (Vargo, 2016); (c) Transactional, which aims at promoting the brand or its products or offers some economic incentive, for example deals (Malhotra et al., 2012) or promotional material (Widmer et al., 2016); (d) Social, which is usually not directly related to marketing, aims at fostering dialogue, and creates a feeling of brand community, for example the use of action-inducing content (Taecharungroj, 2017) or pop culture (Vargo, 2016).

Author and Year	Context	Findings
Lin and Peña (2011)	9 TV programmes	Socioemotional
Malhotra et al. (2012)	48 companies from diverse business areas	Short tweets, Attention words, Request to retweet, Personal content, Accomplishments, Practical, Deals, Topicality, Sense of anticipation
Boveda-Lambie et al. (2014)	two consumer brands and two individual brands	Giveaways, Announcement
Guidry et al. (2014)	50 non-profit organizations	Public Education, Call to Action
Parganas et al. (2015)	Liverpool FC	Product-related

Araujo et al. (2015)	299 Global Brands profiles	Product Information, URL to a website, to photo or video, URL to SNS
Vargo (2016)	18 Brands	Seeking Interaction, Sweepstakes, Current Holidays, Pop Culture, Advice/Useful Info, Charity work
Alwash et al. (2016)	top 10 coffee brands	Functional
Widmer et al. (2016)	Mayo Clinic Account	Publications, Promotional material
Aleti and Harrigan (2016)	Australian Breweries	Hashtag, mentions (@)
Taecharungroj (2017)	Starbucks account	Action Inducing, Visuals (Images and Videos)
Soboleva et al. (2017)	32 Global Brands	Initial (@), RT request , Up to 6 hashtags , photos
Araujo and Kollat (2018)	138 brand accounts	CSR, Engaging, Affective words, Aspirational talk
Manzanaro et al. (2018)	70 Twitter accounts	Mention of an expert/celebrity, Reference to the immediate future

Table 1. Content Characteristics Positively Predicting Retweets

4.2 Phase Two

In the second phase, we engaged in qualitative thematic analysis of empirical data in order to explore the content characteristics of highly retweeted tweets. The 428 identified tweets were imported in NVivo 10 for inductive thematic analysis. In this phase, initial codes were created to identify specific features of the tweets, which were then used as building blocks of themes following the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). From the analysis, we identified nine themes as shown in Table 2. In Table 2, we also provide descriptions and examples for each theme.

Themes	Description	Examples
Affect	Building anticipation, causing excitement, being entertaining, creating sense of urgency, being inspiring or aspirational.	Out of repetition, comes variation. Out of variation, comes iteration. Out of iteration, comes creation. #ORIGINALis never finished. See full film: https://t.co/RO4coVOaMx (Adidas)
Creativity	Showcasing elements of artistry or presentational novelty.	Mysterious creatures: a model in a quilted velvet jacket carrying a dragon walks the #GucciFW18 show. Inspired by the 'Legend of the baby dragon in the jar', the real story of an author who staged finding a baby dragon in his garage in Oxfordshire, England. #makinariumsfxfvx #mfw (Gucci)
Storytelling	Providing live-updates, behind-the-scenes elements, or stories about people.	Creating the gown: 550 hours of work went into @bjork's custom #Gucci dress for her new single #TheGate.' (Gucci)

Informational	Informing about new launches, special editions, or product usage.	Bloodborne and Ratchet & Clank are your PlayStation Plus games for March, new changes coming to the service next year: https://t.co/iO3WtKgcaN (Playstation)
Remuneration	Offering an incentive.	Next up, Lucina versus.. an owl!? If this (+JP and EU) tweet receives 50K RTs by 3/14 at 11:59 PM PT, all players will receive 5 bonus orbs! (Nintendo)
Promotions and Contests	Price promotion, sales, deals.	☘️🍓🍓☘️ Free Tea Friday☘️☘️🍓🍓 Get a free ~tall~ Teavana Iced Tea Infusion Friday 7/14 from 1-2pm!! (Starbucks)
Brand Identity	Mentioning brand values, CSR initiatives, activities and achievements, brand ambassadors, or brand history.	Boeing is proud to build the next generation of Air Force One, providing American Presidents with a flying White House at outstanding value to taxpayers. President Trump negotiated a good deal on behalf of the American people. https://t.co/m0HtGfXV1v (Boeing)
Social Currency	Building content around pop culture and current events.	*Sees clown* Nope. *Goes to BK* (Burger King)
Social Presence	Asking users to like/retweet, posing questions, addressing or responding to the users.	It's the last day of the year and we are going to end it in style. What was your favorite Audi in 2017? #NewYearsEve (Audi)

Table 2. Initial Themes

Once the themes were identified, we revisited our findings from phase one and integrated the nine themes from phase two with the themes identified in phase one. Figure 1 shows the coherent framework that resulted from this process.

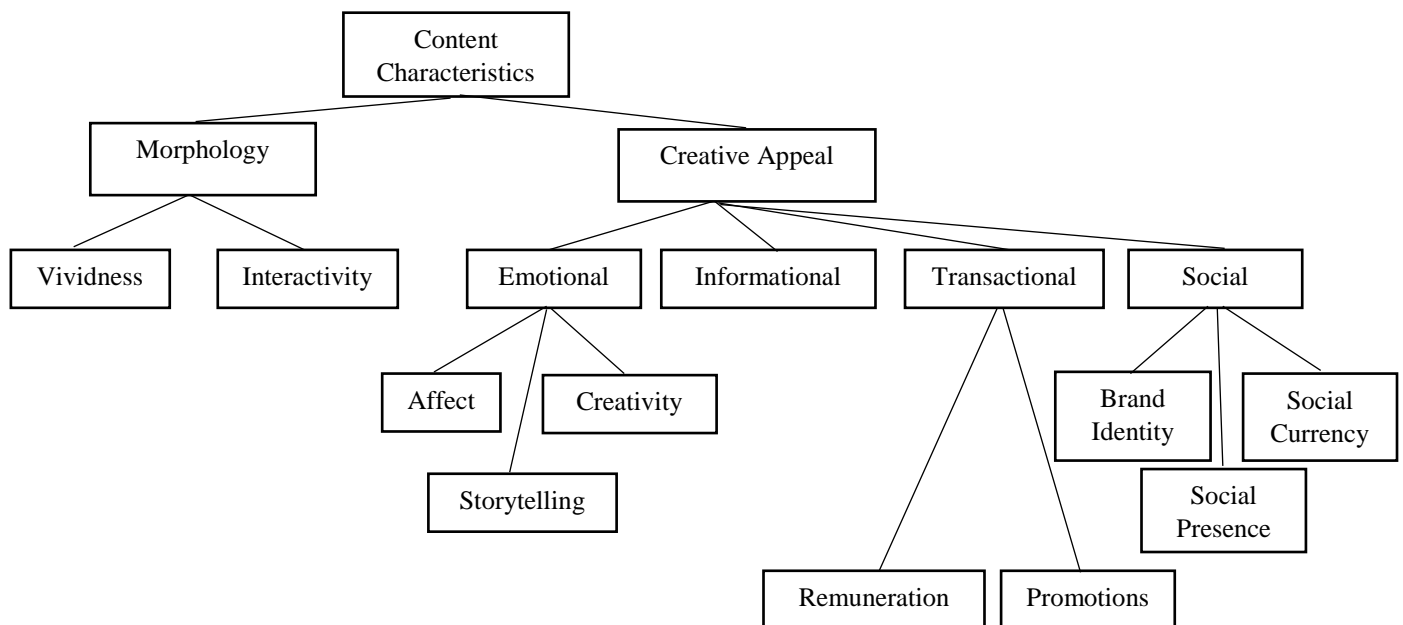


Figure1. Conceptual Framework

5. Discussion and Implications

With this study, we aimed at integrating, enriching, and adding depth to existing knowledge by combining what is already known with our own empirical findings. The novelty of this study is derived from the combination of methods used, as well as the identification of dimensions that holistically capture the elements of successful tweets both in terms of their Morphology and their Creative Appeals. Our final conceptual framework is in line with the existing literature in computer-mediated communication. Morphology as a dimension is consistent with the Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Higher levels of Vividness and Interactivity enhance the feeling of social presence and the level of involvement and can result in favourable attitudes (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005).

With regards to Creative Appeals, recent studies suggest that what makes content spreadable is its alignment with the consumers' motivation to gratify certain needs through Social Media usage (Vilnai-Yavetz & Levina, 2018). Such needs are Emotion Regulation, Informational Needs, Social Connection, Impression Management, and Remuneration (Chang & Chuang, 2011; De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Heinonen, 2011; Lee & Ma, 2012), which can align with the identified broader content themes.

Our work is an initial step in addressing the research question about the content characteristics that predict retweeting. It is an exploratory study that has produced some preliminary findings which need to be formally tested in the future. It can work as a starting point for further quantitative investigation in which the specific content features and the interactions between them can be evaluated in their ability to predict the number of retweets. However, even at this initial stage, our framework makes a contribution to knowledge because it is the first attempt to tackle the fragmented literature. From a managerial perspective, this study can help practitioners have a clearer idea about which elements to consider when designing their tweets and what is considered best practice in order to get retweeted. This is quite important because through retweeting, the users show commitment to the message, add value, and act as brand ambassadors by helping spread the word on their network.

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