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OĞUZ KUŞ
Istanbul University, Turkey

CHARMAINE DU PLESSIS
Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa, South Africa

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIMENSIONS OF BRANDED CONTENT AND INTERACTIVITY ON TWITTER: A DATA-DRIVEN CONTENT MARKETING APPROACH

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between dimensions of branded content and interactivity on Twitter. A data-driven content marketing perspective was adopted within a business-to-consumer (B2C) context by focusing on some social metrics of a flag carrier airline brand. A pragmatic worldview allowed the researchers to test four hypotheses to examine the relationship between dimensions of branded content and their interaction level on Twitter. Facepager was used as a data collection tool. The analysis indicates that there is a significant relationship between the type of visuals, number of hashtags, character count, branded content grouping and more interactivity for the brand's tweets. Further work is required to identify more dimensions of branded content to measure interactivity on social media with a larger sample and more social media platforms. The results extend the literature on data-driven content marketing and facilitate our understanding of how social metrics could assist brands to focus on best performing social media posts for more engagement.

Keywords:

Branded content; business-to-consumer (B2C); content marketing; data-driven content marketing; interactivity; social metrics; Twitter

JEL Classification: M00, M31, M30

1 INTRODUCTION

Useful analytics has emerged as a significant area of interest central to data-driven content marketing, allowing for targeted online content marketing strategies with content that resonates more with the target audience (McPhillips, 2018). Content marketing focuses on publishing valuable free online branded content to attract attention to the brand and is seen as "organic marketing" (Pulizzi, 2012). A data-driven approach considers metrics to determine which content brands most amplified in social media based on facts and statistics (Pennell, 2018). However, social metrics remain a neglected content marketing area (Rancati & Gordini 2014; Patel 2020).

Overall, this paper suggests that the overlooked area of social metrics could also be helpful for a data-driven content marketing approach to identify and focus on best-performing branded content. We adopted a pragmatic worldview to test four hypotheses related to the social metrics of an award-winning flag carrier airline brand on Twitter, anchored in a data-driven content marketing approach (Frey, 2018). The study implemented a business-to-consumer (B2C) content marketing context for this study.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section reviews the extant literature while formulating hypotheses. We then discuss the research methodology, operationalisation and results. We conclude by identifying the study’s limitations and opportunities for future research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMING AND HYPOTHESES

In this section, we discuss the main constructs relevant to this study and formulate four hypotheses.

2.1 Building relationships with consumers with branded content

Content marketing to develop consumer relationships is centuries old. By generating and sharing captivating, branded content on social media, a brand may drive brand discussions to attract, maintain, and build long-term connections with consumers (Pulizzi, 2012; 2014). Since Rowley's

(2008) seminal paper, numerous scholars have studied content marketing from diverse aspects (see Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

However, the current understanding of what content marketing entails has moved beyond the Content Marketing Institute's (CMI) earlier definition as "a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action" (CMI, 2017). Recently, literature has evolved that presents content marketing as a strategic marketing approach to building relationships and consumer loyalty on social media by encouraging engagement (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

2.2 Interactivity as an indicator of consumer engagement

Consumer engagement with branded content is linked to interactivity on social media. Liu and Shrum (2002) define interactivity as "the degree to which two or more communication partners can act on each other, the communication medium, and the messages." Marketing scholars still debate how to define interactive brand-consumer interactions in an online environment (see Aydin, 2019). Also, brands adopt functional interactivity to interact with consumers who want contingent or full interactivity, where their communication roles become more interchangeable with brands (Zhang & Lin, 2015). In this regard, Van Dijck (2013) explains social media as “automated systems” that influence relations by “coding relationships between people, things and ideas into algorithms”. The algorithmic aspect of social networks thus also increases interaction possibilities. As a result, social media users’ posts and suggestions for connections are sorted based on relevancy. Similarly, a brand’s visibility is enhanced because algorithms pull content into users’ social media feeds derived from their social media behaviour (Van Dijck 2013).

There are three types of significant textual interactions on Twitter: replying, retweeting and indicating content as favourites. Our first hypothesis is:

H1: A relationship exists between the format of visuals in branded content and interactions.

2.3 Types of branded content on social media

Brands publish and amplify branded content on social media to attract organic interest in brand-related topics (Patel, 2020). Branded content attracts consumers by entertaining and educating them, providing practical information, or building an emotional connection (Pulizzi, 2014; Servantes, 2018). Fuchs (2020) argues that effective branded content is sympathetic, meaningful, and consumer-focused. There are different ways in which brands produce branded content (McCoy, 2020):

- Branded content can be found organically through the Internet or social media search engines because of brands' blog posts or website content (owned media).
- Consumers generate branded content through comments, feedback and posts (earned media).
- Branded content can also be paid content promotion and social network advertising (paid media).

Content marketers use a content strategy as the foundation for successful content marketing to decide which type of branded content to publish (McCoy, 2020). Organic branded content can be presented on social media as videos, images, Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs), memes, whitepapers, Infographics, whitepapers, text only, eBooks, how-to guides, testimonials and user-generated content, amongst other things (Pulizzi, 2014). Overall, a brand produces content to enhance interactions and consumer engagement on social media (Fuchs, 2020). The concept of engagement is multi-dimensional and has different meanings in different contexts across disciplines. We adopt the view of Van Doorn et al. (2010) that engagement refers to any customer behaviour beyond making a purchase, which in the case of the study may also include metrics such as retweets and favourites on Twitter. Our second hypothesis is:

H2: A relationship exists between the content category of branded content and interactions.

2.4 Features of branded content

Apart from paying attention to the types of branded content, it is also essential to understand the features surrounding such content, for example, considering hashtags and character count. Hashtags are vital components of the World Wide Web (WWW) and essential resources that provide visibility and project the possibility of connections with other social media users (Page, 2012). Furthermore, hashtags enable “meeting points” for users to comment on a specific topic and are thus crucial to assisting content marketing efforts on social media (Patel, 2017). Forbes Media found that social media-specific features, such as hashtags, considerably improve consumer engagement (Davis et al., 2019). Our third hypothesis is:

H3: A relationship exists between the number of hashtags used in branded content and interactions.

Microsoft Canada (2015) reports that people's attention spans are shortening. For example, the average human attention span was eight seconds in 2013. According to Shleyner’s (2018) study, tweets on Twitter with fewer than 100 characters have 17% more engagement than those with more characters. Media consumption, social media use, technology adoption rate and multi-screening affect people's concentration. The length of brand-shared content is thus vital for more social media interactions (Shleyner 2018). Our last hypothesis is:

H4: A relationship exists between the length of branded content and interactions.

2.5 The emergence of digital data-driven content marketing

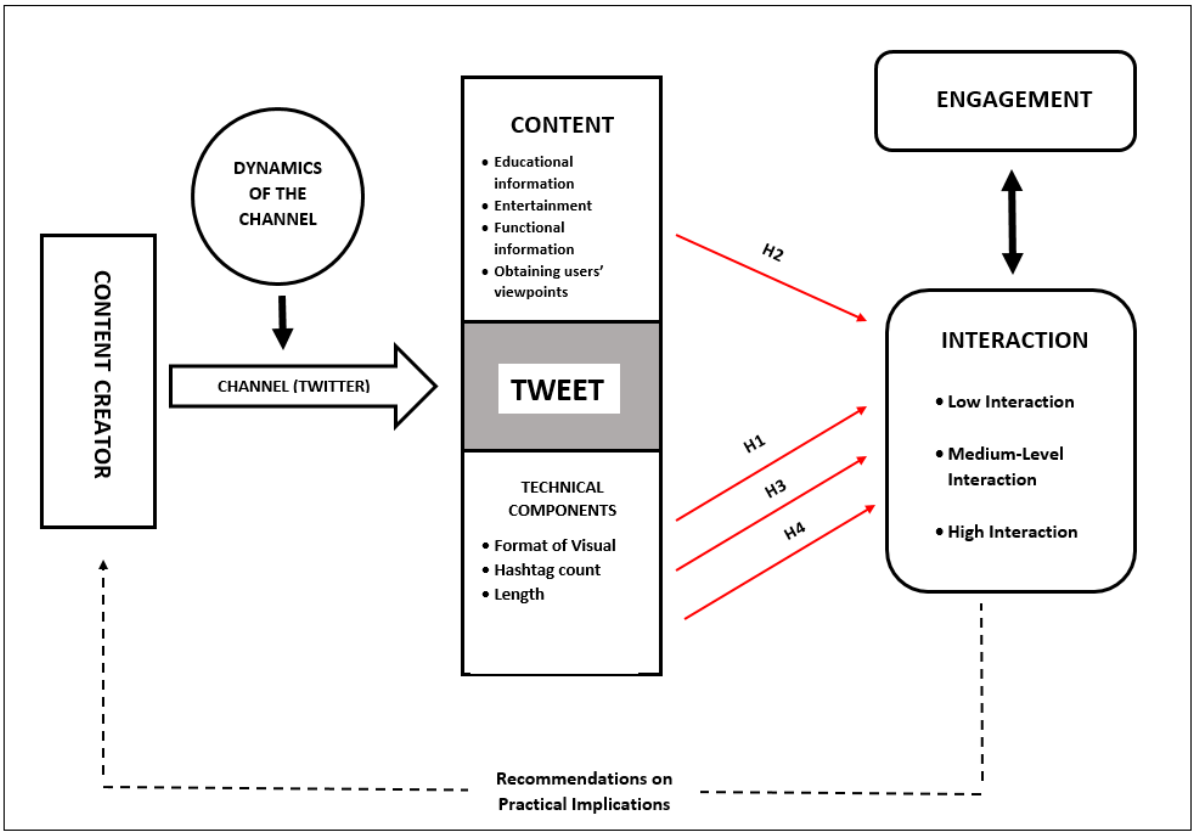
Hollebeek and Macky's (2019) observation that more scholarly work on digital content marketing is essential seems to be well-founded. However, the next decade will likely see more academic

interest in what a successful social media post sharing branded content on social media platforms constitutes (see McPhillips, 2018).

The concept of data-driven content marketing is not new but not well documented in academic literature. Using analytics originates from data-driven marketing, is generally understood to mean using facts and statistics to improve content marketing and is gaining some academic interest in especially business-to-business (B2B) content marketing (see Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). Content marketers must rely on accurate metrics about customer conversations and their needs to construct a workable content strategy (McPhillips, 2018; Pennel, 2018). Patel (2020) reiterates that content marketing today has become more focused on data. Therefore, marketers must set content goals to amplify branded content by, amongst other things, considering the type of content and the social media platforms where consumers are present. Supporting the arguments of Kaushik (2011) and Patel (2020), we argue that social metrics such as retweets, favourites and share counts on Twitter could be important indicators for digital data-driven content marketing efforts to increase interactivity and engage consumers.

Peters et al. (2013) explain metrics as either describing or quantifying a state of a feature, a method, a dynamic trend, or evolution. Of interest to this study is Rancati and Gordini's (2014) classification of content marketing metrics into four closely related groups: consumption, sharing (social), lead generation and sales. They argue that content marketers are mostly concerned with consumption metrics where sharing metrics (social metrics) about views, page views, downloads, unique visitors, time spent with content and social conversations are indicators of interest in the content that is often neglected. Figure I below depicts the key considerations for this study.

Figure I: Key considerations for this study



Source: Researchers.

3 METHODOLOGY

Several tools were used to test the hypotheses of this study. In doing so, a pragmatic worldview was adopted when pursuing data collection and interpretation of results (Frey, 2018). Apart from quantitative statistical analysis, both concept- and data-driven approaches were adopted for content analysis to understand the context and meaning of the tweets in the dataset to categorise the tweets for the statistical analysis. The tweets of a flag carrier airline brand, which were publicly accessible, were collected with the Facepager data collection tool.

3.1 Sample method and data collection

The commercial airline industry was chosen with a purposive sample method to test the study's hypotheses. An award-winning flag carrier airline brand was selected because it has a solid social media presence and engages with content marketing activities, as Menon et. al. (2019) argued.

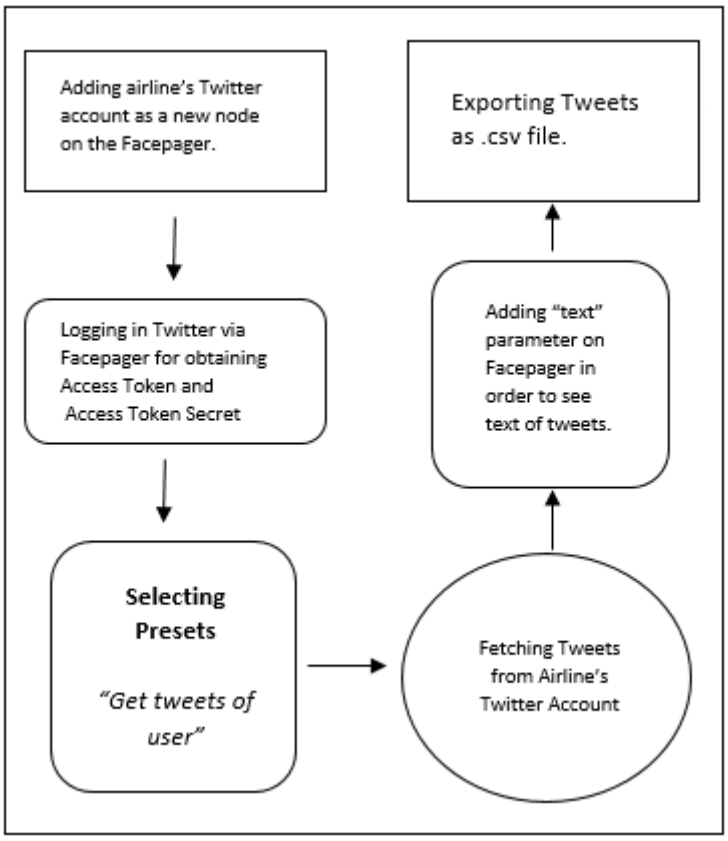
3.2 Data collection process followed

Facepager, an application for generic data retrieval through APIs, was used as a data collection tool to extract data from the Twitter account of the airline brand (Jünger & Keyling, 2018).

After the data collection phase, the data set was pre-processed systematically to make it ready for analysis. This enabled the application of the same rule for every row of data containing thousands of entries. In addition, categories of the branded content and the format of the visuals shared with the content were manually identified. A descriptive perspective was adopted to implement a Chi-Squared Test of Association between variables to calculate the relationship between parameters of tweets and interactions with SPSS 21.

It was essential to reveal the relationships between categories of variables to identify those tweets with more interactivity. Figure 2 below illustrates the data collection process followed for this study.

Figure 2: Data collection process followed for this study



Source: Researchers.

During the data collection process, tweets with branded content posted by the airline brand on their Twitter account from 16 January 2014 to 16 January 2018 were purposively extracted. A historical dataset allowed the researchers to obtain more insight into tweets with more interactivity versus those with less. For this study, retweets, favourites, and share counts were measures of engagement and interactivity and how often consumers interacted with the brand on Twitter (Rancati & Gordini 2014).

After data cleaning, tweets in the dataset contained 465 163 favourites and 214 272 retweets.

3.3 Categorisation of branded content with a mixed-method content analysis

The branded content in the dataset was categorised using mixed-method content analysis by following a concept- and data-driven approach, respectively (Hamad et al., 2016). A concept-driven approach was first adopted to classify branded content (see Pulizzi, 2014; Servantes, 2018), followed by a data-driven approach to code data following a coding book.

3.4 Reliability of the results

Interrater reliability was calculated by comparing two coders' absolute agreement. Two coders coded 1304 tweets to obtain a percentage agreement. The other coder then blind-coded 131 tweets (10% of each coder's data). The literature indicates that 75% to 90% absolute agreement is acceptable (see Graham et al., 2012). Table 1 below depicts the percentage of absolute agreement between the two coders.

Table 1: Interrater reliability for the mixed-method content analysis

Coder	Re-coder	Percentage of Agreement

Coder I	Coder II	75%
Coder II	Coder I	78%

4 RESULTS

During the concept-driven approach, the airline's branded content was classified as educational, functional information, providing entertainment and inviting the target audience's viewpoints and experiences (Pulizzi, 2014; Servantes, 2018). The data-driven approach revealed the following results:

Table 2: Classification, number of tweets and the overall percentage of branded content

Classification of branded content	**Number of Tweets**	**Overall Percentage**
Educational Information	1371	52,6
Entertainment	399	15,3
Functional Information	209	8
Obtaining Users' Viewpoints and Experiences	629	24,1

After implementing a Chi-squared test of association to the above-mentioned variables, the following results were obtained.

H1: A relationship exists between the format of visuals in brand content and interactions.

The results of the Chi-Squared Test of Association (3 x 3) show that there is a significant association between *Interaction* and *the Format of Visuals* used in branded content ($\chi 2$ (4, N= 2608) = 310,364, $p < 0.05$).

A significant relationship became evident between video content and more interactions. It can thus be argued that video content has the potential to be more engaging because it is possible to attract consumers' attention and to provide more information. Furthermore, a video creates interactions and benefits brand awareness and engagement. Also, video content creates a deeper connection with consumers, allowing them to re-share and increase the virality of branded content (Patel, 2020).

H2: A relationship exists between the content category of branded content and interactions.

The results of the Chi-Squared Test of Association (3 x 4) show that there is a significant association between *Interaction* and *category of brand content* ($\chi 2$ (6, N= 2608) = 39,553, $p < 0.05$).

A significant relationship between functional information content and more interactions became evident. It can thus be argued that tweets containing information such as operational issues (flight delays and cancellations, miles usage, insurance etc.), a new route, and destination facts have a higher potential for consumer interactions. The results indicate that functional information content created in the airline industry allows brands to be more empathetic and puts the customer's needs first (Fuchs 2020).

H3: A relationship exists between the number of hashtags used in branded content and interactions.

The results of the Chi-Squared Test of Association (3 x 3) show that there is a significant association between *Interaction* and *the Number of Hashtags* used in brand content ($\chi 2$ (4, N= 2608) = 310,364, $p < 0.05$).

Interestingly, a significant relationship between tweets containing more than two hashtags and more interactions became evident. The number of interactions with two or more hashtags is three times higher than the tweets with no hashtag. It can thus be argued that using multiple hashtags

has a higher potential to receive more interactions since they have been creating a meeting point for like-minded users and providing a context to tweets (Patel, 2017).

H4: A relationship exists between the length of brand content and interactions.

The results of the Chi-Squared Test of Association (3 x 3) show that there is a significant association between interactions and the length of branded content ($\chi 2$ (4, N= 2608) = 73,380, $p < 0.05$).

When considering the significant relationship between variables and the average count of total interactions, it can be argued that longer tweets received more interactions, contrary to arguments by Shleyner (2018). Even though the number of long tweets was fewer, interactions generated were more than two times higher than those of shorter tweets.

5 DISCUSSION

While this study's conclusions can only be generalised to the sample's Twitter data, they underscore the value of data-driven content marketing. The results can assist content marketers to plan branded content that resonates on social media. In this regard, social metrics can demonstrate a brand's interactivity because branded content is amplified to other users and their social media networks, allowing the brand to create relationships with additional consumers (Kaushik, 2011; Cohen; 2017).

The results suggest that to stay competitive on Twitter, brands must also adopt a data-driven approach to their content marketing activities (Pennell, 2018). This could involve analysing social media postings, as this study did to determine which posts received the most interactions (Ordenes et al., 2019).

However, the social metrics of the flag carrier airline brand indicate that the brand only adopted functional interactivity on Twitter to facilitate interactions. It is recommended that brands must

instead seek contingent engagement where social media users play a more prominent brand communication role (Zhang & Lin, 2015). The results indicate that social metrics can complement other digital data-driven content marketing metrics to establish consumer relationships by increasing involvement with sponsored content (Patel, 2020). When content marketing is seen through a data-driven lens, branded content must be considered an independent parameter that drives interactivity and engagement.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

Our research contributes to the extant literature on content marketing in several ways. The results enrich the content marketing literature in a B2C context by better understanding the dimensions of branded content and how branded content could be classified as part of a data-driven content marketing perspective to increase interactivity on social media. The study also advances the topic of social metrics within the content marketing literature. It provides another lens on how brands could focus on best-performing content to resonate more with consumers. In doing so, the study adds more insight into the topic of data-driven content marketing, which has not been well-documented in the academic literature. The results thus lay the foundation for future studies on data-driven content marketing and social metrics.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has put forward a tentative explanation of how a data-driven content marketing approach could include social metrics by focusing on a flag carrier airline brand. In doing so, the relationship between branded content features and interactions on social media were analysed.

The results not only provide more insight into how social metrics can drive a brand's social media content creation but may also stimulate academic debate about using facts and statistics to improve content marketing efforts. It is acknowledged that only one brand's social metrics on one social media platform was analysed. Results for other brands and platforms will thus be different.

However, the results of this study are nevertheless valuable for informing content marketers of ways to present branded content on social media to resonate more with consumers.

However, further work is required to identify more branded content features to measure interactivity on social media. The results should be replicated in a study where more than one brand's social metrics are analysed on different social media platforms or where social media users' inputs were also obtained.

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