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How Does Brand-related User-generated Content Differ across YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter?

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Abstract

This study tests hypotheses regarding differences in brand-related user-generated content (UGC) between Twitter (a microblogging site), Facebook (a social network) and YouTube (a content community). It tests them using data from a content analysis of 600 UGC posts for two retail-apparel brands (Lululemon and American Apparel), which differ in the extent to which they manage social media proactively. Comparisons are drawn across six dimensions of UGC; the dimensions were drawn from a priori reading and an inductive analysis of brand-related UGC. This research provides a general framework for comparing brand-related UGC, and helps us to better understand how particular social media channels and marketing strategies may influence consumer-produced brand communications.

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Keywords: User-generated content (UGC); Content analysis; Social media; Social media marketing; YouTube; Facebook; Twitter

Introduction

Social media have migrated into the 'mainstream' and marketers have taken notice: the percentage of companies using social media for marketing is expected to reach 88% by 2012, up from 42% in 2008 (Williamson 2010). Companies are leveraging social media not only for digital advertising and promotions, but also to handle customer service issues, mine innovation ideas, and 'authentically' engage with customers (Solis 2010). There is considerable diversity across the types of social media, which encompasses formats such as blogs, social networking sites and content communities (c.f. Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). While marketing scholars have studied certain social media channels in isolation, few have incorporated multiple types into a single study for comparative purposes. Research that compares how users engage with different social media can enhance our understanding of the variability between media, and provide managers with insights on how to allocate resources across platforms. One form of consumer engagement that can be compared across social media sites is user-generated content (UGC).

User-generated content is an important means through which consumers express themselves and communicate with others online (Boyd and Ellison 2008); it is what is produced in the moment of being social, as well as the object around which sociality occurs. UGC takes on many different forms, such as Twitter tweets, Facebook status updates, and videos on YouTube, as well as consumer-produced product reviews and advertisements (c.f. Dhar and Chang 2009; Muñiz and Schau 2007). Importantly for marketers, much UGC across various media is brand-related and has the potential to shape consumer brand perceptions.

Casual observation suggests there is a tremendous assortment of brand-related UGC across the different social media types; for example, a YouTube video does not look like a Facebook wall post. Better understanding these differences is potentially important for marketers who are concerned with the co-creation of their brands in different social media platforms. As such, this research addresses the following questions: How does brand-related UGC vary across different social media types? And how does the extent to which social media marketing is proactively managed relate to differences across social media types? These questions have not yet been broached in the still nascent (Burmann 2010) research stream on brand-related

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UGC. To answer them, we draw on brand-related UGC from three different types of social media: Facebook (a social network), Twitter (a microblogging application), and YouTube (a content community). We test hypotheses using data derived from a content analysis of materials on two brands (American Apparel and Lululemon) on each site.

Our study builds on previous brand-related UGC research to make three primary contributions. First, it provides a preliminary framework for comparing the content that consumers create when they produce brand-related posts. Second, it improves our understanding of how specific social media channels influence the brand-related messages that consumers create (c.f. McLuhan 1964). Third, it highlights differences in UGC where social media is more, versus less, proactively managed by brands. Thus, it can help inform managerial decision making about social media. The paper proceeds as follows. It briefly reviews the literature on UGC and the social media sites of interest. It then develops research hypotheses and describes our methods. Finally, it presents results of the content analysis and a discussion of findings.

Literature

Academic research on social media and brand-related UGC is accumulating rapidly. To situate our research within this evolving literature, we review relevant studies on brand-related UGC and the three social media sites under consideration in this study.

User-generated Content

UGC is published content that is “created outside of professional routines and practices” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; OECD 2007, p. 61). It may be individually or collaboratively produced, modified, shared and consumed, and “can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media,” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). While the origins of UGC predate the rise of the Internet and social media, those developments, coupled with increased accessibility of technology, have made UGC creation less demanding (Burgess and Green 2009; Lange 2008). Compelling evidence of the effect of such developments may be observed in China where the percentage of Internet content that is user-produced now exceeds that which is professionally produced (Xiaoji 2010). UGC is related to, but not identical with, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is defined as being “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). While UGC is broader than eWOM, the two overlap considerably when UGC is brand-related, as it is in our study. We identify three relevant streams of brand-related UGC research.

The first investigates consumer-generated advertisements and brands. This work considers what motivates consumers to create, what they produce, how the process of co-creation can be managed, and implications for marketers and advertisers (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008; Burmann 2010; Muñiz and Schau 2007; Pitt et al. 2006). The second stream of brand-related UGC research emphasizes how credible consumers find user-generated posts and their goals for engaging with them (Cheong and Morrison 2008; Liu, Karahanna, and Watson 2011; Riegner 2008). Cheong and Morrison’s (2008) study is atypical of brand-related UGC research in that it considers content generated on different types of sites: YouTube, blogs, and forums. However, as their focus is on perceptions of brand-related UGC versus the types of content generated, they do not provide a systematic comparison of how UGC varies across sites. A third strand of brand-related UGC research focuses on the relationship between UGC and significant managerial outcomes, such as sales. In this research, brand-related UGC is considered a predictor (Dhar and Chang 2009) or driver (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2010) of these outcomes. Dhar and Chang’s (2009) study on predicting music sales incorporates UGC data from multiple media types (blogs and social network sites), but again, it does not concentrate on understanding how UGC differs across sites, which is focal in our study.

Social Media Sites

The range of social media sites on the Internet is vast and growing. This study focuses on brand-related UGC from three of the most popular sites in terms of consumer usage and marketer interest: Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Each represents a different type of social media.

Twitter is a micro-blogging site that was founded in 2006. It allows people to publish (tweet), reply to, and forward posts that cannot exceed 140-characters in length. Posts, which may include hyperlinks to news stories, blogs, pictures, etc., show up in the stream of those following the poster; most posts are also publically available. Research on Twitter has focused on a number of areas, including norms and behaviours (Boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010), self-presentation (Marwick and Boyd 2011), as well as what and why people post (Jansen et al. 2009; Java et al. 2009; Naaman, Boase, and Lai 2010). Tweets commonly ask for or share information, news, opinions, complaints, or details about daily activities. Most relevant to this study is research that touches on brand-related tweets. Jansen et al. (2009) find that 19% of tweets are brand-related, but that in almost half of those cases the brand is not the primary focus of the post. In tweets where brands are focal, users express opinions about and seek or provide information on the brand.

Facebook is a social networking site that was founded in 2004. Facebook users can create profiles featuring personal information, interests, photos, and the like, and can ‘friend’ other site users. They can also participate in a wide range of activities such as writing on friends’ walls, commenting on links, participating in forum discussions, and “liking” brands. Facebook allows people to build or maintain social capital, communicate with others, keep up with other peoples’ lives, and discover rumours and gossip. Research on Facebook has considered the site’s functionality and norms (Papacharissi 2009), how and why people use it (Debatin et al. 2009; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007), as well as identity management and self-presentation on the site (Labrecque, Markos, and Milne 2011; Papacharissi 2009; Tom Tong et al. 2008;

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