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Like it or not: The Fortune 500's Facebook strategies to generate users' electronic word-of-mouth

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of companies' social media communication strategies on users' electronic word-of-mouth behavior through a content analysis. The sample includes more than 15,000 posts from Fortune 500 companies' Facebook accounts in a five-year time frame. Three communication strategies are examined, including appeal, vividness, and interactivity. Results confirm the main effects of vividness and emotional appeals. However, interactivity does not help generate more eWOM behavior. Proposed interactions between vividness and appeal type, as well as between vividness and interactivity, are significant. Emotional appeals amplify the beneficial effects of vividness, whereas interactivity dampens the potency of vividness.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of social media generates interest from communication professionals and academia alike, as marketing communication has shifted from traditional media to social media. Today, social media are where the people are, and that is the primary reason for corporations to invest the time and money to communicate with consumers on social media (Kabani, 2013). Facebook, a leading social media platform, has more than a billion active users (Facebook Newsroom, 2017). According to Van Belleghem, Eenhuizen, and Veris (2011), more than 50 percent of social media users are fans of corporate pages (cited in De Vries, Gensler, & Leeftang, 2012). Various motivations lead to the use of corporate social media pages, such as consuming company-related information, seeking entertainment, interacting with the company and/or other fan-page users, and so on (Jahn & Kunz, 2012).

Noticeably, today's consumers are active information seekers and disseminators, especially on social media. They share their opinions and experiences—either satisfaction or discontent—on

corporate social media pages, establishing social media as a powerful electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) forum with the capability to reach a massive audience in a matter of seconds (Marken, 2007). Prior research has effectively demonstrated the effects of eWOM on purchase decision-making and attitude change (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). However, the other important aspect of eWOM—the generation of eWOM—is somewhat understudied (Varadarajan & Yadav, 2009). The main objective of the current study is to shed new light on this research direction by examining corporations' social media communication strategies for attracting attention from consumers and encouraging their eWOM behavior. Specifically, this study focuses on what communication messages Fortune 500 companies deliver to consumers via Facebook and how different message strategies affect persuasive outcomes measured by users' eWOM behavior such as “like,” “share,” and “comment.” There are three message strategies under investigation and all are closely relevant to communication practice: appeal (emotional or informational), vividness (vivid or non-vivid), and interactivity (interactive or non-interactive).

Each of these strategies has been extensively investigated in the literature regarding its persuasion effects such as affecting people's attitudes and behavior (Coyle & Thorson, 2001; Fortin & Dholakia,

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2005; Liu & Shrum, 2009; Lwin & Phau, 2013). Lwin and Phau (2013) found that emotional appeals outperformed informational appeals by generating more favorable attitudes. Other studies (e.g., Coyle & Thorson, 2001; Liu & Shrum, 2009) demonstrated that higher levels of message vividness and interactivity led to more favorable attitudes and stronger purchase intentions. However, with all three strategies possible on social media, whether a combination of them would always yield desirable results is unknown. Few studies have investigated such interaction effects and that is what the current study aims to accomplish. By testing the joint effects of different message strategies, this study is attempting to make a unique contribution to the literature by addressing such questions as “Would emotional appeal, vividness, and interactivity mutually benefit each other?” and “Would this relationship work effectively on promoting eWOM behavior in the context of corporate social media communication?”

Another distinct aspect of the current study is to adopt a large data approach. More than 15,000 posts are sampled from Fortune 500 companies' Facebook accounts within a five-year time span, reflecting their “real world” social media communication strategies. The persuasive effects of those strategies are also measured in a natural and unforced way, operationalized as whether Facebook users like, share, or comment on the posts. This study adds to eWOM research on social media and explains why liking, sharing, and commenting on Facebook can be conceptually categorized as eWOM behavior. The three communication strategies used by companies when disseminating social media messages are further discussed under relevant theoretical frameworks. Finally, hypotheses and research questions regarding main effects and interactions among the three strategies are developed, explained, and tested.

2. Literature review

2.1. eWOM on social media

Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to oral and interpersonal communication for a non-commercial purpose (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). With the rapid development of the Internet, WOM has expanded in scope from interpersonal interaction within limited acquaintances (one-to-one and one-to-many communications) to many-to-one and many-to-many communications (Weisfled-Spoltor, Sussan, & Gould, 2014). Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) defined eWOM as “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” (p. 39). In general, both traditional WOM and eWOM have been demonstrated to have a strong influence on shaping attitudes and behavior (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Lee & Youn, 2009).

Regardless of channel, WOM (online or offline) is an information-sharing behavior pertaining to products and services (Kapoor, Jayasimha, & Sadh, 2013). Under this definition, the *Comment* function on Facebook, in addition to one-click social plug-ins such as “Like” and “Share” buttons, can be considered as eWOM due to the ability these functions afford users to evaluate products and services. Facebook comments function similarly to online review platforms, message boards, blogs and forums by providing a means to write opinions and share with others (Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). The “Like” button, activated in 2009, was considered as a tool to “drive deeper engagement with consumers” (Harris & Dennis, 2011, p. 339). By clicking the “Like” button in a Facebook post, the user assigns interest or positivity toward the message (Swani, Milne, & Brown, 2013). Importantly, the “liking” behavior along with the original post is displayed to the user's network of friends on their newsfeeds (Debatin, Lovejoy,

Horn, & Hughes, 2009), which makes “liking” a public announcement and an example of eWOM behavior. The “Share” button mirrors the “Like” button, but with extra functionality that allows users to add personal messages and to direct the message to specific groups. Compared to the “Comment” function, one-click social plug-ins are quicker, simpler and require much less cognitive effort (Swani et al., 2013). Accordingly, “Like” and “Share” are classified as low-level eWOM in this study, while “Comment” are considered high-level eWOM.

As described earlier, this study aims to understand what social media communication strategies will generate more eWOM behavior. Only a few studies have explored this topic. For example, in an exploratory study, De Vries et al. (2012) analyzed 355 company Facebook messages, and investigated how each of multiple message strategies (e.g., entertainment, information, vividness, and interactivity) would separately influence the number of likes and number of comments a post could receive. Later, Swani et al. (2013) analyzed 1143 Facebook messages from 193 companies, but focused on company-level differences (B2B vs. B2C, products vs. services) rather than message strategies. To the best knowledge of the authors, there has been no study investigating the joint effects of multiple strategies (i.e., emotional appeal, vividness, and interactivity). As mentioned before, those three strategies are frequently used during online communication on social media and particularly suitable for Facebook (De Vries et al., 2012). Facebook in nature is for connection (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), thus through Facebook companies can foster relationships with potential customers in much the same way people do with potential friends. Consumers also prefer companies to communicate with them in an interpersonal manner (Nair, 2011). Therefore, the effectiveness of emotional appeals is expected to be particularly salient on Facebook. Interactivity, which is operationalized as the presence of hyperlink in this study, also closely relates to the web-mediated communication and “permits a deep cognitive engagement to peripheral aspect” of the message (Sams & Park, 2014, p. 295; see also in Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005). Vividness, though not limited to social media or online communication only, has been found effective regarding eliciting more clicks (both behavioral intention and actual click-through-rate) of online ads (Cho, 1999; Lohtia, Donthu, & Hershberger, 2003). Besides, past research showed that vividness and interactivity are frequently used by companies on social media. In De Vries et al. (2012), 50 percent of company Facebook posts contained vividness characteristics, and 75 percent included interactive features. To conclude, vividness, interactivity, and emotional appeal need more attention and are thus investigated in the current study. Attempting to make a unique contribution to the literature, the current study aims at not only testing the main effect of each strategy in generating more eWOM but also examining the interaction effect between multiple strategies. Would emotional appeal, vividness, and interactivity mutually benefit each other? Or, would a combination of multiple strategies backfire? To addressing these questions, introduction of each strategy and the rationale behind each interaction effect are provided in the next sections.

2.2. Emotional and informational appeals

Emotional appeals and informational appeals are frequently used execution strategies in communication research. These strategies operate under the assumption that people make decisions for either rational or emotional reasons (Copeland, 1924). Informational appeals, or functional/rational appeals, use logical arguments to directly persuade the target audience (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999; Behboudi, Vazifehdoust, Najafi, & Najafi, 2014). This strategy usually presents the advantages in a product's quality, economy, performance or value (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994, p. 468).

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