COBRAs on Facebook:
Exploring Message Types and Consumer Contribution

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Abstract

To most effectively use social media, marketers should understand what types of content drive consumer engagement. Specifically, what types of brand messages elicit higher level consumer online brand-related activities (COBRAs) that are more easily observed by users' connections (e.g. shares, comments, reactions). Through content analysis based on Tafesse and Wien's (2017) framework for categorizing social media posts, this study expands upon and ties together research concerning both the aforementioned social media post categorization framework and COBRAs.

Literature Review

Social network theory explains each user or entity represented in social media, including businesses and brands, is a node connected to other nodes via a variety of relationships (e.g. work affiliation, friendship), allowing ideas and information to spread (Marin & Wellman, 2010). More than 50 million businesses use Facebook pages (Chaykowski, 2015) to connect with consumers and – by extension – consumers' connections. In February 2016, Facebook reported 1.59 billion active users, each connected to one another by an average of only 3.57 people (Bhagat, Burke, Diuk, Filiz, & Edunov, 2016), which evidences the tight interconnection between all nodes on Facebook. Across Facebook and all other social media platforms, the heaviest users (members of Generation X, current ages 35-49) spend nearly 7 hours each week on social media, and notable numbers of those users report usage is important for learning about products and services, gaining access to exclusive discounts, and supporting their favorite companies or brands (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggin, 2016).

When a consumer engages in activities concerning brand-related content on a social media platform he is engaged in a consumer online brand-related activity (COBRA) (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). COBRAs exist on a continuum including three usage types driven by various motivations: consuming (minimal activity like viewing videos), contributing (moderate activity such as engaging in branded conversations), and creating (highest level activity such as uploading brand-centric content) (ibid). On Facebook, a user's connections can easily observe moderate to high-level brand related activities, which expands the brand's reach and enables the brand to leverage the user's endorsement. Thus, it is valuable for marketers to know which types of social media posts are most likely to elicit contributing and creating COBRAs.

Brands post a variety of media and messages. Through a formalized analysis of brand posts in social media, Tafesse and Wien (2017) developed an exhaustive and mutually exclusive list of 12 categories of brand posts, equipping researchers with a conceptual foundation for the coding, categorization, and analysis of brand posts. The framework includes the following categories: emotional brand posts, functional brand posts, educational brand posts, brand resonance, experiential brand posts, current event, personal brand posts, employee brand posts, brand community, customer relationship, cause-related brand posts, and sales promotion. The researchers note many posts contain a combination of message types.

Research Questions

Given the added value brands realize when followers engage in higher levels of brand-related activities and brand posts' capacity for driving those responses, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Which categories of brand posts do top-valued brands most frequently share on Facebook? Do they differ by industry and brand value?

RQ2: What categories of brand posts elicit the greatest consumer engagement via contributing activities (reactions, shares, comments)?

Methodology

Designed to expand upon and tie together previous research concerning categories of social media posts and COBRAs, this research assesses brand posts using a content analysis of latent content (the meaning behind the manifest content, which is the countable components) (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2015). Using a convenience sample of Facebook brand page posts issued by six brands ranked on the Forbes (2016) list of The World's Most Valuable Brands, a content analysis was completed for all brand posts issued during the eight-week period from November 1 – December 31, 2016. Noting Tafesse and Wein's (2017) findings concerning use of multiple categories of brand post within a single post, each post was coded for up to three categories. With an eye toward understanding how brand posts may vary by brand value, the top-ranked and lowest-ranked brand was selected within each of three industries: apparel (Adidas, Nike), luxury (Prada, Louis Vuitton), and automotive (Toyota, Volkswagen). Based on Tafesse and Wien's (2017) framework, a coding agenda was created to provide clear definitions, examples, and coding rules (Mayring, 2000) for the 12 categories of brand posts. A total of 329 brand posts were assessed in April 2017. Each Facebook post was categorized according to the coding agenda and publicly-available response analytics (e.g. reactions, comments, shares) were recorded. Average reactions, comments, and shares were calculated for each post type and compared.

Results

Of the 329 brand messages assessed in this study, 142 (43%) were brand resonance messages, which are defined as follows:

> "Brand resonance posts are brand posts that direct attention to the brand promise and identity of the focal brand. These posts highlight some of the main tropes of brand identity, such as brand image, brand personality, brand association, and/or branded products. Brand resonance posts seek to differentiate and favorably position the focal brand in the mind of the consumers" (Tafesse & Wein, 2017).

Overall, 215 (65%) of the brand posts utilized more than one message type, a finding aligned with that of Tafesse and Wien (2017) who noted brand posts frequently incorporate more than one message into a post.

Automotive Industry   Automotive industry firms most frequently used brand resonance messages. Two automotive industry firms were included in this study: Toyota, ranked No. 6 on Forbes (2016) list of The World's Most Valuable Brands, and Volkswagen, ranked No. 77. For both the industry and the individual firms, brand resonance messages were the most frequently used post type. Of the 224 posts reviewed for the industry, 97 (43%) contained brand resonance messages, and 161 (72%) of the posts used more than one message type. Toyota posted 169 times during the assessment period, and 79 (47%) of those posts were brand resonance messages; however, it was the firm's functional posts – posts highlighting functional attributes and benefits of products (Tafesse & Wein, 2017) – that garnered the greatest consumer engagement. Volkswagen, which posted only 55 times during the same period, used brand resonance messages 18 (33%) times, but consumer contribution was strongest for brand community posts (reactions), personal brand posts (comments), and educational posts (shares).

Apparel Industry   Apparel industry firms Nike, ranked No. 18 on the Forbes (2016) list of The World's Most Valuable Brands, and Adidas (No. 90) were included in this study. The firms issued a total of 39 posts, with 27 (69%) of the posts utilizing more than one message type. Like the automotive industry, firms in the apparel industry most frequently use brand resonance messages. Of the 39 total posts issued by the two firms, 33 (85%) were brand resonance posts. During the assessment period, Adidas posted 31 times, and 30 (97%) posts were brand resonance posts. Consumer engagement was greatest for messages presenting emotional (reactions), functional (comments), and educational (shares) themes. Nike issued only 8 posts, using brand resonance posts 3 times (37.5%), and using experiential (37.5%) and personal (37.5%) posts with the same frequency. Consumer contribution (reactions, comments, shares) was greatest for the firm's brand resonance and experiential messages.

Luxury Industry   Within the luxury industry, the researcher examined posts from Louis Vuitton, ranked No. 19 on the Forbes (2016) list of The World's Most Valuable Brands, and Prada (No. 97). Combined, the firms

issued a total of 66 posts, with 27 (41%) of the posts utilizing more than one message type. Sales posts were the most frequently issued post type for the industry, with 41 (62%) of posts containing sales promotions designed to move the consumer toward a buying decision (Tafesse & Wein, 2017). Prada relied most heavily on sales posts, with 35 (70%) of the posts containing sales promotions. Messages using cause-related (reactions) and brand resonance (comments, shares) themes elicited the highest levels of consumer contribution. Luis Vuitton replied most heavily on sales promotion and brand resonance posts, issuing 6 (37.5%) sales promotions posts and 6 (37.5%) brand resonance posts; however, the firm's current event posts elicited the strongest consumer contribution (reactions, comments, shares).

Conclusion and Discussion

Both the highest and lowest-valued automotive and apparel brands included in this study most frequently issued posts with a brand resonance theme. The exceptions were those firms in the luxury industry, which most frequently used sales promotion posts. While there was little variation in prevalent post type by industry, there was a noticeable difference in the frequency with which firms posted in social media, as lower-valued firms in the apparel and luxury industries posted three to four times more often than their high-valued counterparts. Within the automotive industry, higher-valued Toyota posted far more frequently, repeatedly sharing current event posts concerning accolades earned at car shows.

Contribution activities in response to social media posts varied by firm and industry. Of the six firms examined for this study, only Nike demonstrated alignment between the types of social media posts most frequently issued and the post types eliciting the strongest levels of contribution (reactions, comments, shares) from consumers. This may be explained in part by Nike's relatively quiet presence. While Toyota led the group with an average of more than 20 posts per week, Nike issued only eight posts in the eight-week period. Consumers may experience fatigue with redundant message types, an issue which could be explored through additional research designed to determine the degree of variability and frequency consumers desire in brand messages on Facebook.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This study provides an initial exploration of the way top-valued firms use and consumers respond to different types of social media posts, enabling marketers to make more informed strategic decisions concerning content and opening the door to additional research concerning COBRAs and social media post types.

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