SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGE STRATEGY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SPONSORED POSTS AND PROMOTED TWEETS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the frequency and effectiveness of message strategies on Facebook and Twitter. Utilizing a content analysis of sponsored messages taken from Facebook and Twitter news feeds of undergraduate student subjects, the research analyzes message objectives and tactics, product categories, and consumer engagement. Results show significant differences in the effectiveness of message tactics overall and between the two social media sites. The findings suggest that some tactics that generate high numbers of likes and shares, like cause-related posts, may be underutilized, while others, like the straight sell, are very common and less effective.

INTRODUCTION

Social media advertising spending approached US$ 90 billion in 2019 and is projected to reach US$ 125 billion by 2023 (Statista, 2019). Although Facebook dominates social media advertising, Twitter, with global revenue over 3 billion (Statista, 2020), is also a significant player. Research on brands' use of social media is increasing rapidly, providing greater insight into both strategies and effectiveness. However, this research has primarily utilized brands' posts on their own pages, not brands' paid messaging. Brands' posts to their own accounts may or may not be "boosted" through payment to appear in consumer news feeds. Furthermore, most studies have looked at either two to three very broad categorizations of message strategy or at vary narrow tactical features. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine both broad advertising objectives and specific advertising tactics used in sponsored posts as they occur in users' news feeds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Message strategy for marketing communications can be defined as "a guiding approach to a company or institution's promotional communication efforts for its products, services, or itself" (Taylor, 1999). However, from early studies on print and television advertising, to more recent studies on social media, message strategy has been operationalized in many ways, and at many different levels of generality. In early and influential work in this area, Puto & Wells (1984) devised a four category typology of message strategy based upon informational and transformational dimensions. According to Puto & Wells (1984, p. 639), informational advertising "provides consumers with factual…relevant brand data," while transformational

advertising "associates the experience of using (consuming) the advertised brand with a unique set of psychological characteristics." In recognition of the unique nature of social media—specifically, the ability of users to respond to brands' social media messages—studies examining social media message strategy have often added a behavioral dimension to message strategy, usually referred to as "interactive" (de Vries et al., 2012; Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Tafesse & Wein, 2018). Tafesse & Wein (2018) define the interactional message strategy as one that, "cultivates ongoing customer interactions through the rich interactive affordances of social media" (p. 244). These three categorizations or types of message strategies neatly mirror the three components of attitude: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960; Breckler, 1984). There are theoretical models to support the ability to influence attitudes through each of these three components. Attitudes can be influenced by changing beliefs about an object or action (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975); by associating affect with an object or action such as by classical conditioning (Gorn, 1982; Stuart et al., 1987); or by inducing action consistent with the desired attitude to produce cognitive dissonance (Cummings & Venkatesun, 1976; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976).

In efforts to more completely describe message strategy, in particular when predicting effectiveness, many researchers have included more specific marketing communication methods or tactics. For example, Laskey et al. (1995), drawing on Puto & Wells, defined nine subcategories: comparative, unique selling proposition, preemptive, hyperbole, generic, other informational, user image, brand image, and use occasion. Similarly, O'Guinn et al. (2009) define message strategy to include both broader objectives and more specific methods. In social media research, categorizations of message strategy have also ranged from broad to more specific. Tafesse & Wein (2018) categorized Facebook posts according to the informational, transformational, and interactive strategies discussed above; Tafesse & Wein (2017) devised a twelve-category framework for categorizing brands' social media posts; and others have coded very specific tactics such as links, videos, and hashtags (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Swani et al., 2014).

Our understanding of the relationship between message strategy and effectiveness is complicated, not only by the differing conceptualizations of message strategy, but also because of a number of moderating factors, including product category and medium. Laskey et al. (1995) found that the preemptive strategy was effective in generating brand preference in the breakfast foods and snacks category while the unique selling proposition strategy was effective in generating brand preference in the household items category. Likewise, Kim et al. (2015) found differential effects of task-oriented, interaction-oriented, and self-oriented strategies for convenience versus service brands. Several social media strategy studies have found transformational strategies and tactics to increase "likes" on Facebook (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Tafesse & Wein, 2018; Yuki, 2015), while Taecharungroj (2017) found that action-inducing content increased retweets on Twitter, and Araujo et al. (2015) found informational cues increased retweets. In addition, studies have identified differential effects on effectiveness measures including likes, shares, and comments (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; de Vries et al., 2012; Tafesse, 2015). A summary of social media studies utilizing content analysis to study message strategy effectiveness is shown in Table 1.

Table 1			
Social Media Message Effectiveness Studies			
Authors	**Sample**	**Message Strategies**	**Significant Findings**
Araujo et al. (2015)	Tweets from 298 profiles from 65 top 100 global brands	Informational and emotional cues	Informational cues were predictors of higher levels of retweeting.
Cvijikj & Michahelles (2013)	Facebook posts from 100 FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) brands	Vividness, interactivity, entertainment, information, remuneration and interactivity	Entertainment increased likes, comments, and shares. Brand-related information increased likes and comments. Interactivity had a negative effect on likes and comments. Remuneration increased comments.
deVries et al. (2012)	Facebook posts from 11 international brands from six different product categories	Vividness, interactivity, information, and entertainment	Vivid and interactive post characteristics increased likes. Interactive post characteristics increase comments.
Kim et al. (2015)	Facebook posts from 92 global brands	Task-oriented, interaction-oriented, and self-oriented	Task-oriented generated the most likes, comments, and shares. For convenience brands, self-oriented received more likes that interaction-oriented. For service brands, interaction-oriented generated more likes than self-oriented.
Swani et al. (2013)	Facebook posts from 193 Fortune 500 companies	Corporate branding, emotional content, and calls to purchase	The use of corporate brand names lowered the number of likes and the use of emotional content increased the number of likes. Emotional content generated relatively more likes in service accounts than in product accounts. The use of corporate brand names generated relatively more likes for B2B than B2C accounts.
Taecharungroj (2016)	Tweets from Starbucks	Information-sharing, emotion-evoking, and action-inducing	Action-inducing increased tweets and favourites. Visual content increased effectiveness.
Tafesse (2015)	Facebook posts from five top selling automotive brands in the UK	Vividness, interactivity, novelty, brand consistency, and content type (informational, entertaining, transactional)	Vividness increased brand shares. Interactivity had a significant negative effect on likes and shares. Novelty and consistency increased likes and shares. Entertaining posts generated more likes than informational posts.
Tafesse & Wein (2018)	Facebook posts from 20 top global brands	Informational, transformational, and interactional	Transformational posts generated a higher level of engagement (likes + shares).

Drawing from the above research, the current study examines message strategy on two levels in order to investigate both the nature of sponsored messages and their effectiveness. The first, broader, level divides messages into three categories that reflect the message objective: information, transformation, and action. These categories have substantial theoretical and empirical support behind them (Breckler, 1984; Puto & Wells, 1984; Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960) and are closely aligned with typologies that have been used both with Facebook (Tafesse & Wein, 2018) and Twitter (Taecharungroj, 2017). In addition to the three broad message objectives, in order to provide greater specificity and consistency with prior research (Laskey et al., 1995; O'Guinn et al., 2008), the study also looks at five additional, narrower, tactics: promotion, cause/institutional, curiosity, image, and straight sell.

HYPOTHESES

The literature suggests both theoretical and empirical support for the belief that message strategy impacts message effectiveness (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Tafesse & Wein, 2018; Yuki, 2015) and that both its usage and its impact on effectiveness differ according to product category (Kim et al., 2015; Laskey et al., 1995). Therefore, we propose:

H1: Message effectiveness will vary significantly with respect to message strategy.

H2: The (a) frequency and (b) effectiveness of message strategies will vary significantly by product category.

The literature review did not uncover previous studies that directly compared the effectiveness of different message strategies on Facebook and Twitter; however, studies looking separately at each of these sites have shown conflicting results with respect to the most effective strategy, e.g., transformational for Facebook (Tafesse & Wein, 2018) and action-oriented for Twitter (Taecharungroj, 2017). Given this finding, and the knowledge that message outcomes are affected by medium and media vehicle (Arens et al., 2013), we also propose:

H3: The effectiveness of message strategies will vary significantly by social media site (Facebook versus Twitter).

METHODOLOGY

Sixty-three traditional undergraduate student subjects from three upper-level business courses at a US university participated in the study. Subjects were given written instructions and then verbally led through the process of visiting the desktop and mobile versions of four different social media platforms, logging in where applicable, and capturing screenshots from each. The screenshots were taken simultaneously, during each class time. The first two collections took place on the same day, and the second on the following day, so all sponsored messages were collected within a 24-hour time span. Only the desktop data collected for Facebook and Twitter are utilized in the present study. Google Chrome Full Page Screen Capture was used in order to capture the entire page and not just the viewable screen. The resulting files were saved on the students' laptops and then transferred to flash drives provided by the instructor.

Eliminating screenshots with no sponsored messages due to ad blocking or failure to log in narrowed the sample to 43 subjects, 64 screenshots and 174 sponsored messages. Further elimination of duplicate ads resulted in a final sample of 42 subjects (21 male, 21 female), 62 screenshots and 140 sponsored messages—65 from Facebook and 75 from Twitter—for analysis. Sponsored messages were defined as messages occurring in the news feed that were labeled "sponsored" on Facebook and "promoted" on Twitter. Posts from followed or liked brands that were not labeled as sponsored or promoted were not included in the measure of sponsored messages. Ads occurring to the side of the news feed on Facebook were not included in the present analysis.

The methodology employed to study the sponsored messages was content analysis. Content analysis can be defined as "a scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative, and generalizable description of communications content" (Kassarjian, 1977). Content analysis is frequently employed in studying social media posts. Tafesse & Wien (2017) provide a comprehensive summary of 13 published studies on brand posts, ten of which utilized content analysis. As recommended in content analysis, for variables where judgment was required, such as communication objective and tactic, two coders worked independently to determine the appropriate category. For objective variables such as site and numbers of likes, shares/retweets, and comments for each sponsored message, a second coder was employed to check items coded by the primary coder. Product categories were determined by first coding the specific sponsor and product (e.g., Pandora, internet radio) and then grouping products into categories (e.g., leisure/entertainment), guided by categories used in content analyses of advertising to similar audiences (Hanson, 2014; Morris & Nichols, 2013). In cases where a web retailer was promoting its site and a product, the category for the product being promoted was used. The resulting product typology captured 86% of the products in seven categories: apparel/accessories, food/drink, auto, technology, financial, health/beauty, and leisure/entertainment (e.g., movies, streaming services, and sports and celebrity websites). The three broad message objectives identified—information, transformation, and action—mirror the three components of attitude and are widely used, if differing slightly in definition and label. Our coding of message objective was guided by that of Taecharungro (2017): action objectives included sales promotions and other calls to action, information objectives included factual information and announcements, and transformational objectives (labeled emotion-inducing by Taecharungro) included imagery and sentimental or inspirational posts. Message tactics were determined in a process similar to that used by Tafesse & Wein (2018). First, an extensive list of tactics, brand post categories, and subtypes was derived from the literature. Next, an initial review of the posts was conducted to identify the most common tactics and any additional tactics not included. The final list included four commonly identified tactics—sales promotion, cause/institutional, image/experiential, and straight sell/functional—and one additional tactic, labeled curiosity. Curiosity was used to describe sponsored messages that enticed the viewer to click by arousing curiosity with tactics such as, "Which recipe is your state known for?" In cases where ads employed more than one tactic, the one most prominent was coded. Intercoder reliability, as measured by Cohen's kappa, was .83 for objectives and .64 for message tactics. These levels are considered "substantial" or better (McHugh, 2012). Discrepancies in categorizations were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS

Advertiser profile

The sample included 120 different advertisers across the 140 sponsored posts. Fifty-six percent of the advertisers were relatively new companies, defined as founded in 2000 or later, and only 12% were in the top 100 of US advertisers, as measured by Adbrands (Adbrands.net, 2015). There were no significant differences in advertiser age category or ad spending category by platform.

Descriptive statistics

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we compared differences in message strategy usage and overall engagement between the two social media sites. Tables 2 and 3 show the frequencies of message objectives and tactics for Facebook and Twitter. Action was most common objective and straight sell and promotions were most common tactics across both sites. There were no significant differences between sites.

Table 2 Frequency of Objective by Site			
	Facebook	Twitter	Total
Action	83.1% N = 54	6.0% N = 57	79.3% N = 111
Information	9.2% N = 6	16.0% N = 12	12.9% N = 18
Transformation	7.7% N = 5	8.0% N = 6	7.9% N = 11
Total	100% N = 65	100% N = 75	100% N = 140
$\chi2 = 1.46$, p = .48			

Table 3 Frequency of Tactic by Site			
	Facebook	Twitter	Total
Cause/Institutional	4.6% N = 3	1.3% N = 1	2.9% N = 4
Curiosity	24.6% N = 16	18.7% N = 14	21.4% N = 30
Image	6.2% N = 4	6.7% N = 5	6.4% N = 9
Promotion	33.8% N = 22	30.7% N = 23	32.1% N = 45
Straight Sell	30.8% N = 20	42.7% N = 32	37.1% N = 52
Total	100.0% N = 65	100.0% N = 75	100.0% N = 140
$\chi2 = 3.34, p = .50$			

Table 4 shows mean likes and shares/retweets for Facebook and Twitter. Mean likes were greater than shares/retweets for both sites. Mean likes were significantly greater for Facebook than Twitter. Mean shares on Facebook were also greater than mean retweets on Twitter, but the difference not statistically significant.

Table 4 Mean Likes and Shares/Retweets by Site			
	Facebook	Twitter	Total
Likes	3077.18	620.72	1761.22
	N = 65 SD = 9826.72	N = 75 SD = 2077.57	N = 140 SD = 6947.72
Shares/Retweets	1191.22	285.32	705.91
	N = 65 SD = 4702.11	N = 75 SD = 1034.84	N = 140 SD = 3309.95
Likes * Site: F = 4.46, p = .04; Shares/Retweets * Site: F = 2.64, p = .11			

Hypothesis tests

Tables 5 and 6 show mean likes and shares by objective and tactic. The differences in likes and shares by message objective were not statistically significant; however, the difference in likes and shares by message tactic was significant, providing partial support to Hypothesis 1. The mean number of likes and shares was greatest for the strategy least frequently found in our sample, cause/institutional, while the strategy with the lowest mean number of likes and shares, the straight sell, was most frequently used.

Table 5 Mean Likes and Shares/Retweets by Objective				
	Action	Information	Transformation	Total
Likes	1997.08	871.22	837.55	1761.22
	N = 111 SD = 7714.19	N = 18 SD = 2251.44	N = 11 SD = 2183.91	N = 140 SD = 6947.72
Shares/Retweets	773.95	464.72	414.00	705.91
	N = 111 SD = 3649.71	N =18 SD = 1520.96	N = 11 SD = 1256.35	N = 140 SD = 3309.95
Likes * Objective: F = .31, p = .74; Shares/Retweets by Objective: F = .11, p = .89					

Table 6 Mean Likes and Shares/Retweets by Tactic						
	Cause/ Institutional	Curiosity	Image	Promotion	Straight Sell	Total
Likes	10828.50	4255.97	1254.56	1034.53	341.02	1761.22
	N = 4 SD = 11980.36	N = 30 SD = 13439.75	N = 9 SD = 3173.15	N = 45 SD = 3207.11	N = 52 SD = 684.05	N = 140 SD = 6947.72
Shares/Retweets	3349.00	2092.40	752.00	231.33	105.42	705.91
	N = 4 SD = 3825.17	N = 30 SD = 6766.72	N = 9 SD = 2155.98	N = 45 SD = 922.46	N = 52 SD = 253.61	N = 140 SD = 3309.95
Likes * Tactic: F = 3.60, p = .01; Shares * Tactic: F = 2.74, p = .03						

Tables 7 and 8 show the frequencies of message strategies by product category. Chi-square tests confirmed that there were significant differences in objectives and tactics across categories, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2a. Action was the most common objective overall. All of the health and beauty messages and ninety-two percent of the leisure product messages were action oriented. Sales promotion was the most frequently employed tactic for health and beauty products and apparel products; straight sell was the most frequent for financial and technology products; and curiosity was the most frequent for leisure products.

Table 7				
Frequency of Objective by Product Category				
	Action	Information	Transformation	Total
Apparel/ Accessories	74.3% N = 26	11.4% N = 4	14.3% N = 5	100.0% N = 35
Automotive	20.0% N = 1	60.0% N = 3	20.0% N = 1	100.0% N = 5
Financial	77.8% N = 14	22.2% N = 4	0.0% N = 0	100.0% N = 18
Food	57.1% N = 4	0.0% N = 0	42.9% N = 3	100.0% N = 7
Health/ Beauty	100.0% N = 11	0.0% N = 0	0.0% N = 0	100.0% N = 11
Leisure/ Entertainment	91.7% N = 22	8.3% N = 2	0.0% N = 0	100.0% N = 24
Tech	81.0% N = 17	14.3% N = 3	4.8% N = 1	100.0% N = 21
Other	84.2% N = 16	10.5% N = 2	5.3% N = 1	100.0% N = 19
Total	79.3% N = 111	12.9% N = 18	7.9% N = 11	100.0% N = 140
$\chi 2 = 34.90$, p = .002				

	Cause/ Institutional	Curiosity	Image	Promotion	Straight Sell	Total
Table 8						
Frequency of Tactic by Product Category						
Apparel/ Accessories	2.9% N = 1	5.7% N = 2	11.4% N = 4	42.9% N = 15	37.1% N = 13	100.0% N = 35
Automotive	0.0% N = 0	0.0% N = 0	20.0% N = 1	20.0% N = 1	60.0% N = 3	100.0% N = 5
Financial	0.0% N = 0	27.8% N = 5	0.0% N = 0	22.2% N = 4	50.0% N = 9	100.0% N = 18
Food	14.3% N = 1	14.3% N = 1	28.6% N = 2	42.9% N = 3	0.0% N = 0	100.0% N = 7
Health/ Beauty	0.0% N = 0	27.3% N = 3	0.0% N = 0	54.5% N = 6	18.2% N = 2	100.0% N = 11
Leisure/ Entertainment	0.0% N = 0	58.3% N = 14	0.0% N = 1	16.7% N = 4	25.0% N = 6	100.0% N = 24
Tech	0.0% N = 0	23.8% N = 5	9.5% N = 2	23.8% N = 5	42.9% N = 9	100.0% N = 21
Other	10.5% N = 2	0.0% N = 0	0.0% N = 0	36.8% N = 7	52.6% N = 10	100.0% N = 19
Total	2.9% N = 4	21.4% N = 30	6.4% N = 9	32.1% N = 45	37.1% N = 52	100.0% N = 140
$\chi2 = 61.51$, p = .00						

Hypothesis 2b posits that product category moderates the effect of a given strategy on effectiveness. Following the test for moderation outlined in Baron & Kenny (1989), we performed a 2x2 ANOVA with likes as our measure of effectiveness and product category and tactic as independent variables. The effect of tactic on likes was significant ($\chi2 = 10.02$, p = .04), but the interaction between tactic and product category was not significant ($\chi2 = 17.93$, p = .33), thus H2b was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 posits that social media site moderates the effect of a given strategy on effectiveness. This hypothesis was also tested by performing a 2x2 ANOVA, as outlined above, with likes again as our measure of effectiveness, and tactic and site as independent variables. Social media site ($\chi2 = 4.84$, p = .03), message tactic ($\chi2 = 9.24$, p = .05), and the interaction between site and tactic ($\chi2 = 10.64$, p = .03) were all significant, thereby supporting Hypothesis 3.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Given the interactive nature of social media, it was not surprising that action was the most common message objective. The mean number of likes for action-oriented posts was also more than twice that of informational or transformational posts, although the difference in effectiveness was not statically significant. A lack of statistical significance in this case should be interpreted with care, as the overwhelming dominance of action-oriented posts (79%) resulted in unequal sample sizes, which can reduce statistical power (Rusticus & Lovato, 2014). The difference in effectiveness by tactic was statistically significant. Cause-related posts garnered the most likes and shares. Although caution must be taken in generalizing the results as there were only four cause-related posts in our sample, the finding is consistent with recent research by Saxton, Gomez, Nigoh, Lin, & Dietrich (2019), who found that sharing was positively associated with messages that convey corporate social responsibility topics such as the environment or education. The tactic with the second most likes and shares, curiosity, represented over 20% of the sponsored posts and garnered more than twice the average number of likes and shares. The power of curiosity to increase consumer interest and learning (Menon & Soman, 2002) and predict purchase motivation (Hill, Fombelle, & Sirianni, 2015) in a simulated digital environment has been documented, so it is perhaps not surprising that it stood out as an effective strategy for engagement in the present study. Curiosity as a social media tactic has not been specifically addressed in prior coding schemes and seems worthy of further attention. Interestingly, the most frequently used tactic, the straight sell, representing 37% of the posts, was the least effective, accounting for only 20% of likes and 15% of shares.

Consistent with earlier research on advertising (Kim et al., 2015; Laskey et al., 1995), our results showed that advertisers have different objectives and use different tactics according to their product category. In our study, apparel/accessories and leisure/entertainment were the most common products advertised and were more likely to utilize action-oriented messages. For apparel, the tactic was sales promotions, while for leisure products, like movies and sports or celebrity websites, tactics played on curiosity. However, unlike some previous studies, our results did not support significant differences in tactic effectiveness by product category.

Previous studies have found different message strategies to be effective for Facebook (Tafesse & Wein, 2018) versus Twitter (Taecharungroj, 2017). The present study provides further evidence that tactic effectiveness will differ depending on social media site by directly comparing effectiveness of tactics for Facebook versus Twitter and finding a significant interaction. Among the more frequent tactics, curiosity was the most effective on Facebook and sales promotion was the most effective on Twitter. The success of cause-related and curiosity tactics on Facebook and sales promotions on Twitter may be attributed to differences in the nature of their content. As described by Smith et al. (2012), Facebook's focus is on personal information while Twitter's content is more focused on news and information.

CONCLUSIONS

More than twenty-five years ago, in a study on television commercials, Laskey et al. reported that, "some strategies were found to be particularly 'popular' in a category in spite of the fact that they were also found to be relatively ineffective…" (1995, p. 39). The present study seems to suggest that the same holds true today for social media. While advertisers are pursuing objectives such as action and employing tactics such as curiosity that are well-suited to social media, some tactics that seem to have promise, like cause-related posts, may be underutilized, while others, like the straight sell, are very common and less effective. In addition, there were no significant differences in the tactics used in Facebook versus Twitter messages in our sample, in spite of the fact that there were significant differences in tactic effectiveness between the two sites. These findings suggest that, in spite of the social media data analytics available to brands, there are avenues to improve engagement that are not being utilized to their full extent. Social media analytics, while great at revealing which posts worked, are less helpful at determining why a post worked, and are typically limited to insights on owned brands (Yamaguchi, 2015). Studies that use human judgment, while limited in sample size, may be able to uncover qualitative characteristics that analytics cannot, and thus provide valuable insight into why certain posts work.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research presented in this study provides a snapshot of message strategy and message effectiveness in sponsored posts drawn from news feeds of a narrow demographic sample, undergraduate college students. The sampling frame resulted in a smaller sample of posts than found in studies that draw from posts on the brands' own social media pages. However, one advantage of a sample drawn from news feeds is that it includes smaller brands, which have been largely ignored in previous studies that have naturally focused on leading brands' social media pages. As smaller brands represent a large volume of social media advertising, more research is needed on their social media use, and how it might differ from large global brands. Finally, given the rapidly changing social media landscape, replication and expansion of the research is needed to better understand the advertising dynamics on Facebook and Twitter, and to investigate the growing number of new social media sites and the changes in advertising practices and effectiveness.

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