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A Contextual Messaging Framework: Informing the Design of Effective Social Media Marketing Messages

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing scholarship on social media (SM) marketing, a holistic consideration of what constitutes an informed messaging strategy has yet to emerge. Drawing on the contextual usability literature, this study proposes a Contextual Messaging Framework, encompassing four dimensions—Brand, Industry, Medium, and Action—that jointly drive the strategy, media type, and content as employed in a particular brand social media post and its subsequent effect on consumer engagement. Employing a longitudinal multiple case study of three Fortune 110 companies—Delta Airlines, Wal-Mart, and McDonald’s—we analyzed 369 Facebook posts across two six-week data collection periods. Support was obtained for all hypotheses revealing that our framework not only offers a reliable set of conceptualizations and operationalizations that can be employed by SM researchers in future SM studies, but further offers a comprehensive lens that can guide SM practitioners in the design of effective messages that result in greater consumer engagement.

Keywords

Contextual Messaging Framework, Social Media, longitudinal study, multiple case study, Facebook Pages, engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have revealed that companies have grown their social media marketing spending and are expected to continue to increase social media budgets in the next five years (Moorman, 2013), making social media one of the fastest growing marketing platforms in the world. Similar to the social media hype among marketing practitioners, an explosion can be witnessed in the domain of social media marketing (SMM) scholarship. Despite the burgeoning SMM literature, few studies have provided a holistic framework for understanding what constitutes an informed messaging strategy (Coursaris, Van Osch, and Balogh, 2013). Consequently, the factors associated with and that impact successful SMM strategies and subsequent consumer engagement are still poorly understood.

In order to fill this void in the literature, this study adapts the contextual usability framework as proposed by Coursaris and Kim (2011) for mobile technology to the domain of social media marketing. By doing so, this framework offers a contextual lens for the effective design of social media marketing messages in consideration of four dimensions, namely the Brand, the Industry, the Medium, and the Action that collectively drive the specific strategy, media type, and content as used in a particular brand social media post.

In order to test the proposed framework and the underlying hypotheses linking the four dimensions of contextual social media marketing together, we conducted a longitudinal multiple-case study of three Fortune 110 companies—Delta Airlines, Wal-Mart, and McDonalds. A total of 369 Facebook posts were collected for analysis over two distinct six-week periods in the Spring and Fall of 2012. Findings from our hypotheses testing reveal significant relations between the four dimensions as well as the significant effects of Brand Strategy and Media Type on consumer engagement with brand messages.

LITERATURE REVIEW: A CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

In order to provide a holistic and contextual framework of the messaging behavior of brands on Social Media, we draw on the concept of context of use as it relates to usability—the effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction associated with the use of a specific technology for a particular task. For usability, context considers many dimensions beyond the immediate interface of a technology that impact usability (e.g., Coursaris & Kripintiris, 2012; Lee & Benbasat, 2003), including the User (e.g., prior relevant experience, age, education), the Environment (e.g., lighting, noise), the Task (e.g., complexity, interactivity), and the Technology (e.g., interface design, device) (Coursaris et al., 2012) which jointly constitute the contextual usability framework as presented in Coursaris and Kim (2011).

Adapting this framework to the SMM domain, we propose the following four dimensions, namely the: Brand, the Industry, the Medium, and the Action, which jointly impact the messaging behavior of a particular

brand post. Compared to the dimensions proposed by Coursaris et al. (2012), a number of modifications are made here in terms of nomenclature to tailor the framework for the SMM domain. First, User is replaced with Brand to reflect the organizational level nature of our focus and topic of analysis. Second, Industry replaces Environment as it encapsulates all factors external to the brand that may affect the marketing communication and messaging behavior of the brand. Third, Task is replaced with Action, which maintains its behavior-oriented focus, while improving its consistency with jargon in the marketing literature that generally focuses on the “call to action” as a key component of messaging. Fourth and finally, Medium replaces Technology, again given its consistency with marketing nomenclature, as media selection is a key process in marketing communications.

These four contextual factors jointly constitute the Contextual Messaging Framework as depicted in Figure 1, which contains three elements similar to Coursaris and Kim’s (2011) original framework. First, the outer circle shows the four contextual factors (i.e., Brand, Industry, Action, and Medium), which jointly drive brand message development. Second, the inner circle shows the key message dimensions, namely Strategy, Media Type, and Content. Third, the box on the top of contextual factors shows a list of consequences, i.e., dependent variables, including the most current of metrics found in consumer Engagement.

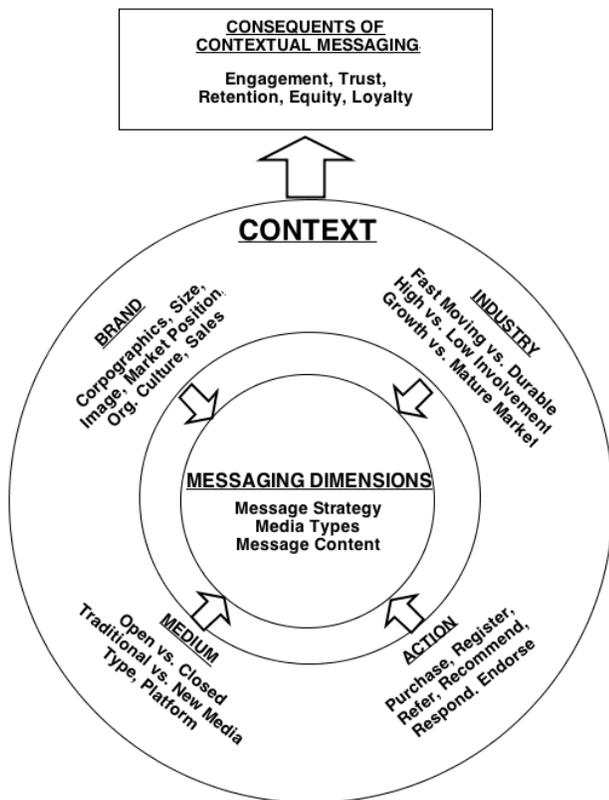


Figure 1. Proposed Contextual Messaging Framework

Although most of the contextual factors—including the selection of the brands and the medium—are specified in the research design section of this paper, Table 1 provides a brief overview of one important contextual Industry factor, namely Purchase Involvement, as well as the three key message dimensions—Strategy, Content, and Media Type—as specified in the inner circle of our framework. Furthermore, it summarizes a set of hypotheses regarding the relations between these dimensions since providing detailed theoretical underpinnings is beyond the scope of this short paper.

Construct	Definition	Associated Hypothesis
Purchase Involvement	The extent of interest and concern that a consumer brings to bear upon a purchase-decision task (Mittal, 1989)	
Messaging Strategy (Laskey et al. 1989)	Informational messages address negatively originated motivations, such as problem removal or avoidance, normal depletion, or incomplete satisfaction.	H1a: The higher the brand’s purchase involvement, the more informational the messaging strategy
	Transformational messages, containing a dominant psychological element, address positive-ending motives such as sensory gratification, intellectual stimulation, or social approval.	H1b: The lower the brand’s purchase involvement, the more transformational the messaging strategy
Messaging Content (Coursaris et al., 2013)	Typology of seven overarching messaging categories (Brand Awareness, Corporate Social Responsibility, Customer Service, Engagement, Product Awareness, Promotional,	

	Seasonal) and 23 subcategories.	
Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986)	A function of the medium's capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues available, and language variety.	H3a: More abstract content categories—i.e., brand awareness, CSR, and customer service—are associated with richer media (i.e., video, photo, or URL).
		H3b: Product awareness messages are associated with posts with a photo/URL.
Consumer Engagement	An engagement metric calculated based on likes, comments, shares (see Research Design)	H2: The more transformational the messaging strategy, the higher the consumer engagement
		H4: The inclusion of richer media types—photo/video/URL—is associated with higher consumer engagement.

Table 1. Constructs and Hypotheses

RESEARCH DESIGN

As brand-consumer interactions are highly contextual, a single case-study research design—by analysing a single Facebook Page to explore messaging strategies and categories—would pose a challenge to generalizability. Hence, using a multiple-case study approach, the three Facebook Pages of Delta Airlines, Wal-Mart, and McDonald’s were selected to represent like-brands and their respective social media marketing communications. Multiple case designs enhance generalizability (Yin, 1994), augment within-case analyses with cross-case comparison (Eisenhardt, 1989), and increase confidence in the robustness of theoretical results (Yin, 1994).

With respect to social media marketing, Delta Airlines, Wal-Mart, and McDonald’s represent leaders in their respective domains. Furthermore, they represent different levels of purchase-decision involvement, namely: low involvement as found for McDonald’s and other fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs), mixed involvement as is the case with Wal-Mart and other Big Box Retailers, and, high purchase-decision involvement found in Delta Airlines and other expensive and greater risk-bearing goods and services.

The data collection process was divided over two six-week periods, one collected in Spring 2012 and one in

Fall 2012 to enhance the longitudinal nature of our data set and to explore the existence of temporal biases.

All brand posts were analyzed using a content analysis method by a pair of independent coders—two graduate research assistants. The interrater agreement between the two coders for period 1 (Spring 2012) was 95.6% (.73 Cohen’s kappa) and for period 2 (Fall 2012) was 97.5% (.74 Cohen’s kappa). Face-to-face meetings were organized to discuss and reconcile disagreements. After the entire dataset had been coded, summary tables and graphs were constructed for each category of the coding scheme.

For hypotheses testing, we used SPSS ANOVA¹—for pairwise comparisons between brands—and SPSS Regression—for analyzing the effects of different messaging types, strategies, and media types on engagement.

For the regression of the different messaging components—strategy, media type, and content category—we computed a social media engagement score, which we define and calculate as follows:

$$Social\ Media\ Engagement = .5*\Sigma(L) + 1*\Sigma(C) + 1.5*\Sigma(S)$$

Where L refers to Likes, C refers to Comments, and S refers to shares.

The weighing of likes, comments, and shares, is based on the increasing level of cognitive involvement, exposure, and vulnerability (in terms of visibility in one’s own personal network) associated with each of these engagement activities respectively for the consumer.

For the analysis of media richness, we additionally computed a compound media richness variable encompassing the combined values for photos, videos, and/or URLs. I.e., a text-only post will have a media richness value of 0, a post including only one media type will have a value of 1, and a post including two or all media types would have a value of 2 or 3 respectively.

FINDINGS

Our findings from the hypotheses testing are summarized in Table 2 below.

Hyp.	Specification	P-Value	Result
H1a:	Higher purchase involvement > Informational Strategy	.019	Supported
H1b:	Lower purchase involvement >	.019	Supported

¹ Because of the sensitivity of ANOVA to unequal sample sizes (Howell, 2009), we used SPSS Select Cases to randomly select equal sample sizes across the three brands

	Transformational Strategy		
H2:	Transformational Strategy > Higher Engagement	.024	Supported
H3a:	Abstract Content Categories > Richer Media	.05	Supported
H3b:	Product Awareness Messages > Photo/URL	.013/.039	Supported
H4:	Richer Media > Higher Engagement	.005	Supported

Table 2. Hypotheses Testing

Additional post-hoc analyses were conducted for all variables to explore temporal biases between the data from the Spring and the Fall. None of the variables showed significance, except for Weighted Engagement ($F = 4.682$; $p = .031$). This implies that whereas the brands' usage of specific messaging strategies, content categories, and media types were consistent between the two time periods, consumer engagement with the brand grew likely reflecting the overall increase in Facebook fans and messaging frequency. The lack of temporal bias for all other variables indicates that our typology can be consistently applied across time periods.

DISCUSSION

This paper presented the result of a longitudinal multiple-case study of three Fortune 110 companies—Delta Airlines, Wal-Mart, and McDonalds—using a total of 369 Facebook posts over two distinct six-week periods in the Spring and Fall of 2012 for analysis.

Using the full set of data ($N=369$ posts), hypotheses testing—using SPSS ANOVA and Regression—reveals that brand purchase involvement significantly predicts the messaging strategy employed by brands in their Facebook Page posts. Furthermore, our analysis of content categories reveals significant relationships between the context of a brand Facebook post and the media type—text only, photo, video, or URL—included in the message. Additionally, findings show that specific message strategies and high media richness of brand posts result in significantly higher engagement, whereas content categories have no effect on engagement.

Practitioner Takeaways

The following list summarizes takeaways for practitioners emerging from the proposed Contextual Messaging Framework:

- Be sensitive to the multitude of messaging dimensions—strategy, media type, and content—and their relative impact on consumer engagement
- Focus beyond the content and consider how messaging strategy and manipulating the media

richness of a post may impact consumer engagement

- Account for the level of abstraction of the content category when selecting the media type used. Abstract content categories are best combined with richer media types to enhance the overall consumer experience and thereby positively impact consumer engagement.
- Combine product awareness posts with images or URLs to afford product recognition and support the associated call to action
- Do not neglect industry characteristics, as purchase involvement significantly predicts the messaging strategies most effectively employed by a brand
- Keep a message design checklist considering all contextual factors as well as means for optimizing engagement by considering the three messaging dimensions: strategy, media type, and content

Challenges and Future Research

Although this paper represents an initial attempt to offer a comprehensive typology of Facebook Page marketing messages, more work remains to be done. Particularly, we identify three directions for extending the current work:

1. Validate the applicability of the proposed framework in the context of other Social Media platforms to analyze if the same messaging categories hold across these media platforms and if different platforms have different emphases.
2. Broaden scope of industry categories and the number of brands within each category to create an even more comprehensive sample.
3. Propose additional relationships between the concepts studied in addition to the hypotheses proposed and tested in this paper.

Despite the abovementioned limitations, the multiple-case and longitudinal nature of our study, as well as the careful selection of critical (i.e., successful), but highly diverse case companies enhance confidence in the robustness and generalizability of our findings.

To conclude, the results emerging from this study not only offer social media marketing researchers a lens for disentangling the various components of a message as well as a set of conceptualizations and operationalizations that can be employed in future SMM studies, it further offers a comprehensive and contextual framework that should guide social media managers and practitioners in the design and development of effective messages that result in greater levels of consumer engagement.

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