Towards a Process Model for Social Media Marketing

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Towards a Process Model for Social Media Marketing

Research-in-progress

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Abstract

Social media marketing (SMM) provides new opportunities to promote a brand and tools to engage with consumers. Marketers have to understand the social media (SM) landscape and the opportunities that it offers to consumers, who now have more power, because they are able to influence a brand’s reputation positively or negatively. In fact, a successful SMM requires not just knowledge of its organization but also a well-conceived plan of how it can be used to achieve the organization’s goals. However, despite the literature on SMM, an overarching SM management framework is rarely addressed and corporate cases highlight the challenge for organizations to deeply understand the SM landscape. Based on a comprehensive theoretical literature review, we identify the stages of SMM and SM management processes and synthesize the rather fragmented literature. Consequently, we propose an integrated conceptual SMM process model of eight steps to enable a better strategic management of SMM.

Keywords Social media, Social media marketing process, Social media strategy, Social media management, Guidelines.
1 Introduction

Many organizations are attracted by social media (SM) and already understand the role that SM plays in their overall business strategy. SM comprise fundamentally scalable digital communication technologies that enable users to interact, share content, collaborate (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Montalvo 2011) and expand marketing’s ability to create ‘engagement, consideration, loyalty and advocacy’ (Hanna et al. 2011). Brand promoters turned into storytellers, content creation via SM has become the new advertisement and hashtags have equalled the role of traditional taglines (Kotler et al. 2017). However, utilizing SM as a part of the digital marketing and brand building campaigns requires a substantial commitment in time, skilled people and money. Otherwise, organizational interests such as good public relations or strong customer relationships may be affected negatively (Boudreaux 2011). Previous research offers several explanations of specific contributions of social media marketing (SMM) such as identifying target groups (Diba et al. 2019; Li et al. 2021), optimizing brand posts (De Vries et al. 2012) or managing owned vs. earned vs. paid (advertised) channels (Boudreaux 2011; Felix et al. 2017; Hu and Olivieri 2021; Kotler et al. 2017). Despite the plethora of valuable contributions, an overarching SM management framework is rarely addressed and much less linked to the diverse topics discussed in the literature. However, such a strategic view of the interconnections of various activities can be helpful and consists of factors how to create or improve an organization’s SM strategies (Boudreaux 2011). A few rather normative approaches exist in the textbook literature (e.g., Kotler et al. 2017) but they are neither linked to the literature nor is it clear how they were conceived. The importance of systematic links between the various academic contributions is expressed in academic studies and anecdotal evidence of corporate cases that highlight the challenge for organizations to deeply understand the SM landscape in order to derive corporate results. Example challenges include identifying the right platform, understanding the target audience or meeting user expectations (Geyser 2022a). Accordingly, we suggest that there is a demand for guidance about managing SMM efficiently and how to specifically interact within a platform (e.g., Facebook) across the various organizational digital marketing efforts. Li et al. (2021, p. 56) describe organizations’ SM activities and engagement initiatives as “a continuum”. However, only few research articles address such procedures that span multiple steps, e.g., as predecessor-successor-relationships to highlight interdependencies between activities. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to contribute to knowledge and theory regarding SMM and SM management processes through a systematic theoretical literature review that adopts a process theory perspective (Burton-Jones et al. 2015) with a focus on sequences of events that affect a final outcome. Consequently, the objective of this paper is to answer the following research question: How are the different specific contributions, as operationalized by academics and organizations, integrated into a stage model of SMM? We contribute to the academic discussion with an integrated conceptual process model of SMM to synthesize the rather fragmented literature and enable a better strategic management of SMM.

The next section briefly introduces into the theoretical framework. Section 3 details the research methodology for the literature review. In section 4 we present the main findings from the literature review. In section 5, we discuss the results of the review and propose a SMM model. Finally, the conclusion summarizes our research and outlines, how our findings motivate our future research work aiming to extend the guidelines how to specifically interact within a platform.

2 Management of Social Media

In an organizational context, SMM requires a well-conceived SM strategy that comprises everything that an organization plans to do on SM, e.g., it includes the SM goals, the tactics that will be used to achieve the goals and the metrics that will be tracked to measure the progress – thus, a SM strategy guides the actions of an organization (Newberry and Wood 2022). Accordingly, SM management encompasses all the tasks of a SM strategy which, in this regard, refers to the collaborative process of using Web 2.0 platforms and tools to reach the business goals (Montalvo 2011). It includes creating and maintaining a profile on SM platforms (SMPs), creating and distributing content as well as managing engagement with the target audience, e.g., responding to comments (Wilcox 2020). However, research shows that a successful adoption of a SM strategy often remains challenging for organizations (Pour et al. 2021) and that SMM is basically conducted more intuitive than planned (Ananda et al. 2016).

Kotler et al. (2017) suggest that, in order to enable online conversations in SMPs, content marketing involves ‘creating, curating, distributing and amplifying’ content that should appeal to a defined target group as ‘interesting, relevant and useful’. De Vries et al. (2012) suggest a more channel specific perspective by emphasizing that different factors influence and determine the quality of a brand post, e.g., a post should be vivid, allow interactivity and contain informational and entertaining content. Relatedly, ‘content improvement’ is suggested to be an important step (Kotler et al. 2017; Pour et al.
2021) which characterizes that SMM is a sequential process where, according to the process theory view, one step influences the success of another step in a sequence with implications for the final outcome (Burton-Jones et al. 2015). Understanding SM environments with the specifics of SMPs and its users in order to build up a suitable SMM is, thus, a relevant research objective. In the next section we will now explain in more detail our research methodology.

3 Research Methodology

We conducted a literature review and followed the methodological guidelines that have been presented in the field of information systems (IS) (Rowe 2014; Schryen et al. 2020; Webster and Watson 2002). After defining the review scope, we initiated our review via an abstract guiding conceptual framing that we derived from the content orders portrayed in widely adopted and cited textbooks that cover SMM and SM management from a broader but often non-academic perspective (Atherthon 2020; Dahl 2021; Evans et al. 2021; Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus 2013; Hegde and Shainesh 2018; Hyde 2016; Kotler et al. 2017; Tuten 2021; Van Looy 2016; Wollan et al. 2011). The included books focused on more integrated frameworks on several stages. For example, Wollan et al. (2011) arrange their book into sections that represent aspects of SMM or Kotler et al. (2017) give a rather normative (and not empirically grounded) overview of example marketing activities in the SM context. Due to the space restrictions of this paper, we provide the Initial Guiding Categorization of SMM Steps Identified from Textbooks on SM and SMM separately in an Online Supplement (OS) (cf. OS Table 1, tinyurl.com/z9ar4hra). Based on the review scope (but independent of the guiding structure of the textbooks to not limit our inquiry), we defined important criteria and keywords, that were being in line with the purpose of our main literature review step. We decided to include papers based on (1) their relevance to our research purpose, (2) a clear description of the background paradigm and suggestions on a SMM process/model/steps or guidelines and (3) publication outlets (e.g., journals and conferences). Papers missing these criteria were excluded. Google Scholar was used as a main searching source rather than focusing on a specified database. A key reason lies in the high accessibility of papers and the interdisciplinarity of our research topic, e.g., SM research can be found in IS and marketing. Additionally, Google was used to investigate practical suggestions or service portfolios on SMM (e.g., created by organizations, SM agencies or bloggers). We assembled the initial dataset for our literature review by using the keywords "SMM process", "SMM steps", "SMM guide", "SM guidelines", "SM strategy framework", "SM strategy guide" and "SMM management". We then selected the specific time period (Rowe 2014) of a completed five-year window (between 2016-2021) to conduct a more thorough search and to find recent papers on SMM but we also used the method of citation chaining in order to systematically develop and extend our keyword set by searching both backward and forward in the literature without limiting the time period (Schryen et al. 2020, p. 136; Webster and Watson 2002, p. xvi). The 270 results (cf. OS Table 2, Column 2) were initially examined by title, keywords, abstract snippet (shown in Google Scholar) and publication before clicking on the literature link to screen the whole abstract (cf. OS Table 2, Column 3). In the next step, 33 literature results were selected for further screening by full-text (cf. OS Table 2, Column 4), whereas 24 were finally relevant. Additionally, we could find further eight literature types by backward search from relevant literature (cf. OS Table 2, Column 5) and retrieved in sum 32 relevant academic literature types, from those we could attain initial insights to frame our research. We followed the saturation principle and conducted the literature search continuously until we noted that no further relevant papers were listed. Further, out of 20 investigated anecdotal search results in Google, four articles were relevant, to compare practical contributions on SMM processes with academic contributions, which have been cited in our research. In next section, we present the key findings attained through our literature review process.

4 Findings

As we outlined previously, the objective of this study is twofold: to identify the stages of a SMM and SM management process, as operationalized by academics and organizations and to approach an integrated conceptual process model. Constrained by the page limit of this paper, we will now briefly summarize the findings based on our analysis of academic sources. Our review (Table 1) shows that various classification proposals of SMM and SM management exist. However, these contributions mostly cover only some sequential steps or categorize SM practices but do not articulate a clear process (e.g., Aral et al. 2013; Du Plessis 2017; Hu and Olivieri 2021; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Tuten 2021; Vinerean 2017). For example, Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) first framework element of ‘how to be social’ contains mixed steps that should be considered as a process rather than be categorized together, e.g., the first point represents ‘being active and ensure fresh content’, followed by ‘being interesting but listening to the customers first’. Other examples refer to brand post elements and popularity (Ashley and Tuten 2015;
De Vries et al. (2012) but do not articulate predecessor-successor-relations (indicated by an x in Table 1) and some authors focus on strategic and tactical issues, how companies should define SM goals, key performance indicators (KPIs) and develop strategies (Boudreaux 2011; Felix et al. 2017; Matikiti et al. 2018). He and Wang (2016) refer to the importance of content development as a latter step of content planning. Boudreaux (2011) proposes a SM management process focusing on an organizational perspective to manage campaigns but ignores content planning. Ananda et al. (2016) explicitly discuss SMM strategic actions and point out that the components interact and intersect one another, leading to ‘interconnected dimensions’. We also found some other framework (Effing and Spil 2016) that provide a social strategy cone framework which differs in each step from most of the conceptualizations.

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*Table 1. Literature Review on SMM and SM Management Processes (B = Book, J = Journal, Digits = Articulate the Sequence of Steps, x = Consideration without an Explicit Process).*

We noted that a process model is a useful approach to synthesize previous research on SMM activities and that the current literature pays little attention to create a coherent view of SMM and its
interdependent steps as a consistent process with clear predecessor-successor-relations. However, a more holistic SMM process is, albeit very rarely, suggested in papers that cover many of our proposed steps. Nevertheless, despite some overlap with our guiding framework from the textbook review stage (cf. OS Table 1), the start and end steps are inconsistent and our suggested process view is not assumed. Our findings suggest that the eight steps of our framework are suitable to synthesize and sort the reviewed articles, as articles which covered fewer steps aligned them in line with our eight steps process order (e.g., Boudreaux 2011; Keegan and Rowley 2017; Li et al. 2021), while other articles swapped steps but did so inconsistently. Some articles have other sorting rationales (e.g., Ashley and Tuten 2015) and there is no group of articles that reverts relevant steps. The contribution of the literature review is further confirmed as no set of articles directly addresses all proposed steps. Only Kotler et al. (2017) were mostly in line which is, however, only a textbook. Finally, from our categorization, the following Eight Steps of SMM emerged: 1. Defining SM Goals, KPIs and Strategy, 2. Defining the Target Audience, 3. Content Planning, 4. Content Production, 5. SM Channel Selection and Content Distribution, 6. Motivating and Managing Engagement and Customer Relationship Management (CRM), 7. Performing SM Analytics, Measurement and Decision Making and 8. Development & Improvement (Table 1 and cf. OS Figure 1).

5 Discussion

We started out by noting the lack of a more strategic view on SMM strategies and the various inconsistent ways in which several steps of SMM and SM management are addressed in textbooks and in the literature. We found that most papers address several but not all steps of our SMM Process Model (Table 1). Such incoherence challenges the practical adoption of academic findings by SM managers in organizations. It further poses difficulties for integrating different contributions into a larger framework. Such a framework, however, is useful as a foundation for examining and understanding the interdependencies of various SM management activities such as managing paid channels via advertisement investment, target group identification and content planning, to name just a few examples. Moreover, general management orientations such as the overview in Montalvo (2011) are disconnected from more detailed treatments of individual steps such as De Vries et al. (2012) not allowing a coherent evolvement of a relevant academic discourse in managing the digital domain of SMM. We further noted that the practitioners are closer to identifying a sequence step and emphasize the necessity of the process steps which is in line with our argument that the academic perspective is not yet accounting well for the process nature of SMM tasks. Anecdotal literature for organizational practitioners, i.e., the four additional articles mentioned in the methodology section (Kenan 2022; Geyer 2022b; Newberry and Wood 2022; Rathore 2017) provide more fine-grained descriptions on specific steps (e.g., on target audience) of SMM which express the relevant practical challenge for organizations to deeply understand the SM landscape (Geyer 2022a) and the related planning of interventions as a management process. In a first step to address this incoherence, our review findings shed light on how existing studies detail advancements in the focused areas of SM research and often indicate partial sequences implicitly, but do not develop a comprehensive and coherent process-oriented framework on SMM consisting of predecessor-successor-relations.

6 Conclusion and Expected Contributions

In sum, our examination of the literature on SMM and SM management processes supports a process view on SMM with eight steps (Table 1) as a useful basis for synthesizing the academic discourse. The process logic is rarely addressed explicitly but was implied in the textbooks, supported by the various frameworks suggested in the reviewed articles and explicitly discussed (Ananda et al. 2016).

Our further research is now focusing on identifying and conceptualizing interdependencies between steps in more detail from a process-oriented view. In line with the general process theory (e.g., Burton-Jones et al. 2015) it is important to consider the whole SMM activities as a process because the early steps may influence the latter steps and the latter steps are not independent (cf. OS Figure 1). We will further investigate to what extent a process view is a useful foundation for conceptualizing the strategic level of SMM which is, so far, only normatively and briefly covered (e.g., Montalvo 2011). A practical aspect of our future work can take the derived model as a point of departure to operationalize the individual stages by defining the different strategies and roles in each step of the SMM process and by conducting in-depth interviews with SM managers to find out about possible uncertainties that need to be considered by our model. Our presented model can further be assessed empirically, in terms of its adoption and perhaps variation in diverse organizational settings. Additionally, we can link the process to a platform-specific perspective by adding guidelines about how to specifically interact within a platform such as Facebook or Instagram with a focus on the differences between the platforms along the Eight Steps of SMM to provide a more detailed perspective of how managers generate value on digital
media platforms. Next to our objective of better integrating the sum of literature into a coherent framework, we also envision to attain a better strategic planning instrument to aid SMM practitioners of which many might not yet follow a systematic step by step approach of SMM.

7 References


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