



## What messages to post? Evaluating the popularity of social media communications in business versus consumer markets<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Although social media usage in business markets continues to grow, managers still struggle with designing popular brand message posts. This research investigates the key factors that contribute to Facebook brand content popularity metrics (i.e., number of likes and comments) for *Fortune* 500 companies' brand posts in business-to-business (B2B) versus business-to-consumer (B2C) markets. Building on psychological motivation theory, the authors examine key differences in B2B and B2C social media message strategies in terms of branding, message appeals, selling, and information search. Using Bayesian models, they find noteworthy differences in the propensity of viewers to popularize brand posts. Specifically, the results indicate that the inclusion of corporate brand names, functional and emotional appeals, and information search cues increases the popularity of B2B messages compared with B2C messages. Moreover, viewers of B2B content demonstrate a higher message liking rate but a lower message commenting rate than viewers of B2C content.

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### 1. Introduction

Social media is becoming an integral part of business strategy and has transformed the way that businesses interact with their customers – it enables marketers to influence brand outcomes and purchase decisions through fan promotion and popularization of brand content (De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang, 2012; Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012; Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, and Feldhaus, 2015; Nelson-Field, Riebe, and Sharp, 2012). While scholars have taken steps to understand the financial and branding implications of social media, they have focused little on understanding the factors that drive the popularity of brand content on social media sites (De Vries et al., 2012; Kumar, 2015), specifically in business-to-business (B2B) markets where there is a lack of research guidance and the presence of unique barriers that business marketers face in their attempts to develop and implement effective social media communications (Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides, 2011; Leek, Canning, and Houghton, 2016; Lacka and Chong, 2016). Indeed, creating the perception of

popularity or likeability has long been considered important, particularly in online contexts (Fu and Sim, 2011; Hanson and Putler, 1996; Smit, Meurs, and Neijens, 2006; Baron, Brouwer, and Garbayo, 2014), as has understanding how to develop and effectively implement social media brand content that becomes popular (Marketing Science Institute, 2014). In this research, we analyze factors that contribute to Facebook content popularity metrics (i.e., number of likes and comments) for *Fortune* 500 companies' brand posts on their brand pages. In particular, we focus on comparing popular brand posts in B2B versus business-to-consumer (B2C) markets.

Within the social media context, brand content popularity is deemed important for marketers as research suggests brand content popularity affects sales, brand awareness, brand performance, brand loyalty, and social media ROI (Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012; Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, and Hughes, 2013). Besides, popular brand content is likely to provide brands with differential advantages over their competitors. Indeed, marketers try to popularize their brand content by implementing strategies that encourage interaction with their customers in order to influence sales, generate leads, build relationships, increase brand awareness and loyalty, and even expedite purchase decisions (Swani, Brown, and Milne, 2014; Rapp et al., 2013).

Creating popular brand content on social media sites such as Facebook can be challenging because most online conversations take place between customers and exclude marketers. To interrupt these customer-to-customer conversations and increase the popularity of

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their brands, marketers create brand pages and post brand content with the expectation that followers or fans of their pages will like and comment on them and ultimately share their brand messages (De Vries et al., 2012). Recent changes on Facebook have obligated marketers to reevaluate their social media content strategies. They have begun to shift away from promotionally-based content to brand content designed to encourage viewer engagement and sharing (Kacholia, 2013).

Marketers can share social media content and ultimately create brand post popularity in two ways: (1) by encouraging brand fan membership and fan likes and (2) by encouraging brand post likes and comments (Wallace, Buil, de Chernatony, and Hogan, 2014). Fan membership can be encouraged with monetary and nonmonetary incentives. Although “buying” fans may increase popularity, this strategy’s impact is limited if it fails to popularize brand page posts through increased likes and/or comments so that brand messages are shared throughout a viewer’s network (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Value from fans comes from their level of engagement with brand page posts, particularly when they like and comment on brand posts, such that they eventually popularize the brand content throughout their unique network of friends and associates (Lipsman, Mudd, Rich, and Bruich, 2012). In this sense, liking and commenting are useful proxies for brand post popularity.

B2B marketers have not yet determined how to effectively engage their Facebook fans through promoting liking and commenting actions. While over 80% of B2B marketers actively use Facebook, only 36% say their marketing efforts on Facebook are effective and 57% express a desire to learn more about using Facebook effectively (Stelzner, 2015). Given the lack of guidance and academic research on the subject, B2B marketers are likely to mimic their B2C counterparts who have been successful in integrating Facebook in their marketing communications. However, duplicating Facebook brand post strategies will not reveal similar rewards as the two contexts differ enough to justify dedicated investigations and distinct approaches (Swani et al., 2014). Thus, we aim to address how businesses can increase liking and commenting behaviors in B2B versus B2C contexts. To guide effective social media strategy development, we build on the traditional communication model (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Shannon and Weaver, 1949; Yadav and Pavlou, 2014) by incorporating the role of networks of friends and associates and addressing how customers process and respond to the social media messages they receive from marketers. In addition, we draw on word-of-mouth (WOM) psychological motivation theory to argue that motivations need to be made salient for Facebook users in order for them to share content with their networks of friends and associates (Berger, 2014; Lovett, Peres, and Shachar, 2013).

In our empirical model, we measure liking and commenting behaviors and highlight the key differences between B2B and B2C social media message content in terms of branding, message appeals, selling, and information search cues. Through the analysis of the Facebook brand posts of *Fortune* 500 companies, we find that the use of (1) corporate brands, (2) functional and emotional appeals, and (3) information search cues makes messages more popular; that is, these types of content result in a higher number of message likes for B2B messages compared with B2C messages. In addition, we find that viewers of B2B content demonstrate a higher message liking rate but a lower message commenting rate than viewers of B2C content.

This research contributes to B2B social media literature and B2B advertising literature by providing theoretical and empirical support that enhances understanding of the relationship between Facebook social media content and popularity metrics (i.e., likes and comments volume). In particular, by explaining when and why B2B viewers of social media posts like and comment on brand posts, we contribute to managerial practice by uncovering the strategies that are likely to be most effective in B2B versus B2C markets.

Our research proceeds as follows: We present our theoretical framework using WOM psychological motivation theory (Berger, 2014; Berger and Milkman, 2012; Lovett et al., 2013; Alexandrov, Lilly, and

Babakus, 2013) and discuss social media message decoding and encoding behaviors. Next, we conceptualize the differences in B2B and B2C social media behavior based on organizational buying and B2B advertising theories, after which we test our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the results and managerial implications, list study limitations, and offer directions for further research.

## 2. WOM: psychological motivation theory

Marketers attempt to design social media posts with the objective of facilitating engagement and sharing between network members, particularly their target customers and their networks of friends and associates (Leek et al., 2016). Based on the social media communication model, for sharing (encoding) to occur, network members must be motivated to read (decode) and spread company marketing messages (Swani et al., 2014). Thus, marketers benefit by crafting appropriate communication strategies that motivate network members to share their content. Research suggests that marketers can strategically design messages that motivate viewers to share them (Swani et al., 2014; Lothia, Donthu, and Hershberger, 2003; Wallace et al., 2014). In short, when marketers craft motivating message content, they can encourage WOM communication about their brands.

Several key psychological motivations are likely to influence people to transmit content (Berger, 2014; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler, 2004; Lovett et al., 2013). These include the need to share information and express self-identity, uniqueness, expertise, feelings, emotions, concern for others, and excitement. Motivations also include the need to increase self-worth among friends, pursue economic incentives, and derive social benefits. Marketers can tap into these psychological motivations through social media by designing messages that integrate the right brand cues, message appeals, selling tactics, and level of information (Alexandrov et al., 2013; Lovett et al., 2013).

We suggest that B2B and B2C marketers use distinct message content strategies (encoding processes) to motivate and, ultimately, persuade their target viewers to engage with social media brand messages (Swani et al., 2014; Swani, Milne, and Brown, 2013). Extant research suggests that the most effective message content strategy depends on the process viewers use to decode and encode messages. That is, viewers of B2B or B2C online content tend to consider the saliency of the messages they encounter before deciding whether to or how they might share them with their network. The information processing approach they use generally depends on their viewing environment or situation (Lothia et al., 2003; Gilliland and Johnston, 1997).

## 3. Decoding and encoding B2B and B2C social media messages

### 3.1. The decoding process

The unique characteristics of B2B and B2C markets suggest that viewers of social media content decode business-oriented messages differently from consumer-oriented messages (Gilliland and Johnston, 1997; Lothia et al., 2003; Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, and Donthu, 2012). Lothia et al. (2003) note that online viewers process or decode B2B and B2C banner advertising differently, for example. Specifically, B2B advertisements tend to trigger a central, rather than peripheral, processing approach. This is due to the characteristics of the B2B environment in which online content tends to be viewed in highly involved and rational situations, thus requiring high levels of cognition. The B2C viewing environment is characterized by less involvement and more emotional attachments, on the other hand, and therefore viewers tend to expend much less cognitive effort (Gilliland and Johnston, 1997). Because of their lower levels of involvement, we expect viewers of B2C social media messages to demonstrate more impulsive buying behavior when purchasing some offerings than viewers of B2B social media messages (Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, and Johnston, 2011). Indeed B2C viewing environments may also depict high involvement

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