Social media management strategies for organizational impression management and their effect on public perception

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ABSTRACT

With the growing importance of social media, companies increasingly rely on social media management tools to analyze social media activities and to professionalize their social media engagement. In this study, we evaluate how social media management tools, as part of an overarching social media strategy, help companies to positively influence the public perception among social media users. A mixed methods approach is applied, where we quantitatively analyze 15 million user-generated Twitter messages containing information about 45 large global companies highly active on Twitter, as well as almost 160 thousand corresponding messages sent from these companies via their corporate Twitter accounts. Additionally, we conducted interviews with six social media experts to gain complementary insights. By these means, we are able to identify significant differences between different social media management strategies and measure the corresponding effects on the public perception.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, social media platforms (SMPs) attracted a lot of attention and are established as an additional channel for communicating and broadcasting information (Aral et al., 2013; Shi et al., 2014). This development has changed the role of Internet users from mere information consumers to active information contributors (Larson and Watson, 2011). In this sense, individuals not only disclose how they are related to each other or what opinions and interests they have, but also set off market trends by influencing the public about topics, products, or companies. The fast and effective dissemination of user-generated content in SMPs results in an extensive sharing of information about companies and their products as digitized word of mouth among its users (Dellarocas, 2003; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Shared information has a significant influence on (potential) consumers' as they rely more and more on the opinion of others (Rindova et al., 2005). Hence, the digitized stream of information from social media is important for companies to consider. Such impact is even intensified when shared information contains less favorable or negative statements about a company, product, or service (Baumeister et al., 2001; Kimmel, 2010). Thus, to benefit from social media, companies need to build up capabilities to monitor activities on SMPs and to engage with the community in a positive manner. By applying social media analytics, companies can monitor the user opinions about them, their products and services to obtain important feedback for improvements (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011; Larson and Watson, 2011). In turn it may help lowering costs for research and development by learning directly from the customers about their needs (Parent et al., 2011; Dong and Wu, 2015). Accordingly, Apple bought a

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social-media analytics company to enhance their analytics capabilities and to gain access to the full stream of Twitter data (Wakabayashi and Macmillan, 2013). Moreover, based on the large interest in financial topics on Twitter (Greenfield, 2014) and the growing research on the connectedness of social media and stock markets (Chen et al., 2014) stock exchanges like the NASDAQ and NYSE use social media monitoring to provide investors with stock-related social media information for decision support (NASDAQ, 2012; Intercontinental Exchange, 2013). Monitoring social media is also important to determine the success of engagement activities and needs to be measured and compared with other business performance indicators (Hanna et al., 2011). Hence, companies are increasingly interested in social media to collect valuable information about potential customers (Culnan et al., 2010).

Besides monitoring social media activities to understand what is happening on social media, companies can take advantage of social media for their own business purposes (Culnan et al., 2010; Miller and Tucker, 2013). In general, the active management of corporate social media accounts has been found to positively influence the volume of user-generated content and thus stimulating the public debate about the company (Miller and Tucker, 2013). From a technological perspective, companies have the possibility to engage on SMPs by either using the SMPs' Web-frontend or to deploy more sophisticated SMM tools (e.g., Hootsuite, Salesforce, Spreadfast). These tools provide monitoring capabilities (e.g., sentiment, influencer, or trend analyses) and help to professionalize the workflow for user engagement (e.g., multi-user management, scheduled sharing, or automated replies). Independent of whether a company deploys specialized SMM tools, its SMM strategy needs to be aligned with the strategic goals of the company to be effective (Culnan et al., 2010). For example, if the revenue of a company is directly related to the image and the public perception of it, then actively influencing this perception is critical for business success. However, it remains challenging to make a strategic decision about the appropriate level of engagement in order to not only increase the share of message but also improve the public perception about the company. Hence, companies need to come up with a strategy about their engagement in social media to have a positive impact on the companies' public perception (Culnan et al., 2010). Among others, companies have to select the SMPs they want to be active on, decide on the purpose of their engagement (e.g., customer care, marketing, etc.), determine the extent to which they want to enter into dialog with the users and much more. As companies are forced to be active on different SMPs, SMM tools provide functionalities to deploy a holistic management across the different SMPs (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

So far, there is only little research investigating how companies should manage their social media activities and whether SMM tools are suitable to support their goals (e.g., Miller and Tucker, 2013). Thus, Aral et al. (2013) and others call for more research about the strategic use of social media at the organizational level. In this paper, we address this call and analyze the impact of different SMM strategies on the resulting public perception in social media. Accordingly, our aim is to enhance the understanding of how a professionalized social media engagement influences the perception of company in social media. Thus, we are interested in *how companies can influence their perception among social media users and which social media strategy should be applied to achieve it?* To address this question, we analyze approximately 15.5 million user-generated Twitter messages (tweets) containing information about the 45 most active Twitter-using companies from the Fortune 500 list, which we collected between October 2012 and June 2013. For the same period, we also extracted 159,815 messages sent from the primary corporate Twitter accounts of these companies. The analysis of the content and the metadata of the user- and company-generated tweets allows us to not only identify significant differences between the SMM strategies applied but also to measure the corresponding effects on the public perception. To allow a rich interpretation of the results from our quantitative study we conducted semi-structured expert informant interviews in a sequential mixed methods research approach.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we start elaborating on extant literature dealing with the theoretical foundations of organizational impression management. Subsequently, our hypotheses are stated before we introduce our mixed methods research approach in section four. Afterwards, in section five, we discuss our findings from the quantitative and qualitative study and integrate the results in the context of the existing body of knowledge. The paper concludes with the theoretical and practical implications, restrictions, and recommendations for further research.

Organizational impression management to influence the public perception

Companies engage in social media in order to get in contact with the public in a positive way. Generally, the way in which individuals and organizations perform activities to influence the public are described by theories of self-presentation introduced by Goffman (1959) and impression management developed by Schlenker (1980). The concept of self-presentation describes how individuals play conscious or unconscious roles in everyday life to positively influence other people's impression of oneself (Goffman, 1959). Hence, self-presentation is a self-centered concept dealing with what an individual does in its own interest. Impression management, the broader concept, describes how individuals engage in activities to control or influence the perception of the public about themselves, other individuals, groups, or organizations (Schlenker, 1980). Therefore, impression management differs from self-presentation concerning the benefiting party of the actions. Most often the impressions made aim at establishing a positive and favorable image of an individual or a group in question (Wayne and Liden, 1995; Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011). The motivation behind this is the desire to achieve a specific public perception or to correct differences of what is perceived by the public with what is desired to be perceived (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). The extent to which impressions are made depends on the motivation to manage impressions and on the importance of the resulting public perception.