



No Comment?! The Drivers of Reactions to Online Posts in Professional Groups

Robert P. Rooderkerk ^{a,*} & Koen H. Pauwels ^{b,1}

^a Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

^b Özyeğin University, Istanbul, Turkey

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Abstract

Social media has moved beyond personal friendships to professional interactions in high-knowledge industries. In particular, online discussion forums are sponsored by firms aiming to position themselves as thought-leaders, to gain more insight in their customer base and to generate sales leads. However, while firms can seed discussion by posts, they depend on the forum members to continue the discussion in the form of reactions to these posts. The goal of the current study is to investigate what features and characteristics drive the number of comments that a post receives on an online discussion forum. The empirical setting involves a global manufacturer connecting with health care professionals through a LinkedIn discussion forum. We project that (i) content characteristics, (ii) post characteristics, (iii) author characteristics, and (iv) timing characteristics jointly determine the number of comments a post receives. We show that the readability of the post, the controversiality of the content and the status of the post author have the highest elasticity on the number of comments. These results provide valuable insights for firms on how to build and maintain an attractive online forum through ongoing discussions.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the Internet has evolved to a dynamic network where people can easily and constantly connect with each other (Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn 2008; Stephen and Lehmann 2009a). Social media websites allow consumers from around the world to interact and inform each other on products and services (Stephen and Toubia 2010). Increasingly, B2B firms embrace social media as a way to connect with their professional clients. Often their initiatives take the shape of establishing online communities. Firm goals include the (i) positioning as thought-leader in knowledge-intensive industries, (ii) gaining insights used for product innovation, (iii) developing meaningful relationships with the customer base and (iv) increasing brand preference

resulting in sales leads (LinkedIn 2010a,b,c, 2011a,b). Currently, B2B firms selling products² spend on average 8.3% of their marketing budget on social media (The CMO Survey 2015). They plan on increasing this to 10.4% (18.9%) in the next (five) year(s). However, B2B firms struggle with the measurement of content marketing, specifically regarding how to generate engaging content and to measure its effectiveness (Content Marketing Institute 2015).

To build and maintain attractive forums it is crucial for firms to stimulate discussion appealing to the forum members. Wiertz and De Ruyter (2007) argue that the success of firm-hosted commercial online communities entirely depends on the willingness of the users of the platform to spend time and effort responding to each other. Online discussion forums share this need for member investment with other social media, such as microblogging (e.g. Twitter) and social networks (e.g. Facebook) (Hoffman and Fodor 2010). However, under-contribution is a problem for many online

* Corresponding author at Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 10 4082421.

E-mail addresses: rooderkerk@rsm.nl (R.P. Rooderkerk), koen.pauwels@ozyegin.edu.tr (K.H. Pauwels).

¹ Tel.: +90 216 559 2373.

² Our empirical setting deals with a global manufacturer selling healthcare products to organizations such as hospitals.

communities (Ling et al., 2005), as encouraging participation has proved to be one of the greatest challenges for any online community provider (Bishop 2007).

Recent research has shed light on the motivations for consumers to engage in social media (Hoffman and Fodor 2010; Stephen and Lehmann 2009a,b), and the consequences of social media use by consumers (Chen and Xie 2008; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Dellarocas 2003; Godes and Mayzlin 2004, 2009). Other studies analyzed the value of online word-of-mouth (Libai, Muller, and Peres 2009; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009, 2010) and the best metrics to evaluate social media effectiveness (Peters et al. 2013). However, no study examined which specific posts generate most participation, with the exception of De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang (2012), who focus on the characteristics of the content (what was said) and the post (how it was said). Based on work in innovation though, post *author* characteristics (who said it) should matter as well (Bayus 2013), especially if commenters are motivated to establish a relation with the author (e.g. Hoffman and Fodor 2010). And in a cost–benefit framework (e.g. Johnson and Payne 1985), posts that cost more effort to comment on (e.g. because of inconvenient timing) should receive fewer comments (Johnson and Payne 1985). We bring these factors together in a conceptual framework that includes content, post, author and timing characteristics. In contrast to the past focus on consumer environments (Bayus 2013; De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012; Goh, Heng, and Lin 2013), we contribute to the academic literature by investigating the importance of these content, post, authors and timing characteristics in a business-to-business setting of online forum participation.

Interesting to researchers, our findings also lead to actionable recommendations for firms running a forum by (i) identifying several categories of content-induced comment drivers, (ii) suggesting and operationalizing measurement for these drivers, and (iii) assessing the (relative) influence of the identified characteristics in driving post comments. First, firms can highlight the content, post, author, and timing³ characteristics most likely to get comments. Second, many firms hire communication agencies to keep the discussion on their online discussion forum going. Optimizing the design and content of the topics that are inserted in the forum should lead to more discussion in the form of comments. Finally, the newfound knowledge might also be used in future social media activities (i.e. corporate blogs). In sum, our results can help firms to grow their online discussion groups.

Research Background: Social Media and Online Discussion Forums

In this section we review different types of social media and zoom in on social network sites and online discussion forums. These two types are blended in our empirical setting, an online

³ The timing of a post may not directly affect the amount of comments, but rather be a proxy for audience size and interest level. In our work, the implications for when to post will stay the same, regardless of the underlying process. Still, we encourage future research to disentangle these effects with the appropriate data.

discussion forum for healthcare professionals managed within social network site LinkedIn.

Social Media Characteristics and Classification

Social media can be briefly defined as a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). These applications differ on several characteristics, leading to the classification in Table 1.

Social media platforms differ in the level of self-disclosure, their primary use (informative or entertaining), the requirement to create a personal page or account, the typically expected posting frequency and their media richness. We focus on social media network sites and online discussion forums, of which our empirical setting is a hybrid form.

Social Network Sites and Online Discussion Forums

Social network sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they are connected and view a list of connections of others (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Popular sites include Facebook, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. *Discussion groups* refer to Internet-based forums and computer-mediated social gatherings. Online discussion groups or forums are defined as ‘places in which consumers often partake in discussions whose goals include attempt to inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brands’ (Kozinets 2002). Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) argue that consumption-related online communities are representations of word-of-mouth networks, where individuals with a shared interest regarding a certain product category interact. These online communities offer an increasingly prominent environment for interpersonal exchange, as it allows members to continuously share opinions (Miller, Fabian, and Lin 2009). Steyer, Garcia-Bardidia, and Quester (2006) highlight that online discussion groups have the potential to be great sources for data collection, as the discussions can be recorded in real time and information is available regarding the source and the sequence of the messages.

Online Discussion Forum on LinkedIn for Healthcare Professionals

Many companies use the LinkedIn environment to start discussion groups⁴. Examples include British Gas for Business, Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, Philips, and Sage. Using the LinkedIn environment allows firms to benefit from the readily available IT infrastructure and from a large and still expanding global audience. Currently, LinkedIn operates the world’s largest professional network on the Internet with more than 300 million members in over 200 countries and territories (LinkedIn 2015a).

⁴ A recent survey by the Content Marketing Institute (2015) showed that 94% of the B2B marketers in North America use LinkedIn to distribute content, making it the most popular social media outlet for content distribution. In addition, they indicate that it is the most effective channel.

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