THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS ON CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT – A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: *This paper explores the relationship between social media content characteristics and consumer engagement. Utilising a systematic literature review, we analysed 89 relevant studies, highlighting key findings on how various content types, formats and other characteristics affect user engagement. Our findings reveal that while high-quality visual content generally enhances engagement, emotional appeal and interactivity are essential for fostering connections with consumers. However, we identified several gaps in the literature, which future research should address to clarify how social media content should be designed and delivered in order to maximise consumer engagement.*

Keywords: social media; content; consumer engagement

JEL classification: M31

1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) have become a global phenomenon. Most recent data suggests that every minute, 4 million posts on Facebook receive a "like", and a billion story-type posts are shared daily on social media (Statista, 2024). We, individual users and companies, are now connected globally through these networks. Interaction between brands and consumers is easier than ever. And yet, how do you keep consumers engaged? What type of content should you post?

Given the official data (Statista, 2024) Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok are the most popular social networks worldwide, by number of monthly active users. Some authors (Voorveld et al, 2018) argue that when it comes to these online networks, engagement is highly context-specific and consists of various types of experiences on each social media platform, with each experience being unique. For instance, it was found that higher levels of engagement are obtained on Facebook, compared with Instagram or X (Twitter) (Devereux, Grimmer, & Grimmer, 2020). However, given the type of content available on all of these platforms, the recent trends made them more similar (Roma & Aloini, 2019). These shifts in content formats and engagement dynamics suggest a need for a deeper exploration of the content-related factors that drive consumer engagement across different platforms.

This paper aims to synthesize key aspects from existing literature on the characteristics of social media content and its impact on consumer engagement, while also identifying gaps in the literature.

2. Research purpose and methodological approach

This systematic literature review seeks to consolidate existing concepts and correlations examined within the specialized literature, explaining the relationship between social media content, its characteristics, and consumer engagement. Accordingly, this study synthesizes key findings from prior research in the field, employing the PRISMA model framework (Tricco et al, 2018) as a methodological guide. The adopted PRISMA approach encompasses five stages, outlined as follows:

Phase 1: Database research
Firstly, to conduct the systematic analysis of the specialized literature, we used the Web of Science as the main database to identify articles related to the following combinations of keywords: (social media AND content characteristics) OR (social media AND consumer engagement) OR (content-type AND consumer engagement) OR (content characteristics AND consumer engagement). We focused on papers indexed in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE) that pertain to the following fields: economics, business, psychology, communication, social sciences, management or computer science. During the initial phase of our research, we identified 280 relevant articles.

Phase 2: Refinement based on source quality
After the initial phase, we applied a refinement process to ensure the quality and credibility of the sources. Specifically, we selected only papers published by well-regarded academic publishers: Emerald, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, and Springer. These publishers are known for their strict peer-review process and dedication to publishing high-quality research, which enhances the reliability of the papers in our database. By applying this criterion, we narrowed down our collection to a set of 216 studies.

Phase 3: Shortlisting Publications Based on Content
From this new dataset, we aimed to identify only the studies that directly relate to our research goals. Research design was not a deciding factor, meaning we took into consideration studies with various methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, experimental, etc.). Thus, we proceeded to exclude irrelevant articles by scanning their titles or abstracts. Specifically, any studies not addressing the relationship between content characteristics and consumer engagement on social media were removed. After this phase, we identified 89 relevant studies that fulfilled all the specified criteria.

Phase 4: Relevant data analysis
The final sample of studies was systematically analysed based on a summary table including the following details for each study: authors, year of publication, journal, publisher, objective/hypothesis, method and social networking sites taken into consideration.

Phase 5: Compiling the results

The final phase consisted of compiling data about the hypotheses, research methods and results extracted from all the studies in such a way as to allow us to formulate clear conclusions, based on empirical evidence, regarding the relationship between content and customer engagement. In addition, we could identify a series of gaps in the existing literature but also highlight the practical implications that this type of study can add to existing literature.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Key characteristics of the studies

The 89 studies included in our dataset were published in journals owned by six different prestigious publishers. As it can be seen in Table 1, out of these studies, a significant amount was published by Emerald (31,5%) and by Taylor & Francis (23%).

Table 1: Articles included in the systematic literature review

Journal	No. of articles
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	6
Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	5
Online Information Review	5
Journal of Consumer Behaviour	4
Psychology & Marketing	4
Journal of Advertising	3
Journal of Brand Management	3
Journal of Business Research	3
Journal of Interactive Marketing	3
Cogent Social Sciences	2
International Journal of Consumer Studies	2
Internet Research	2
Journal of Computer Information Systems	2
Journal of Product and Brand Management	2
Other journals (with one paper each)	43
Publisher	**No. of articles**
Emerald	28
Taylor & Francis	21
Elsevier	16
Wiley	11
SAGE	8
Springer	5
Year published	**No of articles**
2023-2024	29
2021-2022	25
2019-2020	19
2017-2018	12
2015-2016	2
2013-2014	2

We noticed an increasing number of publications focused on the relationship between social media content characteristics and consumer engagement over the past decade. Thus, from only two articles published in each of the biennia 2013-2014 and 2015-2016, the volume of research rose steadily through subsequent periods, reaching a notable 29 articles by 2023-2024. This upward trend reflects academia's response to the evolving role of social media as an essential platform for consumer-brand interaction.

3.2. Methodologies and research approaches

The methodologies and research approaches utilized in the studies varied significantly (see Table 2). More than 50% of the studies (50 out of 89) employed content analysis as the primary research method, which involved extracting existing content from various social networks and analysing consumers' level of engagement with that content. Other quantitative research methods included online surveys, used in 20 out of the 89 studies, while experimental research design was conducted in only 11 studies. The remaining studies were more theoretical or conceptual, providing valuable recommendations for future research.

Table 2: Distribution of studies by methodological approaches

Method	No. of articles
Observation (Content analysis)	50
Online surveys	20
Experiments	11
Theoretical / Conceptual	8

The prominence of content analysis indicates a strong focus on observational data and tangible metrics (i.e., likes, comments, shares etc.) that can capture real-world interactions between consumers and brands. On the other hand, online surveys offer a complementary perspective, capitalizing on self-reported consumer attitudes, perceptions, and motivations that may not be directly observable through content analysis alone. However, experimental designs offer a more appropriate framework to examine cause-effect relationships between specific content characteristics and engagement outcomes, enabling researchers to isolate and test individual variables.

3.3. Investigated social network sites

As previously mentioned, each social network has its own unique characteristics. However, according to official data from DataReportal (2023), Facebook is the most widely used platform among consumers. This dominance is evident in the numerous studies conducted, with 46 out of 89 studies identifying Facebook as the primary social network for testing research hypotheses (see Table 3). The second most referenced network in these studies is Instagram, appearing in 11 studies, followed by X (formerly Twitter), which was mentioned in 10 studies. Only a small percentage of studies (about 10%) considered YouTube, LinkedIn, or TikTok for research purposes.

This platform-specific distribution of studies highlights potential research gaps, particularly on emerging or less-examined platforms like LinkedIn and TikTok, where consumer engagement might differ substantially from more traditional networks,

given the fact that most recent data shows that TikTok gains eight new users every second, making it one of the most widely used social media platforms worldwide (DataReportal, 2023).

Table 3: Distribution of studies by investigated social network platform

Social network site	No. of articles
Facebook	46
Instagram	13
X (Twitter)	10
YouTube	5
TikTok	2
LinkedIn	2

Our results suggest that future research could benefit from exploring the unique engagement characteristics of these platforms, especially as they continue to evolve and attract diverse user segments.

3.4. Main topics

3.4.1 Content type

Social media content can take different forms, from text to audio, photos, or videos. Some researchers have focused their studies on measuring the impact of various types of content on consumer online behaviour, demonstrating that the effect differs across them (Luarn, Lin, & Chiu, 2015; Le, 2018). For instance, posts that include high-quality photos tend to result in higher engagement rates, attracting the most likes and comments (Doyle, Su, & Kunkel, 2022). If a photo showcases a product, particularly fashion accessories, engagement levels increase (Bonilla-Quijada et al, 2023). On the other hand, a study on X (formerly Twitter) (Li & Xie, 2019) emphasizes the importance of using a combination of images and text when promoting products. Additionally, other researchers (Li & Ensafjoo, 2024) found that audio tweets tend to be more engaging compared to text or video tweets because text-based posts result in lower user engagement compared to audio-visual content. When it comes to video content, it appears to generate limited engagement, even though it is shared more frequently (Balamurugan et al, 2021). Videos without texts get more likes, shares, and views, whilst videos including music or spoken language are more frequently added to "favourites" (Einsle, Garcia-Fernandez, & Izquierdo, 2024).

For Instagram in particular, publishing content in carousel format (including more than 1 photo per post) leads to a higher number of likes (Wahid & Gunarto, 2022). Research on Instagram shows that aesthetically appealing visual content leads to more likes and comments (Kusumasondjaja, 2020), while the story-like format is gaining popularity among users (Karpinska-Krakowiak & Modlinski, 2018). However, a study found that when involvement with the product is low, users generally engage more with brand posts regardless of their format (Barreto & Ramalho, 2019).

These findings emphasize that different types of social media content and different content formats can drive distinct patterns of consumer engagement, which need further investigation. For instance, the varying impact of video content raises

important questions about the effectiveness of video as an engagement tool, which future research could explore. For example, none of the studies included in our SLR have analysed short-form video content, which is becoming increasingly popular on social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok), and its impact on consumer engagement. In addition, the preference for audio tweets over text-based ones on some platforms suggests that audio content can create a more immersive experience for users. Yet, little is known about the broader applicability of audio across other platforms or types of products. Also, while text content typically shows lower engagement levels, it remains unclear how this format can be optimized to appeal to consumers. Furthermore, there seems to be a knowledge gap in understanding how the interplay between content format and product involvement shapes engagement outcomes.

3.4.2 Content characteristics

Content can vary widely in its characteristics. Research indicates that hedonic content is shared less often than utilitarian content (Hoang, Tran, & Le, 2024). Additional studies suggest that to increase likes and shares, content should focus on emotional appeal rather than solely promoting a product (Izogo & Mpinganjira, 2020).

Gupta, Mahajan, and Bhusan (2023) also concluded that emotional content fosters emotional engagement, whereas informational content impacts cognitive and behavioural aspects. For instance, content should be more functional and communicate product benefits to stimulate sales (Liadeli, Sotgiu, & Verlegh, 2023). However, non-sales-related content is more helpful in generating likes and shares (Xu, Chen, & Ow, 2023). On the opposite, the findings of Wahid, Karjaluoto & Asiati (2023) suggest that informational content generates higher engagement than emotional content.

Kujur & Singh (2017) indicate that the characteristics of social network content, such as vividness, interactivity, entertainment, and information, directly influence consumers' online participation. Some authors agree that interactivity is crucial for creating engaging content (Pathak & Kaushik, 2024). Including questions in the content is likely to enhance consumer engagement and increase responses (Li, Chang, & Liang, 2022). Additionally, offering promotional incentives can enhance audience engagement (Fan et al., 2023). Drossos, Coursaris & Kagiouli (2024), discovered that the length of a message plays a crucial role in consumers' intentions to share. This finding is supported by Pancer et al. (2019) who found that easy-to-read posts receive more likes, comments, and shares on social media. Additionally, Shabbir-Husain et al. (2024) confirmed that the use of conversational language enhances consumer engagement. Moreover, another significant factor in driving consumer engagement is the use of pronouns, particularly second-person pronouns (Labrecque, Swani, & Stephen, 2020).

Overall, previous research indicates that content characteristics play an important role in driving consumer engagement on social media. Nevertheless, many specific topics in this area still need further investigation. For instance, while utilitarian and emotionally engaging content both appear effective, they each fulfil different engagement functions. This points to a potential gap in understanding how to balance or combine emotional and informational elements to maximize engagement.

In addition, even though research suggests that interactivity is essential, there is limited research on the specific types of interactivity that most effectively foster different forms of engagement, across diverse platforms and demographics. Moreover, the importance of message length and readability suggests that ease of processing is critical, yet more research is needed to identify optimal lengths or linguistic styles for maximizing engagement within different content types and product categories. Furthermore, previous findings suggest that a personalized, approachable communication style may help brands resonate on a more individual level with consumers. However, further research could examine how these stylistic elements interact with brand image, as what is effective for one brand or context may differ for another.

3.4.3. Consumer engagement

Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh (2018) classified digital engagement practices into five categories: engaging for fun, learning, providing customer feedback, discussing a brand, and working for a brand. Others view consumer engagement through the lens of likes, comments, and shares on social media. They argue that liking a post generally generates positive feedback while sharing can be linked to both positive and negative comments about a brand (Dhaoui & Webster, 2021). The findings indicate that a branded content experience enhances consumer engagement with the content, ultimately fostering a sense of virtual community among customers (Waqas, Hamzah, & Salleh, 2021).

It seems that content source plays a moderating role in content engagement (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). Sardar, Tata, & Sarkar (2024) agree that consumer engagement acts as a mediator between source credibility, content characteristics, and purchase intentions.

Moreover, the effectiveness of social media content on users' engagement is moderated by content context (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021). Some authors argued that not only the content type is important, but also the time when it's posted. Hoang, Tran & Le (2024) concluded that posting visual content midweek, on weekends, or on afternoons, generates higher engagement rates. Content released in the morning enhanced the positive effects of warmth, excitement, and joy on consumer engagement, compared to content released in the afternoon (Dong et al, 2024). In contrast, a study (Yesiloglu, Memery, & Chapleo, 2021) found that medium-length and long videos posted during non-business hours on weekdays are more likely to receive views, likes, and comments. However, content quality drives engagement more than frequency (Romero-Jara et al, 2024).

All these findings suggest several areas where researchers could further explore the relationship between content characteristics and consumer engagement. One key area is the role of engagement practices, particularly in terms of how different forms of engagement relate to distinct consumer behaviours and outcomes. Research could investigate how these engagement practices interact with content type and platform characteristics to influence overall consumer responses. Additionally, the moderating effect of content source on engagement warrants further investigation, especially in terms of how source credibility and brand authority interact with content characteristics to drive engagement or influence purchase intentions.

The role of content context, such as posting time and timing strategies, is another promising area for future research. While some studies suggest that certain times of day or specific days of the week enhance engagement, further exploration is needed to identify the optimal posting windows across different social media platforms, industries, and demographic groups. Research could also tackle into how these contextual factors interact with content type to amplify or diminish engagement outcomes.

Also, the role of branded content in creating a sense of virtual community represents another potential future research direction, by specifically examining how brands can enhance engagement by creating a more personalized or community-driven experience. Future studies could investigate how virtual communities, driven by branded content, contribute to long-term brand loyalty or influence consumers' behavioural intentions beyond the immediate post-engagement stage.

4. Theoretical and practical implications

Our systematic literature review (SLR) identifies several gaps in the existing literature, highlighting opportunities for future studies to address these areas. Future research should explore various aspects of social media content and consumer engagement. Studies could examine the effectiveness of different content formats, such as video, audio, and text, and how they interact with product involvement to shape engagement outcomes. Research should also address the use of both utilitarian and emotional value to obtain more content consumer engagement while investigating how interactivity and platform-specific dynamics influence engagement across diverse demographics. Further exploration is needed to determine optimal message lengths, linguistic styles, and the role of personalised communication in enhancing engagement. Additionally, the impact of contextual factors like posting time and timing strategies on engagement should be studied across different SNSs and industries. Finally, researchers could focus on how branded content fosters virtual communities, driving long-term brand loyalty and influencing consumer intentions beyond immediate interactions.

On the other hand, this SLR on social media content marketing serves as a valuable resource for practitioners seeking to understand how to effectively engage consumers through the content they share on social networks. It highlights what types of content - such as photos, videos, or text - are most effective and identifies areas for improvement in their online communication strategies. Given the continuously evolving online environment, with new technologies emerging frequently, consumer behaviour is significantly influenced by these changes. Therefore, social media marketing specialists must stay informed about these ongoing changes to ensure their strategies remain relevant and effective.

5. Conclusion

Engagement on social media varies by content type and platform. Different forms of content impact consumer engagement in distinct ways across various platforms.

Content characteristics and timing are essential factors that drive engagement. Specific traits, such as interactivity, vividness, and language style, play a significant role in influencing engagement levels. Therefore, social media content creators should take both the characteristics of their content and the timing of their posts into

account to maximize reach and interaction. Also, while frequent posting can maintain visibility, the quality and relevance of content are more significant in driving meaningful engagement.

Our SLR provides actionable insights for social media marketers looking to enhance engagement. It suggests that brands should leverage emotional and visually engaging content, optimize posting times, and focus on high-quality, interactive posts to build stronger connections with consumers.

Additionally, this SLR identifies gaps in current research, particularly concerning different types of social media content and its effects on audience engagement. Also, we suggest that future studies should investigate user interactions with content on other emerging SNSs. Filling these gaps will enhance our understanding of shifting audience preferences in an increasingly dynamic digital environment.

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