

TEACHING SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING THROUGH FOLLOWING FIRMS ON TWITTER --- A PERSPECTIVE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Yujie Wei
The University of West Georgia
jwei@westga.edu

INTRODUCTION

Experiential Learning in Social Media

The experiential learning theory sees learning as a four-step process: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualism, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). According to Kolb, learning is a cyclical process and effective learning takes place only when the cycle is completed. Prior research demonstrates that experiential learning can enhance student learning in marketing education (Cappuccitti, Gunn, and Lee, 2019; Young, 2002). Students will be more likely to succeed in a corporate context if they experience daily interactions throughout a curriculum that approximate a professional environment (Ewing and Ewing, 2016).

The process of following companies on social media is experiential learning (Craciun and Corrigan, 2010). Social media users who follow a brand acquire knowledge of the brand, its company, and other users (Chu, Chen, and Sung, 2016; Jin and Phua, 2014; Logan, 2014). Similarly, college students can follow firms or their brands, learn brand information, evaluate assurances, and interact with account managers and other followers. In a sense, the following itself is “doing” from a perspective of experiential learning because the student can observe the marketing activities of firms and interact with account managers and other followers by writing comments for others and responding to others, including the account managers. College students can learn real-world social media marketing skills and content management by following companies.

As social media marketers use more advanced content management systems to create and update content, social media platforms have created a resourceful learning environment. Twitter provides millions of mass-produced messages or images to users on mobile phones and laptops (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015). Previous research demonstrates that Twitter is a real-time environment for student learning; instructors can use Twitter for direct communication with students to generate discussion and interest in the course topics and examples (Rinaldo, Tapp, and Laverie, 2011). This research project uses elements of experiential learning to explore how students benefit from following companies on Twitter. Specifically, the research addresses three crucial questions about teaching social media marketing: (1) how can instructors integrate Twitter into social media marketing courses to provide experiential learning? (2) how does following firms on Twitter enhance students' learning? (3) what theoretical implications can this research provide for experiential learning?

METHODOLOGY

A field study was conducted on Twitter in which the students' learning stages occurred in the natural corporate environment. Students followed Nike's and Subway's official corporate accounts on Twitter for 12 weeks and read their tweets posted by the two firms. The instructor (researcher) followed the two accounts with the students and monitored the student's learning process and aid. Twitter is suitable for the research for two primary reasons. First, Twitter has become the key communication platform for significant events unfolding live in real-time worldwide. Second, both students and instructors can observe and track messages overtime on Twitter. The massive flow of tweets gives the instructor a firm basis for framing these activities using the intellectual tools of experiential theory. Thus, the qualitative data can be collected and analyzed in a natural, unobtrusive setting.

Samples and Procedures

Two Marketing Management classes of 56 undergraduates of a major university in the southeastern part of the U.S. participated in this research for credits. The average age of the participants is 21.3 (from 19 to 24 years old). None of them had previously followed the focal brands on Twitter. They read the tweets, observed the tweeting activities, and made comments every week. Participants were also encouraged to respond to the firms' tweets by commenting on the tweets and actions. The approach has been employed by social media researchers and has proven to be effective (Porter et al., 2015). This approach is appropriate for experiential learning because participants could completely go through the four stages of experiential learning.

Data Analysis

Fifty-six participants submitted 600 reports with approximately 180,000 words total. The data were analyzed using content analysis (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991), which is often applied in research on mass-mediated communications, especially in research

involving tweets (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Ivana and Almaraz, 2013; Okazaki et al., 2014; Porter et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2012). A three-step analytic procedure was followed in data analysis. The first step in the analysis involved reading through the participants' comments to develop a sense of their content. Second, following a process of dialectical tacking, the researcher moved back and forward between findings and the relevant literature to develop a deeper understanding of the following firms on Twitter and their impact on student learning. As a final step, in a peer debriefing process, two independent interviewers reviewed and reanalyzed each transcript as auditors for added reliability (Grayson, Iaccobucci, and Rust, 2001).

Findings and Conclusion

From the participants' reports, we identified four themes corresponding to the four stages of learning theory. The first theme deals with "content experience", which fits Kolbe's "concrete experience". As first-time followers, the students' first reports of the tweets they have followed are full of surprises, shocks, or frustrations with the firms' tweeting activities. Some experienced disappointment, and some experienced excitement because of things learned. The first stage, which we label "**content experience**", continued for two to four weeks until they moved into the second stage (reflective observation); most students adjusted their expectations.

In this second stage, the student analyzed more tweets of the two firms and began to think about why the firms tweeted more or fewer messages or used videos. The student started to relate the content (tweets) to marketing and interpreted the content from the marketing perspective. They began to apply their textbook knowledge to tweet analysis and understanding, which enhanced their learning by relating theories to real-world practices on social media. Thus, the second stage of online experiential learning can be labeled as "**analytical learning**".

The third stage began after following the two firms for about six weeks. As they had experienced more content and interactions between the account manager and followers, they could tell what tweets would benefit the firms and what would not. They would praise or criticize the account manager for their tweeting behaviors, their responses, or the words they had used and discuss the consequences of their tweeting activities or service failures. Their reports began to include more in-depth comments on the tweeting activities, demonstrating they had learned from the following over time. The third stage of learning, characterized by much critical thinking, can be called "**critical learning**".

The last stage spanned the final two weeks of the following. After the ten-week continuous exposure to numerous tweets and content experiences, most students had grown from first-time followers to confident social media experts. The 12-week following had changed their first impression of the two firms' social media marketing and taught them how to use social media platforms for marketing effectively. Thanks to experiential learning, many students could recommend new solutions or better approaches to the firms like experts do. The last stage can be called "**creative learning**", which inspires students and help them apply what they have learned from the textbook to real-world problems.

Our findings confirm that the following is an effective experiential process, leading to positive learning outcomes. In the process, the student experienced the dynamic tweets by the firms and their interaction with the follower, witnessed the firms' real-time growing followers on the platform, and the setbacks and negative consequences resulted from poor strategies. The student could never learn as much from the textbook.

Theoretical Implications

The research contributes to experiential learning theory in four ways. First, social media platform provides richer learning resources for students, thus greatly enriching the student's online experiential learning. Twitter's quick and dynamic content system creates an experiential learning environment for students. A continuous flow of messages (videos or visual materials) can help students dive deeper and understand social media marketing more effectively. Furthermore, the student can track the firm sites on different social media platforms simultaneously, which delights many students and increases their understanding of the branding on social media. The student can also compare the competing brands' tweeting activities, evaluate the marketing effectiveness of the different strategies, and recommend the best practices to the focal firms. Thus, following companies on social media should be integrated into online experiential learning as an effective teaching tool.

Second, following firms on Twitter can help engage the student for a more extended period because of social media message systems' openness, immediacy, and interactivity. Compared with traditional experiential learning, following firms on social media does not have the limitations of geographical barriers, leading to a more robust and longer interest in marketing topics. More importantly, social media allows followers to create content by sharing their stories and experiences, making their content experience more engaging and helpful to the students' learning than the content published exclusively by the firm.

Third, social media provides an efficient experiential learning environment because of the many technology-enhanced functions to followers. Social media platforms utilize new marketing communication technologies (e.g., animation, automation, and AI-based apps) to build an artificial but equally live reality to entertain their users. Therefore, following firms on social media platforms can refresh students' media experiences and help them keep up with the digital marketing technologies, preparing them to become technology-efficient marketers.

Fourth, following the digital footprints of firms on social media can help the student learn first-hand information on

marketing management, how to create brand stories and distribute a flow of branding messages for their target markets, how to influence consumer attitude, and how to win the support of the follower on a cause, or change the biased perception of the brand or firm.

In conclusion, following firms on social media can effectively help students understand what determines the success of social media marketing, what content strategies are effective, and how to interact with the follower. Over time, the instructor can educate the student by applying the textbook knowledge to real-world scenarios.

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