What Attracts Followers?
Exploring Factors Contributing to Brand Twitter Follower Counts

Yu-Qian Zhu, Department of Information Management, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Taiwan

Bo Hsiao, Department of Information Management, Chang Jung Christian University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Although business and researchers acknowledge the importance of social media, little research has been conducted to explore what attracts people to follow brand Twitter accounts. This research attempts to achieve an analytical understanding of the factors that contribute to brand Twitter follower count based on social network and communication theories. Using data from 346 Twitter accounts spanning 48 industries and 31 countries, the authors found that the quality and quantity of tweets, as well as social learning of brand Twitter accounts are positively related to brand Twitter account followers; contrary to popular belief, the use of hashtags and links and interactivity with users are not positively related to brand Twitter account followers. The study is among the first to investigate what attracts brand Twitter account followers, which offers important strategic recommendations for brand social media managers on how to manage their social media accounts.

KEYWORDS

Brand Twitter Accounts, Social Learning, Social Media, Twitter Followers

INTRODUCTION

The era of social media has afforded new communication channels for businesses in attracting, developing, and maintaining customers (Li, Berens, & Maertelaere, 2013; Wamba, Akter, Bhattacharyya & Aditya; 2016). Social media, i.e., the Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) has gained strategic importance as a powerful new form of electronic word of mouth, reported being approximately twenty times more effective than marketing events and thirty times more effective than media appearances (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009). Research found that followers of brand on social media have higher trust and brand identification (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014; Maldonado & Sierra; 2016; Díaz-Díaz & Pérez-González; 2016), are more loyal to the brand (Laroche, Habibi, Richard & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Laroche, Habibi & Richard, 2013), have higher customer purchase intentions (Goh, Heng & Lin, 2014; Kim & Ko, 2012), buy more frequently, and are more profitable (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman & Bezawada, 2013). Social media engagements also enhance brand equity, relationship equity, and value equity

(Kim & Ko, 2012; Yu, Duan & Cao, 2013). Twitter, a microblogging and social networking service, in particular, is noteworthy. Launched in 2007, Twitter now has 330 million monthly active users, 500 million tweets per day, and 80% users on mobile (as of September 2019). Twitter has become the social platform of choice for brands' customer engagement, with 413 companies (83%) of the Fortune 500 active on Twitter (Barnes & Andonian, 2014).

Although business and researchers acknowledge the strategic importance of social media, little research has been conducted to explore what attracts people to follow brands' twitter accounts. Follower count is a key metric for social media marketing as it is Twitter's most basic currency (Hutto, Yardi, & Gilbert; 2013). The followers form an audience to the brand and provide the brand access to a network of social ties, resources, and influence (Hutto et al., 2013). Most prior research has addressed brands' Twitter followers from either the brand relationship or the need satisfaction perspective. Research reported that users follow a brand on Twitter to engage in the brand community (Phua, Jin & Kim; 2017), or as a result of brand attachment (Chu, Chen, & Sung; 2016). Yang (2011) argued that by following a brand's Twitter account, individuals fulfill the sense of belonging and citizenship. Zhu & Chen (2015) thought that individuals seek self-esteem and relatedness by following brands on Twitter. However, these researches are from a follower's perspective, i.e., what followers need and want. Most of them have used psychological measures as the dependent variable, rather than actual follower counts. Furthermore, little research has explored the features of brand activities (e.g., interaction, frequency of posting) and their impact on follower counts.

A few scholarly works have revealed some preliminary findings regarding follower count from the account activity perspective. Hutto et al. (2013) reported that message content, social behavior, and network structure could predict follower counts for Twitter accounts. Unfortunately, the research was only geared toward individual Twitter accounts, not business or brand accounts, with no brand-related variables in the model. Levine, Mann & Mannor (2015) found that learning actively online can provide deeper insights into how to attract followers. Stevanovich (2012) argued that engaging users, developing relationships and compelling content are key components of success in social media discourse. Mueller & Stumme (2017) explored how user profiles on Twitter affect follower counts. Despite these pioneer works, no comprehensive research that integrates both the communication perspective and social network perspective has been conducted specifically on business Twitter accounts. This paper attempts to achieve an analytical understanding of the factors that contribute to the number of followers for brands on Twitter based on an integrative model encompassing both the communication perspective and social network perspective with a comprehensive set of variables selected based on sound theoretical framework. Specifically, we seek to examine how Grice's Maxims of communication, social learning and social interactivity contribute to brands' twitter follower counts and present strategic recommendations for social media marketing managers. Our results highlight the importance of quality of the tweets, tweet presentation, tweet frequency and social learning to follower counts.

This research contributes to the literature in two ways. First, for practitioners, the number of followers has long been used as a main performance index for social media metrics (Adweek, 2011). However, most of the results are from trade journals or bloggers, while academic research that is based on theory and empirically tested is little. Thus, this research helps to clarify the question of how to attract Twitter followers for brands managing their Twitter accounts, and gives a clear picture to brand social media managers about what to do based on a theory-guided, and empirically validated research. Second, theoretically, this research contributes by integrating research from both the communication perspective and the social network perspective to develop and test a theoretically and empirically driven model of contributing to brands' Twitter follower counts. By grounding our model in theories of communication and social networks, we highlight the significant role of quality and quantity of Tweets, the presentation of Tweets from the communications perspective, and social learning from the social networks perspective as key drivers of Twitter follower counts.

Related Content

A Model of System Re-Configurability and Pedagogical Usability in an E-Learning Context: A Faculty Perspective
Jianfeng Wang, William J. Dolland Xiaodong Deng (2012). *End-User Computing, Development, and Software Engineering: New Challenges (pp. 168-184).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/model-system-configurability-pedagogical-usability/62795

Using Emotional Intelligence in Personalized Adaptation
Violeta Damjanovicand Milos Kravcik (2009). *Intelligent User Interfaces: Adaptation and Personalization Systems and Technologies (pp. 326-351).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/using-emotional-intelligence-personalized-adaptation/24483

Deciphering Conflicts of Affordances Through a Design-Based Approach
Phil Tietjenand Mahir Akgun (2018). *End-User Considerations in Educational Technology Design (pp. 263-290).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/deciphering-conflicts-of-affordances-through-a-design-based-approach/183023

The Social Media Big Data Analysis for Demand Forecasting in the Context of Globalization: Development and Case Implementation of Innovative Frameworks
Yifang Gao, Junwei Wang, Zhi Liand Zengjun Peng (2023). *Journal of Organizational and End User Computing (pp. 1-15).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-social-media-big-data-analysis-for-demand-forecasting-in-the-context-of-globalization/325217

A Model of System Re-Configurability and Pedagogical Usability in an E-Learning Context: A Faculty Perspective
Jianfeng Wang, William J. Dolland Xiaodong Deng (2010). *Journal of Organizational and End User Computing (pp. 66-81).*
www.irma-international.org/article/model-system-configurability-pedagogical-usability/43752