

Micro-Blog and E-Commerce Strategy: Investigating the Linkages

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INTRODUCTION

E-commerce enables customers to get information and complete their purchase through the Web in an alternative way to the offline purchase thanks to digital technology. With the advent of social media, companies have lost control over the interactions existing between the customers and their product and a proportion of their online sales is surely affected by what is said on social media platforms. Further, firms must monitor the content posted and shared online by customers that, in freely expressing their point of view, can add or remove value from the firms' products with the result of positively or negatively influencing other customers.

Social media management has thus become a priority for many companies and the majority of them are currently active on some social platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Lee, 2014). In particular, micro-blogs are one of the fastest-growing categories of social media applications similar to blogs and utilized for posting brief updates, ideas or quick reflections (Ebner & Schiefner, 2008). In the last few years, their popularity among several types of potential customers has been increasing; for example, in April 2015, Twitter, the most widely known micro-blog service, had 288 million monthly active users (77% of accounts were outside the U.S.) and 500 million Tweets were sent per day (Twitter, 2015).

This makes micro-blogs very attractive for companies in order to achieve their business objectives (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009b; Yue & Xuecheng, 2010). In fact, since micro-blog services offer a channel for people to broadcast brief texts about what they are reading, thinking and experiencing in their lives, they provide firms with enormous potential for marketing strategies (Zhao & Lu, 2012).

The results of the 2013 Digital Report published by Technorati Media clarifies some business opportunities provided by micro-blogs for firms; the study reveals that customers follow brands on Twitter for specific objectives: to keep updated about activities (57%); to learn about product/service (47%); to find promotions (36%); to provide helpful feedback (27%); to join a community of brand fans (26%); to complain about a product/service (19%); and to make purchases (15%).

The last aim, relating to customer use of Twitter, suggests the existence of a relationship between the presence of customers on micro-blog platforms and their regular product purchases. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze micro-blogs from an e-commerce perspective by examining the features that make micro-blogging a powerful marketing tool able to improve an e-commerce strategy.

In spite of the growing popularity of social media in the academic literature, there is a relative lack of research on micro-blogs and, in particular, few studies have explored micro-blogs in an e-commerce context. This paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the existing linkages between micro-blogs and e-commerce strategy.

The paper is organized as follows: after the introduction, section 2 examines the theoretical background on micro-blogs in the academic literature of marketing; section 3 investigates the relationship existing between micro-blogs and e-commerce; section 4 provides future research directions; and finally, section 5 draws conclusions with managerial implications.

MICRO-BLOG BACKGROUND

Micro-blogs are small-sized blogs where users share only minimal information about what they are doing and thinking; it comprises many brief updates about personal life, work, news, events, products etc., that are presented in a reverse-chronological order. They are created by users called *micro-bloggers* who publish *micro-post* messages of maximum 140-200 characters, which may sometimes include links, images or video clips for followers (Patrut, Holotescu, & Cmeciu, 2013).

There are different micro-blog services; Twitter is the most popular where people share 140 character posts that are often accompanied by photos and users organize themselves in a follower-followee network without any reciprocal constraint (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). Once an account is created, the user can choose to send a message, a *tweet*, or follow others. By selecting a list of users to follow, a stream will appear on the home page of Twitter with tweets from the individuals the user is following. From this moment on, the user can resend, or *re-tweet*, a message from a person he is following to followers or reply directly to the user. There is a specific symbol to utilize within this micro-blog: (@) is used to connect with another Twitter follower and hashtags (#) are used to highlight a particular topic and allow people to search for streams within the social platform (Lee, 2014). Twitter's mission is "to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" and it supports 33 languages (Twitter, 2015).

Micro-blogging services other than Twitter include, for example, Tumblr, Plurk, and Jaiku. In Tumblr, there is no limit on the length of the text posts but the speed of this social service tends to ask for short posts; in Plurk, users send updates (otherwise known as *plurks*) which can be up to 210 text characters in length; and, in Jaiku, users can individually choose to make their posts (called *jaikus*) publicly or privately visible. These services generate incredible amounts of micro-blog data, which have become important resources for researchers, even if micro-blogging research is still in its embryonic stage.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2011a) have identified three main reasons behind the growing popularity of micro-blogs: the concept of ambient awareness, their push-push-pull communication and the virtual exhibition and voyeurism that take place within them.

The concept of ambient awareness refers to the circumstance in which many posts published over time tend to offer a good description of people's activities and moods; they seem to create a sort of physical proximity that enables users to understand the attitude of others simply by analyzing the small body movements that users make.

Moreover, micro-blogs allow a push-push-pull communication because when a user becomes a follower of another person, each message sent out from the first is pushed on the micro-blog page of all its followers, and since all the posts published on this social platform are public, everyone can reply and comment on them. Hence, the initial message is transformed from a simple piece of information to word-of-mouth information because the communication flow is from a sender to followers, from followers to followers and from recipients to other external information sources (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011a).

Lastly, micro-blogs allow anonymous voyeurism about other people and, for this reason, most users are not active, they simply observe what others write. For example, Twitter has approximately 645 mil-

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