

Chapter 4

Social Media Marketing of Brands in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Crisis-Related Content

Petek Tosun

MEF University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the social media marketing communication of brands in the first days of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak within the theoretical framework provided by signaling theory. The social media content of six Turkish brands was examined by content analysis. The findings have shown that brands shared posts in four themes: brand promotion, brand's COVID-19 messages, product promotion, and special day posts. Brands integrated the COVID-19 agenda in their social media communication in two ways. First, they designed and shared posts that focused solely on the pandemic. These COVID-19-related posts constituted a separate category that did not include any direct relevance to the brands' promotion activities. Second, they added COVID-19-related points in their social media posts. This study provides valuable findings for marketing practitioners and academicians regarding social media communication in a global health crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which was declared a global pandemic by World Health Organization on 11 March 2020, has caused severe anxiety and significant social and economic impacts across the globe (Wheaton et al., 2021). The pandemic was a shocking global event that changed the way people see the world (He and Harris, 2020). This dramatic health crisis resulted in closed schools and businesses and the governments' "stay at home" messages and lockdowns (Garfin, 2020). Consumers found themselves in the middle of an outbreak and started to spend time at home and making online purchases (Winet and Winet, 2021). This collective trauma has led to a rise in technology utilization, media

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consumption, and social media usage (Garfin, 2020). Many people tried to recover from social distancing and lockdown measures by spending more time on social media (Shirdan, 2020). In 2020, social media usage has increased by 13%, with an additional 1.3 million new social media users included in the user pool every day (Wearesocial, 2021). As of January 2021, more than 53% of the global population uses social media, while 4.2 billion people actively use social media (Wearesocial, 2021).

In the last decade, digital platforms and social media have become inseparable from life, while brands increasingly need to be relevant, helpful, and recreative (Kocheilas, 2018). The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an increase in the global usage of digital tools and platforms (Wearesocial, 2021). In addition to the rise in user numbers, the time spent on mobile phones has also increased, elevating smartphones to the “first screen” of users (Wearesocial, 2021). Connecting with customers has become more significant as social media has been more effectively used by brands to build and maintain connections with their customers. Within that context, the pandemic created a paradigm shift in the ways organizations connect with their general stakeholders and existing and potential customers (Winet and Winet, 2021).

Besides customer-brand relationships, the pandemic influenced the marketing activities of companies (He and Harris, 2020). Most of the organizations adjusted their marketing communication content due to the pandemic. Many brands responded quickly by sharing COVID-19-related videos and content (Sobande, 2020). Because stakeholders’ expectations from brands have been increasing in the last decades, the corporate social responsibility (CSR) actions of companies are also getting increased attention (Nguyen et al., 2019). CSR includes companies’ voluntary actions and sincere efforts to contribute to society, employees, and the environment in a sense that exceeds the legal, financial, and obligations (Carroll, 1979). Following this definition, this study considers CSR as the activities or messages that exceed product or brand promotion. Such messages may be related to social issues, health concerns, or the well-being of people.

The pandemic created a sensitive atmosphere that brands increasingly disclosed their COVID-19-related CSR messages from their social media accounts. They shared their CSR initiatives or continued their brand and product promotion campaigns while mentioning the pandemic. They shared brand-generated content about the pandemic blended with their products, ethical stance in the pandemic conditions, and investments to society (Sobande, 2020). Posting “#stayathome” messages on brands’ social media accounts, including a pandemic-related point in promotion messages, and sharing information about CSR actions regarding the pandemic were some general marketing implementations across many sectors. Reminding people of the importance of hygiene precautions, notifying them about the brand’s donations, or reducing work hours to protect employees’ health are also included in the CSR actions performed by firms.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a severe health crisis in which brands tried to continue their product and brand promotion activities and blend them with their CSR messages on their social media accounts. This context constituted a unique field for research in marketing management as the findings may be beneficial for marketing managers and academicians. This study aims to explore the social media marketing communication of brands in the COVID-19 crisis context by utilizing the signaling theory (Spence, 2002) as the theoretical framework. Signals are visible things and actions of companies and they are partly designed to communicate (Spence, 2002). Marketing communication reveals signals that reduce the information asymmetry in the marketplace and show firms’ confidence in their actions, products, and services (Zerbini, 2017). Besides, brands can signal the high quality of their marketing offerings or their dedication to society by disclosing their CSR actions and sharing their messages from their social media channels.

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