



Creating content to enhance business customers' engagement: A motivational model

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Abstract

Despite the importance of relevant and engaging information offered by business-to-business (B2B) companies to enhance customer engagement on social media platforms, few studies have focused on theoretical aspects of creating interactive content types that can enhance industrial customers' engagement. This study aims to present a theoretical model that can help produce content considering different levels of industrial customers' needs. To this end, a conceptual review was conducted to identify a variety of content types that may impact enhancing customer engagement. This article adopts the existence, relatedness, and growth (ERG) theory as a basis for creating engaging and valuable content for business customers. Next, in an empirical study, 1170 posts from Instagram and LinkedIn were analyzed using the content analysis method. Then, the Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to identify the most successful content types that can help enhance customer engagement on social media networks. The results of the empirical research confirmed the effectiveness of the content related to companies' products and services as the most engaging content type to improve customer engagement metrics. Furthermore, the findings of the research supported the significant influence of the content types created to meet the customers' relatedness needs, and transcendence needs, on increasing their engagement on Instagram and LinkedIn. Finally, the article presents a conceptual model that can be used as a guide to implement effective B2B content marketing to enhance customer engagement on social media platforms.

Keywords: B2B content marketing, Engagement metrics; Customers' needs; Digital content; Social media networks



1. Introduction

Prior research found great potential in using social media platforms for strengthening business relationships (Sundström et al. 2020), selling processes (Kumar and Sharma, 2022), and firm performance (Cao and Weerawardena, 2023). Previous studies have also confirmed the considerable role of providing useful content for business customers in increasing customer engagement on social media platforms (Hristova, 2013; Rietveld et al., 2020; Sundström et al. 2020). However, scant insight exists regarding the theoretical aspects of customer engagement on social media in industrial markets (Hollebeek, 2019). In fact, providing relevant and engaging information to meet the different informational needs of industrial customers enables business-to-business (B2B) firms to build awareness and loyalty, which would result in achieving their main marketing goals, including customer acquisition/retention, lead generation, and enhancement in customer engagement activities on company's digital platforms (Yaghtin et al., 2020). Therefore, B2B firms need to keep a close eye on online engagement metrics, ensuring that the produced content types are in accordance with customers' needs and preferences.

The significant role of motivational drivers and emotional bonds in B2B brand communications and relationships was supported by the findings of previous studies (e.g., Youssef et al., 2018; Mogaji et al., 2018). Some studies have examined the behavioral dimensions of customer engagement (e.g., Zhang et al. 2018). Also, several studies have confirmed the significant impact of providing valuable and interactive digital content on improving customer engagement metrics (Zhang & Du, 2020; Yaghtin et al., 2020). However, the lack of an applicable motivational basis for creating valuable and engaging digital content for business customers is still felt in the marketing literature. Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to identify the most interactive and engaging content types that can help improve customer engagement on social media platforms in B2B contexts. Accordingly, the following research questions were developed:

1. Which content types are commonly used by companies on social media platforms?
2. Which content types can enhance the customers' engagement on social networks?

The article's contribution is threefold. First, this paper theoretically contributes by presenting a conceptual model for planning a digital content marketing strategy based on a motivation theory for implementation in B2B contexts. Secondly, the paper includes practical implications that could provide helpful insights to create engaging. Finally, the findings of this paper contribute to the existing knowledge on improving customer engagement using digital content in the B2B context.



2. Theoretical Framework

2.1.Characteristics of engaging content

The literature suggests that social media usage by B2B firms helps business customers gain insight into their needed content/information which translates into increased customer engagement and customer value creation while improving the firm's performance. Previous studies have investigated various characteristics of compelling digital content for business customers (e.g. Hristova, 2013; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Barry, 2015; Rancati & Gordini, 2014; Muller & Christandl, 2019; Gopalakrishna et al., 2019; Hollebeek, 2019; Yaghtin et al., 2020; Sundström et al. 2020). The general characteristics of valuable and compelling digital content for business customers have been drawn from past research (see Table 1).

Table 1. The literature review on characteristics of valuable and compelling content for B2B audiences

Characteristic	Main Finding	Sample studies
Products/service s information	The product/service-oriented content is usually related to the products/services' technical values, the company's capabilities, or the economic-financial metrics which help customers understand how those qualities would benefit them.	Hristova, 2013; Pulizzi, 2013; Rancati & Gordini, 2014; McLean, 2017; Hollebeek, 2019; Sundström et al. 2020
New technologies	The information related to new technologies allows customers to develop their understanding of cutting-edge technologies in their industry.	Hristova, 2013; Yaghtin et al., 2020; Yaghtin et al., 2022
Entertaining and compelling content	This content type could include questions and puzzles, fashion and style-oriented content, celebrities' endorsement of products/services, or adventure photos/videos.	Hristova, 2013; Pulizzi, 2013; Barry, 2015; Pagani & Malacarne, 2017; Yaghtin et al. 2020
Content related to feelings & family	Feelings and emotional appeals play a significant role in improving business customers' engagement on digital platforms.	Kemp et al., 2018; Yaghtin et al. 2020
Content related to Industry events/exhibitions	Industrial customers are looking for information about relevant industrial events such as tradeshow, conferences, and webinars.	Alias & Othman, 2018; Gopalakrishna et al., 2019
Content related to art & nature	High-arousal appeals like artworks and natural sceneries that evoke a strong aesthetic sense in the audiences can be a way to cut through the competitive social media clutter and get noticed by customers in both B2C and B2B contexts.	Yaghtin et al., 2020; Rietveld et al. 2020
Inspirational content	Inspiring, clear, and non-commercial content is valuable for customers, as it provides advice and persuades customers to think differently and innovatively about their business and their life.	Yaghtin et al., 2020; Sundström et al. 2020
Educational information	Firms can help business customers by providing educational content on how to use complex industrial	Hristova, 2013; Pulizzi, 2013; Muller & Christandl,



	products and services.	2019
Content associated with human resource appreciation	Companies are actively adopting novel initiatives through digital platforms for moving the company image to the organization of employee's choice wherein human resource is the most valuable asset of the company.	Alvarez Dominguez, 2011; Nayak et al., 2020
Content related to CSR and sustainability, and altruism	Companies that implement sustainability strategies send a strong message to their customers and society that they have a profound understanding of today's social and environmental challenges.	Lee et al., 2020; Sundström et al. 2020; Yaghtin, 2021; Yaghtin et al., 2022

Findings from previous work (summarized in Table 1) confirm the idea that the perception of attractive content by business customers is not only affected by logical processes but also influenced by soft factors including emotions, relatedness needs, and transcendence needs of business customers. Informative content could add value by satisfying the informational needs of customers or by solving a specific problem or difficulty they face in their professional life (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Additionally, considering the confirmed impacts of psychological constructs of cognition on numerous aspects of business buyer experience (McLean, 2017), the emotional and growth needs of customers could exert a notable impact on customer perceptions.

2.2. Research Framework

This article adopts the existence, relatedness, and growth (ERG) theory as a basis to create valuable content for B2B customers. According to Alderfer's (1969) ERG theory, individuals' responses to needs are not incremental, and frustration with one may be supplemented by satisfaction with the other (Hong, 2019). This assumption aligns with the results of recent studies that suggest human needs are time-dependent, and their priority will change over time (Revich, 2005; Makkonen & Sundqvist-Andberg, 2017) thereby meeting their needs is a distinct challenge for B2B firms. Within the framework of these criteria, customers may seek different classes of content based on their preliminary informational needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs, depending on their concerns in different situations.

According to ERG motivation theory, existence needs consist of different forms of preliminary needs such as safety, physiological, as well as material needs. Safety needs signify human willingness to be away from undesired feelings such as fear, threat, danger, stress, etc. Physiological needs refer to the human desire for leisure, exercise, and sleep. Physical survival needs include the individual's expectation to possess preliminary materials critical to survival, such as water, food, sleep, and clothing. The relatedness needs consist of feelings of security, belonging, and respect. A sense of security is perceived by individuals when mutual trust exists between them. The feeling of belonging refers to the desire for being away from isolation and loneliness. Belongingness is the individual's need to be an accepted



or loved member of a group or community. The sense of respect refers to the willingness to gain others' respect. Growth needs include the human needs for self-esteem and self-actualization. The need for self-esteem means the willingness to be self-productive, confident, independent, etc. Self-actualization refers to one's desire to achieve self-transcendence and to support others in acquiring their goals (Alderfer, 1969). The overview of engaging content for business customers and the review of theories in relation to the levels of human needs have led the author to posit a holistic typology to introduce main classes of content and content types under each class based on Alderfer's ERG theory:

1. Product/service-related content (preliminary needs)

The product/service-related content is usually related to the product/service's technical values, the company's capabilities, or new technologies, which help customers understand how those qualities would benefit them to make more reliable purchase decisions (Hristova, 2013). This content class consists of various forms of information related to the company's products and services, the company's experience, as well as the company's resources such as tangible assets, intangible assets, and human assets (Rancati & Gordini, 2014; Yaghtin et al. 2020).

2. Content related to feelings, emotions, and relations (relatedness needs)

Emotional digital content marketing engagement arises from the hedonic motives for satisfying relatedness needs through using digital content (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017). A customer's willingness to build a relationship with a specific brand or company extends over and beyond subjective or objective brand assessments, and it happens in response to psychological and emotional attachment to a brand (Vogel et al. 2008). This content class includes the content types associated with emotions, entertainment, and industrial events created to satisfy customers' relatedness needs.

3. Content related to transcendence Needs (growth needs)

Smith and Schwartz (1997) conceptualize self-transcendence as the values related to universalism, such as understanding, patience, caring for the welfare of humanity, nature, and the benevolence to protect people's well-being. According to Huitt (2007) people in growth levels of cognitive, aesthetic, and self-actualization seek edifying information. Individuals at this level look for information on how to connect to something beyond themselves or how to help others. Thus, this class of content involves the content types relevant to the growth needs of customers such as content that evokes the aesthetic sense of audiences, inspirational messages, educational information, and content related to CSR/sustainability/altruism.



3. Methodology

To answer the research questions, first, 24 top-ranked B2B companies with active Instagram and LinkedIn platforms were selected from the tire industry, paint & coating industry, and energy industries (Fortune, 2020). Then, the quantitative content analysis method was used to analyze the content of the last 30 Instagram and LinkedIn posts of the companies from 16 August 2020 to 14 September 2020. Each post was categorized according to its textual content, visual content, audio content, and its main context (Jaakonmäki, et al., 2017). How the engagement rate is calculated varies across different digital platforms. However, the percentage of people who react to a post in some way such as by ‘liking’ it or ‘commenting’ on it are common engagement criteria. Given the structure of Instagram and LinkedIn, and in order to obtain more uniform as well as interpretable results, the number of likes was selected as the indicator to evaluate the audience’s willingness to engage with published content, while the number of comments was used to reflect the audiences’ willingness to participate in conversations.

After classifying the main classes of content based on the theoretical framework, Amazon Rekognition software was utilized to obtain the initial data analysis of the photo and video contents. To establish the reliability of content analysis, two coders, with PhDs in marketing and extensive backgrounds of consulting experience in the selected industries, underwent the coder training process. Each coder independently coded 25% of the total sample (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Then, Cohen’s Kappa was calculated in SPSS version 22 to evaluate the inter-coder reliability. Cohen’s Kappa figures ranged from 0.87 to 0.94 respectively in terms of content types and content classes for Instagram, and from 0.89 to 0.96 in terms of content types and content classes for LinkedIn, which were well above Wimmer and Dominick’s (2006) acceptable range of 0.7 for both Instagram and LinkedIn. Following the inter-coder reliability test, the remaining posts were split and coded independently by the coders. Next, SPSS version 22 was employed to analyze the significant difference levels. For testing the normality of the samples’ distribution, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (K–S test) was used. The result of the K–S test indicated that the data distribution was not normal. Thus, the Kruskal Wallis (K-W test) test was used as an appropriate statistical test to determine whether significant differences existed in engagement levels or not. In the next section, the findings of the empirical research will be explained and discussed.

4. Findings and discussion

In response to research question 1, the results of the content analysis revealed 13 content types commonly served by B2B companies on their Instagram and LinkedIn pages (See Table 2). The identified content types were categorized under the three content classes based

10th International Conference on Opportunities and Challenges in Management, Economics and Accounting



09 - 11 June 2023

Nice, France

on Alderfer's ERG theory: i) Product/service related content: the content types identified under this class are 1) Products & services, 2) New technologies; ii) Relatedness needs: This content class includes 3) Feelings & family, 4) Adventurous, 5) Events & ceremonies, 6) Questions & puzzles, 7) Celebrities endorsement, 8) Fashions & styles; iii) Growth needs: the content types identified under this class are 9) CSR/sustainability/altruism, 10) Art & nature, 11) Human resource appreciation, 12) Educational, 13) Inspirational contents. Table 2 also indicates the results of content analysis in terms of the usage levels of content types by B2B companies. According to the results, the products/services (n=233) content type is the most commonly used content type among the total number of 1170 analyzed posts on Instagram as well as LinkedIn. It was followed by posts containing information related to CSR/sustainability/altruism activities (n=143) as well as events & ceremonies (n=138) respectively in terms of cumulative levels of usage on companies' social networks. (See Table 2). Concerning the content types published to meet the relatedness needs of audiences, a higher usage rate on Instagram can be found compared to LinkedIn. One possible explanation could be the difference in the perceived effectiveness of this class of content for encouraging customer engagement activities on Instagram and LinkedIn, probably due to the higher ratio of professional B2B audiences on LinkedIn compared to the lower rate of active B2B experts on Instagram. Regarding the contents related to the growth needs of audiences, in spite of the dissimilarity in the influence of different content types on customer engagement metrics (See Table 2), this class of content was used effectively by companies on both Instagram and LinkedIn.

Table2 Identified content classes and content types

Content Classes (Based on ERG theory)	Identified Content Types	Number of related Posts on Instagram	Number of related Posts on LinkedIn
Product/service-related content (Basic informational needs)	Products/services	124	109
	New technologies	17	43
Relatedness needs	Feelings & family	69	7
	Events/exhibitions news	74	64
	Adventurous	51	17
	Questions & puzzles	30	–
	Celebrities' endorsement	14	–
	Fashion & style	76	–
Growth needs	CSR/sustainability/altruism	74	69
	Art & nature	83	13
	Human resource appreciation	27	72
	Educational	16	29
	Inspirational	65	27
Total		720	450



Research question 2 seeks to find the most engaging and interactive content classes as well as content types that would effectively increase the audience engagement metrics (i.e., the rate of likes and the rate of comments). The mean ranks of 'likes' for different content types on Instagram and LinkedIn are indicated in Table 3. The results of the K–W test for Instagram posts revealed the significant effect of content types on the total number of likes [$H=65.19$, $df=12$, $p=0.00$] at 0.05 level. Based on the results, a higher level of engagement is ascribed to the posts containing information about companies' products/services ($M=230.94$), compared to other content types. They were followed by posts related to art & nature ($M=207.25$) as well as events & ceremonies ($M=197.75$) produced to meet the growth needs and the relatedness needs of B2B audiences respectively (See Table 3).

Table 3 Total mean ranks of likes and comments

Needs classification (Based on ERG theory)	Identified Content Types	Mean Ranks of likes		Mean Ranks of Comments	
		Instagram	LinkedIn	Instagram	LinkedIn
Product/service- related content (Basic Informational needs)	Products/services	230.94	115.74	224.08	115.62
	New technologies	125.21	87.97	127.42	84.59
Relatedness needs	Feelings & family	163.02	68.71	165.67	68.38
	Events/exhibitions news	197.75	92.41	202.21	92.32
	Adventurous	168.88	38.74	158.27	39.03
	Questions & puzzles	138.83	—	148.56	—
	Celebrities' endorsement	102.83	—	109.00	—
	Fashion & style	112.10	—	120.23	—
Growth needs	CSR/Sustainability/altruism	132.69	106.06	135.27	107.50
	Art & Nature	207.25	47.50	198.31	55.85
	Human resource appreciation	158.60	113.26	156.94	112.85
	Educational	114.17	83.62	109.58	81.26
	Inspirational	182.23	101.00	178.96	97.59

The results of the K–W test for LinkedIn posts also showed the significant effect of content types on the total number of likes [$H=46.38$, $df=9$, $p=0.00$] at 0.05 level. Once again, companies' products/services content type can be considered as the most engaging content type ($M=115.74$), followed by the posts related to human resource appreciation ($M=113.26$) and CSR/sustainability/altruism ($M=106.06$) on LinkedIn which are created to meet the audiences' growth needs based on 'likes' (See Table 3).

The results of the K–W test revealed the significant effect of content types on the total number of 'comments' on Instagram [$H=56.75$, $df=12$, $p=0.00$] at 0.05 level. In terms of the influence of content types on audience engagement in conversations, Table 3 indicates the mean ranks of comments for different content types on Instagram and LinkedIn. The posts



associated with companies' products/services ($M=224.08$), events & ceremonies ($M=202.21$), and art & Nature ($M=198.31$) respectively are the most interactive content types to enhance customer engagement in conversations on Instagram.

Similarly, the results of the K-W test revealed the significant effect of content type on the total number of comments on LinkedIn [$H=42.48$, $df=9$, $p=0.00$] at 0.05 level. The highest mean ranks of 'comments' on LinkedIn are similar to the highest mean ranks of 'Likes'; as such, the posts related to companies' products/services ($M=115.62$), human resource appreciation ($M=112.85$), and CSR/sustainability/altruism ($M=107.50$) are the major content types to increase customer engagement in conversations on LinkedIn. As also supported by the previous studies (Hristova, 2013), the results of the empirical research confirm the positive impact of the posts containing information related to companies' products/services as the most effective content type to enhance the customer engagement metrics (i.e., the rate of likes and the rate of comments). However, in addition to the product/service-related content class, the content types associated with the relatedness needs and the growth needs of industrial customers have also a significant influence on the customer engagement metrics (See Table 3).

In particular, the results revealed that the information related to 'events & ceremonies' is the most effective content type to boost the audience engagement metrics compared to other content types associated with the relatedness needs of B2B audiences (See Table 3). This result aligns with Dariusz and Marcin's (2017) finding that B2B organizations actively seek information concerning B2B exhibitions and trade fairs. Additionally, 'feelings & family' and 'adventurous' content types positively impact audience engagement on social networks. These results are consistent with Odden's (2012) finding, stating that customers expect brands to invest in the relationship with them before they get into a buying process. Also, Swani et al. (2013) study, comparing social media content between B2B and B2C, indicated that there are reasons to believe that a combination of brand-centered and emotional messages, with the avoidance of commercial statements, will help companies to adopt a pull approach rather than push approach to social media messaging.

Among the content types concerning the growth needs of B2B audiences, the posts related to 'art and nature' and 'human resource appreciation' are the most effective content types to enhance the customer engagement metrics, respectively, on Instagram and LinkedIn (See Table 3). As customers process numerous posts in their social media streams, aesthetic appeals like what can be seen in artworks and natural sceneries can be an effective way to cut through the competitive social media clutter and get noticed (Rietveld et al., 2020). Furthermore, the results of the study about the significant influence of this content class on improving customer engagement support the previous findings (e.g., Hinterhuber, 2015; van Zeeland & Hensler, 2018) suggesting that emotions, humanity, and transcendence have found their way as evocative values into the rational world of industrial marketing.



5. Implications

5.2.Theoretical Implications

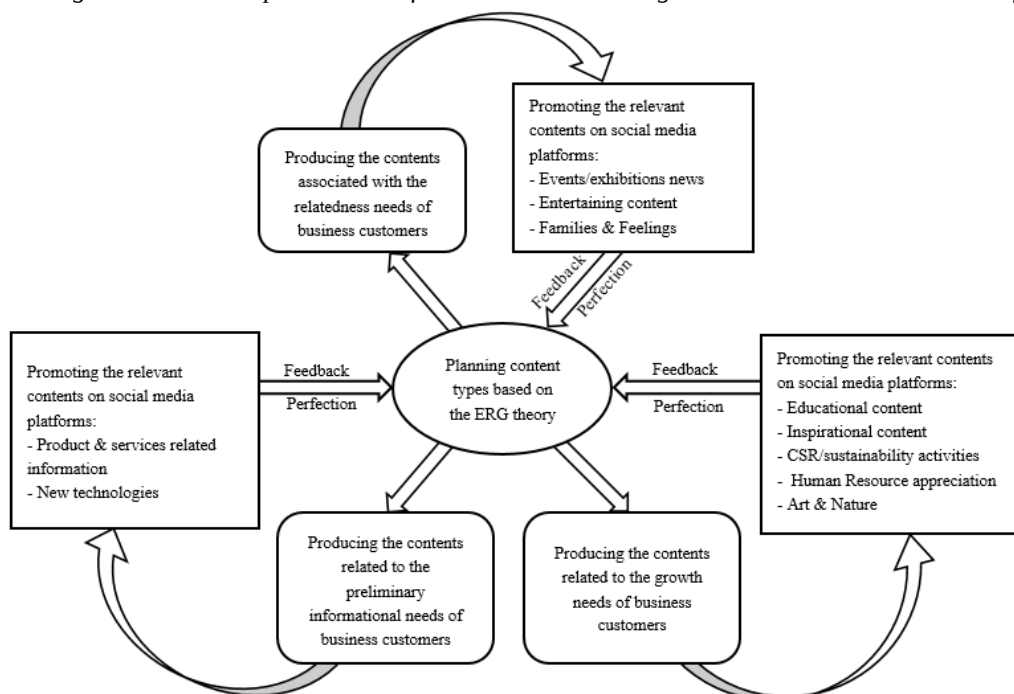
In light of the findings of previous sections and based on the ERG theory, this paper provides a conceptual model to implement effective B2B content marketing that may help enhance customer engagement on social media platforms (Figure 1). This model elaborates on how engaging digital content can be planned, produced, promoted, and perfected using a goal-oriented repeating cycle (Didner, 2014). According to this model, at the planning stage, content types are planned based on ERG motivation theory and the company's marketing objectives. At the production stage, content types are created in accordance with the preliminary informational needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs of audiences. Then, at the promotion stage, business customers who look for relevant information can consume their required content depending on their concerns and preferences. This model also highlights the essential role of monitoring customers' feedback for improving the planned content types at the perfection stage. Furthermore, the use of customer feedback on social media platforms allows companies to deepen their understanding of customers' needs and concerns. This could also lead to customer engagement in the co-creation of value through extracting creative ideas (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Not only quantitative metrics but also qualitative feedback on social networks can be used by firms to obtain customer insight for improving content marketing strategy (Lee, et al., 2020). Further, applying this model to producing a comprehensive content portfolio enables B2B firms to publish more relevant and engaging content, while also helping B2B audiences to obtain their required information with less effort (Yaghtin, 2021). Accordingly, the use of this conceptual model could result in improved customer engagement metrics on social networks, which would ultimately lead to a higher level of customer satisfaction (Lee et al., 2020).

5.2.Managerial Implications

The results of this research can help executives make better decisions about using more engaging and interactive content types considering their particular marketing goals via social media platforms. The results of the study confirmed the effectiveness of the content related to companies' products/services as the most valuable and interactive content type helping industrial customers to make more reliable purchase decisions; thus, B2B companies should place priority upon creating this content type. Furthermore, it is critical to consider the relatedness needs and growth needs of industrial customers that can help improve audience engagement on social media platforms. This is because these content classes can also aid B2B companies to drive a more committed and meaningful relationship with customers. In addition, applying visual-based social platforms provides the opportunity for firms to get noticed by evoking the aesthetic sense of audiences using high-arousal aesthetic appeals in

their posts, thereby cutting through the competitive social media clutter. Finally, after the dissemination of valuable and engaging digital content through social media platforms, B2B companies should consciously monitor audiences' feedback to improve the content marketing cycle, since customers' needs are changing continuously, and their priority for the content may change over time, depending on their particular concerns and preferences in different situations.

Figure 1. The conceptual model of B2B content marketing based on ERG motivation theory



5.3. Implications for future research

This study provides a motivational basis to create valuable and engaging digital content; however, given the limitations of this research, future research could address at least the following three issues: 1- Since this paper focused on offering a theoretical framework for publishing engaging content for industrial customers, regarding the fundamental differences in the nature of B2B and B2C environments, the author invites other scholars to compare effective content types for enhancing customer engagement on social media in B2C and B2B contexts. 2- This is outside of the scope of this research to investigate details of the particular nuances of interactive visual contents since visual-based social media are growing increasingly and have become an integrated part of the customer engagement strategy of many companies in B2B and B2C contexts, thus, the author proposes that further research



should be undertaken to uncover evocative, informative, and emotional appeals of visual content for driving customer engagement on social media platforms. 3- The empirical research in this study was limited to three industries, 24 companies, and two social media platforms; there is, therefore, a potential for future studies to include more industries, companies, as well as other visual-based and textual-based social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter).

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10th International Conference on Opportunities and Challenges in Management, Economics and Accounting



09 - 11 June 2023

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09 - 11 June 2023

Nice, France

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09 - 11 June 2023

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