

An Investigation of Social Media Strategies and Authenticity as they Relate to Engagement Rate Increase

Luis C.M.O.de Almeida*

Associate Professor of Mass Communications at Claflin University, South Carolina USA.

Abstract

Media professionals have been using social media to measure the success its strategic plans, enhance professional networks, and advance understanding of the medium for account growth. However, a measurable strategy of social media that work across all platforms and bypasses the changes in the social media algorithm has been limited. This article introduced important social media best practices and results of its effectiveness in social media account growth. Finally, it ends with important recommendations for further studies that the researcher argues are the next steps for the advancement of studies of social media.

Keywords: Media • Social media • Strategy • Engagement rates • Technology • Communication

Introduction

Social media engagement has been a topic of much discussion among academics and practitioners of media since the advent of social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

A large number of organizations are striving to increase their web presence, drive web traffic using social media networks to sell products and services or growing their existing brands while using a wide variety of social media tools, especially twitter [1-4].

Because we live in a society driven by social media and very few studies have been written on the topic of systematically growing a social media account, the researcher decided to investigate and test which types of social media strategies work best for growing a personal social media instagram account along with which type of content designers should produce in order to increase the rates of social media engagement [5].

In this article, the researcher will present important results relating to social media content quality and authenticity on-line and off-line.

The results of this research study can be of tremendous value to personal brands, institutions of higher learning and/or non-profit organizations wanting to increase their social media engagements gradually and steadily.

Brief literature review

Increasing social media engagement is hard work. Social media engagement is usually achieved through repeated participation and frequency of use [6,7], where authenticity plays a role [6]. Authenticity is crucial for brands to grow in social media [8] and quality of content has been argued to have an impact in engagement rates in social media networks especially in relation to image quality [9].

There is some evidence to support that higher engagement rates in social media networks could be a result of producing better and more professional image content [9].

However, social media networks vary substantially from one another which can have a direct impact on engagement rates because each network has their own structural DNA [7] and are made for different purposes and use [10].

In a study conducted by [11], the researchers found that Facebook promoted social but not academic engagement in higher educational institutions, even when subjects spent hours on the platform [12]. Perhaps, this disparity in engagement rate responses are attributed to social media networks providing different styles of communication opportunities for its users [13], which could result in possible mixed engagement rate results.

Other variables contributing to this disparity include time, frequency of use, along with the actual textual information included in

*Address for Correspondence: Dr.Luis C.M.O.de Almeida, Associate Professor of Mass Communications at Claflin University, South Carolina USA., Email: lca120@gmail.com

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the post itself [6]. Rus and Cameron have stated that imagery emerged as a strong predictor of engagement rates in their study. Messages composed with images outperformed those without having images in rates of liking and sharing [14]. The same was found in a study conducted by [9] where the researchers empirically tested the effects of image content quality and social media engagement.

When it comes to social media and loneliness, a picture on Instagram is worth more than one thousand words on the social media platform Twitter [15]. The use of external links in social media posts predicted lower sharing rates while positive identity perceived by the users predicted lower commenting. In addition, illustrated imagery resulted in less engagements and less illustrated imagery [14]. In a more recent study conducted by [16], the researcher concluded that when it comes to business to business engagement rates, Instagram is the leading platform with an average engagement rate of 22.53%, followed by P interest with 15.88% and Facebook with 5.99%.

Surprisingly, the higher engagement rate on Instagram by industry is higher education with 3.39% engagement rate per post followed by sports teams with 2.28% and nonprofits at 2.14%. The researcher proposed increasing segmentation, ad boosting and dark posts for increasing post relevance, falling short of data to support engagement rates [16]. There have been a number of studies relating to social media in the past decade including studies stating that the new media is beneficial for professionals to use [17], that Instagram is less about making memories to keep for life and more about catering to a particular audience [18], and that brands can be seen and named in the shared photo's caption [19]. However, very few studies investigated which social media strategies work best to grow a social media account and whether authenticity is really a variable that drives social media engagement empirically along with quality of posts. This study attempted to answer the following research questions- what are the best social media strategies to grow a social media account? Does authenticity play a role in increasing engagement rates? Is the quality of imagery shared impacts rates of engagement?

Methodology

The study was a blend of content analysis [20] and action research [21]. The first portion of this research study was a content analysis. A content analysis is a method of research where researchers can use to study artifacts and documents in various formats, including pictures, audio, video, and text [22] in an attempt to discover how often a phenomenon occurs and which impact it can have on variables investigated.

The researcher decided to conduct the content analysis first in order to discover which social media strategies were the best ones to investigate social media account growth and engagement rates increase from a selected number of social media authorities who have written books on the topic and/or have provided relevant and impactful YouTube video content on the subject. For this study, the researcher chose to read three social media related books titled, "Jab, Jab, Jab, Right Hook," "Social Media Engagement For Dummies," and "Instagram Secrets" in order to find out which social media strategies works best to growth accounts and increase engagement rates. The researcher also analyzed content from one

hundred Gary Vaynerchuck videos on YouTube, ranging from consulting sections to podcast interviews explaining how higher social media engagement is attained [23,24]. Some of the videos that the researcher watched were, "One is greater than zero," "The power of social media marketing in 2018," and "The number one LinkedIn strategy for 2019."

Some of these articles were, "How to Use Facebook Insights to Improve Your Engagement," "10 Twitter Tactics to Increase Your Engagement," and "Social Photos Generate More Engagement: New Research."

The process of selection and watching the videos, along with reading the books and the forty social media articles took approximately one hundred hours, seven days a week, for a period of three months over the summer of 2018 and three days a week for two months during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019.

The second part of this research study was an action research project where the researcher sought to discover which social media strategies worked best and whether authenticity played a role in increasing social media engagement, along with bots, pods and different post content produced with iPhone 8 and a DSLR with and without off-line communication. Authenticity was defined in this study as posts produced with a smartphone without the use of photo manipulations, raw and sometimes with lower content quality and off-line communication.

In order to test which strategies worked the best, the researcher conducted two independent pilots testing different strategies as they related to engagement rate growth. In order to answer the authenticity research question, the researcher randomly selected 18 professionally produced social media posts taken with a professional camera and edited with Adobe Photoshop 2019 and compared them with raw photos taken from a smartphone, iPhone 8. Some of the professionally produced social media posts also included a professionally designed branded skin along with the pictures themselves.

The researcher posted content at least once a day for seven days a week during the period of this study, minimum. The social media platform instagram was used in this research study as the social media platform of choice to host the many posts analyzed in this study. The second part of the study took several months to complete and calculate. A t-test was used to calculate the results of this study along with differences in percentages of engagement rates. The alpha level in this study was set to $p=.05$ and frequencies were counted to test the several categories investigated in this research study.

Results

The results of this content analysis generated important and intriguing pragmatic findings relating to social media production and growth strategy. The results of the first portion of the study indicated that great content, consistency of posting; pods, focused hash tags, off-line communication, and GaryVee's 1.80 are excellent ways to drive social media engagement up. The use of follow/unfollow bots were also mentioned as a way to increase engagement rates in instagram specifically but with less frequency and with more negative connotation throughout the literature. Great content was mentioned

positively the most (n=135), followed by frequency of postings (n=127) and authenticity (n=81). Bots were mentioned throughout, especially when using the platform telegram (n=30) (Table 1).

Table 1. Most successful code counts and percentage of mentioning from content analysis.

Ranking	Categories	Code counts	Percentage
1	Great content	135	36%
2	Frequency of postings	127	34%
3	Authenticity	81	21%
4	Bots	30	8%
5	Total	373	100%

The follow/unfollow bot, consistency of postings and the use of pods strategy proved to be helpful to increase engagement rates, despite the negative connotations expressed by [6] and [7]. There were 9007 likes and almost 147 likes received after using these strategies, posting authentic iPhone 8 daily posts, sometimes multiple times a day. The engagement rate received was 32.46%, which was very high for the account. The typical engagement rate for the account under study, without the use of bots, was around 6% (Table 2).

Table 2. Follow/unfollow and pod strategies engagement rate results.

Ranking	Categories	Number of posts	Engagement rate increase
1	Follow/unfollow bot, consistency of postings, and use of pods	50	32.46%
2	No unfollow bot, consistency of postings, and use of pods	50	5.97%

Even though the follow/unfollow bot and the use of bots assisted with the exponential growth in engagement rates during this study, engagement rates decreased exponentially after the researcher stopped using the follow/unfollow bot technique and telegram pods. It can be argued that the engagement rates that the account received using these two strategies (follow/unfollow bot and pods) were artificial and not very sustainable for professional use in the long run.

Based on the results of this study, there are reasons to believe that professionally de-signed posts won't result in higher engagement rate scores when compared with authentic content produced with iPhone 8 along with the use of pods included as a parallel strategy. After a period of seven weeks, authentic content along with the use of instagram bots was the driving force to produce a 443% growth in follow-ship in a personal Instagram account. Engagement increased exponentially in both authentic and professionally made content resulting in over 1000 likes in the account during the study's period. The engagement rate was around 60% during the seven week period for the authentic photo group versus 57% for the professionally (DSLR) group, which confirmed that pods can have an inflated impact

on engagement rate when used in combination with any methods of content production (Table 3).

Table 3. Authentic iPhone vs. professionally DSLR results with pods use.

Method	Categories	Time period	Number of posts	Likes	Comments	Use of pods	Engagement rate
1	Authentic photo content using iPhone 8	7 Weeks	50	1876	81	Yes	60%
2	"Professionally" Photo made content with DSLR production	7 Weeks	50	1825	83	Yes	57%

There was a large difference in engagement rates between photos taken with a DSLR versus photos taken with a smartphone in terms of overall engagement when pods were not used and off-line communication was introduced in the Authentic Photo Content using iPhone 8 categories. After an examination of 18 Instagram posts in a period of a week, the mean engagement rate when content was produced with a DSLR camera was 18.94. The mean engagement rate when content was produced with an iPhone 8 supported by off-line communication was 31.53. According to the results of this study, authenticity seemed to play a major role in social media engagement rates when combined with off-line communication and controlling for pods (Table 4).

Table 4. Differences between authentic iPhone 8 and offline COMM vs. DSLR production.

Method	Categories	Time period	Number of posts	Use of pods	Engagement rate
1	Authentic photo content using iPhone 8+offline communication	2 Week	18	No	31.53%
2	"Professionally" Photo made content with DSLR production without off-line communication.	2 Week	18	No	18.94%

The results of the t-test showed a statistically significant difference between posts produced with a DSLR and with a smartphone beyond descriptive statistics when off-line communication was introduced in the authentic photo content using iPhone 8 categories. (The t-value was 3.61. The p-value was .001. The result was significant at p<.05) (Table 5).

Table 5. T-Test results comparing authentic photo with off-line COMM and pro DSLR production on engagement rate.

Categories	n	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Authentic	18	33.2	15.69	3.61584	17	0.001
DSLR	18	18.9	6.14			

Although the engagement rate in the authentic photo content using iPhone 8 device along with off-line communication category were lower than the authentic photo content using iPhone 8 with pods (60%) and the follow/unfollow bots, consistency of posting and the use of pods (32.46%), the account containing authentic content supported by off-line communication continued to grow at similar rates after the study was over which seems to indicate that using a combination of off-line communication and authenticity are better strategies for growth and engagement in social media than using the follow/unfollow and pods strategies, despite what has recommended [25]. The results of this study didn't seem to support the findings presented by [9] that image quality alone results in higher levels of engagement in social media accounts.

A possible reason for why telegram pods, which are groups intended to like and comment on each other user's posts for account growth and follow/unfollow bot strategies didn't work well after the study was completed was because users who use pods and follow/unfollow bot strategies for rising engagement rates and account growth aren't truly interested or invested in the content [7]. Instead, they seem to be interested in exchanging engagement for their own account growth without truly "liking" what they like and comment. As a consequence, engagement rate dropped after the mutual engagement exchange period ended and when particular users ceased to participate in the exchange process halfway.

Discussion

Although this study quantitatively confirmed that authenticity, consistency of postings, pods, off-line communication, and follow/unfollow bot strategies can be used to grow social media accounts on Instagram, there are several reasons to believe that the results of this study may be inconclusive. The content analysis was conducted by the researcher. The researcher only read three books on the topic of social media engagement and investigated just a fraction of all the social media strategies contained on YouTube. Gary Vaynerchuck and Jeremy McGilvrey are only two experts among the many landscape of social media gurus. Maybe if the researcher read books written by other social media experts, the results of this research study would have been different.

The website socialmediaexaminer.com, the site that the researcher used to analyze written content relating to growing social media accounts on-line, had thousands of articles on the topic of social media growth. The researcher only read a fraction of these articles which could have had an impact on which variables to the researcher decided to observe in this study.

In addition, the researcher only analyzed 18 social media posts in order to answer the authenticity question. Perhaps, if the researcher were to produce more social media posts with a DSLR, the results of this study could have been different. When investigating the

differences in growth between authentic photos content produced with an iPhone 8 and professionally quality content using a DSLR, the researcher introduced another variable in the study-Off-line communication. Perhaps, professionally produced content alone would have resulted in higher engagement rates when compared with authentic iPhone 8 photos only without off-line communication.

Further studies are strongly recommended and necessary. Studies that investigate the use of photos versus video engagements, Instagram stories versus regular posts, and relational studies testing the correlation between frequency of posts and increases in reach are particularly urgent and necessary.

Conclusion

The results of this study pointed to the conclusion that authenticity, consistency of posting, pods, off-line communication, and follow/unfollow bot strategies can be used to increase engagement rates in Instagram social media accounts. However, the follow/unfollow bots and pods strategies seemed to create artificial engagement growth in relation to using a combination of authentic content complemented by off-line communication. Authentic content produced with iPhone 8 along with off-line communication was the best strategy to grow a social media account and have steady growth after this study was completed. The use of telegram pods and follow/unfollow Instagram bots helped a social media account to grow but the researcher has reasons to believe, based on the data collected and engagement rate observed after the conclusion of the study, that account growth using pods and bots was artificial and therefore, not recommended by the researcher. Authenticity played a major role in increasing engagement rates in social media accounts. In fact, Authenticity assisted the researcher with growing a personal account on Instagram and raised engagement rates as stated by Vaynerchuck considerably. Contrary to the advices provided by McGilvrey, the use of engagement pods on Instagram and follow/unfollow bots proved not to be a good strategy for growth in the long run. In the short run, it created the illusion that an account was growing in popularity when in reality it wasn't. This study somehow contradicts the findings presented by Li and Xie in regards to image content and social media engagement. The results of this study didn't totally reject it because another variable, off-line communication was used to investigate the relation between image content and social media engagement rate increase.

In conclusion, based on the results of this study, social media strategists and managers should plan to design and develop more authentic social media content posts using smartphones, along with a strong off-line communication strategy than simply producing costly "professional grade" content for Instagram delivery without the support of a person to mediate engagement.

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