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The Social Media Use of the 20 Largest Listed Austrian Companies – Effective Networking Tool or Mere Showcase Function?

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Abstract
According to Grunig (2009), social media offer companies the potential to communicate with their various stakeholders in a two-way and interactive, symmetrical and dialogical manner. However, there is the possibility that communicators use new media in the same way as old media and that the potential of interactivity is not exploited through a one-sided use of the channels. Zerfaß & Piwinger (2014) also express this fear and emphasize that corporate social media channels often simply fulfill a showcase function. So how does this play out in reality? This study uses a four-stage model to examine the intensity of interactions on individual posts. A distinction is made between low interaction (reactions/likes/shares), increased interaction (comments), dialog (users communicate with each other or the company communicates with users) and digital network structure (the company enters into a communicative exchange with users and the users communicate with each other). The object of the study was 1,993 posts of the 20 largest listed Austrian companies (ATX companies) on the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. The study period was three months. On all four social media platforms, all forms of interaction could be identified. However, the main functions of social media channels, enabling dialogue and networking, could only be observed to a small extent.

Keywords: Social media, interaction, network structure, dialogue, ATX company.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Social media are now firmly integrated into our everyday lives. Be it to get information, to get in touch with other people, to be entertained or simply to distract ourselves. They have a lasting influence on society and the communication that goes with it. Companies want to take advantage of this fact and offer their customers a platform to get in touch with them. The goal of companies is also to provide customers with information and news regarding their company. A company must ask itself several questions in advance, such as which channels do I want to use to reach my target group, should one channel or several be used or with which content should the channels be used? However, the focus of social media use should always be on the dialog element, the interaction with the recipients. If this is not desired, other channels of one-way communication, such as newsletters or websites, will take effect. Today, almost every company tries to use social media channels for its own purposes. But do these channels also fulfill their functions of dialogic communication?

In the context of this work, this question is examined. In doing so, the theoretical perspective of communication in connection with social media will first be addressed and a basic definition of interaction stages will be provided. Based on this structure, it will be analyzed how the 20 ATX companies (as of October 2019) use their social media channels. Another goal of this work is to serve as a basis for further research and to highlight possible new areas of research.

2. Relevance and research questions

Social media have permanently changed society and communication. The Social Internet (Web 2.0) makes every person potentially a communicator - agenda-setting and gatekeeper

functions are shifting from journalists to users of social channels. As a result, corporate communicators also face an increasingly diverse, self-aware and critical public. To strengthen credibility, companies should therefore establish themselves as dialogue-ready interlocutors in social networks (Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010). Social media activities of companies, as well as their interactions on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, are classified as symmetric communication (Grunig & Hunt 1984; Gunig 2009). Grunig (2009) predicts that if the full potential of social media is exploited, corporate public relations will become more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible. However, he sees a danger in the fact that communicators in principle use new media in the same way as old media and the potential of interactivity, through a one-sided playing of the channels, is not used accordingly. Zerfaß & Piwinger (2014) also express this fear and emphasize that social media channels of companies often simply fulfill a showcase function.

The aim of this scientific paper is to analyze whether or to what extent interaction with or among users takes place, what the level of interaction is, and whether a classic digital network structure, as suggested by Meffert, Burmann, & Kirchgeorg (2015), can also be observed in practice. Or do social media actually fulfill only a showcase function, as assumed by Zerfaß & Piwinger (2014)? Based on these considerations, the following research questions arise:

How developed is the level of interaction in the social media channels of the 20 ATX companies?

Do social media channels serve the companies as instruments of dialogic communication or are these channels merely used as one-way communication tools comparable to showcases?

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Definition of Social Media and Social Web

Social media refers to media technologies that enable users to get in touch with other users via the Internet. Or as Kaplan and Haenlein ((2010, p.61) define it: "Social Media is a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." The classic sender-receiver model has been replaced by social media at the latest, and a social dimension now comes to the fore due to the possibility of interaction and networking (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2010). Today, social media have not only proven to be powerful communication tools, but have also brought about a significant democratization of corporate communication. Never before has it been so easy to get in touch with companies, never before has it been so easy to contact a specific company representative directly. Social networks have the characteristic of connecting users with each other.

Social media describe communication channels and communication platforms on which not only private individuals but also companies are active. Moreover, social media can be defined as an accumulation of relationships, behaviors, feelings, empiricism, and interactions between consumers and brands, where two-way communication takes place (Mróz-Gorgoń & Peszko, 2016). The benefit of these digital technologies is to provide people with a way to connect, interact, and produce content (Lewis, 2010). The difference between social media and traditional mass media is the possibility to communicate "one-to-many" as well as "one-to-one" at the same time. The focus of social media is therefore also on dialog, disputes and discussion - the publication of information is only the beginning of the communication process.

Social media are closely related to the term social web. Social web refers to the place in which users reside and in which interactions between stakeholders take place. Gruber (2008, p.4) refers to the social web as an "ecosystem of participation, where value is created by the aggregation of many individual user contributions."

Social media are most effective tools when it comes to interaction and establishing a connection between communicators and recipients. The posted information can be modified, forwarded, added to, shared and commented on (Mróz-Gorgoń & Peszko, 2016). Social media thus characterize themselves as relational (Neuberger, 2017), networked (Pleil & Zerfaß, 2014), multimedia (Issing & Klimsa, 2002), interactive (Neuberger, 2017) online media that favor open access and the use of a global language (Tewes, 2016).

3.2. Interaction

Interaction is understood as a social action context in which at least two or more participants must be present. These use a certain symbolism (language, non-verbal means, etc.) and try to influence the other actors or the situation. There is a reciprocal reference to each other. The basic prerequisite for this is a common context, as well as a uniform symbolism and self-revelation (Mróz-Gorgoń & Peszko, 2016). In relation to social media, interaction is understood as an engagement of the user with the brand or the channel in question on social media platforms, for example, following, replying, tweeting, sharing, liking, or participating. Interaction is also reaction. Interaction on social media occurs on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). The interaction spectrum is broad. Starting from context-independent user utterances (e.g., "First!") to the use of pictorial signs (e.g., emojis) to dialogic expressions, it covers a wide range of different utterance representations. For better differentiation, the concept of interaction is divided into four levels of expression for this paper.

3.2.1. Low interaction

Elter (2013) refers to the likes or shares of a contribution as minor interaction on the grounds that this is already an expression of will and thus more than just passive reception. Neuberger (2017) sees "[...] interaction as a subset of communication [...]" and communication is seen as interactive or reciprocal "[...] when a human counterpart responds individually to a request and a more or less long chain of interactions results." In the case of a share, an external contribution is shared with one's own network and thus an expression of will takes place, which can still be commented on if necessary. In the case of a Like, a post is reacted to; a follow-up reaction by the company or another user, however, is not possible. The five Facebook Reactions "Love", "Haha", "Wow", "Sad" and "Angry" serve as an extension of the Like button and give users more options for expressing their reaction to a post. However, Reactions are not equivalent to emojis or individual icons (Facebook Brand Resource Center - Reactions, 2018) and therefore are not considered individual reactions. Based on this reasoning, Likes, Shares, and Reactions are defined as low interactions in this study.

3.2.2. Increased interaction

According to Neuberger (2017), an interaction is characterized by the reference to the initial message. The factual reference to the initial message (context) can only occur if the messages are created and disseminated one after the other, which also makes the temporal sequence crucial for an interaction. In addition, the social relationship distinguishes an interaction from classic mass communication. A message is targeted to an individual or a group of recipients and not to an indefinite mass (Neuberger, 2017). If we assume Neuberger's (2017) definition of interaction as an individual context related reaction to posts with the possibility of a follow-up reaction, we can speak of increased interaction in the case of a user comment.

3.2.3. Dialogue

A dialog is a communication process whose goal is to mutually influence the

participating communication partners through interrelated acts of communication and understanding (Röttger, Kobusch, & Preusse, 2018). According to Pleil & Zerfaß (2014), Weigand (2012), and Lies (2015), one speaks of a dialogue when a "turntaking" or role change takes place or is at least possible between communicator and recipient. Röttger et al. (2018) define a dialogue as a linguistic interaction based on reciprocity. At least two persons or groups of persons alternate between speech and counter-speech. This does not necessarily have to happen "face-to-face." In the context of corporate communication in social media, a dialog thus takes place when a company responds to a user's comment on a post by the company and thus a change of roles between communicator and recipient takes place (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2012). However, dialog can also be a communication process among the recipients, i.e., when the users communicate with each other (without the influence of the company).

3.2.4. Network structure

According to Meffert et al. (2015), a network structure exists in the context of social media when all participants in an interaction come into contact with each other without restriction. This then includes both the interaction between the company and the user, as well as the interaction between the recipients themselves. The potential for network-oriented interaction is a characteristic of social media, as it bypasses the showcase function of media (for example, the company's own homepage) and thus enables active participation.

3.3. Communication model according to Grunig and Hunt (1984)

In 1984, Grunig and Hunt divided public relations into four stages. Stage 1 is publicity. Its primary goal is to generate attention. The disadvantage of this level is the absence of the truth criterion. This means that although one understands how to reach the public, little value is placed on truthful content. In the next stage, the information factor is added. The goal changes from attention to the transfer of content. Stage 1 and 2 both still use exclusively one-way communication. Stage 3 switches to two-way communication. Stage 3, called Asymmetric Communication, is about persuasion. To influence and convince your stakeholders is in the focus. However, one does not try to generate feedback and create improvements from it. In stage 4, one actively implements two-way communication. The new goal is called dialogue between stakeholders and the company. The advantage is that the feedback might even be implemented and thus continuous improvement would be possible for the company. The stages influence each other. More specifically, stage 4 cannot be obtained without stage 1, as attention must first be created in order to move to dialogue (Röttger et al., 2018). In the age of widespread social media, entry into stage four is easier and also more widespread according to the Grunig-Hunt model of communication described above. This symmetrical communication, which is perceived as ideal, is virtually fundamental and style-forming for social media.

4. Methodology

The basis of the quantitative research is the presented structure of interaction. It was determined when there is low interaction (shares/likes), increased interaction (written comments), dialogue (company interacts with user or user interacts with user) or network structure (company interacts with users and users interact with each other). The interaction structure was examined per post. The highest interaction level in each case was attributed to the post. For example, if a post was followed by 20 likes and a written comment, then that post was categorized as "increased interaction" according to the highest level of interaction "comment". In addition, we analyzed the interactions related to the posts and channels. This was also done purely quantitatively.

At the beginning of the study, all 20 ATX companies as of October 2019 were examined

to determine on which social media channels they are represented and whether these are publicly accessible. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram were identified as the relevant social media channels for this study. The research period of the posts extended from April 01, 2019 to June 30, 2019. A total of 1,993 posts were evaluated and categorized. Thereby, 835 posts on Twitter, 246 posts on Instagram, 755 posts on Facebook and 157 posts on YouTube were analyzed.

5. Findings

Most interactions (Figure 1) - a total of 119,523 - were observed on the respective Facebook pages of the ATX companies. This corresponds to a share of 78% of the total number of responses surveyed. If the view is further differentiated, this result is reinforced: Facebook posts accounted for 41% of the total.

However, the interaction share is 78% of the total interactions. This means that Facebook was by far the most interactive social media channel among the ATX companies during the study period. Instagram follows with 24,744 reactions (16%) and Twitter with 7720 (5%). It is worth noting that the total share of posts on Twitter was 40 percent. However, the interaction level was only 5 percent. The data show that Twitter is thus used by some companies, but that there are hardly any reactions to the tweets from the users. Bringing up the rear in terms of the share of total interactions was YouTube with 965 reactions (7 percent).

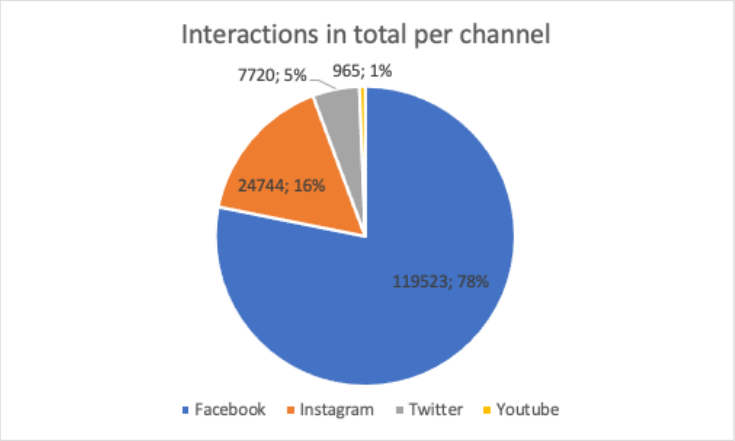

Figure 1. All interactions per channel. Facebook is the medium with the most interactions in external communications. At 78 percent, this social media channel is well ahead of Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

1,993 posts in four different social media channels were analyzed and categorized in this study on the basis of an interaction structure. However, as the results of the analysis show (Figure 2), there is little symmetrical two-way communication on the social media channels of the 20 ATX companies. Only 4.72% of the posts were found to have the interaction level "network structure". Even the posts to which there was no reaction at all, namely 4.92%, were higher than the network structure percentage. In about 13% of the contributions, dialogue took place in the reactions. It was noticeable that the dialogue took place exclusively among the users. Corporate communicators mostly remained passive after a posting. Dialogue and network structure were thus found in only 18.2% of all posts, i.e., symmetrical two-way communication and thus the actual strength of social media functionalities.

Increased interactions such as comments occurred in 17.52% of all posts. However, the "low interaction" category accounted for the largest share of reactions. Almost 60% of all posts had likes, shares or emojis as the highest interaction feature and were thus assigned to the "low interaction" category.

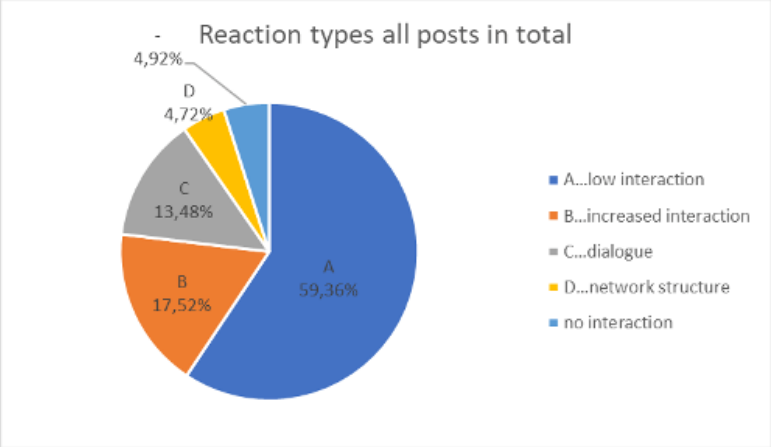

Figure 2. Reaction types of all posts. Of the 1,993 posts examined, almost 60 percent had a low level of interaction. A network structure developed in only 4.72 percent of all posts.

A closer look at FACEBOOK shows that 15 of the 20 ATX companies in Austria were represented on Facebook during the survey period. On the Facebook page of Raiffeisen International AG, the reactions could not be measured, as the comments were not displayed, but only the number. Immofinanz AG, Sparkassen Immobilien, AT & S Austria Technologie & Systemtechnik AG and Schoeller Beckmann Oilfield Equipment AG were not represented on Facebook during the research period. Andritz AG did have a Facebook presence, but the last entry was in 2018.

Verbund AG was the most active on Facebook with 168 posts during the survey period, followed by Telekom Austria AG (149), Bawag Group (102), Erste Bank (95) and Raiffeisenbank International AG (61). However, Raiffeisenbank's posts could not be categorized because user comments were not visible. A total of 755 Facebook posts were rated according to their level of interactivity. Table 1 shows the detailed categorization of the 755 Facebook posts analyzed.

Table 1. Categorization of all Facebook posts in the survey period. A network communication structure has developed in 23 percent of all Telekom posts.

Company	**Posts**	**Low IA**	**Increased IA**	**Dialogue**	**Network**
Telekom AG – A1	149	25.50%	16.11%	34.90%	23.49%
Bawag	102	57.84%	18.62%	20.58%	2.94%
CA Immobilien	11	63.63%	9.09%	27.27%	-
DO & CO	10	80.00%	20.00%	-	-
Erste Bank Group	95	31.58%	32.63%	29.47%	6.32%
FACC AG	43	53.49%	25.58%	20.93%	-
Lenzing	9	55.55%	33.33%	11.11%	-
OMV	27	29.63%	37.04%	25.93%	7.41%
Post AG	30	20.00%	26.67%	40.00%	13.33%
UNIQA	56	57.14%	26.78%	14.29%	1.79%
Verbund	168	70.83%	13.69%	11.31%	4.17%
Voestalpine	36	38.89%	25.00%	19.44%	16.67%
Wienerberg	19	73.68%	26.32%	-	-
total	***755***				

Telekom, Post, Erste Bank and Voestalpine probably manage their social media channels professionally. At least that is what the data suggests. At Telekom, for example, network structures were observed in 25 percent of all Facebook posts. This means that Telekom responded to user reactions and that users also communicated with each other. However, the table shows that this is the exception among the ATX companies. The categories low or increased interaction predominate.

In the evaluation of the social media channel INSTAGRAM, of the 20 ATX companies, only 9 were represented on Instagram, of which seven were really active. Activity in this context means that at least one post was made online per week. The three most active companies were Bawag Group AG (43 posts), Post AG (43), Verbund AG (41) and Raiffeisenbank International (35). On Instagram, it was revealed that with a total of 246 posts, network communication had occurred in only four posts. In 20 posts, there was a dialogue elements.

Eight of the 20 ATX companies use YOUTUBE as a communication channel, with the frequency of use ranging from 2 posts to 51 posts during the three-month period under review. The 3 most active companies were Andritz AG (51 posts), OMV AG (42 posts) and Voestalpine (23 posts). Also active on YouTube are Österreichische Post AG, Verbund AG, Raiffeisen International AG, Bawag Group AG and FACC AG. For example, DO & CO Rest & Catering, Uniqa Insurance AG, Telekom Austria AG and Sparkassen Immobilien did not post anything in the three-month period surveyed. At Immofinanz AG, the comment function is deactivated. Overall, the level of interaction on YouTube was predominantly low. 127 posts out of 157 had only a low interaction level. This channel is therefore one of the channels with the lowest level of interaction.

Likewise, only a low level of interaction was found on TWITTER. Of the more than 800 posts examined, 583 could be assigned to a low interaction level. Of the 20 ATX companies surveyed, 11 were active on Twitter. Uniqa Insurance AG used Twitter most intensively with 248 posts, followed by Voestalpine with 144 and OMV AG with 142.

6. Results

The results show that symmetrical two-way communication with dialog and network communication takes place only to a small extent in the social media posts analyzed. The level of interaction remains mostly low. By far the most reactions to postings are generally found on Facebook. In terms of the level of interaction, Instagram also seems to be a good instrument for corporate communications to initiate communication processes. YouTube and Twitter are used more for one-way communication. These channels thus correspond to the classic showcase function. Posts are made, but reactions and interactions of the users hardly take place. It also often became apparent that social media channels are predominantly used by ATX companies as one-way communication media, similar to "old" media channels. Only a few companies can be said to professionally manage individual social media channels. These include Telekom, Austrian Post and also Voestalpine AG. In summary, it can be stated that the potential of possible two-way communication between recipient and company is far from being exploited.

7. Limitations and further research

The research presented here is a quantitative analysis. The content of the individual postings was not considered in this research. For further research in this area, a qualitative survey of the postings can generate added scientific value. In particular, the topic area of contextual/context-independent content could be the focus here. In addition, the survey period should be extended to an even longer period in order to obtain more meaningful values. The

level of interaction between user and company could become even more important too. The interaction model presented here could therefore be further differentiated. The research could also be enriched with interviews of the communication managers from the companies studied. After all, we do not know the communication goal that is to be achieved through the use of social media channels.

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