

Content marketing capability building: a conceptual framework

Content marketing capability

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to develop a conceptual framework that identifies engaging CM practices, specifically how compelling content is created. Content marketing (CM) is fast becoming a key pillar in a company's marketing mix. It is also a requisite for companies seeking to modernise their marketing practices through digitalisation to enhance online branding. However, overlapping definitions and interchangeable terms arising from different perspectives and methodological practices confound what exactly constitutes CM. Although CM is generally accepted as sharing brand content via owned media to gain earned media, a strategic approach, based on evidence-driven research, is needed to navigate through the overwhelming confusion so that companies can better plan and implement CM.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper addresses the scarcity of work with regard to CM practices in Asia. To address this research gap, the study examines content creation practices of five successful companies, based in Singapore, through case studies, interviews and content analyses, to propose a CM capability development framework.

Findings – The findings point to the need for content creation to align with brand values and value creation to create and socialise compelling content for positive impact. Content created for audiences and marketed by brands can generate value when it is consumed and shared. The paper also provided much needed clarity in terms of how CM capability can be gained to minimise costly trial and error.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited to companies operating in Asia. The framework will require implementation in other regions. Another limitation of the study was that it did not extend to how consumers responded to CM posts. This is an area for further research that can help validate the proposed framework.

Practical implications – The analytical framework adopted in this study can also be used as a functional CM model for marketing managers to construct better CM strategies and informed standards of practice by growing capabilities.

Social implications – CM is also a requisite for companies seeking to modernise their marketing practices through digitalisation to enhance online branding, particularly for small- and medium-sized companies.

Originality/value – This paper addresses the scarcity of work with regard to CM practices in Asia.

Keywords Content marketing, Marketing strategy, Brand values, Capability building, Social media, Digital marketing, Online marketing, Social media marketing, Facebook, Value, Digital growth, Digitalisations

Paper type Research paper

Numerous perspectives and liberal use of buzzwords have led to the use of broad definitions that confuse rather than clarify what content marketing (CM) constitutes. The main reason for much of the confusion may be a result of prominent practitioners angling definitional boundaries to advance their own organisational and methodological agendas. Practitioners tend to adopt an operational definition that is more descriptive and summative in nature when a more process-driven definition that is differentiated and progressive is needed. This definitional confusion and contest may have forestalled gaining a deeper understanding of

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the strategic importance of CM. Even though practitioners may not agree on a common definition of CM, the tactical goals of CM are rather universally similar. The goals are predicated on a “strategic marketing approach for creating and distributing valuable, consistent and relevant content to attract and retain” customers (Content Marketing Institute, 2017) across a multitude of platforms to “deliver engaging relationships, consumer value and measurable success for brands” (Content Marketing Association, 2017).

This paper adopts CM as sharing brand content via owned media to gain earned media to encourage conversations to generate greater brand awareness (Du Plessis, 2015b). Brand-controlled social media are commonly termed as owned media, whereas user-initiated and user-generated mentions, recommendations and other content forms on social media that a brand does not directly control are termed earned media (Colicev *et al.*, 2018). The study aims to identify engaging CM practices, specifically how compelling content is created, distributed and amplified to target audiences, so as to build greater online brand presence, or to drive profitable customer action mid- to long-term. The study’s outcome will culminate in a proposed analytical CM capability development framework. As such, this study contributes to knowledge and understanding of CM by consolidating strategic and tactical insights into a single framework by exploring what competencies are required.

Content marketing’s growing significance

Marketing, as a discipline, is undergoing a shift. One such shift is directly related to CM. We live in an age of engagement, no interruptions. The use of interruptive advertising is waning among consumers. Online banner ads and even paid editorials are being treated with increasing consumer cynicism, as the influence of traditional advertising declines (Kaspar *et al.*, 2019). This is epitomised by Coca-Cola’s content-based marketing strategy, Content 2020, that extolled the use of brand attributes to drive brand conversations and values (Frost and Sullivan, 2016). There is also a good cause for Coca-Cola’s seismic shift considering how the digital advertising space is evolving. According to a study by Adobe and PageFair, the global usage of ad blockers grew by 41 per cent in the 12 months (Q2 2014-Q2 2015), and there were 198 million monthly active users for the major browser extensions that block ads as of June 2015. Audience today are becoming skeptical of pure product advertising and will take active steps to tune out intrusive advertising.

A researcher’s perspective of content marketing

The adoption of CM is linked to companies’ motives to engage consumers as the influence of traditional advertising wanes. The body of work is still somewhat limited, though it is growing. Csordás and Gáti (2014) stated that the advent of CM was a direct result of advertising producing more “scattering loss than targeted reach” (p. 23). As such, marketers must take over the role of content producers from traditional media to compete for consumers’ fractious attention to maintain brand health. Kilgour *et al.* (2015) added that CM catered for active consumer participation and sharing in the social media space that advertising alone could not. Baer (2013) viewed CM as the means for companies to educate, inform or entertain customers or attract prospects to promote profitable actions that resulted in leads, sales or advocacy. CM has also been characterised as an online marketing technique that encouraged user-generated content (Du Plessis, 2015a; Steenburgh *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, there is general agreement between practitioners and researchers on the purpose of CM. CM is also strongly associated with social media, leading several researchers to coin the term, social media CM (Ahmad *et al.*, 2016; Csordás and Gáti, 2014; Gümüş, 2017). While CM is not always socialised through digital channels, it is undeniable that, in practice, social media plays a vital, almost indispensable, role, as consumer-brand relational

communication has become increasingly digital experiences. [Baltes \(2015\)](#) went even further and stated that CM was a fundamental tool for successful and effective digital marketing.

CM has attracted its fair share of academic critique. The term, CM, is perceived as an umbrella term ([Steenburgh et al., 2011](#)), and its interpretation is often a consequence of its context. One of the causes of this is semantics. CM tends to be conflated with the marketing of content or marketing using content. All marketing arguably uses content, but simply using content for marketing purposes does not make it CM. It is not meant to generalise CM to mere use or sharing of content as doing so would be self-defeating. Marketing, as a discipline, would be poorer for it. Another source of confusion comes from CM being associated with branded journalism and native advertising, which are both a less overt form of paid media ([Drell, 2013](#)). While CM shares a similar less overt nature, it is not outright advertising using branded content. CM's mistaken identities and mislabeled doppelgangers can benefit from greater differentiation and clarity to enshrine CM as a vaunted practice.

To address this, [Du Plessis \(2015a\)](#) attempted to arrive at an evidence-based interpretation of CM after conducting a thematic analytical review of 55 research articles, which resulted in the identification of six elements of CM:

- (1) medium element: the nature of the platform for the content;
- (2) strategic element: strategic approach to develop the content;
- (3) formation element: the construction of the content;
- (4) intrinsic element: nature occurrence of the content;
- (5) communication element: the technique(s) used to convey the content; and
- (6) corollary element: the anticipated outcome of the content.

[Du Plessis' \(2015a\)](#) six CM elements proposed a clear understanding of how CM can be implemented. Du Plessis contributed to the debate by offering that CM is “a strategic brand storytelling technique aimed at changing consumers’ inactive behaviour through unobtrusive, engaging brand conversations in earned media” (p. 128). Du Plessis asserted that brand content was best told as brand stories linked to the brand’s persona and tone of voice. Another possible point of confusion lies with how a content strategy differed from CM. A content strategy is an integral part of CM, and it guides the creation and deployment of content assets ([Rose, 2013](#)). It does not replace the need for a strategic CM plan – a prime example is Coca-Cola’s Content 2020.

CM is also strongly associated with value creation for building relational brand relationships. [Zerbini et al. \(2007\)](#) explored how competence-based value creation, and the resultant created content assets, could be marketed to influence business customers’ buying behaviour. Their work started a recurrent theme in the literature that closely associates CM with a “content-as-value-in-use” notion. [Rowley \(2008\)](#) investigated CM from a created “value-in-use” basis for engaging consumers in a digital content economy. [Ho and Dempsey \(2010\)](#) studied and demonstrated how perceived content value drove consumer motivations and content sharing.

CM’s significance lies in its current use as part of any inherent marketing strategy. Clarifying the capabilities needed will aid in developing CM competencies. This is an area that can benefit from further research.

Methodology

This paper presents an empirical investigation to determine the features and elements that characterise CM. The empirical context of the case study was Singapore. Five Singapore-based companies were chosen based on the following criteria:

- at least 20 per cent marketing budget allocated to CM;
- at least a year's experience of adopting CM;
- active on at least two social media platforms; and
- owns consumer brands.

These qualifying conditions were necessary as it established a baseline selection criterion for comparison and guaranteed sufficient CM content assets for analysis. The selected companies are all well-known brands with at least a regional reach and presence in Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific markets. The brands are either heritage brands or up-and-coming brands that enjoyed recognition in numerous business-ranked directories, e.g. top 500 Asian brands or small- and medium-sized companies (SMEs) 500, and garnered consistent mass media coverage. The companies came from various industries, namely, food and beverage, fashion and agri-business. In the case where there was a global holding company, only local branches that were incorporated and/or regionally headquartered in Singapore were considered in the study. The global branches were excluded. The profiles of the five chosen companies are attached in the [Appendix](#). Two researchers independently analysed the companies' social media platforms to verify that CM was being used prior to approaching the companies. After confirming CM was being practiced, the researchers arranged interviews with the marketing managers and executives from the five companies. A semi-structured interview, lasting 90 min, was used to probe:

- CM campaign objectives;
- consumer engagement via CM;
- CM budget and manpower allocation;
- content distribution;
- content creation;
- content promotion; and
- campaign evaluation.

The full list of interview questions can be found in the [Appendix](#). The interviews were transcribed and coded thematically ([Braun et al., 2014](#)) for [Du Plessis' \(2015a\)](#) six CM elements. The axial codes, categories and themes were derived iteratively using constant comparison between the multiple case study interviews.

A content analysis of social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, was also conducted over a six-month period from 1 June 2017 to 31 December 2017. The unit of analysis was a social media post, demarcated by the date of posting. In total, 696 content pieces were analysed over the six-month period. For this study, the interview data was used to generate the codes for the content analysis. An inductive approach was deemed the most suitable ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#)), as a literature review failed to discover definitive studies that specifically researched content analysis for CM. The absence of prior reference or application models, which could serve as a basis for qualitative research, meant that a directed approach was also used in this study where the interview data and existing literature from relevant theories were used to create a coding framework. A directed approach for content analysis uses relevant theories or research findings as the basis for the initial codes ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#)). As such, the interview-generated coding categories were aligned with existing literature and initial interview categories. The coding framework focused on:

- content type;
- content communication characteristics; and
- content centrality.

The coding framework is attached in the [Appendix](#). The coding items in content type were generated based on the interviews and an initial review of each company's Facebook and Instagram pages. These social media platforms were chosen because all companies reported being active on them, at least a post every week, to allow a consistent comparison. The other platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn or blogs were not as actively used by all selected companies. The coding categories for content type were further verified against content types recommended by seasoned content marketers (Frasco, 2018). Content communication characteristics were also guided by interview-generated codes and adapted from research on content characteristics. The codes were adapted from research that examined how content communication characteristics (e.g. modality, intent, interaction and idiosyncrasies) could influence resulting reception via exposure at the point of consumption especially in today's digital content environment (Batra and Keller, 2016; Stephen and Galak, 2012). Content centrality was also derived from interview-generated codes and bolstered by research studies that explored brand centrality of generated content (Smith *et al.*, 2012). Two researchers coded the 696 posts. Cohen's κ was run to determine if there was an agreement between the two researchers' judgements on an SME's Facebook and Instagram posts for content type, characteristics and centrality. There was a strong agreement between the two researchers' judgements ($\kappa = 0.952$, 95 per cent CI 0.0244-1.7559, $p < 0.0005$). The purposeful hybrid approach used in the case study sought to use replication logic founded on theoretical concepts and grounded in interview data to produce an in-depth study of information-rich cases.

Findings

The results of the case study analysis are meant to characterise how companies perceived, planned and executed CM to better understand required CM competencies.

As shown in [Table I](#), the five case companies presented in this study are companies with different industry characteristics. This better represented the diverse business community and afforded a degree of external validity. This was deliberately done so that a wider spectrum of CM situations could be explored. As shared in the Methodology section, care was taken not to duplicate the companies at the sectoral level. They all shared similar operational profiles in that they had marketing managers and executives but did not have dedicated social media marketing staff. They were also present on four social media platforms, which were Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn.

Du Plessis' (2015a) six CM elements were used to guide the thematic coding of the transcripts. The interviews were analysed iteratively to elucidate axial categories to arrive at core themes.

Company	Allswell	Bata	Cat and the Fiddle	Denis Asia (Ayam Brand)	Sakae
Industry	Beverages	Fashion	Food	Food	Food
Sector/Segment	Energy drinks	Footwear retailing	Online bakery	Agri-manufacturing	Restaurant chain
Marketing team size	2	2	2	3	2
No. of social media	4	4	4	4	4

Table I.
Selected case companies

As shown in Table II, the medium elements referred to the modal characteristics of the media channel that the content was created for. The companies reported adopting a channel-specific approach to content creation. They used a media-rich content approach that maximised each social media’s medium affordances – interactivity, functionality – and user preferences. They also reported keeping an eye on what was trending on social media and possible modal consequences such as downtime or broken links.

The strategic elements (Table III) referred to the branding positioning and guidance used to create content. The companies collectively expressed that transitioning to CM was an opportune moment for pushing through marketing innovations that reinvented their brands. The companies viewed CM as a strategic branding investment to uplift brand experiences while also de-emphasising sales content. It was also time to pursue partners for strategic content collaborations. This was done to acquire new customer segments, particularly millennials.

The formation elements (Table IV) covered the actual creation of brand content assets. Unsurprisingly, companies had the most to share about this subject matter (Table IV). The companies’ sharing demonstrated a heightened awareness of content generation as they detailed the numerous explorations across a wide spectrum of content generation techniques. The depth of content generation and alignment rivalled that of any large multinational companies. One of the interesting categories that several companies shared was the practice of “content tiering” that aligned productive efforts with outcomes for better returns on marketing spend. Content tiering is described by several Singapore-based marketing managers as organising different content by priority and ease of production. This practice helped mitigate existing content productive constraints, in terms of working with a limited staff strength and resource restrictions. The companies all reported dissatisfaction working with marketing agencies stating flatly that “the agencies did not understand our brands”.

Table II.
Medium elements

Categories	Themes
Social media modal specificity	Medium affordances
Content type selection	Media-rich content approach
Content variety	Influential trends
Content branding application	Modal consequences
Trans-media integration	
Online-offline channel integration	
Digital influence and social media trends	
Digital inconveniences	

Table III.
Strategic elements

Categories	Themes
Retargeting, rebranding and “un-branding”	Strategic branding
Brand fit, values and unified brand voice	Strategic investment
Increased digital spend	Uplifted brand experience
Strategic content investment	Strategic content collaborations
Redefined brand experience	
Brand uplift and presence establishment	
Millennial customer acquisition	
Content partner synergies	
Collaborative creativity	
De-emphasis of sales content	

Table IV.
Formation elements

Categories	Themes
User-generated	Content generation
Agency-generated	Content alignment
Event-generated	Content productive constraints
Influencer-generated	
Intern-generated	
Partner-generated	
Expert-generated	
Global-led and localisation	
Product-led	
Celebrity-led	
Brand-led	
SEO-led	
Brand stories	
Content tiering	
Content calendar	
In-house production	
Staff and resource constraints	
Hidden content costs	
Content sophistication	

As such, all the interviewed companies reported possessing in-house content production capabilities. They only commissioned work to agencies that required an expert designer, higher production values or were aligned with their top-tiered CM assets.

The intrinsic elements (Table V) denoted inherent content characteristics. For CM, content unobtrusiveness and “value-in-use” notions were integral considerations. Again, the companies articulated thoughtful expertise for adapting CM to suit their organisations’ capabilities and desired brand experiential outcomes. The practical orientation emerged as content assets were created as templates that were optimised for future reproducibility (Table V). Using in-house production capabilities, the content was intrinsically re-engineered for impact, currency and relevance to reach targeted communities. This approach was rather successful in gaining traction and share-ability as the content value was enhanced with less effort over time.

The communication elements (Table VI) included the techniques used to deliver and disseminate brand content. One of the key points raised was the need for content–channel complementarity. The communication elements also included interactive exchanges when brands engaged with audiences as a result of shared content. One of the main challenges

Table V.
Intrinsic elements

Categories	Themes
Content optimisation	Optimised reproducibility
Channel optimisation	Experiential outcomes
Replication and reproducibility	Content re-mastering
Brand alignment	
Community building	
Impact, currency and relevance	
Content subtlety	
Content traction	
Content value and share-ability	

was the need for response readiness when users posted comments or shared content on social media. Communicating was also nuanced by agile positioning to ensure that content retained an educational slant and was designed for channel fit and social media trends.

The corollary elements (Table VII) captured the after-effects or follow-on results and envisaged outcomes. Naturally, all companies articulated a sales metric dominance. As a result, they sensibly used a pragmatic approach to aggregate performance metrics. This is in line with earlier findings that considered staff and resource constraints. Social analytics was often described as a “double-edged sword”, as although it provided a decision-making support, it could just as easily cause encumbrance. The marketing managers also pointed out that no amount of analytical data can replace the on-the-ground feedback, experience and what they termed, “marketing intuition and instincts”.

A total of 696 Facebook and Instagram posts were coded over a six-month period (June 17 to December 17). Separately, 397 Facebook posts and 299 Instagram posts were coded. These two platforms were chosen because all companies reported being active on Facebook and Instagram. This allowed for cross-case study analysis. Facebook remained the main channel used for disseminating content. The posts were coded for content type, content communication characteristics and content centrality. These criteria were chosen to help identify pragmatic qualities that can guide the development of a content strategy.

As shown in Figure 1, the content-coding of content types revealed, at a glance, that photographs or photo-realistic content assets (37.71 per cent) were the most common design feature used to accompany the text. Photo-images offered a “low hanging fruit” that best represented each company’s products or services with less production cost and effort. Another prominent content feature used by companies was embedded links to microsites, landing pages

Table VI.
Communication
elements

Categories	Themes
Content-channel complementarity	Content-channel compatibility
Content positioning	Response readiness
Customer service and response readiness	Agile positioning
Crisis communication handling	
Content post frequency	
Channel prioritisation	
Educational nature	
Content consumption trends	
Reposting and resharing triggers	

Table VII.
Corollary elements

Categories	Themes
Sales metrics dominance	Sales metrics dominance
Tactical focus	Pragmatic performance metrics
Built-in ready-to-use reports	Analytics encumbrance
Market performance and success indicators	Marketing intuition
Metrics aggregation	
Intuition and instincts	
Content measurement difficulties	
Data analytics cost and burden	
Data analytics and benchmarking hype	
Digital shift savings	

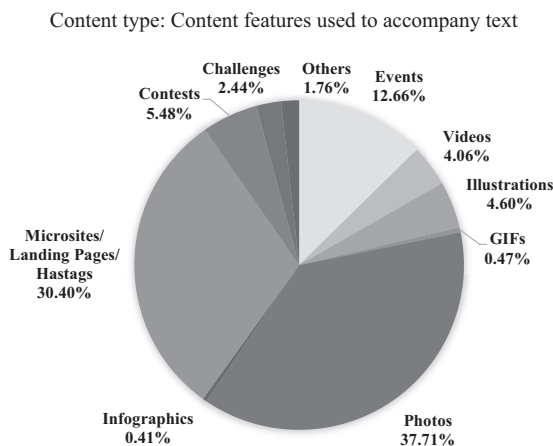


Figure 1.
Content coding analysis – content type

and hashtags (refer to [Appendix 3](#) for definitions) (30.40 per cent) to improve search-ability and share-ability. Event-generated content (22.66 per cent) was also used extensively because it offered an immediate experiential brand experience content. Notably, content types such as illustrations, videos, infographics and GIFs (refer to [Appendix 3](#) for definitions) were used less because these generally needed more expertise, effort and time to produce. The companies used these mostly for key campaign objectives. This was in line with the content tiering approach shared earlier. Another notable feature was the use of contests (5.48 per cent) and challenges (2.44 per cent) in CM to produce product/service engagement and to target sales turnover.

The posts were also coded for communication characteristics. Each post's primary communicative characteristics were coded by;

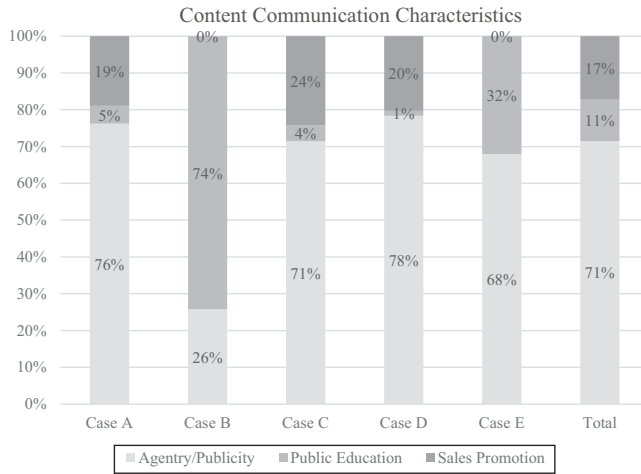
- Agency/publicity – primary mode was to make the company or its products/services/staff appear more desirable or admirable for reputable gain through positive publicity.
- Public education – primary mode was to provide information deemed useful or educational.
- Sales promotion – primary mode was to sell or promote an offer or discounted sales.

While each company's posts showed a de-emphasis of sales promotions with “pushy content” ([Figure 2](#)), different companies were at different maturity stages for this phenomenon. The de-emphasis of sales content was strongly associated with a switch from agency to public education. For companies, the luxury of completely de-emphasised sales for all content was not always possible. Still, the lower percentages suggested that the companies had successfully transitioned to CM.

The posts were also coded for communication triggers and exchanges:

- Two-way asymmetrical – content was designed to trigger a transaction and to ensure stakeholders are overtly guided to effect transactional behaviour and may provide a link to purchase.
- Two-way symmetrical – content was designed to allow the company and its stakeholders to have a voice to achieve shared mutual understanding or appreciation by providing a direct link to allow stakeholders to share ideas and discuss with each other.

Figure 2.
Agency/publicity,
public info/
educational, and sales
promotion
composition



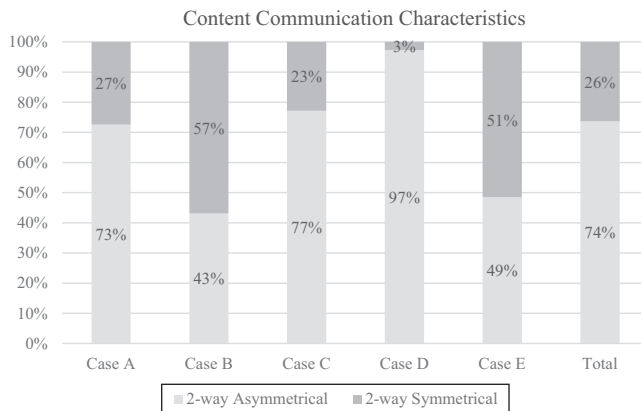
There were clear content trends that a de-emphasis in sales content was associated with an increase in content that promoted two-way symmetrical communication exchanges. This suggested greater consumer engagement. The companies were also at different transitional phases for this phenomenon (Figure 3).

The posts were also coded for content centrality:

- Brand-centric – content predominantly promoted the company and de-emphasises selling of products and services.
- Product-centric – content predominantly promoted products and services.
- Consumer-centric – content predominantly invited stakeholder participation.
- Neutral – neither of the above.

As shown in Figure 4, most content assets were product-centric (average of 55 per cent). This should not be viewed negatively, as product-centric content was most suited for

Figure 3.
Two-way
asymmetrical and
two-way symmetrical
composition



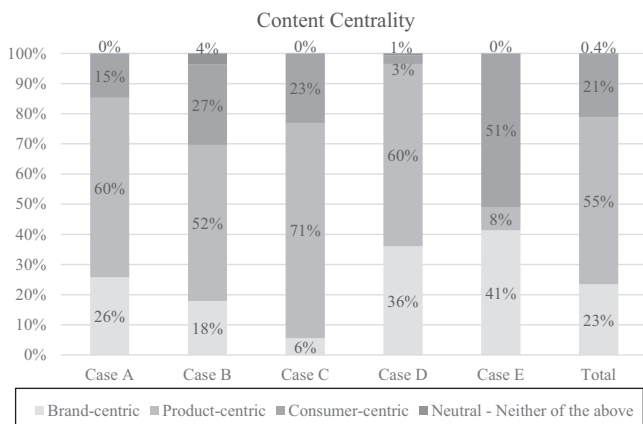


Figure 4. Brand-product-consumer centricity composition

generating sales prospecting and influencing purchase intent. In Case E, the high consumer-centric content (51 per cent) was largely because of event-led content generation.

Discussion

The findings were meant to provide insights into strategies and practices to develop a pragmatic conceptual CM framework for companies. The findings and earlier literature review have persuasively documented that CM is an emerging practice that requires greater theoretical deliberations. To ground the framework development, it is necessary to understand why different companies exhibited varying developmental progress in CM over the course of this study. One of the key considerations appears to be the stage-like CM growth characteristics the companies exhibit (Table VIII).

Companies have tried various social media strategies to generate brand awareness and conversations. There is some agreement that the more effective strategies are being proactive and prolific when generating content. Being more proactive equates to creating content more frequently and extensively (Smith *et al.*, 2012). The cross-case analysis suggested that there are commonalities between the five companies that can be perceived as growth stages. All the companies described building capabilities in stages. These stages can be further categorised as emerging, developing and maturing CM company profiles that can be placed along a continuum. It is evident that as companies scaled up content generation, they also developed new CM expertise. It should be noted that the CM growth stages for companies should only be used for guidance and not as a form of assessment or audit. Increasing the range of content types also increased the percentage of sales content

Capability building stages	Emerging	Developing	Maturing
Content type	<3	3-7	>7
Active social media platforms	1	2-4	>4
CM spend (vs total marketing spend)	Trial Basis	<20%	>20%
Degree of sales content de-emphasis (vs total content developed)	<10%	10%-40%	>40%
Educational content (vs total content developed)	<10%	10%-40%	>40%
Content strategy	-	Articulated	Documented

Table VIII. CM growth stages for companies

de-emphasis and educational content assets used. This coincided with CM spend increases and deftness in managing across a wider range of social media platforms. This culminated in the articulation and documentation of a content strategy as the organisation matures. Therefore, what the cross-study analysis has provided is a means to compare an organisation's existing practices against empirically derived CM profiles. This can help guide an organisation to embrace CM and outlined a growth pathway for developing deep CM expertise.

Another emerging theme from analysing multiple cases was the strategic CM executions surfaced via probing inter-relationships among CM elements, themes and categories. The resultant strategic framework proposes a means to transit, rationalise, optimise and accelerate CM for companies (Figure 5). Today, a company seeking to remain competitive must shift and develop marketing content adapted to its target and distributed by the right social networks (Baltes, 2015). Du Plessis' (2015b) CM elements provided a framework for initial scaffolding to position the strategies and best practices the case companies adopted. It is the inter-relationship that cuts across the elements that provided the richest insights.

In the transitioning phase, one of the most notable marketing management decisions the companies shared was the expressed opportunity to use CM as a driver for rebranding. A unique characterisation of this phase was it involved a creative, destructive process of what one marketing manager termed as "unbranding". The shift from prior more self-promotional content to the more consumer-focused CM required this risky step. It is believed that this could be the chasm where many organisations, particularly companies, would reconsider more than once before taking a leap of faith. Making the transition to CM also involves the need to solve content production constraints. It also required ensuring that the selected mediums were supported by content formation capabilities as well as mechanisms for catering to content intrinsic qualities and the need for user response readiness.

The rationalising phase is where companies reported making substantive CM commitments after balancing the risks and need to build content creation capabilities. One of the key resource commitments is to increase marketing spend on CM. The strategic investment in CM was inseparable from the increase in digital marketing spend. For the

Strategic CM Framework

	Medium	Strategic	Formation	Intrinsic	Communication	Corollary
Emerging Transitioning	Medium Affordances Social Media Modal Specificity Content Type Selection Content Variety	Strategic Branding Retargeting, Rebranding & 'Un-branding' Brand Fit, Values & Unified Brand Voice	Content Productive Constraints In-house Production Staff & Resource Constraints Hidden Content Costs	Content Re-mastering Impact, Currency & Relevance Content Subtlety Content Traction Content Value & Shareability	Response Readiness Customer Service & Response Readiness Crisis Communication Handling	Analytics Encumbrance Content Measurement Difficulties
	Influential Trends Digital Influence & Social Media Trends	Strategic Investment Increased Digital Spend Strategic Content Investment Millennial Customer Acquisition	Purposive Content Generation User-generated, Agency-generated, Event-generated, Influencer-generated, Intern-generated, Partner-generated	Experiential Outcomes Brand Alignment Community Building	Content-Channel Compatibility Content-Channel Complementarity	Analytics Encumbrance Data Analytics Cost & Burden Data Analytics & Benchmarking Hype
Developing Optimising	Modal Consequences Digital Inconveniences					
	Mediated Content Approach Content Branding Application Online-Offline Channel Integration	Uplifted Brand Experience Redefined Brand Experience Brand Uplift & Presence Establishment De-emphasis of Sales Content	Purposive Content Generation Global-led & Localisation, Product-led, Celebrity-led, Brand-led, SEO-led Content Tiering	Optimised Reproducibility Replication & Reproducibility	Content-Channel Compatibility Content Consumption Trends Channel Prioritisation	Pragmatic Performance Metrics Tactical Focus Built-in Ready-to-Use Reports Market
Maturing Accelerating	Mediated Content Approach Trans-media Integration	Strategic Content Collaborations Collaborative Creativity Content Partner Synergies	Content Alignment Content Sophistication Brand Stories Content Calendar	Optimised Reproducibility Channel Optimisation	Agile Positioning Content Positioning Content Post Frequency Educational Nature Reposting & Resharing Triggers	Pragmatic Performance Metrics Market Performance & Success Indicators Metrics Aggregation Digital Shift Savings

Sales Metrics Dominance
Marketing Infiltration
Influencers & Instafests

Figure 5.
Strategic content marketing framework

companies, it was consubstantial. The justifications used to gain management buy-in were the need to acquire new customer segments and to enhance experiential brand outcomes.

The optimising phase provided the most interesting practices for emulation. This phase is characterised by content production processes. Three inter-linked practices stood out. The first was optimising content to desired outcomes and production effort by content tiering (Figure 6). When the marketing managers interviewed spoke or alluded to content tiering, it was often in the context of a renaissance for creative and rich marketing content. All of them recognised that higher quality content assets with images and videos translated to Web traffic and re-sharing increase. The marketing managers were aware of the characteristics of the least and top-performing posts. The pursuit of creative, rich or sophisticated content assets, however, needed to be tempered by time and budgetary constraints. Content tiering is also linked to content optimisation where a proven content asset that elicited brand conversations was optimised as a template for future reproduction. Content tiering, along with optimised reproducibility, is also linked with the de-emphasising of aggressive sales promotion and somewhat boastful brand self-presentation. Content tiering as such can be an effective way to crafting a content strategy. The optimising phase was also marked by pragmatism as a tactical focus guided the choice of metrics used. Most companies used built-in or free analytics tools such as Google Analytics. Only two of the companies subscribed to a paid social analytics service such as Social Bakers.

The accelerating phase is demarcated by agility and collaboration. The latter can be viewed as an extension of the optimised content strategies and practices the companies adopted. Strategic collaborations were a hallmark that all case companies had. Partnerships accelerate the entire CM value chain – from sharing the content production load, doubling content promotion and dissemination to extending reach to targeted content users. Strategic collaborations also generated sophisticated content and had generally higher CM spend. The agile positioning of content is thought to be an acquired expertise that developed with

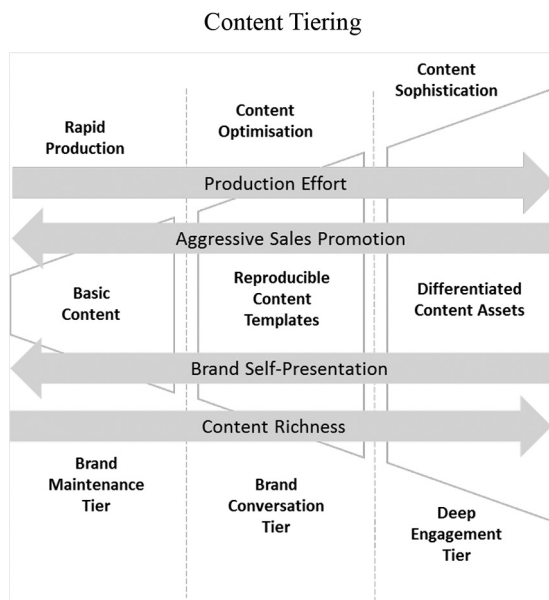


Figure 6. Content tiering processes

experience. As such, the accelerating phase is closely linked to the maturing stage where a wider range of social media is used and where execution is guided by a documented content strategy.

Conclusion and future implications

The study sought to better characterise CM as a valued marketing practice. The findings and discussion suggested that the process of CM was a significant driver that both initiated and facilitated transforming an organisation's fundamental approach to marketing. CM can, therefore, be defined as the optimisation and acceleration of brand content on shared media to earn audience engagement, through the delivery of content-generated value. Content created for audiences and marketed by brands follows a "value-in-use" perspective that is different from more traditional notions of marketing where it was perceived as a promise of value expectations. The content that is consumed and shared can itself be as valued as the product or service. The value that content generates is a result of content sophistication that can engender deeper relational engagement. This content-generated value needs to be surfaced to the forefront of CM.

The proposed framework addresses the scarcity of work in CM in Asia. It also strove to provide scaffolded guidance to companies transitioning to CM. Rakic and Rakic (2014) highlighted the significance of "creating, updating and the promotion of valuable digital content for digital customers/communities" (p. 47) to combat "digital marketing myopia". The proposed CM framework shares the same intent and spirit. It is designed to benefit marketers by CM strategy elements vertically and by CM execution and growth pathways horizontally. It is hoped that an evidence-based approach will guide informed CM practices and minimise costly trial and error. It is also hoped that an objective investigation will aid companies who experience dissatisfaction when working with external agencies. As such, the framework can be used to develop both a CM strategy and a content strategy. The methodology used can also be adapted to help firms discover their CM growth pathways by analysing their existing content assets and creation processes as starting points.

A limitation of the study was that it did not extend to how consumers responded to CM posts. This is an area for further research that can help validate the proposed framework.

The framework was also designed to allow researchers to examine the insights garnered from individual and multiple cross-case analyses. Although the study yielded valuable insights into CM, there are some limitations. The study focused on Singapore-based companies solely. Future research is needed to validate the approach used and the replication logic for companies in other regions or countries. CM is an under-researched topic. Given that the review and findings have definitively embedded CM as a promising and emerging area, it is hoped that more researchers will take up the gauntlet to investigate CM by building on the work of this study.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1. SME profiles

Allswell trading (red bull Singapore)

Allswell Trading markets a range of FMCG beverages including Red Bull Energy Drinks and Allswell Asian Beverages that are category leaders in their respective segments. The company was founded by Samathivathanachai in 1985 and has offices in Singapore and Malaysia. The company started off by importing Red Bull, the energy drink, from Thailand. Today, Red Bull is the world's number one energy drink. Recently, Allswell Asian Beverages marked its 30th anniversary in 2015 in Singapore and it was one of the winners of the 2015 Singapore Prestige Brand Awards (Heritage Category). Allswell Asian beverages are manufactured in a facility in the rolling foothills of Yilan, Taiwan, which has been dubbed a "breadbasket county", because of the streams and rivers that provide a constant source of replenishment for the nutrients in the soil there. This is key characteristics for Allswell's branding.

Bata Singapore

Founded in a small town called Zlin, Czechoslovakia in 1894, Bata provides versatile quality footwear and accessories, which are accessible for all. Having dressed customers' feet with elegance and class throughout the years, the family-owned business continues to be at the forefront of innovation in the design and production of new styles. With more than 5,200 retail stores in over 70 countries in Asia, Europe and Oceania, Bata has built a strong international presence. In Singapore, Bata has grown into a leading footwear manufacturer, operating a retail chain of more than 40 stores across the island, with its flagship store in Peninsula Plaza. In April 2017, Bata announced a modernised global brand direction with its new manifesto "Me and Comfortable With It", which focuses on empowering people to be beautiful and comfortable, no matter who they are, and what their style is. The repositioning aims to reach out to younger audiences while rewarding loyal customers with a new and enticing shopping experience. With this new strategy, the company now caters to the needs of today's consumers, who are sophisticated and increasingly interested in the latest fashion trends. Increasingly, Bata is using social media and CM to connect with today's consumers.

Cat and the fiddle

Cat and the Fiddle, a local online cake shop, is founded by award-winning pastry chef, Mr Daniel Tay, after he sold his famous former cake and pastry business, Bakerzin a few years ago. Currently, Cat and The Fiddle offers 17 varieties of gourmet cheesecakes, from Classic New York Cheesecake, Oreo Cookies and Cream Cheesecake to Asian and local-inspired creations such as Mao Shan Wang Durian Cheesecake and Milo Dinosaur Cheesecake. The company has a staff strength of 10, with an Annual Sales Turnover of around 30,000-36,000 cakes. It is very interesting to see a small business, albeit an online one, using content to market its products and services. The company builds brand awareness by publishing many value-adding content and stories on its website and other social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook; generate leads and conversions using email

marketing, and drives engagement through interacting with their consumers via social media on a personal level. Crowd-sourcing is one of the key strategies used by Cat and The Fiddle. One example is its “Make Your Own Cheesecake Inspired Dessert” contest, which garnered a very good response from the online community.

Denis asia (AYAM Brand)

In 1892, 125 years ago, a French man, Alfred Clouet, founded Ayam Brand in Singapore. His company introduced cutting-edge technology to the region – tinned or canned salmon – that must have been quite an amazement in this tropical region in the days before refrigeration. As canning was considered a high-tech process back then, canned food was considered a premium item. As the brand used technology to preserve food, Ayam Brand went on to win a gold medal at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900. Today, this medal can still be seen on the cans of sardines and mackerels. In 1956, Swiss company the Denis Frères Group of Companies acquired Ayam Brand together with the companies distributing the brand. Clouet Pte Ltd is the distributing arm of this iconic brand in Singapore and Malaysia. Since then, Ayam BrandTM has grown to become one of the oldest consumer brands in Asia. Customer analytics conducted from January 2016 to December 2016 in NTUC stores across Singapore revealed that the Ayam Brand has the highest awareness among people above 40 years.

Sakae holdings

Since its inception in 1996, Sakae Holdings has grown into a global chain with more than 200 outlets internationally, serving over 200 varieties of delectable sushi, sashimi and many others. The company has developed an outstanding portfolio of popular brands – Sakae Sushi, Sakae Teppanyaki, Sakae Delivery, Hei Sushi, Senjyu, Crepes and Cream, Sakae Express, Sachi, Kyo by Sakae and Nouvelle Events – all synonymous with quality dining. These milestones were made possible through Sakae Sushi’s constant technological innovations by its dedicated team of Innovative Food People, and its farm-to-table approach that always ensures food safety and quality. The past 20 years saw Sakae Sushi Holdings winning numerous awards including WSQ Training Excellence Award 2014 (F&B), We Welcome Families Award 2013, The Solar Pioneer Awards 2012, Singapore 1000 Award 2012 – Public Listed Company, and many more.

Appendix 2. Interview questions

- (1) General
 - What are the different types of CM campaigns that you have done for your company/brand?
- (2) Objective of CM social media campaign
 - What were the purposes of those CM campaigns?
 - Why did you embark on such campaigns on social media?
- (3) Budget and manpower allocation
 - What is your digital marketing spend? How much is allocated to CM?
 - How has your marcoms manpower needs changed and what are some of the challenges, if any?
 - Of your digital marcoms budget, what takes up the most amount/per cent.?
- (4) The distribution of content
 - Which digital platform(s) did you find most applicable to your consumers and why?

- (5) Content creation
 - What is the process of our content creation?
 - What are some of the challenges and how did you or your team overcome them?
 - What were the types of contents you produced?
 - Which types of content did you find most effective and why?
- (6) Promotion of content
 - How do you all promote your content on social media?
- (7) Campaign evaluation
 - Do your company/brand conduct any data analytics?

Appendix 3. Content marketing content analysis codes

- (1) Content type – count as per post per date stated
 - Posts – FB, IN, TW
- (2) For the following, count incidence as per presence per post per date regardless of number of incidences found
 - Events – activity-linked, e.g. workshops, occasion-linked, e.g. Christmas
 - Videos – clips or long form videos
 - Blogs – references articles or bloggers
 - Cases – references case studies
 - White papers – references white papers or research reports
 - e-Newsletters – references company-produced newsletters
 - Articles – written as short or long form company-produced or user-generated articles
 - Illustrations – design is predominantly illustrations
 - GIFs – short animated clips, can be photo or animations
 - Photos – design is predominantly photos
 - Webcasts – company-produced or user-generated webcasts, includes podcasts
 - Infographics – company-produced or user-generated visual representations of factual information
 - Presentations – powerpoint, pdf or online company-produced presentations
 - Microsites/landing pages/hashtags – hyperlinks embedded in content that references websites, landing pages (standalone Web pages that appears in response to clicking on a search engine optimised search result or hyperlink), hashtags found on Instagram, etc.
 - Reports – references company-produced reports or user-generated reports
 - e-Magazines – reproduced or references to company-produced or user-generated e-magazines
 - Apps – references company-produced or company-affiliated apps, e.g. e-commerce apps
 - e-Conferences – references company-organised e-conferences
 - Games – references company-produced online casual games
 - Contests – company-produced, time-limited audience-participation events with prizes, without element of judgement – entry is the only requirement

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- Challenge – company-produced, time-limited audience-participation events with or without prizes, element of judgement is present and must meet quality criteria
 - e-Books – company-produced or company-affiliated e-books
 - Others
- (3) Content communication characteristics
- Agency/publicity – primary mode is to make the company or its products/services/staff appear more desirable or admirable for reputable gain through positive publicity
 - Public info/educational – primary mode is to provide information deemed useful or educational
 - Sales promotion – primary mode is to sell or promote an offer or discounted sales
 - Two-way asymmetrical – content is designed to trigger a transaction and to ensure stakeholders are overtly guided to effect transactional behaviour and may or may provide a link to purchase
 - Two-way symmetrical – content is designed to allow the company and its stakeholders to have a voice to achieve shared mutual understanding or appreciation by providing a direct link to allow stakeholders to share ideas and discuss with each other
- (4) Content centrality
- Brand centric – content predominantly promotes the company, de-emphasises selling of products and services
 - Product centric – content predominantly promotes products and services
 - Consumer centric – content predominantly invites stakeholder participation
 - Neutral – about neither of the above

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