

A Taxonomy for Higher Education Institutions to Tell Micro-Stories with Content Marketing

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Abstract: The study explored a relatively new area, namely telling micro-stories with content marketing in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs). Although long-form content remains popular, the concept of creating concise content for social media while focusing on what matters to the target audience has gained traction. The study focused on HEIs because they operate in a multifaceted environment where they must maintain a high level of authenticity with current and prospective students. Additionally, many HEIs face increased competition from education service providers operating in various sectors and a reduction in public funding. Although HEIs have embraced digital marketing, effective marketing on social media requires some careful planning. HEIs need to connect and communicate with them emotionally to resonate with the target audience, using micro-stories. To date, no study has examined which micro-stories HEIs can tell as part of their social media content marketing efforts to capture the attention of their target audience in a cluttered online environment. To take a fresh look at this phenomenon, the social media posts of five HEIs involved in content marketing were analysed and triangulated across four social media networking sites, following a grounded theory approach. The findings indicate that to connect with current and prospective students, HEIs tell micro-stories in an online brand community that are authentic, depicted as a visual experience and meet the long-term needs of the target audience. The proposed taxonomy can stimulate further academic debate and future studies.

Keywords: content marketing, grounded theory, higher education institutions, micro-stories, micro-storytelling, social media

1. Introduction

This study examines a relatively new area, micro-storytelling on social media, which has emerged because of the need for the art of brand storytelling to evolve from lengthy to more concise narratives to keep up with technology trends (Sellas, 2015). Brand storytelling is a widely adopted brand communication technique that employs imbued brand experiences to represent historical events that shape the brand. In addition, brand storytelling illustrates the brand's origins and purposes through its website and social networking sites to portray its life story through different storylines (Kao, 2019). In this regard, Pereira (2019) argues that in order to resonate with consumers, compelling brand storytelling requires an understanding of the customer journey, the brand's identity and the market or context in which the brand and the customer exist side by side.

Pereira's (2019) argument is specifically essential because consumers want immediate gratification and constant connectivity in the digital era has made it increasingly difficult for marketers to maintain the attention of the consumers on social media (Duquette, 2018; Duffy, 2019). For example, a 2015 Microsoft study revealed that the human attention span had dropped to eight seconds, which constitutes a decrease of nearly 25% in just a few years (Microsoft Canada, 2015). Although long-form stories are still prevalent, the idea of creating concise stories on social media while focusing on what is essential to connect with the target audience has become more widespread (Jaaiin, 2020). For this reason, the study adopted Emerson's (1976) Social Exchange Theory, which puts forward that one must have a vested interest in the relationship to participate in social behaviour. Both sides should feel obligated to increase social media engagement for mutual rewards. In the context of this study, the interactive social environment could become the reward based on a sense of community established by higher education institutions (HEIs) on different social media platforms (Botha, 2021).

HEIs are the focus of this study because they function in a complex environment where they must ensure a high standard of authenticity with current and prospective students, parents, funders, former students, organisations and other stakeholders to meet and maintain enrolment targets. Also, many HEIs face increasing competition from education service providers functioning in various sectors and a reduction in public funding (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016; Camilleri, 2020). In this regard, they struggle with tight budgets, the dwindling influence of traditional media and a lack of resources to conduct proper market research, among other things (Hawkins & Frohoff, 2019). To augment traditional marketing efforts, many HEIs currently have a presence on social media to communicate with their target audience because of stakeholders' ways of absorbing information, what resonates with them and where they can find information on furthering studies have shifted. Besides being used for teaching and learning, social media is also used by HEIs to create brand awareness, inform stakeholders

about new research programmes, policy changes, upcoming events, vacancies, recruitment, interaction with alumni, and communicate institutional news (Chugh, nd).

However, although HEIs have adopted digital marketing, it necessitates more than merely joining social media networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter; posting regularly or having a website to become effective on social media. HEIs need to connect and communicate with the target audience emotionally to actively resonate with them (see Walter & Gioglio, 2018).

Through content marketing, HEIs can illustrate what sets their brand apart from the competition. They tell appealing micro-stories on social media in easily accessible formats such as skimmable short text, hashtags, short videos and images to capture the target audience's attention in a cluttered online environment. A micro-story forms part of micro-content on social media and typically includes quick spurts of short-formed content, memes, visuals and bite-sized content that performs well on social media (Bosomworth, 2014; Sellas, 2015). However, many HEIs still mistake flooding social media with posts devoid of meaningful coherence (Cohen, 2021), but telling micro-stories can be of assistance.

Consequently, the study answers the following research question:

What micro-stories can higher education institutions tell on social media, using content marketing, to emotionally connect with their target audience?

To date, no academic study has examined what micro-stories HEIs can tell as part of their content marketing efforts to connect with their target audience. To attend to this shortcoming in the literature, the social media posts of five HEIs across four social media networking sites were analysed, following a grounded theory approach. In doing so, a taxonomy was proposed concerning what micro-stories HEIs can tell on social media as part of a well-planned content strategy for more consumer engagement.

First, some background to content marketing and HEIs is provided before discussing telling micro-stories on social media. After that, the research method and process are explained, followed by the findings, discussion and conclusion.

2. Content marketing and higher education institutions

Although content marketing is more recognised today than 11 years ago when Rowley (2008) published the first scholarly paper on the topic, there are still diverse scholarly views on what content marketing in the extant literature entails (Beard et al., 2021). Content marketing is a digital marketing strategy to create and distribute various forms of online content, for example, social media posts, videos, visuals, blogs, and white papers. This online content is not explicitly promotional of a brand but is intended to generate interest in their products or services and pull consumers to the brand. Social media plays a vital role in content marketing in that social media networking sites assist brands in connecting with consumers with their online content (Du Plessis, 2017; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). While there are still diverse views, the fundamentals of content marketing, namely to create brand awareness and increase brand engagement and conversion, are relatively consistent across countries (Beard et al., 2021). Tracking the history of content marketing, Beard et al. (2021) found that it is currently a component of a much larger organisational concept and initiative referred to as content strategy, as put forward by Clark's (2016) work. For example, staff at the marketing, web design, corporate communication and public relations departments integrate organisational content across different channels with an approved content strategy (Clark, 2016). Patel (2021) also emphasises that content marketing is the "what and how", and the content strategy is the "why" of using content for marketing purposes. By using a content strategy as part of content marketing, a brand can connect and engage with consumers on social media platforms, which can be enhanced with the ability to create engaging content (Ku, 2021).

Like other organisations, marketing for HEIs has also become heavily reliant on content. Colleges and universities use content in various ways to communicate with their audiences, acquire and grow leads and drive new student enrolment (Stobierski, 2020). In this regard, staff at HEIs create and share content on social media to improve their brand awareness and create a trusting relationship (Carvalho et al., 2010). Content creation, among others, could also entail obtaining information through impromptu polls, encouraging conversations and sharing insightful posts aimed at improving interactions with online users interested in furthering their studies (Camilleri,

2020). However, Wayman (2015) warns about brands merely “pushing out” content to consumers on social media instead of pulling consumers to social media content based on their interest in the topic for more consumer engagement. This study adopts Hollebeek et al.’s (2014, p. 154) definition of consumer engagement as, “a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions.”

3. Telling micro-stories on social media

While brand storytelling is widely documented in the extant academic literature, telling micro-stories on social media in the context of HEIs needs exploration. Also, the literature on telling micro-stories on social media is still scant. Nevertheless, the idea of telling micro-stories on social media is not new, as six years ago, Wayman (2015) pointed out that brands should treat each social media post as a well-planned micro-story for an online brand community. She made this observation because, in her view, the social media posts of many brands lacked quality. According to seminal scholars Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 412), a brand community is a “specialised, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand”. Although members are more heterogenous and more prominent, a brand community can also be established on social media where brand storytelling is more interactive and visual (Habibi et al., 2014).

Micro-stories are short-form content and can be read by consumers within seconds or minutes and have become an essential part of a content marketing strategy (Medicks-Weckler, 2020). The use of short-form content has several advantages, one of which is that it appeals to the shorter attention span of consumers of the modern digital era (Duffy, 2019). In addition, this kind of content is more cost-effective and easier to produce (Sukhraj, 2020). Already in 2014, Hardy (2014) highlighted that storytelling must become a critical component of the marketing strategy of HEIs since academic content will not be enough. This is because a higher education brand exists in “the head and mind” of prospective consumers and the content must draw attention to the uniqueness of the College or university. Therefore, it is argued in this paper that micro-stories could assist HEIs in producing more cost-effective and engaging content on social media as part of a well-planned content marketing strategy that attends to more consumer interactions.

The idea of using micro-stories to increase brand engagement was further advanced by Nichols (2018) at the CommerceNext Conference in New York, United States of America (USA). She pointed out that micro-storytelling is compelling because it does not rely on a single significant idea but instead on a collection of smaller ideas that may extend the brand’s overall message. Rather than pursuing a restrictive, inconsistent focus on only one topic or theme, the micro-storytelling approach allows social media posts to feed into a broad range of topics with more frequent stories. She referred to the cosmetic brand Estee Lauder, which has used micro-stories with great success to strengthen consumer relationships (Nichols, 2018).

Currently, there is no academic research on what micro-stories HEIs can tell which will be clarified and advanced by adopting a grounded theory approach.

4. Research method

An interpretivist worldview was adopted to propose a taxonomy for what micro-stories HEIs can tell on social media. In this regard, researcher interference was not beneficial, as is frequently the case with interviews or surveys, since a more naturalistic approach was needed. Naturalistic inquiry is a method for comprehending the social environment. The researcher collected, reported on and interpreted the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of specific individuals and groups in their social and cultural contexts (Armstrong, 2012).

Because it was essential to gain a new perspective on the phenomenon, a Straussian grounded theory approach was used to analyse the social media content of five HEIs triangulated across four social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. The datasets for this study spanned 1 August 2020 to 1 August 2021 to allow for enough data. As a naturalistic and inductive methodology for theory building, seminal literature reports and grounded theory helped the researcher develop a theoretical account of general concepts while asynchronously integrating them into empirical observations or data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). According to Ramenyi (2014), induction is a method of inference that, when combined with grounded theory, proposes an association or pattern between widely divergent sets of data or evidence without prior awareness of everything that could be learned about the specific situation and scope of the datasets.

4.1 Sample method and size

Five higher education institutions were purposefully selected because they were featured in marketing blogs for their outstanding content marketing efforts. To propose the taxonomy, it was essential to understand what micro-stories are told on social media that connect with current and prospective students. Owing to the difficulty in determining the amount of data required for a grounded theory study, theoretical saturation principles were followed. In this regard five cases provided enough data for no new ideas to become evident (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). After cleaning the data, removing duplicates and combining data files, 20 028 tweets on Twitter, 1 755 LinkedIn posts, 1 620 Instagram posts and 1 266 Facebook posts were analysed with the NVivo Plus data analysis software.

4.2 Data processing

The research protocol put forward by Ramyeni (2014) was followed. The data was processed with the aid of NVivo software and complemented with manual searches (Hutchisona et al., 2010). The research question and the data context were the primary driving forces for which data to use (Ramyeni, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). As the data processing progressed, each piece of information was reviewed, compared and contrasted with other pieces of information (De Poy & Gitlin, 2016).

Through the continuous comparison process, commonalities and dissimilarities between information categories became apparent and an inductive theory explaining observations could eventually be developed. Thus, the questions in this study dealt with by grounded theory do not pertain to specific domains but rather to the structure of the researcher's intended organisation of the findings (De Poy & Gitlin, 2016).

4.3 Data analysis

A process of iterative coding was followed during three phases, beginning with the creation of open codes (inductive), grouping and relating them through axial coding, and finally by process of selective coding (Ramyeni, 2014; Simmons, 2019).

As part of a grounded theory approach, suppositions were developed inductively from a corpus of data through a process of constant comparisons. The micro-stories of higher education institutions (HEIs) were collected and grouped into representative concepts through open, axial and selective coding, writing theoretical memos and constant comparisons with other incidents in the data. This was done until data saturation was reached and no new concepts became evident (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Therefore, representation and the consistency of concepts were achieved through theoretical sampling and a vigorous and continuous coding process (Simmons, 2019).

The trustworthiness of the results was enhanced through data triangulation by obtaining data from various sources such four social networking sites to acquire a thorough comprehension of the phenomena of what micro-stories HEIs can tell. In addition, the entire process was also documented with memo writing as part of the grounded theory approach (Ramenyi, 2014).

5. Findings

After theoretical sampling, the conversations reflected the main ideas for further analysis. It was possible to build a theoretical explanation of the concepts, for example, the circumstances that led to these concepts, how they were expressed through micro-stories, the consequences that resulted from them and any dissimilarities as discussed below. A taxonomy grouped per three elements is now proposed to conceptualise what micro-stories HEIs can tell to connect emotionally with the target audience, which can be part of a well-crafted content strategy (see also Figure 1).

5.1 Element 1: Ensuring authenticity with real-life experiences

Ensuring authenticity with real-life experiences is an essential aspect of the micro-stories of HEIs. Being genuine is appealing and makes an education brand more unique to stand out from the competition (Hardy, 2014). In particular, the micro-stories of HEIs reflect the type of experiences students can expect in different locations on campus while being in class, when registered for different qualifications, or when participating in sport and/or other campus activities. The micro-stories thus focus on genuine personal accounts of all aspects of being a student at the HEIs by prominently featuring members of their communities.

Some examples included, as one current student shared, “this is an enormous opportunity that I thought was far-fetched but is now a reality!” In addition, the stories also focused on first-year student experiences. Current students and alumni shared their involvement in short-form stories through images, text and videos. For example, former students “share[d] how the college experience changed their perspectives,” while current students reflected “about their first days on campus during #college orientation” or “on starting their college career during a pandemic”. Some students were also placed in the spotlight to share their experiences with a specific field of study, for example, “Student Spotlight ’21: Studying science and conducting research inspired [name omitted] to achieve his full potential.”

The candidness of these micro-stories connects the target audience with real people whose stories they can relate to and trust about what is possible at the HEI (Hardy, 2014). The uniqueness of the HEI is also emphasised by providing a snapshot of the kinds of student experiences that can be expected. In addition, the key student experiences that were highlighted could facilitate a mutually beneficial relationship by developing positive connections as part of the online community (Jaaiin, 2020; Botha, 2021).

5.2 Element 2: Showing the target audience not only telling them

HEIs also allow the target audience to create a mental image of the quality and impact of their anticipated journey at institutions, strengthening consumer relationships (Nichols, 2018) instead of focusing on only information (Cohen, 2021). This is done by visually showcasing their world-class academic research, student facilities, and campus scenes with colourful images and short video clips during different seasons and semesters. These visuals were shared in addition to student testimonials about the impact their qualifications had on their lives. These compelling visuals and testimonials allowed the target audience to visually participate in what the HEI brand had to offer and encouraged interactions. Therefore, the HEIs identified and leveraged their existing strengths on different social media networking sites as part of their online community.

For example, one student testified: “now I can create my own fashion designs, take photographs of them, launch marketing campaigns for every collection, and improve the brand image by establishing a good relationship with our stakeholders based on effective communication, relevant content, and powerful communication tools.” Also, one HEI shared “find out more about the amazing research that our staff and students have been working on this year”; and “here's a thread of what you can expect and enjoy from your alumni team.”

By showing and not only telling with micro-stories, the target audience becomes more active participants to visualise how success can be achieved. In doing so, the target audience can be drawn to the idea of studying at the HEI by creating a mental image of the journey ahead and by inferring ideas about studying there.

Therefore, rather than releasing information about the HEI, a dynamic picture of the road ahead is painted so that prospective students and their parents/caregivers can envision themselves taking the next step because of becoming emotionally connected (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

5.3 Element 3: Connecting the target audience to outcomes

Telling micro-stories that connect the target audience to desired outcomes by meeting their needs allowed them to consider the bigger picture by reminding them why they want to study (Hardy, 2014). Most students register to study at an HEI to become successful in life (Ahmad et al., 2016), and telling and showing resonating micro-stories about the outcomes of their studies and opportunities along the way may elicit strong emotions in their minds (see Hardy, 2014).

In this regard, HEIs told micro-stories about skills that are in demand, job and scholarship opportunities and available internships. For example, HEIs shared micro-stories to encourage the target audience: “set you on the right path when it comes to your upcoming internship & job opportunities” and “take advantage of increasing opportunities in a rapidly-changing job market.” HEIs also shared stories from students, showcasing their certificates after completing or starting specialisation courses and explaining their in-demand skills. HEIs furthermore focused on alumni “to help find and build authentic relationships that can result in more interviews” and having “essential and career skills.” Students who received scholarships also shared stories of gratitude and encouragement: “College is the first step of the rest of my adult life, so I'm so glad that I get to start it on a great note. Thank you so much.”

By focusing on the results and potential opportunities, the interest of prospective students may be attracted because of highlighting the possibilities of studying at the HEI (Stobierski, 2020).

The proposed taxonomy of what micro-stories HEIs can tell on social media as part of a well-planned content strategy is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

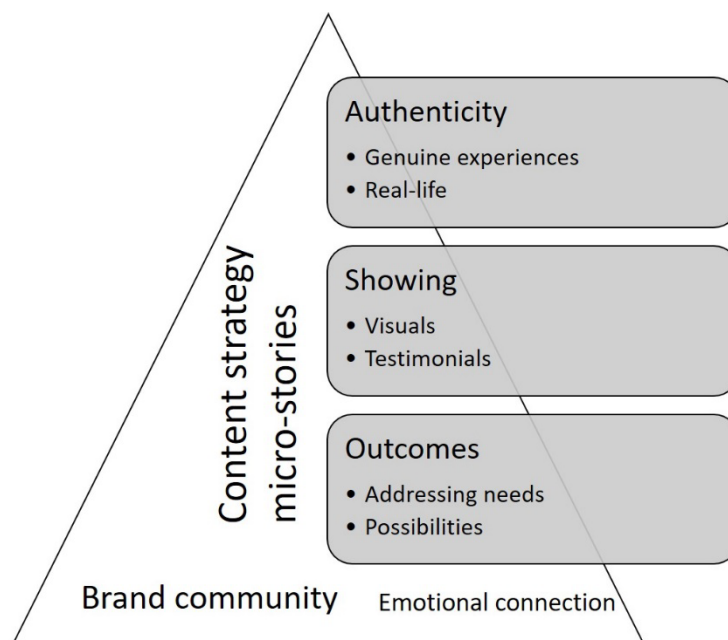


Figure 1: A taxonomy of what micro-stories HEIs can tell on social media to connect with the target audience

6. Discussion

The research question was answered by proposing three elements as part of a taxonomy that highlights what micro-stories HEIs can tell on social media to connect emotionally with their target audience.

The study showed that HEIs tell micro-stories using content marketing to ensure authenticity with real-life experiences, help the target audience to become active participants in their anticipated journey at the HEI (by visually showing not telling) and by connecting the target audience to the outcomes of their intended studies as part of an online community on different social networking sites. In doing so, the HEIs could appeal to consumers with shorter content (Sukhraj, 2020), highlight their institution's unique qualities, and visually engage the target audience (Hardy, 2014). In this regard, HEIs' micro-stories conveyed genuine experiences, allowed the target audience to picture themselves taking the next step and focused on what was essential to the target audience. The micro-stories demonstrated a degree of congruence (Cohen, 2021) and comprised a collection of smaller ideas that extended the brand message of HEIs (Nichols, 2018). Micro-stories resulted in more insightful social media posts to enhance interactions with users interested in higher education (Camilleri, 2020). It was interesting to note that it was essential for HEIs to provide information and take the target audience on a visual journey to what they will be experiencing when pursuing various degree programmes.

The study has theoretical and practical implications. In terms of its theoretical contribution, the study added to the body of content marketing knowledge with a specific focus on telling micro-stories on social media within the context of HEIs. The proposed taxonomy can also stimulate some academic debate and direct future research on the topic. Practically, the study's findings can serve as a heuristic to marketing professionals at HEIs on how to connect with a complex target audience on social media using content marketing by producing more relevant and resonating content.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, micro-stories that convey genuine experiences allow the target audience to imagine themselves acting by focusing on important outcomes when furthering studies, resulting in more attention-grabbing social media posts to extend the brand messages of HEIs. By allowing meaningful shorter stories within a more

prominent brand narrative as part of an online community, the elements in the proposed taxonomy could serve as a starting point for HEIs to plan their micro stories for more engagement. The results also provide the basis for future research on telling micro-stories on social media with content marketing in the context of HEIs, for example, delimitating the type of engagement that micro-stories enhance while consumers' perspectives should also be studied. Some limitations of the study are that only five HEIs were included in the study and that the followers of their social media accounts did not provide any inputs. Although the results can only be generalised to the sample in the study, they are nevertheless valuable for both scholars and practitioners involved in marketing at HEIs.

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