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Content marketing strategy of branded YouTube channels

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ABSTRACT

As content marketing becomes a viable approach to build brands and connect with consumers, this study assessed top brands' content marketing strategy on branded YouTube channels via content analysis. Using a consumer engagement conceptual framework, the study examined brands' strategies addressing the interactivity, attention, emotion, and cognition aspects of engagement and explored the role of YouTube capabilities, financial resources, and product category in strategy differentiation. Results indicated that engagement through social media content marketing is highly contextual and platform dependent. YouTube capabilities, financial resources, and product category play an important role in strategy differentiation.

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As YouTube becomes a ubiquitous video platform competing for advertising revenues across the globe, marketers are increasingly turning to this platform to connect with the so-called YouTube generation and social media enthusiasts (Ghosh, 2016). YouTube differs from the traditional TV advertising platform in that it offers brands the opportunity to take control of the message environment with less time or fewer creative limitations while offering new interaction and community-building possibilities. YouTube provides a video content marketing avenue that was unavailable in the past. As online streaming becomes mainstream and YouTube reaches over a billion users (YouTube, n. d.), studies of media systems and management of such systems would be incomplete without further understanding of YouTube's characteristics as a media channel for marketing communications purposes.

Over the past years, marketers are increasingly turning to the so-called content marketing to build their brands and connect with consumers. Content marketing is defined as "a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience – and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action" (Content Marketing Institute, n.d. para. 3). Unlike traditional marketing communications (e.g. advertising) where messages are designed for the benefits of brands, content marketing emphasises offering value to consumers (Asmussen et al., 2016). In addition, content marketing uses a pull logic instead of push logic – consumers are not forced to encounter brand-related information but opt in to receive content from brands (e.g. following a brand on social media). As

a result, consumers are less likely to avoid or ignore the content. Content marketing is gaining strength as a means of building brands, retaining customer relationship, and driving customer actions in today's fragmented media environment (Arrese & Perez-Latre, 2017).

In 2018, more than 70% of brands in the U.S. claimed having content marketing strategies and over half of brands around the globe expected to increase their content marketing budget in 2020 (Beets & Handley, 2018; Handley et al., 2020). In 2019, specifically, video content was the fastest-growing type of content, as 69% of brands increased their use of video content in content marketing (Beets & Handley, 2018). As such, YouTube offers a great opportunity for brands to practice content marketing. It has been suggested that YouTube can help marketers cultivate authority, build credibility, and construct brand community through branded content (Agrawal, 2016; Ciampa, 2013). However, as important as content marketing and YouTube are today, academic studies addressing content marketing on YouTube are scarce.

The key to successful content marketing was “engaging in a conversation with your customers and prospects” (Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009, p. 15). By eliciting consumer engagement, it is believed that content marketing will lead to positive outcomes, such as brand loyalty and purchase intention (Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009). As a result, this study adopts the engagement framework and investigates the engagement aspects of top brands' content marketing strategies on YouTube. The goal is to understand how brands have utilised the relatively new marketing communication platform YouTube. In addition, considering that a company's resources and capabilities can significantly affect the formation of marketing communication strategies of the brands it owns (Forsyth, 2009), this study explores how two resource- or capability-based factors, namely YouTube capability and financial resources, have contributed to the differences in brands' YouTube strategies. This study also examines brands' strategy differentiation based on product category. These factors are of high relevancy in the YouTube context.

As such, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of top brands' use of YouTube in practicing content marketing. Specifically, the study is designed to identify major trends in top brands' engagement strategies on the platform and investigate strategy variations from a resource and capability perspective. Practically, it offers content marketing insights for practitioners by systematically analysing leading brands, which often set the tone of industry practices.

Literature review

Engagement through social media content

Systematic studies on social media content marketing strategies are scant. In the context of Facebook, Stephen et al. (2015) developed a typology of social media content characteristics and studied the effects of these characteristics on consumer engagement. They proposed six categories and a number of subdimensions, such as information (subdimensions: product-related, value-related, and brand-related) and calls to action (subdimensions: calls to engage, calls to enter a competition). They found that being informative is not sufficient in driving consumer engagement and calls to action actually has little impact. Instead, persuasion-oriented content characteristics (subdimensions:

relevance, message clarity, and advertising tone) work the best. A similar work from Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) studied characteristics of brands' Facebook content (e.g. content type and media type) on four engagement actions (i.e., likes, comments, shares, and interaction duration). They reported that both content type and media type affected engagement results. In general, entertainment content and photos drove more engagement.

However, engaging consumers on YouTube can be different, given that social interaction on most social media platforms, including Facebook, is mostly based on profiles and friending (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), but YouTube's interaction is rooted in the video content itself (Burgess & Green, 2009; Lange, 2007b), complemented by comments (Lange, 2007a). In a way, YouTube's form of communication provides more contextual cues due to its focus on content and audio-visual presentations (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Waters and Jones (2011) study is the only study thus far that specifically studied the strategies of branded videos in YouTube brand channels, though it focused on non-profit organisations. It examined the 100 most viewed YouTube non-profit channels and coded several items (e.g. overall purpose, references to non-profit topics, and calls to action) in an attempt to identify the purpose of these videos, the content being used to develop organisational identity, and the way to engage stakeholders. This study found that non-profit organisations focused on informing and educating viewers about their missions, programmes, and services rather than engaging stakeholders. Although the study provides great insights, what is found in a non-profit context may not apply to commercial brands.

In summary, little research has been done regarding engagement strategies of top brands in social media content marketing, especially that on YouTube. How variance in these strategies across brands relates to company- or brand-related factors is not explored as well. This study aims to address the gap in relevant literature. Specifically, the study examines brands' engagement strategies from four aspects – interactivity, attention, emotion, and cognition – and how their strategies differ based on three factors, namely YouTube capability, financial resources, and product category. A conceptual diagram of this study can be found in Figure 1.

The engagement framework – interactivity, attention, emotion, and cognition

In exploring the content marketing strategy of branded YouTube channels, this study subscribes to the conceptual framework of consumer engagement to identify the most important strategic aspects in this context. Consumer engagement is defined as “a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, cocreative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g. a brand) in focal service relationships” (Brodie et al., 2011, pp. 106–107). The concept is proposed to be multi-dimensional with a set of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, experiential, or social components (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Vivek et al., 2014). From a consumer-brand perspective, engagement can help stimulate purchase intention, encourage word-of-mouth behaviours, and build brand loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2014). Existing literature also suggests that engagement is highly contextual. This study explores the concept on a video-based social media platform in a brand content marketing context.

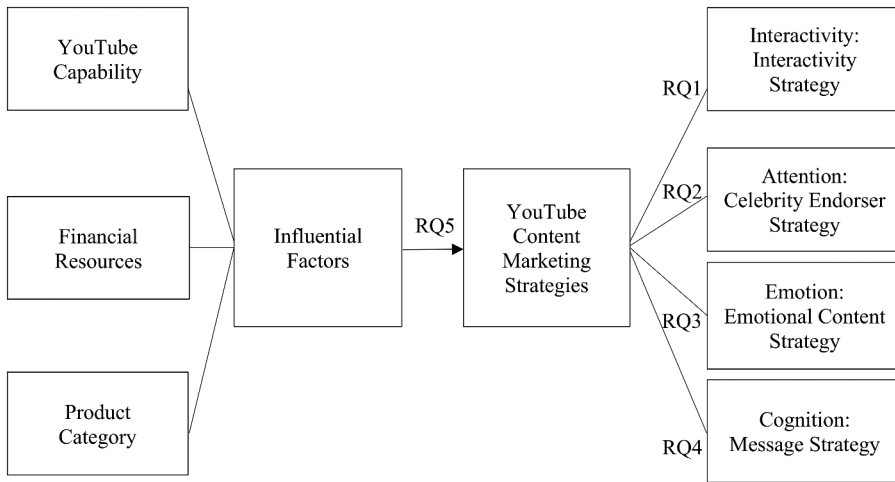


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study and the corresponding research questions.

Overall, four strategic aspects are identified that contribute to engagement on YouTube. These aspects (i.e., interactivity, attention, emotion, and cognition) are discussed below.

Interactivity

The definition of engagement suggests that an interactive experience is at the core of the engagement concept (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Scholars have discussed interactivity as one of the most important features of engagement (Asmussen et al., 2016; Mollen & Wilson, 2010). This is especially true when it comes to engagement through social media. It is believed that the interactive capabilities of social media perfectly match the nature of engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014). By providing interactive content and facilitating interaction with consumers, social media connect brands with consumers and foster consumer engagement (Van Laer et al., 2013). Studies have shown that YouTube influencers often use multiple interactive elements (e.g. greetings, interaction invitations) in their videos and the comment function to engage their followers and develop communities (Cayari, 2011; Tolson, 2010). However, little is known about how brands interact with consumers in YouTube channels. Accordingly, this study will first address the interactive strategy of branded YouTube channels with the following research question.

RQ 1: How is interactivity strategy utilised by brands in their YouTube channels?

Attention

Outside the interactive core, engagement has several dimensions. Among the dimensions, attention is often the first one mentioned (e.g. O'Brien & Toms, 2010; Vivek et al., 2014). It is the key concept underlying the phase of engagement before behavioural responses (Hollebeek et al., 2014). When engaged, consumers tend to concentrate on the engaging object and ignore other things (O'Brien & Toms, 2010). To attract consumers'

attention, several techniques could be used in advertising, such as the so-called borrowed interest appeal (i.e., interests that consumers naturally have, such as cute puppies and beautiful women), animation, flash, size changes, and pop-up (Campbell, 1995; Nilsson, 2006). In addition, celebrity endorsement has also been found effective (Erdogan, 1999; Kamins, 1989). The current study focuses on celebrity endorsement as an attention-getting technique given its strengthened power in the social media context (Brison et al., 2016; Wood & Burkhalter, 2014). Different from the traditional advertising context, where celebrity endorsers are socially inaccessible by the advertising audience, on social media, brands can actually connect the audience with an endorser immediately by including a link to the endorser's account. Such an interaction opportunity could help with attracting the audience's attention. In addition, brands can take advantage of the endorser's follower base by having the endorser post on their own page, attract followers' attention, and drive traffic to the brand's channel.

In addition to traditional celebrities, a relevant phenomenon that is unique to social media, especially YouTube and Instagram, is the existence of social media celebrity, also known as social media influencers. YouTube celebrities' videos, comments, and behaviours can influence the discourse and goals of the YouTube community (Lange, 2007a). In practice, a wide range of brands have hired YouTube celebrities to promote their products (Slutsky, 2010). To examine the attention aspect through celebrity endorsement, the following research question is posited.

RQ 2: How is celebrity endorsement, especially YouTube celebrity endorsement, adopted by brands in YouTube channels?

Emotion

As one key aspect of engagement, emotions are the internal drive that causes people "to desire things, to form attachments, to have particular kinds of emotional reactions to media" (Gates, 2014, p. 77–78). Strong affective engagement can be achieved without a high level of attention and strong brands can be built through the emotional route (Heath, 2009). Emotions are important in social media content marketing. Pleasurable emotions elicited by branded content will lead to positive attitudes towards the brands (Chen et al., 2015). The type and intensity of emotions contained in a video are associated with its virality (Botha, 2014; Nelson-Field et al., 2013). Brands can strategically design emotional content to engage consumers (Biener et al., 2004; Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1984). Subscribing to the emotional content framework proposed by Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy (1984), which combines the positive/negative bipolarity of emotion with the pleasure-arousal-dominance framework (Mehrabian, 1996), the present study also explores the emotional content strategy of the branded YouTube channels.

RQ 3: How is emotional content employed by brands in YouTube channels?

Cognition

To address the cognitive aspect of engagement strategy manifested in branded YouTube channels, this study explores the message strategy of the videos. The dual-processing models, such as the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980) and the elaboration

likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), suggest that consumers may process advertising messages through two different approaches. One approach relies heavily on cognition and requires extensive information processing, while the other is more peripheral or heuristic. Brands could choose to foster either approach by adopting different message strategies. The current study adopts the message strategy typology developed by Laskey et al. (1989). The two-step typology categorises message strategy into one of the two main categories – informational or transformational – and then into a sub-category belonging to the main category. While the informational approach implies a more cognitive message strategy, the transformation approach represents a non-cognitive message strategy. Regarding social media content marketing, research on message strategies and consumer engagement with branded content have in the past focused on text-based social media platforms (e.g. Ashley & Tuten, 2015). A few studies have examined the YouTube context, but with an emphasis on corporate social responsibility issues (e.g. Wen et al., 2017). To fill the research gap, the following research question is posited.

RQ 4: How is cognitive content, as reflected by message strategy approach, adopted by brands in YouTube channels?

Factors affecting marketing strategies – YouTube capability, financial resources, and product category

The resource-based theory suggests that companies possess different resources and capabilities that serve as the foundation for business strategy, such as knowledge resources, financial resources, and complementary capabilities (Grant, 1991). This indicates that a company's resources and capabilities are likely to impact the marketing strategies of the brands it owns. In addition to resources and capabilities, the theory also indicates that external environment, such as the industry a company operates in, can have an impact on strategy (Grant, 1991). Based on the theory, this study identifies three factors that are most relevant in the YouTube content marketing context and explores how these factors may affect brands' content marketing strategies on YouTube. The factors are YouTube capability, financial resources, and product category. It is worth noting that although resources and capabilities are normally assigned to a company behind a brand rather than the brand itself and therefore brands owned by the same company may share some resources and capabilities, the three factors this study explores are actually brand specific. This will be further elaborated in the following sections.

YouTube capability

YouTube capability, a company's capacity of deploying primarily knowledge-based resources it integrated about YouTube, is likely to influence how it approaches the platform. In the YouTube content marketing context, YouTube capability is reflected by a company's understanding of YouTube users, YouTube content, and YouTube functions. It can be achieved through not only in-house teams but also outsourcing to specialised external agencies. In either way, companies that have fewer subscribers and views are likely to have lower levels of YouTube capability, as they don't seem to master the art of YouTube content marketing. In addition, companies that are new on the platform may have lower levels of YouTube capability because they are less experienced. Although outsourcing to experienced agencies is available, most companies don't

outsource content strategy; they only hire external agencies for content creation (Handley et al., 2020). As such, companies that are new on the platform may not sufficiently understand how to develop effective content strategies to engage with consumers on the platform. Studies have indicated that companies' social media strategies varied by their experiences with social media (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011). The current study measures three indicators to represent a brand's YouTube capability, namely subscribers, total views, and years on YouTube. Because even brands owned by the same company have their independent YouTube channels and audience bases, YouTube capability can be regarded as a brand specific factor that represents a brand's knowledge and capability of utilising this platform.

Financial resources

Financial resources have been found to affect a company's strategies as well as other resources and capabilities (Kaleka, 2011). Although brands owned by the same company may share some financial resources, a type of financial resource that is often brand specific is advertising budget. Advertising budget can be calculated at a product level, a brand level, or a company level. This study focuses on the advertising budget allocated to a brand. Advertising budget has been shown to influence brands' media strategies (Forsyth, 2009). To assess brands' budget on content, especially video content, the current study measures two indicators, namely advertising expenditure and TV advertising expenditure.

Product category

A brand's industrial environment, as indicated by product category, can affect the brand's marketing strategies because each industry has its own attributes and dynamics. For example, luxury brands are found to offer entertaining content all the time (Kim & Ko, 2012), while non-profit organisations majorly provide informational content (Waters & Jones, 2011). The present study employs the widely accepted involvement level concept (Martin, 1998) to indicate a brand's category. Accordingly, the following research question is proposed:

RQ 5: How do content marketing strategies vary across brands based on their YouTube capability, financial resources, and product category?

Methods

This study utilises content analysis to assess branded YouTube channels. Content analysis is useful "both in the context of justification for establishing patterns which support existing theories (or fail to support them) and in the context of discovery for establishing patterns on which to formulate new theories" (Carlson et al., 1993, p. 29).

Sampling

Fifty brands that have their own branded YouTube channels and are ranked among the highest on Forbes' "The World's Most Valuable Brands" list (Forbes, 2017) were selected. The Forbes list is well-known for its credibility and therefore is a proper sampling frame for measuring top brands' strategies. Top brands with high brand values are considered

successful in branding and marketing. How they adopt novel marketing approaches has always been a focus of research (e.g. Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Burns, 2016; Guo, 2012), as it indicates whether these approaches have become mainstream and indispensable elements of the promotion mix. This study focuses on major brands' content marketing practices on YouTube in order to learn how this marketing technique and this media channel have been used by major brands for marketing communications purposes.

To sample brands and corresponding YouTube channels, the top 50 brands were first checked. Two brands that didn't have YouTube brand channels were removed as they are considered as not conducting content marketing on YouTube. New brands were then replenished based on their ranks. For brands that have more than one channel, only the main channel was selected. Specifically, only the channel that represents (1) the whole brand, instead of a certain category (e.g. Nike vs. Nike Running); and (2) the brand's global market, instead of a certain country (e.g. Nescafe vs. Nescafe USA), was selected. One brand was excluded because it did not have a global channel. The rationale is that a single category or a specific country is lacking in representativeness of the brand as a whole. In each brand channel, the featured video at the home page and another four latest videos were collected. The featured video was preferred because it indicates the strategic focus of the brand. Another four newest videos were also collected for more comprehensive representation of the brand's content strategy. Finally, a sample of 50 brands and 250 videos was generated. A list of the brands is provided in Appendix A.

Data collection and coding procedures

To code videos as they are viewed by consumers on YouTube, the whole coding process was online. This is necessary because YouTube has several interaction functions that only work online. For example, a pre-set link may appear during a video inviting consumers to join a competition and disappear after several seconds. This link will not appear when the video is downloaded and played offline. Two trained coders coded the videos according to the codebook in two phases. First, 12% of the sample brands ($n = 6$) and the corresponding videos ($n = 30$) were used for coder training. During the training process, discrepancies were discussed and the codebook was revised accordingly. This process repeated several times until the coders reached acceptable inter-coder reliability. In the second phase, each of the coders independently coded 22 of the remaining brands. This coding method has been widely adopted by media and communication researchers (e.g. Faerber & Kreling, 2014). The coding process started in February 2017. When coding, the coders first coded variables containing values that change constantly (e.g. number of views) simultaneously to minimise the impact of time. After that, other variables were coded in a one-week period. The final inter-coder reliability of each variable was calculated and presented in Appendix B.

Coding scheme

Regarding interactivity strategy, six indicators addressing both the content (i.e., content interactivity) and non-content (i.e., interaction frequency) aspects were measured, including post frequency in a month, response frequency in a week, frequency of disabling comments, use of link, use of call to act, and use of contest/question that invites

consumers to participate/answer. For attentional engagement, namely celebrity endorsement strategy, the presence of traditional celebrity and that of YouTube celebrity were coded respectively for each video. As for emotional content strategy, two dimensions (pleasure and arousal) were coded, each with three categories (e.g. positive, negative, and neither). As for the cognition aspect, namely message strategy, each video was coded into one main category (informational vs. transformational) and then one subcategory (informational: comparative, unique selling proposition, pre-emptive, hyperbole, generic-informational. Transformational: user image, brand image, use occasion, and generic-transformational).

Regarding factors affecting strategies, YouTube capability was indicated by subscribers, total views, and years on YouTube. Advertising expenditure and TV advertising expenditure were recorded using secondary data to assess financial resources. When identifying the expenditures, we recorded the amount of money attributed to the brand names appeared in the Forbes list, rather than any specific product lines of the brands or any parent brands of the brands. Lastly, product category was indicated by involvement level (high vs. low). The operational definitions and coding categories of the variables can be found in Appendix B.

Sample distribution

The 50 brands come from various industries, including technology, automobile, energy, fashion, retailing, telecommunication, banking, fast moving consumer goods, and so on. Among the 50 brands, 10% have more than 1 million subscribers, 50% have between 100,000 and 1 million subscribers, and 40% have fewer than 100,000 subscribers. Concerning total views, 6% have more than 1 billion views, 24% have between 100 million and 1 billion views, 64% have between 1 million and 100 million views, and 6% have fewer than 1 million views. As for YouTube experience, 80% have been on YouTube for 10 years or above. With regard to financial resource, 44% spent more than 100 million dollars on advertising in the last year, and 36% spent more than 100 million dollars on TV advertising. With regard to product category, 52% belong to the high involvement category, while 48% belong to the low involvement category.

Data analysis

A usage score was calculated for each of the strategy variables except for post frequency and reply frequency by aggregating the times of using this strategy by a brand in its five videos. The lowest possible score is 0, referring that the brand did not use this strategy in any of the five videos. The highest possible score is 5, which means that the brand used this strategy in all five videos. As such, the original dummy variables representing a single video were recoded into continuous variables representing a whole brand. Likewise, reply frequency of each brand was calculated by summing up the total number of responses in the brand's five videos. These variables were recoded because this study is interested in content marketing strategies at a brand level instead of a video level.

Descriptive analysis, Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis H test, and Kendall's Tau-b correlation coefficient were utilised to analyse the data. The later three nonparametric

tests are suitable for data with authentic outliers and are not normally distributed, which is often the case for data collected by content analysis. Note that because the advertising expenditure data of McDonald's were not available, this brand was excluded when analysing the variance in strategy based on advertising expenditure.

Results

The descriptive stats concerning RQ1 to RQ4 are provided in Table 1. RQ 1 addresses interactivity strategy from both content and non-content aspects. As for content interactivity, around half of the brands (42%, $n=21$) used "link" and the same percentage used "call to act" in every video, meaning that the brands were actively linking YouTube videos to other platforms and inviting consumers to connect with them or explore more about them. Only 10% of the brands ($n=5$) didn't use "link" or "call to act" in any of their videos. However, the highest level of interactivity, contest/question, was seldom used by brands, as only 6% ($n=3$) used it once and 94% ($n=47$) didn't use it at all. As for the non-content aspect, namely interaction frequency, the brands posted relatively frequently but rarely replied to comments. Post frequency ranged from 0 to 225 per month and most brands posted more than once a week ($Mdn = 7.5$, $M = 20.24$, $SD = 37.40$). Reply frequency ranged from 0 to 8 per week. 90% of the brands ($n=45$) didn't reply to comments at all. In addition, the brands showed a strong will to control user-generated-content (UGC), as 28% ($n=14$) of them disabled the comment function for at least one video and 14% ($n=7$) even disabled comments for all videos.

RQ 2 explores the attentional aspect of engagement by examining celebrity endorsement strategy. 24% of the brands ($n=12$) used traditional celebrity to some extent. 12% ($n=6$) used it once, 5% ($n=5$) used it three times, and 2% ($n=1$) used it four times. YouTube celebrity was used indeed, but very rarely, as only 4% of the brands ($n=2$) used it and just in one video.

RQ 3 addresses emotional engagement and emotional content strategy. Emotional content was commonly used. The majority of the brands (78%, $n=39$) used positive pleasure to some extent and 10% ($n=5$) used this strategy in all five videos. 14% of the brands ($n=7$) used negative pleasure but all of them only used it once. 16% of the brands ($n=8$) did not use any pleasure in any video (i.e., used "neither pleasure" in all five videos). Regarding arousal, 76% of the brands ($n=38$) used positive arousal to some extent and no brand used negative arousal. 16% of the brands ($n=8$) used positive arousal in all their videos. 24% of the brands ($n=12$) did not use any arousal in any video (i.e., used "neither arousal" in all five videos).

RQ 4 explores message strategy, which represents the cognitive aspect of engagement. Almost all brands (98%, $n=49$) used transformational (non-cognitive) message strategy at least once in their videos and the majority of the brands (66%, $n=33$) used informational (cognitive) strategy at least once in their videos. It is worth noting that 34% of the brands ($n=17$) employed transformational (non-cognitive) strategy in all five videos, while only 2% ($n=1$) used informational (cognitive) strategy in all videos. Most brands using informational (cognitive) strategy just used it once (22%, $n=11$) or twice (20%, $n=10$). With regard to sub-strategy, the most widely used informational sub-strategy was pre-emptive, as 46% of the brands ($n=23$) used it at least once. The least used ones were comparative and USP, each used by 4% of the brands ($n=2$) and only in one video.

Table 1. Descriptive results of the brands' usage of interactivity, celebrity endorsement, emotional content, and message strategies.

Strategy	Descriptive statistics						
	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Interactivity							
Post frequency	50	0	225	20.24	37.40	7.5	0
Frequency of replying to consumers	50	0	8	.35	1.31	0	0
	Overall			Usage score			
	No	Yes	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency of disabling comments	36 (72%)	14 (28%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	7 (14%)
Link	5 (10%)	45 (90%)	3 (6%)	10 (20%)	7 (14%)	4 (8%)	21 (42%)
Call to act	5 (10%)	45 (90%)	3 (6%)	10 (20%)	7 (14%)	4 (8%)	21 (42%)
Contest/questions	47 (94%)	3 (6%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Celebrity endorsement							
Traditional celebrity	38 (76%)	12 (24%)	6 (12%)	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
YouTube celebrity	48 (96%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Emotional content							
Positive pleasure	11 (22%)	39 (78%)	14 (28%)	7 (14%)	7 (14%)	6 (12%)	5 (10%)
Negative pleasure	43 (86%)	7 (14%)	7 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Neither pleasure	5 (10%)	45 (90%)	7 (14%)	7 (14%)	8 (16%)	15 (30%)	8 (16%)
Positive arousal	12 (24%)	38 (76%)	12 (24%)	9 (18%)	6 (12%)	3 (6%)	8 (16%)
Negative arousal	50 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Neither arousal	8 (16%)	42 (84%)	3 (6%)	6 (12%)	9 (18%)	12 (24%)	12 (24%)
Message strategy							
<i>Informational (cognitive appeals)</i>	17 (34%)	33 (66%)	11 (22%)	10 (20%)	5 (10%)	6 (12%)	1 (2%)
Comparative	48 (96%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
USP	48 (96%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Pre-Emptive	27 (54%)	23 (46%)	10 (20%)	7 (14%)	3 (6%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)
Hyperbole	43 (86%)	7 (14%)	6 (12%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Generic-informational	43 (86%)	7 (14%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
<i>Transformational (non-cognitive appeals)</i>	1 (2%)	49 (98%)	6 (12%)	5 (10%)	10 (20%)	11 (22%)	17 (34%)
User image and use occasion	18 (36%)	32 (64%)	9 (18%)	9 (18%)	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	4 (8%)
Brand image	19 (38%)	31 (62%)	13 (26%)	9 (18%)	6 (12%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)
Generic-transformational	35 (70%)	15 (30%)	7 (14%)	2 (4%)	4 (8%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)

Table 2. Summary of correlation and group difference results.

	YouTube capability			Financial resources		Product category
	SUB	VIE	EXP	ADE	TVE	
Interactivity						
Post frequency	+					
Disabling comments						
Reply frequency		+		+	+	
Link	+	+				
Call to act	+	+				
Contest/question						
Celebrity endorsement						
Traditional celebrity	+					
YouTube celebrity						
Emotional content						
Positive pleasure	+	+				
Negative pleasure						
Neither pleasure	-	-				
Positive arousal	+	+			+	√
Message strategy						
<i>Informational (cognitive)</i>						√
Comparative						
USP						
Pre-Emptive						
Hyperbole						
Generic-informational	-					
<i>Transformational (non-cognitive)</i>						√
User image/use occasion						
Brand image						
Generic-transformational	+					

Note: SUB = Subscriber, VIE = Total view, EXP = Experience on YouTube, ADE = Ad expenditure, TVE = TV ad expenditure.

Hyperbole and generic-informational strategies each was adopted by 14% of the brands ($n=7$). As for transformational sub-strategy, the most frequently used was brand image – 62% of the brands ($n=31$) used it at least once. Generic-transformational was the least used one, as 70% of the brands ($n=35$) did not use it in any video. User image and use occasion was adopted by 64% of the brands ($n=32$).

A series of analyses were performed for RQ5, which addresses the relationship between content marketing strategies and the three influential factors. A summary of the results is provided in Table 2. First, two indicators of YouTube capability were associated with interactivity strategy. To be specific, subscribers was positively correlated with post frequency ($\tau_b = .234, p = .018$), link ($\tau_b = .238, p = .026$), and call to act ($\tau_b = .238, p = .026$). Total views was positively correlated with reply frequency ($\tau_b = .271, p = .033$), link ($\tau_b = .234, p = .030$), and call to act ($\tau_b = .234, p = .030$). Two indicators of financial resources were positively correlated with reply frequency, including ad expenditure ($\tau_b = .282, p = .025$) and TV ad expenditure ($\tau_b = .288, p = .022$). Generally speaking, the correlations were significant but weak. With regard to product category, no group difference was significant ($p > .05$). In other words, the brands' interactivity strategy didn't differ based on their product category.

In terms of attention strategy as reflected by the use of celebrities, Kendall's tau-b correlation showed that there was a positive association between traditional celebrity

endorsement and subscribers, $\tau_b = .24, p = .036$. No other significant correlation or group difference was identified ($p > .05$).

With regard to emotional content strategy, because no brands used negative arousal, it was exempted from further tests. Consequently, “neither arousal” was also exempted because it is merely the absence of positive arousal. YouTube capability indicators were significant. Subscribers was significantly associated with positive pleasure ($\tau_b = .24, p = .023$), neither positive nor negative pleasure ($\tau_b = -.26, p = .012$), and positive arousal ($\tau_b = .35, p = .001$). Similarly, total views was also associated with positive pleasure ($\tau_b = .22, p = .037$), neither pleasure ($\tau_b = -.25, p = .018$), and positive arousal ($\tau_b = .32, p = .003$). A financial resource indicator, TV ad expenditure, was also significantly associated with positive arousal ($\tau_b = .23, p = .031$). In addition, differences based on product category were significant, though marginally. Low involvement brands used positive arousal (mean rank = 29.67) more frequently than high involvement brands (mean rank = 21.65), $U = 412, z = 1.981, p = .048$.

As for cognitive engagement through message strategies, group differences based on product category were significant. Compared to low involvement categories, high involvement categories used informational strategy more (mean rank_{high} = 30.73, mean rank_{low} = 19.83, $U = 176, z = -2.724, p = .006$) and transformational strategy less (mean rank_{high} = 20.27, mean rank_{low} = 31.17, $U = 448, z = 2.724, p = .006$). With regard to the sub-categories of message strategy, subscribers was negatively associated with generic-informational strategy, $\tau_b = -.28, p = .014$, and positively associated with generic-transformational strategy, $\tau_b = .22, p = .049$. Both associations were weak.

Conclusion and discussion

This study explores how top brands use branded YouTube channels for content marketing purposes based on the premise that this video social media platform provides an effective environment for brands to engage consumers. Brand strategies are examined from the perspectives of interactivity, attention, emotion, and cognitive message design. This engagement framework is effective in guiding our examination of content strategies. In this section, we identified the major trends concerning the top brands' YouTube content marketing strategies, and discussed the differences in the brands' strategies based on their YouTube capability, financial resources, and product category.

The first trend identified is that top brands focus on interacting through content rather than platform functions. Nevertheless, they do not attempt to elicit higher levels of interactivity in content, as contest/question is rarely used. The focus on content rather than interaction with consumers may result from the environment of YouTube. Compared to other social media platforms, YouTube is not designed for communication, but content consumption and sharing (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Consumers are the least likely to generate UGC responding to marketers' online actions on YouTube, compared to Facebook and Twitter (Smith et al., 2012). Interaction on YouTube relies on the video content itself (Burgess & Green, 2009; Lange, 2007b). Hence, brands might be responding to the nature of YouTube as a platform by trying to provide quality content, instead of interacting with consumers as a means of engagement. It is necessary for marketers to understand the distinct characteristics of each social media platform and set engagement objectives accordingly.

The second trend is that top brands are trying to control UGC by disabling comments. This might be an effort of controlling the media environment in their channels. Given that uncontrolled negative UGC can harm brand equity (Christodoulides et al., 2012), top brands may see controlling UGC necessary. However, disabling comments may hamper consumers' engagement level with the brand, as the emphasis of engagement – interactive experiences – is inhibited. In addition, it limits interactions among consumers, which impedes engagement. Marketers should be careful when using this function.

Third, top brands feature traditional celebrities at a moderate level but are reluctant to star YouTube celebrities. A possible reason is that many of the videos are the secondary exploitation of the brands' TV commercials starring traditional celebrities. This also indicates a significant difference between traditional celebrities and social media influencers. On the one hand, although social media influencers often have a strong relationship with their followers and are considered more relatable and trustworthy than traditional celebrities by their followers (O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016), they might be less effective in terms of attracting the attention of general consumers. General consumers who do not follow an influencer may not be able to recognise this person and therefore may consider him/her as a mere actor when seeing him/her in a branded YouTube channel. This explains why some of these major brands cooperated with social media influencers (e.g. McDonald's, Nestle) but did not post videos about these influencers in their branded YouTube channels. Brands tend to have YouTube influencers post branded content on the influencers' channels in order to leverage the great impact of the influencers on their followers (Mediakix, 2016; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). On the other hand, the finding that 4% of the top brands examined have featured YouTube influencers shows that these grass-root celebrities are exhibiting more and more impact. They might work better than traditional celebrities in targeting certain consumer segments. It is worth noting that the power of influencers is not limited to attracting attention; with their strong relationships with followers, they are able to affect followers' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Marketers need to understand the respective advantages and disadvantages of traditional celebrities and social media influencers and develop marketing strategies accordingly.

Fourth, emotional content is widely employed, especially positive emotions. Although negative emotions were occasionally featured, they all led to a positive ending. Hence, they are not truly negative, but a way to stimulate positive emotions from a different approach. The finding is consistent with previous findings that brands frequently publish emotional content on social media to engage followers (Taecharunroj, 2017). It also conforms the belief that emotional content in marketing communication can evoke consumers' emotional reactions and contribute to the overall engagement level (Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1984; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Emotional content seems effective in engaging consumers. Marketers could try to create and deliver more emotional content on YouTube.

Fifth, non-cognitive (transformational) emphasis, instead of cognitive (informational) appeals, dominates YouTube brand channels. In support of Stephen et al. (2015) and Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013), our findings indicate that informational content may not be sufficient in terms of engaging consumers on social media, and transformational content, such as content of entertainment value, might be more effective. In addition, how companies utilise YouTube is different from non-profit organisations, as the latter

underlines information and education (Waters & Jones, 2011). Our findings also reveal an important difference between brands' strategies on YouTube and on other social media platforms. While brands were found using a primarily informational strategy on text-oriented or multimedia-oriented social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Araujo et al., 2015; Ashley & Tuten, 2015), they seem to focus on transformational branded content and non-cognitive engagement on YouTube. In addition, the emphasis on brand image reveals the role of branded YouTube videos in brand image building. Marketers could offer more transformational, non-cognitive content on YouTube and start to deploy the platform as a brand building channel rather than an information transmission channel.

Sixth, consistent with previous studies (Forsyth, 2009; Grant, 1991; Kaleka, 2011), our findings support the notion that factors related to resources, capabilities, and marketing environment could affect brands' marketing strategies. With regard to strategy differentiation on the basis of YouTube capability, financial resources, and product category, three main findings can be stated. First, overall, YouTube capability is the most significant factor in strategy differentiation, especially subscribers and total views, which were correlated with most of the strategy variables, covering all the four engagement aspects. Contradicting previous studies (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011), YouTube experience did not make a difference. Brands with a higher level of YouTube capability interact with consumers more, feature celebrities more, embed emotional content more, and adopt transformational messages more. Second, product category is a key differentiator in emotional content and message strategy, corresponding to the suggestion of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) that under low-involvement conditions, emotional and non-cognitive content work better than rational, informational arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Third, it is interesting that brands with more financial resources reply to comments more frequently, indicating that financial support is essential in interaction. Overall, it is clear that resource- and capability-based factors, as well as product category, affect brands' content strategies. Marketers who want to make use of YouTube content marketing should allocate enough resources to the designated team and design strategies based on their product categories.

Theoretically, the study found that engagement is highly contextual and platform dependent. Engaging consumers on YouTube can be totally different from that on other social media platforms, as it (1) emphasises the presentation of high-quality content instead of the presence of two-way communication (e.g. comments and replies), which is considered imperative on other platforms (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Lin et al., 2017; de Vries et al., 2012), and (2) has a focus on transformational, non-cognitive content instead of informational, cognitive content, which is more common on Facebook and Twitter (Araujo et al., 2015; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). In addition, traditional celebrity and social media celebrity play different roles in brands' marketing communications. While social media celebrities engage well with their own followers, featuring them in brands' own channels may not be effective in terms of engaging with the brands' subscribers. Furthermore, different strategic aspects are influenced by various factors. Directly related capability, such as YouTube capability in this study, is the most significant one in strategy differentiation.

This study is limited by its relatively small sample size of 50 brands and 250 videos. Future studies could sample more videos to represent a brand and study other variables

that are important in content marketing, such as type of content, layout of channel, and link to other social media platforms. In addition, this study only examined videos from large, leading brands. Future studies might investigate brands of different sizes and valuations to detect further differences in these brands, or brands that are considered doing well in content marketing to learn from their practices. Moreover, this study focused on strategy instead of effectiveness, and therefore no engagement outcome variables were measured. Future studies could incorporate outcome variables (e.g. sharing) and examine the relationships between strategies and outcomes. For example, how UGC control could influence engagement. On a related note, this study only focused on YouTube channels owned by brands; how brands engage consumers through other channels, especially influencer channels, was not explored. Future studies could further explore that area.

Other limitations derived from measurement and data analysis should also be articulated. First, because emotion is highly subjective, it was mainly measured based on the emotions of the characters shown in the videos. Though this strategy protected the objectivity of this study, some emotional cues in music and visual elements might have been omitted. Future research could optimise measures of emotional content. Second, restrained by practical data access issue, advertising expenditure instead of content marketing expenditure was recorded. Third, because this study set 100,000 subscribers as the cut point between normal YouTubers and YouTube celebrity, some less popular YouTuber might have been excluded. However, fame and popularity are necessary in order to drive attention. Hence, this exclusion is appropriate. A possible future research direction is to study different levels of celebrity endorsers. Finally, this study did not control for possible confounding variables. It is important to interpret the results with caution. Since each of the influential variables has several indicators, the readers could be more confident about an influential variable's impact when several of its indicators correlate with or lead to a difference in a strategy variable (e.g. YouTube capability and interactivity, YouTube capability and emotional content, YouTube capability and message strategy, product category and message strategy).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Brands Included in the Final Sample

Brands				
· Accenture	· Disney	· Gucci	· Louis Vuitton	· Samsung
· Amazon	· Ebay	· H&M	· McDonald's	· SAP
· American Express	· ESPN	· Hermès	· Mercedes-Benz	· Starbucks
· Apple	· Facebook	· Home Depot	· Microsoft	· Toyota
· AT&T	· Ford	· Honda	· Nescafe	· UPS
· BMW	· Fox	· HP	· Nestle	· Verizon
· Budweiser	· Frito-Lay	· HSBC	· Nike	· Visa
· Cisco	· GE	· IBM	· Oracle	· Walmart
· Coca-Cola	· Gillette	· IKEA	· Pampers	· Wells Fargo
· CVS	· Google	· Intel	· Pepsi	· Zara

Appendix B. List of Variables, Operational Definitions, and Sources

Variables Operational definitions Inter-coder reliability Interactivity: interactivity strategy (Source: de Vries et al., 2012 and self-developed) Post frequency The number of videos the brand posts in one month. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Disabling comments Comment function of the video disabled. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Response frequency The number of responses the brand replies to viewers' comments in one week. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Link A link to other websites in the video or the description area. 93.3% agreement; Scott's Pi = .63 Call to act Asks consumers to do something in the video or the description area. e.g. subscribe the channel, explore more on the official website, and like the brand on other social media. 93.3% agreement; Scott's Pi = .79 Contest/question Contains questions or contests in the video or the description area and asks viewers to answer/participate. 96.7% agreement; Scott's Pi = -.02 Attention: celebrity endorsement (Source: Self-developed) Traditional celebrity Showing an individual or a group of individuals that has/have been reported in either of the two well-known celebrity news websites: TMZ or E! News. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 YouTube celebrity Showing a YouTuber with more than 100,000 followers. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Emotion: emotional content (Source: Hollbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1984) Pleasure Type of affection the video primarily conveys based on characters shown in it. If there are no people, judge based on the overall presence including visual, music, voiceover, and super. Positive: happy, pleased, friendly, loving, satisfied, hopeful, relaxed. Negative: sad, lonely, annoyed, unsatisfied, despairing. Neither: Neither positive nor negative affection. 86.7% agreement; Scott's Pi = .73 Arousal Type of content that arouses or suppresses mental alertness and responsiveness based on characters shown in it. If there are no people, judge based on the overall presence including visual, music, voiceover, and super. Positive: content that arouses mental alertness and responsiveness. e.g. lively, energetic, active, excited, and motivated. Negative: content that suppresses mental alertness and responsiveness. e.g. sluggish, inactive, dull, sleepy, bored. Neither: Neither positive nor negative arousal. 83.3% agreement; Scott's Pi = .65 Cognition: message strategy (Source: Laskey et al., 1989) Informational (cognitive) Provides consumers with factual (i.e., presumably verifiable), relevant brand data in a clear and logical manner such that they have greater confidence in their ability to assess the merits of buying the brand after having seen the advertisement. e.g. utility, function. Main category: 96.7% agreement; Scott's Pi = .89 Sub-category: 86.7% agreement; Scott's Pi = .81 Comparative Compares the brand/product with competitive brands or products (including other brands and precedent products from the brand itself). USP Claims explicitly that the brand has a unique product attribute or benefit-in-use which can be verified or proven objectively. Pre-Emptive Demonstrates factually based on objectively verifiable attributes or benefit-in-use, but contains no claim of uniqueness or mention of competing brands. Hyperbole Factual based, but are exaggerated or can't be objectively verified. Generic-informational Does not focus on a particular brand but on the general product category. Transformational (non-cognitive) Associates the experience of consuming the product with a unique set of psychological characteristics. e.g. feelings and experiences. User image or use occasion Focuses on brand users and their lifestyles, experiences of using the brand, or situations where the brand is used. Brand image Focuses on the image of the brand itself. They are trying to deliver "personalities" of the brand, such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Generic-transformational Focuses on a product category rather than a specific brand. YouTube capability (Source: Self-developed) Subscriber Number of subscribers of the channel. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Total view Number of total views of the channel. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Experience Number of years since the brand opened the channel. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Financial resources (Source: Self-developed) Ad expenditure Advertising spending last year. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 TV expenditure TV advertising spending last year. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1 Product category (Source: Chand, 2014) Involvement level High: people need to consider carefully before making purchase decisions. It often has these features: a high price; complex technical; major differences compared to alternatives; projection of self; and high risks. Low: people don't need to consider carefully before making purchase decisions. It often has these features: a low price; differences between the brand and alternatives are minimum; is a daily-consumption item; and low risks. 100% agreement; Scott's Pi = 1