Brand Post Popularity on Social Media: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract—**Social media has now become an indispensable marketing tool. Much research has been done to understand what makes brands' social media posts popular by attracting Likes, Comments and/or Shares. The objective of this paper is to carry out a systematic literature review on brand post popularity on social media. Through a literature search on Scopus—the largest database of peer-reviewed literature, 19 relevant articles were identified. Facebook has been the most widely studied platform while only a handful of works have focused on Instagram and Twitter. Platforms such as LinkedIn and TikTok have not been studied. Scholarly attention has mostly been trained on well-known and popular brands. A list of 22 antecedents of brand post popularity could be identified, some of which have often yielded contradictory findings. Several directions for future research are proposed. Consistencies in the literature are also summarized for the benefit of practitioners such as social media marketers.**

Keywords—*brand post popularity, digital branding, digital marketing, Facebook, Instagram, research agenda, social media, social media marketing, systematic review, TikTok, Twitter*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has now become an indispensable digital marketing tool. It is a key ingredient to build an organization's brand strategy, promote its offerings to consumers, and generate online engagement [1]. What brands post on their social media pages is known to shape consumers' attitudes and perceptions, which in turn affect their purchase decisions. Hence, it is imperative for social media managers to ensure that brand posts on social media are able to attract netizens' attention [2].

On the scholarly front, several works have been done to understand what makes brand posts popular on social media. This body of research apparently started with [3], which examined 355 brand posts from 11 international brands. The purpose was to find out how brand post popularity, measured in terms of the number of Likes and Comments (dependent variables), was predicted by vividness, interactivity, informational content, entertaining content, content positioning, and valence of Comments (antecedents or independent variables). A conceptual framework was proposed and empirically tested. This seminal work has been giving rise to a number of similar articles over the years, with the purpose of identifying antecedents of brand post popularity (e.g., [4-21]). As shown later, some of these works have also resulted in contradictory findings. Hence, there is a need to consolidate this body of knowledge.

Therefore, the objective this paper is to carry out a systematic literature review on the topic of brand post popularity on social media. The specific research questions (RQs) are as follows:

RQ 1: What are the contexts of investigation in brand post popularity research?

RQ 2: How is brand post popularity operationalized?

RQ 3: What are the antecedents of brand post popularity?

The significance of the paper is two-fold. First, it clarifies the current state of the literature on what makes brand posts popular on social media. This clarified understanding will help identify new and more compelling research directions for the future. Second, social media managers can develop a holistic understanding of this research topic. This in turn can inform and improve their practice of online content strategy.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section elaborates the systematic review methodology. This is followed by the findings that are grouped in accordance with the three RQs. Subsequently, the results are discussed and future research directions are proposed. Lastly, a conclusion is drawn that sums the paper up.

II. METHODOLOGY

The systematic literature review was conducted based on the PRISMA protocol [22]. It involved four steps as shown in Fig. 1. In the first step, a literature search was conducted using Scopus. Specifically, Scopus was selected for the search because it is regarded as the largest database of peer-reviewed literature [23]. It also covers articles that can be retrieved via other independent databases such as Emerald, IEEE Xplore, and Springer [24]. Hence, a literature search via Scopus obviates the need to search such other databases separately. The search term brand AND post AND popularity was applied on titles, abstracts and keywords. This was informed by key texts such as [3], [5] and [20]. The search returned 85 hits.

In the second step, the 85 hits returned from the first step were screened based on several exclusion criteria. Nine records were excluded on the basis of factors such as language (e.g., articles that are not in English), and publication date (e.g., articles published before the advent of social media), leaving behind 76 articles.

The third step included manually examining the abstracts of the 76 records. Of these, 35 were excluded for being irrelevant to the topic at hand. A smaller pool of 41 articles remained.

In the final step, the full-texts of these 41 articles were carefully inspected. The goal was to retain articles that identify antecedents of brand posts' popularity on social media. Those articles that did not identify any antecedent but

relied on algorithms as a black-box to predict popularity were eliminated. This further resulted in the elimination of 22 articles, leaving behind 19 articles for the final systematic review.
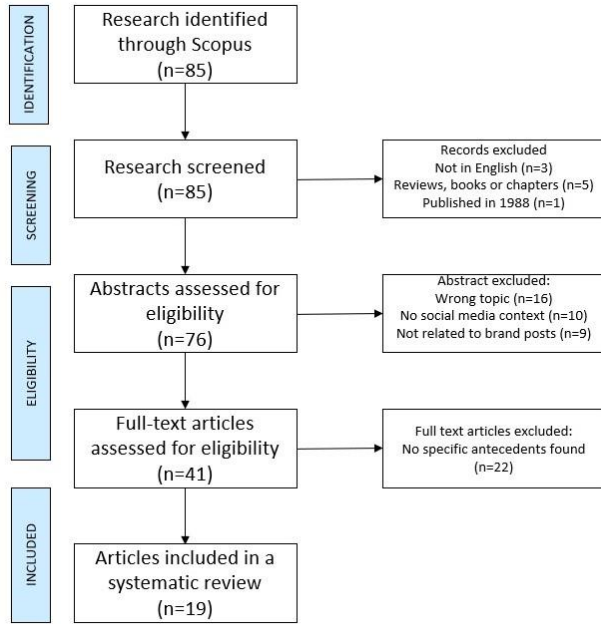

Fig. 1: Systematic literature review methodology.

III. FINDINGS

Table I summarizes the contexts of extant research (RQ 1) including the platform studied, number of social media posts analyzed (i.e.; sample size), and the type of brands examined. Facebook has been the most widely studied platform while only a handful of works have focused on platforms such as Instagram [9, 16, 18] and Twitter [6]. The sample size ranges from 164 [5] to as high as 75,000 [9].

Scholarly attention has mostly been trained on well-known and popular brands that are likely to have a large fan following. For example, the scope of [9] was trained on the likes of McDonalds and Burger King. Similarly, [13] focused on Fortune 500 brands.

Apparel and food retailing brands' social media efforts are widely investigated. For example, [12] focused on brand posts created by apparel retailers such as Primark and H&M and food retailers such as Aldi and Lidl. In [18], the focus was on cuisines in Macau. A small number of articles studied social media posts of electronics brands. For example, [11] investigated the Facebook posts of the international mobile phone companies operating in India. The most popular ones included in the study are Samsung, Sony Mobile and Asus.

A smaller number of articles adopted a broader approach by including the social media posts of companies belonging to miscellaneous industries. For example, [3] analyzed brand posts of various companies from diverse sectors ranging from food, accessories and leisure wear to alcoholic beverages, cosmetics and mobile phones. In a later study [20], the sample came from five sectors that include automobile, entertainment, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), retail and technology. More recently, [21] obtained data from the social media pages of 100 brands that represent more than 17 product categories.

TABLE I. STUDY CONTEXTS (RQ 1)

	Platform	Sample Size	Brand Type
[3]	Facebook	355	Food, accessories, leisure wear, alcoholic beverages, cosmetics and mobile phone brands
[4]	Facebook	1,143	Fortune 500 companies
[5]	Facebook	164	Spanish travel agencies brands
[6]	Twitter	221	Clothing, cosmetics, electronics, accessories, foods, beverages, automotive, credit cards and airlines brands
[7]	Facebook	4,350	Convenience stores, food and beverages, fashion, telecommunication, and transport brands
[8]	Facebook	1,577	FMCG, e-commerce, retail food, telecommunications, electronics, fashion, finance, jewelry & watches, and retail brands
[9]	Instagram	75,000	Fast food brands
[10]	Facebook	1,834	Electronics brands
[11]	Facebook	1,488	Mobile phone brands
[12]	Facebook	415	Apparel and food retailing industry
[13]	Facebook	1,467	Service and consumer brands
[14]	Facebook	792	Apparel and food brands
[15]	Facebook	421	Fitness tracker brands
[16]	Instagram	1,200	Running brands
[17]	Facebook	1,834	Electronics brands
[18]	Instagram	939	Food industry
[19]	Facebook	2,621	Retail brands
[20]	Facebook	10,000	Automobile, entertainment, FMCG, retail and technology brands
[21]	Facebook	600	Mixture of 100 brands that represent 17 product categories

Table II reflects the operationalization (dependent variables) of brand post popularity in the literature (RQ 2). It further highlights the various antecedents (independent variables) of brand post popularity identified in the literature (RQ 3). These studies have mostly used regression-type statistical procedures to examine the degree to which the antecedents could predict the outcome of brand post popularity.

In terms of operationalization (RQ 2), Likes, Comments and Shares are commonly studied in the context of Facebook. In addition, [15] examined the use of hashtags. Furthermore, [19] studied positive reactions such as "Haha" and "Love" as well as negative reactions such as "Angry" and "Sad". Likes, Comments and Hashtags have been studied in the context of Instagram [18]. In the context of Twitter [6], brand post popularity has been operationalized as Likes, Replies (similar to Comments on Facebook), and Retweets (akin to Shares on Facebook).

A notable exception in the literature is [21], in which brand post popularity was measured in terms of what is referred as the relative interactivity index. The relative interactivity index assigns a higher weightage to effortful tasks such as Comments, the valence of which can range from positive to negative, compared with trivial single-click tasks such as Likes—an unequivocal sign of affirmation and approval for the post.

TABLE II. OPERARIONALIZATION (RQ 2) AND ANTECEDENTS (RQ 3)

	Operationalization	Antecedents
[3]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Entertainment, Informativeness, Interactivity, Post length, Valence of Comments, Vividness
[4]	Likes	Brand name, Call to action, Message appeal
[5]	Likes and Comments	Post length, Submission time, Vividness
[6]	Likes, Replies and Retweets	Submission day, Submission time
[7]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Deal provision, Interactivity, Vividness
[8]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Informativeness, Message appeal
[9]	Likes	Brand centrality, Entertainment, Informativeness, Valence of Comments, Vividness
[10]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Call to action, Contest organization, Question
[11]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Submission day, Submission time, Vividness
[12]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Interactivity, Post length, Vividness
[13]	Likes and Comments	Brand name, Message appeal, Vividness
[14]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Interactivity, Vividness
[15]	Likes, Comments, Shares and Hashtags	Deal provision, Message appeal, Submission time
[16]	Likes and Comments	Brand centrality
[17]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Call to action, Vividness
[18]	Likes, Comments and Hashtags	Interactivity, Submission time, Valence of Comments, Vividness
[19]	Reactions, Likes, Comments and Shares	Informativeness, Submission day, Submission time, Valence of Comments, Vividness
[20]	Likes, Comments and Shares	Brand centrality, Competitor comparison, Contest organization, Corporate social responsibility, Deal provision, Member recognition, Member tagging, Post interval, Post length, Seasonal relevance, Targeted marketing, Vividness
[21]	Relative Interactivity Index	Entertainment, Informativeness, Message Appeal

Note. Interchangeably used terminologies have been merged. For example, media richness, content richness, and image/video are indicated as vividness. Incentives, deals, etc. are indicated as deal provision.

With respect to RQ 3, a total of 22 different antecedents of brand post popularity is identified from the systematic literature review. Each of these is discussed as follows:

1) *Brand centrality:* It is defined as the extent to which the brand takes centre stage in a given social media post [20]. According to [16], companies should implement strategies to make the brand conspicuous through their social media marketing efforts. In this regard, there is consistency in the literature that brand centrality is positively related to brand post popularity [9, 20].

2) *Brand name.* According to [4], posts that include corporate brand names are likely to become popular on social media. A more nuanced finding emerged from [13]: The use of corporate brand names was popular for service messages. In contrast, for goods messages, the use of product brand names, images, and videos was more popular.

3) *Call to action:* A social media post that encourages the online community to engage or interact is known as a call to action. There is consistency in the literature that such posts positively relate to brand post popularity [10, 17].

4) *Competitor comparison:* On social media, brands can choose to compare its offerings with those of its competitors based on various criteria such as product characteristics and price. According to [20], competitor comparison is positively related to brand post popularity. However, apart from [20], no other article has studied this antecedent.

5) *Contest organization:* On social media, a brand could create posts about contests for its fans to engage with. According to [20], contest organization has a damning effect on brand post popularity. However, [10] argued that contest organization helps make posts popular.

6) *Corporate social responsibility (CSR):* Brands often create social media posts to highlight their philanthropic initiatives. Only one article has examined the relation between CSR and brand post popularity. Posts highlighting CSR efforts only attracted Likes but had no effect on Comments and Shares [20].

7) *Deal provision:* This refers to brand posts that mention prizes and incentives. According to [7], incentives do not increase brand post popularity. A similar finding is also echoed later in works such as [15] and [20].

8) *Entertainment:* Fun, exciting, humorous and cool posts are perceived as entertaining. According to [3], entertainment has a negative effect on the level of engagement as entertaining posts are unrelated to the brand. On the other hand, [9] found entertainment to have a positive relation with brand post popularity. According to [21], humor moderated the effect of storytelling on brand post popularity. Humorous narratives did not work well in brand posts.

9) *Informativeness:* It refers to the richness of factual details in posts. Research demonstrates that providing informational content on brand posts does not positively affect post popularity [3]. According to [8], the pursuit of information does not have any effect on the number of Likes, Comments and Shares. A similar finding is echoed in later works such as [19] and [21]. Contrarily however, [9] identified a positive effect on post popularity when informative content was shared.

10) *Interactivity:* A critical element to enhance the salience of a brand post, interactivity involves many-to-many communication between a brand and its fans, as well as among the fans themselves. According to [3], a high level of interactivity is recommended to increase the number of comments. However, [7] demonstrated that low and moderate levels of interactivity increased the level of engagement. A high level of interactivity was negatively related to the number of Likes, Comments and Shares. As an extension to previous research, [12] and [14] argued that interactivity enhances users' tendencies to engage with brand posts. More recently, [18] analyzed the use of hashtags as an interactive means to increase

engagement with brand posts, arguing that they were rather useful.

11) *Member recognition:* Brands could use social media posts to recognize their fans. According to [20], member recognition is negatively related to Shares but has no effect on Likes and Comments.

12) *Member tagging:* Brands could make use of the tagging feature on social media to connect with their fans. Research demonstrates that member tagging is positively related to the number of Likes, negatively related to the number of Comments, and has no relationship with Shares [20].

13) *Message appeal.* Message appeal refers to the overall style and theme of a post [25]. It can range from emotional appeal on one hand to rational appeal on the other. While the former stimulates emotions, the latter provides facts in an objective format [15]. In this vein, [4] found that emotional appeal works well in brand posts. More recently, [21] showed that emotional appeal conveyed through brand posts that follow a story-like format work well for highly involving product categories that are associated with a long purchase cycle but do not work for fast-moving consumer goods. Emotional appeals that commonly make brand posts popular include motivation, happiness/love and action/adventure [15]. In contrast, rational appeals such as product features were also found to be useful to grab the attention of the online community [15].

14) *Post interval.* This is a measure of the time gap between two consecutive posts on social media. New entries briefly top users' social media feed as they are pushed down by newer posts. This antecedent was investigated solely by [20], which found that a low submission frequency was needed to increase the number of Likes, Comments and Shares. If the post interval is overly short, users are likely to be overwhelmed due to information overload.

15) *Post length.* Commonly measured as the number of words in brand posts, post length has been shown to be negatively related to the number of Likes [12]. This is in contrast with the results of [5], which showed that lengthy posts are useful to increase the number of Likes. According to more recent evidence, post length in words is negatively associated with Likes and Shares but has no relationship with Comments [20]. In sum, the impact of post length on post popularity remains largely inconclusive.

16) *Question:* According to [10], brand posts asking questions are related to neither Likes nor Shares. However, interrogative posts were found to increase the number of Comments.

17) *Seasonal relevance:* This refers to posts created in relation to festive events such as Christmas or Easter. According to [20], seasonal relevance in brand posts is negatively related to post popularity. Still, more research is needed on this antecedent.

18) *Submission day:* With respect to submission day, there is inconsistency in the literature. According to [6], the first two days from the publication of a tweet are crucial to increase the level of engagement. While [11] suggested that posts submitted on weekdays increase the likelihood of Comments, [19] argued that such posts have a negative impact on the number of Likes, Comments and Shares.

19) *Submission time:* With respect to the submission time of brand posts, [15] argued that late afternoons and evenings are ideal However, no specific finding was reported. According to [5], brand posts published during business hours are likely to attract Comments. On the other hand, [11] argued that non-working hours have a negative effect on Likes. Moreover, [11] suggested that non-working hours have no effect on Shares and Comments. On Facebook, some studies have found submission time to have no bearing on Likes, Comments and Shares [19]. But on Twitter, submission time and frequency could be more important for brand post popularity as Twitter users tend to be relatively more responsive [6].

20) *Targeted marketing:* Targeted marketing here refers to brand posts that target consumers with specific demographic characteristics in terms of age, gender or religion. Although not widely studied, [20] found that targeted posts help enhance the number of Likes and Shares.

21) *Valence of Comments:* This refers to the sentiment polarity of the online discussion among users under brand posts [3]. Comments with a positive valence increase the number of Likes and Comments [3]. Works such as [9] and [18] also suggested that the valence of Comments can shape brand post popularity. Furthermore, positive reactions such as "Haha" and "Love" as well as negative reactions such as "Angry" and "Sad" usually had a positive relationship with brand post popularity [19].

22) *Vividness:* It refers to the extent to which a post is visually captivating, and is deemed to be one of the most important factors in determining the popularity of posts [19]. It is fostered using images, videos, and animations [3, 20]. In [19], vividness was found to attract Likes and Shares. According to [20], images and videos in brand posts attracted Likes, Comments as well as Shares. However, animations had no effect on brand post popularity.

IV. DISCUSSION: FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

With respect to the contexts of investigation (RQ 1), this paper finds that Facebook has been the most widely studied platform in the brand post popularity literature. Therefore, future research needs to look into social media platforms beyond Facebook. More research on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn is clearly warranted. The paper also calls for scholarly attention on emerging social media platforms including the likes of TikTok [26].

Also, it was found that most works confine their scope of investigation to just one social media platform. The literature lacks a comparative study of how post popularity pans out for the same set of brands on multiple platforms [27]. Therefore, there is limited understanding on the type of content strategy that works well on one platform but fails on another. This research gap is also important to plug.

Interested scholars are further encouraged to consider studying brand post popularity of brands that are not well-

known. Popular brands are expected to be supported by a huge fan following. Findings on post popularity for such brands are not expected to generalize to more obscure brands including SMEs and start-ups. Given the growing computational capacity, researchers are encouraged to work with large samples [9], and employ big data analytics. This in turn calls for greater collaboration between computer scientists and business/management/digital marketing scholars.

With respect to the operationalization of brand post popularity (RQ 2), Likes, Comments and Shares have been widely studied on Facebook. However, relatively little scholarly attention has been trained on Facebook reactions such as "Angry" and "Love". On other platforms such as LinkedIn, reactions such as "Celebrate" and "Insightful" also exist. However, these have rarely been studied. Future research needs to widen the operationalization of brand post popularity beyond the traditional measures of the number of Likes, Comments and Shares.

Moreover, there is a need to acknowledge that not all measures of brand post popularity have equal weightage. Commenting is much more cognitively challenging compared to clicking the Like button. To this end, the relative interactivity index studied in [21] can be a helpful indicator. Prior research has found member recognition to be negatively related to Shares but unrelated to Likes and Comments [20]. How it relates to relative interactivity index can give social media managers a clear guidance on whether member recognition is at all worth incorporating in brand posts.

With respect to the antecedents of brand post popularity (RQ 3), several yielded contradictory findings. For example, there is little consensus in the literature on how brand post popularity is predicted by antecedents such as contest organization, entertainment, informativeness and post length. Further research is necessary to reconcile the tension in the literature. In addition, more research is needed on the antecedents that are under-examined thus far. This includes the likes of competitor comparison, CSR, member recognition, and targeted marketing.

Moreover, this systematic review identified a few antecedents that show unique relationships with the different dimensions of brand post popularity. For example, according to [20], posts with CSR attracted Likes but had no effect on Comments and Shares. More research is needed on such antecedents to better understand the different dimensions of brand post popularity. Such other antecedents include member recognition, and member tagging. To this end, the use of the relative interactivity index [21] could be insightful.

Timestamp remains an important factor that needs to be better understood in the context of brand post popularity. Existing literature presents multiple inconsistencies with respect to the roles played by submission day and time of brand posts. This could be vestige of the confounding effect of time zones as well as proprietary algorithms such as Facebook's EdgeRank [20]. More scholarly attention is also needed on the frequency of posts. Netizen's attention on social media content is brief, flickering and inconsistent. Therefore, companies need to understand the ideal number of times it should post per week to optimize brand post popularity. This ideal number could vary depending upon factors such as month and season.

A handful of articles have treated the valence of Comments as an antecedent of brand post popularity. These works implicitly assume that users will first have a look at the comments before Liking, Commenting and/or Sharing. The assumption can be conceptually questionable. In fact, valence of Comments is more suited to be a measure of brand post popularity rather than its antecedent. A post that receives several positive Comments and few negative Comments should work well for any brand, and can be regarded as an indicator of brand post popularity. Future works are recommended to conduct a sentiment analysis of Comments posted in response to brand posts. Such sentiment analysis results could also be incorporated in measures such as the relative interactivity index [21].

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that even though the literature has identified 22 unique antecedents of brand post popularity, few works have examined the interactions among them. For example, prior research has examined vividness and message appeal in isolation. But given that their interaction has not been studied, the literature is silent on questions such as the following: How do vivid posts perform in terms of brand post popularity when they convey rational vs. emotional appeal? Does emotional appeal conveyed through images work better than when highlighted through videos? Does rational appeal conveyed through videos work better than when reflected in texts? Answers to such hitherto-unanswered questions will offer important insights to digital marketers.

There is also a need to study moderators such as the type of brands, products, and industry. How brand post popularity differs between products and services also remains an open question. Social media efforts of companies operating in the B2B industry are not investigated even though it is flourishing, especially in the technology sector. Thus far, scholars have mostly focused on the B2C industry.

The country in which a company has its presence may also dictate its brand post popularity on social media. Hence, scholars interested in this area should take into consideration the differences between the social media marketing efforts in the home country and the foreign markets. This could help demonstrate whether an adaptation or a standardization strategy should be adopted on social media.

Future research should also focus on analyzing the use of celebrities and influencers, as in brand selfies [28], to increase brand post popularity. In addition, social media is often used to debunk disparaging rumors about brands [29]. However, how such debunking posts fare in terms of popularity has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper conducted a systematic literature review on brand post popularity on social media. Through a literature search on Scopus—the largest database of peer-reviewed literature, 19 relevant articles were identified. Facebook has been the most widely studied platform while only a handful of works have focused on Instagram and Twitter. Platforms such as LinkedIn and TikTok have not been studied. Scholarly attention has mostly been trained on well-known and popular brands. A list of 22 antecedents of brand post popularity could be identified, some of which have often yielded contradictory findings. Several directions for future research are proposed.

Of particular relevance to practitioners such as social media marketers, the consistencies in the literature are as follows: First, brand centrality positively relates to brand post popularity. On brands' social media pages, consumers

appreciate if brands take centre stage than otherwise. Second, posts that urge users to take an action usually work well in terms of brand post popularity. Third, deal provision does not help in terms of brand post popularity. Hence, posts offering deals should be used sparingly. Fourth, vividness plays a crucial role in determining brand post popularity. Bright images and videos could be useful to increase brand post popularity. Lastly, emotional appeal in brand posts with a story-like format is also likely to work well. Social media marketers should be mindful of these consistencies in the brand post popularity literature when developing their online content strategy.

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