FORUM

How to use Facebook in your market research

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Although social networking sites such as Facebook are increasingly being regarded as an interesting source of information, there are no specific techniques that adequately address the specific nature of social media. In our opinion, social networking sites display intentions of consumers and therefore techniques specifically designed to deal with this aspect have to be introduced. We propose using the theory developed by Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), to incorporate this data into market research. In this paper we focus on Facebook groups, but the techniques described can be used to analyse any social networking site.

Introduction

Until 2007, the term social networking site seemed to be synonymous with MySpace. Its popularity was exemplified by the 109 million visitors per month, more than twice the number of Facebook visitors. But the times they are a-changin’. In May 2008, Facebook had, for the first time, a higher number of visitors than MySpace (Dumon 2008). Wikipedia (2008) offers a good description of what Facebook actually is: ‘Users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people. People can also add friends and send them messages, and update their personal profile to notify friends about themselves.’ Undoubtedly, any market researcher who wants to feel the heartbeat of today’s society must realise that the 124 million Facebook visitors per month can provide a wealth of information.

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In their excellent paper, published in a recent issue of the *International Journal of Market Research*, Mike Cooke and Nick Buckley (2008) have already tackled the importance of Web 2.0 for the future of market research. But they primarily regard social media as a promising tool to make market research run more smoothly, and do not consider it to be an interesting source of information in itself. Moreover, although they correctly mention that understanding the social aspect of Web 2.0 could provide a deeper insight into this, their paper only briefly describes this opportunity. According to us, a further exploration of this theme could offer market researchers some meaningful insights, because it hints at the very nature of market research: ‘What it really does is it helps you understand your … customers’ (Herb Baum, in Churchill & Iacobucci 2001).

**The ‘dramatic’ character of Facebook**

Today’s internet users are using social networking sites to communicate their personality to their friends and to the rest of the world. We can safely claim that Facebook profiles (or MySpace pages for that matter) are carefully constructed tokens of identity. ‘The commonly held belief that social networking pages are composed without thought or even anxiety is about as believable as thinking that university students don’t pay attention to the choice of which clothes to wear’ (Williams 2008). These pages do not necessarily give a correct illustration of what people are, but more of how they would like to be perceived by others. People are more often acting out their desirable personalities than being themselves, or as David Beer (2008) summarises it more eloquently in *IJMR*’s ‘Web 2.0 Special Issue’, ‘The market researcher operating in this confessional society [Web 2.0] will be researching people *marketing themselves*’ (Beer’s italics). Facebook data could therefore be seen as a crystal ball for future consumer intentions. As most of the actions performed on Facebook are displayed in the news feed that all your friends see when opening their Facebook account, performing an action in Facebook could be compared to acting on a stage.

One of the Facebook features that perfectly embodies this ‘dramatism’ is the act of joining a group, whether for instance one wants to meet former classmates, support a local political candidate or ban a well-known person from hosting a TV show. None of this may be of interest to a market research department, but a treasure trove of information lies waiting for them when users launch groups such as *I bet I can find 1,000,000 people*
who dislike Heineken. (In this paper we will primarily focus on this aspect of Facebook.) On the other hand, difficulties arise when trying to integrate the actual number of people having joined such a group into a quantitative study, as one could question the representative nature of such a group. (For those interested, on 1 July 2008, 7,699 had already joined the rally against Heineken.) Quantitatively speaking, one thus encounters grave methodological problems, but the underlying motives behind these actions still remain truly meaningful for market research. Why have people joined such a group? What are the implications for the product and/or brand? Can all these users be united in one single motivation, namely ‘just’ disliking Heineken? Williams (2008), who conducted research about online performances of identity, has already hinted at the complexity behind these actions: ‘When I first read the quotation “Run, Forrest, Run!” I assumed she was a fan of the film …. I also assumed she enjoyed the film and that led me to assumptions about the kinds of movies she liked and what that indicated about her personality. When she talked about the quotation, however, she said, “I’m on the rugby team and my nickname is ‘Forrest’. I am supposed to run, apparently, so they nicknamed me ‘Forrest’ and yell that at me when we play.”’ Clearly, this quotation was meant for a specific type of audience. Data such as this help to interpret the theatre-like actions on Facebook. Therefore, being a member of I bet I can find 1,000,000 people who dislike Heineken does not immediately entail disliking the taste of Heineken. It could also refer to a hangover after having drunk too much of your favourite beer.

**Kenneth Burke: the guilt redemption cycle**

Answering the need for a framework to analyse the intentions of Facebook users, we propose using the theory of Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), who developed a critical technique called dramatism, which could be promising for us as it emphasises the motives of humans. First, we want to focus on his theory concerning the importance of guilt in human communication. According to him, guilt (covering feelings such as tension, anxiety, shame, disgust and embarrassment) is the foundation of rhetoric. There are two sources of this guilt. First, language itself creates the negative because ‘we necessarily need to define ourselves and others in terms of what we are not’ (Burke 1945). The aforementioned Facebook profiles are a perfect illustration of this: people try to describe themselves by referring to elements that are not exclusively theirs (e.g. interests and favourite music). Second, humans always want to structure their lives in hierarchies, and
this ‘hierarching’ triggers off competition, division and eventually guilt: ‘Those in lower classes may feel guilt in their low positions, and those in higher classes may feel guilty because of their supremacy’ (Littlejohn cited in Podris 2003).

According to Burke, the ultimate motivation of all public speaking is to purge ourselves of this sense of guilt and to redeem it through mortification (blaming ourselves) or scapegoating (blaming an external enemy), but as there always is a new evil, this is a continuous cycle. This guilt redemption cycle is being employed in any ‘text’ that urges its ‘listeners’ to take action, and that symbolically would like to ‘kill’ the one who disturbs the order. The better this cycle is executed, the more effective the text will be. For instance, one might claim that Obama’s success in the US presidential campaign was mainly due to his being able to group all Americans against an enemy ‘camp’ to which no American voter actually belonged. Another example is the well-known Dove commercial, in which extensive make-up and Photoshopping adjustments transform an ordinary girl into a top model. Everyone could relate to Dove’s message that unrealistic images of women have distorted our perception of beauty. One can also discover this ‘guilt redemption cycle’ in Facebook groups that attempt to group everyone who dislikes Heineken. Of course, market researchers are more interested in which ‘new transcendent order’ such a text proposes.

However, strangely enough, market researchers tend to neglect this dramatic nature of Facebook. If having a Facebook account equals giving a speech, why do we not apply the same procedures/techniques that other researchers use when analysing a Barack Obama speech?

**Kenneth Burke: ‘the dramastic pentad’**

An example of such a technique is ‘the dramastic pentad’, another aspect of Kenneth Burke’s theory. The primary goal of this theory should be to understand ‘what is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it’ (Burke 1945). As already mentioned, Burke believed that all human actions were part of a drama (or theatre, if you like), and that the motives of actors (people) could be discovered by studying their particular type of motivation in action and discourse. For this reason, he designed this ‘dramastic pentad’ (Burke 1978), which consists of five elements: agent (who is performing the action?), act (what happened? can refer to any human action), agency (which means or vehicle is used to perform the action?), scene (what is the (abstract or physical) context? What is the background situation?), and purpose (why do the agents act?).
Although focusing on these five items is not a novel idea (one can easily recognise any good journalist’s set of basic questions in it), it is the interdependence of these five items to interpret actions that mark the originality of Burke’s ideas: ‘while act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose can be distinguished for the purpose of partial analysis, they are bound together and, further, each of the terms shades the interpretation of the others. No single aspect provides a full sense of its own meaning’ (Shearer 2004). This combination of separate items of the pentad into so-called ratios (for instance, scene–act ratio, agent–purpose ratio) can be used as a heuristic framework to interpret human actions. For instance, in his blog, Ted Remington (2008) analyses two speeches made by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in Selma (Alabama), and suggests that Clinton focuses on the purpose–scene ratio (with purpose being the dominant term) and Obama on the act–scene ratio (with act being more dominant). They both drew upon the same historical ‘scene’ of the civil rights marches, but because they each stressed another element of the pentad, the impact of their message was felt differently. Both presidential candidates tried to create a sense of identity with the audience. Clinton could only mention that she shared the same motivations as the marchers, but Obama focused on the act of the marches, could link that to concrete actions today and therefore had a greater impact.

Using Burke to integrate Facebook groups into your market research

The same technique could be used in the exploratory stage of a market research study in order to get a better understanding of the customers, and their attitudes, opinions and/or intentions. Not only the data retrieved from focus groups discussing their Facebook actions could be dealt with accordingly but also some of the statements that Facebook users post on their group’s wall could prove to be interesting. Referring to this pentadic criticism as described by Foss (2004), we would like to use these wall posts to exemplify the Burkean approach to Facebook. It is important to stress that this is an approach with many possible diversions during the process, and not necessarily a method with a strict step-by-step plan to follow. Depending on your initial objective, many different conclusions could be drawn from the same data, but the scheme below can be followed in any situation. One first has to select an artefact, then label the different terms of the pentad, and finally one should apply the ratios to determine the dominant term in the artefact.
Selecting an artefact

In our case, we will be focusing on the Facebook group *I bet I can find 1,000,000 people who dislike Heineken*, more specifically on the wall comments posted by the group members. Although we now limit ourselves to these items, the pentadic approach could be used for any human utterance – for instance, group members posting pictures.

Labelling the terms

After having decided which artefact will be analysed, we continue with labelling the five terms of the dramatic pentad: agent, act, agency, scene and purpose. The agents of our Facebook wall posts are members of the group *I bet I can find 1,000,000 people who dislike Heineken*, as one cannot post a comment if one has not first joined the group. The act they are all involved in, is, of course, expressing their dislike of Heineken beer.

This act is being performed (so the agency) by referring to Heineken in different ways: for instance,1 (ex. 1) ‘Im in the United Arab Emirates and everywhere u turn your it’s u see this shitbeer ... GRRRRR. How come you can find the worst beer ever made everywhere in the world?’, (ex. 2) ‘I have issues with large commercial breweries telling the qworld [sic] that their beers are “the finest” and representing them as small batch brewed. “The finest” probably refers to the filters that they pass through in the bottling plant, filtering out any flavour and body.’, (ex. 3) ‘Heineken sucks! Thats just a fact! Its pis! Greatz from Belgium (Home of the greatest beers!)’, (ex. 4) ‘hmmmmm duvel’ [which is a Belgian strong golden pale ale (8.5%)].

The wall of the Facebook group *I bet I can find 1,000,000 people who dislike Heineken* can be called the scene in which the act takes place. Concerning purpose, the final element of the pentad, it is important to notice that purpose should not be confused with motive. Purpose is what moves us to a particular act in a particular situation, whereas motive is the larger explanation of that same act. We could purchase a new Tommy Hilfiger jacket because the one that we had is torn (a purpose), but it could also be interpreted as us buying only designer clothing (a motive). In our case, the agents want to disapprove (ex. 1 and 2) the omnipresence of Heineken, or they depict it negatively as a (ex. 2) money-thirsty multinational or as (ex. 3 and 4) Dutch beer.

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1 All statements are taken literally from the Facebook group’s wall, spelling errors included.
Applying the ratios to identify the dominant term

Now we have to combine these terms into ratios to discover the dominant term, which entails analysing the relationship between any of the five elements of pentad. As previously mentioned, a ratio is a pairing of two terms of the pentad (for instance, scene–act ratio, agent–purpose ratio), which means that ten ratios are possible. In each ratio, one has to try to determine whether one term influences the other. In a scene–act ratio, for instance, does the scene shape the act? Or in an act–scene ratio, does the act affect the scene? However, this does not entail that a dominant relationship between two items of the pentad can always be uncovered. It might be possible that the first term of the ratio has no effect on the second one, or vice versa, but the market researcher has to discover the ratios that do show a power relationship. Consequently, one ends up with a list that looks like this: ‘agents–act: yes’, ‘act–agents: no’, ‘agents–scene: unclear’, etc.

Reviewing these ratios leads to discovering which pentadic term is the most dominant in this artefact. The more the market researcher acknowledges that this term determines another term, the more likely it is that this term dominates the whole artefact. After having scrutinised our Facebook wall posts, we detected an interesting relationship between agents–agency–scene. The agency (how the dislike of Heineken is being voiced) is increasingly being determined by the agents. The first wall posts mainly criticise Heineken because it is inescapably present in the group members’ local bars and is not flavoursome enough. But suddenly, the wall posts are being written in Dutch, although the introductory description of the Facebook group is still in English. Facebook users write that they reject Heineken as it is a Dutch beer. They begin to comment on how they prefer Duvel (8.5%) to Heineken (5.4%), which is striking, as most market researchers would not immediately perceive a strong pale ale as a competitor of the lager Heineken.

These data should be interpreted in the perspective of the scene, and that the agency is slowly changing this scene. The first wall posts refer to an international context where Heineken is a prominent player, whereas the latter posts should be explained in a Belgian scene where there is a nearly folklorish rivalry with its neighbouring country, the Netherlands. Eventually, the Facebook group is attracting discussions on whether Dutch beer in general is good enough, which changes the scene from anti-Heineken to anti-Dutch beer.

As we have demonstrated, pentadic criticism can help us to analyse Facebook wall posts. It can also assist us in limiting these comments to
a certain scene, and pointing out where more market research is needed. Local market research in the low countries may, for instance, deepen our analysis of the negative image of Heineken in Belgium, or can incorporate such unforeseen competitors as strong pale ale in quantitative research.

**Conclusion**

We acknowledge that this is only a preliminary paper. Full research still has to be conducted to realise the implications and possibilities of this Burkean approach to social networking sites, but market researchers can already profit from many of its insights. On the other hand, one must realise that Burke’s theory is designed only as a heuristic model, and his concepts do not have a counterpart in reality. Nevertheless, it is an extra way to clarify the motives behind human actions, a subject in which market researchers are always interested.

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**References**


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