

Untangling social media excellence: Five typical patterns of super successful posts

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Online social media plays an important role in the mix of many companies' marketing communications. Thus, scholars have recently tried to uncover patterns that positively affect social media communication effectiveness, predominantly focusing on message characteristics. Although a lot of valuable insights have been generated, it remains unclear what the drivers of 'super successful posts' (SSP) are. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to reveal why a very small proportion of social media posts significantly outperforms the majority of other posts. For this purpose, we employed case evidence from the automotive industry and collected 2,000 Facebook posts. In regard to the numbers of likes, comments and shares, the 20 most successful posts each were selected. After removing the duplicates, a final sample of 42 SSP remained. With an explorative multi-level approach, including two focus group sessions, an in-depth analysis was conducted for every post. Aiming to capture a comprehensive picture, we also investigated the context of each post beyond the online environment. With our analysis, we reveal five typical patterns of social media excellence (co-branding, wow effect, cognitive task, timing, and campaign). In addition, we further elaborate on four selected SSP to enhance the understanding of underlying mechanisms. Among other things, our findings are supposed to sensitize practitioners in regard to a broader view on social media posts. Moreover, the understanding about the five patterns of SSP may support practitioners to enhance the popularity of their future posts.

The Challenge of User Engagement

In 2015, companies worldwide invested more than \$18.2 billion in social media advertising, counting about 20% more than in the previous year (Statista, 2016). These numbers impressively indicate the growing importance of social media channels as a marketing tool for companies and highlight the need for social marketers across various industries to understand the consequences of their social media activities (Corstjens & Umblijs, 2012; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012).

Today, social marketers face a broad range of different social media sites on the Internet, such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. Although there are similarities across the variety of social media sites, there are also significant differences in regard to interaction and communication mechanisms (Burton & Soboleva, 2011; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). For instance, the use of the hashtag ('#') differs on Twitter compared to the social networking site (SNS) Facebook. However, in order to make best possible use of each individual social media site, it is essential to understand the specific characteristics of each platform (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011).

On Facebook, for example, by creating corporate SNS identities in the form of brand fan pages (Lin & Lu, 2011), marketing messages can be spread through posts in order to interact and connect with customers (Lipsman, Mud, Rich, & Bruich, 2012; McCorkindale, 2010; Trefzger & Dünfelder,

2016). Typically, users engage with these marketing messages through liking, sharing or commenting on brand posts (Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). These actions of user engagement mostly indicate agreement with or affinity towards a brand, product or just the message of the post (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). Additionally, Wallace et al. (2014) found that fans with higher level of engagement on social media posts tend to develop closer relationships with the respective brand. That is why user engagement is a meaningful criterion for brand success on SNS and thus an important objective for all marketing managers.

For social media users, today's vast availability of information easily causes overload or overstimulation in information consumption (Moore & Harris, 1996). This is especially true for SNS such as Facebook because more and more brands compete with their posts for the limited attention of the user. Interestingly, although most brands have already put a lot of effort into their social media activities and have therefore reached a professional level of social media expertise, there are brand posts which are much more successful than other posts. As a consequence, it is of particular importance that marketers understand the peculiarities of these 'super successful posts' (SSP) on social media.

Several scholars have already started to uncover the drivers of post success on SNS. These research activities have

predominantly focused on certain message strategies relating to the content or design of a post and have revealed various valuable insights (e.g. Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Cañabate, & Lebherz, 2014; Trefzger, Baccarella, Scheiner, & Voigt, 2016; Trefzger, Baccarella, & Voigt, 2016). However, research has not yet examined those few posts that outperform the majority of other posts.

Against this background, the aim of this study is to analyze brands' SSP in order to untangle the underlying mechanisms that help a SNS post to stand out from the masses of other posts. Thereby, we contribute to the literature of social media research and particularly expand the understanding of SNS user engagement by a new perspective. For practitioners, we generate valuable insights on how to cross the chasm between a solid and an excellent social media strategy.

Our article is structured as follows. First, we explain the applied methodology, which we performed to collect and analyze the data. Then, we present five typical patterns of social media excellence, followed by further explanations on four selected post examples. Our article concludes with implications for practitioners and scholars, as well as by outlining limitations and future research avenues.

Methodology

Data Collection

To identify SSP, we collected 2,000 Facebook posts from automotive brands. We used Facebook as the research object because it is the most popular SNS with more than one billion active users per day (Statista, 2015). We focused on one industry, aiming to avoid distortions related to industry-specific circumstances (Baccarella, Scheiner, Trefzger, & Voigt, 2016). The posts have been collected from the ten most valuable car brands, compiled by Millward Brown (2014). Accordingly, we included posts by Audi, BMW, Chevrolet, Ford, Honda, Hyundai, Mercedes-Benz, Nissan, Toyota, and VW (Volkswagen). In December 2014, 200 Facebook posts from each brand were collected and manually saved as screenshots. Between the latest post and the first day of data collection, there was a time span of around five weeks. In accordance with e.g. Sabate et al. (2014), we assumed that, after those five weeks, additional user engagement with a post is negligible. Since photo album posts are automatically reposted when new photos are added to the album, these posts may go through several rounds of user engagement. We therefore excluded those 52 posts. Our data set then comprised 1,948 SNS posts.

After data collection, the number of likes, comments, and shares of every post was assessed. We then calculated relative performance measures for each post by dividing the number of likes, comments, and shares by the number of respective Facebook page followers. On average, the brands' Facebook pages had 7.14 million (SD = 6.00 million) followers. The BMW page had most followers (19.03 million), and Hyundai had least followers (1.76 million). Finally, we multiplied the calculated measures by one million for clarity in presentation. Thereby, we generated performance measures (adjusted user engagement) which indicate how much user engagement

(likes, comments, shares) a post received among one million page followers. We consider this user engagement measurement as more useful than directly looking at the number of likes, comments, and shares, regardless of the number of page followers.

During the next step, the most successful posts were identified. In particular, we collected the top 20 posts for (adjusted) likes, comments, and shares across all brands. Because some of the posts were in more than one of the three top 20 lists, the final sample of SSP comprised 42 posts.

Data Analysis

An in-depth analysis of each of the final 42 SSP was thoroughly conducted. For this purpose, our research team consisted of two senior researchers and two doctoral students with appropriate experience in the social media research field. The analysis followed a twofold explorative approach inspired by the qualitative case study method (Baxter & Jack, 2008). First, we comprehensively examined each post to understand and determine similarities across the sample. Second, we investigated the online and offline context of each post. This step involved an extensive online research on each post's related topics during the time the post was created. The research included brand websites, press websites, websites mentioned in the post, search engines, and other SNS brand fan pages. The goal was to reveal the strategy behind each post and how it was embedded in the respective brand's media ecosystem and marketing activities. Overall, a holistic, in-depth analysis of each post was conducted.

Subsequently, two focus group sessions were performed – one with six social media practitioners, and one with seven marketing students. During these sessions, the participants were asked in regard to every single post to discuss the reasons for its popularity. At this stage, we provided necessary background information on every post, which we had gathered beforehand in our context analysis. After the focus group sessions were completed, we aggregated the results in our research team. A final discussion clearly led to five typical patterns of social media excellence, which are presented in the following.



Figure 1: Five patterns of social media excellence

The Five Patterns of Social Media Excellence

The framework we use (see Figure 1) consists of five distinct patterns that were identified among SSP: co-branding, wow effect, cognitive task, timing, and campaign. Although each block reflects a specific pattern that can be operationalized with various actions, the underlying mechanisms remain the same. The five patterns are neither mutually exclusive nor do they all have to be implemented in a SNS post. In the following paragraph, we introduce the five patterns one by one and describe underlying mechanisms that support user engagement.

Pattern 1: CO-BRANDING

The first identified pattern refers to co-branding. In fact, many of the SSP had in common that they utilized at least a second brand to maximize user engagement. The second brand might be a celebrity, a newspaper brand or any other brand. The approach of bundling different brands in one post is aligned with a co-branding strategy as a means to gain more media exposure (Washburn, Till, & Priluck, 2000).



Figure 2: Ford Mustang's 50th anniversary

Joint advertising as a specific strategy in co-branding was also used, for example, within the Apple Macintosh Powerbook campaign that featured the movie Mission Impossible as the second brand (Grossman, 1997). Several authors already described the concept of co-branding and discussed advantages and disadvantages of it (e.g. Hillyer & Tikoo, 1995; Krishnan, 1996; Rao & Ruekert, 1994). An important goal of co-branding in social media posts is to reach

the community of the second brand, in addition to the own followers. This increases the potential audience of the social media post and may lead to increasing user engagement.

There are two ways to take advantage of another brand. First, the sole naming of another brand or celebrity can help to draw more attention towards the own post. That, in turn, may lead to more user engagement. Nissan, for instance, posted a photo of their new pickup truck with a built-in diesel engine by Cummins Inc., which is a US-based company selling diesel engines worldwide. Although there is no link to the Cummins Inc. fan page, which has almost 400,000 SNS followers, this co-branding enabled Nissan to leverage the brand awareness of Cummins as well.

Second, brands use a direct link to another brand or celebrity fan page or website incorporated into the post. For example, Nissan posted a press review of the Nissan GT-R and integrated a link of the New York Daily News fan page with more than 2.1 million Facebook followers. Ford linked press websites like Mashable (www.mashable.com) or ESPN Magazine (www.espn.com/magazine) to their own posts (see Figure 2). Honda included a link to the fan page of the entertainer and celebrity Nick Cannon who has more than 2.7 million followers on Facebook. Toyota also tried to harness the network of the celebrity Oprah Winfrey in a social media post by advertising and pointing out to be a financial supporter of the Life-You-Want-Campaign. This campaign consists of different events and is meant to motivate people to pursue their individual dreams.

Pattern 2: WOW EFFECT

The wow effect is the second identified pattern derived in our SSP analysis. Especially in the social media environment, users are confronted with a large amount of information. However, they are not able to process all available information (Moore & Harris, 1996). Against this background, social media managers face an intense competition about the limited attention of social media users. This leads to a situation where all brands try to generate a high level of user engagement through differentiating from the mass of other posts. In our sample, it is clearly noticeable that SSP often create a moment of surprise and astonishment for the users (wow effect).

Studies about the effect of surprise state that peoples' attention is predominantly drawn towards completely new and unseen content or content that is in some way special and does not belong to a standard solution (Itti & Baldi, 2009). In order to achieve this wow effect, brands in our sample followed two approaches.

First, in order to create a special post that contains something that deviates from a standard solution, SSP strongly emphasize luxury, high-performance, future or innovative technology features of the product. Mercedes-Benz, for instance, posted videos of a highly sophisticated future truck (see Figure 3) or of future LED headlamps. Nissan focused on high-performance features by posting pictures of their sports car Nissan GT-R and the potential successor Nissan Concept 2020 Vision GT. Honda published a post about the first ever car built-in vacuum cleaner in the new Honda Odyssey to capture the attention of their followers.

Second, adding up on these emphasized features, user engagement increases even more if the post unveils a completely new product that has not been shown ever before. Mercedes-Benz, for example, published the first pictures of their new Mercedes-AMG GT. The post contained a strong high-performance and luxury focus and additionally included the first picture of this new car on the SNS.



Figure 3: Mercedes-Benz Future Truck 2025

Pattern 3: COGNITIVE TASK

The third pattern of SSP is related to a cognitive task. These posts raise a question demanding a direct user response and, thus, provoke user engagement in terms of comments. Brand posts by Ford, for example, asked the SNS user about their favorite Ford color and their first ever driven Ford model. This mechanism mainly focuses on provoking comments as one way of user engagement.

Another driver of user engagement in this pattern might be the fact that posts containing a cognitive task stimulate the user's curiosity. According to the theory of human epistemic curiosity, strange, surprising or puzzling information arouse users' curiosity. This triggers the user to spend more time with the puzzling information in order to create meaning out of it or to relate the unknown information to something familiar (Berlyne, 1954). Ford, for instance, published a post showing a photo of the parking space of a Ford manufacturing site of 1965 with a lot of different Ford cars pictured. The SNS user is requested to name the different Ford models portrayed. Another example of a Ford post shows a macro photograph of

a car part that is supposed to be named as well. Moreover, Volkswagen posted a picture of a Volkswagen Golf GTI filled with soccer balls and asked the users to guess how many soccer balls can fit in the car (see Figure 4). The best performing post of this category and a prime example of the cognitive task pattern was published by Toyota and shows a picture puzzle, which had to be encoded. We elaborate on this example later.

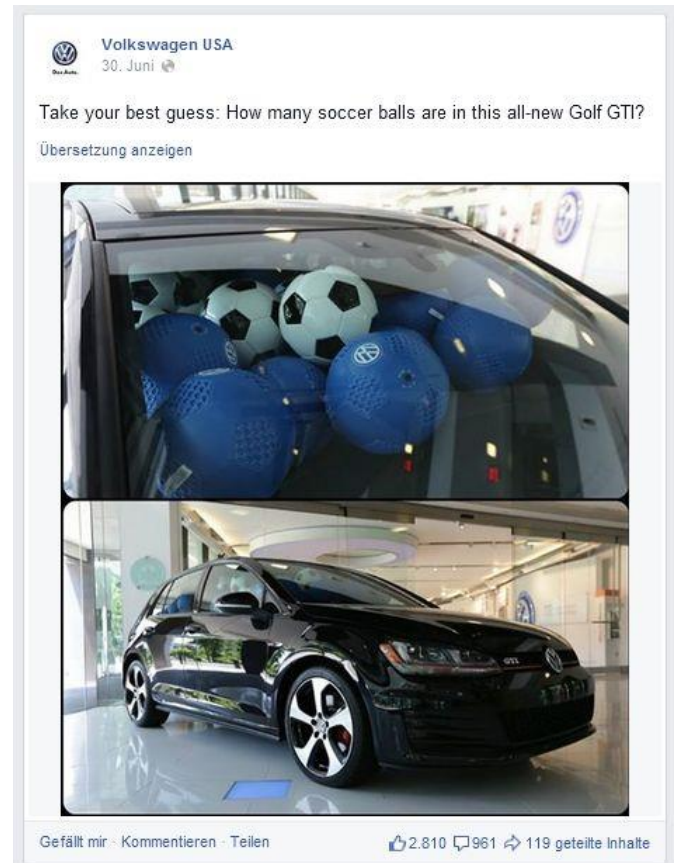


Figure 4: Volkswagen soccer ball challenge

Pattern 4: TIMING

Our results reveal that many SSP are characterized by an intelligent publication timing. These posts take advantage of a certain event that is already in the focus of attention. Agenda-setting theory supports this notion by indicating that an audience perceives issues as more important as more emphasis is placed on it by mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The more the media already covers an event, the more attention it gets and, therefore, the more user engagement is generated on SNS. This means that publishing a post related to an event at the time when the attention for this event peaks helps brands to reach out to new audiences.

Especially two types of events could be identified which especially drove user engagement. First, non-brand-related events such as the FIFA World Cup, Mother's Day, Father's Day or Independence Day are used in this context. Of course, each event can become a brand-related event through sponsorship, but here we mean events that are initially not

directly related to a brand. For example, Volkswagen posted a video showing VW Golfs playing soccer in the national colors of Germany and Argentina celebrating the win of the FIFA World Cup of the German national team. The video was published right after the end of the match. This is an interesting approach to benefit from the attention of that event without being an official sponsor and having paid for media coverage. Another post by Volkswagen celebrates the Independence Day in the US by publishing a photo of the VW Beetle in a scene with fireworks and the words: ‘Independence is something we love to celebrate’. This post attracts the attention of people celebrating the Independence Day even if they might not be directly interested in the Volkswagen brand at this moment. Ford published posts about Mother’s Day and Father’s Day through telling emotional stories and linking it with the car industry. On Father’s Day, for instance, they published a video telling the story of a father trying to comfort the daughter because of failing the driver’s test a second time (see Figure 5).

Second, brands also align their posts according to brand-related events such as anniversaries. Ford, for example, published posts to celebrate the anniversaries of the first ever sold Ford Model A or the Ford Mustang (see also Figure 2). Moreover, Honda posted content about sports events like Honda winning the Indianapolis 500, which is a very famous car race in the US. Furthermore, Volkswagen announced their participation in the Global Rallycross in Las Vegas. The Rallycross is a rally car race in Las Vegas sponsored by Red Bull.

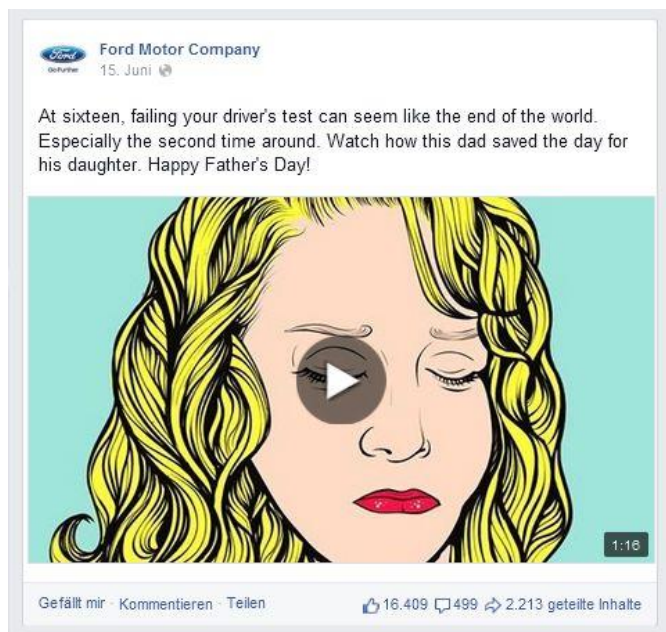


Figure 5: Ford celebrating Father’s Day

Pattern 5: CAMPAIGN

The last identified pattern is based on the fact that brands implement their social media posts in a cross-media marketing campaign. In this case, a SNS post represents an element of a

larger campaign, which often includes television, newspaper, radio, internet or other advertising activities. The mere-exposure effect gives one explanation in regard to the positive impact of this approach. Accordingly, repeated exposure of a communication message to an audience induces a more positive attitude towards this message (Zajonc, 1968). This positive attitude might lead to a higher likelihood of user engagement with the initial social media post. If a user has already seen the campaign on other media channels, this can lead to a higher likelihood of engagement with this social media post.

For instance, BMW’s SSP concerning the new BMW i8 model (see Figure 6) was part of a much broader cross-media product launch campaign. In addition to their social media activities, the campaign included seven different print ads and three TV spots shown worldwide on TV, in cinemas, and on their website (BMW, 2014). Similarly, for the launch of the 2013 Honda Civic, the brand created a television ad and additionally focused on a digital advertising campaign, including two Facebook posts, which turned out to be highly successful (Honda, 2013).



Figure 6: BMW i8 post as part of product launch campaign

Learning from the Best – Four Cases

Our findings show that creating a SSP requires an appropriate understanding of the media ecosystem in which the post is situated. In order to better understand underlying mechanisms, we further elaborate on four SSP in the following section. Again, great emphasis was placed on a holistic explanation, taking into consideration not only the post itself, but also its online and offline context.

Introduction of the new BMW i8

The first example and best-performing post in our sample in terms of the number of likes is about the introduction of the new BMW i8 hybrid car (see Figure 7). The post includes a picture of the new car and the claim: 'Take part in a journey from the impossible to the possible'. Additionally, a link to a video about the story behind the car is provided.

First of all, and as mentioned above, a cross-media product launch campaign was rolled out in parallel to the social media post. The marketing campaign started on 9th May 2014, whereas the post was published on 13th May 2014. The first German TV spot aired on 10th May 2014 and was repeated over several weeks across the globe (BMW, 2014). During this time, the audience was able to learn about the new car and to discover the new technologies. Thereby, BMW was able to increase the awareness and attention for their new car. The campaign also included online advertising on influential business, automotive and lifestyle websites. Advertisements in print magazines and national daily newspapers had already started earlier (late April), accompanied by billboard advertising, building projections and video installations in selected areas. An increased exposure of the BMW i8 created not only familiarity and attention towards the product, but created also a more positive attitude towards the product. A possible explanation for this might be again the already mentioned mere-exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). Because the BMW i8 was brand new at that time and emphasized high-performance and future features of the car, the post also corresponded to the wow effect pattern. The high degree of novelty of the car added upon the attention to the social media post. People who got in contact with this social media post by BMW were thus more likely to engage because they either had already seen content from the cross-media campaign or were astonished about this so far unseen brand new product.



Figure 7: Introduction of the new BMW i8

Honda's 'Best Yourself' campaign

The SSP that received second most (adjusted) likes in our sample is a Honda post (see Figure 8). The post contains the slogan 'Challenge yourself – push yourself – best yourself'. At first glance, the post and content seem to be very inconspicuous. Nevertheless, it received a high level of user engagement. Honda successfully achieved to set up a highly emotional cross-media campaign for the launch of the new product and the social media post as part of it. This approach is aligned with the abovementioned campaign pattern. Honda's campaign called 'Best Yourself' was about one's motivation to achieve success through non-traditional paths. The message of continuous improvement by celebrating individuals' achievements towards personal growth along the campaign perfectly matched the millennial generation's mindset. The wish to belong to something special helped to foster user engagement because people more easily immersed in the campaign. The campaign further comprised a TV commercial placed in the commercial break of the TV show 'America's Got Talent', which fitted the idea of achievements through continuous personal improvement.



Figure 8: Honda's 'Best Yourself' campaign

Overall, Honda utilized various media channels for their campaign, such as television, different social media channels (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube) and various media partners such as Huffington Post, Complex Media Network, and Ballislife.com. To further drive user engagement, Honda partnered up with Nick Cannon as a popular celebrity of the millennials. In line with the presented co-branding pattern, this helps to increase the potential audience and to leverage the large fan base of the celebrity

(Honda, 2013). All in all, the post achieved to communicate a strong and emotional message and successfully targeted the right audience through the right channels while utilizing a co-branding and campaign pattern.

Volkswagen's post about the FIFA World Cup 2014

Volkswagen published by far the most successful post concerning shares (see Figure 9). The Volkswagen post shows a video of a soccer match between Volkswagen cars in the German national colors and cars in the Argentinian national colors. While in the video the German team scores a goal, the text of the post states: 'Now that's the power of German engineering. Congrats to #Germany, the new champions!'. Additionally, the post provides the link to a longer version on Youtube. What has made the post extremely successful is its timing. It was posted directly after the win of the world championship of the German soccer national team on July 13th 2014. Aligned with the discovered timing pattern, this post tries to leverage the attention on this international sports event for the Volkswagen brand. The marketing managers of Volkswagen probably selected the (anticipated) win of the German team due to the extensive media coverage of the game. Figures show that roughly three billion people worldwide watched at least one minute of one of the matches on TV, whereas alone one billion people watched at least one minute of the final (FIFA, 2015). With this post, Volkswagen congratulated Germany for winning the soccer world championship. Volkswagen expected that users might share the post to celebrate the win with their team. Moreover, Volkswagen as a German brand tried to link the success of the German soccer national team with the German engineering abilities in a creative way. All in all, this post is a vivid example of how marketing managers can use media coverage of specific events for their own purpose.



Figure 9: VW's post about the FIFA World Cup 2014

Toyota's picture puzzle

Toyota published the most successful post regarding the (adjusted) number of comments (see Figure 10). The post showed a riddle with different sketches combined with letters and words that have to be decoded to reveal a safe driving advice. Furthermore, the post stated a clear call for action: 'Put your detective skills to the test. Decode and find more safe driving tips at [link]'. The reason for the high amount of comments seems intuitive because answers to solve the quiz can only be placed in a comment. The fact that a direct call for action leads to a higher level of user engagement regarding comments is also supported by other research findings (Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). Moreover, the post contains puzzling information that refers to the abovementioned cognitive task pattern, which can make users curious about the solution of this quiz. This curiosity may drive user engagement even more. Moreover, due to the nontrivial challenge, users might have different solutions, which lead to a discussion, resulting in even more comments. Previous research shows that high variance in comments provokes other users to comment as well (Moe & Trusov, 2011; Schlosser, 2005; Vries et al., 2012).



Figure 10: Toyota's picture puzzle

Implications

Due to the growing importance of social media and especially SNS for marketing communication, scholars have put increasing emphasis on the antecedents of communication effectiveness. In this context, this article follows a unique research approach. Instead of searching for antecedents of post success in a large-scale sample, we have particularly focused on SSP that have outperformed the majority of other posts,

aiming to learn from these few success stories about the underlying mechanisms.

Our research offers several contributions. First of all, the findings are supposed to sensitize practitioners in regard to a broader view on social media posts. The results suggest to look beyond a social media post and to rather incorporate it into a broader media ecosystem or into brand campaigns. Second, we revealed communication patterns that SSP typically have in common. These patterns can help marketing managers to enhance the chances to replicate this success when planning future social media campaigns. The five derived patterns can inspire marketing managers in their daily work of designing social media posts. Third, this study adds to the literature body of social media research through discussing various factors that make social media communication exceedingly successful regarding likes, shares, and comments. Our research approach also offers a new lens through which researchers can view on social media messages. Thereby, we hope to encourage future studies in this field.

The limitations of this article offer further research directions. First, the findings of this study are derived from case evidence from the automotive industry. Thus, the results cannot simply be generalized across other industries. Further research could examine the applicability of our patterns in different industries. Second, this study focuses on the description of recurring patterns of SSP. Although we have relied on an empirical approach to generate our sample of SSP, the derived success patterns have to be further empirically validated. Future research could analyze underlying mechanisms in more detail to foster a sound understanding of the mode of action for each pattern.

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