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The role and forms of social media branded content driving active customer engagement behaviours

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ABSTRACT

In today's saturated digital ecosystem, content is crucial for brand differentiation and audience engagement. This study adopts a consumer-centric approach, using event-based diaries and semi-structured interviews to explore how different types of branded content on social media – informational, entertaining, remunerative, and contextual – drive active customer engagement (i.e. deliberate interaction). It also examines the motivations behind these behaviours, identifying three core drivers: functional, hedonic, and symbolic, along with varying levels of engagement, from low to high involvement. In an era defined by the attention economy and generative AI – where content is abundant but meaningful engagement is scarce – our approach advances the understanding of branded content's strategic role in digital marketing and offers actionable insights for content marketers aiming to optimise audience engagement.

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Organic content; digital marketing strategy; social media; brand communications; customer-brand interaction; content marketing

Introduction

Industry data reveal that 71% of consumers have become increasingly sceptical of brands' advertising communications on digital media channels (O'Brien, 2021). Furthermore, forecasts predict a decline in the effectiveness of widely adopted customer engagement techniques, such as influencer marketing, paid partnerships, and sponsored content, which is attributed to factors such as consumer fatigue and the shifting dynamics of platform algorithms (e.g. Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). While these trends may appear discouraging, they present a critical opportunity for brand managers to rethink and refine their digital strategies. One strategic response lies in digital content marketing, defined as a marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience (Content Marketing Institute, 2023; Maslowska et al., 2016). Done well, it allows brands to meet non-monetary goals – such as strengthening brand perception and building long-term connections – especially in an environment where authenticity and trust matter more than ever (Hootsuite, 2025).

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Within digital content marketing, our focus is on branded content – brand-initiated or endorsed material (Asmussen et al., 2016), which significantly differs from other formats like public relations (Quinton, 2013) or user-generated content (UGC; Malthouse et al., 2016) in its clear brand ownership with a deliberately softer, more audience-oriented tone. Branded content ranges from paid formats – such as sponsored campaigns on third-party platforms or through influencers – to unpaid formats like organic posts on a brand's own channels, but what unifies them is their consumer-centric logic (Terho et al., 2022). Unlike traditional push marketing, branded content adopts a pull strategy: it seeks to engage audiences on their own terms through relevance and resonance, rather than direct promotion (Stürmer & Einwiller, 2022). This softer, less intrusive approach has been shown to increase perceived value and engagement (Yaghtin et al., 2020), while offering brands a cost-effective route to stand out in crowded digital environments (Olson et al., 2021). Empirical evidence consistently highlights the strategic impact of branded content, linking it to stronger brand attitudes (Müller & Christandl, 2019), enhanced customer experiences and loyalty (Lou & Xie, 2021), and ultimately, tangible business outcomes such as increased purchase intent, cross-buying, and profitability (Kumar et al., 2016).

In line with this, branded content expenditure is on the rise, with projections estimating it will reach US\$107 billion by 2026 (Statista, 2024a) and the majority of online businesses incorporating branded content into their broader digital content marketing strategies (Iskiev, 2025). Importantly, from a managerial perspective, there is an urgency for brands to rethink content strategies that is further heightened by two converging forces: the attention economy and the rapid evolution of generative AI (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021). In an environment where content is limitless, but consumer attention is not, breaking through the noise requires more than volume: it demands relevance, value, and resonance.

Despite this, much of the research on branded content remains based on reviews (Bubphapant & Brandão, 2024a; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), is context-specific (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021; Dolan et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021), studies individual forms of branded content (e.g. entertaining; Lou & Xie, 2021), and is typically limited to a single consumer engagement format (e.g. liking; Cheung & To, 2023, commenting; Ciunova-Shuleska et al., 2024) or the characteristics of the content (e.g. timing, length; Liu et al., 2024). We contend that a more comprehensive investigation into branded content is essential, one that not only examines its diverse forms across various contexts and brands but also explores the underlying customer motivations and the multiple engagement behaviours that drive its effectiveness, offering a holistic account of this phenomenon – an inquiry in need of fresh scholarly attention.

In response, we adopt a consumer-centric, multi-method qualitative approach, integrating event-based diaries with semi-structured interviews to examine the interplay between different forms of branded content, consumer motivations, and engagement behaviours from the consumer's perspective. Our findings offer key contributions to the fields of content marketing and customer engagement. First, we offer a novel conceptualisation of branded content that situates it within the dynamic social media environment (Waqas et al., 2022), highlighting the critical role of consumer involvement in shaping its value and effectiveness. This perspective helps reconcile existing inconsistencies and debates surrounding the conceptualisation of branded content (e.g. Bezbaruah & Trivedi, 2020). Second, we refine and extend existing categorisations of branded content

(Dolan et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021) by presenting a multidimensional framework aligned with contemporary industry practices. Specifically, we advance the literature on three primary categories of branded content – informational (factual, educational), entertaining (behind-the-scenes, emotional, visual), and remunerative (personalised, non-personalised) – each of which fosters engagement through distinct motivational pathways. Additionally, we introduce novel forms of branded content (i.e. contextual) that serve as significant drivers of high-involvement engagement, further enriching the discourse on social media engagement motives (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2016).

For practitioners, we offer a contemporary toolkit that illustrates the different engagement motivations and corresponding behaviours that consumers adopt when interacting with various forms of branded content. This framework will assist digital content managers in prioritising organic branded content strategies based on desired consumer engagement actions.

Theoretical background

Digital content marketing: conceptualisations and disagreements

The concept of digital content marketing – that is content marketing disseminated on digital channels – was first introduced by Rowley (2008) and has since become a central focus of digital marketing research, as evidenced by numerous studies highlighting its prominence (for instance, Dolan et al., 2015). However, the literature on digital content marketing remains fragmented, with scholars using varied terminology and exploring a wide range of digital content formats and platforms. This diversity has led many researchers to call for a clearer conceptualisation of the term (Bubphapant & Brandão, 2024a; Stürmer & Einwiller, 2023). While digital content marketing is often used as an umbrella term aimed at fostering long-term audience relationships (Yaghtin et al., 2020), there remains significant debate regarding its boundaries and subcategories.

Branded content, in particular, is increasingly viewed as a modern subtype and strategic tactic within the broader digital content marketing framework, specifically designed to generate immediate audience engagement (Buzeta et al., 2024; Cheung & To, 2023; Fitó-Carreras et al., 2024). In Table 1, we outline the most prominent conceptualisations of branded content. Among these, Asmussen's et al. (2016) definition provides the most precise and relevant foundation for this study. While alternative definitions of content marketing and digital content offer valuable insights, they primarily frame branded content as a strategic organisational process (e.g. Fitó-Carreras et al., 2024), which does not fully align with our consumer-focused perspective. Given the lack of consensus in the literature and the limitations of existing definitions, we recognise that Asmussen's et al. (2016) conceptualisation may require refinement. At the same time, the evolving nature of branded content highlights the need for a more contemporary definition that reflects current industry practices.

Beyond the need for conceptual clarity, scholars have also examined the role of branded content in driving engagement and enhancing competitiveness, reinforcing its significance in contemporary marketing strategies (Sabate et al., 2014). Building on this,

Table 1. Branded content conceptualisation in the marketing literature.

Authors, Year	Term	Definition	Key Characteristics	Limitations
Asmussen et al. (2016)	Branded Content	Branded content is any output fully/partly funded or endorsed by a brand owner, designed to promote brand values while making audiences choose to engage based on entertainment, information, or education.	Brand owned or funded; Uses a pull strategy; Emphasis on entertainment, information and education tactics.	Focus on entertainment, information, or education overlooks other forms of engagement, such as emotional or experiential connections.
Waqas et al. (2021)	Branded Content Experience	A cognitive and/or affective state which arises from cultural meanings given to the set of interactions between a customer and a brand-related image/video/text on a social media platform.	Focused on experience, highlighting role of cultural meaning; References new media; Positioned in the social media context.	Limited to user experience and culture, does not focus on outcomes or types of content.
Suárez-Álvarez and Pastor-Rodríguez (2023)	Branded Content	The product, service or brand is the common thread and storyline of the audio-visual content.	Integration of branded content into audiovisual content, product, brand or service as a central element of the storyline.	Focus on specific type of content, does not put emphasis on the role, value or outcomes of such content.
Barreto et al. (2020)	Branded Content	Branded content, in which brands do not focus on the direct announcement of products and services, but on the creation and sharing of experiences in a process that unites publicity and high-quality entertainment.	Focused on entertainment, experience and storytelling.	Limited to experience, outcomes of the branded content are not mentioned.
Sukontip et al. (2024)	Brand-Generated Content (BGC)	BGC refers to any type of content, such as social media posts, blog articles, videos, and other digital or physical materials that are created and published by a brand or business with the aim of promoting their products or services.	Holistic focus that includes different content formats; Frames brand generated content as promotional activity.	The purpose is promotion rather than engagement generation. Broad conceptualisation that may include generic social media content.
Fitó-Carreras et al. (2024)	Branded Content	Branded content is a flexible strategy, capable of adapting to all media and constructing the narrative through its own tools and formats.	Overly holistic definition; Highlights content flexibility; Focuses on narrative.	Refers to branded content as a strategy which may cause confusion with the content marketing concept.
Kumar et al. (2016)	Firm-Generated Content	Firm-initiated marketing communication in its official social media pages	Emphasis on brand control and implies that content is distributed on official pages; Context-specific	Lacks clarity on value of such content and its strategic aims.

prior research has identified four primary types of branded content – informational, entertaining, remunerative, and relational – which we examine in more detail next.

'Informational' content encompasses brand posts on social media that provide insights about the company, its products, or the industry (Davis et al., 2014). This type of content addresses consumers' need for information gratification, a concept widely discussed in the digital media literature, and is often associated with information seeking, self-education, and information exchange (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Research indicates that the perceived value of information is a key reason for consumers to engage with social media (Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021), participate in virtual communities (Dholakia et al., 2004), and consume company information (Muntinga et al., 2011). Likewise, Buzeta et al. (2024) highlighted that information is a fundamental motivation for social media use, particularly in individualistic cultures, where users actively seek content that provides functional value and enhances their knowledge. Ultimately, informational content is crucial for consumers, aiding in problem-solving and providing social benefits when engaging with such content (Davis et al., 2014) and in a business-to-business (B2B) context this type of branded content can also help in enhancement of trust and loyalty (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021; Yaghtin et al., 2020). Some researchers go even further to suggest that branded content should be primarily focused on factual, accurate, trustworthy information that supports consumers in making well-informed choices (Sukontip et al., 2024).

'Entertaining' branded content is conceptualised as the integration of brand messaging with entertainment value (Zhang et al., 2010) and it can be viewed as an extension of traditional product placement (Hudson & Hudson, 2006). The incorporation of entertainment into brand communications has been shown to significantly drive social media usage (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) and foster positive attitudes towards brand messages on social networking sites (Wiese & Akareem, 2020). Studies suggest that consumers motivated by entertainment value seek 'fun and relaxation through playing or otherwise interacting with others' (Dholakia et al., 2004, p. 244), and this type of content effectively encourages user engagement with brands (Cheung & To, 2023; De Vries et al., 2012; Fitó-Carreras et al., 2024). In a retail context, Bowden and Mirzaei (2021) found that entertaining content was more effective in driving engagement in online brand communities than in more traditional forms of digital content distribution. More recent research has demonstrated that gamified content can have a positive effect on brand equity and brand perception (Alanadoly & Salem, 2024).

'Remunerative' content refers to the use of monetary incentives, such as loyalty points, prize draws, and discounts, to boost engagement activities. This type of content has primarily been researched within the context of online brand communities (Baldus et al., 2014) and social media platforms more broadly (Buzeta et al., 2024). Existing literature has described it using terms such as perceived economic benefits (Gummerus et al., 2012), monetary benefits (Kang et al., 2014), remuneration (Muntinga et al., 2011), remunerative content Dolan et al. (2015), and monetary incentives (Dessart et al., 2015).

Finally, 'relational' content addresses consumer needs for integration, social interaction, and social benefits (Dolan et al., 2019). This content aims to foster a sense of belonging among consumers, allowing them to connect with friends, family, and the broader community, seek support, and compensate for real-life companionships (Risius & Beck, 2015). From a brand perspective, relational content

nurtures relationships with social media audiences through enhanced engagement behaviours and improves companies' dialogic communication strategies (Badham & Mykkänen, 2022).

Customer engagement with branded content

Moving away from the various forms of branded content studied in past research, it is equally important to understand the deeper motivations behind why consumers engage with such content on social media. While content itself may differ in form and function, the driving forces behind consumer interactions remain rooted in three primary motives, as outlined in past research: functional, hedonic, and authenticity-driven (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). 'Functional' motives are grounded in utilitarian needs, such as the desire to gather information about brands to guide purchasing decisions (Ruggiero, 2000). These motives typically precede consumer interactions with brands and tend to persist until the specific practical need – such as acquiring relevant product details or making an informed choice – has been met (Baumöl et al., 2016). In contrast, 'hedonic' motives arise from emotional and experiential needs, such as seeking entertainment, relaxation, or personal enjoyment. These motivations are closely tied to consumers' desire for self-gratification and self-expression, and they remain influential in shaping behaviour long after initial exposure to branded content (Yesiloglu et al., 2021). Finally, 'authenticity-seeking' motives reflect consumers' preference for brands to communicate in ways that feel genuine and transparent (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). This process encompasses a desire for continuity, integrity, and symbolic resonance within branded content, as consumers seek a deeper connection with brands that align with their values and ideals (Grayson & Martinec, 2004).

Building on the underlying motivations that drive engagement with branded content, scholars have outlined three customer engagement modes with brand content: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2016), with the latter being of particular interest in this paper. Van Doorn et al. (2010) define customer behavioural engagement as: 'customers' behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers' (p. 254). These voluntary consumer actions can have both positive and negative implications for the brand, with engagement behaviours manifesting in likes, comments, shares, and reactions (Barger et al., 2016).

Customer engagement behaviours can be further categorised into 'passive' and 'active'. Passive behaviours are characterised by minimal, positive, and largely inactive consumption of content (Dolan et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). In this mode of engagement, users inertly interact with content on social media without actively contributing or creating their own (Muntinga et al., 2011). Research suggests that passive engagement is the dominant form of behaviour on social platforms, representing the majority of user involvement and engagement with branded content (e.g. Fernandes & Castro, 2020). Conversely, active engagement behaviours go beyond passive consumption, necessitating moderate to high levels of interaction with digital content, such as creation and contribution to branded content (Dolan et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al.,

2021). While both forms of engagement – passive and active – are significant to brands, in this study, we place particular emphasis on active engagement, specifically consumer contribution (and not passive consumption), due to the limited exploration of this behaviour within existing literature.

The present research

Despite the body of research, important gaps remain, inviting deeper exploration. Many studies are review-based (e.g. Bubphapant & Brandão, 2024a; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), highlighting the need for further research grounded in real-world data. Additionally, much of the empirical research to date has centred on specific brands or industries (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021; Dolan et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021) or relied on fictional and mock-up brands (Buzeta et al., 2024), which may limit the broader applicability of findings and overlook the diversity of consumer behaviours across sectors. Similarly, the predominant focus on specific online brand communities (Baldus et al., 2014; Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021) and individual brand pages (Kang et al., 2014; Sabate et al., 2014) has provided valuable insights but tends to examine engagement in isolated contexts, offering a less comprehensive view of how consumers interact with brands across the wider social media landscape.

Furthermore, previous research mainly focuses on individual behavioural manifestations (Kabadayi & Price, 2014), which can result in an oversimplified understanding of the factors driving engagement, while overlooking the deeper motivations and long-term relationships that influence consumer interactions. Another significant gap is the scarcity of longitudinal studies that record engagement behaviours over time (Barger et al., 2016; Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021; Buzeta et al., 2024; Dessart et al., 2015; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019) in order to be able to offer insights into realistic user experiences with branded content (Bubphapant & Brandão, 2024b). Instead, most studies rely on snapshot analyses, which provide limited insight into how consumer engagement evolves.

In response, our study is guided by the following three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the main forms of branded content that generate active customer engagement?

RQ2: What active engagement behaviours do customers display when interacting with branded content on social media?

RQ3: What motivates consumers to actively engage with branded content on social media?

The present inquiry situates itself at the intersection of content marketing (Müller & Christandl, 2019; Rowley, 2008), customer engagement on social media (Dolan et al., 2019), and the motivations underpinning such engagement (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2016), whereas prior studies have primarily addressed these dimensions in isolation. Existing literature typically categorises digital content marketing into three formats: organic media, such as brand-generated social media posts and content hosted on owned platforms; UGC, classified as earned media created or shared voluntarily by consumers; and

sponsored media, including paid stories, influencer partnerships, and promoted content. These formats represent the core building blocks of digital content marketing and are essential to understanding how brands initiate and shape online engagement. Our study focuses specifically on *organic* content, as it reflects brand-led but unpaid and publicly accessible material that is largely free from commercial incentive or artificial amplification.

We argue that the type of branded content audiences encounter directly influences the nature and intensity of customer engagement behaviours, ranging from passive consumption to content creation, and ultimately, active contribution. These behaviours are, in turn, driven by a combination of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural motivations. Emotional motives include feelings of enjoyment, attachment, or nostalgia; cognitive motives involve curiosity, knowledge-seeking, or the perceived relevance of the content; and behavioural motives centre on the desire to express opinions, interact with others, or influence the brand or wider community. Our study places particular emphasis on *behavioural* engagement and *contribution* motivation, as these provide the most visible and effortful forms of interaction. They signal a deeper level of involvement where consumers are not just reacting to content but actively shaping the dialogue around it – something of increasing value to brands seeking to foster participatory and co-creative relationships with their audiences.

Figure 1 visualises this relationship, positioning our central contribution where the three streams – digital content marketing, customer engagement, and engagement motivations – converge to offer a holistic view of branded content's value from the consumer's perspective.

Methodology

To address our three RQs, we adopted an inductive exploratory approach with a consumer-centric research design, integrating a multi-method procedure. This approach included the use of participant diaries to capture branded content on Facebook and the corresponding engagement, complemented by semi-structured interviews, as recommended by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977). Diaries provide observable behaviours ('what?' and 'how?'), enabling the real-time documentation of interactions with branded content. This method allows participants to record real-life scenarios over time, offering insights from their perspective and tracking changes in their engagement patterns (Bolger et al., 2003). Given that customer engagement behaviours on Facebook, such as likes, comments, and shares, may not always be consciously reflected upon by participants (Muntinga et al., 2011), recalling these behaviours can be challenging. The diary method alleviates this by allowing participants to document their experiences as they occur or shortly thereafter, ensuring a reliable capture of details that may otherwise be forgotten (Markwell & Basche, 1998).

Follow-up interviews offered deeper insights into the motivations and reasons behind these behaviours ('why?'), allowing us to explore the contextual drivers of engagement. The combination of diaries and interviews is particularly advantageous as it provides a nuanced and holistic understanding of both the observable actions and the underlying psychological drivers – a dynamic often overlooked in other methods like participant observation or quantitative techniques such as surveys and experiments (Alaszewski, 2008). Moreover, the follow-up interviews enhanced the robustness of the diary method by improving the study's external validity.

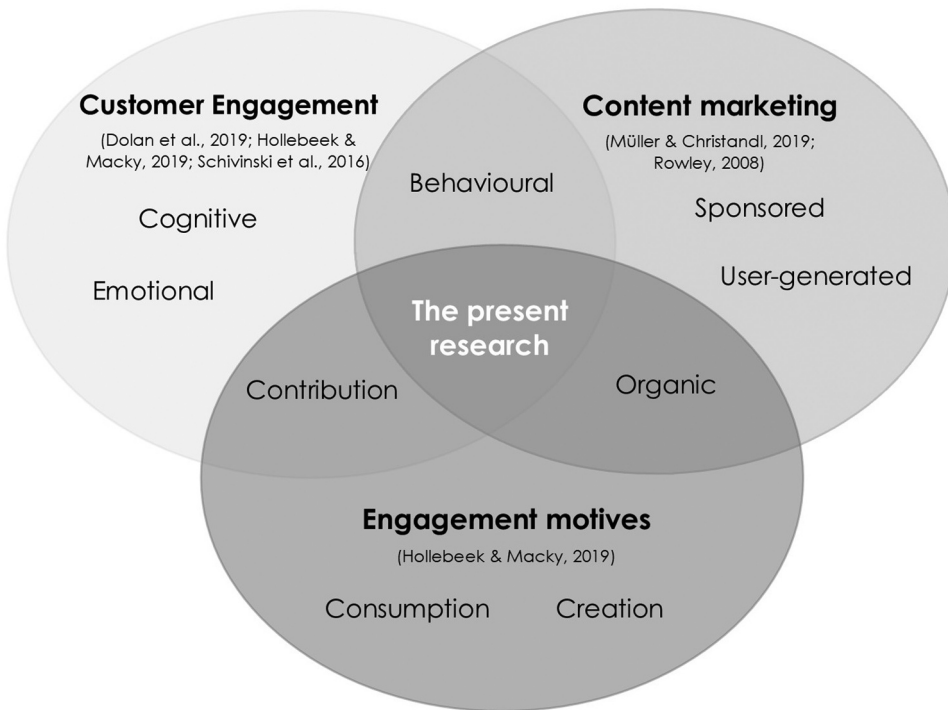


Figure 1. Research contribution.

We employed a purposive sampling strategy (Gentles et al., 2015), which entailed selecting participants who met specific criteria relevant to our RQs. The sample comprised 25 Europe-based participants aged 33 to 41, a range selected to capture the perspectives of digital-native adults with sufficient life experience to engage meaningfully with brand content on social media (see Table 2 for more information) (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). All data were collected in English, a shared second language for many participants, with fluency assessed during recruitment. No translation was required at any stage. The decision to focus on Europe-based participants reflects both practical and conceptual considerations: it ensured a degree of cultural proximity while still allowing for cross-national variation in platform use and brand engagement (Samuel Craig & Douglas, 2006).

Participants were recruited via the first authors' organisational network, while the selection criteria ensured that eligible participants: 1) were actively engaged with, or had interacted with at least one brand or branded content on social media within the past 12 months; 2) used digital and social media regularly, defined as accessing or posting on social platforms at least once per week; 3) had a minimum of one to two currently active social media profiles, where 'active' includes both visible engagement (e.g. posting, commenting, liking, sharing) and passive consumption (e.g. viewing content, following brand accounts) within the past month; and 4) followed brands across these platforms – all characteristics that align with the typical demographic of Facebook users (Statista, 2024b). Comparable to past research (e.g. Larsen et al., 2010), we limited the number of

Table 2. Research sample.

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Country	Example brands followed	Platforms with active accounts	Social media usage
1	Female	36	Germany	MAC Cosmetics, Ibiza Rocks, EasyJet	Facebook, Instagram	Passive observer
2	Male	41	Spain	Innocent, Mercedes, Barclays	Facebook	Frequent poster
3	Female	35	Italy	Porsche, Ryanair, KFC	Facebook	Passive Observer
4	Male	34	UK	Oreo, BMW, Red Bull	Facebook	Frequent Poster
5	Male	36	Germany	Pizza Hut, Formula 1, Cadbury	Facebook, X	Frequent Poster
6	Female	33	UK	Hard Rock Cafe, Mac Cosmetics,	Facebook, Snapchat	Frequent Poster
7	Female	41	UK	Oreo, Lush, Ryanair	Facebook, Pinterest	Frequent Poster
8	Female	35	Germany	Skittles, Starbucks, Nike	Facebook, Pinterest	Frequent Poster
9	Female	37	UK	VisitScotland, Disney, Marks and Spencer,	Facebook, X	Frequent Poster
10	Male	38	Germany	Volkswagen, Oreo, Papade Munich	Facebook	Frequent Poster
11	Female	35	Spain	SIXT, Porsche, Netflix	Facebook	Frequent Poster
12	Female	35	Germany	CK, Lush Cosmetics, MOMA	Facebook, Pinterest	Frequent Poster
13	Female	37	Italy	SIXT, The Body Shop, Freeletics	Facebook, X	Frequent Poster
14	Female	35	UK	VisitScotland, Oreo	Facebook	Frequent Poster
15	Male	36	Germany	Innocent, Volkswagen, Adidas	Facebook	Frequent Poster
16	Female	36	France	KitKat, Nestlé, Coca Cola	Facebook	Frequent Poster
17	Male	38	UK	Innocent, Microsoft, Aldi	Facebook	Frequent Poster
18	Female	35	Germany	Vision Express, Lush, BA	Facebook	Frequent Poster
19	Male	34	Italy	Innocent, IKEA, McDonald's	Facebook	Frequent Poster
20	Male	35	Germany	Audi, Porsche, Google	Facebook	Frequent Poster
21	Female	34	France	Pepsi, MAC Cosmetics, Uber	Facebook, Pinterest	Frequent Poster
22	Female	36	UK	Rimmel London, Debenhams, Lush	Facebook	Frequent Poster
23	Female	36	UK	IKEA, L'Oréal, Adidas	Facebook	Frequent Poster
24	Female	35	Italy	CK, Chanel, Innocent	Facebook	Frequent Poster
25	Female	34	France	IBM, The Body Shop, Nike	Facebook, X	Frequent Poster

respondents to 25 to maintain a manageable sample size for in-depth analysis, while ensuring data saturation (i.e. sufficient diversity of perspectives).

To capture authentic engagement, participants were asked to record content consumption as it organically occurred (i.e. without intentionally engaging with or consuming content for research purposes; see Olorunfemi, 2024). As this study aimed to explore diverse forms of branded content, we prioritised the content itself over specific brands to

ensure inclusivity across different modes of engagement. Participants received no monetary incentives; their involvement was entirely voluntary, driven by intrinsic interest in social media content and genuine curiosity about their own engagement behaviours. This approach was considered essential for eliciting authentic, reflective responses on interactions with branded content, thereby enhancing data quality (Krause et al., 2019; Olorunfemi, 2024).

Over a period of 11 weeks, participants logged entries into their diaries. The diary design was informed by five key factors as outlined by Sheble and Wildemuth (2016). We adopted a naturalistic semi-structured diary format to minimise distortion and encourage structured logging (Alaszewski, 2008). To generate relevant data, we provided participants with written guidance attached to each diary entry (see Appendix). Participants were encouraged to focus on specific events rather than fixed timeframes. As the aim of the research was to explore the types of branded content that elicited active engagement behaviours – engagement itself served as the primary event-prompting diary logs. Participants were further instructed to log their entries as soon as possible after engaging with branded content on Facebook. This approach reduced potential recall biases (Wheeler & Reis, 1991). Additionally, participants were guided to record comprehensive details by responding to the prompts: ‘who-what-when-where-how’, as per Zimmerman and Wieder (1977). To manage participant engagement over the 11-week period, regular check-ins and reminders were implemented to ensure consistent participation in both diary entries and follow-up interviews. There were no dropouts during the study, as we mitigated potential attrition by establishing clear expectations from the outset, emphasising the importance of consistent participation, and offering flexibility in diary submissions and interview scheduling.

In total, we recorded 950 brand-related interactions, with an average of 38 diary logs per participant. The brands referenced included both services and products across various sectors, encompassing premium and budget offerings. This diversity provided a holistic overview of branded content from multiple industries. Following the diary entries, we conducted the semi-structured interviews. The interview method was designed to expand upon the data captured in the diaries, offering an opportunity to further explore and clarify participants’ entries (Sheble & Wildemuth, 2016). Interview durations ranged from 35 minutes to over three hours. Participant consent was obtained to use findings in this study in future publications, and all follow-up interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The data from the diaries and interviews were systematically collated due to their complementary natures – diaries capturing the ‘what’ and ‘how’, while interviews uncover the ‘why’ – aligning with the methodological approach adopted in marketing and sociology research (Larsen et al., 2010; MacDonald et al., 2018). The combined data were then analysed using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, as illustrated in Figure 2 (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This analytical process encompassed three primary phases. First, we developed a priori coding templates based on our RQs, drawing from the theories presented in Dolan et al. (2019) and Hollebeek and Macky (2019) regarding customer motivations and engagement with social media content. In this phase, we applied codes derived from prior research on content forms and

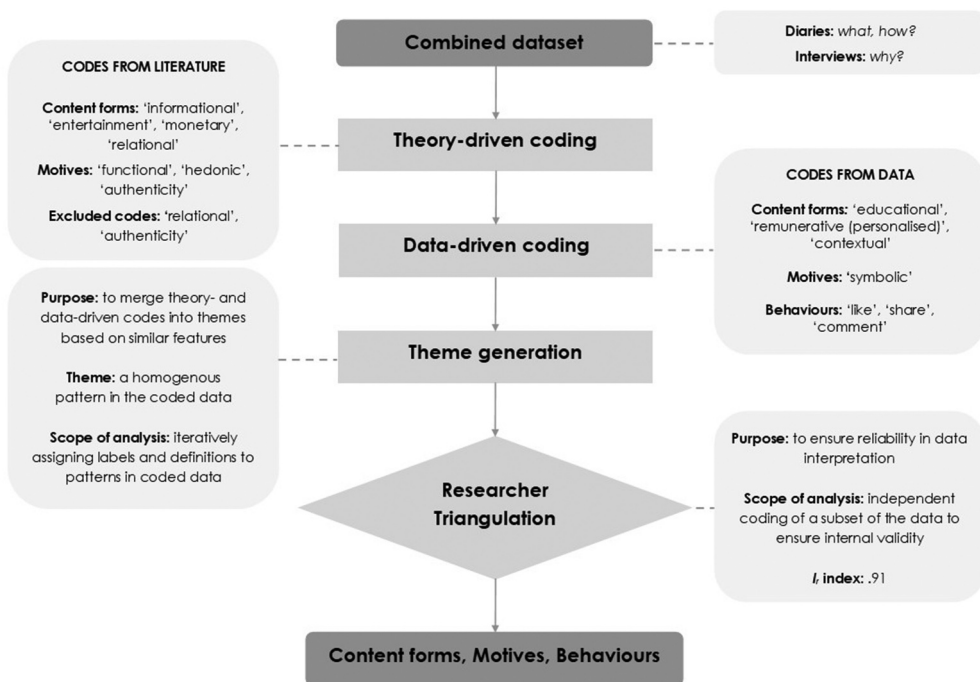


Figure 2. Research procedure.

engagement motives to the raw dataset. However, two theoretical codes – ‘relational’ content and the ‘authenticity’ motive – were excluded due to their inapplicability to the dataset and a lack of supporting evidence in participant data.

The second phase involved inductively generating additional codes to complement our theoretical coding. This phase revealed new data-driven codes that emerged from unique features within the dataset, leading to additional layers within previously recognised forms of branded content. Specifically, we identified ‘educational’ content, ‘personalised remuneration’, and a novel, data-driven theme termed ‘contextual’ content. Additionally, we uncovered a ‘symbolic’ motive for engagement with branded content. We also inductively generated codes for active engagement behaviours, categorising them into ‘low-involvement’ versus ‘high-involvement’ behaviours based on the frequency and depth of user interaction – for instance, passive liking versus commenting or resharing. The final phase of analysis involved synthesising both theory-driven and data-driven codes, culminating in the identification of four distinct forms of branded content, each encompassing two or more sub-themes, three motives for engagement, and two modes of engagement.

To ensure internal homogeneity and external validity, researcher triangulation was conducted, with a second researcher independently analysing a subset of the data. This process helped confirm that while some codes were applied to multiple data excerpts and final themes were not strictly mutually exclusive, the selected final representative code and overarching theme reflected the dominant form of branded content (e.g.

'remunerative') featured in each excerpt. For instance, although a Mother's Day branded piece of content could be interpreted as contextual due to its alignment with topical content in terms of timing, it was primarily classified under remunerative (personalised) content because its engagement was driven by a competition-based mechanism. Following a comparative analysis of the independent interpretations and discussion of any discrepancies, a satisfactory inter-rater reliability index was achieved ($I_r = .91$) using the method of proportional agreement (Rust & Cooil, 1994).

Findings

Through our thematic analysis, we constructed four primary forms of branded content consumers engage with. These content types align with varying levels of consumer involvement, ranging from low- to high-engagement behaviours. Furthermore, we uncovered three core motivations driving consumer interactions with branded content. Specifically, the analysis identified entertaining content as the most prominent form participants engaged with, with a significant presence throughout the data. Informational content followed closely, emerging as an important but secondary form. Contextual content also received notable attention by respondents, while remunerative content was the least represented in terms of what participants chose to engage with. While our goal was to group branded content types by dominant codes present in each theme, it is important to note that they are not entirely mutually exclusive. Individual content items may exhibit features of multiple categories (e.g. educational and entertaining), but for analytical clarity, we classified each example based on the primary meaning of each message. We summarise our findings in Table 3.

Informational branded content

Informational branded content unfolds across two distinct and compelling sub-themes: factual content and educational content. *Factual* branded content, which was consistently identified by most participants, predominantly triggered low-involvement engagement, typically manifesting as simple likes. This content is explicitly centred on the brand and its operations. Insights from participants' diaries indicated that examples of factual branded content often included updates about the brand's products or services, its mission, customer service initiatives, and other brand-related developments. A significant proportion of participants who engaged with this content likened Facebook to a digital magazine, newspaper, or newsletter. In contrast to conventional digital media, participants expressed a preference for Facebook, as it enabled them to remain informed about brand developments while exercising control over the content they engaged with. As one participant aptly noted:

I think Facebook is a good thing for me to specify, say, or choose my interests and get the content for it. In earlier days, if I wanted to get informed, I would buy magazines or something. Then I'd buy art magazines or architecture magazines or fashion magazines and I'd get all the information on any brand on everything. On Facebook I just have to specify which content I would like to see and which not. It's like a personal magazine. **(Participant 11)**

Table 3. Coding framework and data examples.

Form of branded content		Definition	Frequency %	Engagement behaviours	Motives for engagement	Examples
Informational	<i>Factual</i>	Content that primarily conveys information centred around the company and/or its operations.	24%	Liking	Functional	News about the brand's products or services, mission, customer service and any developments.
	<i>Educational</i>	Content that primarily conveys useful information to consumers and only implicitly refers to the company.		Liking, commenting	Hedonic	Infographics, articles, recipes, DIY tasks, educational hacks, and branded editorials.
Entertaining	<i>Behind-the-scenes</i>	Content that divulges internal brand information that is typically left out of the public's eye.	38%	Liking	Symbolic	Information about employee stories, experiences, achievements, the working environment, how company products are made or used.
	<i>Emotional</i>	Content that evokes strong emotional responses among consumers including laughter, amusement, sadness, fear, shock, or polarisation.		Liking, social sharing	Hedonic	Pictures, videos, comics, and one-liners centred around emotions.
Remunerative	<i>Visual</i>	Content that relies solely on high quality imagery-based posts.		Liking, social sharing, following brand pages	Hedonic	Photographs, graphics, cartoons, videos, memes.
	<i>Non-personalised</i>	Content that uses gamification to promote engagement based on generic audience incentives.	16%	Social sharing, commenting, following brand pages	Functional	Contests, sweepstakes, competitions, and questionnaires.
	<i>reward-based</i>					
Contextual	<i>Topical</i>	Content that incorporates trending or viral events and topics into the brand posts.	<i>Personalised reward-based</i> 22%	Content that uses gamification to promote engagement based on tailored to the audience incentives. Liking, social sharing, Commenting	Liking	Symbolic Information about popular topics and themes in the media or seasonal trends e.g. Valentine's Day.
	<i>Celebrity</i>	Content that refers to celebrities and influential people without an official endorsement in place.		Liking	Symbolic	Information relating to celebrities e.g. how they use or mention the brand's and/or its products.

Note. Some branded content types may exhibit characteristics of multiple categories, but classifications are based on the dominant theme in the content.

A significant pattern that emerged from the dataset was the engagement of participants with branded posts through low-involvement behaviours that are quick, casual, and driven more by practicality than emotional connection and predominantly focused on acquiring information (e.g. news, facts) about the brand. As such, we categorised functionality as the main motivator for engaging with this form of branded content, whereby participants interacted with factual content to fulfil a practical need or desire for information.

In contrast, *educational* content subtly informs consumers about the brand while prioritising the delivery of valuable, actionable information that extends beyond the brand itself. Rather than solely detailing a brand's products, services, or operations, educational content provides customers with useful insights presented in a way that avoids overt commercial intent. This distinction marks educational content as a novel layer within the broader spectrum of informational content. Participants' diary entries highlighted various examples of such content, including infographics, articles, recipes, DIY projects, educational tips, and branded editorial pieces. In addition to generating primary engagement modes, such as likes and clicks, educational content also sparked higher levels of interaction, notably through comments. When discussing their engagement with this type of content, participants expressed it as a convergence of informative and practical material that encourages voluntary and more profound engagement. This sentiment is reflected in the following excerpts from the data:

'18 Things to do' or '15 Things to do', I tend to click on it, because I know the content will be good. **(Participant 9)**

'Amazing hacks that will make travelling a breeze' (...) I thought it was so cool because it had, how you can save space in your suitcase, how you can pack lighter and it was really, really interesting and funny. It had little videos as well, so I thought that would be amazing. I just posted 'I'm in the travelling mood' and then posted that video. Quite a few people liked it as well ... If it's just what they're doing, then I don't care too much. Something that could help me, which could make my life easier. Also, stuff that I didn't know before, like the how to live a hundred years thing brand post. Finding out about things as well. **(Participant 10)**

From our data, it appears that engagement with educational branded content is largely influenced by hedonic needs, which prioritise pleasure and enjoyment in the consumption of information. This suggests that consumers are not simply seeking functional or practical information; rather, they are motivated by the intrinsic satisfaction that comes from learning and engaging with content that feels enjoyable and stimulating and aligns with their hedonic motives for engagement.

Entertaining branded content

A second core form of branded content, identified as the biggest theme from the diary entries, centred on entertainment, enjoyment, or passing the time. This type of content encompassed various formats revolving around three main themes: *behind-the-scenes*, *emotional*, and *visual* content. Participants consistently noted that they engaged with this content through likes and social shares, as it offered them significant intrinsic value. As one respondent remarked:

Rationally, the expectation is that I get something out of it. For some people, it might be a special offer or something, and for me it's mostly entertaining content. **(Participant 3)**

First, *behind-the-scenes* content offers audiences access to internal brand-related information that is typically not visible to the public, representing a novel addition to existing conceptualisations of content. The majority of the recorded behind-the-scenes content noted in the diaries focused on brand employees and their everyday work environments. Many participants engaged with this type of content through 'likes', appreciating the opportunity to glimpse a more personal side of the brands they follow on Facebook. This enhanced visibility has the potential to foster stronger relationships between brands and consumers, leading us to categorise behind-the-scenes content as eliciting symbolically motivated engagement, whereby consumers seek a personal connection with the brand and its people that feels genuine and departs from conventional brand-related 'sales' content. This is illustrated by the following comments:

I like seeing the workplace, posts about the workplace . . . because it shows more of a personal side, it's like you see that the brand isn't just a brand. It's the people behind the brand . . . I just like it. It makes me feel closer to the brand. **(Participant 20)**

I really liked the fact with this brand they post pictures from the office, because usually you are just a customer. That's the way you can identify with the staff and then with the brand, and build a connection with them . . . because it's a social network, it should be personal, there should be people involved. **(Participant 3)**

Fewer participants in the study also referred to behind-the-scenes content, though in a different guise – emphasising the process behind a product's creation or guidance on its effective use. This reflects a more relational orientation aimed at building a deeper connection by showcasing the craftsmanship, innovation, or practicality behind the product, thus contributing to its perceived usability. This, in turn, aids in the formation of stronger self-brand connections, as consumers feel they are engaging with a brand that aligns with their values and provides them with practical, higher quality, authentic and well-crafted solutions. The following data excerpt illustrates this dynamic:

Like the snacks . . . I wonder how they're made, but I don't really care about whether you are doing a promotion. You can tell me your new flavors, but I don't want to know if they are on sale. I'll know when I know. I don't like seeing sales. . . I prefer something like behind-the-scenes, how is it made. **(Participant 13)**

The participants' interest in behind-the-scenes content indicates a significant shift in how customers engage with brands on social media. Our findings suggest that consumers are no longer satisfied with carefully curated and idealised promotional images of products or services. Instead, they seek authentic glimpses into the real people behind the brands, their environments, product development processes, and genuine footage from brand-related events. As such, behind-the-scenes content is categorised as entertaining because it provides consumers with novel, authentic, and personal insights into brand environments and people, which elicits symbolic engagement rooted in emotional connection. While some instances may hint at functional interest (e.g. how products are made), the dominant motive across participant responses is the enjoyment of humanised, relatable, and non-promotional brand storytelling.

Another widely noted form of entertaining content that drives customer engagement behaviours, such as liking and social sharing, is *emotion*-based branded content. Participants included a variety of emotional content in their diaries, categorising it as humorous, cute, sad, scary, shocking, or controversial. This content took the form of pictures, videos, comics, and one-liners, and we view it as a sub-theme within the broader category of entertaining content. Among the different emotional types, humorous posts stood out as the most prominent in the diaries, capturing significant attention and engagement. When reflecting on their diary entry related to a post by the Rimmel brand, one participant alluded to the following:

It was a video for Red Nose Day, because they had a certain lip-gloss range for Red Nose Day. The cameraman is videoing it but it doesn't show you on the screenshot that David Walliams was actually dressed as a supermodel [...], so I think that made me laugh because he was dressed up as all these super models. I think that actually the only post, although I like Rimmel London on Facebook, I think it's the only post I liked on it, because I found it humorous.
(Participant 22)

During the follow-up interview session, another social media user reflected on humour-induced brand posts that he interacted with suggesting that incorporating strong emotions in branded content improves a brand's competitive advantage, as follows:

I think funny content is very engaging ... Something which is not usual because you have so many brands on Facebook, and every brand is engaging all the time, every day, in every hour ... I think to really stand out from that you have to be creative, you have to be different ... I think that's why brands like SIXT, for example, they're successful because this is just a car rental [...] They have so much power behind this that when I think about renting a car, I would always say, oh, SIXT, because they are really engaging me with funny content, provocative. [...] And within this competition, you really have to stand out to engage me.
(Participant 11)

Building on these data excerpts, we observed that infusing emotion, particularly humour, into branded content powerfully sparks high-involvement engagement behaviours among customers and boosts brand recall. Participants consistently highlighted in their diaries how they frequently share emotional content with their networks, especially when it has the potential to stir strong emotions in others. In essence, they are driven by a desire to evoke similar emotional reactions from their audience, creating a shared experience that deepens connection and amplifies engagement.

Moreover, our analysis of the diary entries reveals that branded content predominantly featuring visuals, such as pictures and videos, generated significantly higher levels of customer engagement behaviours – such as likes and shares – compared to content that relied solely on text within the broader category of entertaining branded content. When discussing their diary entries that highlighted numerous likes and social shares of visual content, one interviewee remarked:

I seem to like them a lot. It was also something I realized later on when I finished with this/ diary/. I think it's the pictures, really nice pictures... They say one picture is a thousand words and on Facebook I don't think anyone is going to be bothered to read a really, really long post, where a picture can say something in a stronger way... They make more of an impact.
(Participant 10)

Another participant recorded the following entry regarding their engagement with emotion-based branded content:

Wonderful, easy and fun post of Skittles. I shared that picture after a few days, and a few friends shared it as well. I think it's a really fun picture, simple picture again, so not complicated and fun. **(Participant 8)**

From these data excerpts, it was evident that both emotional and visual branded content allow participants to derive genuine pleasure from engaging with such material. These forms of content are primarily consumed and interacted with by customers seeking hedonic enjoyment – engagement driven not by necessity, but by the pleasure, amusement, or emotional gratification it provides.

Remunerative branded content

Remunerative content taps into the power of gamification to drive engagement by offering rewards through contests, sweepstakes, competitions, and surveys. Our analysis uncovered two distinct types of remunerative branded content, differentiated by whether the rewards are personalised or untargeted. The first type, as highlighted in participants' diaries, revolves around non-personalised rewards and monetary incentives, distributed to a wide Facebook audience. Participants mentioned a range of prizes, from free event tickets and makeup sets to holidays, store vouchers, and credit cards. One participant shared that she regularly engages with various brands on Facebook, primarily through social shares and comments, driven solely by the allure of winning prizes – a practice she described as a habitual part of her social media routine. During the interview, she elaborated further:

I liked their page as well because it's also what you have to do when you would like to win the prize ... I read some sentences about the game and the prize, but I haven't read any more about the page, just about participating for the prize ... I mean it's an easy opportunity to win something. But most of the time you don't win. I've never won anything. **(Participant 3)**

This quote highlights that the participant's main motivation was the desire to win the prize, with little to no interest in other brand-related content. Intriguingly, she continued engaging with these posts even without ever winning a prize, showcasing her sustained participation, as confirmed during the follow-up interview. This suggests that monetary incentives can effectively encourage repeated engagement with specific brand posts, driving customers' involvement through the promise of functional value.

The second form of remunerative content revolves around personalised competition rewards, which offer customers symbolic value. This represents a fresh and important addition to existing conceptualisations of branded content. As evidenced by the following diary entry, one participant provided valuable insight into this form of engagement:

I like this post because it was a result of a Mother's Day competition where a Debenhams designer was personalizing home accessories with winning users; comments around the theme of 'My Mum taught me to ...'. I liked this post because it was different from any other Mother's Day-themed post that I have seen on Facebook ... If I had logged into Facebook the day before, I would have entered the competition. **(Participant 22)**

Personalised remunerative content, designed to offer tailored rewards or incentives, often leads to lower engagement behaviours like liking, as its primary goal may not be immediate interaction but rather fostering longer term consumer-brand connections. By offering personalised content, such as exclusive discounts or messages that cater to individual preferences, brands provide symbolic value that resonates with consumers on a more emotional level. This sense of being recognised and valued enhances relational and affiliative outcomes, fostering long-term brand attachment, even when immediate engagement metrics are less pronounced.

Contextual branded content

Contextual branded content refers to material created or presented in relation to specific circumstances, trends, or events. This type of content is designed to engage audiences by aligning the brand with relevant topics or themes that resonate with current interests, ongoing discussions, or cultural moments. Our analysis revealed two forms of contextual branded content: *topical* and *celebrity-driven* content.

Topical branded content takes advantage of popular media trends to capture the attention of social media users and spark word-of-mouth conversations. A significant number of diarists reported engaging with branded content tied to external events, such as new movie releases. During one follow-up interview, when asked why they chose to 'like' these topical brand posts, one participant shared:

I really liked the way VisitScotland did it. The photo which appears under the caption '50 Shades of Scotland', it looked like the cover of the first book, but instead of the title was a black sporran, so it looked almost as authentic as the actual cover or the next book. It was done so well. When I clicked to read more, they had this selection ... Things to do, places to see, and things to eat in Scotland. The reason it was really funny because it really sounded as if ... I mean the vocabulary fitted into the language of Fifty Shades of Grey.

The majority of participants in the study highlighted that topical content consistently triggers high-involvement customer engagement behaviours, such as social sharing, underlining its effectiveness in capturing attention and driving interaction. This type of content, often timely and relevant, resonates deeply with consumers, prompting them to share it with their networks, which further amplifies its reach and impact. Additionally, participants seemed to be primarily motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment in their interactions with this content, rather than solely by functional or informational goals. As a result, we categorised engagement with this content as hedonically motivated, as it taps into consumers' intrinsic desires for entertainment, amusement, and emotional satisfaction, making the engagement experience more enjoyable and personally fulfilling.

Second, brand-related content that included famous celebrities and influencers was another important theme that emerged from the data on contextual content. Many diarists included logs in which they mentioned branded content that included famous celebrities. This was mostly related to the empathy that participants had towards some of the famous personalities. One participant engaged with brand posts that included the actor Emma Watson, and she provided the following justification:

I 'liked' it. I can't remember if it was a sponsored ad or a friend liked it, but it's related to Emma Watson. I like Emma Watson, so I liked the post. **(Participant 24)**

Furthermore, participants appeared to perceive celebrity endorsement as a reassurance of quality as they often mentioned that if a specific celebrity is involved then the brand must be communicating something worth interacting with. Given that engagement with celebrity contextual content corresponds to consumers' desire to affiliate with the status of brand and/or the celebrity involved in the content, we argue that engagement with this form of branded content is symbolically motivated.

In sum, in [Figure 3](#) we illustrate how different likely modes of engagement (low vs. high) correspond with functional, hedonic, or symbolic engagement motives in response to the identified forms of branded content.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

The aim of this paper was to develop a comprehensive, customer-driven understanding of engagement with various forms of branded content and the underlying motivations driving such engagement. Consequently, our findings offer three significant contributions to the existing literature on content marketing and customer engagement.

First, we make a significant contribution to the field of digital content marketing by offering a novel conceptualisation of a subset of it – branded content – that reflects contemporary industry practices (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Lopes & Casais, 2022). From our research, we define branded content as:

Any form of organic digital media created, distributed, or endorsed by a brand, designed to elicit immediate, positive and active consumer engagement behaviours, driven by the user's perceived value of the content.

This conceptualisation departs from and extends previous definitions of this phenomenon (e.g. Barreto et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2016; Suárez-Álvarez & Pastor-Rodríguez, 2023) by placing greater emphasis on the digital environment (Waqas et al., 2022) and highlighting the critical role of consumer engagement with the content. Unlike prior definitions, which may focus more narrowly on the creation or distribution of branded content (e.g. Fitó-Carreras et al., 2024; Sukontip et al., 2024) our conceptualisation emphasises how engagement behaviours – whether low-involvement or high-involvement – reflect the perceived value of the content. By adopting a consumer-centric perspective, we assert that the ultimate value of branded content is not predetermined by the brand, as stated previously (Kumar et al., 2016; Sukontip et al., 2024) but is instead shaped by the consumer's interaction (or lack thereof) with the content. This view recognises that the consumer's personal preferences, emotions, and motivations influence how they assess and engage with content, making engagement a more dynamic and individualised process.

Second, our findings offer the first empirical insights into the complex interplay between various forms of branded content, customer engagement behaviours, and the underlying motivations driving these interactions within the organic and naturalistic context of participants' Facebook feeds. While prior studies have often examined these elements in isolation (Dolan et al., 2015; Sabate et al., 2014), this study directly responds to

the call for a more comprehensive approach to branded content research that moves beyond a single brand or industry focus (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022). Additionally, we advance the understanding of how brand category influences customer engagement behaviours (Bowden et al., 2015), revealing that desirable active engagement behaviours can emerge across various brand types and categories. This challenges previous assertions that such behaviours are solely contingent upon the brand itself (Bowden et al., 2015; Dessart et al., 2015), suggesting instead that these behaviours are primarily driven by the type of branded content being promoted.

Third, our research makes a substantial contribution to existing typologies of branded content by expanding and refining the classification of content types that drive consumer engagement. We explore the significance of information value as a key determinant of engagement behaviours, corroborating past literature that identifies it as crucial for fostering social media engagement (Dholakia et al., 2004; Whiting & Williams, 2013) and interactions with online brand communities (Baldus et al., 2014; Dessart et al., 2015). We build upon Dessart et al. (2015) work on purposeful engagement, revealing that information-seeking behaviours on social media are intentional, rather than incidental. Additionally, we extend previous conceptualisations by categorising informational content into two distinct sub-types: factual and educational. Our study asserts that engagement with factual content is driven by functional motives, fulfilling practical needs, while educational content appeals to hedonic ones, highlighting the role of content presentation in shaping consumer engagement (Pulizzi, 2012).

Next, we contribute to the understanding of entertaining content as a significant driver of active engagement behaviours, expanding on previous research (Sabate et al., 2014). We further refine this category by subdividing entertaining content into three sub-themes: behind-the-scenes, emotional, and visual content. Our research emphasises the importance of behind-the-scenes content in fostering low-involvement engagement driven by symbolic motives, which facilitate connections with the brand and like-minded consumers – an effect previously explored in luxury branding contexts (Bazi et al., 2020). Moreover, we demonstrate that visual content not only increases engagement with familiar brands but also encourages interaction with unfamiliar ones, a previously unexplored area. Emotional content emerges as a key driver of high-involvement engagement behaviours, complementing existing research on the power of emotive content (Davis et al., 2014). Since

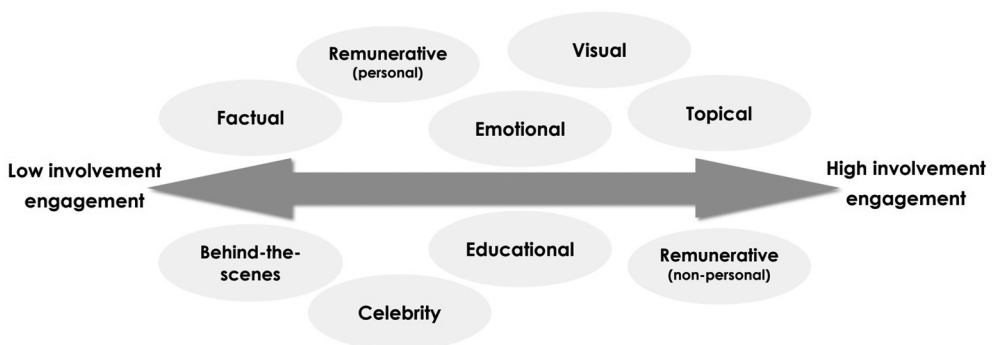


Figure 3. Branded content forms and likely engagement behaviours.

entertaining content is largely driven by hedonic motives, our findings align with previous studies emphasising consumers' pursuit of self-gratification (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

Additionally, we advance the understanding of remunerative content by categorising it into two types: non-personalised and personalised. Our results reveal that non-personalised reward-based content prompts high-involvement engagement behaviours, such as social sharing, driven by functionality, while personalised content evokes low-involvement behaviours, such as 'likes', driven by symbolic motivation. This distinction suggests that non-personalised rewards may appeal to extrinsic motivational factors without fostering a deeper connection to the brand (Arghashi & Arsun Yuksel, 2023).

Finally, we introduce contextual branded content, comprising topical and celebrity content, as a significant addition to the literature. Our findings show that topical content frequently stimulates high-involvement engagement, driven by its relevance and viral nature, offering new insights into its creative use by brands. While celebrity endorsements have been widely studied in marketing (e.g. Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016), their role in brand-related customer engagement has been underexplored. Our research demonstrates that celebrity-driven branded content elicits high-involvement engagement motivated by both symbolic and hedonic desires, suggesting that celebrity endorsements are not the sole means of achieving consumer engagement.

Managerial implications

Our findings provide useful insights for professionals in digital content marketing and brand management who want to improve customer engagement on social media. We've created a clear toolkit that links different engagement motivations to specific behaviours, helping managers focus on the right type of branded content to achieve their goals. However, it's worthwhile noting that our recommendations should be viewed in the context of our specific sample and demographics. As such and despite the inclusion of a broad spectrum of brands, it's important for managers to take our findings with caution, as they may not apply universally across all industries or specific situations. To foster active customer engagement, brands can select from four distinct content types: informational, entertaining, remunerative, and contextual. These content forms align with key trends in social media (Hootsuite, 2025) – such as content experimentation and audience-focused engagement – and are designed to meet specific consumer motivations and desires.

First, informational branded content delivers valuable insights and can be divided into two key types: educational and factual. Educational content broadens consumers' knowledge, often addressing topics beyond the brand itself, while factual content highlights the brand's attributes and offerings. This distinction is essential for brands seeking to align their messaging with consumer interests, particularly those focused on utilising social listening to identify informational gaps or opportunities. Understanding the right approach ensures the content resonates with the audience's expectations.

Second, entertaining branded content aims to captivate and engage users, with three subcategories: behind-the-scenes, emotional, and visual content. Behind-the-scenes and emotional content tell authentic brand stories, fostering deeper connections with consumers, which aligns with the recent creative disruption trend – where brands move beyond consistency to explore more dynamic personas and

voices. Visual content, on the other hand, engages users through aesthetic appeal, making it an effective tool to encourage interaction and emotional investment. Employing these elements can boost engagement in a way that reflects current micro-virality tactics – tapping into smaller-scale moments that resonate with niche audiences.

Third, remunerative content incentivises consumers with rewards and can be classified into non-personalised and personalised reward-based content. Non-personalised content generally appeals to functional needs, driving high involvement, while personalised rewards enhance the symbolic motivation to engage by personally recognising and rewarding a consumer, as opposed to receiving generic or monetary rewards. Since AI tools can now enable personalised experiences at scale, brands are offered the chance to engage users on a deeper, more individual level via remunerative content.

Fourth, contextual branded content includes topical and celebrity-driven content, engaging consumers through relevant trends and external themes. Topical content allows brands to tap into cultural moments, aligning with trendjacking strategies derived from social listening insights, while celebrity endorsements amplify reach and engagement. Increasingly, such content may also feature influencers – both human and virtual – who serve as culturally resonant figures that help brands connect with audiences through shared interests and timely conversations, thereby encouraging higher-involvement behaviours.

Finally, to encourage high-involvement behaviours such as comments and shares, brands should prioritise visual, topical, educational, and emotional content. These forms of content are primarily driven by consumers seeking enjoyment and entertainment from their interactions. Additionally, non-personalised remunerative content can drive high involvement through economic rewards, appealing to functional needs. In contrast, to stimulate low-involvement behaviours like ‘likes’, brands can focus on behind-the-scenes, celebrity, factual, and personalised remunerative content. These types cater to consumers’ functional and symbolic needs, offering quick, fulfilling interactions that contribute to long-term brand relationships.

While each content form has its own strengths, the key to a successful social media strategy lies in their integration. Brands can strengthen their content strategy by combining elements from different content types to appeal to a range of consumer motivations. It’s important to note that these categories are not fixed – branded content often blends multiple characteristics. Our typology highlights the primary driver of engagement, but in practice, content may serve multiple purposes simultaneously.

Conclusion

Our study provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between branded content and customer engagement on social media. By exploring the main types of branded content that spark consumer interaction (RQ1), we identified several distinct forms, each eliciting different engagement behaviours (RQ2). Furthermore, we studied the underlying motivations driving these behaviours (RQ3), revealing a nuanced landscape where both functional needs and emotional desires influence how customers engage with brands online. However, our study is not without limitations and these present avenues for further research.

Firstly, our research is primarily centred on Facebook, which may not fully represent customer engagement behaviours across other digital platforms. Future research could extend this work beyond Facebook to explore customer engagement with branded content on various social media platforms, particularly those that have recently emerged and are more short-form video-oriented, such as TikTok or Instagram Reels. A comparative study analysing user engagement behaviours across different platforms could offer valuable insights into how platform-specific features influence the effectiveness of branded content.

While this paper provides a comprehensive overview of active engagement with branded content practices on Facebook, it does not examine the direct effect such engagement or content forms on other customer behaviours, such as purchasing intentions or message recall, which we recognise may undermine the practical implications of the present research. Future research could quantitatively assess the effectiveness of different content types in relation to distinct stages of the sales funnel (Ho et al., 2022). Additionally, further investigation could explore how these content types contribute to stronger self-brand connections (Hollebeek et al., 2023). Understanding how various forms of branded content influence customer behaviour at each stage of the customer journey would offer social media managers actionable insights to refine their strategies and enhance conversion rates.

Moreover, our study focused exclusively on one dimension of consumer engagement: behavioural engagement. Scholars may consider exploring other dimensions, including cognitive and emotional engagement. For instance, a cross-cultural study examining customer engagement in diverse cultural contexts could provide valuable insights into how cultural differences shape engagement behaviours and content preferences on social media (Bianchi et al., 2017). Such research could help brands tailor their digital content strategies to better resonate with audiences across different cultural landscapes.

Additionally, the rapid advancements in AI and its growing role in digital content marketing raise important questions for future research. With the rise of AI content generation tools, it is crucial to examine how this type of content compares to human-created content in terms of customer engagement. Future studies could investigate key factors such as consumer trust, perceived authenticity, and overall engagement levels when exposed to AI-generated versus human-generated branded content. By analysing these variables, researchers can offer valuable insights into the implications of AI on branded content strategies and customer engagement practices.

Finally, our study relied on participant diaries as a data collection method, which, while valuable for capturing engagement behaviours in naturalistic settings, also presents limitations. Diary-based research depends on participants' consistency and accuracy in reporting their behaviours, which may be subject to recall bias, incomplete entries, or skewed responses. Future studies could complement diary data with other methods, such as real-time digital tracking, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of engagement behaviours. While we chose manual diaries for their capacity to prompt deeper, more reflective entries – particularly important when exploring subjective experiences – emerging digital diary tools can

streamline data capture, reduce participant burden, and allow for time-stamped, real-time inputs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical approval statement

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Edinburgh Napier University School Research & Integrity Committee (Ref. ENBS/012). All procedures followed the approved protocol and institutional ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

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Appendix. - Diary instructions: an exploratory study on factors influencing brand-related consumer engagement behaviours on Facebook

Please use this diary to record all your behaviours, thoughts, feelings, and experiences that relate to your interactions with brands on Facebook. This is an event-based diary, which means you should make an entry each time an event occurs – specifically, any interaction with brands on the platform. An event refers to any engagement, such as liking, sharing, or commenting on brand-related content. It is essential that you provide a detailed account of each event, explaining how the interaction occurred and what influenced your behaviour.

For example, if you choose to like, share, or comment on any brand-related content, please reflect on the context of your engagement. What led you to take this action? Were there any particular factors, such as the content's message, format, or emotional appeal, that influenced your decision? Similarly, if you decide to post about a brand (either positively or negatively) on your own Facebook feed, please describe how the post came about and the underlying motivations for expressing your opinion.

In instances where you see brand-related content but choose not to engage, it is equally important to record why you made that decision. What were the reasons behind your choice to bypass interaction? This reflective process will help capture a comprehensive picture of your engagement behaviour.

Additionally, for each entry, you should specify where the brand communication originated. Was it from a brand's page that you follow? Was it a sponsored post? Or was it content shared by one of your Facebook friends? It is crucial to note the source of the communication to provide context for your engagement. This will help identify patterns or trends in how brand content reaches you and how you engage with it.

As this is an event-based diary, it is imperative that you record your entries as soon as possible after each event. This ensures that your reflections remain accurate and capture your spontaneous thoughts and feelings. Alongside each entry, please include the date and time of the interaction. If applicable, you are also encouraged to include screenshots of the content, as this can provide additional context and clarity to your entry.

Throughout this process, it is important to emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to capture your authentic experiences with brand-related content, so please be as honest and detailed as possible. Additionally, it is essential that this diary does not influence your behaviour in any way. The objective is to document your natural interactions and reactions with brand content, without any awareness of the study influencing your choices.