

[DOI: 10.20472/BMC.2017.006.004](https://doi.org/10.20472/BMC.2017.006.004)

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TOWARDS A MORE UNIVERSAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONTENT MARKETING: THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Abstract:

As a new marketing paradigm, the scholarly publications about content marketing have steadily increased since the first academic study in 2008. It is, however, still surpassed by the thousands of practitioner publications in the form of blogs, case studies, and industry publications. Varied perspectives and competing concepts about content marketing impede universal understanding and hinder future growth. Marketing scholars have only recently started to address content marketing's definitional and conceptual issues and have thus far contributed very little to the continuous debate about this shift in marketing thought.

This study was consequently done to address a gap in our understanding of content marketing by focusing on the state of current scholarly contributions when it comes to unanimity about its conceptual foundation. It is furthermore also important to be aware of how research has advanced content marketing theory so far to expand existing knowledge.

A directed, inductive content analysis of 191 academic studies about content marketing was done to establish how content marketing is conceptually and consistently explained and understood in existing scholarly work. Three main categories emerged that illustrate uniformity in views, namely delineation of content marketing, content marketing field, and foundational elements. Conceptual understanding of a phenomenon is crucial to develop frameworks and models to accurately describe it. This study could thus be an underpinning for future studies to add to incomplete conceptions about content marketing and thereby advancing its growth.

Keywords:

content marketing, content marketing research, marketing theory, content analysis, social media

JEL Classification: M31, M30, M00

Introduction

This study was necessary as content marketing is still an emergent marketing paradigm with limited academic publications since the first study was published in an scholarly journal in 2008 by Jennifer Rowley, an academic at Manchester Metropolitan University. Although the content marketing concept is not new and awareness about its benefits is growing, the literature reveals that there is still not universal understanding about its nature and benefits. The numerous attitudes, beliefs, and ideas of what it is and how it should be implemented are especially evident in the thousands of practitioner publications available through searches on the Internet (see Du Plessis, 2015). Graduate students in marketing and business studies are noticeably eager to further their studies on the topic of content marketing with mounting publications in conference proceedings and journals by marketing and other interested scholars.

However, since existing scholarly empirical studies address content marketing from different angles, wide-ranging appreciation for the complexities around the implementation of the strategy is impeded. Despite the rise in academic literature, marketing scholars and students thus far have contributed very little to the continuous debate about this shift in marketing thought and practice. Critics of the popular and well-cited definitions of content marketing argue that they fail to adequately address its true scope as well as nature of the content. There thus remain many unanswered questions about how the content marketing field could be conceptually advanced.

Although definitions differ and are varied, it is generally accepted that with content marketing brand content is created and pulled to consumers who are already interested and actively seeking information about a brand or topic. When content is pulled to consumers, social word of mouth (SWOM) is encouraged while more brand awareness and loyalty, amongst others, are created. Brand content often takes the form of brand stories strategically linked to the organization's brand personality to catch the interest of consumers based on relevancy to their own lives. These brand stories are then shared on social media or via email subscriptions using search engine optimised (SEO) and include case studies, blog posts, videos, whitepapers, podcasts, webinars, infographics, press releases, free eBooks, interviews, and testimonials, to name but a few (Pulizzi, 2010; 2012 and 2013).

The goal of this paper is thus to seek initial insights into how content marketing is conceptually and consistently clarified in the existing body of academic literature. Wacker (2008) confirms that consistent conceptual understanding is important for theory building and that concepts should not be renamed.

A directed, inductive qualitative content analysis of 191 academic publications was done to identify overall conceptual concurrences about content marketing which could be used as a heuristic for future academic studies. By concentrating on similarities of

scholarly perspectives and not differences, diverse conceptions about content marketing have been consolidated and universal understanding of the phenomenon advanced.

The paper is structured as follows: literature review, research question, the research method, data and analysis, discussion and lastly conclusions.

Literature review

The term “content marketing” coined by Pullizi (2010) from the Content Marketing Institute (CMI), is not new but still evolving. Defining content marketing has been challenging as its meaning seems to depend on context as well as perspectives of practitioners and academics. As is evident in the thousands of practitioner articles, blogs and industry papers available on the Internet, marketers are increasingly adopting content marketing to replace interruptive advertising and to attract more attention to the brand. Content marketing is perceived as ideal to emotionally connect with consumers as it uses unobtrusive pulling and not pushing techniques as in traditional marketing (see also Liu and Huang, 2014). Unlike traditional marketing, content marketing is non-promotional aimed at creating and sharing valuable brand content so that consumers could become familiar with and trust the brand before converting into customers (Brieger, 2013).

Since it is a recent marketing paradigm the foundational marketing theories in which it is anchored are still varied, as argued by marketing practitioners and scholars, for example, digital marketing, relationship marketing, integrated marketing communications (IMC), marketing communications and public relations (see Lieb, 2012; Sullivan, 2013; Du Plessis, 2015; Cronin, 2016). A review of the literature reveals that the numerous viewpoints of the nature of content marketing are mainly from practitioners' and scholars' own perspectives, backgrounds and epistemologies. There is, however, an increasing noteworthy scholarly body of knowledge about content marketing that critically considers how it should be conceptualized and defined to enhance the future growth of the discipline (see, for example, Pažėraitė and Repovienė, 2016). Since there are many competing concepts about content marketing it is reported on differently in both academic and practitioner literature hindering uniform understanding and development of the field. Some of these competing concepts include but are not limited to post internet branding, brand journalism, open source branding, co-creating brands, influencer marketing, story marketing, native advertising and inbound marketing (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Kent 2013; Steenburgh et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2013, Swan, 2013). However, content marketing is argued to mostly resemble inbound marketing which pulls customers to the organization's products and services by offering useful information and resources (Steenburgh et al., 2011). Whereas inbound marketing is more metrics- and result-driven content marketing is more concerned about conversations and an essential subset of inbound marketing (Lieberman, 2016).

There are numerous definitions of content marketing but thus far the CMI's (2012) definition of content marketing is still very popular among both practitioners and academics which define it as "the marketing and business process for creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action". Pullizi (2012), the foremost content marketing expert's argument that brand stories are the main focus of content marketing, is supported by both practitioners and scholars. To further impede universal understanding, content marketing is also approached from both business to consumer (B2C) and business to business (B2B) perspectives. Although the processes are the same they have different marketing strategies, tactics, and messages (Rane, 2016). Since the meaning of the content marketing concept does not change irrespective of which perspective is adopted, the study included both B2C and B2B topics.

Acknowledging Koiso-Kanttila's (2004) seminal work, Rowley (2008) was the first academic who did a study and published about content marketing. At the time she referred to the term "digital content marketing" with the first scholarly definition as "the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer requirements profitably in the context of digital content or bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels". However, as more academic studies have become available, previous popular and well-cited definitions such as by Rowley (2008) and the CMI (2012), are seen as too narrow to explain its real nature other than making a profit. These definitions also do not explain the intricacies and scope of content marketing as a carefully managed process or acknowledge its numerous other benefits (see Pažėraitė and Repovienė, 2016; Georgieva, Djoukanova and Tarnovskaya, 2014). A study by Symons (2015) confirms growing arguments that practitioners appreciate content marketing more for its long-term brand building benefits as they cannot connect content marketing efforts to an increase in sales.

The complexities and benefits of content marketing are evident in more recent studies that have approached content marketing, amongst others, from theoretical positions such as business-to-business strategy (Holliman and Rowley, 2014), brand engagement (Vivero, 2016), social media (Van Waveren, 2015), organizational branding (Koljonen, 2016; Myllys, 2016), its elements (Du Plessis, 2015), practical performance (Arhammar, 2014), online marketing strategy (Augustini, 2014), marketing automation (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016), as a new trend in marketing practice (Wong and Kee, 2015), customer satisfaction (Andaç et al., 2016), optimization (Kose et al., 2016), digital channels (Banjo, 2013) and effectiveness (Pažėraitė and Repovienė, 2016).

This study attempts to advance universal understanding of content marketing by focusing on how it is conceptually and consistently explained in existing academic studies. By doing so, theory building and the future growth of content marketing are also augmented.

Research question

The aim of this study was to answer the following research question:

In what way is content marketing conceptualized and consistently understood in academic studies?

Research methodology

For this study, a directed content analysis of 191 full-text academic publications, including articles, conference proceedings and theses from 2008 to 2016 was done. This body of research studies was purposively selected via Google Scholar, a search engine concentrating on scholarly literature and are freely accessible. Content analysis is strictly guided by analytical rules and the data are analysed in stages. It was a functional method for this study since research about how content marketing is conceptually and consistently understood in academic literature would benefit from a further description (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The units of analysis were social artifacts (academic documents).

The data analysis to develop categories of common themes was done as follows. At first Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis approach was followed to reduce the data in an accurate manner and to eliminate studies that do not refer to content marketing in operational definitions. Thereafter operational definitions for all pre-determined categories were formulated. The data were examined on two levels, namely manifest and latent. For the manifest level the literal meaning of the text was identified whereas on latent level the inherent meaning in the text was important (see Bengtsson, 2016). After this systematic review, the text was coded into categories and highlighted where the data represented instances of a pre-determined category. In the last step, subcategories were identified where needed (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The final code frame for this study consisted of 37 individual codes located across three main categories.

The issue of coding reliability was addressed by following up the initial manual coding with coding via a qualitative data analysis software program, QDA Miner, by Provalis Research. This ensured that data were thoroughly interrogated and follows coding reliability suggestions by Welsch (2002). It is widely argued in the academic literature that a computer-programme-assisted analysis ensures higher reliability than human coding techniques (Silver and Lewins, 2007).

Analysis and findings

Three categories with three and two subcategories respectively emerged from the data.

Table 1 below illustrates the three main categories, the number of cases, codes, and frequency which are discussed in more detail below. The three categories are indicative of the areas of conceptual consensus about content in academic literature.

Table 1: The three main categories and frequency in the data

Category	Description	Frequency	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Delineation of content marketing	Consistent clarification and description of content marketing in academic literature	5455	25.80%	162	81.40%
Content marketing field	Coherent focus area in which content marketing is positioned in academic literature	8840	41.70%	175	87.9%
Foundational elements	Concurred essential elements of content marketing to facilitate practice	6888	32.50%	167	83.90%

Category 1: Delineation of content marketing

Category 1 encompasses all findings concerning how consistently content marketing is clarified and described as a concept in the academic literature and constitutes 25.80% of the codes. Three subcategories became evident, namely that of a pull marketing environment, strategic approach and storytelling. This category firstly illustrates that content marketing is explained and described within an environment in which the target audience is organically attracted to content through "search engine optimization" and primarily "social media" which typically includes valuable free resources. Secondly, the brand has become a "publisher" which strategically includes

the creation and sharing of content from the "point of view of customers" as part of a documented content strategy. Since the target audience is already interested, members naturally engage with the brand because of "relevant, engaging content which educates or entertains them" and adequately addresses their needs.

A customer-centric approach allows consumers to become "co-creators of value" which will enhance their engagement with the brand. Opinions and continuous conversations with consumers will provide the brand with the necessary knowledge to improve and better position itself in the market. Since there is a shift from "selling to helping" the target audience should be carefully defined to create the best content that will solve their problems as part of a brand community. Active participation in a brand community "...can stimulate creativity. Creativity results from the collective endeavor of motivated and connected people".

Thirdly content marketing comprises holistic activities and "aligns the strategy, culture, and vision of the organization" through topical storytelling with a consistent tone and voice across platforms. Stories have relevance to the lives of consumers, are engaging and build long-term relationships through an emotional connection and "familiarity with the brand". The brand's character is conveyed through "persona-focused storytelling and making consumers feel part of and significant to the brand community."

The table below 2 below depicts the subcategories and codes for Category 1.

Table 2: Category 1: Explanation of content marketing

Category 1: Explanation of content marketing			
Subcategories	Pull marketing environment	Strategic approach	Storytelling
Codes	Purpose	Content creation	Audience engagement
	Customer value	Holistic framework	Engaging relationships
	Customer-centric	Brand community	Consistency
	Free offer	Content marketing strategy	Alignment
		Understanding needs	Topicality

Category 2: Content marketing field

Category 2 encompasses all findings relating to the coherent focus area from which content marketing is argued in academic literature and constitutes 41.7% of the codes.

Two subcategories became evident, namely that of the branch of knowledge and main purpose. The category firstly illustrates that researchers place content marketing in diverse areas of marketing, namely customer engagement marketing, marketing communications, digital/online marketing, relationship marketing, integrated marketing

communication (IMC) and inbound marketing. Content marketing, however, is not described as "brand journalism," "native advertising" or "influencer marketing" as was evident in the earlier literature. It is still often referred to as "digital content marketing" since most of its activities occur online. It is considered a smaller marketing area than traditional marketing but appreciated as a marketing discipline that "over time will grow to beat it" since traditional marketing "interrupts" the target audience while content marketing does not.

Secondly, the focus area of content marketing has obvious connections among the focus areas in academic studies when it comes to the purpose of content such as "building trust", "credibility," "loyalty", "positive interactions" and "creating brand awareness". It is furthermore also increasingly acknowledged in research findings that content marketing is adopted for more than merely "driving sales," and that it has numerous other brand benefits. "Building trust and rapport with the target audience" is one of the several long-term benefits of content marketing which eventually ensure loyal customers. Through authentic storytelling, the brand is seen as an expert ensuring "credibility" and "brand awareness", amongst others. In addition "positive interactions in especially social media" that are not paid for, "trigger brand experiences" which deepens the connection of the brand with the target audience.

The table below 3 below depicts the subcategories and codes for Category 2.

Table 3: Category 2: Content marketing field

Category 2: Content marketing field		
Subcategories	Branch of knowledge	Main purpose
Codes	Customer engagement marketing	Customer loyalty
	Marketing communication	More than profitable action
	Digital/online marketing	Building trust
	Digital content marketing	Innovative forms of interaction
	Relationship marketing	Credibility
	Integrated marketing communication	Brand awareness
	Inbound marketing	

Category 3: Foundational elements

Category 3 encompasses all findings using a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies relating to concurred essential elements of content marketing to facilitate practice and constitutes 32.50% of the codes. This entails all characteristics or behaviour that is inherent to content marketing practices. Two subcategories became evident namely that of the style of content and process.

The category firstly illustrates that content in the form of video, sound, images and text need to be compelling, relevant, unique and engaging otherwise the brand will not reap any rewards by creating or sharing it. Also, not all content can be seen as content marketing which often is a misconception about what content marketing entails. "Content is ultimately aimed at improving consumers' knowledge" and should "bring a particular benefit to the recipient."

Secondly, it became evident that content marketing follows a process which is not often evident in how it is presented in definitions. Firstly the target audience needs to be fully understood in order to create the most relevant content. The content also has to be found through search engine optimization (SEO) which attracts users through lead generation (free valuable content in various formats) to convert (making the target audience sign up to a newsletter, downloading content, commenting or making a purchase, etc) to build familiarity with the brand. However, customers making a purchase is considered a long-term goal and not an immediate concern. The content is "amplified" through numerous social media tools for maximum exposure and success measured through analytics software. Each aspect of content marketing practice has a bearing on the next as "the content planning and creation phases are essential for the success of the content distribution phase."

The table below 4 below depicts the subcategories and codes for Category 3.

Table 4: Category 3: Foundational elements

Category 3: Foundational elements		
Subcategories	Style of content	Process
Codes	Compelling	Target audience
	Relevancy	Content creation
	Uniqueness	Search engine optimization (getting found)
	Engagement	Lead generation (conversion)
		Leveraging social media tools
		Metrics

Discussion

Although the findings can only be generalised to the 191 content marketing studies in the sample, the data provide sufficient evidence to show that as a new marketing paradigm, academic studies are increasingly positioning content marketing as a streamlined process within an environment conducive to connecting with consumers based on interest and relevance. The growing body of knowledge is essential and long-awaited since academics play an important role in theory building to expand universal understanding and implementation. Universal understanding is also

important when it comes to theory building. Studies in the sample in particular address content marketing's nature, focal point, inherent characteristics, and process. The findings thus provide evidence of topics that are strongly associated with the content marketing field thereby affording more insight into knowledge representation and gaps in understanding its complexities.

With regard to the research question how consistently content marketing is conceptualized by researchers within the marketing discipline, it became evident that there are still varied academic views when it comes to the area of marketing in which it is positioned as also argued by Lieb (2012), Sullivan (2013) Cronin (2016) and Du Plessis (2015). This could be because researchers have different epistemologies and backgrounds but which do not necessarily limit our understanding of content marketing's inherent nature and fundamentals. Studies show similarities with regard to the reasons for using content marketing, namely "building trust", "credibility," "loyalty", "positive interactions" and "creating brand awareness". It furthermore also became apparent that content marketing is treated in academic studies as a process that needs to be carefully managed in a "pull environment" to attract the right target audience to the content through mainly brand storytelling consistent with Pullizi's (2012) earlier arguments.

In addition, the findings confirm arguments that earlier popular definitions of content marketing do not adequately explain its scope as also argued by Pažėraitė and Repovienė (2016) and Georgieva et al. (2014). Some of these definitions, such as by the Content Marketing Institute (2012), not only limit the purpose of content distribution to making a profit only but also do not attend to pertinent issues such as its features and extent of content. The findings demonstrate that content marketing has numerous brand benefits other than making a profit which are becoming more obvious because of academic studies' inputs. These include brand visibility, authority and recognition, long-term relationships, loyalty and becoming an industry expert.

Academic studies in the sample reveal that the broad range of current scholarly insight into content marketing is mainly reflected in how consistently the strategy, content creation, communication practices, types of media channels and expected outcome are explained. When it comes to strategy, arguments are centred around the strategic approach that should be adopted which includes the brand's positioning and strategy. It is important to have a clear purpose when creating content which should be anchored in a documented strategy as part of the organization's overall brand strategy (Pullizi, 2012;2013).

In addition arguments call for content to be integrated for the same message to be reinforced in various social media, which is most consistent with the area of IMC (Cronin, 2016). Framed within a documented strategy, brand content should include the brand's values and brand promise (Georgieva et al., 2014). It is important to humanize the core values of the organization with a familiar brand voice (or brand

persona) to better connect with the target audience and build trust. In addition, brand content needs to be natural and unobtrusive and part of the target audience's daily conversations (Du Plessis, 2015). Content can be conveyed through numerous communication techniques, which include, but are not limited to being educational or entertaining. Brand content needs to be relevant and fulfil a particular need of the target audience before it will be consumed. It is thus important to convey the content in an appealing manner to be noticed among all the clutter in online channels (see Andaç et al., 2016). It is important to select the right channels for brand content which should have interactivity, functionality and self-publishing abilities. Many brands own their content (owned media) and create it via their blogs or websites to share in different online channels (Hillebrand, 2014). Brands furthermore also use paid media for the brand content to be targeted according to the target audience's social media usage and profiles (Myllys, 2016). Each brand has its own expectations when it comes to what it wants to achieve with its content. Perspectives range from expecting a return on investment (ROI), creating brand awareness and loyalty, more earned media, conversion into customers and driving more traffic to the organization's blog or website (see Duc, 2013).

The findings thus enhanced the core knowledge about content marketing as a specific conceptual term and new marketing paradigm through better understanding of this phenomenon that is fractured by perceptions.

Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to seek initial insights into the coherent conceptualization of content marketing through a directed content analysis of academic research. By concentrating on similarities instead of differences, the set of concepts, terms, and activities that make up the professional content marketing domain become more complete. By returning to the research question posed at the beginning of the study, it is now possible to state that although academic approach studies approach content marketing from different angles, uniformity exist on a range of topics that are strongly associated with this field.

However, how content marketing is understood as a growing field in the marketing discipline is even now very much dependent on the perspectives of academics. Although there are distinct views there is a consensus that content marketing has a strategic purpose in the organization and should be integrated with other marketing functions. Content marketing also differs from other marketing actions as it is not primarily concerned with immediate sales but rather a more humanised form of marketing through engaging and relevant brand stories to first instil deep relationships with the target audience.

The study has some limitations. The findings of this study can only be generalised to the academic studies in the sample and it is also acknowledged that further studies

could have become available since the completion of this study. The findings nonetheless provide a more coherent understanding of content marketing and address a gap in existing literature. This exploratory study could also become a heuristic for future academic studies to advance how content marketing is understood and implemented.

Further academic studies are necessary to explore the applications and contexts of content marketing, in particular, B2B and B2C content marketing. Future studies could also compare practitioner and academic views on strategy to further advance implementation.

While it is important to know what conceptions about content marketing academics hold, how to address them in future studies to benefit the content marketing field is even more important.

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