Journal of Marketing and Communication

Likability vs. controversy: Investigating The Effects of Emotions on E-word of Mouth (EWOM) Reach for The Trump Brand

Noel Klein Reesink, Gino Verleye

ISSN: 2617-359X

Stratford Peer Reviewed Journals and Book Publishing
Journal of Marketing and Communication
Volume 8||Issue 1||Page 45-64||July |2025|
Email: info@stratfordjournals.org ISSN: 2617-359X

Likability vs. controversy: Investigating The Effects of Emotions on E-word of Mouth (EWOM) Reach for The Trump Brand

[1]Noel Klein Reesink, [2]Gino Verleye

[1& 2]Dept. Communication Sciences Ghent University, Belgium Korte Meer

***Email of the Corresponding Author:** Noel.Klein-Reesink@gmx.de

***How to cite this article*: Klein Reesink, N., & Verleye, G. (2025). Likability vs. controversy: Investigating the effects of emotions on e-word of mouth (eWOM) reach for the Trump brand. *Journal of Marketing and Communication, 8(1),* 45–64. https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t7060**

Abstract

A growing number of marketers has been trying to encourage more user-generated content as an addition to their traditional promotional activities. User-generated content might behave differently, as it originates by definition from the brand's followers and observers and therefore might be linked to higher levels of trust than company sponsored information. Additionally, co-created content could be more controversial than messages generated by corporations, as it is not screened for political correctness and displays the honest opinion of the audience. The current study examines which strategies companies should use to generate user-generated content. More specifically, the paper aims at contributing to closing this research gap, by investigating the amount of participation and virality of co-creation, based on different emotions for Twitter messages about Trump and his brand. A focus shall be laid on the question whether more beneficial results might be achieved by striving for likability through positive messages or by purposely stirring up a controversial discussion through negative emotions, thereby creating higher visibility online.

Keywords*: Virality, controversy, eWOM, co-creation, content marketing, political marketing, social media*

1.0 Introduction

In an online environment oversaturated with informational, educational and entertainment content, consumer product companies have been struggling to gain and sustain consumer attention and interest (Close 2012). One method for this objective, which has been gaining popularity in recent years, is so-called "content marketing," i.e., the creation of appealing information with the potential to attract an online audience to the brand (Wall & Spinuzzi 2018, Ahmad *et al.* 2016 and Baltes 2015).). Nevertheless, the sole crafting of such content is not sufficient for promotional purposes. Rather, marketers have to carefully consider a diffusion strategy to have the largest number of possible readers get in contact with such corporate information. Current best practices for brand marketing include the deliberate inclusion of emotional elements or triggers within the message, helping to get the product noticed and linked with positive associations (Kee & Yazdanifard 2015 and Kumar & Balabanis 2016).

In fact, the connection between emotions and sharing of passive content (virality), such as blog posts, has been well established in business research. Some existing literature suggests that positive, high-arousal emotions create the largest degree of virality (Dobele *et al.* 2007, Berger & Milkman 2012). Other works found that also negative, high-arousal emotions, including anxiety, anger and indignation, could create viral diffusion (Kunz & Elsässer 2016, Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan 2013), with some indicating that they might even be more effective than positive emotions (Guerini & Staiano 2015).

At the same time, another parallel trend in content marketing is the strategic use of co-creation by supporters, observers and consumers of the brand (Constantinides *et al.* 2018). Until now, co-creation has been mostly applied in the form of product innovation and design (Ramaswamy & Ozcan 2016, Frow *et al.* 2015). Nonetheless, in the form of reviews written by consumers, user-generated content about the brand also plays an essential role as part of product marketing and promotion (Marchand *et al.* 2017). As Bhalla (2010, p. 10) describes, "in many fields, like software, computer games, and product design, social approaches to creativity and innovation often perform better than hierarchical corporate bureaucracies." Whether the above-described correlation between emotion and the amount of sharing also applies to co-creation has not been addressed in business research until now. User-generated or co-created content for the context of this paper shall be understood as content crafted by the audience itself, instead of developed and distributed by the company. User-generated content might behave differently, as it originates by definition from the brand's followers and observers and therefore might be linked to higher levels of trust and credibility than company sponsored information (Halliday 2016, Song *et al.* 2016). Additionally, co-created content could be more controversial than messages designed by corporations, as it is not screened for political correctness and displays the honest opinion of the audience. Exactly this kind of controversy might act as a stimulant to keep the conversation among different users active (Beck 2008). Although Donald Trump is a unique political figure, his brand represents a particularly potent case of identity-driven marketing. The extreme polarization it provokes makes it a relevant proxy for understanding how emotional signaling and user-generated content operate in high-stakes, visibility-oriented contexts.

The paper aims at contributing to closing this research gap, by investigating the amount of participation and virality of co-creation, based on different emotions towards the Trump brand. In particular, the differences between the virality of positive and negative messages shall be contrasted. While positive messages are expected to lead to more favorable reactions to the message ("likes"), negative messages might offer the benefit of stirring up a controversial discussion with more participants, thereby creating overall higher visibility.

2.0 Literature Review: The Role Of Emotions For Brand Strategy

2.1. The Link Between Sentiments and Virality

According to psychological research, the main basic human emotions include anger, anticipation, joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness and disgust (Plutchik 1991). In particular, for mass-market end consumer goods, crafting an emotional appeal and integrating it as part of the brand narrative and product communication can be an essential pillar for the success of viral marketing promotions (Akpinar & Berger 2017). This can be explained by the fact, as Forgas (2006, p. 273) emphasized, that emotions "appear to influence what we notice, what we learn, what we remember, and ultimately the kinds of judgments and decisions we make." It is therefore only logical that product

management is aiming at utilizing the impact of emotions to influence brand and purchase decisions of consumers.

People are more inclined to share emotionally charged contents, as this kind of information may resonate most with their current psychological state, either positive or negative (Berger and Milkman 2012). Also, Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) found that emotionally charged Twitter messages are getting shared faster and more actively than neutral ones.

However, the valance is not the only element to be considered. Berger and Milkman (2012) furthermore suggest that the degree of arousal an emotion evokes might be another factor contributing to its virality: high-arousal, action-provoking emotions, such as anger, surprise or happiness might, therefore, contribute much more to active sharing than low-arousal, passive emotions, such as sadness. They found that content is more likely to get shared the more positive it is. While passive negative emotions, like sadness, are not an effective trigger for virality, anger and anxiety-inducing emotions as well seem to activate users to share more frequently. These findings are also in line with the research of Bell and Sternberg (2001), who found that memes online are most frequently forwarded when enticing strong emotions, like disgust. Also, Nelson-Field *et al.* (2013) observed in their research that high-arousal videos are shared roughly twice as often as low-arousal content. Furthermore, Dobele *et al.* (2007) found that the strongest motivator to pass content on was that of surprise, or its sub-emotions astonishment or amazement. Lastly, one study suggested that virality could be achieved most effectively through a combination of high valence (pronounced degree positivity or negativity), high arousal and high dominance (characterized as a feeling of control of the emotion) (Guerini & Staiano 2015).

The available research consequently points towards the fact that both high-arousal positive and negative emotions can effectively support virality, with positive sentiments being most effective in most studies. Some potential reasons why positive content is shared so actively is the fact that people forward such content as a means of self-presentation (Berger and Milkman 2012); consequently, they hope that a positive message will also reflect positively on them personally.

However, also negative high-arousal sentiments have been utilized in brand marketing effectively. For instance, BMW introduced a series of short films, called “The Hire”, featuring stories including hostage and ambush situations (Kunz and Elsässer 2016). These films were highly successful and were shared actively, possibly due to the fact that their anxiety-inducing storyline helped to create high arousal states with the audience, who were interested in watching and sharing them. While not strictly representing online content, the popularity of thriller and horror movies might also be explained based on such reasoning.

2.2. Gaining eWOM Through Emotional Triggers

Linked to the concept of virality of information is the creation of eWOM. As part of their promotional strategy, a growing number of companies are trying to create and encourage positive Word of Mouth online (eWOM), which can be characterized as "the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers" (Chu & Kim 2011, p. 48) in a digital context. While corporate marketing has traditionally mostly focused on self-created, own or paid promotional content, in recent years, marketers have started to understand the relevance of earned, customer-driven content (May 2017). In an online media environment, where consumers are often inundated with a massive amount of information, including an overwhelming number of brand messages (Opreana & Vinerean 2015), activating the individual consumers, and in particular fans of brand, can not only help to spread the marketing message to previously inaccessible customer groups (Hanna *et al.* 2011). eWOM also offers the additional advantage of being more measurable than traditional

recommendations, which makes this channel interesting from the corporate strategic viewpoint (Cheung *et al.* 2012).

While eWOM as a concept has been addressed in depth in the context of various business research projects, the exact linkages of emotions and eWOM have been gaining less attention. Hsieh et al. (2012) found that positive emotions, like humor, can help encourage eWOM in context of digital contents, like online video. Interestingly, one study found that the most credible eWOM from anonymous sources, seen from the perspective of the recipient includes both positive and negative emotional expressions: Completely negative comments are often attributed to an irrational reviewer, but overly positive are perceived as too one-sided as well. If the eWOM, however, addressed both positive and negative aspects though, it is seen as balanced and therefore trustworthy (Kim & Gupta 2012; Larson & Denton 2014).

Understanding the relevance and impact of emotions on personal sharing and Word-of-Mouth is also crucial for designing corporate eWOM. As the above argumentations have illustrated, a company however to achieve virality should not only evoke emotions with its audience but make sure that these emotions are leading to activation and specific action. The success of an online promotional message though should not be measured solely by the number of times it was shared. Rather, the amount of engagement it creates, such as turnover, sales and brand perception, might be factors just as essential for the product and company (Nelson-Field *et al.* 2013).

Based on the research mentioned above, it appears only consistent to suggest for the corporate marketing strategy to use strong, positive emotions in order to gain shares with the audience. Nevertheless, this approach might have the downside of simply following a me-too marketing process: Especially because this kind of linkage has already been well established in business research, a large number of companies are likely following the exact same approach. In fact, other authors have pointed out that one of the most critical challenges in online marketing today is not the provision of content alone, but rather being able to stand out from the competition. To distinguish the company from other providers with similar products and services, it might, therefore, be effective to use not corporate generated, but user-based content, as well as to strive not only for positive emotions, but rather to generate controversy, as shall be explained in the following section. Lerman et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence that affective polarization significantly shapes how user-generated content spreads. Their study shows that when the ideological distance between audiences is large, emotionally charged posts trigger more expressions of anger, disgust, and toxicity—suggesting that ideological alignment is a key condition for engagement across networks.

2.3 Relevance of User-Generated Content For Digital Marketing

2.3.1 Methods to encourage fan-generated content

A review of empirical research suggests that most studies have focused on investigating how social media increases engagement with followers and the effects of social media engagement on various aspects of the brand. There is though a relative shortage of research delving into the specific strategies that firms can use to encourage fan-generated content. Nonetheless, a number of methods can be identified from research.

Colicev *et al.* (2018) find that corporate reputation plays a moderating role in the interactions a firm has with its customers. More specifically, they suggest that having a positive brand reputation may have a supportive impact on a brand's interactions with its customers. Good reputation is associated with increased trustworthiness and credibility. Hence firms can encourage fan-

generated content by building a reputation within the communities they serve, through strategies such as having a compelling brand story, offering quality products and services and utilizing targeted advertising (Momeni *et al.* 2013; Chen and Seng 2016; Emami 2018).

In another study by Pongpaew *et al.* (2014), the social presence of firms, defined as the degree to which a party in a given interpersonal relationship is 'real' and 'present' in an interaction, was found to have a significant influence on the quality and degree of customer engagement on social media. More specifically, a higher social presence was associated with higher customer engagement. Additionally, the same researchers found that firms could enhance social presence by offering customers information, entertaining them, providing economic incentives such as discounts, running contests and games and optimizing brand communication.

In fact, there is evidence of companies using a number of these strategies in a bid to encourage user-generated content. In 2014 for example, Starbucks ran a contest dubbed 'White Cup' where customers were encouraged to decorate Starbucks cups with their own art, take photos of the cups and submit them through the hashtag #WhiteCupContest. The winning design was then printed on a limited edition reusable Starbucks cup (Starbucks 2014).

Apart from the methods already highlighted, firms may also encourage more user-generated content by holding customer surveys, leveraging social media influencers to create hype and even hosting physical events such as community fundraisers and other corporate social responsibility initiatives. Firms are further boost fan engagement by using hashtags, engaging with their content on social media through strong 'calls to action' and placing these everywhere their fans are likely to interact with the brand (NewsCred 2015, Gyant 2018).

Nonetheless, for firms to even stand the chance of having increased user-generated content, two things are vital. First, the firm must choose its social media platform wisely; this is because specific platforms are ideal for different content. For example, Instagram is often most effective for photos, while Facebook is generally better suited for videos. Secondly, it is important for firms to understand the cultures and trends associated with their target market and subsequently leverage this knowledge to create content that is well suited for the specific segments (NewsCred 2015).

2.3.2. Audience-Driven Controversy and Fandom

Besides of using positive emotions and well-targeted content, one insightful strategy to encourage virality and enhance the reach of one's message might be through creating controversy. Controversy may be defined as a situation where there are opposing views over a particular subject or issue (Xie and Wei 2018). While the concept of controversy in marketing is not new, much of the research on the topic has revolved around the leverage of controversy by brands in their marketing strategies with the intention of generating heated public discussions and subsequently increasing public awareness of the brand (Erdogan 2008; Xie and Wei 2018). The underlying assumption behind the use of such a marketing approach is that when presented with controversial content, customers will be drawn to the product out of curiosity and would, therefore, engage into a discussion and interaction with the brand (Chen and Berger 2013). However controversial topics are frequently associated with the arousal of negative emotions.

Considering that the context of this study is co-creation, it is assumed that some of the content generated by a firm's audience may result in highly conflicting views among the other members of the audience. After all, it is unlikely that all of a firm's customers will agree with all its content or with all other views on the firm's content. However, whether this generates increased

interactions is subject to debate. Indeed, research suggests that some people may find it uncomfortable to engage in controversial discussions due to things such as fear of conflicting with friends and family or even concerns what others will think about their opinions. This implies that controversy may discourage public discussion. Customers might furthermore avoid engaging in controversial discussions when they know that their identities are public. However, if anonymity is allowed, the controversy may generate more active conversations (Chen and Berger 2013; Xie and Wei 2018). Ultimately, whether the audience-generated controversy will generate increased discussions and interactions appears to depend on contextual factors. This study contributes to the debate on the controversy by investigating whether negative emotions in political user-generated content are associated with more discussions than positive emotions.

In discussing audience generated controversy, it is important to factor in the concept of fans and their reach. Fan is the shortened form of 'fanatic' a term initially used to refer to devoted 'servants of the temple' (Misailidou 2017). In the modern sense though, the word 'fan' is often used to refer to people who demonstrate strong interest and strong emotions for a particular brand or subject. Fandom can be defined as an alternative community, comprised not of the original producers of content, but of fans who not only actively participate consuming a brand's products and engaging in interactions with the brand, but also hold common practices and shared meanings (Licasa *et al.* 2016). In addition, fans within a fandom 'own' the brand by actively creating, sharing and exchanging stories and content, as well as constructing a shared cultural and social identity (Kloet and Zoonen 2007; Misailidou 2017). Such fans may also distort the original content of the producers and develop their own distribution channels for the content they create; actions that may be a source of controversial content themselves. Because fans are comprised of customers, who consume the firm's products and services and also produce content they are vital sources of co-created content (Siuda 2014).

While the above-described ideas about manufacturing virality through controversy are indeed interesting from a theoretical point of view, actual empirical data will be needed in order to confirm or disprove the validity of this concept. In what ways however can these fans be best activated and encouraged to actively spread content? What emotions are indeed most effective to use for this purpose, especially in light of exploiting the above-mentioned impact of controversial content? In the following, an empirical study about one of the most controversial brands in current years, Trump, shall be conducted and analyzed for its reach in the light of emotions and digital diffusion through fans, adversaries and social media followers.

2.4 Empirical Study: Social Reach Analysis of The Trump Brand

2.4.1. Trump as A Controversial Brand

One of the most successful modern brands using heated debate and opposing opinions to spread its reach and impact is the businessman-turned-politician Trump. Since rising into the presidency of the United States on a wave of populism, Donald Trump has appeared to court controversy at every turn.

Right at the start of his term, Trump was confronted with the Russian scandal. Both the FBI and the CIA accused Russia of having tampered in the 2016 elections with the purpose of undermining Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and ultimately helping Trump to win the elections (Murse 2018). While Trump has vehemently denied these allegations, calling them made-up stories, several of the people allied to him have been linked with the Russian scandal. Donald

Trump Jr. for example, is alleged to have held a meeting with a Russian lawyer in June 2016 with a view of leaking 'dirt' on Hillary Clinton. Similarly, Michael Flynn, an ally and Trump's first national security adviser, admitted to having post-election contact with the Russian ambassador to the United States (Bloomberg 2019).

Donald Trump was then accused of trying to undermine the investigations into Russia's interference in the 2016 elections by abruptly firing FBI director James Comey in 2017 (Murse 2018). Even Trump's use of Twitter has been a source of great controversy. Trump strongly and candidly expresses his thoughts and emotions online, presenting them as official statements, many times at odd hours, without any vetting of the tweets (Colby 2018). At the same time though, Trump's popularity with its base is still strong and he had considerable success throughout his candidacy, as well as his first two years in the presidential office, gaining attention and support from his fans.

In summary, it is evident that Trump is not only a controversial brand, he also has been a master marketer using the heated discussion about him, his activities and views in order to gain free press coverage. This study focuses on the reactions of Twitter users to some of the controversies associated with Trump with the view of determining whether negative emotions create more interactions in the form of shares and comments and whether positive emotions result in higher degrees of virality in the form of likes.

2.4.2. Hypotheses

For the purpose of the study, based on the above literature and research review, the following hypotheses have been established:
Hypothesis 1: Positive high-arousal emotions, such as happiness, create the highest degree of positive virality ("likes") in comparison to the other control groups, such as negative high-arousal emotions and low-arousal emotions.
Hypothesis 2: However, for an emotional topic like politics, negative emotions are expected to create more total eWOM through controversy and a heated discussion, which can help ultimately to expand the reach and visibility of the brand (shares and comments).
In essence, it is expected that positive message will generate likability, while negative, high-arousal emotions, will be able to create a larger reach online. Whether these assumptions are true or false for the Trump brand will be analysed in the following.

3.0 Research Methodology

To gather data necessary for testing the study's hypotheses, the research analyzed audience-generated content related to the Donald Trump brand on Twitter by recording the top 50 tweets containing the keyword "Trump" each day over a four-week period from 17th December 2018 to 13th January 2019. This process, which relied on Twitter's internal listing of top-rated tweets, yielded a total of 1,400 messages. The tweets were assessed based on the number of shares, comments, and likes they received, with the goal of capturing representative patterns of user engagement over time. After collection, each tweet was coded according to the emotion it conveyed and categorized into one of seven emotional groups: Anger, Disgust, Sadness, Neutral (No emotion), Surprise, Hope, or Happiness. These emotional categories, along with their respective engagement metrics, were further analyzed in subsequent sections of the study.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Anger

Anger is a negative high arousal emotional state that ranges from mild irritation over something to more severe states characterized by rage, fury and aggression (Carrion, 2012, Nasir and Ghani 2014). Anger is often in response to real or perceived threats; both tangible and intangible including perceived injustices, humiliation or betrayal. It may be expressed in various ways including physically or in the case of this study, verbally through electronic word of mouth. Out of the Tweets collected, 359 can be attributed to the expression of anger. The findings seem to suggest that on average, Tweets expressing anger towards the Trump brand attracted 123 comments, 551 shares and 2523 likes.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Anger

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	15137	59431	222765
Mean	42	166	621
Standard Deviation	123	551	2523
Mode	0	0	4
Skewness	6	8	10
Kurtosis	37	77	125

4.2. Disgust

Like anger, disgust is also a negative high arousal emotional state and it is often considered one of the basic emotional states. Disgust has been defined in numerous ways over the years. Darwin defined it as primarily that which has an "offensive" or 'revolting' taste; although he noted that it could also refer to any other thing which causes a feeling of 'revolt' through either of the senses, including eyesight (Olatunji and Sawchuk 2005; Adams et al. 2011).

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Disgust

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	3767	13466	63488
Mean	10	34	161
Standard Deviation	55	209	1310
Mode	0	0	0
Skewness	12	14	14
Kurtosis	174	226	221

More appropriately for this study, Russell and Giner-Sorolla (2013) identify moral disgust as a being elicited by real or perceived violations of moral norms; making a distinction between bodily moral violations such as incest and other non-body moral violations such as deception, social injustices or betrayal. 394 of the Tweets collected and analyzed were adjudged to depict feelings of disgust. The analysis suggests that on average, Tweets expressing disgust regarding the Trump brand received 10 comments, 34 shares and 161 likes.

4.3. Sadness

Sadness is also one of the primary emotional states and one that is associated with the negative end of the spectrum. However, it is a low-arousal emotion. Perhaps the simplest way of defining

sadness is that it is the opposite of the emotional state of happiness (Larsen *et al.* 2001). It is an emotion that results when one is faced with a real or perceived irreversible loss, failure, disappointment or even sense of inadequacy (Goodrum 2011). Sadness is often synonymous with sorrow, dissatisfaction, regret, gloom and heart-break. Out of the Tweets collected and analyzed in the study, only 32 of them were found to express sadness, with on average 4 comments, 16 shares and 55 likes.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Sadness

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	141	515	1749
Mean	4	16	55
Standard Deviation	11	36	117
Mode	0	0	1
Skewness	4	3	3
Kurtosis	16	11	7

4.4. Neutral (No Emotion)

Analayo (2017) defines the neutral feeling as that which lies in the middle of the emotional spectrum and therefore relates to neither pleasantness nor pain; positivity nor negativity. In this sense, the neutral state represents indifference towards something or someone. Neutrality has also been described as a non-emotional response to someone or something (Hareli, Shomrat and Hess 2009). A total of 345 neutral Tweets were collected and analyzed in the study, with on average 37 comments, 119 shares and 245 likes.

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Neutral

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	12897	41008	84541
Mean	37	119	245
Standard Deviation	335	490	836
Mode	0	0	0
Skewness	17	10	9
Kurtosis	296	104	96

4.5. Surprise

Surprise is an emotional state that is associated with a sense of ‘astonishment’ and ‘wonder’; most times directed at an unexpected or baffling event or subject (Mellers *et al.* 2013). While the emotion of surprise is often associated with neutrality, it is often expressed with undertones of either positive or negative emotion (Lindgreen and Vanhamme, 2003). This implies that surprise may be positive or negative. A total of 94 Tweets expressed surprise regarding certain aspects of the Trump brand, with on average 13 comments, 37 shares and 158 likes.

Table 5: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Surprise

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	1175	3438	14863
Mean	13	37	158
Standard Deviation	32	81	542
Skewness	6	5	7
Kurtosis	43	30	56

4.6. Hope

Being hopeful is synonymous with the belief that certain goals are achievable and that one has the capabilities required to achieve these goals. Hope is often defined as a positive emotional state that is associated with having a positive or optimistic view of the future and its outcomes (Slezackova 2017). Because hope creates excitement and optimism for the future, this study associated it with high arousal. 94 of the Tweets collected and analyzed in this study expressed feelings of hope in regards to the Trump brand, with on average 23 comments, 94 shares and 376 likes.

Table 6: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Hope

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	2118	8827	35321
Mean	23	94	376
Standard Deviation	110	423	2379
Skewness	8	9	9
Kurtosis	70	80	91

4.7. Happiness

Happiness is one of the primary high arousal emotional states and one that is associated with the positive end of the emotions spectrum. Happiness represents a sense of feeling 'good,' cheery, joyful or satisfied with certain outcomes or at certain events (Alipour *et al.* 2012). Out of the Tweets collected and analyzed in this study, 82 of them represented the emotional state of happiness, with on average 9 comments, 43 shares and 102 likes.

Table 7: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Happiness

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	708	3550	8369
Mean	9	43	102
Standard Deviation	26	147	318
Skewness	5	6	5
Kurtosis	31	32	21

4.8. Positive Emotions Combined

For easier comparison, the two positive high arousal emotions of happiness and hope were put into a single group. In total, there were 176 Tweets associated with positive high arousal emotions. The resulting data set suggested an average of 16 comments, 70 shares and 248 likes. As expected, these averages are lower than those of the Hope data set but higher than that of the Happiness data set. This implies that the mean is buoyed by the Hope data set.

Table 8: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Positive High Arousal Group

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	2826	12377	43690
Mean	16	70	248
Standard Deviation	82	325	1753
Skewness	10	10	13
Kurtosis	120	124	165

4.9. Negative High Arousal Emotions

Conversely, the negative high arousal emotions of anger and disgust were also put into a single group resulting in a sample of 753 Tweets. As seen in the table below, Tweets with negative high arousal emotions got an average of 25 comments, 97 shares and 380 likes. All of these averages are significantly higher than those in the positive high arousal emotion group.

Table 9: Descriptive Analysis Summary for Negative High Arousal Group

Descriptor	Comments	Shares	Likes
Sum	18904	72897	286253
Mean	25	97	380
Standard Deviation	95	414	1995
Mode	0	0	0
Skewness	8	10	12
Kurtosis	64	128	177

4.10. Analysis

To test the hypotheses, it is necessary to compare and analyze the findings based on the arousal and valence of the emotions under study. In line with this, the comparison involved 5 groups; the Positive high arousal group, the Negative high arousal group, the Negative low arousal group (sadness), surprise and neutral groups.

Because the totals in each of these groups varied, it was deemed inappropriate to compare them on the basis of the total comments, shares and likes received in each. Instead, the means (averages) were seen as a better alternative as they represent each of the individual distributions (groups) in a single value. This value is obtained by taking the sum of all the values in a data set and division by the number of observations. The resulting figure is said to be the 'typical' or 'representative' value of the group in question (Manikandan 2011). Table 10 below summarizes the averages in each of the groups under analysis.

Table 10: Summary of group averages

	Comments	Shares	Likes
Positive High Arousal	16	70	248
Negative High Arousal	25	97	380
Negative Low Arousal (Sadness)	4	16	55
Neutral	37	119	245
Surprise	13	37	158

4.11 Likes

The comparison of the means suggests that negative high arousal emotions, such as anger and disgust typically attract the most number of likes (380) in comparison with all the other groups including positive high arousal emotions which typically attracted the second highest number of likes (248). This seems to go against the first hypothesis which proposed that positive high arousal emotions create the highest virality (likes) in comparison with negative high arousal and low arousal emotions.

However, excluding the negative high arousal emotions and comparing the positive high arousal emotions with the other control groups of negative low arousal, neutral and surprise groups shows that they are likely to get more likes.

Table 11: Ranking of 'Likes' Averages among the Groups

Group	Average of 'Likes'
Negative high arousal	380
Positive high arousal	248
Neutral	245
Surprise	158
Negative low arousal (sadness)	55

4.12 Shares

In regards to the typical number of 'shares' likely to be received in each group, the Neutral group was found to have the highest average of 119 with the negative high arousal emotions having an average of 97 comments. Again, sadness had the lowest average of 16 comments with surprise and positive high arousal emotions having averages of 37 and 70 respectively. It is also important to consider that Twitter's platform dynamics such as brevity, public visibility, and political polarization—may amplify both emotional tone and controversial content differently than platforms like Instagram or Facebook.

Table 12: Ranking of 'Shares' Averages among Groups

Group	Average of 'Shares'
Neutral	119
Negative high arousal	97
Positive high arousal	70
Surprise	37
Negative low arousal (sadness)	16

These findings suggest that neutral Tweets may result in more shares, perhaps because people associate neutrality with less risk as associated with negative high arousal emotions and positive high arousal emotions which may, within the context of the Trump brand, be viewed as controversial.

Lastly, the average comments for each of the groups were compared. Findings suggest that the neutral group again had the highest average of 37 comments. The groups of negative high arousal, positive high arousal, surprise and negative low arousal follow this category respectively.

Table 13: Ranking of 'Comments' Averages among Groups

Group	Average of 'Comments'
Neutral	37
Negative high arousal	25
Positive high arousal	16
Surprise	13
Negative low arousal (sadness)	4

Notable, for the shares and comments, the neutral group recorded higher means than the negative high arousal group and all the other groups. This suggests that people are more willing to engage in neutral discussions than they are to engage in emotionally charged discussions such as those in the negative and positive high arousal groups. One possible explanation for the seemingly higher degree of discussions in the neutral group is that people may find it uncomfortable to engage in emotionally charged discussions (such as those expected in the negative high arousal and positive high arousal groups) due to things such as fear of conflicting with friends/family or even the fear of having different opinions (Chen & Berger 2013; Xie & Wei 2018). These findings are consistent with those of Lerman et al. (2024), who show that while moral-emotional appeals can generate initial visibility, their long-term diffusion depends heavily on the ideological proximity between users. Content perceived as emotionally or politically distant tends to provoke strong reactions but is less likely to be widely shared, limiting its overall reach across diverse networks.

In summary, the findings from this comparison of averages suggest that the two hypotheses proposed in the study are false, at least for the case of the Trump brand. For one, the analysis (Table 11) suggests that negative high arousal emotions create more likes than positive high arousal and other control groups. Secondly, Table 12 and Table 13 show that the Neutral group was typically associated with a higher average of shares and comments; going against the hypothesis that negative emotions create the most discussions through controversy.

In order to test the eventual relationships between the emotional valence (5 groups) and the three dependent variables (comments, shares and likes) we used Kruskal-Wallis tests. As the group standard deviations for all three dependent variables are very volatile, ANOVA was not considered for this test. Table 14 contains the mean ranks for all splits.

Table 14 Mean Ranks for All Splits

Comments	Emotion	N	Mean Rank
	Positive High	177	668,86
	Negative Low	33	496,05
	Negative High	754	702,87
	Surprise	94	665,40
	Neutral	345	746,76
Shares	Emotion		
	Positive High	177	666,09
	Negative Low	33	477,71
	Negative High	754	697,84
	Surprise	94	606,99
	Neutral	345	776,86
Likes	Emotion		

Positive High	177	652,18
Negative Low	33	489,71
Negative High	754	719,20
Surprise	94	612,94
Neutral	345	734,55

Table 15: Test Statistics For The Kruskal-Wallis Tests.

	Comments	Shares	Likes
Kruskal-Wallis H	15,283	28,713	19,889
Df	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.004	<.001	<.001

The analysis revealed that mean engagement levels—measured through likes, shares, and comments—varied consistently with the emotional tone of tweets mentioning Donald Trump. Neutral content consistently yielded the highest mean ranks across all dependent variables, followed by posts categorized as negative-high, positive-high, surprise, and lastly, negative-low. This trend underscores the powerful role of emotional valence in shaping audience interaction on social media. Supporting evidence from prior studies indicates that neutral or moderately emotional posts tend to resonate more broadly with users due to their relatability and lower risk of alienating audiences (Brady et al., 2017). While high-arousal emotions such as anger and outrage can occasionally boost virality (Berger & Milkman, 2012), their polarizing nature often limits sustained engagement. Furthermore, the concept of emotional contagion suggests that aligning message tone with audience sentiment—without tipping into extremes—can significantly enhance user interaction (Kramer & Hancock, 2014). This pattern of engagement suggests that emotionally balanced or subtly provocative content may be more effective for public figures like Donald Trump, who seek to maintain continuous online relevance. Posts that avoid overt hostility or excessive emotional charge tend to invite broader participation and dialogue, likely because they offer cognitive space for interpretation rather than eliciting defensive reactions. In this regard, Trump's communication strategy could benefit from a more calibrated emotional approach—one that intersperses relatability, surprise, and moderate sentiment to maintain user interest without overwhelming them. While emotional extremes can occasionally spark attention, the findings emphasize that long-term engagement is more reliably achieved through content that is emotionally textured yet accessible. Future research exploring how these emotional dynamics vary across platforms like Facebook, TikTok, or Instagram could further refine strategies for maximizing audience response across diverse social media ecosystems.

4.13 Limitations and Necessary Further Research

This study has a number of limitations. The first of these is that non-probability sampling was used. The disadvantage with non-probability sampling is that it is subjective and prone to researcher bias; since the researcher bears most of the power in selecting the subjects for a study. This poses challenges on the representativeness of the sample, which in turn limits the generalizability of the study and its findings (Etikan *et al*. 2016, Sharma 2017). In addition to that, data obtained using convenience sampling often has the disadvantage of being prone to outliers. The second limitation of the study is that it focused on only one social networking platform; Twitter. The conclusions made can, therefore, be considered only in light of this social media platform.

Nonetheless, these limitations result in more possibilities for research. First, it would be important to make a comparison of the positive high arousal, negative high arousal and neutral groups using normally distributed, that has been sampled using probability methods and tested using parametric tests. This would provide further evidence on the differences that exist between these groups in regards to comments, shares and likes received. More research would also be required to determine whether the effects of emotions on the comments, shares and likes of user-generated content are similar across different social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

5.0 A win of content versus emotion? Implications for corporate brand marketing strategy

This paper started out with the assumption that, as previous research suggested, linking strong emotions to brand messages can be a very effective way to encourage virality through user-generated and shared content. However, the results of this empirical investigation indicate that this is not necessarily the case. For the Trump brand for instance, while many emotionally charged messages are identified, the best performing and mostly shared ones are neutral. This leads to two important implications for the professional brand marketer:

Neutral content matters: Against the original expectation, neutral content has been preforming exceptionally well in gaining attention and attracting interaction on social media within the study. This can serve as an indication that if the content itself is interesting and noteworthy, it can help diffusion online and boost customer interactions, even though the associated emotions are completely neutral. There are some possible explanations for this surprising fact. First of all, for the online observer, emotionally charged messages and heated discussions might seem more viral, as they stand out from the large majority of neutral content. This may leave the (false) assumption that these controversial messages are better performing, even though the actual numbers speak for neutral content.

Secondly, neutral brand messages might actually be more suitable for online virality, as they are easier to share among friends and within one's professional network, without being perceived as a supporter of a controversial view. Assuming that the majority of the audience is not belonging to an extremist niche, content that is not emotionally charged therefore could actually be the better positioning, in particular for mass-market brands.

Sad content should be avoided: Furthermore, the findings suggest that corporate marketers should avoid messages that reflect sadness as these are likely to attract the least number of comments, shares and likes. Overall, the findings from this study also seem to suggest that marketers should be careful advocating for high arousal emotions in their user-generated content as the effects of these emotions on likability and visibility are not guaranteed.

6.0 Conclusions

This study started by recognizing the importance of co-created content in the contemporary marketing environment and particularly on social media platforms. The study acknowledges that user-generated content may be more controversial than firm generated content as it is not regulated. This user-generated content may reflect either of several emotions including positive and negative high arousal, positive and negative low-arousal, and even neutrality. Keeping in mind that previous research suggests that high arousal emotions lead to increased virality and visibility, this paper sought to prove or disprove two hypotheses, based on the assumption that strong positive emotions create the highest likability, while strong negative (controversial) emotions could lead to more virality and interaction. However, for the Trump brand, this has not been the case. In fact, the empirical data suggest that neutral content has been the best performing in relation to encouraging

fan engagement and interactivity. This is consistent with recent findings by Lerman et al. (2024), who show that while moral-emotional content may create short-term attention, its long-term diffusion depends on ideological closeness between sender and audience. If audiences feel emotionally disconnected, such content is more likely to provoke reaction than to foster sustained participation.The implication for brand marketers therefore should be that emotions are not necessarily a suitable tool to manufacture virality and increase brand reach through eWOM. In fact, creating and spreading interesting neutral content could be after all the best method to attract attention and encourage diffusion online by the brand's audience.

References

Adams, T., Brady, R. & Lohr, J. (2011). The Nature and Function of Disgust in Coping and Control. In R. Trnka, K. Balcar, & M. Kuska (Eds.), Re-constructing Emotional Spaces: From Experience to Regulation (pp. 63-76). Prague: Prague Psychosocial Press.

Ahmad, N. S., Musa, R. & Harun, M. H. M. (2016). The impact of social media content marketing (SMCM) towards brand health. Procedia Economics and Finance, 37, 331-336.

Akpinar, E. & Berger, J. (2017). Valuable virality. Journal of Marketing Research, 54(2), 318-330.

Alipour, A., Pedram, A., Abedi, M. & Rostami, Z. (2012). What is Happiness? Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business, 3(12), 660-667.

Analayo, B. (2017). What About Neutral Feelings. Insight Journal, 43, 1-10.

Baltes, L. P. (2015). Content marketing-the fundamental tool of digital smarketing. Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov. Economic Sciences. Series V, 8(2), 111-118.

Beck, T. (2008). Web 2.0: User-generated Content in Online Communities; a Theoretical and Empirical Investigation of Its Determinants. Hamburg: Diplomica.

Bell, C. & Sternberg, E. (2001). Emotional selection in memes: the case of urban legends. Journal of personality and social psychology, 81(6), 1028-1041.

Berger, J. & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? Journal of marketing research, 49(2), 192-205.

Bhalla, G. (2010). Collaboration and Co-creation: New Platforms for Marketing and Innovation. New York: Springer.

Bloomberg. (2019). Trump Team's Conflicts and Scandals: An Interactive Guide. Retrieved February 9, 2019, from https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/trump-administration-conflicts/

Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 114(28), 7313–7318. Carrion, O. (2012). Conceptualization of Anger in English Pop Fiction Stories. Praxis, 3(2), 1-29.

Chen, L. & Seng, L. (2016). The influence of brand story in building a positive brand image. International Journal of Economics, Commerce and Management, IV(10), 686-696.

Chen, Z. & Berger, J. (2013). When, Why, and How Controversy Causes Conversation. Journal of Consumer Research, 40(3), 580-593.

Cheung, C. M. & Thadani, D. R. (2012). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth communication: A literature analysis and integrative model. Decision support systems, 54(1), 461-470.

Chu, S. C. & Kim, Y. (2011). Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. International Journal of Advertising, 30(1), 47-75.

Close, A. G. (Ed.). (2012). Online consumer behavior: theory and research in social media, advertising and e-tail. New York: Routledge.

Colby, E. (2018). Donald Trump's noteworthy tweets as president. Retrieved February 10, 2019, from https://www.newsday.com/news/nation/donald-trump-s-noteworthy-tweets-as-president-1.12632966

Colicev, A., Kumar, A. & O'Connor, P. (2018). Modeling the relationship between firm and user generated content and the stages of the marketing funnel. International Journal of Research in Marketing, 1-44.

Constantinides, E., Romero, C. L. & Del Chiappa, G. (2018). Innovating with customers online: A comparative study of European customers' motives to co-create. 17th International Marketing Trends Conference 2018, Paris.

Dobele, A., Lindgreen, A., Beverland, M., Vanhamme, J. & Van Wijk, R. (2007). Why pass on viral messages? Because they connect emotionally. Business Horizons, 50(4), 291-304.

Emami, A. (2018). Factors Influencing Brand Equity: A Case Study of Dairy Industry. Journal of Hotel & Business Management, 7, 173-177.

Erdogan, B. (2008). Controversial Marketing. Journal of Marketing Communications, 14(4), 247-248.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. & Alkassim, R. (2016). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling. American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, 5(1), 1-4.

Forgas, J.P. (2006). Affective influences on interpersonal behavior: Towards understanding the role of affect in everyday interactions. In J.P. Forgas (ed.), Affect in Social Thinking and Behavior. New York: Psychology Press, 269–290.

Frow, P., Nenonen, S., Payne, A., & Storbacka, K. (2015). Managing co‐creation design: A strategic approach to innovation. British Journal of Management, 26(3), 463-483.

Guerini, M. & Staiano, J. (2015). Deep feelings: A massive cross-lingual study on the relation between emotions and virality. Proceedings of the 24th International Conference on World Wide Web, 299-305.

Goodrum, S. (2011). The Management of Sadness in Everyday Life. In R. Trnka, K. Balcar, & M. Kuska (Eds.), Re-constructing Emotional Spaces: From Experience to Regulation (pp. 121-133). Prague: Prague College of Psychosocial Studies Press.

Gyant, N. (2018). 7 Smart Ways to Encourage More User-Generated Content. Retrieved February 9, 2019, from https://thrivehive.com/how-to-get-more-user-generated-content/

Halliday, S. V. (2016). User-generated content about brands: Understanding its creators and consumers. Journal of Business Research, 69(1), 137-144.

Hanna, R., Rohm, A. & Crittenden, V. L. (2011). We're all connected: The power of the social media ecosystem. Business Horizons, 54(3), 265-273.

Hareli, S., Shomrat, N. & Hess, U. (2009). Emotional Versus Neutral Expressions and Perceptions of Social Dominance and Submissiveness. Emotion, 9(3), 378-384.

Hsieh, J. K., Hsieh, Y. C. & Tang, Y. C. (2012). Exploring the disseminating behaviors of eWOM marketing: persuasion in online video. Electronic Commerce Research, 12(2), 201-224.

Kee, A. W. A. & Yazdanifard, R. (2015). The review of content marketing as a new trend in marketing practices. International Journal of Management, Accounting and Economics, 2(9), 1055-1064.

Kim, J. & Gupta, P. (2012). Emotional expressions in online user reviews: How they influence consumers' product evaluations. Journal of Business Research, 65(7), 985-992.

Kloet, H. & Zoonen, E. (2007). Fan Culture: Performing difference. In E. Devereux (Ed.), Media Studies: Key Issues and debates (pp. 322-341). London: Routledge.

Kumar, A. & Balabanis, G. (2016). Brand placement effectiveness: exploring the role of positive emotions and implicit attitudes. 2016 Global Marketing Conference at Hong Kong, 723-724).

Kramer, A. D. I., Guillory, J. E., & Hancock, J. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. PLOS ONE, 9(8), e105140. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0105140

Kunz, R. & Elsässer, F. (2016). Crossmediale Markenführung durch „Branded Entertainment ". In: Marken und Medien, Wiesbaden: Springer, 53-77.

Larsen, J., McGraw, P. & Cacioppo, J. (2001). Can People Feel Happy and Sad at the Same Time. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81(4), 684-696.

Larson, L. R. & Denton, L. T. (2014). eWOM Watchdogs: Ego - Threatening Product Domains and the Policing of Positive Online Reviews. Psychology & Marketing, 31(9), 801-811.

Lerman, K., Feldman, D., He, Z., & Rao, A. (2024). **Affective polarization and dynamics of information spread in online networks.** ***npj Complexity*****,** 1**, Article 8.** https://doi.org/10.1038/s44260-024-00008-w

Licasa, P., Zaballos, L. & Prieto, J. (2016). Fandom, Music and Personal Relationships through Media: How Teenagers Use Social Networks. Journal of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 6(1), 44-67.

Lindgreen, A. & Vanhamme, J. (2003). To Surprise or Not to Surprise Your Customers: The Use of Surprise as a Marketing Tool. Journal of Customer Behaviour, 2(2), 219-242.

Manikandan, S. (2011). Measures of central tendency: The mean. Journal of Pharmacology & Pharmacotherapeutics, 2(2), 140-142.

Marchand, A., Hennig-Thurau, T. & Wiertz, C. (2017). Not all digital word of mouth is created equal: Understanding the respective impact of consumer reviews and microblogs on new product success. International Journal of Research in Marketing, 34(2), 336-354.

May, B. (2017). Media Brand Marketing: The New Business Models. 2nd edition. London: Axix Press.

Mellers, B., Fincher, K., Drummond, C. & Bigony, M. (2013). Surprise: A belief or an emotion. In V. Pammi, & N. Srinivasan (Eds.), Progress in Brain Research (pp. 3-19). Amsterdam: Elsevier B.V.

Misailidou, E. (2017). Social media fandom: The construction of identity in the cases of "The 100" and "Once Upon a Time" Tumblr Communities. 2017 Wireless Telecommunications Symposium (WTS). Chicago: IEEE.

Momeni, S., Khesal, S., Roustapisheh, N. & Zohoori, M. (2013). Factors Influencing Brand Image in Banking Industry of Iran. Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business, 5(2), 502-508.

Murse, T. (2018). The Biggest Donald Trump Scandals (So Far). Retrieved February 9, 2019, from https://www.thoughtco.com/trump-scandals-4142784

Nasir, R. & Ghani, N. (2014). Behavioral and Emotional Effects of Anger Expression and Anger Management among Adolescents. Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences, 140, 565-569.

Nelson-Field, K., Riebe, E. & Newstead, K. (2013). The emotions that drive viral video. Australasian Marketing Journal (AMJ), 21(4), 205-211.

NewsCred. (2015). 10 Ideas for Getting More User-Generated Content, Online. Retrieved February 8, 2019, from https://insights.newscred.com/10-ideas-for-getting-more-user-generated-content/

Olatunji, B. & Sawchuk, C. (2005). Disgust: characteristic features, social manifestations and clinical implications. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 24(7), 932-962.

Opreana, A. & Vinerean, S. (2015). A new development in online marketing: Introducing digital inbound marketing. Expert Journal of Marketing, 3(1), 29-34.

Plutchik, R. (1991). The Emotions. Revised edition. Lanham: University Press of America.

Pongpaew, W., Speece, M. & Tiangsoongnern, L. (2014). Social presence and customer brand engagement in corporate Facebook. 12th EBES Conference – Singapore (Eurasia Business and Economics Society) (pp. 2113-2134). Singapore: EBES.

Ramaswamy, V. & Ozcan, K. (2016). Brand value co-creation in a digitalized world: An integrative framework and research implications. International Journal of Research in Marketing, 33(1), 93-106.

Russell, P. & Giner-Sorolla, R. (2013). Bodily Moral Disgust: What It Is, How It Is Different From Anger, and Why It Is an Unreasoned Emotion. Psychological Bulletin, 139(2), 328-351.

Sharma, G. (2017). Pros and cons of different sampling techniques. International Journal of Applied Research, 3(7), 749-752.

Siuda, P. (2014). Fan Cultures: On the Impossible Formation of Global and Transnational Fandoms. In A. Fellner, S. Hamscha, K. Heissenberger, & J. Moos (Eds.), Is It ‘Cause

It's Cool?: Affective Encounters with American Culture (pp. 295-318). Vienna: Lit Verlag.

Song, J., Goh, K. Y. & Phan, T. Q. (2016). Consumers' Endorsement effects on Marketer and User-Generated Content in a Social Media Brand Community. Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems 2016 Proceedings, Singapore.

Slezackova, A. (2017). Hope and Well-Being: Psychosocial Correlates and Benefits. Msida: Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health.

Starbucks. (2014). Starbucks Invites You to Decorate its Iconic White Cup, Online. Retrieved February 9, 2019, from https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2014/starbucks-invites-you-to-decorate-its-iconic-white-cup/

Stieglitz, S. & Dang-Xuan, L. (2013). Emotions and information diffusion in social media—sentiment of microblogs and sharing behavior. Journal of management information systems, 29(4), 217-248

Wall, A. & Spinuzzi, C. (2018). The art of selling-without-selling: Understanding the genre ecologies of content marketing. Technical Communication Quarterly, 27(2), 137-160

Xie, H. & Wei, H. (2018). Controversial Marketing Frontier Analysis and Future Prospect. Open Journal of Business and Management, 6, 470-477.