

FACEBOOK TRAFFIC OF THE PROJECT “PLOVDIV – EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2019”

The aim of this paper is to examine the Facebook traffic of the project “Plovdiv – European Capital of Culture 2019” for the first quarter of 2019 using rates and indicators available from research. Applying quantitative analysis, the authors of this paper conclude that latent opportunities for development in a more positive way than the current situation have to be unlocked. The social media strategy can be specified through monitoring and “social listening”. Afterwards, recommendations are made how to increase awareness and reach a wider audience with the intent of engagement of more fans and followers in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th quarter of the title-year.

JEL: M31

1. Introduction

Internet transparency allows companies to get inspired and outrival their competitors. The social media as an online platform define the world in such a new and different manner because it allows consumers from all over the world to interact with each other. They successfully overcome geographic as well as demographic boundaries and connect people from diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Moreover, social media allows global partnerships and innovations. Social media platforms are based on crowdsourcing methods (Kotler et al., 2017) and help customers strengthen the feeling of belonging to a new kind of common cultural area.

Social media as a term or concept encompasses easy-to-use Internet applications and platforms that allow users to share information, to communicate and to connect to each other (Rapp, <http://frankrapp.de>). Another important feature of social media is that these applications and platforms allow many-to-many communication and interaction. Their advantage consists in a low technological as well as economic entry barriers of new users. According to the last updated data from Bulgarian National statistical institute, in 2017 34.4% of all registered companies in Bulgaria have used social media as a marketing tool (NSI, 2017). Therefore, social media are diversified and divided into various groups and

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categories, e.g. they include social networks (Facebook, Twitter etc.). Both authors of this paper pay particular attention to this category. The current survey is limited to Facebook due to the fact that this social media is the most widely used in Bulgaria and might be the most important and beneficial online communication channel in the business-to-consumer context.

It's an odd, but indisputable fact that the control in social media has been shifted from companies to consumers. The customers play a central role in social media platforms and their opinion could be of great importance for further research. Meanwhile, the impact is no longer concentrated on individuals, but moves from one person to various social groups (Kotler et al., 2017).

Thanks to the technological development, markets evolve from mass markets (high volume production) to niche markets (focused on a specific product). Future competitors come from related branches as well.

While in the past it was easier to convince customers to choose a company's product with marketing campaigns, nowadays most of them are using the F-factor (family, friends, Facebook fans, Twitter followers). People search for an advice in social media from unknown person, in which they have more confidence than advertising and expert's opinion.

2. Literature review

Scientific researches consider a dynamic nature of the emergence of social media platforms, where different agents (individuals, groups, societies) are building a connective common space for information and communication. Users become "thirsty" for online connection in order to fulfil their human basic needs. In 21st century cultures network connectivity seems to transform the understanding of the matter (van Dijck, 2012). On the one hand, platforms enhance citizenship and collective engagement (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). Thus, platforms are socio-technical and cultural-ideological constructs that create a new type of social capital: connectivity. Through social media, marketers have the unique advantage to be at the same place as their customers, to interact with them and to gain insights into their attitudes, interests, needs, etc. On the other hand, social media sites do not automatically turn all users into active participants. Companies need to target exactly the right audience and to create content relevant to each customer's need. Therefore, a loyal and reliable relationship with the audience can be built (Chaffey and Smith, 2005; Facebook Business, 2019; Laudon and Traver, 2008; Miller, 2008; Tsai, 2009; Scott, 2007; Weber, 2007).

According to Hartshorn (2010) there are some differences between social media and social networks. First, social media is primarily used to share information with a broad audience, while social networking allows people with common interests to engage and build relationships through the community (Cohen, 2009; Hartshorn, 2010). Social media is simply a communication channel. However, social networking is a two-way communication to such an extent that relationships are developed through conversations (Bedell, 2010; Hartshorn, 2010). Therefore, social networking is direct communication

between users. In contrast, social media does not allow them to manipulate comments or other data for the personal or business benefit (Bedell, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Hartshorn, 2010; Nations, 2010; Stelzner, 2009). The difference between social media and social networks consists not only in semantics but primarily in the features and functions of these websites and the way they have to be used (Cohen, 2009). Social media is about a strategy, while social networking is a tool for connecting with other users (Cohen, 2009; Stelzner, 2009).

Hollier (2009) pointed out the long term benefits of social media. Social media engagement will reinforce the brand experience, which will support brand building. By building a brand, social media helps to strengthen the brand in the minds of the consumers and will also help building trust and a good reputation for a business organization. Customers experience a brand in both ways: while using a product or service and when interacting with a company (Carraher, Parnell, Carraher, Carraher and Sullivan, 2006). Social media can be used to motivate people to speak for the company as well as to reduce negative talk (Hollier, 2009). However, social media is now facing the biggest challenge, which is to be a reliable source for communication. It is both the most inexpensive place for marketing and advertising of company's products or services and also a place to interact with the customers and solve their problems (Edosomwan, et al., 2011).

Tuten (2008) pointed out, that today social marketing represents user control, freedom and dialogues. For example, social media platforms have created a new form of a dialogue between firms and customers by turning the previous passive consumers into active producers and distributors of content, also known as prosumers. Traditional forms have been business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-customer (B2C), while new forms are customer-to-business (C2B) and customer to-customer (C2C) (Chaffey and Smith, 2005).

The goal of social media marketing is to pay attention to the consumer and their opinions and build trust (Chaffey and Smith, 2005; Laudon and Traver, 2008; Tsai, 2009; Tuten, 2008; Weber, 2007). Since the launch of the first social network sites, online communities have attracted millions of users, mainly due to the fact that users have the possibility to share their opinions and experiences with other users.

The brand-customer relation in the digital era is not vertical anymore, but horizontal, i.e. customers have to be seen as brand followers or brand co-creators (Kotler et al. 2017). Before making a decision customers inform themselves about brands and pay attention to the following three factors: first, marketing message and advertising (radio, television, print issues); second, closest friends and family's opinion; third, their own personal knowledge and brand image, that depend on previous experience with the brand. The main advantage of connection through social media in the world today is building trust and assurance of making the right choice. From a customers point of view, social media platforms shield individuals and their relatives from bad companies and brands. The meaning of word-of-mouth in terms of final purchase decision increases, because it's easy to ask other customers for an advice (Kotler et al., 2017).

Nowadays, the diversity of social media platform allows consumers to share and discuss opinions with consumers from all over the world (Kotler et al. 2017). Hence, five different types of social networks can be distinguished (Acquisti and Gross, 2006; Boyd and Ellison,

2007; Gillin, 2009; Laudon and Traver, 2008; Tuten, 2008; Weber, 2007): General networks e.g. Facebook; Professional networks e.g. LinkedIn; Interest-based or vertical social networks e.g. Flickr; Horizontal networks e.g. TripAdvisor; Sponsored communities e.g. eBay.

Companies can benefit from social media and learn more about their target groups, because in most cases customers share detailed information about their interests. A great example is the social media Facebook (Facebook Business, 2019). Companies create a fan page on Facebook or a public profile in order to collect likes from customers and fans. If a company publishes images or videos, all fans will be informed about this action in their news-feed. Further, brand owners can share events and if a customer has given his or her explicit consent, the event will appear in his calendar and news-feed, that is visible to his Facebook friends (Facebook Business, 2019).

Facebook’s marketing system is based on the concept of transparency. Companies can access users’ published personal information in order to target exactly the right audience (Blech et al., 2009; Tapscott and Williams, 2008). Nowadays, marketers try not only to capture consumer attention but also to hold their attention via engagement (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). Therefore, adding an entertainment component to social communications can facilitate a beneficial relationship with customers. Nevertheless, some experts argue that social network sites as Facebook are useless for marketing purposes. In their opinion, people use Facebook to stay in touch with friends and not as an information source (Maurer and Wiegmann, 2015).

In conclusion, there is no doubt that social media platforms provide many chances to companies, but sometimes the fact that their use arises some questions and can be very risky has been underestimated. For example, some questions may be related to how to engage audiences and plan an adequate social strategy? How to measure the engagement rate of posts in social media? Major challenges for specialists are related to planning, advertising campaigns and measuring results (Kreutzer, Hinz, 2010). In order to overcome this problem in Facebook, they rely on quantitative data, that has been derived from research. Especially in European Capital of Culture project, social media is of great importance, because the product is intangible and as such cannot be tried out before a purchase (Charlesworth, 2009; Chung and Buhalis, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to examine the Facebook traffic of a particular project called “Plovdiv – European Capital of Culture 2019” using rates and indicators available from research. “Plovdiv – European Capital of Culture 2019” creates an opportunity for Bulgaria to promote its ancient cultural heritage not only at European, but also at global level. It happens for the very first time and provokes civil society, designers, people, involved in creative industries, Plovdiv municipality, non-government organizations, marketing and brand managers to cooperate and work together³ for a common goal. The survey encompasses the first quarter of 2019. Afterwards recommendations are made how to increase awareness and reach a wider audience with the intent of engagement of more fans

³ #together is the slogan of “Plovdiv 2019”.

and followers in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th quarter of the title-year. In order to achieve this aim, the following tasks were set.

First, to examine major rates, indicators and metrics, used in social media, in particular on Facebook.

Second, to analyze best versus worst performing posts on the main page of “Plovdiv 2019” and to study the shared video content of “Plovdiv 2019” on Facebook up to now.

Third, to examine the performance of Plovdiv on Facebook up till now and to compare its positioning to previous cities holding the title “European Capital of Culture” during the period 2017-2020.

Fourth, to make recommendations on how to increase awareness and reach a wider audience with the intent of engagement of more fans and followers.

Both authors support factually the need for social media monitoring, “social listening”, and make readers of this paper aware of the possible negative implications for “Plovdiv 2019” if the above-mentioned techniques get neglected.

There are some limitations due to the scope of this research. It only refers to the main Facebook page of “Plovdiv 2019”, i.e. not to be taken into account the associated pages such as Plovdiv 2019 – Chitalishta, Tobacco city, Kapana – Creative District, Plovdiv 2019 – Volunteers. Further, only organic reach will be considered (paid reach has not been widely applied). Both authors use the marketing platform Facebook Insights to accumulate input data. Figures and tables are being processed with the program STATA 14. The research focusses on the social media platform Facebook, because of the wide range of usage in the context of South-Central region of Bulgaria, in particular Plovdiv.

3. Methodology

Several methods for quantitative measurement of the effect of social media exist. They build the so-called **social media traffic framework** research. Depending on the used social media, the terms are different, but the meaning remains the same. Number-of-clicks (or the traffic) is seen as a key indicator, followed by “number-of-impressions”, “reach”, “number-of-likes”, as well as “page consumption” and “number-of-active-users”. In order to examine the level of success in social media, specialists use the following rates: “applause rate”, “conversation rate” and “amplification rate”. They can be informative enough, when researchers observe and combine them with other analysis methods. Quantitative social media metrics can be confusing and lead to wrong interpretation of results when observed simultaneously or isolated.

“Applause Rate” is being estimated through:

$$\text{Applause Rate} = \frac{\text{Number of Likes}}{\text{Number of Posts}}$$

Social media marketers measure “Conversation Rate” as follows:

$$\text{Conversation Rate} = \frac{\text{Number of Comments}}{\text{Number of Posts}}$$

Last, but not least, specialists compute the “Amplification Rate” as follows:

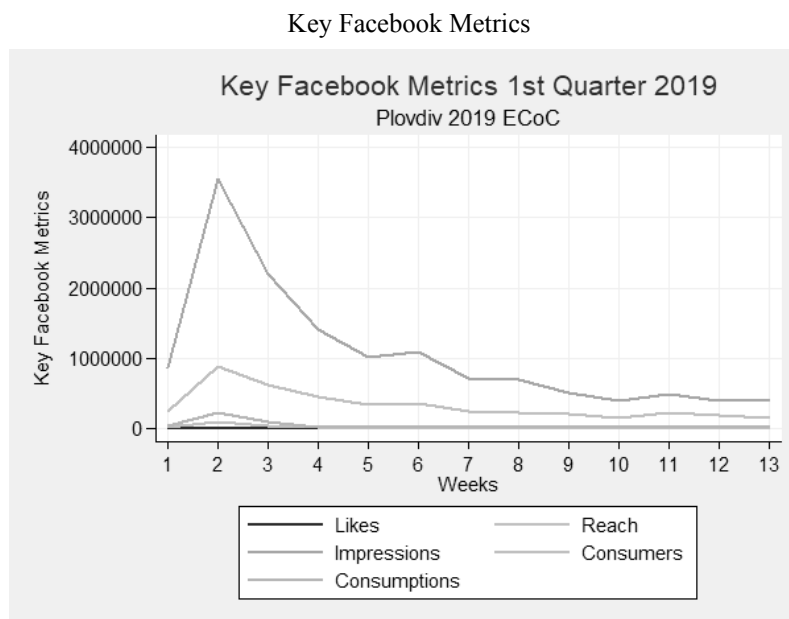
$$\text{Amplification Rate} = \frac{\text{Number of Shares}}{\text{Number of Posts}}$$

In particular, in social media a best versus worst performing posts analysis on Facebook is considered. It is important to study both the type of content, being published (link, image, status, video) on Facebook. Examination of these rates and terms is the most reliable way to gain insights about the performance of “Plovdiv – European Capital of Culture 2019” on Facebook and the only way to avoid one-sided interpretation of results.

4. Research findings and discussion

The key Facebook metrics for “Plovdiv – 2019” project in terms of “likes”, “impressions”, “reach”, “consumers” and “consumptions” in the 1st quarter of 2019 (from 1st to 13th calendar week) are shown on Figure 1.

Figure 1



The figure makes clear, that the lines showing the number of impressions and the number of reach follow the same path and move parallel during the period. In contrast, the line

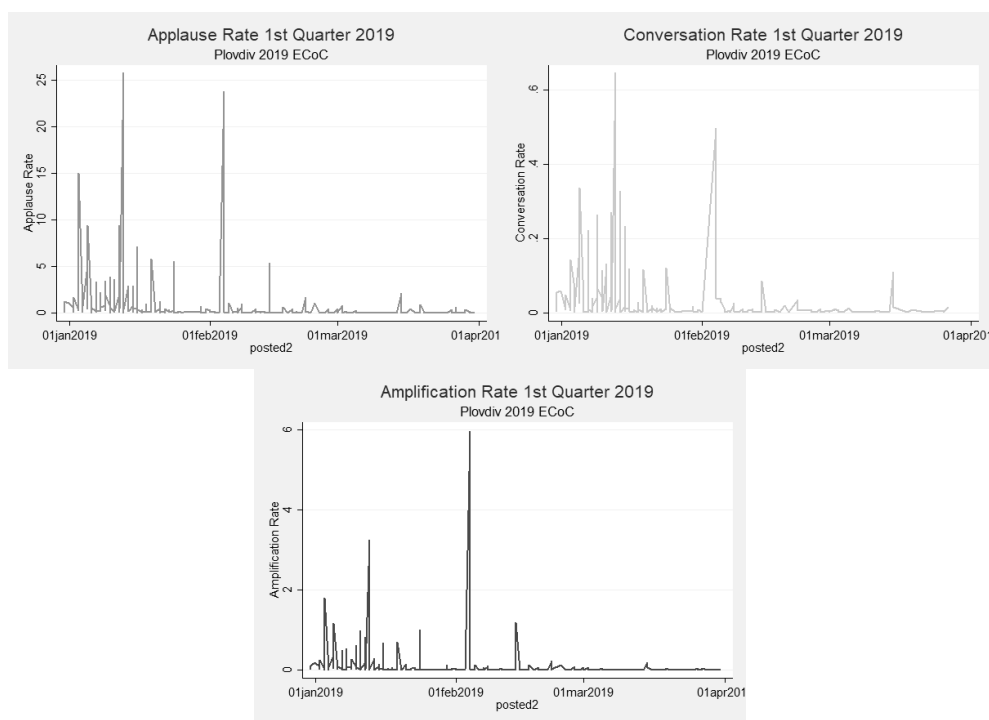
representing “reach” has lower values. However, this observation is nothing but expected and logical, because a priori the total reach is always less than or equal to impressions.

Number of likes, number of active consumers and consumptions remain almost the same during the observed period of time with less dynamics in values. Their values are as close to each other, as the lines in the figure overlap.

Not without reason some social media specialists define these three rates as “the best social media metrics”. The rates determine the level of social media success. Figure 3 shows the values of “applause rate”, “conversation rate” and “amplification rate” for ”Plovdiv 2019” on Facebook in the first quarter of 2019.

Figure 2

Rates in Facebook

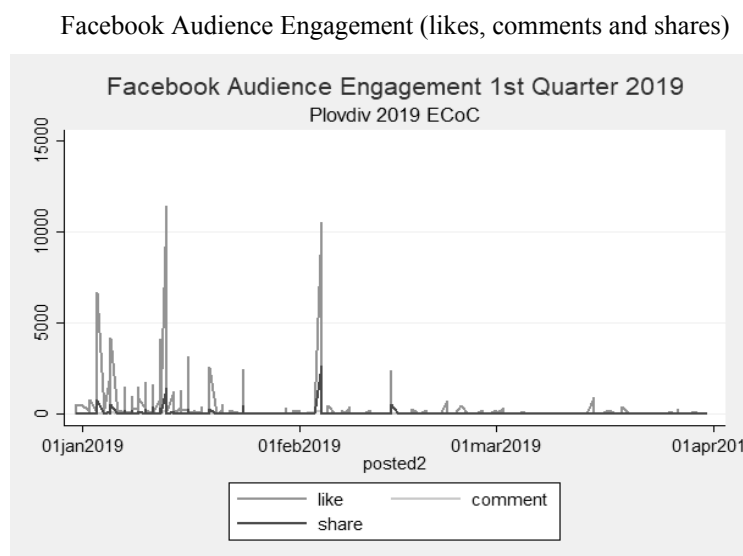


Despite their popularity, marketers need to be careful when analyzing the calculated values. Researchers need to observe and combine them with other analysis methods. These rates can be confusing and lead to wrong interpretation of results when observed simultaneously or isolated. At the same time, it’s compulsory to perform best versus worst performing posts analysis, as well as to consider other key metrics (in particular, Facebook audience engagement).

Audience engagement on Facebook counts number of likes, comments and shares in a fixed period of time on the page of “Plovdiv 2019”. Figure 3 shows the dynamic of the indices and how they fluctuate in the first quarter of 2019.

As Figure 3 shows, the most likes the Facebook page of “Plovdiv 2019” has accumulated during the period from January to February 2019, while the comments and shares remain constant almost through the whole period of time, with a little fluctuation again in January and February.

Figure 3



In spite of these positive trends, the measured values (comments, shares) cannot reach the high level of likes. On the basis of available information can be concluded, that visitors are still not willing to comment and reshare published content on the page of “Plovdiv 2019” with their own friendship circle. The reasons behind their action or lack thereof need to be profoundly examined. It is recommended for the marketing team of “Plovdiv 2019” Foundation, responsible for the content in social media, to create opportunities to increase visitor’s motivation to comment and share on Facebook.

The total number of users, who have liked the Facebook page of “Plovdiv 2019” in the first quarter of 2019 is shown on Figure 4. The figure makes clear, that the number of unique users increases with time. While at the beginning of the referenced period the page has been liked by 41 331 people, at the end of the period their total number has grown to the amount of 50 386 people.

Besides the total number of users, who have liked the Facebook page of “Plovdiv 2019”, another important Facebook indicator is the daily accumulation of likes compared to the daily measurement of unlikes. This way researchers get a clue about the effectiveness of marketing efforts. It’s necessary to examine the reasons, and therefore why the Facebook

page of “Plovdiv 2019” is losing its audience. Afterwards, marketers should take action in order to limit the number of unlikes.

Figure 4
Total number of people who have liked your page (Facebook Unique Users)

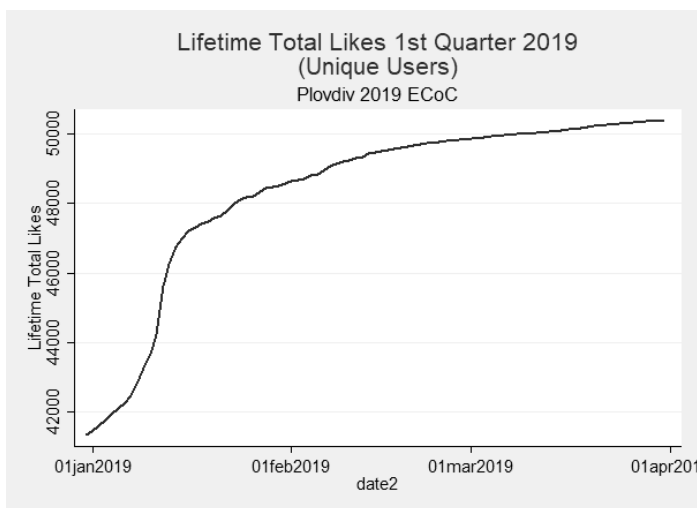
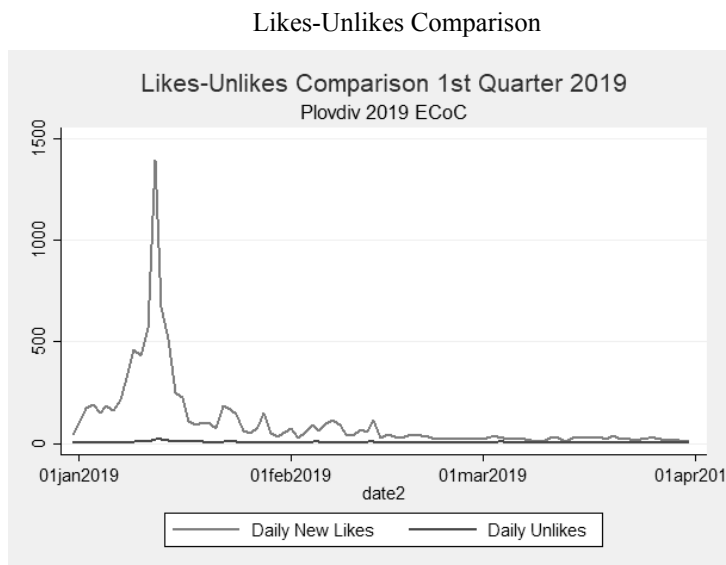


Figure 5



The reasons why there are people, who have clicked first the button “like” and after some time “unlike” the Facebook page of “Plovdiv 2019” can vary: it is possible that

administrators of the page publish content too often, or in contrast, they publish very rare, so there might be posts, that visitors find boring.

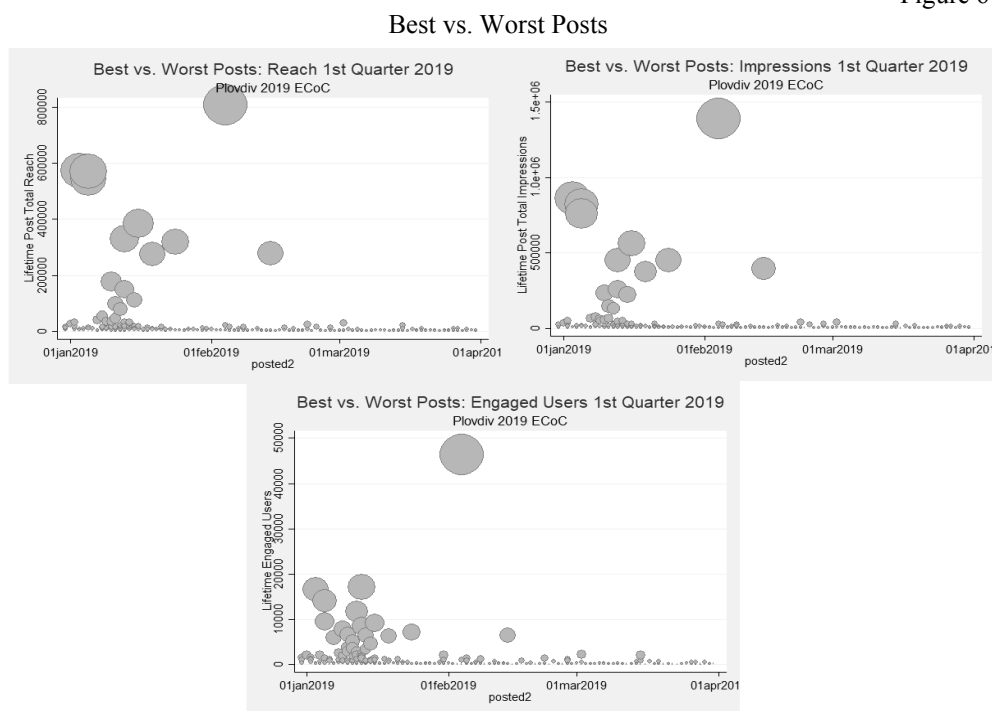
Posts content matters to all Facebook fans. Here counts the principle 70/20/10: the most of the post in social media must be informative (70%) and to provoke lively interest, because this way a relationship between brand and audience is created. Researchers recommend lesser part to be devoted to shares of someone else's posts, blogs, images or videos (20%), and slight part of post (10%) can be “self-promoting” (Ayres, 2016). Ignoring user's comments, containing negative feedback, can still lead to “unlikes”. In this particular case, the marketing team of “Plovdiv 2019” Foundation have to carefully study consumer's behaviour in order to identify possible reasons for accumulation of “unlikes” and to give adequate prepositions how to resolve this problem.

Besides key indicators on Facebook, regarding fan activity on the page of “Plovdiv 2019” in the social media, mentioned above, it is also needed publications to be tracked and their performance to be interpreted.

5. Analysis of “Plovdiv 2019” publications on Facebook

Best and worst performing posts on Facebook are shown on Figure 6. The authors use three types of criteria to evaluate the posts performance: “reach”, “impressions” and “engaged users”. All three criteria deliver similar results. The circle size depends on the weight of the specific post, i.e. the bigger the circle, the greater amount of Facebook users have seen this post, the greater amount of users are reached and engaged.

Figure 6



The figures point out a negative trend: while in January 2019 posts have been evenly distributed between both best and worst-performing posts, in March and April all posts lose their significance and attractiveness (circles with small weight). One of the best performing posts on the page of “Plovdiv 2019” on Facebook throughout the observed time period is released in February (biggest circle). This is caused by the fact that the above-mentioned post contains a linked video content from a third-party channel, which should be heavily used when sharing content in the future.

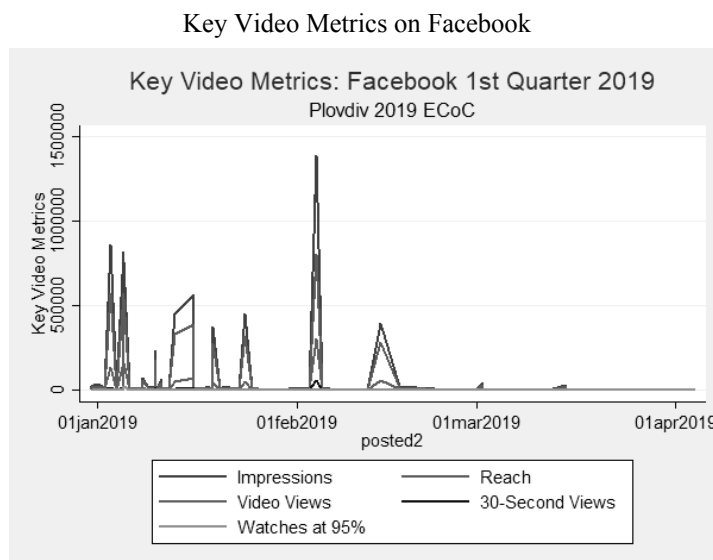
Video on Facebook

Besides analysis of posts, the performance of published videos on Facebook should also be taken into account. Marketing specialists submit videos, primarily because of the influence, that they can have regarding users and fans. Images or video (in comparison to textual content) have been preferred by the major part of consumers. Images encompass emotions, that can be easily sent to the audience.

Videos on Facebook start automatically, but without sound, until the person watching does not activate it by a simple click. So, videos have to contain visual elements that attract target audiences, even if there is no sound.

Furthermore, videos bond audience and are an effective way to increase key successful metrics in social media, as well as “applause rate”, “conversation rate” and “amplification rate”. Facebook videos have another advantage: they are visible, i.e. they can be found without any effort in Google. The key video metrics that inform about customer retention are: “impressions”, “reach”, “video views”, “30-second views” and “watches at 95%” (Figure 7).

Figure 5

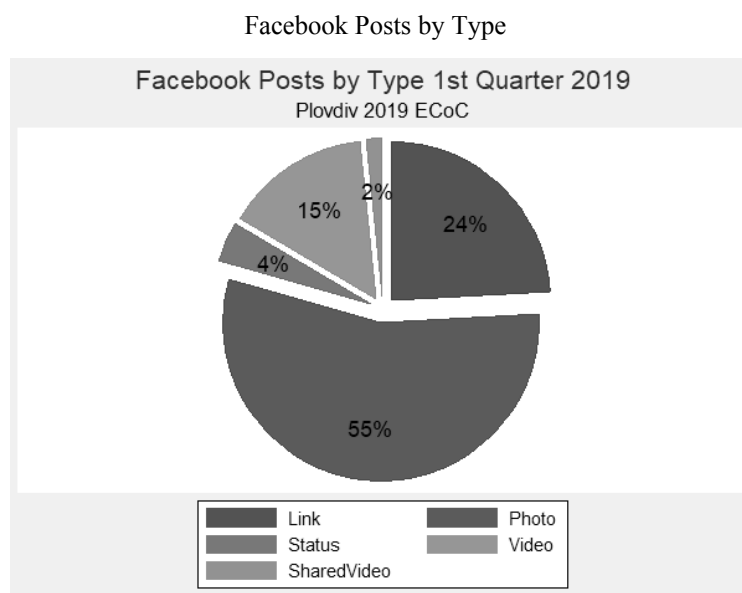


Almost all metrics described above (except “watches at 95%”, which remain constant) throughout the time period of the conducted study move simultaneously whether up or down, but not in different directions. Therefore, consumer behaviour is more or less uniform, homogenous, has a spiralling motion and various stages. As both authors of this paper have already mentioned above, a prediction can be made: in the next months, a slowdown of key video metrics values can be expected, followed by a peak after that.

The efforts of marketing specialists have to be concentrated in such a way, that peaks duration get maximized, for instance, creating more interesting video content for users.

An evaluation of content, delivered to customers in social media, has to be considered after a Facebook video analysis is done. The pie diagram on Figure 8 refers to the type of content published on the page of “Plovdiv 2019” on Facebook. It can be an image, link, status, video or a shared video.

Figure 8



The figure shows, that the former outweigh the latter: 55% of all published posts on the page are devoted to images, while 24% refer to links. Videos count for 15% of the published content, which is a relatively small per cent, taking their unique opportunities to engage the audience into account, which both authors have shown on previous pages of this paper. The last two places are devoted to published status and shared videos, respectively – 4% and 2% of the total posts on Facebook.

In order to gain an in-depth view of the performance of “Plovdiv 2019” in social media, Facebook is necessary to discuss a benchmark between European Capitals of Culture 2017-2020 on Facebook.

A benchmark between European Capitals of Culture 2017-2020

Benchmarking in the context of “Plovdiv – European Capital of Culture 2019” aims to highlight the positioning of previous, as well as future cities holding the title regarding the effectiveness of efforts, that marketing teams have made or are making on Facebook.

The time period encompasses 2017-2020. Secondary data and statistics from Facebook pages of each ECoC⁴ is used. Data has been calculated during the second quarter in the year before holding the prestigious title “European Capital of Culture”.

Cities, that both authors consider, are as follows: Pafos, Aarhus (2017), Valleta, Leeuwarden (2018), **Plovdiv**, Matera (2019), Rijeka, Galway (2020).

Figure 9

Likes/Follows on Facebook – A benchmark between European Capitals of Culture 2017-2020

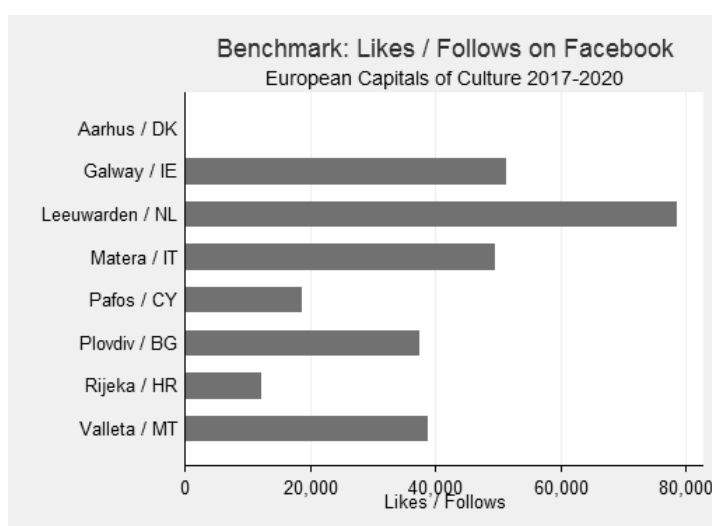


Figure 9 makes clear that the city Leeuwarden in the Netherlands leads the ranking with a score of total of 78 625 likes/follows on Facebook. Galway finishes up second and Matera third, while Plovdiv remains with less than 40 000 likes. This statistics is even more worrying, if we consider the performance of Plovdiv on Facebook in comparison with Valleta. Valetta has more fans than Plovdiv up to now, although the city will hold the title ECoC in 2020. It is also remarkable that there is a big difference between cities regarding their location – Eastern (new ECoC) vs. Western Europe (old ECoC) and population. Western cities usually perform better, even when their population is fewer. For example, Leeuwarden has a population of 122.983 (year 2019), Galway 79.504 (year 2016), Matera

⁴ ECoC is an abbreviation for European Capital of Culture

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60.403 (year 2017), Valleta 5.730 (year 2016) and Plovdiv 346.893 (year 2018). Leeuwarden still leads the likes / follows ranking on Facebook.

Figure 10
Maximum Shares on Facebook – A benchmark between European Capitals of Culture 2017-2020

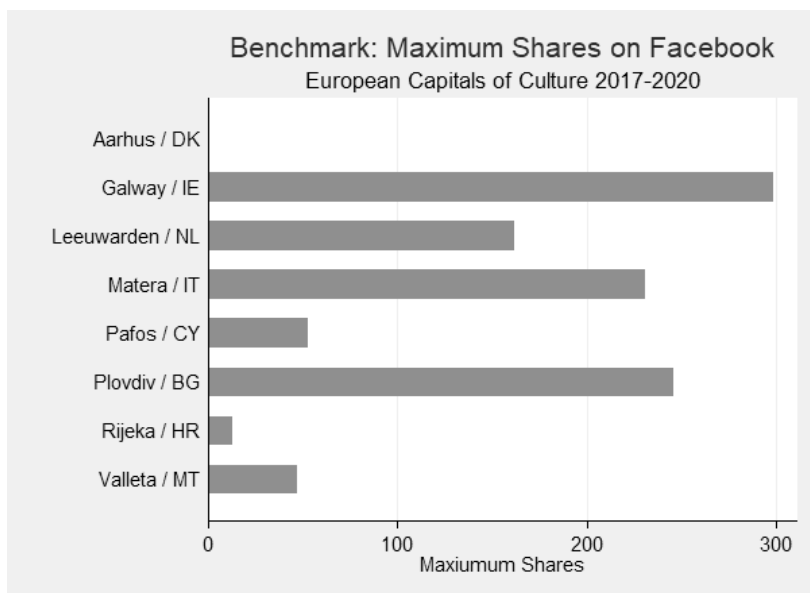


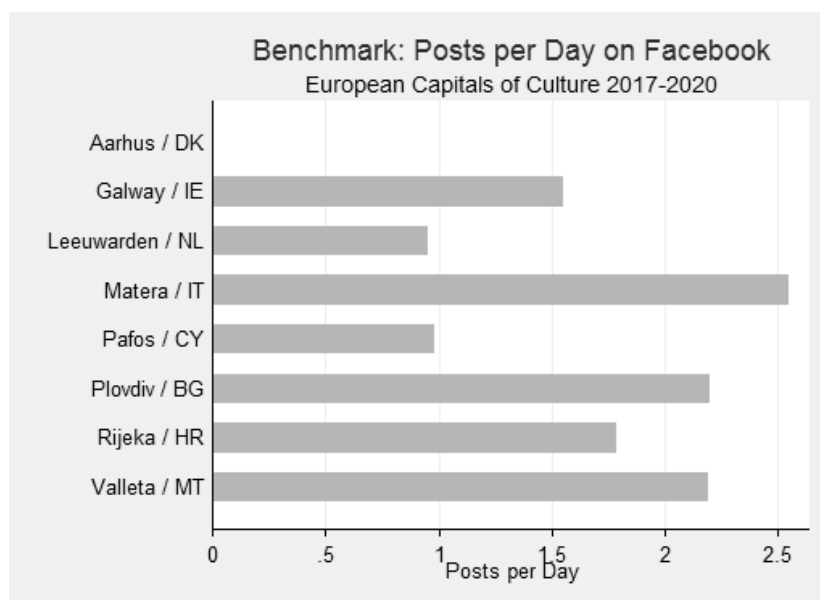
Fig. 10 shows that maximum shares on the social media Facebook – according to statistics – are devoted to Galway, Ireland (approximately 300). Plovdiv holds second place in this ranking with 246 shares. The difference between Plovdiv and Matera (the second city in 2019 holding the ECoC title together with Plovdiv) is minimal (15 shares).

Results show, that the most active team on social media is the communication team, responsible for the performance of Matera on Facebook. Per day on average on Matera’s page on Facebook 2,55 posts are published, which is less than on Plovdiv’s page (see Figure 11).

There is a slight difference between Plovdiv and Valleta, i.e. 0,01 (statistical amounts are as follows: 2.20 post per day are distributed to Plovdiv and 2.19 to Valleta).

The above research has shown an opportunity for quantitative measurement of the effect of social media Facebook through several methods, building the so-called **social media traffic framework**. Results are being discussed.

Figure 11
Posts per Day on Facebook – A benchmark between European Capitals of Culture 2017-2020



Conclusions and implications have to be drawn in the last session of this paper.

6. Conclusion

The outlined from both authors in this paper data about key Facebook metrics is designed to analyze traffic and performance of the project “Plovdiv – European Capital of Culture 2019” in the first quarter of 2019. On the basis of the conducted study, missing opportunities are found. Marketing specialists attach great importance to “social conversations” in the web. Some of their applied aspects are very important for “Plovdiv 2019”, but are not being used adequate or enough in the right manner until now.

Both authors make the following recommendations on how to improve the social media strategy of “Plovdiv 2019” in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th quarter of the title-year:

- Through “social listening” social strategies are made, aiming to reach a wide range of audiences with appropriate, timely and sufficient content. As a result, more users, fans and followers are being engaged. All these efforts increase brand awareness.
- It’s relevant to users that the “Plovdiv 2019” page has to be as easily accessible as possible in different social media platforms. Users want to receive timely and consistent information and content.

- Past (Leeuwarden) and future (Galway) European Capitals of Culture have better positioning on Facebook regarding the number of likes and shares up to the moment of conducting this survey. The city of Matera (holding the ECoC title together with Plovdiv in 2019) leads the ranking when considering the number of daily post on Facebook during the second quarter in the year before the title “European Capital of Culture”. Plovdiv holds a similar position to Valleta – ECoC 2020. For this reason, both authors suggest an increase in publishing of daily posts on Facebook, but also necessarily taking users preferences with regard to the type of content into account.
- The performance of “Plovdiv 2019” on Facebook in the first quarter of 2019 is good. After a social media traffic analysis, it can be concluded, that there are latent opportunities for development in a more positive way than the current one, i.e. through heavy usage of linked video content from a third-party channel. Further, the social strategy can be refined through monitoring and “social listening”.

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