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Visual Content Marketing: An Imperative for Subscriber Patronage of GSM Service Providers in Port Harcourt

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ABSTRACT

The Aim of this research was to empirically examine the relationship between visual content marketing and subscriber patronage of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt. The study adopted cross-sectional survey design in accessing the research elements. While the study's population comprise of active voice subscribers of GSM service providers; however, a total of 400 subscribers were administered copies of questionnaire. Information retrieved through this means were analyzed with Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient tool and results revealed that visual content marketing has a positive and significant relationship with subscriber patronage. The study therefore concluded that visual posts containing brand related and entertaining information are motivational factors that create interaction with/and to engage subscribers with brand related activities (likes, comments and shares), which in-turn results to subscriber satisfaction and loyalty. Based on the findings and conclusion, the study recommended that GSM service operators who want to improve subscriber patronage are encouraged to focus more on visual post containing brand related and entertaining information; as this has been confirmed to be key motivation that create interaction and engage subscribers to become loyal customers and satisfied with products and services of these firms.

Keywords: Visual Content Marketing, Information Content, Subscriber Patronage.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian telecommunication industry has witnessed tremendous transformation within the last decade, and has become one of the viable industries that contributes immensely to the growth of the economy (Oyatoye, Aebiyi & Amole, 2015). According to Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC, 2019), by the end of 2018, telecoms contributed revenue of over 77.42% to the ICT sub-sector Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 9.46% to national GDP. It was also reported that the deregulation of the sector gave rise to an increase in active subscription, which grew from 400,000 lines in 2001 to 145.3 million lines in May 2017, resulting in a tele-density of 0.4% and 103.82% in both years respectively (NCC, 2019). Tele-density measures the percentage number of active telephone connections for every one hundred persons living within an area.

Though, the transformation of the telecom sector was greatly felt after the privatization of Nigeria Telecommunication Limited (NITEL) in 2007, and the influx of privately owned telecommunication companies, otherwise known as Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) such as MTN, Globacom, Airtel, 9Mobile, etc; however, scholars have attributed this transformation to the advancement of marketing content creation of these private telecom firms occasioned by various digital technologies (Castells 2015; Langton & Campbell, 2016). At the center of this advancement is the design and consumption of images or visual content (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014) since we live in a digital electronic world, based on images designed to capture eyeballs, build brand names, create mindshare, design successful products, and shape electronic patronage (Lazard & Atkinson, 2014; Langton & Campbell, 2011).

This paradigm shift is further proved by López & Sicilia (2014), who suggested that a crucial trait of the 21st century economy is the image branding. According to this author, GSM firms are deploying several visual content marketing strategies such as informative contents or visual storytelling; entertaining contents, remunerative content, visual appeal, visual comprehension and retention, and others; are used to build corporate visual identity, e-loyalty, subscriber satisfaction, and a host of other marketing success indices (Annette, van den, Menno, de Jong & Elving, 2005). In fact, this point has been long recognized that images subdue the impact of words for attitudinal formation and transformation, particularly in persuasive messages among GSM firms. Images frequently triumph with persuasiveness in a message over printed text or verbal speech (Kim & Park, 2013; Lazard and Atkinson, 2014). The effects likewise hold for particular design features; for instance, a basic font substitution in a graphic design can intensify the persuasive and emotional power of a printed message or idea (Klanten, Ehmann, Schulze, Losowsky & Silus, 2011). More so, the use of visual content as a tool for communication has experienced a resurgence in digital marketing; a field previously dominated by textual content (Bullas, 2012). The following recent statistical trends further confirmed that articles online that contain videos or images get 94% more user views than online articles without such visual content (Bullas, 2012); Users who click on photo images of real individuals online are twice as expected to convert to a product sale (Binkley, 2016); A conversion rate of 9.6% was observed when consumers interact with purchaser photos (Instagram, 2016).

In view of the above, visual content marketing has emerged as a strategic tool GSM firms could deploy in improving subscriber patronage and loyalty (López & Sicilia, 2014). In addition to these observations about the advantages of visual content over textual information in communicating messages strongly, the way in which visual content is consumed by subscribers have been of interest to researchers as it has been suggested that consumer behaviour regarding the use of visual content changes with time (López & Sicilia, 2014). More interestingly, studies suggest that the consumption of visual content has progressed through three dominant phases and these phases include, the digital image, which was popular in the 1990s; the networked images in the 2000s, which involved digital images on the web; and then the current phase, which is the social media images (Hochman,

2018). This phase has been described as a newly dominant cultural visual form of the 2010s and involves the active production, manipulation, sharing, and organization of images through social media streams by users (Hochman, 2018; Morgan, Snelson, & Elison-Bowers, 2010).

Many studies have been carried out in the area of visual marketing and consumer purchase behaviour. De Vries & Carlson (2014) examined visual content, social commerce, and consumer behaviour. The author used visual appeal and visual storytelling as dimensions of visual content engagement; with the intention to evaluate their effect on repeat purchase and word-of-mouth. More so, Fedric & Saumya (2020) evaluated visual communication and consumer-brand relationship on social networking sites. These scholars adopted entertaining content and informative content as sub-variables of visual communication in order to check whether these variables will strengthen the consumer-brand relationship. However, in view of the above-mentioned studies and other related ones, this research deviated from extant studies by using Fedric & Saumya (2020)'s framework involving; entertaining content and informative content, as dimensions of visual content marketing; with a view to examining their relationship with subscriber satisfaction and loyalty in the GSM market in Rivers State. Therefore, this research empirically examines the relationship between visual content marketing and subscriber patronage as it relates to GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

1.1 Operational Framework and Research Hypotheses of the Study

This research has both independent and dependent variables. while the former is visual content marketing, the latter is subscriber patronage. The independent variable has informative content and entertaining content as dimensions. On the other hand, the dependent variable was measured with subscriber satisfaction and loyalty. Below is the model specification:

SP	=	$f(\text{VCM})$	----- Model 1
VCM	=	IC, EC	----- Model 2
SP	=	SS, SL	----- Model 3
SS, SL	=	$f(\text{IC}, \text{EC})$	----- Model 4

Where:

SP = Subscriber Patronage
VCM = Visual Content Marketing
IC = Information Content
EC = Entertaining Content
SS = Subscriber Satisfaction
SL = Subscriber Loyalty
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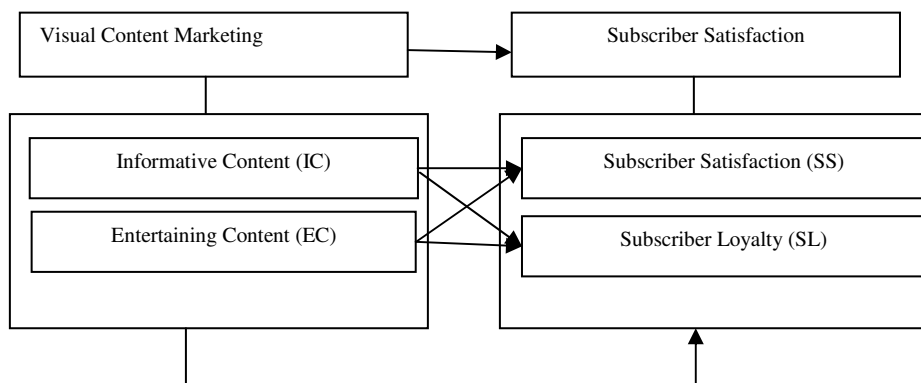


Fig 1.1: Operational Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Research Desk; as adopted from Fedric & Saumya (2020).

Based on the above operational framework, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between informative content and subscriber satisfaction of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between informative content and subscriber loyalty of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between entertaining content and subscriber satisfaction of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between entertaining content and subscriber loyalty of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theories upon which this study was anchored are Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). First, the UGT was developed by Psychologist Herzog to understand why people actively look for specific media to satisfy specific needs (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). The UGT was initially applied in various traditional mass media (such as television and electronic bulletins) to analyze the motivation and associated behaviours of being engaged in various forms of media. However, with the invasion of the internet, increased usage of mobile devices, and

new technologies; the UGT focused on the prerequisite motivations for people to use the new and modern technologies to make more informed and better decisions (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018).

This theory is based on two assumptions, first, is the user as an active and self-conscious contributor in media choice; and second is the user being driven by social and psychological needs and therefore, seeks out a media that could fulfill his goals. The level of gratification received by the consumer determines the recurring use of that particular media (Lee & Ma, 2012; Jakus, 2018). The theory divides consumer's needs in five classes namely: cognitive needs, emotional needs, personal integrity needs, social integrity needs, and tension release needs, that would influence the uses and gratifications of a media (Smock, Ellison, Lampe & Wohn, 2011).

Secondly, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is another baseline theory we adopted in this research. TAM was introduced by Davis (1986) to describe the usage behavior of new technologies (Rauniar et al., 2014). The Technology Acceptance Model is a special conformity of Theory of Reasoned Action for IT usage. Similar to Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behavior, behavior is defined by the intention to perform the behavior. In this study, the conceptual model draws that intention to purchase leads to actual purchase. The underlying assumption of TAM assumes that behaviour is volitional. However, TAM does not include behavioural control construct, which means that behaviour is directly at the discretion of oneself. In other words, this model does not explain cases where consumers are not able to perform transactions even though there is an intention to do so. For example, consumers do not have sufficient money or credit card for purchases (Loh, 2011).

2.2 Visual Content Marketing

A strategically designed graphic image can potentially communicate much more information about a brand in less time than several pages of text-based content can (Vanichvasin, 2013). Thus, the growing preference for visual content marketing. Content is defined as the appearances or signs and symbols presented visually in their totality (Agrawala, Li & Berthouzoz, 2011). The authors stated that visual content can be conveyed through a metonymic or a metaphoric perspective. While the former refers to all image attributes representing themselves and should be described based on appearances; whereas the latter treats visuals as symbols and examines what an image signifies beyond mere appearances. Järvinen & Taiminen (2016) define visual content marketing as the creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to sustain engagement with the brand as a conduit to future economic value. In addition, Akbari (2015) defined visual content marketing as the practice of using images, video and other visual content (e.g. infographics) to more effectively reach social media audiences in ways that bring favourable feedback and image to the firm.

The popularity of visual content marketing is as a response to consumer behaviours such as "liking and sharing" of brand messages as indications of willingness to engage or socialize with brands before purchase decisions are made. This is opposed to merely interacting with brands on basis of their products alone, which is a key consumer behaviour associated with traditional e-commerce activities (Jamieson, 2007). Many scholars have considered visual content as a necessary social media feature in today's information technology world, while stressing its acquisition and retention capabilities to digital lovers (Johanna Gummerus, Veronica Liljander, Emil Weman, Minna Pihlström, 2012).

2.3 Subscriber Patronage

Patronage is something that consumers may exhibit to brands, services, stores, or product categories. A consistent patronage or re-purchase from a buyer demands that he/she is deeply committed to such firm or its product. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) point out that those subscribers who are brand loyalist do not evaluate the brand, they just make a purchase confidently on the basis of their experiences. They further mentioned that subscriber patronage is the impulse, desire and consideration within the individual which stimulate the purchase of products and services. The relevance of a subscriber and its patronage per say is so profound that GSM firms may not be able to survive without it. A study conducted by Kotler and Keller (2006) revealed that firm capacity, products or attributes, economic situation, political forces, social and psychological factors, situational competition, marketing mix program, etc; are the major influence of customer patronage in a firm.

Alam & Perry (2002), stated that 'patronage is usually measured by comparing subscriber's total week/monthly purchase (in money terms), with the normal family consumption in a month'. Subscriber patronage is the approval or support provided by the subscriber with respect to a particular brand. Patronage delivers the foundation for an established and growing market share. Kotler and Keller (2006), advocated that consumer have unpredictable degree of patronage to particular services, stores and other entities.

2.4 Visual Content Marketing and Subscriber Patronage

Many studies have been done in the area of visual content marketing and various customer purchase indices. Okoli (2016) who examined visual content, social commerce and consumer behaviour, surveyed 400 post-graduate students and found that visual content has a huge influence on customer loyalty and satisfaction. Therefore, engaging and holding the attention of viewers over a sustained period of time is becoming a great challenge (Lankow, Ritchie & Crooks, 2012). Thus, using visual content as a means for communicating with users quickly has become the way forward; a strategically designed infographic can potentially communicate much more information about a brand than several pages of text-based content could; moreover, intangible concepts and ideas may be translated logically and in an easily comprehensible way using visual content (Ritchie & Crooks, 2012).

2.4.1 Informative Content and Subscriber Patronage

Previous studies reveal that pleasure-oriented information system makes social effects and motivates to participate and to contribute to brand communities on social media platforms (Raney & Janicke, 2013; Dolan, Conduit, Fahy & Goodman, 2016). According to Kim, Wu, Chiang, Ko & Lee (2016), informative content on social media marketing activity helps the firm to build relationships with customers and increase customer loyalty. Vivek, Beatty & Morgan (2012) developed and validated the informative content scales in the e-commerce industry. Their study reveals that informative content positively influences purchase intention and brand equity. The cosmetic brand's informative content is expected to initiate a positive influence on brand equity and social brand engagement. Customer engagement is another common objective; a study in 2012 found that 78% of marketers report using informative content to enhance customer engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). As a brand's engagement in social media, the firm can leverage informative content to build up a relationship with customers and increase corporate customer satisfaction and traffic. The brands' informative content

activity is expected to initiate a positive influence on customer brand engagement and brand equity (Kim et al., 2016). Verhoef, Franses & Hoekstra (2002) found that visual post containing brand related information works as the key motivational factors to create interaction with and to engage consumers with brand related activities (like, comment and share) in online shopping. Further research shows that since the consumers are provided with useful information, they tend to have positive attitudes toward informative ads on social media (Dolan, 2016).

In addition, Ashley & Tuten (2015) conducted a research study regarding the impact of informative content on touch points during the consumer's purchase decision journey. Key points resulting from this research were: consumers felt that information sharing, collaboration and relationship building was necessary to support ongoing communication; and informative content allowed organizations the opportunity to be in the position to offer additional sources of information regarding product benefits, product features, and provide real time feedback to consumers. Overall, informative content was found to have a significant impact on purchase intentions (Fauseret al., 2011). In view of the above postulates, we state the following hypotheses:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between informative content and subscriber satisfaction of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between informative content and subscriber loyalty of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

2.4.2 Entertaining Content and Subscriber Patronage

The important motivational factors for consumer participation in online shopping depend upon consumers' interest to experience entertaining content in the brand post. Studies have considered the entertaining value of content marketing to measure the level of consumer engagement using visual posts like images and videos on brand social media pages, as it involves high levels of pleasure and arousal while viewing or watching an advertisement (Luarn, Lin & Chiu, 2015). This high level of pleasure and arousal has been proven by extant studies to influence consumer intention to return to the brand's page and also influence the desire to spread positive WOM about the brand (Duffett, 2015). In Duffett (2015)'s study, entertaining content was revealed to have a positive and significant relationship with consumer buying intention and word-of-mouth behaviour. Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski (2015) also found that entertaining content is the main motivating factor for online engagement which was utilized in the form of consumption, contribution and creation. The visual content-driven characteristics of advertising message that is entertaining has been identified as determinants which influence consumer attitude toward the brand post on brand fan pages (Oh, Roumani, Nwankpa & Hu, 2017).

Judy (2014) found that the most important visual strategy for creating attention to product of consumer is to provide a good entertaining content to build consumer brand engagement, which in-turn lead to purchase intention in the future. Vivek et al. (2012) found that creating quality entertaining content influence the online shopper to prefer the brand, which management of the brand need to create entertaining content that keeps users visiting website and stimulate them to engage in purchase intention (Puro, 2013). Content marketing is one of the best strategies used in stimulating online engagement (Hollebeek, 2011). The key to create an effective user engagement can be created by creating an entertaining content (Sashi, 2012). According to Bill gates (1996), content is king; which entails creating the appropriate content brings success. Entertaining content is one of the best strategies used to stimulate online engagement and has emerged simultaneously with the rise of social media (Content Marketing Association, 2014). It was against this backdrop the following hypotheses were raised:

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between entertaining content and subscriber satisfaction of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between entertaining content and subscriber loyalty of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted cross-sectional survey type of quasi-experimental design due to the geographical concentration of the study's subjects and the inability of the researcher to have a total control over the research elements. Basically, the population of this research constitute subscribers of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2021), the total active voice subscribers of GSM services is five million, four hundred and forty-four thousand and seventy (5,444,070). According to the report, MTN has a total of 2,192,617 subscribers; Glo has 1,276,583; Airtel has 1,276,583; and 9mobile has 754,410 respectively. In view of the large population size of 5,444,070, the research adopted Taro Yemen's formula in determining a sampling size of 400.

Due to the nature of the population, this research adopted stratified sampling method in selecting those research elements that made up the sample. According to Ogbuji (2013), stratified sampling ensures an even distribution of copies of questionnaire to respondents. This sampling technique was used by dividing Port Harcourt into four (4) strata, North, South, East and West. The table below shows how the 400 copies questionnaire was distributed among the 4 strata.

Table 3.1: List of Active Users of Four Major Registered GSM firms in Port Harcourt

Tele. Loc.	North	South	East	West	Total
MTN	25	25	25	25	100
Glo	25	25	25	25	100
Airtel	25	25	25	25	100
9Mobile	25	25	25	25	100
Total	100	100	100	100	400

Source: Researcher's Desk Study, 2022

From the table above, each stratum received 100 copies of questionnaire. As a result, the subscribers of the 4 telecom firms received 25 copies each.

In addition, two main sources of data were used: primary and secondary sources. While the former was sourced with the help of questionnaire, the latter was obtained from journal articles, credible internet publications, textbooks, etc. More so, the research instrument was evaluated through expert checking for content, therefore, a pilot study was conducted to pre-test the questionnaire. To determine the reliability of the research instrument,

Cronbach's Alpha tests were carried out. Lastly, the research adopted a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical tools in analyzing data. In terms of descriptive statistics, the research used charts, tables, averages (means and standard deviation), percentages, etc; on the other hand, Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient, which is an inferential statistical tool was used, with the help of SPSS application (version 21.0), in testing hypotheses.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presented findings from analyses of data obtained from the field of study.

Table 4.1: Questionnaire Administration and Responses.

Details	Frequency	Percent (%)
Administered Copies	400	100.0
Returned Copies	376	94
Not Returned Copies	24	6
Returned & Used Copies	366	91

Source: Survey Data 2022, SPSS 21.0 Version

Table 4.1 indicated that a total 400 copies of questionnaire were administered; however, 376 representing 94% were returned. More so, 24 copies were not returned, but 366 representing 91% were both returned and used.

Table 4.2: Result of Reliability Analysis

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Informative Content	0.810
Entertaining Content	0.899
Subscriber Satisfaction	0.809
Subscriber Loyalty	0.843

Source: Survey Data 2022, SPSS 21.0 Version

From the table above, all variables in the research instrument showed signs of reliability, since all test results are more than the standard of 0.700 (70%).

Testing of Hypotheses

As mentioned earlier, Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was used in testing the various hypotheses proposed in this research. The table below highlights results and decision criteria in each case:

Table 4.3: Summary of Test of Hypotheses

S/N	HYPOTHESES	p-value	Sig. Level	Decision	Conclusion
Ho₁	There is no significant relationship between informative content and subscriber satisfaction of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.	0.005	0.878	Rejected	Significant
Ho₂	There is no significant relationship between informative content and subscriber loyalty of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.	0.005	0.923	Rejected	Significant
Ho₃	There is no significant relationship between entertaining content and subscriber satisfaction of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.	0.005	0.861	Rejected	Significant
Ho₄	There is no significant relationship between entertaining content and subscriber satisfaction of GSM service providers in Port Harcourt.	0.005	0.879	Rejected	Significant

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Survey Data 2022, SPSS 21.0 Version

The above table indicates that in each case (Ho₁, Ho₂, Ho₃, Ho₄), the significant level (0.878, 0.923, 0.861, 0.879) showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between the dimensions of visual content marketing (informative and entertaining content) and measures of subscriber patronage (subscriber satisfaction and loyalty). It was against this backdrop we reject the null hypothesis. Which means that there is a positive and significant relationship between visual content marketing and subscriber patronage of GSM firms in Port Harcourt.

Discussion of Findings

Ho₁ and **Ho₂** were set out to ascertain the relationship between informative content and subscriber satisfaction on one hand, and subscriber loyalty on the other hand, of GSM firms in Port Harcourt. Both hypotheses were tested using Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient and results revealed a rho value of 0.878 & 0.923. Therefore, while the null hypotheses were rejected in both cases, this revealed a positive and significant relationship between informative content and subscriber satisfaction & subscriber loyalty. By way of comparing this finding to previous ones; Kim et al. (2016) found that informative content on social media marketing activity helps the firm to build relationships with customers and increase customer loyalty. Yadav &

Rahman (2017) who developed and validated the informative content scales in the e-commerce industry. Their study reveals that informative content positively influences purchase intention and brand equity. The brand's informative content is expected to initiate a positive influence on brand equity and social brand engagement.

Ho₃ and **Ho₄** aimed at examining the relationship between entertaining content and subscriber satisfaction on one hand, and subscriber loyalty on the other hand, of GSM firms in Port Harcourt. Our analysis revealed a positive and significant relationship between entertaining content and subscriber satisfaction & subscriber loyalty of telecom firms in Rivers State. Accordingly, the null hypotheses were rejected, and subsequently, the alternate hypotheses accepted. These findings corroborate with the argument of Vivek et al. (2012), when they found that creating quality entertaining content influence the online shopper to prefer the brand, which management of the brand need to create entertaining content that keeps users visiting website and stimulate them to engage in purchase intention. Puro (2013) further expressed that content marketing is one of the best strategies used to stimulate online engagement. Similarly, Sashi (2012) noted that the key to create an effective user engagement can be created by creating an entertaining content.

CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Haven analyzed data obtained from the field with the help of questionnaire administration and findings highlighted; it may well be concluded that visual posts containing brand related information function as key motivational factors that create interaction with and to engage subscribers with brand related activities (like, comment and share). This kind of visual engagement spur subscribers to continually using products and services of the firm. The research further revealed that since subscribers are provided with useful information, they tend to have positive attitudes toward informative ads on social media. Thus, information in the content motivates the subscriber to be more loyal to the firm. In addition, pleasure-like contents (posts) evoke subscribers' emotion toward the brand, influence subscribers' intentions to return to the brand's page, and feel satisfied with the brand's product and services.

Based on the above findings and conclusions this research recommends that GSM service operators who want to improve subscriber patronage are encouraged to focus more on visual post containing brand related and entertaining information; as this has been confirmed to be key motivation that create interaction and engage subscribers to become loyal customers of the firm. These activities lead to customer satisfaction and continues patronage.

More so, due to the idea that pleasure-like contents (posts) evoke subscribers' emotion towards the GSM brand, influence subscribers' intentions to return to the brand's page, and become loyal to the brand; therefore, GSM operators should make design contents with entertainment appeal.

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