

Corporate e-reputation management on LinkedIn: the owned and earned media mix

Abstract

LinkedIn has become a key communication tool for organizations establishing itself as the first professional social network in the world. We conducted a critical analysis of e-content on LinkedIn Business Pages and LinkedIn Personal Pages on a sample of 1 000 employees (members of LinkedIn) and on a sample of organizations from the automobile sector. This analysis highlights owned and earned media and enables to develop a typology of LBP and LPP e-content through four indexes: the index of information, the index of visibility, the index of quotation and the index of participation. These formative constructs are new antecedents of corporate e-reputation within the neo-institutional approach of reputation. Thanks to this analysis of the owned and earned media uses, relevant recommendations with reference to the strategic management of corporate e-reputation have emerged.

Key words: professional social networks, LinkedIn, e-reputation, owned media, earned media

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Introduction

Inside social media, professional networks have become major marketing tools. LinkedIn is the first professional social network worldwide (more than 500 million members in 2017¹). It also ranks first in France (14 million members in 2017²). LinkedIn is playing an important role within digital strategies of communication, of recruitment, of HR marketing; and corporate e-reputation is fundamental for these strategies. All activity sectors, all organizations' departments and more and more professions are on LinkedIn nowadays. This professional social network offers new opportunities to managers allowing them to appeal internal and external stakeholders and to generate interactions. Managers have understood what is at stake and use LinkedIn so as to grow the prominence of their organization by creating LinkedIn Business Pages (LBP). Although the influence of LinkedIn gets bigger every year, research works have been more focused on mass networks such as Facebook (Pronschinske, Groza and Walker, 2012) and Twitter (Vignolles, Galan and Munzel, 2016). These digital tools reinforce the traditional communication of organizations (Viot, 2010). Firms deploy their digital presence and work on their corporate e-reputation thanks to broadcasted messages and their content (Deephouse, 2000). On professional social networks (PSN), companies have three types of media at their disposal; their management is complex. This typology includes (1) owned media (website, official blog, LinkedIn Business Pages, for instance), (2) paid media (display) and (3) earned media (stakeholders' e-content, in particular

1 Source: LinkedIn official figures, available on LinkedIn website, <https://press.linkedin.com/fr-fr/about-linkedin>, visited in November 2017.

2 Source: LinkedIn official figures, available on LinkedIn website, <https://press.linkedin.com/about-linkedin>, visited in November 2017.

employees' e-content) (Décaudin, Digout and Fueyo, 2013). According to this typology and regarding the neo-institutional approach of reputation (Rindova et al., 2005), the management of these media on LinkedIn gets a strategic dimension for three reasons:

- the LBP belongs to the owned media of the organization;
- through its LBP, a firm can buy display ads on LinkedIn;
- and through its LBP, a firm can manage earned media contents generated on this LBP and also those generated on LinkedIn Personal Pages (LPP) linked with the organization (particularly employees' LPP).

Managers can benefit from these opportunities to

build corporate e-reputation by creating, increasing and keeping up relationships between the organization and its different stakeholders. These actions reflect traditional decisions and correspond to strategies of conquest and loyalty.

This research is interested in analyzing the strategic issues that managers can implement to handle the owned and earned media of their company in order to build corporate e-reputation on LinkedIn. In that way, the definition of e-reputation and its concerns are developed within the literature review. Then we present the research methodology that allows us to conduct the critical analysis of organizations' uses on their LinkedIn Business Pages as well as the critical analysis of employees' uses on their LinkedIn Personal Pages. The results are discussed in the course of their presentation; they make emerge a typology of LBP and LPP e-content through four indexes (index of information, index of visibility, index of quotation and index of participation). According to these results we invite managers to take into account this typology in digital marketing strategy to achieve the construction of corporate e-reputation. Finally, contributions, limits and research issues are exposed in conclusion.

Corporate e-reputation: an « intangible asset » to build

Because the web has become social, the reputation of an organization is subject to more risks and its management is becoming more complicated. However, opportunities do exist to build corporate e-reputation and tools to protect it are being created. In this literature review we present the concepts of reputation and e-reputation. We also describe the theories we take on. And we underline the new issues organizations have to cope with regarding the management of their corporate e-reputation.

Reputation is at the core of organizations' success. Reputation is an "intangible asset" (Drobis, 2000; Miles and Covin, 2000; Goldberg et al., 2003; Dolphin, 2004), an "economic asset" (Fombrun, 2001) and has a real impact on an organization's success (Roberts and Dowling, 2002).

The neo-institutional theory defines reputation as a socially built perception. This perception is the result of information exchanges and social influence among various stakeholders interacting in an organizational field (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Rao, 1994; Rindova and Fombrun, 1999; Rindova et al., 2005). This approach underlines the major role of the collective awareness of an organization's existence and relevancy in a given organizational field (Fombrun, 1996; Rao, 1994). Corporate reputation is a construct redefined by stakeholders in accordance with the decisions to be evaluated

(Puncheva-Michelotti and Michelotti, 2010).

The integrating model of Stuart (1999) determines the position of corporate reputation at the end of a long process that includes corporate identity and corporate image (Barnett, Jermier

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and Lafferty, 2006). Corporate identity is built by the employees' and managers' perception about their organization. It deals with an internal outlook. Organizations create their corporate identity in an independent way (Argenti, 2003). Corporate image is made by external stakeholders' perception about the organization. Corporate reputation is the aggregation of these both perceptions. The stakeholders' theory (Bitektine, 2011) and the intellectual capital theory (Bontis, 1998; Edvinsson and Malone, 1997) show the necessity to reckon with all the stakeholders – not only the consumers.

The digital environment empowers reputation

Corporate e-reputation is considered as the part of reputation derived by electronic contacts (Chun and Davies, 2001). "Corporate e-reputation is built by stakeholders' judgment broadcasted on all digital platforms according to their expectations, their beliefs, their values and informational exchanges (e-WOM), and stem from their perception of the amount of an organization's actions, performances and behaviors since its creation" (Fueyo, 2015).

The communication theory (Chernatony de, 1999) and the networks theory (Stuart, 2000) highlight the importance of interactions between an organization and its stakeholders. The value of a social network is based on the extent of its use (Thorbjornsen, Pedersen and Nysveen, 2009). The stakeholders' weight has not to be underestimated. As explained by the theory of resource (Hamori, 2003), the competitive advantage is at the core of the organization: the human capital. Employees are vectors of corporate reputation. Thanks to an appropriate internal communication, they are able to become ambassadors delivering a positive message about their organization inside their digital ecosystem. By their speech employees influence consumers' judgement about an organization (Chernatony de, 1999). This phenomenon of emotional contagion as defined by Bettencourt, Gwinner and Meuter (2001) states that the more the employees have a positive perception of their organization, the more they are going to influence positively the customers' perception. It is necessary to standardize the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders to avoid crises (Dowling, 1994; Hatch and Schultz, 2001). Corporate e-reputation requires a specific management and particular skills that get used to the web inherent features. The new applications of social web make every stakeholder able to take part

in the construction of corporate e-reputation. Internet users are active influencers and a powerful online information relay. These social networks are tools of which content, opinions, ideas and media can be shared (Nair, 2011). The word-of-mouth effect is multiplied (Fogel, 2010; Sago, 2009) as its influence goes over family and friendly circles (Kiecker and Cowles, 2002). The efficiency of message flow is intensified. Indeed, the message is broadcasted faster, costs less and impacts in a more lasting manner (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009).

The role of owned and earned media

According to Deephouse (2000), media influence knowledge and opinions, in particular the agenda theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1993): the media coverage of facts increase the importance of these facts in the public agenda. Deephouse defines the media-reputation as a collective concept connecting the organization and its stakeholders. They are identified such as sources of information and readers of information. The media-reputation is fully realized in the digital environment and is put into perspective by the typology of media (Fueyo, 2015). On LinkedIn, an organization is concretely connected with its stakeholders. The members of the network are creators, broadcasters and readers of information. E-content on LBP (owned media) and LPP (earned media) represents that information. Earned media is online content that stakeholders create and control whereas owned and paid media is online content that organizations create and control (Décaudin, Digout and Fueyo, 2013). Contrary to Facebook members, for instance, members of professional social networks such as LinkedIn define themselves firstly by their working identity: they mention the organization, in which they work, their profession, and their missions. Thick networks provide stakeholders with a better access to more news and credible judgements (Bitektine, 2011). Thus, the more connected are the stakeholders, the less they trust communications from the organizations they evaluate. The number of employees who join this professional social network (LinkedIn) keeps on growing. These employees are building a thick network that allows them to have a direct access to better information about organizations they are interested in, through LinkedIn Business Pages and LinkedIn Personal Pages of their peers.

Research methodology

We are pursuing a dual objective with this research. The first objective is to conduct a critical analysis of the use of the organization's owned media e-content on LinkedIn. LinkedIn Business Pages (LBP) represent the corporate owned media. The second objective is to conduct a critical analysis of the use

of the organization's earned media e-content on LinkedIn. LinkedIn Personal Pages (LPP) represent the earned media. According to the neo-institutional approach, these elements are considered as the antecedents that impact both dimensions of corporate e-reputation (the perceived quality of the digital presence and prominence). The expected contributions involve enriching knowledge about the construction of e-reputation on professional social networks. The expected managerial contributions are the development of tools and recommendations dedicated to managers in charge of the management of their organization's e-reputation.

It is necessary to define what are Business Pages and Personal Pages on LinkedIn.

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- A LBP is a digital platform created by an organization on LinkedIn to inform members of the company, its products, its services and the opportunities of recruitment. This page bears the name of the organization. Every LinkedIn member can follow a LBP. Organizations are able to communicate with their subscribers. The subscribers of a LBP are visible. Broadcasted content on a LBP is created and controlled by an administrator who has a LPP and who is an employee of the organization for which he develops the LBP.

- A LPP, also called "profile", is a digital platform created by an individual when he becomes a member of LinkedIn. A LPP is dedicated to the professional path of an individual. A LPP bears the name of the individual. Broadcasted content on a LPP is created and controlled by the holder of the account. Various features allow to enhance the "profiles" and to increase their visibility. Every member can be in contact with other LinkedIn users and can develop his network. Every member can follow a LBP and subscribe to a "Group".

LBPs and LPPs enable to amplify the digital word-of-mouth and to contribute to the construction of corporate e-reputation (Fueyo, 2015).

The subject of this research needs a sample of homogeneous LBPs. LBPs have to belong to the same activity sector in order to make a consistent statistical processing. We take the car industry on. We realize a survey to 1 222 French members of LinkedIn (641 women and 851 men) so as to establish a ranking of the ten most spontaneously quoted companies of the automobile sector:

Renault (29.70%), Peugeot (15.71%), Citroën (9.98%), Audi (9.16%), BMW (8.59%), Ford (6.38%), Volkswagen (5.40%), Toyota (5.15%), Nissan (4.99%) and Opel (4.90%).

For each of these ten companies we conduct a

critical analysis of e-content use on LBPs. For each of the ten organizations, we analyze 100 employees' LPPs; that is to say a total of 1 000 LPPs (717 men and 283 women; this sample is proposed randomly by LinkedIn). Our study aims to identify the items of employees' LPPs e-content referring to the company. The objective consists in finding habits of employees who are LinkedIn members, in determining how they contribute to ensure their organization a digital presence and in developing its prominence. Data collection relies on the examination of the presence (or the absence) of different contents, called indicators inside every LBP and LPP. Data are coded within a dichotomous manner (0 – absence; 1- presence). As we deal with formative constructs and dichotomous answers, we create indexes for these measures. We conducted the analysis of e-contents' uses regarding indicators at first and then indexes.

Findings and discussion

Results of this research enable to develop a typology of LBP and LPP e-content through four indexes: the index of information, the index of visibility, the index of quotation and the index of participation.

Typology of e-content in LinkedIn Business Pages (LBP)

Thanks to LBPs e-content analysis, we make emerge a typology that includes two indexes:

- the index of information (gathering four indicators: (1) company's logo in the title –LogT, (2) company's description –Pres, (3) "fresh news" –INR, (4) career tab –AOPE);

- the index of visibility (gathering three indicators: (1) the number of subscribers to the LBP –NAPE, (2) the number of company's employees having a LPP –NEPE, (3) the number of members of the company's main eponymous group –NMGEp). LinkedIn members have access to these indicators. The indicators of visibility are data generated automatically by LinkedIn and put of the LBP. They give quantitative information showing the positioning of an organization within the network.

Index of information

We observe the following results. The ten companies use the three indicators of information (LogT, Pres, INR) on their LBP. About their description, every organization indicates its website, its sector, its legal status and its size. Ford is the only one not to indicate its headquarters. Links to other owned social media are not always mentioned. Renault and Audi show their links to their Facebook and Twitter official accounts; only Audi indicates its YouTube page. The career tab (AOPE) is only developed on

the LBP of Ford and Nissan.

Taking into account the index of information after aggregating the indicators, we notice that Ford and Nissan are the firms that manage the information indicators in an optimal manner (ten out of ten). Other firms obtain a high level (7.5 out of ten). These firms are not distinguished by their indicators management; only the career tab (AOPE) is not created. And yet this indicator belonging to owned media plays an important role in the strategies of communication and HR marketing. It favors the recruitment of new talents and the development of employer brand for instance.

Results also reveal that two organizations that benefit from a lower prominence are more active on LinkedIn. They use all the dedicated features in their LBP. Thus, they improve the quality of their digital presence.

Index of visibility

Bigger disparities appear regarding the use of the three indicators of visibility (figure I, page 13). First of all, the number of LBPs' subscribers varies very much from a company to another. Opel is the only organization below 10 000 subscribers. Peugeot and Citroën are also at the bottom of the ranking with 14 624 and 20 290 subscribers respectively. Audi, Renault and Volkswagen count more than 100 000 subscribers. Nissan, Toyota and BMW exceed 200 000 subscribers. Ford is the only company to count more than 500 000 subscribers. Firms that benefit from a lower prominence are those with the most followed LBPs.

Then, the number of employees having a LPP (all countries inclusive) varies very much: from 73 986 for Ford to 2 232 for Opel. The number of employees having a LPP can grow thanks to a reinforced internal communication strategy that explains the importance of creating a LPP so as to increase the organization's digital visibility.

Finally, eponymous groups differ in terms of development (Volkswagen, 10 998 members; Nissan, 615 members). These open groups foster dialogue and interactions with stakeholders. They are clearly under-used by the organizations. That causes a lack of visibility.

The visibility rate³ of an organization on LinkedIn is defined as the percentage of members who are registered for its community platforms and who are different from employees. In this research, organizations' visibility rates are significant and reveal the essential role of owned media on professional social networks: 95.54% for Audi; 93.09% for BMW; 91.55% for Toyota; 91.06% for

Nissan; 88.39% for Peugeot; 86.28% for Ford; 84.04% for Renault; 81.58% for Opel; 74.08% for Volkswagen. Only Citroën has a negative visibility rate (-0.28%).

3 Organization's visibility rate on LinkedIn = $\frac{((NAPE+NMGEp)-NEPE)/(NAPE+NMGEp)}{100}$. Employees having a LPP are registered for, at least, one of the two corporate community platforms, that is to say the LinkedIn Business Page (LBP) and the eponymous group (Fueyo, 2015).

Figure I. LBPs' indicators of visibility

Entreprises	NAPE	NEPE	NMGEp
Renault	165191	27498	7097
Peugeot	14624	1909	1830
Citroën	20290	22568	2215
Audi	138265	6266	2212
BMW	284995	20098	6029
Ford	537225	73986	2264
Volkswagen	179069	49260	10998
Toyota	235319	20317	5250
Nissan	234430	21002	615
Opel	9774	2232	2348

Typology of e-content in LinkedIn Personal Pages (LPP)

Simultaneously, we analyze e-content of LinkedIn Personal Pages (LPP). We make emerge a typology that includes two indexes:

- the index of quotation (gathering three indicators: (1) name of the employee's organization in the "identity file" –NET, (2) name of the employee's organization in the experience bloc –NEEx, (3) organization's logo in the experience bloc –LEEx);
- and the index of participation (gathering two indicators: (1) having a subscription to the LinkedIn Business Page –APE and (2) being a member of the eponymous group –MGEp).

Index of quotation

There are also formative constructs that influence corporate e-reputation (Fueyo, 2015). We observe the following results. For the most part, the employees of the ten organizations

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use each of the three indicators belonging to the index of quotation (NET: 8.05 out of ten; NEEx: 10 and LEEx: 8.11).

Therefore, employees refer to their company several times in their LPP. All employees mention the name of their organization in the experience bloc (NEEx). On the contrary, the use of the two others indicators is not optimal. The employees of Renault, Peugeot, Citroën, Ford and Opel use first LEEx then NET whereas the employees of Audi, BMW, Volkswagen and Nissan use first NET then LEEx. Employees of Toyota use as much LEEx as NET. These results show that employees define themselves by the post they hold but also by the organization that recruits them.

Regarding the logo, the employees of Ford highly incorporate it (8.9 out of ten) whereas the employees of BMW faintly adopt it (6.4 out of ten). Although the use of the name of the organization in the identity file is not automatic, it is frequent. The employees of Audi highly use it (nine out of ten). The employees of Renault mention it less (7.3 out of ten).

Then, when we take into account the index of quotation, results of the analysis reveal that the employees of Audi (9.23 out of ten) and of Ford (8.9 out of ten) are those who mention the most their organization. The employees of BMW are those who refer the least to their company in their LPP (8.23 out of ten). The scores of the quotation index make appear a ranking that is different from the spontaneous brand awareness ranking (Audi, Ford, Citroën, Toyota, Volkswagen, Opel, Renault, Peugeot, Nissan, and BMW).

The employees of the organizations that benefit from a lower prominence are those who are the most active on the professional social network. Indeed they use more the dedicated blocs in their LPP to quote their organization. Thus, they insure the development of the digital presence quality of their organization.

Index of participation

Regarding the two indicators of the index of participation, employees subscribe massively to the LinkedIn Business Page of their organization (9.16 out of ten). Nevertheless they neglect the eponymous groups (3.13 out of ten). The employees of Toyota (4.6), of BMW (4.5), of Renault (4.1) and of Citroën (4) are the most numerous to join the eponymous group of their organization. On the contrary, the employees of Ford (1.3), of Audi (1.4) and of Opel (1.5) faintly contribute to it. The majority of the employees of Audi subscribe to its LBP (9.7 out of ten). Nissan is the organization with the fewest employees who subscribe to its LBP (7.9 out of ten). Then, when we take into account the index of participation, results of the analysis reveal that the employees of Renault are those who participate the most in the community platforms of their organization (6.85 out of ten). On the contrary, the employees of Opel are those who participate the less in them (5.35 out of ten). The scores of the participation index make appear the following ranking: Renault, Citroën, Toyota, BMW, Peugeot, Volkswagen, Nissan, Audi, Ford, and Opel. The low participation of employees in the eponymous group has an impact on this ranking.

The whole of the results of this research underlines the indivisible character of LBP and LPP. Without the creation of the owned media by the organization, employees cannot be involved in the corporate community platforms. Without employees' participation (without these earned media), the visibility of the organization remains minor. When a LBP does exist, the quotation of the name of an organization in a LPP appears automatically as a hyperlink referring to the aforesaid LBP. Once again, earned media and owned media are enhanced mutually. That strengthens the digital presence quality of an organization. The importance of LPP does not have

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to be underestimated. These earned media stem from employees, have to be integrated in the digital marketing strategy of organizations so as to build their corporate e-reputation.

Conclusion

The major theoretical and managerial contribution is that this research highlights the indivisible character of the owned media and earned media on LinkedIn thanks to the creation of two typologies: the typology of LBPs e-content and the typology of LPPs e-content. These two typologies bring a new perspective regarding the digital marketing strategy of an organization in which corporate e-reputation fits in with. Indeed, in one hand, we identify the way to analyze the e-content of LBPs and LPPs. And in the other hand, we make emerge the main role of internal stakeholders within the promotion of their organization (employee advocacy) and their impact on the construction of corporate e-reputation. These typologies (through the indexes of information, of visibility, of quotation and of participation) allow enriching knowledge by the identification of new constituent antecedents of corporate e-reputation. As a matter of fact we provide managers with precious tools to analyze and manage the e-reputation of their organization.

With regard to managerial applications, results allow us to make several recommendations to launch a global corporate e-reputation strategy. This strategy consists first in the creation of owned media by the organization and then in the generation of earned media through LPPs, in particular employees' LPPs. It is necessary to conduct at the same time the management of both types of media. The indicators associated to each of two typologies are fundamental tools on which managers can rely on. Managers have to watch the LPPs e-content of employees: it is an essential step within the management of corporate e-reputation. Earned media contribute to the promotion of owned media to various circles⁴ of external stakeholders. The organization cannot reach these different circles by its own actions. Earned media that are generated improve the digital presence quality as well as its visibility.

First of all, organizations need to inform their employees about their presence on LinkedIn and to invite them to create their LinkedIn Personal Page (LPP). Employees quote not much the name of their organization in their identity file. It is necessary that companies communicate about the importance of this action as, during the research of contacts on LinkedIn, only the identity file is visible by the members. The absence of the name of the organization weakens its e-reputation. In order to encourage employees to follow the eponymous groups (as this action is not mostly done), organizations need to explain the impact of this action using internal communication tools. A low participation affects the visibility of the organization. One of the objectives for organizations is that every employee having a LPP subscribes

to their LBP to strengthen corporate e-reputation. Contents are to be broadcasted regularly within a LBP and an eponymous group to increase the digital presence quality. It goes hand in hand with the creation of the indicator "Career" which is a HR marketing tool favoring interactions. We recommend to managers the following strategic orientation: providing employees with corporate content they can share on their LPP. Employees can also be inspired by this corporate content to create their own content connected with the organization.

One sector and one professional social network are analyzed in this research. In terms of external validity, it will be pertinent to replicate the study on other professional social networks and other activity sectors. A new analysis of LinkedIn Business Pages would look at the different items gathered in every indicator of the indexes of information and visibility. The first objective would be to determine what kind of contents LinkedIn members search for. The second objective would be to identify what kind of reactions are produced when expected contents are absent on the LBP and to measure the impact of these reactions on corporate e-reputation. It will be also pertinent to compare the perceived credibility of owned media through LBPs with the perceived credibility of earned media through LPPs. Finally, a study would be conducted to understand motivations and drawbacks of employees about their use of the indicators of quotation and of participation on LinkedIn.

⁴ On LinkedIn, it does exist three types of circles of contacts: first, second and third degree (Fueyo, 2015).

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