

# **Let's Not Boil the Ocean: A 30,000-Foot View of Human Capital Consulting Firm Twitter Use**

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*Consulting firms that specialize in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology have begun using social media to promote products and services, yet little research has been done on their attempts to market the field. 382 Tweets were collected and analyzed from 16 human capital consulting firm Twitter accounts. Likes, comments, and retweets were also collected. Analyses revealed that medium-sized firms had higher engagement scores than both boutique and large firms. Text analyses revealed that boutique firms used more positive language than large firms. Content that was coded as entertaining was the largest driver of social media engagement. We recommend that consulting firms use more humor and relational language in their posts to draw greater levels of engagement. Future research should expand to other social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok).*

*Keywords: twitter, social media, human capital consulting, industrial-organizational psychology, marketing*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent data suggest that 91% of United States businesses use social media for marketing purposes (Guttmann, 2019). 69% of C-suite executives ranked “digital customer engagement” as their highest digital priority (Hirt & Willmott, 2014; Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). An estimated 92% of marketing practitioners believe in social media’s importance (Stelzner, 2014; Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). This swift embrace of social media brings many positive outcomes for the organization such as increased sales, increased brand loyalty, the development of positive organizational image, and brand equity (Coulter et al., 2012; Kietzmann et al.,

2011; Powers et al., 2012; Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). Thus, communication with stakeholders via social media is essential to an organization's online relevance and impacts consumer decision-making.

I-O psychology's presence has grown on social media (Jimenez et al., 2020; Swani et al., 2014) along with the presence of human capital consulting firms. Twitter's user base has increased considerably (Needleman, 2020) and may provide an opportunity for I-O psychology to share its message. Twitter is defined as "an information network made up of short messages (including photos, videos, and links) from all over the world" (*Glossary*, n.d.). Twitter can create an online presence. Further, organizations categorized by online third-party media, like *Vault*, are seen by potential customers as more credible (Dineen et al., 2019). For example, each of the *Vault 2020 Best Consulting Firms for Human Resources Consulting* have an active Twitter account. Human capital consulting firms that are credible can shape human resource best practices (Islam et al., 2018). Despite calls to better understand how I-O psychology can promote itself (Gasser et al., 200), little empirical research has been conducted on how human capital consulting firms, which engage in I-O interventions, market their services (Armbrüster & Barchewitz, 2004). Many human capital consulting firms employ social media in their marketing strategy and, in turn, promote I-O interventions (Islam et al., 2019; Islam & Schmidt, 2019). To further investigate these notions, we applied Dolan et al.'s (2016) social media framework, a framework based on *information*, *entertainment*, *remunerative*, and *relational* content, to the Twitter content of 16 human capital consulting firms. Thus, the present study is an attempt to explore how human capital consulting firms utilize Twitter to market themselves.

## THEORY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### Social Media and the Organization

Few empirical studies have been conducted on how organizations use social media and even less is known about the reasons behind stakeholder engagement with social media (van Osch & Coursaris, 2013). Social media technologies have the potential to "radically change important organizational processes of communication and collaboration," however research about social media use by organizations has been ignored (van Osch & Coursaris, 2013, p. 700). Van Osch and Coursaris (2013) suggest this may be due to the "lack of a thorough, theoretically-grounded description of the meaning of social media" (p. 700). Scholars acknowledge the effect social media has on marketing and advertising (Felix et al., 2017) as well as employee behaviors such as collaboration, relationship building (Schmidt, Lelchook, & Martin, 2016), knowledge sharing, and learning and innovation (van Osch & Coursaris, 2013). Further, social media content can drive stakeholder engagement for users, draw in potential clients and improve brand recognition (Li, Berens, & de Maertelaere, 2013). Researchers in I-O psychology have recognized the potential for stakeholder engagement via social media platforms (Armstrong et al., 2020). For example, content such as memes, have become a useful vehicle to "inject a bit of fun into the world of I-O" (Jimenez et al., 2020, para. 24). An evidence-based Twitter strategy may help I-O psychologists bridge the scientist-practitioner gap (Islam et al., 2018) by reaching key stakeholders. Human capital consulting firms may effectively curate social media strategies to drive stakeholder engagement, build brand recognition, and potentially drive sales while promoting I-O interventions.

The present exploratory study focuses on the social media platform, Twitter. This platform allows users to interact with users (i.e., organizations), through concise messages (i.e., text, photos, videos, and links). Twitter uses metrics such as "followers," "likes," "replies," or "Retweets" offer great insight into how stakeholders engage with content. According to Twitter's official glossary, a *like* is an action that indicates, to the author, that you "appreciate [the Tweet];" a *reply* is a "response to another person's Tweet;" and a *Retweet* is the "act of sharing another account's Tweet" (*Glossary*, n.d.). These actions can be taken with haste and the high levels of interactivity and quick reactivity have made Twitter a popular social media platform (Burton & Soboleva, 2011; Leung, Bai, & Strahura, 2015), yet it has been difficult for organizations to leverage this tool effectively and understand what content drives follower engagement (Juntunen, Ismagilova, & Oikarinen, 2019).

## Social Media Content Framework

Dolan et al.'s (2016) social media content framework is built on the idea that consumers are active recipients of media. This notion can be explained through the use and gratifications theory (UGT) which addresses how media meets one's needs through the gratification of knowledge enhancement, entertainment, social interaction, and rewards (Dolan et al., 2016; Ko et al., 2005). UGT explains how stakeholders navigate social media platforms that allow for choice and interaction (Ruggiero, 2000). On social media, organizations interact with their stakeholders as a "brand," providing value through content (Malthouse et al., 2013). This content is designed to engage stakeholders by meeting their needs (Malthouse et al., 2013). Based on these needs, Dolan et al. (2016) posited that social media content can be organized into four categories: *information*, *entertainment*, *remunerative*, and *relational*.

Stakeholders search social media to attain various forms of brand information. Information sharing has been recognized as one of the most important reasons individuals use the internet and social media (Dholakia et al., 2004; Lin & Lu, 2011; Park et al., 2009). Therefore, *informational* content considers the extent to which an organization's social media content provides stakeholders with resourceful and helpful information (Chen et al., 2002; Dolan et al., 2016). *Entertaining* content is defined as being fun for stakeholders (Dolan et al., 2016; Eighmey & McCord, 1998). Considering the UGT, entertaining content, fulfills needs for escapism, emotional release, or aesthetic enjoyment (McQuail, 1983). Not only does this content lead to positive attitudes toward the content, it leads to a return to the site (Taylor et. al, 2011). Moreover, stakeholders engage with content if it offers some level of remuneration. *Remunerative content* promises rewards in the form of economic incentive, job-related benefits, or personal wants (Dolan et al., 2016; Muntinga et al., 2011). *Relational* content meets stakeholder needs for social interaction. These needs are met through social media use through a virtual connection with society, allowing for stakeholders to reveal their feelings and share views. This application of UGT to social media engagement behavior, Dolan et al. (2016) argue, shine light on stakeholder motivations behind particular types of media. Thus, we propose the following two research questions to highlight how human capital consulting firms market themselves via Twitter.

**Research Question 1:** *What content is most shared by human capital consulting firms?*

**Research Question 2:** *What content receives the highest level of social media engagement?*

## METHOD

We collected 382 Tweets from 16 human capital consulting firm Twitter accounts. Posts were reviewed from October 2018 to October 2019. From these 16 organizations 25 tweets were collected during this time period. These 25 Tweets consisted of every fifth Tweet from the respective organization's Twitter feed. We were only able to collect 7 tweets from one organization's Twitter feed. Each account was coded for size based on the number of individuals that followed the respective organization's LinkedIn page. Organizations were coded either *boutique* (<100 employees) *medium* (>100-<1000 employees) and *large* (>1000 employees). Firms were categorized based on a review of their LinkedIn pages for the number of employees. 47.64% of firms were large, 39.27% were medium, and 13.09% were boutique.

Tweets were coded according to the Dolan et al. (2016) model. Tweet content was not mutually exclusive. A single tweet, for example, could be coded as either information, remunerative, or both. Researchers also coded whether a Tweet contained brand information. A researcher coded the Tweets, which were then reviewed by another researcher until consensus was achieved about the social media content framework categorization. The content of the tweets was also collected for text analysis.

## RESULTS

Table 1 contains a list of the human capital consulting firms included in the study. Table 2 depicts the Pearson Correlations among relevant study variables.

**TABLE 1**  
**LIST OF HUMAN CAPITAL CONSULTING FIRMS USED IN THE STUDY**

Large Firms	Medium Firms	Boutique Firms
<b>Mercer-Sirota*</b>	Fors Marsh Group	Talent Metrics, LLC
<b>DDI</b>	Outmatch	Training Industry
<b>PwC</b>	HireVue	
<b>EY</b>	Namely	
<b>Gartner</b>	YSC Consulting	
<b>Aon</b>	Culture Amp	
<b>SHL</b>		
<b>McKinsey &amp; Company</b>		

*Note:* \*Mercer-Sirota Tweet information was not included in word clouds due to deletion.

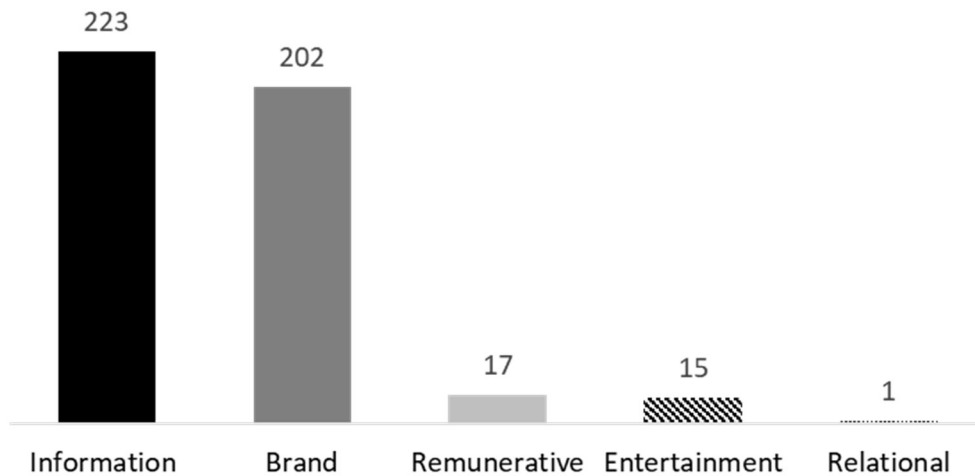
**TABLE 2**  
**LIST OF BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS FOR RELEVANT STUDY VARIABLES**

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Average Engagement Rate	—				
2 Followers	-0.053	—			
3 Likes	0.772 ***	0.256 ***	—		
4 Retweets	0.344 ***	0.450 ***	0.822 ***	—	
5 Replies	0.054	-0.015	0.057	0.091	—

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

First, we categorized all information shared by organizations according to Dolan et al.'s (2016) social media content framework. We also analyzed Tweets containing brand information. Figure 1 contains a bar chart of Tweet frequencies by category. The most popular framework category was information (58.37%), with 223 Tweets. Brand information (52.88%) was the second most frequently Tweeted, with 202 total Tweets. Firms tweeted relational (4.45%), entertaining (3.93%), and remunerative (0.26%) content less frequently with 17, 15, and 1 Tweets, respectively.

**FIGURE 1**  
**TWEET FREQUENCIES CATEGORIZED BY THE DOLAN ET AL. (2015) SOCIAL MEDIA**  
**FRAMEWORK. BRAND INFORMATION IS INCLUDED**



Next, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the impact of firm size (large, medium, boutique) on Twitter behavior (likes, Retweets, and replies). We found a significant main effect of firm size on likes received ( $F(2, 379)=3.417, p<.05, \eta^2=0.018$ ). Post-hoc analyses using Tukey’s HSD test revealed large firms ( $M=9.19, SD=18.52$ ) had significantly more likes than boutique firms ( $M=1.08, SD=1.43$ ). We also found a significant main effect of firm size on Retweets ( $F(2, 379)=16.293, p<.001, \eta^2=0.079$ ). Post-hoc analyses using Tukey’s HSD test revealed large firms ( $M=3.67, SD=6.31$ ) received significantly more Retweets than both Medium ( $M=0.99, SD=3.07$ ) and Boutique firms ( $M=0.60, SD=0.70$ ). The relationship between firm size and Twitter comments was nonsignificant.

Table 3 contains a one-way ANOVA that was conducted to determine the impact of firm size (large, medium, boutique) on Twitter engagement (Shleyner, 2019). Engagement was calculated by adding likes, Retweets, and replies, then dividing this sum by followers. Twitter engagement rates to range from 0.5% to 1% (Shleyner, 2019). A higher percentage denotes greater engagement. Firm size’s effect on Twitter engagement approached statistical significance ( $F(2, 379)=2.036, p=0.13, \eta^2=0.011$ ). Means are to be interpreted as percentages. Descriptive statistics suggest medium firms ( $M=0.63, SD=4.50$ ) have on average, greater engagement than both boutique ( $M=0.06, SD=0.11$ ) and large firms ( $M=0.03, SD=0.05$ ).

**TABLE 3**  
**ONE-WAY ANOVA RESULTS SHOWING THE EFFECT OF FIRM SIZE ON**  
**TWITTER ENGAGEMENT**

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	$\eta^2$
Firm Size	32.129	2.000	16.064	2.036	0.132	0.011
Residual	2990.064	379.000	7.889			

*Note.* Type III Sum of Squares

**TABLE 4**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ENGAGEMENT, BY FIRM SIZE**

Firm Size	Mean	SD	N
Boutique	0.061	0.113	50
Large	0.028	0.053	182
Medium	0.629	4.479	150

Figure 2 depicts a graph showing Tweet engagement means, by Dolan et al.'s (2015) framework, including brand information. Table 15-19 contains respective means and standard deviations. Means are to be interpreted as percentages. Tweets containing entertaining content had the greatest engagement ( $M=1.69$ ,  $SD=3.66$ ). Brand content had modest levels of engagement ( $M=0.44$ ,  $SD=3.86$ ). Tweets containing information ( $M=0.06$ ,  $SD=0.15$ ), relational ( $M=0.03$ ,  $SD=0.06$ ), and remunerative ( $M=0.01$ ) content saw little engagement.

**FIGURE 2**  
**TWITTER ENGAGEMENT MEANS CATEGORIZED BY TWEET ENTERTAINMENT LEVEL**

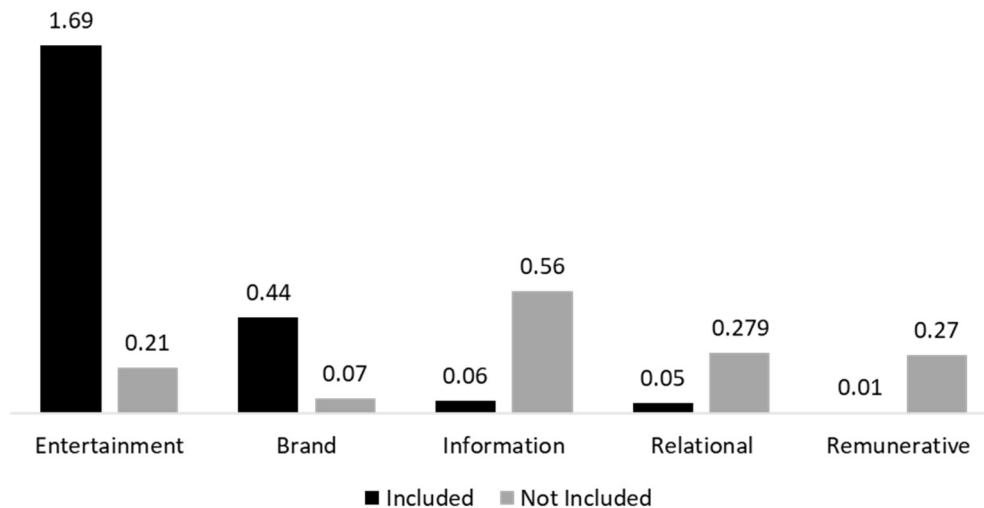


Table 5 contains a One-way ANOVA determining the effect of Tweet type (single entertainment, entertainment multiple, single no entertainment, no entertainment multiple) on engagement. Table 6 contains respective descriptive statistics. Figure 3 contains a graph of Tweet categories. The outcome was nonsignificant. However, tweets with entertaining content and some other aspect had the highest engagement. Entertaining tweets coupled with another aspect of the model/brand had the highest engagement ( $M=1.97$ ,  $SD=4.25$ ).

**TABLE 5**  
**ONE-WAY ANOVA RESULTS SHOWING THE EFFECT OF TWEET TYPE ON**  
**TWITTER ENGAGEMENT**

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	$\eta^2$
Tweet	35.757	3.000	11.919	1.509	0.212	0.012
Residual	2986.436	378.000	7.901			

*Note.* Type III Sum of Squares

**TABLE 6**  
**ENGAGEMENT DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, BY TWEET**

Tweet	Mean	SD	N
Single entertainment	0.928	1.062	4
Entertainment multiple	1.970	4.252	11
Single no entertainment	0.231	2.996	313
No entertainment multiple	0.090	0.161	54

**FIGURE 3**  
**TWITTER ENGAGEMENT MEANS CATEGORIZED BY TWEET TYPE**

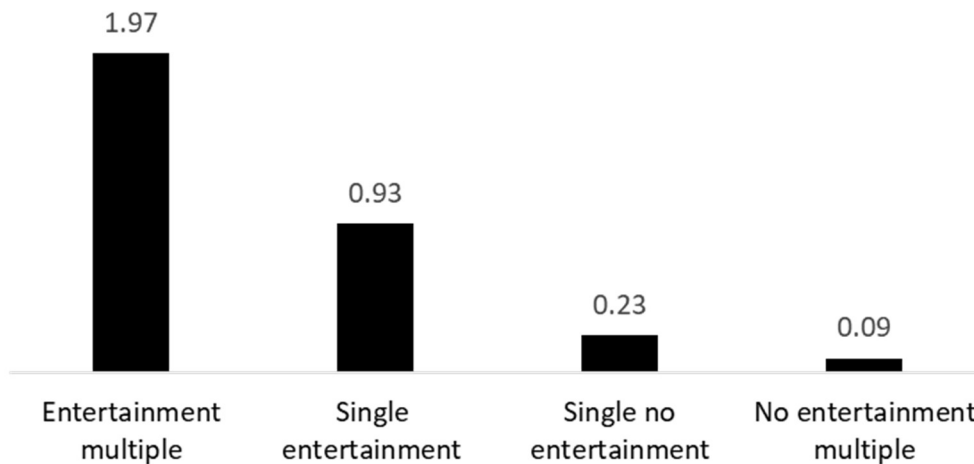
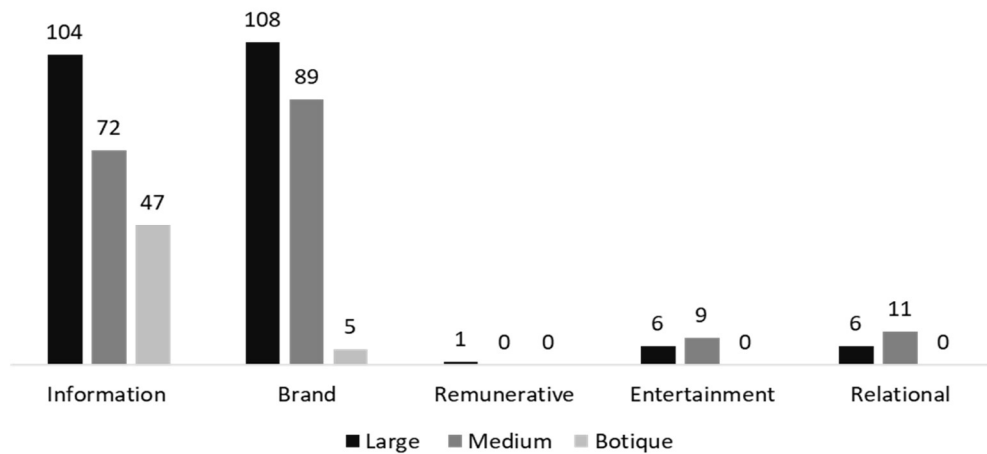


Figure 4 contains a graph showing Tweet frequencies, by Dolan et al.'s (2015) framework, including brand information, by firm size. Large firms Tweeted information 104 times, medium-sized firms 72 times, and boutique firms 47 times. Next, large firms Tweeted brand 108 times, medium-sized firms 89 times, and boutique firms 5 times. Remunerative information was Tweeted by Large firms one time, medium-sized firms zero times, and boutique firms zero times. Large firms Tweeted entertainment six times, medium-sized firms nine times, and boutique firms zero times. Finally, large firms Tweeted relational six times, medium-sized firms 11 times, and boutique firms zero times.

**FIGURE 4**  
**TWEET FREQUENCIES CATEGORIZED BY THE DOLAN ET AL. (2015) SOCIAL MEDIA FRAMEWORK, BY FIRM. BRAND INFORMATION IS INCLUDED**



Exploratory text analyses were conducted in Voyant Tools. We analyzed eight large consulting firms, six medium consulting firms, and two boutique consulting firms. The most frequently used words were sorted into a word cloud. Figures 5, 6, and 7 contain text word clouds by firm size. Mercer-Sirota’s Twitter account had been removed prior to the text analyses data being collected. The researcher sought trends in these analyses and compared the results between each firm size. First, we analyzed plain text contained in company tweets, by size. The five most frequently tweeted were “HR,” “Gartner,” “Global,” “New,” and “Leadership.” The five most frequently tweeted words by medium companies were “HR,” “Talent,” “Work,” “People,” and “YSC.” For boutique companies, the five most frequently tweeted words were “Training,” “Workplace,” “HR,” “IO,” and “Smarter,” see Figure 6. When comparing the text of the different firms, large and medium sized firms seem to focus more on personal branding. These firms used more general terms such as HR and talent. Boutique sized firms appeared to focus more on I-O Psychology terms. For example, boutique firms mentioning ‘I-O’ frequently. Their terminologies seem to be more associated with development with words such as training, HR and workplace.

**FIGURE 5**  
**THE MOST FREQUENT WORDS USED IN TWEETS BY LARGE FIRMS**







and 10 contain hashtag word clouds by firm size. The five most frequently used hashtags by large companies were “#gartnerhr,” “#CHRO,” “#HR,” “#betterworkingworld,” and “#leadership.” The five most frequently used hashtags by medium companies were “#hvhorizon19,” #ibelongatysc,” #peopleandpurpose,” “#talktome,” and “#championsretreat2019.” Boutique companies employed the following five hashtags most frequently “#smarterworkplace,” “#HR,” “#iopsych,” “#humanresources,” and “#leadership.” We see a similar trend in the hashtags for large and medium firms, taking the opportunity to market themselves. For example, #gartnerhr and #ibelongatysc. Large and medium firms used hashtags to draw attention to their events such as HireVue’s hashtag #hvhorizon19 and Fors Marsh Group’s team bonding experience using #championsretreat2019. A similar approach was used by professional associations like SHRM (#Nextchat) and SIOP (#SIOP2020) (Armstrong et al., 2020; #Nextchat | *Blog.SHRM.Org*, n.d.). Boutique firm hashtags espoused a similar niche I-O focus (#iopsych) as their text content (IO), yet, also brought attention to human resource management topics.

**FIGURE 8**  
**THE MOST FREQUENT HASHTAGS USED IN TWEETS BY LARGE FIRMS**



**FIGURE 9**  
**THE MOST FREQUENT HASHTAGS USED IN TWEETS BY MEDIUM-SIZED FIRMS**





revenue. Some firms (i.e., Culture Amp) already offer these types of internal networks to their client base. Boutique and medium sized firms may benefit from using Twitter to communicate these ideas and approximate this kind of relationship building among current and potential clients.

However, the present research was limited in two ways. First, social media content categories were coded by a pair of researchers that achieved consensus together. Second, we were limited in the number of human capital consulting firms used in our analyses especially boutique firms. Now that more firms are joining and using Twitter to build their brand, a larger sample of companies would provide a larger sample of tweets.

Future research should look at the impact of current events on the types of tweets firms put forward. The COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice protests have likely had a dramatic impact on the content human capital consulting organizations shared on Twitter (Ashman, 2019). Social media use, for example, has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Arens, 2020). Researchers may be interested in investigating the Twitter behavior of organizations entering the “new normal” Armbrüster and Barchewitz,(2004, p. 1) suggest public reputation, trust, and word-of-mouth as “mechanisms of the consulting market.” Researchers and practitioners alike may benefit from applying aspects of the Dolan et al. (2016) framework to investigate these mechanisms such as predicting firm sales.

The aim of this exploratory study was to further our understanding of human capital consulting firm use of Twitter. By applying the Dolan et al. (2016) social media framework, we were able to uncover content that drives engagement. In all, we suggest human capital consulting firms expand their use of entertaining content and brand information.

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