



Gratifications of using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat to follow brands: The moderating effect of social comparison, trust, tie strength, and network homophily on brand identification, brand engagement, brand commitment, and membership intention



Joe Phua^a, Seunga Venus Jin^{b,*}, Jihoon (Jay) Kim^a

^a Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia, 120 Hooper Street, Athens, GA 30602-3018, United States

^b School of Business, Sejong University, Neungdong-ro 209, Gunja-dong, Gwangjin-gu 05006, Seoul, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Applying uses and gratifications theory (UGT), this study examined consumers' use of one of four social networking sites (SNSs): Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat, for following brands, and their influence on brand community-related outcomes. Results ($N = 297$) indicated Snapchat users scored highest for passing time, sharing problems, and improving social knowledge, while Instagram users scored highest for showing affection, following fashion, and demonstrating sociability. Twitter users had highest brand community identification and membership intention, while Instagram users had highest brand community engagement and commitment. Attention to social comparison, SNS trust, tie strength, and homophily also significantly moderated the relationship between frequent use of each SNS to follow brands, and brand community-related outcomes. Implications for future research on SNS users' goal-directed consumption behaviors are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) enable users to create personal profiles, articulate their identities, connect with other users and brands, and view, share, upload and comment on photos, messages, videos and other content posted on their newsfeeds (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Phua and Jin, 2011). SNSs are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the everyday lives of people worldwide. Among the most popular SNSs as of March 2016 are Facebook (1.56 billion active users), Instagram (400 million active users), Twitter (320 million active users), and Snapchat (200 million active users) (Statista, 2015). Additionally, a 2015 industry report by Social Media Examiner found that over 96% of businesses use SNSs to market their brands and products, due to their ability to increase brand exposure, attract website traffic, develop loyal fans, and gain marketplace intelligence (Stelzner, 2015). At the same time, consumers are increasingly using SNSs to find out about brands and products (Laroche et al., 2012; Lipsman et al., 2012). Consumers also integrate two or more SNSs as part of their daily activities (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010) and access these SNSs on their mobile devices (Lenhart et al., 2015), allowing marketers more

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: joephua@uga.edu (J. Phua), venus@sejong.ac.kr (S.V. Jin), jaykim82@uga.edu (Jihoon (Jay) Kim).

touch-points to reach their consumers. Social media activities for a brand can foster the consumer base of the brand (Xie and Lee, 2015) and engagement in social media brand communities increases consumers' purchase expenditures (Goh et al., 2013). Millions of companies have set up Facebook pages for brand communication purposes and the popularity of social media necessitates theoretical understanding of how social media exposures influence brand-related outcomes (Xie and Lee, 2015).

In light of the exponential growth of SNSs and the integral role social media platforms play in brand communication (Xie and Lee, 2015; Goh et al., 2013), this study aims to provide theoretical explanations for “why” people use SNSs and further elucidate the key motivations for using different SNS platforms in the context of brand communities. To this end, the current research draws from uses and gratification theory (UGT) given the relevance of the theory to the assumption of media users as “active communicators” instead of passive recipients of media forms and contents (Rubin, 2002).

Approaching the intersection between consumers' use of multiple SNSs to find out about brands and the utility of different SNSs for social media marketing, this study applies UGT (Katz et al., 1974) to examine consumers' use of several top SNS platforms to follow brands, gratifications gained from using them, and their influence on brand community-related outcomes. Drawing from UGT and building upon previous empirical findings (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010), the present study posited that frequent users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat would derive different gratifications from their use (passing time, showing affection, following fashion, sharing problems, demonstrating sociability, and improving social knowledge) (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010), and also have different impacts on brand community-related outcomes (identification, engagement, commitment, and membership intention). The relationship between SNS use and brand community-related outcomes would also be moderated by several intervening variables (e.g., attention to social comparison, SNS trust, tie strength, and network homophily). Overall, the study offers insights into the utility of different SNS platforms for marketing and their influences on consumers' perceptions of brands they follow.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social networking sites (SNSs) and brands

A major advantage of SNSs over more traditional media (e.g., radio, television) is their capacity for greater user interactivity. When SNS users “like” or “follow” a brand, they will receive updates and posts by the brand on their newsfeed. The users can then “like”, share, or comment on the post, which would further propagate it on their friends' newsfeeds, whose own interactions with the post would, in turn, be rebroadcast to their networks. Hence, brand content is transmitted in SNSs at a much faster rate and to a much larger and more responsive audience than most traditional media, but at a much lower cost (Qualman, 2013). As such, digital marketers are increasingly incorporating SNSs as an indispensable part of their online brand strategy by raising brand awareness, driving engagement, and increasing conversions for their brands and products. Previous research on SNSs in consumer marketing found increased consumer engagement with brands based on frequency and content of brand pages' updates (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; Phua and Ahn, 2014; Tsai and Men, 2013), proliferation of user-generated content (UGC) (Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008; Vanden Bergh et al., 2011), referrals and recommendations (Chatterjee, 2011), identification and membership in brand communities (Christodoulides et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2014), and celebrity-endorsed electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) (Jin and Phua, 2014; Lee and Youn, 2009). Studies also examined motivations for engagement with SNS advertising content (Chi, 2011; Kwon et al., 2014; Muntinga et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2012), suggesting that SNS users have various motivations (e.g., information-seeking, leisure, etc.) that influence their use of features within one SNS platform as well as across different SNS platforms. The current study attempts to examine whether gratifications of using SNSs significantly differ across four different SNS platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat), each with unique interactive features and ways for consumers to engage with branded content.

2.2. Uses and gratifications theory (UGT)

UGT (Katz et al., 1974) is a theoretical framework explaining how and why people actively seek out different media to fulfill their specific needs and wants. UGT posits that the gratifications users receive through the media they select, in turn, satisfy a variety of informational, social, and leisure needs. Key assumptions of UGT are: consumers are goal-directed in their media selection behavior and actively interpret and integrate media messages, including advertisements, within their everyday lives, so as to achieve optimal levels of gratification for their needs and desires (Rubin, 1986). Studies applying UGT have found that consumers actively seek out different media to fulfill their informational, entertainment, social, and escapism needs, with media self-efficacy, habitual behavior, prior attitudes, self-regulation, and other factors moderating their media selections (Dimmick et al., 2004; Ko et al., 2005; LaRose and Eastin, 2004).

More recently, scholarly research has used UGT to examine consumers' goal-directed consumption behavior in the context of SNSs (e.g., Chi, 2011; Kwon et al., 2014; Muntinga et al., 2011; Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011; Taylor et al., 2012). In particular, two trends with regards to SNS use among brand consumers have been identified: (1) the majority of consumers simultaneously use more than one SNS platform because each has its unique features and purposes, and; (2) consumers increasingly embrace SNSs as both a communication channel and an informational tool that help them fulfill their informational, emotional, and social desires when used in tandem (Lenhart et al., 2015; Quan-Haase and Young,

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