Understanding consumer motivations to interact on brand websites in the international marketplace: Evidence from the U.S., China, and South Korea

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A B S T R A C T

Brand websites provide opportunities for levels of interactivity that increase the potential for innovative co-creation between consumers and firms. However, little is known about predicting consumer interaction levels on brand websites in markets outside of North American and Europe. Adult consumers in the U.S., China, and South Korea responded to a survey measuring theory-based social and brand-based antecedents of brand website interaction frequency. In all countries, respondents who viewed brands as integral parts of self-concept also interacted more on brand websites. This relationship was mediated by consumers' strength of identification with brand websites as communities. Susceptibility to social normative influence and a positive attitude toward materialism were important predictors of consumer interactions in all countries. Overall, this study found stronger cross-national similarities than differences. Implications emphasize recommendations related to the potential challenge and value of increasing consumer interactions on brand websites in Western and East Asian markets.

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1. Introduction

As Puligadda, Ross, and Grewal (2012, pp. 115) note, "The intriguing possibility that consumers differ inherently in the way they interact with brands has received scant attention." At the same time, consumer interactions with firms that result in shared brand meanings and uses have the potential to enhance brand value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Such brand–consumer encounters increasingly occur on corporate and social media brand websites that enhance firms' abilities to "foster relationships and interact with consumers" (De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012, pp. 83). Consequentially, many companies are harnessing the power of co-creation through development of online communities that build connections between brand users and management (Wu & Fang, 2010).

Recent research suggests simply increasing interactions between firms and consumers in online or offline brand communities can lead to null or even negative outcomes (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005; Homburg, Ehm & Artz, 2015). However, given growing use of the Internet for both brand information and expression of brand opinions (Dellarocas, Zhang & Awad, 2007; De Vries et al., 2012), proactive management of online interactions is increasingly important to firms' long-term successes. (Asmussen, Harridge-March, Occhiocupo & Farquhar, 2013). Central to successful management of such interactions is an understanding of factors motivating consumers

to act as brand development partners, rather than passive recipients of company offers (Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007),

In line with this objective, researchers have identified individual difference antecedents associated with higher levels of consumer participation in online communities and brand websites. For example, Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, and Strobl (2015) report that higher valuation of opinion leadership, self-presentation, enjoyment, and altruism is associated with higher participation in three Austrian online communities. Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang, and Mallin (2013a) find that U.S. and Ukrainian consumers, who more deeply assimilate brands as reflections of their self-concepts, have stronger intentions to engage with brands on *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Kelley and Alden (forthcoming) conclude that individual differences in brand website interaction levels are influenced by a network of antecedents and mediators such as susceptibility to normative influence (SNI; Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989), brand self-concept linkages (Sprott, Czellar & Spangenberg, 2009), purposive motives (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004), and opinion leadership (Huffaker, 2010).

To date, most of this research has either taken place in Western markets or has emphasized theoretical models developed in Western cultures (e.g., Ren et al., 2012). As a result, understanding of factors motivating consumers to interact on brand websites in non-Western markets remains limited. Two notable exceptions are relevant. First, Tsai and Bagozzi (2014) report that social identity and group norms (emotions and attitudes) are more important motivators of desire to contribute to online friendship groups in Taiwan for study participants with weaker (stronger) self-reliance values. Second, Wu, Huang, Zhao

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and Hua (2015) find that purchase frequency increases as Chinese consumers participate more in online brand communities, but then flattens at higher participation levels for consumers whose self-regulatory focus is not promotion oriented (Chatterjee, Roy & Malshe, 2011).

Despite such valuable advances, further research is needed to identify individual difference factors motivating consumers to interact with other consumers and firms on brand websites in markets outside of North America and Europe. In addition to the important theoretical contributions accompanying cross-national testing of marketing theory (Engelen & Brettel, 2011), empirical investigations of consumers in foreign markets assist managers who increasingly promote their brands globally (Steenkamp & de Jong, 2010) in highly competitive markets with large numbers of web users. For example, the number of Internet users in China and South Korea in 2014 was almost three times that in the United States (558 versus 191 million, *Statista*, 2014). Extending the stream on motivational factors leading to higher levels of consumer interactions on brand websites (CIBW) and building on Tsai and Bagozzi (2014) as well as Wu, et al. (2015), this study analyzes social and brand-related motivations for interactions with firms and other consumers on brand websites in the U.S., China, and South Korea. In addition, given well-known differences across the Western and Eastern cultures (e.g., collectivist versus individualist values; Hofstede, 2001), this study explores the extent to which culture-level differences moderate hypothesized effects on consumer tendencies to interact on brand websites. The paper concludes with theoretical implications and managerial recommendations for increasing CIBW in diverse markets.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Brand-related and social predictors of interaction frequency on brand websites — the role of self-knowledge theory

Brand websites are potentially valuable marketing tools providing powerful opportunities for cultivating customer relationships (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Zaglia, 2013). Related research has focused on goal-oriented motivations for engagement (Dholakia et al., 2004), self-presentation (Simmons, 2008), learning through knowledge transfer (Jayanti & Singh, 2010), socialization (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002), recreation (Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007), and online community culture formation (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). Studies of CIBW have examined consumers' transactional behaviors in online settings (Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009; Wu & Fang, 2010). In this context, participants accomplish specific tasks, such as solving problems, developing ideas, and influencing others (Dholakia et al., 2004). Based on analyses of the social networking site *Twitter*, researchers report that some brands intentionally attempt to co-create brand-related narratives with consumers (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010). Other research suggests strong admirers of certain brands desire to interact with other users and the firm directly (Porter, Donthu, MacElroy & Wydra, 2011). Higher interaction levels are indicated when consumers report frequent communication of thoughts to the company and/or other brand users via one or more brand websites (Wu & Fang, 2010).

With this overview in mind, we now offer the theoretical rationale for our proposed nomological network of antecedents to higher levels of CIBW. In selecting constructs of interest, we are guided by "self-knowledge theory," which states that individuals are "assumed to construct self-concepts from their unfolding life experiences" in "selective, inventive, and creative" ways (Markus, 1983, pp. 543). Self-schemas are central to self-knowledge theory and are defined as "knowledge structures about the self that derive from past experience and that organize and guide the processing of self-relevant information contained in the individual's social experiences" (Markus 1983, pp. 547; see also Forehand, Deshpande & Reed, 2002; Wheeler, Petty & Bizer, 2005). Thus, in this study, we draw on self-knowledge theory, hypothesizing that social and brand-related self-schemas play important roles in differentially motivating consumers' interactions on brand websites with firms and other consumers.

First, two social self-schema which are frequently used in cross-national research (Alden, Steenkamp & Batra, 2006) and which reflect social self-schema studied in the brand community context (Dholakia et al., 2004) are tested as exogenous higher-level constructs: social normative influence (Bearden et al., 1989) and materialism (Richins, 2004). The constructs are modeled as higher-level antecedents that exert their influences on CIBW through two more concrete, brand-related endogenous mediators. These self-schema constructs are "brand engagement self-concept" (BESC; Sprott, et al., 2009), which measures the extent to which consumers incorporate brands as integral and important aspects of their self-schema and "identification with brand websites as communities," which taps into consumers' tendencies to view brand websites as social communities where belongingness needs are potentially satisfied (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sen, 2012; Tuškej, Golob & Podnar, 2013; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Furthermore, purposively sampling from the U.S. as the baseline Western culture in which individual difference antecedents and tendencies to interact on brand websites have been most thoroughly examined, this study examines the boundary conditions of existing research by conducting additional studies in two East Asian markets: China and South Korea. Thus, H1–H5 propose main effect relationships expected to be found in all three countries, while H6a–H6c address possibilities of cultural moderation of the strength of main effect relationships within the proposed nomological network.

3. Hypothesis development

3.1. Exogenous social self-schema hypotheses

SNI reflects a consumer's tendency to learn from others and to conform to others' expectations regarding appropriate consumption in order to enhance self-image (Bearden et al., 1989). The construct also indicates the extent to which consumers "identify with a group to enhance their self-image and ego" (Batra, Homer & Kahle, 2001, pp. 116). Brand-related attitudes and behaviors are central to the conceptualization of the construct as well as its measurement in consumer psychology (Batra et al., 2001; Bearden et al. 1989). From such research, it is reasonable to predict that brands and brand information developed and stored within self-schema will be more accessible to high versus low SNI consumers.

Sprott et al. (2009) propose and validate a construct they refer to as brand engagement in self-concept (BESC; see Appendix A). BESC measures how central brands are to consumers' self-schema. The role of BESC in the model is also supported by self-knowledge theory, as consumers may use brands to reinforce their understandings and expressions of individual self-concepts (Fournier, 1998). Escalas and Bettman (2005) suggest that consumers form brand attachments that build self-concepts and align with their self-images. Sprott et al. (2009) report positive associations between BESC and self-brand memory links, liking of brand logos, and preferences for higher priced products from their favorite brands. Given the importance of brands as self-image enhancement vehicles, high SNI consumers are also likely to have higher BESC. This prediction leads to our first hypothesis (see Fig. 1).

H1. Higher levels of SNI are associated with higher levels of BESC in the U.S., China, and South Korea.

As noted, consumers form brand attachments in line with their self-concepts (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Furthermore, brand websites that allow C2B, B2C, and/or C2C interactions provide ready-made sources of information about the brand-norms of consumers active on the site. For this reason, highly interactive consumers who are high on SNI should be more likely to extend their self-concepts to include knowledge of associations with brand websites as communities. As a result,