Persuasive messages, popularity cohesion, and message diffusion in social media marketing

Yu-Ting Chang [a,*,1], Hueiju Yu [b,**], Hsi-Peng Lu [a,***]

[a] National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Taipei, Taiwan
[b] Chinese Culture University, Taipei, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Social media marketing is an influential marketing method. Liking or sharing social media messages can increase the effects of popular cohesion and message diffusion. This research investigates how persuasive messages (i.e., argument quality, post popularity, and post attractiveness) can lead internet users to click like and share messages in social media marketing activities. This research develops hypotheses on the basis of elaboration likelihood model and a 392 fans survey from a fan page on Facebook. Structural equation modeling analyzes questionnaire data. Results show that the three types of persuasive messages are important to click like and to share post messages. Post popularity is essential and works through both central route and peripheral according to research model. In addition, different message characteristics and user groups have different communicating behaviors. This research provides valuable recommendations for social media marketing activities.

1. Introduction

As online users and browse time increase, networks become powerful marketing channels. Only touching and persuasive messages can change users' attitudes and induce enthusiastic interactions (Bhattacherjee & Premkumar, 2004; Coulter & Punj, 2004). Social media marketing, which uses social networks such as Facebook to enable content sharing, information diffusion, relationship building, and fans cohesion (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Kim & Ko, 2012), is an influential marketing method nowadays.

The automatic connections of social media marketing easily spread messages. Social media scale creates synergistic effects, making it a powerful communication tool. Thus, marketing managers must persuade internet users to spontaneously share messages with relatives, colleagues, or friends. Therefore, effective dissemination of information becomes an essential factor in social media marketing success and persuading internet users to facilitate promotions is paramount for recent marketing research.

On the basis of elaboration likelihood model (ELM), which posits two routes of persuasion process (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), this research explores how social media marketing persuades internet users to forward messages to reach popular cohesion and message diffusion. This study investigates message characteristics and how internet users' evaluations affect communicative intention. Moreover, this research analyzes different user groups to understand their communication purposes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Using persuasive messages to change internet user behavior

Persuasion is an active attempt that changes receivers' actions and beliefs via reasonable and sensible expressions (Lee & Xia, 2011). Persuasive messages focus on benefits to and communication with receivers (Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010).

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is an important marketing strategy that affects internet user behaviors (Park & Kim, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009). Suspicious of traditional advertisements, users prefer trustworthy friends, or even information coming from strangers online. Social media sites like Facebook (like, comment, sharing) or Youtube (like, dislike) enable the expression of opinions and emotions (De Vriesa, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Yang, 2012).

ELM is a theory of persuasion researchers often use regarding behavioral changes among message receivers. ELM defines central

* Correspondence to: Y.-T. Chang, Department of Information Management, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, No. 43, Sec. 4, Keelung Rd., Da-an District, Taipei City 106, Taiwan. Tel.: +886 2 2733 3141#7910.
** Correspondence to: H. Yu, Department of Advertising, Chinese Culture University, No. 231, Sec. 2, Jianguo S. Rd., Da-an District, Taipei City 106, Taiwan. Tel.: +886 2 2700 5858#8558.
*** Correspondence to: H.-P. Lu, Department of Information Management, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, No. 43, Sec. 4, Keelung Rd., Da-an District, Taipei City 106, Taiwan. Tel.: +886 2 2737 6781.
E-mail addresses: cathries@ms28.hinet.net (Y.-T. Chang), hjyu@sce.pccu.edu.tw (H. Yu), lu@mail.ntust.edu.tw (H.-P. Lu).

and peripheral routes in persuasion and describes how receivers' thinking processes change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). ELM central route persuades people who carefully consider a wide range of information. Peripheral clues (such as subjective impressions) persuade people who lack motivation or ability (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006; Di Blasio & Milani, 2008).

2.2. Communication technology, cohesion, and diffusion effects

Nowadays communication technologies are bidirectional (Camarero & San Jose, 2011). Both marketing managers and internet users provide messages, targeting individuals and social alignments that comprise their links or relationships. Communication technologies such as bulletin board systems for collecting public opinion, blogs which share personal messages, and interactive and connective social media can achieve message diffusion and popular cohesion (Karnik, Saroop, & Borkar, 2013; Yoo & Alavi, 2001).

3. Research model and hypotheses

To explore the relationship between persuasive messages in a fan page post, recipients' cohesion, and diffusion behavior, as well as the moderating effect of relative significance and user expertise, this study develops a theoretical framework according to ELM. Fig. 1 shows research model.

3.1. Persuasive messages

Argument quality refers to the persuasive strength of arguments in the post content (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006) and is an essential factor in recipient perception that may lead to recipient attention (Coulter & Punj, 2004). Strong arguments generate favorable cognitive responses regarding posts. If posts are full of wrong content, broken links, non-related topics, and ads, recipients may have a negative vision. Recipients should be aware of page topic to analyze argument quality, which directly affects usefulness (Zhou, 2012). Therefore, this study poses the following hypothesis:

H1. Argument quality of posts has a positive effect on usefulness.

Post popularity refers to the number of likes and comments, as well as sharing and response comments on posts (De Vriesa et al., 2012). Post popularity directly affects usefulness and indirectly affects behavioral intention to choose central routes. Therefore, post popularity directly affects preferences and indirectly affects behavioral intention to choose peripheral routes (Sinclair, Moore, Mark, Soldat, & Lavis, 2010). Research shows that external influences such as social norms or social

influences affect user behavior (Cheung & Lee, 2010). User comments affect usefulness beliefs and preferences (Park & Kim, 2008). This study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2a. Post popularity positively affects usefulness.

H2b. Post popularity positively affects preference.

Posts attractiveness refers to the extent to which recipients perceive posts as admirable and appealing (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999). Hence, post attractiveness may affect individual preferences (Verhagen, Feldberg, van den Hooff, Meents, & Merikivi, 2012).

H3. Post attractiveness positively affects preference.

3.2. Beliefs and attitude

Recipients mainly read posts because of two factors: Usefulness and preferences. Usefulness refers to user perceptions deriving from personal or professional judgment about content that may benefit their performance in browsing posts (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006), while preferences comprise favorable feelings and interests (Kim & Son, 2009). Recipients' beliefs about posts usefulness affect preferences (Bhattacherjee & Premkumar, 2004).

H4. Usefulness positively affects preference.

Innovation diffusion theory (IDT) explains that usefulness determines the eWOM diffusion intention of post recipients (Rogers, 1995). Hence, usefulness has a positive connection with eWOM intention (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

H5a. Usefulness positively affects like intention.

H5b. Usefulness positively affects share intention.

Recipients express like or share behaviors when they have interest in posts consistent with personal expectations. Therefore, preference positively affects eWOM intention (Hsu & Lin, 2008; Murray & Haeubl, 2011).

H6a. Preference positively affects like intention.

H6b. Preference positively affects share intention.

3.3. Behavioral intention

Like intention refers to the intention to press the like button, while share intention refers to the intention to press the share button (De
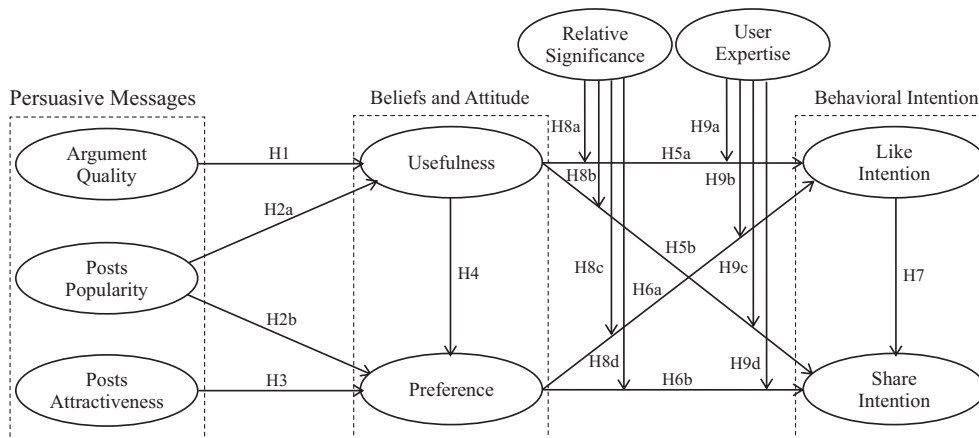

Fig. 1. Research model and hypotheses.