



Predicting positive user responses to social media advertising: The roles of emotional appeal, informativeness, and creativity



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ABSTRACT

As social network services become more pervasive, social media advertising emerges as an attractive vehicle for augmenting advertising effectiveness. To leverage this new means of marketing, one must understand what engages SNS users in a favorable online behavior (i.e., overtly indicating personal interest in, or support for, the exposed message by clicking the Like or Share button in Facebook), thereby resulting in an effective advertising campaign. This research conceptualizes SNS ad effectiveness as a concept encompassing emotional appeal, informativeness and creativity that all have a potential to contribute to a positive online behavior. It empirically investigates the antecedents of positive user behavior for a SNS ad based on the theory of reasoned action, the social influence theory, and a persuasion theory. It proposes and tests a conceptual model of the formation of online user's behavioral responses with regards to SNS advertising. The results of our empirical tests of the model reveal that informativeness and advertising creativity were key drivers of favorable behavioral responses to an SNS ad and that intention to engage in favorable user responses was positively associated with purchase intention. Based on these findings, the paper suggests further research directions and offers implications for harnessing the full potential of the new SNS advertising platform.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the increasingly widespread use of social networking sites (SNS) has gradually shifted the advertisement platform used by business firms from traditional media to social media. Strong growth in mobile advertising is expected to increase the use of digital ads, which represented up to 30% of all U.S. ad spending in 2014 (eMarketer.com, 2014). Social media marketing enables word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising campaigns, inducing brand awareness and increasing sales revenue (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009; Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012), and also promotes a firm's relationships with prospects, which makes it easy to accurately target consumers. Social media marketing has thus attracted much attention from businesses seeking to generate increased consumption of their commercial offerings (Wikipedia.org, 2015b).

One challenge facing marketing professionals considering campaigns on SNS is ensuring that the social network ad in question serves its goals effectively. Many marketing professionals find it difficult to measure the effectiveness of social media campaigns

because tracking their outcomes is hard. However, the extent to which a social media advertisement is producing the intended benefits can be gauged by examining the interactions (e.g., the number of "Likes" or "Shares") among social network users to assess their perceptions of the ad (Burg, 2013). The bottom line is that in order for a SNS ad to be considered effective, it should be able to lead a user to favorably respond to the ad (e.g., publicly expressing his/her support for the ideas conveyed by, or for the mood generated by, the ad). User's positive responses on a social network are likely to help spread the advertisement message among the users, contributing to the increased awareness of the featured brand. According to a related research report (Gustin, 2012; Lipsman, Aquino, & Kemp, 2012), not only 'exposed fans' but also 'friends of fans' were found to spend more after viewing ads on Facebook. Presumably, ads that can induce positive perceptions and responses among social network users would likely create the WOM effect, and thus result in greater sales yielding high return on investment in SNS ad campaigns.

In this regard, present research has been motivated by two research questions (RQ): what are the qualities of a SNS ad that help produce positive user responses (RQ1), and is positive user behavior with regards to a SNS ad a predictor of positive purchase behavior (RQ2)? Extant research has not systematically addressed these issues. Research identifying desirable qualities of a SNS ad will pro-

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vide useful implications for producing positive user responses, and hence intended business benefits of the ad. A few studies (Ducoffe, 1996; Gao & Koufaris, 2006; Logan, Bright, & Grngadharbatla, 2012; Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011) have examined the predictors of user attitudes to SNS advertising, but they offer little assistance in predicting attitudes to the positive user responses that help improve the brand awareness on a social network. It is imperative to understand what drives users' favorable online behavior (e.g., clicking the Like or Share button for a SNS ad) if a firm is to increase the potential effectiveness of an ad campaign. In this research, we use the term 'positive user behavior' to refer to a user's behavioral responses associated with disclosing and spreading the user's personal interest in, and/or support for, a SNS ad.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify the antecedents of the behavioral intention to engage in positive user behavior for an SNS advertisement and propose a conceptual model of how positive user responses to an advertisement are formed on a SNS. The conceptual model is built around the theory of reasoned action, the social influence theory, and a persuasion theory. We thus gain insight into the predictors of viral behavioral intention with respect to SNS advertisement and the impact of these predictors (e.g., attitude, subjective norm, herd behavior, privacy concerns, etc.) on consumers' behavioral responses including purchase intention. Predictors believed to play a sizable role in forming users' behavioral responses will be drawn from the related literature. The findings of this research will offer useful implications for firms seeking a favorable return on investments from their SNS campaigns.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, we review the related literature to gain a basic understanding of underlying concepts that will be used to construct a theoretical model and hypotheses. The literature on empathy expression, advertising effectiveness, social influences, and privacy concerns would provide insights into potential antecedents to the viral behavioral intention. Next, we introduce the data collection method, sample, and measures used to test the model. Then, we present the results and discuss the key findings of the study. Finally, we provide implications as well as limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

One theoretical backbone that underlies the present research is the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The theory of reasoned action (TRA) posits that an individual's behavior is conceptualized as a consequence of the behavioral intention that is affected by both the individual's attitude concerning the behavior and the subjective norm concerning it (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Over the last decade, numerous studies have modeled user behavior on SNS based on the TRA. However, these studies have focused on either SNS use (Kwon & Wen, 2010; Pelling & White, 2009; Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2008) or continued SNS use (Choi, 2013) with little attention paid to user behavior concerning SNS ads. In our research, we use the TRA to model the user's online behavior associated with a SNS ad. The TRA provides a powerful model to predict consumer's volitional behavior and intentions based on salient information and beliefs about the likelihood that performing a particular behavior will lead to a specific outcome (Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992). And user's online behavior including revealing personal reaction to a SNS ad is regarded as a type of volitional behavior that can be adequately modeled and predicted using information and beliefs about the use of a SNS. Specifically, a positive user response to a SNS ad is viewed as a behavioral outcome jointly formed by the user's attitude toward the user response and the subjective norm about that user response. It is presumed further that the user's attitude is determined by beliefs a consumer may have as to the effectiveness of a SNS ad, such as emotional appeal.

Meanwhile, user behavior associated with SNS ads may also be explained from the perspective of the social influence theory. SNS advertising differs from conventional advertising in the way the advertising content spreads among the individuals whom the ad is targeted at. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) enabled by a SNS accelerates the dissemination of the advertising message over a social network. Interpersonal influence that exists in a SNS serves as a driving force for users' engagement in eWOM so that SNS users' online dissemination behavior including opinion giving, opinion seeking and pass-along responses tend to be driven by the acts of peer users (Chu, 2009). While the TRA includes a social influence construct called subjective norm that denotes an individual's perception of the pressure to conform to the expectations of important others, the theory is not extensive enough to incorporate the bandwagon effect that refers to the tendency that the probability of individual adoption increasing with respect to the proportion who have already done so (Colman, 2014; p. 77). It is important that both dimensions be taken into consideration to assess the social influence.

In summary, the TRA and the social influence theory represent two prime theories used in this research to predict the user's positive responses to a SNS ad. The theoretical framework underpinning the present research encompasses both internal and external drivers of the behavioral intention to express empathy (e.g., to click the Like or Share button) with regards to a SNS ad. Internal drivers are a user's own evaluations of the outcome of a given behavior, while external drivers are the user's perceptions of other people's behavior or evaluations such as social pressures inducing the user to perform that behavior. The TRA provides both an internal driver (i.e., attitude) and an external driver (i.e., subjective norms). However, the external driver incorporated into the TRA is not comprehensive in that it only includes normative social pressure without paying attention to informational social pressure. Thus, we combined the TRA with the social influence theory so as to include both informational and normative social influences. The resulting research model now incorporates relevant internal and external drivers that are likely to influence the intention about empathy expression.

In addition to the two theories mentioned above, this research employs a theory of persuasion called elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to illuminate the influence of emotion on attitude change. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) view persuasion as a process in which the success of influence depends chiefly on the way the receiver makes sense of the message. They state that ELM introduces two distinct pathways that one can use when trying to persuade others. Central route is associated with cognitive processing of the message content, while peripheral route relies more on peripheral cues (e.g., speech tones, credibility of the persuader, etc.) for a short cut than on the content itself. The ELM theorizes that peripheral messages appealing to a given peripheral cue can enable powerful influence especially when message receivers are either uninterested in, or unable to process, the content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Given peripheral route processing, emotional appeals may make a positive impact. Thus, the ELM will provide a theoretical guideline in hypothesizing the relationship between emotional appeal and attitude toward empathy expression.

Given the aforementioned research aim, it was imperative that we identify key constructs that play a role in leading to a positive user evaluation of the empathy expression behavior. A review of the literature resulted in the research model shown in Fig. 1, which outlines the antecedents and their impact on behavioral intention to express empathy about the given ad. Hypotheses H1, H6, H7 and H9 involve the relationships between the behavioral intention to express empathy and its antecedents. As the TRA posits, the behavioral intention is influenced by attitude and subjective norm. The model incorporates the positive impact of social influences

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