Full length article

Are you on Timeline or News Feed? The roles of Facebook pages and construal level in increasing ad effectiveness

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examines how psychological distance between a user and a Facebook page (Timeline vs. News Feed) impacts the effectiveness of advertising messages framed by two different construal levels (high- vs. low-level construal). Based on construal level theory, a 2 (Psychological distance: distant vs. proximal) × 2 (Message type: high-level vs. low-level construals) factorial design was employed. The results of the study showed that individuals accessing the News Feed page responded more favorably to abstractly framed desirability-focused messages than concretely framed feasibility-focused messages. In contrast, individuals accessing the Timeline page showed more positive reactions to concretely framed feasibility-focused messages compared to abstractly framed desirability-focused messages. The study concludes with the discussions of theoretical and empirical implications and recommendations for future research.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the popularity of social media has sky-rocketed and advertisers and marketing practitioners have put more effort into using social media to communicate to consumers (Chi, 2011). To verify the value of social media, numerous studies have explored the roles of social media in the areas of marketing and consumer behavior (i.e., Chu, 2011; Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan, 2010; Logan, Bright, & Gangadharbatla, 2012; Jung, Shim, Jin, & Khang, 2015; Van Noort, Antheunis, & Verlegh, 2014). For instance, Dehghani and Tumer (2015) suggest that the process of gathering and exchanging information about a brand through Facebook can enhance the brand's image and equity, thereby enhancing the intention of consumers to make a purchase. Facebook has a particularly strong advantage with its so-called "friendvertising," which allows users to share information with others about their favorite products and services (Maurer & Wiegmann, 2011). By making users incorporate a brand message in conversations with friends on the News Feed page, Facebook can be used as a marketing communications channel.

What sets social media apart from other online media is that it enables users to articulate and visualize their social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This uniqueness provides users with opportunities, not only to form new connections with others, but also to maintain their existing social ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In so doing, social media users tend to tailor their online presentations to match the target audience with whom they wish to communicate (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Since users present themselves differently to different audiences, they prevent certain audiences from viewing some parts of their Facebook account (Zhao et al., 2008). This concept is well-illustrated by two pages that users visit most frequently in Facebook: News Feed and Timeline (Barreto, 2013). The News Feed page is a relatively open place where users connect to and read recent posts by other users, who range from acquaintances to family and close friends. By

contrast, the Timeline page is a relatively private place that may be accessed mainly by close friends and family. Thus, while the News Feed page is a space designed to obtain news from a wide spectrum of sources, the Timeline page serves as a user's personal homepage. In this sense, it can be assumed that the host user employs Facebook's News Feed and Timeline pages to enact different social relations. Despite the importance of social relations in Facebook, little empirical research has been conducted to investigate how those two distinctive Facebook pages, representing different users' social connections, can influence the effectiveness of social media marketing.

Through the concept of psychological distance, construal level theory (CLT) suggests that individuals conceptualize psychologically distant objects in an abstract way, whereas they form more concrete representations of psychologically proximal objects (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Psychological distance is defined as "a subjective experience that something is closer or far away from the self, here and now" (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440). Because social distance is one dimension of psychological distance, CLT predicts that the greater a social distance to another person, the more likely the person is represented in terms of abstract, primary concepts, such as stereotypes and dispositions, rather than in terms of concrete and more incidental details (Kim, Zhang, & Li, 2008). The idea of comparative psychological distance suggested by construal level theory would thus dictate that Facebook's News Feed and Timeline pages play disparate roles in moderating the effectiveness of messaging in that they are framed in two different ways (high-level vs. low-level construal messages). This is demonstrated by users' more socially distant connections on their News Feed than their more socially proximal relationships on their Timelines. Therefore, when users are on the News Feed page, which is frequented by mere acquaintances, an abstractly framed message that emphasizes the superordinate features of an object or event may be more persuasive than a concretely framed message that emphasizes subordinate features of an object or event. The reverse will be true when users are on the Timeline page, which is frequented by family and friends.

The central premise of this research is that matching the advertising-message framing with the psychological distance a user has to a Facebook page increases the likelihood of a favorable evaluation of the advertisement and the brand. Through these relationships, the current study seeks to demonstrate the application of construal level theory in new media research and offers practical guidelines for social media communications.

1.1. Facebook

Social media can be categorized by its characteristics into content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), and microblogging (e.g., Twitter; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Among these platforms, Facebook is considered the largest platform through which advertisers communicate directly with consumers (Bennett, 2014). As of June 2015, Facebook has 1.49 billion worldwide users who are active monthly, with 968 million users logged onto Facebook daily (Facebook, 2015a). On average, users access Facebook for approximately 21 min per day, which constitutes 33.3% of the time they spend on their social networking sites (eMarketer, 2014). Based on these figures, businesses advertising on Facebook access a huge number of existing or potential consumers as marketing targets, as reflected by 2014 figures indicating that Facebook held 75% ($11.4 billion) of the entire social media ad budget ($15.3

billion), followed by Twitter at 8% (Beck, 2015)

A number of studies have been conducted to understand Facebook use and behavior (e.g., Chen & Marcus, 2012; Ellison et al., 2007; Jin, Phua, & Lee, 2015; Lang & Barton, 2015; Ryan & Xenos, 2011). For example, Lang and Barton (2015) demonstrated several methods by which individuals managed undesirable Facebook photos to maintain their self-images. Moreover, Jin et al. (2015) suggested that the popularity of a community on Facebook, as well as its message styles, can impact perceived source credibility and information value. For instance, Facebook users prefer popular pages that have a high number of "likes" and informational messages from experts over less popular pages and testimonial messages from other users (Jin et al., 2015). Self-presentation and interaction with other users are the major functions of Facebook (Zhao et al., 2008).

These functions can be associated with the site's structural features. Buddy Media (2012), reporting *where* users spend their time on Facebook pages, found that the most frequently visited pages were News Feed (27%) and Timeline (21%). The News Feed page, also known as the Home Page, is "a constantly updating list of stories from people and pages that you follow on Facebook. News Feed stories include status updates, photos, videos, links, app activity and likes" (Facebook, 2015b). Timeline pages, also sometimes referred to as a "Profile" or "Wall," include a "collection of the photos, stories, and experiences that tell the users' stories" (Facebook, 2015c). Given that News Feed posts typically contain a variety of information ranging from commercial brand messages to stories from friends, the News Feed page can represent the breadth of a user's social relationships. By contrast, since most posts on the Timeline page relate to the user's daily life and news from his or her close friends and family members, the Timeline page can evidence a greater concern with the user's self. Therefore, the user's perception of distance vis-à-vis the two Facebook pages may differ, such that the user may feel more proximally distant toward his or her Timeline compared to News Feed.

1.2. Construal level theory (CLT)

Construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003) suggests that temporal distance, defined as the perceived proximity of an event in time, can influence an individual's reaction to future events by changing his or her mental representations of those events. Trope and Liberman (2003) proposed that the greater the temporal distance, the more likely future events are to be denoted by abstract features which relate to the essence of the events (high-level construals) rather than in terms of concrete features concerned with incidental details (low-level construals). Based on the relationship between temporal distance and construal levels, CLT was developed to cover other dimensions of perceived distance: social distance, spatial distance, and hypotheticality within the concept of psychological distance (Bar-Anan, Liberman, & Trope, 2006; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Since psychological distance is an egocentric concept with the self, here and now, as a reference point, the four dimensions (temporal, spatial, social distance, and hypotheticality) are cognitively related and influenced by a similar level of mental construals (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Therefore, as psychological distance from an object or event increases, individuals are more likely to conceptualize the object or event in an abstract way (a high-level construal) rather than in a concrete way (a low-level construal), similar to their perceptions of temporal distance (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, &