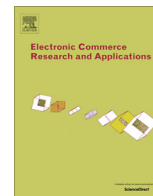




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## Building brand loyalty in social commerce: The case of brand microblogs



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### ABSTRACT

Social commerce enables companies to promote their brands and products on online social platforms. Companies can, for instance, create brand pages on social networking sites to develop consumer–brand relationships. In such circumstances, how to build consumers' brand loyalty becomes a critical concern. To address this, we draw upon the relationship quality perspective to suggest that brand loyalty is primarily determined by relationship quality, which is further influenced by self-congruence (i.e., the self factor), social norms (i.e., the social factor), information quality and interactivity (i.e., characteristics of brand pages). To test our model, we conduct an empirical survey on companies' brand microblogs. We find that all proposed hypotheses are supported. Interestingly, the self factor rather than other factors was found to have the strongest impact in the model. In addition to its noteworthy implications for practitioners, we believe that this study provides important theoretical insights into understanding how to build brand loyalty in social commerce.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, social commerce has emerged as an important arena of electronic commerce (e-commerce). The concept of social commerce refers to any business activities that are mediated by social media or social networking sites (Curty and Zhang 2013). To embrace social commerce, a primary online practice for many companies is to establish an identity, also known as a company's brand page, on social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter (Zadeh and Sharda 2014). In fact, Fortune 500 companies have shown increasing interest in using Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and self-hosted online communities to enable interactions with consumers (Culnan et al. 2010). A recent report by Barnes and Lescault (2014) highlighted that 83% of Fortune 500 companies have already created brand microblogs on Twitter, and 80% have Facebook brand pages.

For companies, creating a brand page on a social networking site is merely a step towards engaging in social commerce. However, much still remains unknown regarding how to achieve success in this emerging context (Zhang et al. 2015). Recent studies have shown a growing interest in some important dependent variables of social commerce. For instance, Liang et al. (2011)

developed the concept of social commerce intention. They referred to it as the degree to which online users are likely to receive and share commercial, shopping, or product information on social networking sites. Hajli (2014) followed the same direction and investigated whether social support and relationship quality positively affected social commerce intention on Facebook. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2014a) contended that social commerce intention may be influenced by technological environments and virtual consumer experiences. Another line of research emphasizes consumers' purchase behavior stimulated by social networking sites. Wang and Chang (2013) conducted an experiment on Facebook and showed that tie strength and perceived diagnosticity of recommendations affected consumers' decisions to buy recommended products. Ng (2013) examined purchase intention by considering the mediating effect of trust on social networking sites and the moderating effect of culture. Finally, Kim and Park (2013) found that the characteristics of social commerce firms influenced consumers' trust in firms, which in turn affected purchase intention.

Whereas the abovementioned studies provided some valuable insights into consumer behavior in social commerce, a largely uninvestigated dependent variable is consumers' brand loyalty (Laroche et al. 2013), and brand loyalty is indeed a critical concern in the extant literature (Oliver 1999). Similar to many previous studies (e.g., Casaló et al. 2007, Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001, Jang et al. 2008, Porter and Donthu 2008), this research defines *brand loyalty* from a behavioral perspective. We refer to it as the extent to which consumers will *repurchase* products of a brand

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and recommend the products or brand to their friends while following and being influenced by companies' brand pages on social networking sites. From this perspective, brand loyalty reflects the long-term relationship between consumers and brands (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001), and it also captures an important aspect of consumer behavior in the online brand building process. A recent survey by eMarketer (2013) showed that 53% of social network users in the US and 66% of those in China had followed companies' brand pages. Marketprobe International (2013) indicated that 72% of users tended to buy products from a small or medium-sized business after following its brand microblog on Twitter, and 30% of them were inclined to recommend the microblog to friends. Malhotra et al. (2012) observed that companies should build brands rather than promote products blatantly through social networking sites. Based on these findings, it becomes imperative for both practitioners and researchers to comprehend how to create, maintain, and strengthen consumers' brand loyalty using social networking sites.

In this research, our purpose is to understand the determinants of brand loyalty while consumers follow companies' brand pages on social networking sites. Contrary to traditional online brand communities, in which consumers primarily interact with other consumers, companies' brand pages accentuate their role in interacting with their consumers and followers. To address this unique attribute of brand pages, we draw upon the relationship quality perspective. We propose and empirically test a research model to articulate the mediating role of relationship quality in building brand loyalty. More importantly, we propose four key determinants of relationship quality, namely, self-congruence (i.e., the self factor), social norms (i.e., the social factor), and information quality and interactivity (i.e., the characteristics of brand pages). We expect this study to contribute to research in a number of aspects. First, it adds to recent social commerce research by investigating brand loyalty on social networking sites. This is an important research area that only receives limited attention (Laroche et al. 2013). Second, we investigate the mediating role of relationship quality on brand loyalty. We identify and empirically test brand loyalty's antecedents in the current social media context, and this relationship quality perspective extends our understanding of online brand communities by emphasizing the relationship between companies and consumers rather than just focusing on interactions among consumers. We expect our findings to provide insights into companies that intend to take an active role in engaging with consumers through social networking sites (Codes et al. 2005). Finally, we identify the self factor (i.e., self-congruence) as the most important antecedent in our model. This is not in line with the common understanding that the social factor or characteristics of companies' brand pages are likely to play dominant roles in online social contexts (e.g., Jang et al. 2008, Zeng et al. 2009).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we present the theoretical background of this study. We develop our research model and hypotheses in Section 3. In Sections 4 and 5, we empirically test the model by conducting an online survey on a microblogging site. Finally, in Section 6, we discuss our findings and address the theoretical and practical implications, as well as the limitations and opportunities for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background

To gain insights into building brand loyalty in social commerce, this section first reviews previous studies on brand loyalty in online environments. We then discuss the perspective of relationship quality, as well as the self and social factors and characteristics of brand pages.

### 2.1. Brand loyalty in online environments

With the prevalence of e-commerce and Web 2.0 technologies, many marketers and companies are realizing that it is important and beneficial for them to build brand loyalty in online environments. To achieve this goal, the most widely adopted approach is to establish online communities in which consumers can share their interests and interact with each other (Hagel and Armstrong 1997, Kim et al. 2008). The seminal work of Armstrong and Hagel III (1996) determined that online communities may address four aspects of consumer needs, namely, transactions, interest, fantasy, and relationship needs.

In the extant literature, we identify a total of 12 key papers that empirically investigate brand loyalty building in online communities. A summary of these papers is depicted in Appendix A and is briefly discussed here. Brand loyalty is often defined in these papers from a behavioral perspective, which primarily considers consumers' product or brand repurchase and recommendation (e.g., Casaló et al. 2007, Hur et al. 2011, Porter and Donthu 2008). Brand loyalty was examined from an attitudinal perspective by Shang et al. (2006), emphasizing consumers' commitment and emotional attachment to brands, while Kuo and Feng (2013) studied oppositional brand loyalty, which refers to the degree to which consumers express negative opinions on rival brands. As shown in our literature summary, prior research has provided insights with respect to the direct antecedents of brand loyalty. In general, a majority of these studies focus on the influence of consumers' beliefs, feelings, or behavior associated with online communities. For instance, Casaló et al. (2007, 2010a,b) elucidated the influence of consumers' community participation on brand loyalty. Hur et al. (2011) posited that if consumers trust the members of an online brand community, then they are likely to develop a high level of loyalty to that brand. Jang et al. (2008) and Kuo and Feng (2013) also showed that community commitment is an important determinant of brand loyalty in such contexts. Looking at these studies, we observe that only few of them examine the impacts of relational factors between consumers and brands or companies (e.g., Porter and Donthu 2008). Similarly, few studies have investigated brand loyalty building on social networking sites (e.g., Laroche et al. 2013). None of the studies in our literature summary applied the relationship quality perspective to investigating brand loyalty building in online communities. The current state of this research area appears to be understandable because prior research on online communities often assumes that the communities mostly consist of consumers. Hence, the conversations (and content) within the communities are generated among consumers. Therefore, consumers' participation and community identification with and commitment to other consumers usually constitute the research focus when studying these communities (e.g., Casaló et al. 2007, Hur et al. 2011, Jang et al. 2008). In contrast, brand communities on social networking sites are distinctive because companies play a dominant role in interacting with and posting messages to consumers (followers). This suggests that prior research on traditional online communities may not be sufficient for understanding how to build consumers' brand loyalty through companies' brand pages on social networking sites. To address this concern, more emphasis should be placed on explicating companies' relationships with consumers and investigating what companies can do to strengthen such relationships.

### 2.2. Relationship quality

Relationship marketing is an important research area in the literature. Many relationship marketing studies have been conducted in a range of contexts (e.g., business to business, buyer to seller, and service) in the past two decades (Vincent and Webster

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