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When do consumers buy the company? Perceptions of interactivity in company–consumer interactions on social networking sites



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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites allow their users to view how companies interact with fellow consumers in a variety of ways. This study seeks to clarify how merely viewing company–consumer interactions can meaningfully influence viewers' impressions of a company and its products. In an online experiment, participants viewed a company Facebook page that varied in how the company responded to its consumers. The results indicate that perceptions of company responsiveness and personalization, based on existing consumer interactions, affect how participants rated the company, the quality of their own potential company interactions, and their likelihood of purchasing products from the company. The theoretical and practical implications of this study's results for online interactivity research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Web 2.0 communication platforms, such as social networking sites, provide an ideal outlet for discussions between geographically dispersed individuals and groups. In an increasingly global marketplace, newer media present opportunities for both companies and consumers because of their ability to facilitate various forms of interaction that otherwise would be unfeasible face-to-face or too costly with traditional media. Popular social networking sites, like Facebook, afford users features of traditional mass media and interpersonal communication on a single platform, visible conversations among parties for others to observe, and persistence of content over time. The degree to which newer media afford interactive communication has been studied extensively and is thought to meaningfully affect the outcomes of online communication (Walther & Jang, 2012). Consequently, it can be assumed that interactions are important to consumers and companies.

Although a wide variety of organizations ranging from Fortune 500 companies to small businesses have implemented social media into their marketing mix, the specific types of interactions that take place on these platforms has been relatively understudied. Successful company–consumer interactions foster customer loyalty,

willingness to try new offerings, and resistance to negative information about the company (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Social networking sites help facilitate greater communication among companies and consumers (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). However, a company's mere presence on social media does not guarantee advantageous company–consumer interactions.

Word of mouth is considered one of the most effective strategies in shaping attitudes and behavior, especially in commercial transactions (Brooks, 1957). Similarly, electronic word of mouth allows comments, inquiries, and complaints about companies, products, and services made widely available via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). The literature indicates that the interactive nature of conversations is one thing that influences positive outcomes. Personalization of messages may be one feature that is difficult to effectively execute for a company on social networking sites; however, personalized interactions provide benefits to the consumer through better matching of preferences, services, and information (Godin, 1999; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Wind & Rangaswamy, 2001).

A recent *NBC News* article highlights the prevalence of companies alienating consumers by using static responses to appear interactive (Sullivan, 2013). More commonly, corporations are implementing Internet “bots,” which account for an alarming 50 percent of web traffic (Noyes, 2016). Scripted or automated bot responses are losing the personal touch that companies strive to

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deliver their customers. Bot responses may be perceived as misleading or inaccurate self-presentations, which are likely to elicit negative attitudes (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Moreover, social networking sites afford a company visibility and content permanence that may magnify the consequences of these poor public relations tactics. Other users can make judgments about a company based on the types of interactions they have with others.

Online interactivity research has primarily focused on *actual interactivity* where people either (a) use a particular technological feature available within a platform (e.g., online chatrooms, hyperlinks, searchable pull-down menus, commentary or feedback boxes; Wu, 2005) or (b) actively participate in interactions (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005). However, social networking sites allow people to view and evaluate publicly available conversations without having to interact themselves over time: People do not need to actively engage with a company to gain information and form impressions. This study builds on previous work by exploring how simply viewing the interactions of others is pivotal in shaping attitudes toward the source and behavioral intention.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online interactivity

Online interactivity is a widely studied concept with inconsistencies in conceptualization and operationalization. *Actual interactivity* typically refers to features of the medium or capabilities of creating interactive content (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Steuer, 1992). Actual interactivity has been operationalized by varying the presence or absence of feature-based interactive elements including online chatrooms, hyperlinks, and searchable pull-down menus (Wu, 2005). For example, a traditional newspaper represents one-way mass media with low actual interactivity. The reader cannot easily communicate with the writer or easily seek out further information. In contrast, an online newspaper provides features, such as a writer's email address hyperlink to send messages and banner advertisements leading to other websites (Wu, 2005). These interactive features characterize high levels of actual interactivity. From this perspective, interactivity is considered more objective, which allows clearer distinctions about what constitutes interactivity.

A number of past studies suggest that actual interactivity has a direct positive impact on attitudes toward the source (Hwang & McMillan, 2002; Jee & Lee, 2002; Yoo & Stout, 2001). Several studies have also shown that the presence of interactive features contribute to increased feelings of telepresence on commercial websites (Coyle & Thorson, 2001), higher involvement with news websites (Bucy, 2004), and more positive attitudes toward the platform (Fogg, 2003). Conversely, other studies conducted around the same time frame did not find such positive relationships between actual interactivity and attitudes and behavior (Bezjian-Avery, Calder, & Iacobucci, 1998; Coyle & Thorson, 2001). These inconsistent findings are likely attributable to different conceptualization and operationalization of interactivity.

2.2. Perception-based interactivity

While some studies have explored interactivity from an objective or feature-based viewpoint, others have conceptualized interactivity from a more subjective or perception-based perspective. *Perceived interactivity* is the subjective experience viewers equate with interactions (Burgoon et al., 2000; Hwang & McMillan, 2002; Wu, 1999). From this perspective, interactivity depends largely on

the perceiver during the interaction process (Williams, Rice, & Rogers, 1988): The greater potential for interaction determines relative benefits to viewers. Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1995) define perceived interactivity as a two-dimensional psychological construct of internally-based self-efficacy and externally-based system efficacy. Internally-based self-efficacy is the viewer's perceived utility of interactions (Whitaker, 1998), while externally-based system efficacy is related to the perceived responsiveness of the platform (Wu, 1999). This conceptualization suggests there is a link between perceptions of interactivity and actual features or characteristics available on the platform.

Unlike actual interactivity, research on perceptions of interactivity provides more stable findings. Several studies have consistently found a significant positive relationship between perceived interactivity and outcome variables, such as attitudes and behavior (Chung & Zhao, 2004; Hwang & McMillan, 2002; Jee & Lee, 2002; Schlosser, 2006; Wu, Hu, & Wu, 2010; Yoo & Stout, 2001). Further, prior research provides two important reasons why perceptions of interactivity are important to examine relative to actual interactivity.

First, perceptions of interactivity vary subjectively when no variance exists objectively. A study found that perceptions of interactivity for three computer manufacturers' websites (apple.com, dell.com, and hp.com) were different, while actual interactivity was the same across websites (Lee, Lee, Kim, & Stout, 2004). This study suggests that actual interactivity can be held constant, but people perceive the nature and quality of the interaction differently. A recent study found that perceived personalization determines message effectiveness regardless of whether the message is actually personalized (Li, 2016). Several other studies indicate that perceptual variables are stronger predictors of attitudes toward the source than structural variables (i.e., technological features; McMillan, Hwang, & Lee, 2003; Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011).

Second, perceptions of interactivity mediate the effect actual interactivity has on outcomes of interest. A study demonstrated that perceptions of interactivity mediate feature-based interactivity in assessing attitudes toward the source (Wu, 2005). Since perceived interactivity is more psychological in nature, the specific nature and quality of online interactions that enhance perceptions of interactivity is relatively less understood.

While previous research provides a basis for further exploration of perceived interactivity in general, specific dimensions exist within interactivity. Across several studies on websites or webpages, researchers have explored the interactive dimensions of responsiveness, personalization, user control, and connectedness (Chu & Yuan, 2013; Dholakia, Zhao, Dholakia, & Fortin, 2000; Downes & McMillan, 2000; Florenthal & Shoham, 2010; Lee, 2005). Unlike past work in this domain, social networking sites are inherently interactive platforms with specific user affordances for message construction.

2.3. Social networking sites as a context for perception-based interactivity

Social networking sites provide specific user affordances to explore interactivity from a perception-based perspective. First, social networking sites incorporate both features of traditional mass media and interpersonal communication on a single platform—a phenomenon known as *context collapse* (Boyd, 2008; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012): Companies and consumers can seamlessly communicate with each other on social networking sites. Second, *visibility* is high because social networking sites allow both mass entities (companies) and individuals (consumers) to make their content observable to a broad audience (e.g., other

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