



Proposing to your fans: Which brand post characteristics drive consumer engagement activities on social media brand pages?



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ABSTRACT

Directly engaging consumers with brand messages (posts) is one advantage of social networking sites. Using consumer engagement as a theoretical framework, the current study analyzes consumer engagement activities with brand posts, taking into account post characteristics, such as vividness, interactivity, content, and publication timing, while also controlling for post length, number of fans, and industry differences. The study identifies differences across different consumer engagement activities and industries. As such, vivid post characteristics yields mixed results, whereas post interactivity has a mainly positive effect on social interactions. If content categories address only some portion of the target audience, they negatively affect post interaction, compared to the baseline category. In terms of post publication, time at the top of the brand page increases the number of interactions, whereas weekday versus weekend has no effect on consumer engagement behavior. The findings challenge research and practice alike to account for these important differences.

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1. Introduction

New media have introduced significantly new ways to disseminate information, especially through new social exchanges characterized by collaboration, community, conversation, and sharing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Trusov et al., 2009). For example, social networking sites provide online platforms for networks of individual and organizational users to share and consume various types of information (Schultz, 2016). Companies use so-called brand pages of social networking sites to engage with consumers who also create some portion of the page content (Pöyry et al., 2013). Consumers who engage with brands on social networking sites have stronger relationships with those brands than consumers who do not interact via social media (Hudson et al., 2016). In addition people can create value for and with brands through social media, as reflected in the notion of consumer engagement value, such as by directly engaging in transactions, initiating recommendations, affecting purchase decisions, and providing data for market research (Kumar et al., 2010).

Whereas most previous investigations of social networking sites center on modeling (online) social networks (e.g., Ansari et al., 2011; Trusov et al., 2010) or detailing the opportunities

and risks associated with them (e.g., Champoux et al., 2012; Munnukka and Järvi, 2014; Pfeffer et al., 2014), an open question remains regarding what drives users to interact with brands on such sites. Functional, hedonic, and social values (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Pöyry et al., 2013; Yang and Lin, 2014) as well as brand and social interactions and self-presentation motives (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Jahn and Kunz, 2012) lead people to use brand pages on social networking sites. But the interactions also depend on the characteristics of brand posts, which can drive various user behaviors, such as liking, commenting, or sharing (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015; Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). Therefore, the current study seeks to extend the literature by investigating brand post characteristics, namely vividness, interactivity, and content types, as well as timing, length, number of fans, and degree of involvement in an industry. In particular, the study identifies various content types of brand posts and combines these themes with vivid and interactive post characteristics, in order to understand which elements activate and enhance engagement with these brand messages and lead to post interactions. The effect of these elements on the corresponding consumer engagement activities are analyzed by means of a regression approach following de Vries et al. (2012) and Sabate et al. (2014).

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Previous research demonstrates that such social media engagement and interaction result, for example, in commitment and loyalty (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2013; Zheng et al., 2015), as well as purchase intention (Beukeboom et al., 2015; Hutter et al., 2013; Ng, 2013) and sales value (Kumar et al., 2016, 2017; Pöyry et al., 2013). In contrast to a simple (e.g., Rishika et al., 2013) or aggregated (e.g., Kumar et al., 2016) social participation value, the present study addresses consumer activities, such as liking, commenting, and sharing, referring to varying degrees of consumer engagement on a social networking site (Tsai and Men, 2013). These engagement behaviors follow traditional user differences in activity – from connection to consuming to contributing (Sashi, 2012; Tsai and Men, 2013). Beyond incorporating content types, the study considers hashtags as another interactive measure. Further dominant characteristics are post vividness and post interactions that both affect consumer engagement with brand posts on a social networking site (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015; Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). As such, this study addresses the question of which characteristics and content drive liking, commenting, and sharing behavior with respect to brand posts on social networking sites. These findings help explain a degree of consumer interactions with brand posts and allow social media managers to plan their social media strategies accordingly, in order to obtain such positive outcomes as commitment, loyalty, purchase intention, and sales value.

The next section briefly discusses the theoretical framework and prior literature on brand post interactions. These insights lead on to the hypotheses and research framework. After presenting the data and method, this article presents and discusses the empirical results. Finally, the article concludes with some limitations and directions for further research.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Theoretical framework

The present study uses consumer engagement as a theoretical framework. Following a behavioral focus, consumer engagement is defined as “behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers (Van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254).” Based on the behavioral dimension, Kumar et al. (2010) propose the construct of consumer engagement value including the consumer lifetime, referral, influencer, and knowledge value (Kumar et al., 2010). Brodie et al. (2011) subsequently conceptualize five aspects of consumer engagement. Firstly, consumer engagement encompasses the psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, cocreative customer experience with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand). Secondly, consumer engagement occurs within a dynamic, iterative relationship. Thirdly, no relational occurrences are isolated; but they are interdependent. Fourthly, consumer engagement is multidimensional reflecting various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Lastly, consumer engagement differs across individuals and situations. One aspect to note is that even though consumer engagement is individually different and may vary in certain situations, brand managers are interested in the predominant reactions of their target groups. Consumer engagement has drawn increasing research interest and has consequently been addressed in social media as well (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; Kabadayi and Price, 2014; Zheng et al., 2015). “[S]ocial media has provided firms – both large and small – with a new tool for customer engagement (Rishika et al., 2013, p. 114).”

This study is particularly related to the outcome of consumer engagement that results in brand post interactions (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). Based on different

levels of consumer engagement (Schultz, 2016; Tsai and Men, 2013), brand post interactions also represent various behavioral activities. Consequently, treating brand post interactions uniformly, as in measures like post interaction rate,¹ neglects the behavioral differences and subsequently their varying outcomes.

Consumer engagement not only affects brand interactions, but also community and brand commitment, satisfaction, and loyalty (Wirtz et al., 2013). As potential outcomes, Kristofferson et al. (2014) caution liking publicly, such as on a social networking site, which may not lead to engagement in subsequent relevant behavior, as demonstrated by their experimental studies concerning a charitable organization. However, engaged consumers also exhibit loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, trust, and commitment (Brodie et al., 2013). Economic, entertainment, and social benefits mediate consumer loyalty and satisfaction induced by consumer engagement (Gummerus et al., 2012). Similarly, perceived benefits and costs lead to engagement with a brand page, that in turn enhances online commitment and consequently, brand loyalty (Zheng et al., 2015).

While positive brand evaluations may precede consumer engagement with brand pages and brand messages, Beukeboom et al. (2015) indicate that engagement with a brand page in a social networking site also positively affects brand evaluations and purchase intention. Consumer engagement in social media may not only lead to purchase intention, but also affect profitability (Kumar et al., 2010, 2016; Rishika et al., 2013). However, Kaptein et al. (2016) caution that increased engagement leads to increased spending for inactive members only, whereas already engaged members decrease spending. Beyond, for example, sales value (Kumar et al., 2016; Pöyry et al., 2013), engaged consumers create value as co-creators in business processes, such as for market research, product development, and recommendations (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Kabadayi and Price, 2014).

Consumer engagement in a brand community results in brand post interactions (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013), which precedes different value dimensions (Kabadayi and Price, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010; Sashi, 2012). Accordingly the present study seeks to understand how brand post characteristics increase engagement in a social networking site measured by brand interactions. The present study draws in particular on different levels of consumer activities, such as liking, commenting, and sharing (Luarn et al., 2015; Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Schultz, 2016). In this way, the study demonstrates that these behaviors differ across various brand post characteristics.

2.2. Brand post vividness and interactivity

Beyond content type categories, post vividness and post interactions are two dominant characteristics affecting consumer engagement with brand posts on a social networking site (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015; Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). Before the next section addresses previous research results on brand post interactions, we briefly introduce both concepts. Vividness and interactivity both refer to media characteristics of brand posts.

Vividness reflects the degree to which information addresses various senses. Different media types, such as text, images, and videos, thus represent different levels of media richness (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015). Similarly, as pictures augment purely textual information, videos explicitly affect audio-visual processes. As vivid media activate users, they resonate with

¹ Post interaction rate is, for example calculated as the sum of interactions (likes, comments, and shares) divided by post reach (number of fans).

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