Relationship norms and media gratification in relational brand communication

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ABSTRACT

Brands are increasingly engaging in relational communications, which are personalized or privative messages sent to regular customers as part of a company's relationship marketing strategies. However, little is known regarding the underlying processes governing the creation of targeted relational outcomes. Drawing on the social theory of relationship norms, this study shows that by influencing the nature of media gratification, contextual communal norms rather than exchange norms have a stronger effect on how gratification contributes to attitudes toward the media and brand gratitude as significant media-related antecedents of brand commitment. Of particular interest, this study reveals that communal media gratification (in contrast to exchange media gratification) contributes the most to gratitude outcomes, whereas it only slightly influences media attitudes. The implications of these findings are significant for brand communication researchers and managers.

1. Introduction

The current marketing environment is characterized by a surge in multichannel shopping and a parallel growth in advertising channels (Dinner, van Heerde, & Neslin, 2014). In an attempt to create valuable relationships in this context, companies are increasingly engaging in relational brand communication, that is, personalized or privative messages sent to regular customers or even brand communities that include informational and brand image-enhancing content that goes beyond basic promotional appeals (Godfrey, Seiders, & Voss, 2011; Koch & Benlian, 2015; Mimouni-Chaabane & Volle, 2010). Most notably, traditional direct marketing has tended toward this form of communications (Gázquez-Abad, De Canniére, & Martínez-López, 2011).

Following this communications approach initiated by companies, some research has explored how relational brand communications, depending on its content or multichannel nature, can improve brand profitability by increasing purchase intentions and behavioral loyalty (e.g., Danaher & Dagger, 2013; Gázquez-Abad et al., 2011; Godfrey et al., 2011; Thomas, Feng, & Krishnan, 2015). However, investigations into the more effective aspects of relationships that are shaped by a brand's relational communications are lacking. In particular, the reinforcement of consumers' brand commitment as a key precursor to the attainment of profitable outcomes, such as future intentions (Bansal, Irving, & Taylor, 2004), is still not well understood in the area of relational communications.

Building on the "uses and gratifications" approach, which is drawn from the field of communication studies (see Rubin, 2009), a well-established stream of research has studied how consumers, by extrapolating various consumption values from their brands' mediated communications, form attitudes toward the communication channels used by these brands (e.g., Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001; Tran & Strutton, 2013). In turn, media attitudes have been found to modify brand attitudes and purchase intentions (e.g., Choi, Kim, & McMillan, 2009; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Huang, Su, Zhou, & Liu, 2013). Despite providing noteworthy insights on the contribution of media gratification to brand-related attitude constructs, these studies generally ignore important parts of relational dimensions specifically pertaining to media gratification. The social benefits derived from the use of a given brand communication channel are well identified in terms of interactions with other consumers (e.g., Bronner & Neijens, 2006; Calder et al., 2009; Nambisan & Watt, 2011). In contrast, the parasocial gratification involving a brand's agency is generally overlooked; one reason for this being that brand is not mentioned as a social source in the original "uses and gratifications" framework (Ruggiero, 2000).

Similarly, the issue of relationship norms (Clark & Mills, 1993) – which can be oriented toward either a quid pro quo relational mode (exchange norm) or a more socially integrative one (communal norm) – stands out as another blind spot in the literature on media gratification in terms of brand relationships. Recent research in the marketing field indicates that consumer attitudes and behavioral responses to a brand's

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actions are affected by the type of brand relationship norms salient at the time of the interactions (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). More generally, consumers seem to use relationship norms to guide their interactions with brands, select brand information during these interactions, and assess the brand's conduct (e.g., Aggarwal & Law, 2005; Wan, Hui, & Wyer, 2011). Given that brand communications can be regarded as a form of relational investment (DeWulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001) that activates social appraisals and brand information processing on the part of consumers, the benefits that consumers derive from consuming brand communications are likely to be influenced by relationship norms. We therefore posit that the nature of media gratification and the way it contributes to brand commitment might depend on the type of contextual brand relationship norms prevailing at the time of media use. Such a proposition not only challenges a common view of media gratification, which is fundamentally a-relational in that it tends to ignore the communication source as a social agent, but also sheds light on the nature of contextual determinants at work in the brand-related outcomes that companies pursue through relational communication. Specifically, we investigate two questions: How can the description of media gratification be associated with brand relationship norms? What are the underlying mechanisms that mediate the influence of contextual brand relationship norms as reflected by the corresponding media gratification on brand commitment?

In answering these questions, our research makes significant contributions to the literature on brand communication. First, it provides two formative scales, that is, exchange gratification versus communal gratification, to measure the media gratification that reflects the type of brand relationship norms salient at the time of the brand interaction. Second, it demonstrates that the influence of both types of media gratification on brand commitment is conveyed by two distinct routes relying on a customer's attitude toward the media and a customer's feelings of gratitude, respectively, as media-driven mediating variables. Third, and at the heart of this research, our findings outline the contrasting contributions of media gratification, depending on the relevant brand relationship norms, to each of the two mediating routes; that is, communal gratification contributes significantly more than exchange gratification to consumers' gratitude responses; whereas exchange gratification more strongly influences attitudes toward the media. Finally, by informing marketers of how to perform relational brand communications with consideration for customer relationship norms, this study offers new insights for driving brand gratitude through the development of communal forms of media gratification.

The rest of the paper presents the theoretical background for our research and develops hypotheses regarding media gratification in light of relationship norms. Further, we report on a two-study investigation that assesses the nature of media gratification depending on relationship norms and then validates the investigated mediating routes with a field survey. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Consumption values derived from brand communication channels

As one of the more developed theories in communication, the "uses and gratifications" approach is rooted in the investigation of political information-seeking motivations (Blumler & McQuail, 1969). Specifically addressing entertainment media, the "uses and gratifications" school developed a theoretical framework of individual motivations for information acquisition via media that relates social and psychological needs to the formation of expectations regarding media (Ruggiero, 2000). In turn, these expectations lead to different patterns of media use and ultimate gratification (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Consistent with such assumptions, empirical studies have not only described a large array of media gratification but also provided

converging evidence that the gratification received is a good predictor of continued media use (e.g., Rubin, 2009). However, suggesting a potential a-relational bias in the early "uses and gratifications" research, gratification theories tend to ignore the social agency related to communication sources.

Drawing on the "uses and gratifications" framework, a substantial body of literature on how consumers derive benefits from the use of brand communication channels has flourished in the marketing field over the past 20 years (e.g., Bronner & Neijens, 2006; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Mathwick et al., 2001; Tran & Strutton, 2013). This stream of research is generally consistent with the view of consumer value creation ingrained in usage and socially constructed through experiences (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). To the extent that they emphasize the multidimensional nature of media experience, these studies provide conceptualizations of consumer media gratification that may vary by context and type of media. These variations notwithstanding, a common minimum structure of media gratification has emerged that includes dimensions related to consumer information, personal identification, social facilitation, and diversion values (see Calder et al., 2009).

More recently, building on the literature on brand relationships that has noted process similarities across brand and human relational spaces (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012), the research on media gratification has emphasized a brand's parasocial role. On the premise that a brand is likely to intervene as an appreciable communications partner in the relational exchange mediated by a given brand communicational device, themes of media consumption values have been found to relate to brand emotional bonding involving a sense of brand intimacy and companionship (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Labrecque, 2014; Simon & Andrews, 2015).

2.2. Relationship norms and types of media gratification

Researchers have noted that consumers differ in how they relate to brands (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998). This stream of research has suggested that people sometimes form relationships with brands in a way similar to how they form human relationships in a social context. Therefore, the distinction between communal and exchange norms (Clark & Mills, 1993) is useful for understanding the nature of brand-consumer relationships (Aggarwal, 2004; Wan et al., 2011). In communal relationships, people expect partners to have a real concern for the other's welfare and not be motivated by reciprocation or profit maximization. Although the people involved in a communal relationship often reciprocate the benefits that they receive, their reciprocation is normally motivated by feelings of appreciation rather than of obligation (Wan et al., 2011). Most family relationships, romantic relationships, and friendships fall into this category (Aggarwal, 2004). In contrast, the exchange relationship norm implies quid pro quo and a request for prompt repayment for received benefits. Relationships between people who interact for business purposes are typical exchange relationships (Aggarwal, 2004).

As outlined by Wan et al. (2011), the norms that govern an exchange relationship are most likely to apply when a consumer and a company are unacquainted. When individuals are regular customers of a given brand, they may have a communal relationship with the brand as well as an exchange relationship. In this case, the norms and expectations that govern their reactions to the brand's behavior can depend on which relationship happens to be dominant in the current situation (Wan et al., 2011). In particular, it can be influenced by the consumer's motivational orientation, which can be either one of exchange, meaning that the consumer is preparing or implementing a buying plan, or communal, meaning that the consumer is primarily seeking psychological proximity and attention in the on-going brand relationship (Yim, Tse, & Chan, 2008).

Because brand-consumer relationship norms situationally vary according to consumer motivational orientation, it is expected that