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## Engaging customers through online participation in social networking sites

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 14 October 2015

Received in revised form

25 February 2016

Accepted 27 October 2016

Available online xxx

### 1. Introduction

Social networking is gaining its importance as one of the most popular online activity among consumers worldwide. Not surprisingly, the industry has followed the consumer and almost 94% of all businesses with a marketing department have established their presence and continuously pursue engaging their customer base on at least one of the “Big Four” social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google+.

Today in business context, Social media is achieving increasing importance as a channel for consumer's online engagement. Although the term engagement still lacks clear definitions and applications, the concept of customer engagement has become commonplace among marketers. More and more resources are being invested in social media and brands from all over the world to continue to grow their online fan base. Moreover, having social media presence on the web facilitates number of advantageous platform for the brand owners relating to advertisement, product development and market intelligence by observation and analysis of the user generated content (UGC) (Richter, Riemer, & vom Brocke, 2011). At present the use of social media is a need for all the businesses because it is popular, encourages two-way communication, reaches all ages and demographics, and promotes e-word of mouth (Divya, S & Regi, B, 2014). Social media marketing includes the Word of Mouth (WOM) marketing which is

also known as viral marketing, buzz, and guerilla marketing and involves intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communication through professional marketing techniques (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). The advantage of this new electronic channel is that it can be used to communicate globally and to enrich marketing toward consumers at the personal level (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Through users' feedback or by observing conversations on social media, a company can learn about customers' needs, potentially leading to involvement of members of the community in the co-creation of value through the generation of ideas (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

Social media marketing is not a replacement of the traditional marketing but is an additional marketing channel that could be integrated with the traditional ones as a part of the marketing mix (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). From the previous studies it has been found that the attitude of the customers with regard to the brand could be studied or analyzed in terms of transactional and non-transactional behavior of the customers (Garcia-Murillo & Annabi, 2002). We argue that non-transactional behavior or in other word we can say personal interactions with customers lead to richer content and can help explain why customers do what they do. While transactional data is useful to identify problems and preferences, it is difficult to determine the reasons for customer decisions. With personal interactions firms can ask customers directly and have an idea of the source of problems, preferences, and needs through engagement marketing principles. Thus the terms engagement and participation became the central non-transactional constructs, used to describe the nature of participants' specific interactions and/or interactive experiences (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). Today engagement has become the main purpose of the social media in business context as it implies level of involvement, interaction, intimacy, and customer influence with a brand over time (Safko & Brake, 2009). Many studies also reveal that when consumers are highly engaged with a social networking sites they can be more responsive to brand advertisements (Bronner & Neijens, 2006; Cunningham, Hall, & Young, 2006; Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Wang, 2006).

Hence this study calls for a rigorous research on the influencing factors in terms of characteristics of the content communicated by the company for consumers' participation in online brand related activities which ultimately lead to higher level of online engagement on Social Networking Sites (SNS). Further we also discuss how

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Peer review under responsibility of College of Management, National Cheng Kung University.

these factors are mediated by consumers' positive attitude towards Social Networking Advertising (SNA).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Social media as consumers' online engagement tool

A central element of online social media is the extent to which it enables brands and consumers to connect, communicate, and engage. Consumer engagement has been defined by the Advertising Research Foundation as the process of “turning on a prospective customer to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context” (Burns, 2006), and both academic as well as industry researchers increasingly view engagement as an important construct in the study of brand-consumer relationships (e.g., Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010; Haven, 2007). The main purpose of the social media in business context is to engage people. Engagement is the level of involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence customers have with a brand over time (Safko & Brake, 2009). Many studies reveal that when consumers are highly engaged with a media vehicle, they can be more responsive to brand advertisements (Bronner & Neijens, 2006; Coulter, 1998; Cunningham et al., 2006; Wang, 2006). Therefore as online user's browse time increase, SNS become more powerful marketing channels since the moderator posts only touching and persuasive messages which in turn changes users' attitudes and induce enthusiastic interactions (Bhattacharjee & Premkumar, 2004; Coulter & Punj, 2004; Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015). Literature review shows that the attitude of internet users changes due to two factors: Usefulness and Preferences. Usefulness refers to user perceptions deriving from personal or professional judgment about content that may benefit their performance in browsing posts (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006), while preferences comprise favorable feelings and interests (Kim & Son, 2009; Chang et al., 2015). Strong and relevant content of the brand posts generate favorable cognitive responses regarding posts, which ultimately leads to positive attitude toward posts and influences purchasing decision on the basis of information gathered from the posts (Akar & Topçu, 2011; Miller & Lamma, 2010).

Compared to traditional views of brand-consumer engagement, online brand interactions are viewed as consisting of greater cognitive processing, heightened relevance and emotional experiences (Mollen & Wilson, 2010), and greater advertising effectiveness (Calder et al., 2009). Driven by the growth of online media, consumers are increasingly seeking, even expecting, and a more involved role in the consumption process (Calder & Malthouse, 2005a, Calder & Malthouse, 2005b). Brand-consumer engagement specific to social media has, more directly, been conceptualized as consisting of several elements, including 1) creating and posting online content that is relevant to consumers; 2) brands relinquishing some degree of control over content so that it becomes sharable, and even modifiable, among friends; 3) engendering a sense of online community among customers; 4) and facilitating conversation rather than delivering one-way marketing communications (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). Overall, this online engagement perspective led to the development of our research instrument (a social media diary assessing individuals' engagement with brands using social media), the data collection, and the analysis illustrated next.

### 2.2. Content characteristics of SNA and consumer's online engagement over SNS

In the present market scenario, interest in customer engagement is mushrooming as the development of the Internet is at boom which creates an interaction between consumers and the

brands. Hollebeek (2011), defined consumer's engagement (CE) with a specific brand as “the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions,” and identifies the three consumer engagement dimensions of immersion (cognitive), passion (emotional) and activation (behavioral). Further, Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, and Ilic (2011) defined CE as “a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a particular agent/object (e.g. a brand)”. The idea behind these assertions is that engaged customers play a crucial role in viral marketing activity by providing referrals and/or recommendations for specific products, services, and/or brands to others. Engaged customers can also play an important role in new product/service development (Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft, & Singh, 2010; Kothandaraman & Wilson, 2001; Nambisan & Nambisan, 2008), and in co-creating experience and value (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zaratello, 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Amidst Scholarly endeavors, it has been found that by utilizing social networking platform, companies can create online brand communities. Perhaps the best-known example of this is Facebook Brand Pages (FBP) found on the Facebook platform (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). In practice, the FBP is followed by media users by clicking the ‘like button’, which indicates that the media users like the brand in their social network. This process then enables new contents to be automatically sent from the brand to be posted to their personal Facebook newsfeed, where media users can interact with a brand by means of anecdotes, status, photos, videos or other brand-related contents that users can like, share or comment on with other followers of the brand or their own friends and relatives (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013). Interestingly, the social media technology has been successful in enabling brands to be popular with, and among, active social media users through higher levels of customer-brand interaction by the dynamic marketing agencies (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Such interactive communications can act as mechanisms for value co-creation and for allowing possibilities such as improved brand meaning (Gensler et al., 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2010) and collaborative product innovation opportunities (Kozinets et al., 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005), thereby enhancing perception of consumer's online engagement with FBP. Based on this rationale, the analysis of the content characteristics that makes SNA popular as well as the study of those factors that are conditioning consumer interaction become a matter of interest for firms in order to address their marketing efforts in social media in the right directions. From the intensive literature review, five content characteristics in the SNA have been identified namely vividness, interactivity, information, entertainment and incentive that help in achieving consumer's online engagement over social media through customer-brand interaction. So far in the study, we have seen the benefit of the customer-brand interaction which keeps the social media users engaged over SNS and the content characteristics of the ad which are likely to cause consumers online engagement. But a question here arises that how these content characteristics of the ad influence consumer's online engagement? To answer this question, the consumers' attitude toward ad plays very pivotal role in mediating the relationship between content characteristics of the ad and consumers' online engagement behavior.

### 2.3. Role of attitude toward SNA as mediator

Based upon studies of traditional mass media advertising literature, Chen and Wells (1999) are among the first to propose a

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