Full length article

Investigating the role of identification for social networking Facebook brand pages

Bastian Popp [a, *], Bradley Wilson [b, c, d]

[a] Saarland University, Chair of Business Administration, in particular Retail Management, Campus, Building A5-4, 66123 Saarbruecken, Germany
[b] Universidad de Los Andes, Facultad de Administración, Associate Professor of Communication, Branding and Urban Creative Cultures, Building Julio Mario Santo Domingo, Block SD, Oficina Calle 21#01-20, Barrio Las Aguas, Bogota, Colombia
[c] RMIT University, School of Media and Communication, Senior Lecturer in Advertising, Melbourne, Australia
[d] University of Bayreuth, Department of Services Management, Visiting Professor of Services Management, Bayreuth, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study highlights the multiple roles of identification in a Facebook context. We differentiate and monitor the impacts of three key targets of identification, specifically, the identification with: a brand's Facebook page, other users of this Facebook brand page, and identification at the conventional consumer-brand level. In this study, the relevance of each target was investigated with its impact on the level of loyalty to a Facebook brand page and word-of-mouth in favor of this page. Another level was examined at the broader brand level with the constructs of brand loyalty and word-of-mouth brand being integrated. The findings clearly illustrate that each target of identification has varying impacts on overall brand loyalty and word-of-mouth. Additionally, in some cases there is more of a mediated effect through loyalty and word-of-mouth towards the brand's social networking page. Future researchers should include separate identification targets in new studies. Also, the inclusion of loyalty and word-of-mouth allows numerous managerial diagnostic benefits to be assessed.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Many have debated the utility of social media for delivering suitable marketing strategy (e.g., Gao & Feng, 2016; Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). 2.13 billion monthly active users of Facebook, the world's biggest social media website (Facebook, 2018), illustrate the crucial relevance of social media for companies and their brands. Recent studies undoubtedly highlight Facebook's positive impact on building consumer-brand relationships and key facets including brand trust, brand recall and brand loyalty (e.g., Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Luo, Zhang, & Liu, 2015). One of the key findings of existing research that has been commonly accepted is that the primary benefit of social media is its ability to encourage and harness individuals' interaction (Fournier & Avery, 2011). As a result, social media has substantially transformed the nature of consumer-brand interaction. Social media increases business presence and interaction generating significant return on investment (Salesforce Research, 2016).

In this study we subscribe to Kaplan and Haenlein's accepted definition of social media as "a group of internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and it allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (2010, p. 61). In particular, we focus on a brand's social networking website, i.e. a "Facebook brand page" (FBP) (De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013) or "brand fan page" (Kudeshia, Sikdar, & Mittal, 2016; Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). FBPs are usually operated by a brand owner within a specific social networking service (e.g., Facebook) and enable consumers to interact with the brand and with each other by 'liking' or commenting on posts. Thereby, FBPs are supposed to contribute to the success of the brand.

From a traditional marketing perspective, brand success is commonly represented by high levels of customer loyalty towards the brand. Most recently, consumer-brand identification has been identified as a crucial determinant of customer loyalty (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009; Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010; Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013). However, most of the literature that uses the identification construct either does not incorporate the

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: bastian.popp@uni-saarland.de (B. Popp).

social media environment at all or falls short of capturing the specific characteristics of consumers' identification within FBPs. Therefore, developing a better understanding of the identity-motivated relationships impacting loyalty towards social networking brand pages and brand loyalty is an imperative to advancing a theory of online consumer behavior.

This research paper aims to make a key contribution in bridging the gap in knowledge that exists between different targets of identification and their impact on brand loyalty in the context of social media. In this case, identification is clearly separated with regard to the relevant targets of identification (brand identification, FBP identification, and identification with FBP users). A literature review highlights pertinent theories as they relate to the identification and brand loyalty literatures. A structural model is developed and tested. The sample characteristics, data collection and analysis methods are outlined in the methodology. Finally, the results are reported outlining the major contributions as well as managerial utility and the ambitious scope for future research.

2. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses

2.1. Identification

Within the marketing literature, identification is commonly conceptualized as a consumer's identification with a specific brand which is consensually defined as a consumer's psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand (Lam et al., 2013). As targets of identification previous research for example focused on consumer's identification with companies (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), brands (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Lam et al., 2010, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012), and brand communities (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2016; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). However, a customer may simultaneously identify with multiple targets of identification and, in practice, these multiple identifications may interact with one another and could be conflicting (e.g., Thoits, 1983). Consequently, consumer research has to consider different targets of identification which are respectively engendered with separate identification meaning and can be perceived as unique entities by consumers. Thus, depending on the specific situation, several targets of identification have to be taken into account concurrently.

While customers generally have ties with a brand, with a company, and with other customers (Ambler et al., 2002), the need for research incorporating the multiple targets of identification perceived by the customers becomes even more pertinent in the context of social media. The present study is unique in providing clear separation and focus between multiple targets of identification when studying users of Facebook brand pages. This contributes to a better understanding of FBPs, because, within a social networking website, users are simultaneously exposed to different targets of identification such as the FBP in general, the users of the FBP, the brand of social networking service, and the brand on which the FBP is centered on.

There are several theoretical explanations for the existence of multiple targets of identification. First, social identity theory attempts to explain cognitions and behavior with the help of group processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1978b). Thereby, SIT implies that more than one identification target may be attractive to an individual and people often aim to identify socially with several groups (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Hence, impersonal bonds can be enhanced based on common identification with symbolic groups or social categories without the need for formal group memberships to exist (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Reed II, 2002).

Second, the later proposed self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) shares the idea of social identity and most of the assumptions and methods, but in self-categorization theory social identity is seen as the process that changes interpersonal to inter-group behavior. Rather than seeing interpersonal and intergroup dynamics as opposite ends of a bi-polar spectrum, personal and social identity represent different levels of self-categorization. Moreover, self-categorization theory postulates that people may have different aspects of the self (Sirgy, 1982) which they may reinforce or protect. Finally, self-categorization theory indicates that individuals simultaneously belong to different groups (Turner et al., 1987). The "relative" salience of the different levels of self-categorization determines the individual's behavior.

In research on brand management, it is hard to draw a line between social identity theory and self-categorization theory, because researchers draw on processes of social identity and social categorization found in both theories. Both domains are often collectively described as the 'social identity perspective', commonly referring to the operations of both social identity theory and self-categorization theory. These theoretical underpinnings clearly provide the foundation for the existence and operation of the majority of necessary brand-building activities including brand image and brand personality creation. The meaning construction process intimates that brand personality may be central to identification. Social identity theory centres on the degree of identification the person derives from social (or desired) categories of membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Indeed, groupings exist in many aspects of our lives (demographic groups, social groups, work groups, sporting groups, community groups, etc.) (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995). Groups endorse consumers' self-definition of their own social surroundings (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and group conjunction helps elucidate a feeling of belonging with either the in-group or out-group (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). This separation into groups helps individuals to create social identity (Tajfel, 1978a), i.e. a "self-conception as a group member" (Abrams & Hogg, 1990, p. 58). Participants and non-participants utilize vicarious learning in reference to group membership (Katz & Kahn, 1978), which can create a degree of conflict between and within groups. The underlying motivation in striving towards the membership group is, typically, to strive for self-esteem enhancement and to supplement notions of self (Sirgy, 1982), and social identity (Hogg, 1992). The self-concept suggests that there is an actual self, "how a person perceives himself"; an ideal self, "how a person would like to perceive himself"; a social self, "how a person thinks others perceive him"; and a situational self, which is "the person's self-image in a specific situation" (Mowen, 1995, p. 229). The perception of oneself includes applications to the physical self, services/products consumer and social membership groups (Todd, 2001). Recent research further analyzes self-construal in social networking sites and demonstrates that electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) can be evoked by how consumers see themselves in relation to other members of the social networking (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2012). In other words, eWOM can be considered as a means to express the individual sense of self in relation to others and thus constitute an important part of self-construal.

Generally, people are seen as having a natural tendency to form relationships and are specifically driven to form relationships with groups, as they derive value and utility through engaging in successful social exchanges (with each other and the collective). This illustrates the theory of relational cohesion (Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2000). In this case, consumers seek different targets with which to identify (e.g., company, brand, social networking services, etc.). There is reinforcement and value offered to participant members by seeking higher levels of relational cohesion. Aaker (1996, p. 153)