



## Full length article

## Key values driving continued interaction on brand pages in social media: An examination across genders

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## ABSTRACT

Brand pages in social media provide companies with a competitive marketing tool to create added value for their firms and customers. Past studies suggest that understanding what customers really value in brand pages is the most vital step in promoting their continued interaction, and that the relative impacts of customer values on continued interaction are contingent on individual demographic factors such as gender. However, little research has examined the relationships between customer values and their intention to engage in continued interaction, and how these relationships are moderated by gender, in the context of brand pages. This study identified eight value factors to measure customer values on brand pages, then examined their impacts on customers' continued interaction intention, and studied gender effects on the latter relationship. Our proposed hypotheses are mostly supported by data collected from users of Sina Microblog brand pages and analyzed by partial least squares.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media is redefining how businesses communicate with their customers and brings both challenges and opportunities to marketing practices. During the past decade, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Microblog have gained in popularity all over the world among both individuals and enterprises. Many companies have now set up brand pages (also called fan pages or brand communities) on social media platforms and employ them as a major marketing channel to connect with their customers (Acker, Gröne, Akkad, Pötscher, & Yazbek, 2011). One major advantage of the social media brand page (hereafter “brand page”) is that it provides an online platform for companies to get closer to their customers through continued interactions (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013). From the customers' standpoint, customers with a high level of continued interactions on a brand page tend to be more open to receiving relevant marketing information about the brand, and thus may also develop a deeper emotional attachment to this particular brand page (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). From the companies' standpoint, the use of brand pages can greatly enhance business performance through customers'

continued interactions and the values created from such interactions (Trainor, 2012).

The enhancement of customer value is considered essential to understanding customers' continued interaction because customer experiences in the online environment can be a source of value motivating their continued interactions (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Today, customers are more value-conscious than ever, so it is indispensable for companies to focus on improving customer value in social media marketing (Leroi-Werelds, Streukens, Brady, & Swinnen, 2014). Past studies focused on values driving continued interactions for individual use of social media (e.g., Al-Debei, Al-Lozi, & Papazafeiropoulou, 2013; de Oliveira, Huertas, & Lin, 2016), but the social media on companies' brand pages has received little attention. Unlike individual use of social media, which is mainly centered on hedonic values (Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2009), companies' use of social media embeds social commerce in a social networking environment, which is expected to provide customers with values that satisfy various needs (Muk, 2013). Current brand page practices reveal that most companies do not comprehend what their customers really value (Woodcock, Green, & Starkey, 2011). Despite the importance of customer value in the brand page context, most previous studies have discussed this topic descriptively and there is a lack of systematic investigation of content based on theoretical foundations (e.g., Luo, Zhang, & Liu, 2015).

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A deeper understanding of the dynamic values that stimulate users' continued interactions on public social media platforms is needed (Guo, Liu, & Liu, 2016). To fill this gap, the present study is intended to extend the brand page literature by investigating antecedents of customers' continued interactions based on customer value theory.

In addition, while companies' usage of brand pages may satisfy customers' value needs, customers may not react to various values in the same way because they have different need structures (Zhou, Jin, & Fang, 2014). As demonstrated by Leroy-Werelds et al. (2014), customer value is personal, and its perception depends largely on individual customers' demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, etc.). Past studies have considered gender to be the most fundamental customer characteristic relating to engagement and interaction in specific activities within social media (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012; Thelwall, 2008). However, in the brand page context, there is a lack of understanding of gender's role in affecting the associations between customers' perceived values and their intention to interact continuously (Aral, Dellarcas, & Godes, 2013). In this study, we consider gender an important intervening variable for the following two reasons. First, different online platforms have diverse characteristics, and findings regarding gender differences may not be applied universally (Zhou et al., 2014). Therefore, research is needed to address how gender affects users' perceived values in the context of companies' social media usage, compared with individual social media usage, which is mainly hedonic-oriented and characterized by strong ties. Second, understanding gender differences could help practitioners to manage gender segmentation skillfully by applying different marketing strategies according to value needs (Lee, 2011).

In sum, this study intends to address the abovementioned gaps in the literature by investigating the following research questions:

**Q1.** What are the relationships between customer values and customers' continued interaction on a brand page?

**Q2.** Does gender intervene in the association between customer value perceptions and customers' continued interaction on a brand page?

## 2. Background knowledge

### 2.1. Customers' continued interaction on brand pages

Interactivity is one of the most distinctive characteristics of brand pages, distinguishing them from many traditional marketing tools which mainly depend on unidirectional information delivery from companies to customers (Zhang, Lee, & Feng, 2013). Continued interaction intention indicates that customers are not only willing to keep visiting a brand page, but also to keep participating and interacting with it (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). Today, although many customers show a high level of continuance intention on certain brand pages, their continued interaction intention is relatively low, reflected by their low level of posting frequencies and communicating enthusiasm (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2013). Continued interactions on brand pages are considered essential for business success for two major reasons. First, continued interaction on a brand page fosters closer relationships among customers, and thus may encourage more frequent exchange of product information and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Ng, 2013). Second, continued interactions indicate that customers care about the development of the company (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). Companies believe that they can learn more about customers' needs from their close, constant, and continued interactions on brand pages and thus improve their business performance (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2011a).

Research has demonstrated that customers may feel like interacting during the initial period of following a brand page, but their interaction intention may decrease gradually if they perceive little value in their interactions (Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013). According to Nambisan and Baron (2007), customers may derive different types of benefits from their initial experience in a virtual community environment, and their perceptions of such benefits will impact their future interaction in the community.

### 2.2. Customer value theory

Studies on customer decision-making have long considered customer value an essential concept, and often conceptualize customer value as solely comprising cognitive factors. However, this point of view has been criticized as it ignores certain other factors (e.g., hedonic and esthetic perceptions) involved in customer decision-making, and may cause problems in measuring perceived customer value (Chen & Dubinsky, 2003). Following this principle, customer value theory (CVT) was developed to explain why consumers make the choices they do based on three dimensions of value: functional, social, and emotional value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Functional value measures the perceived quality, performance, and monetary value of products/services. Social value derives from the enhancement of customers' social relations and social well-being. Emotional value refers to perceived benefits derived from customers' inner feelings or affective states. These value dimensions consider different aspects of customer perceptions, and make different contributions in different choice situations (Chang & Weng, 2012).

Although many studies focus generally on these three dimensions of customer value, Kim, Gupta, and Koh (2011) pointed out that it is important to gain a full understanding of the content of each customer value. Most studies have treated the content of functional, social, and emotional values as the "black box" but provided no explanation of what actually leads to a perception of increased value in each of these customer values (e.g., Lu & Hsiao, 2010). Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon (2001) suggested that these three dimensions of customer value should be operated at the top level and provide a contextual frame for various specific customer experiences. Understanding the actual contents of each dimension of customer value permits practitioners to implement them in the social media environment (Kim et al., 2011). Following this principle, we believe that there is a need to explore the content of each customer value while investigating their impacts on customers' continued interactions with brand pages.

We reviewed literature published in top marketing and IS journals in order to identify relevant studies about customer/user value in online communities and social media. We found that the literature includes different coverage and labels for the contents of functional, social, and emotional values (see Table 1). Our study is intended to identify the key factors of each dimension of customer value based on an integration of the extant literature. As shown in Table 1, we matched the findings of the literature review and identified three key factors for functional value (i.e., information quality, product-related learning, and economic benefit), three for social value (i.e., interactivity, collaboration, and social presence), and two for emotional value (i.e., entertainment and arousal). These factors will be further discussed in Section 3.

### 2.3. Gender research in online contexts

Evidence has shown that there are gender differences in motivations and behaviors in web technology use (e.g., Ragowsky & Awad, 2008; Zhang, Lee, Cheung, & Chen, 2009). As suggested by gender role expectation theory, women tend to be more tentative

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