Full length article

Social television: Examining the antecedents and consequences of connected TV viewing

Jhih-Syuan Lin [a], Yongjun Sung [b, *], Kuan-Ju Chen [c]

[a] Department of Advertising & Public Relations, Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Georgia, United States
[b] Department of Psychology, Korea University, Republic of Korea
[c] Department of Business Administration, National Central University, Taiwan

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Extant research has examined the impact of social television on viewer behavior; however, little is known about how social TV strategies help the broadcasting industry develop relationships with the audience, increase and sustain viewer engagement. Building on the literature, this study surveyed a national sample of 300 U.S. TV viewers (18—49) to investigate how viewers' social TV participation predicts satisfaction, investment, and perception toward alternative programs and, subsequently, predicts program commitment and emotional consequences toward a committed program after viewer-program relationship breakups. The findings discover that the more viewers engage in social TV activities, the greater their satisfaction and investment toward their favorite programs. Given the quantity of options, viewers may perceive other programs as attractive, weakening their sense of exclusivity in viewer-program relationships. The findings further suggest that greater satisfaction and investment combined with less attractive alternatives may lead to higher program commitment. Viewers' post-breakup reactions are likely determined by their investment of resources in viewing and the quality of alternatives. Importantly, commitment mediates viewers' tendencies to persist in viewer-program relationships as well as breakup distress. This study highlights the underlying mechanism through which viewers' social TV participation influences the dynamics of the relationships in the viewer-program dyad.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Social television, brought about by the integration of TV and digital technology to support sociable, computer-mediated group viewing experiences, has made the act of TV viewing a communal, interactive, and engaging experience (Chorianopoulos & Lekakos, 2008; Cohen & Lancaster, 2014; Oehlberg, Ducheneaut, Thornton, Moore, & Nickell, 2006; Shin, 2013). With the incidence of multi-screening, TV viewers can follow their favorite programs, share TV-related content and reactions, and connect with fellow viewers before, during, and after a program. According to the Council for Research Excellence (Rao, 2014), one in five online Americans aged 15 to 54 reported daily use of social media related to their TV viewing. In another study, Nagy and Midha (2014) found that 85% of primetime-active Twitter users habitually tweeted about TV programs, with 72% tweeting while watching live, 60% tweeting while

not watching, and 58% tweeting while watching on other content platforms (e.g., Netflix). As a result, there is a growing interest among broadcasters to foster, interact with, and maintain computer-mediated social relationships with viewers around their programming (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013).

In an effort to understand the social TV phenomenon, researchers from industry and academia alike have started exploring the dynamics of TV-related digital media usage, viewers' cross-platform engagement, and the impact of social TV on viewer behavior (e.g., Nielsen, 2013; 2014; Phalen & Ducey, 2012; Hill, 2012; Smith & Brenner, 2012). Current research has discovered a two-way causal influence between social TV strategies and TV tune-in rates, suggesting that social chatter around programming is an important component of TV branding strategies (Hill, 2012; Nielsen, 2013). While Twitter and text messaging have a greater impact on real-time social TV engagement, Facebook and offline communications more strongly influence the generation of interest among infrequent viewers (Kaye, 2015). In that sense, social TV strategies are complementary for building relationships with the audience, driving conversations about programming, and

increasing ratings. The rise of social TV offers a positive opportunity to build viewer engagement with TV programs and their advertisers (Nagy & Midha, 2014; Pynta et al., 2014).

Cohen and Lancaster (2014) revealed that viewers' engagement with in-person and social media coviewing can be predicted by viewers' emotional contagion, their need to belong, and three dimensions of an individual viewer's coviewing orientation (i.e., need for company, need for solitude, and audience monitoring). Lim, Hwang, Kim, and Biocca (2015) further proposed three levels of social TV engagement (i.e., functional, emotional, and communal) among sports event viewers. The results showed that increased interactivity resulting from functional and communal engagement helps induce social presence, or viewers' feelings of being with others. While communal engagement was found to be associated with channel loyalty, emotional engagement was found to lead to channel loyalty via increased channel commitment. Therefore, it is important for broadcasters to engage viewers with social TV activities, which in turn can help maintain viewing consistency and develop bonding relationships with viewers.

In line with these findings, one question that remains is how social TV influences the nature of bonding relationships that viewers hold in the view-program dyad. Because TV broadcasters strive to exploit distinct brand images and brand personalities to combat the ever-increasing competition (Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2008; Sung & Park, 2011), viewers may perceive some programs at a symbolic level and form imaginary relationships with programs in ways that resemble interpersonal relationships (Russell, Norman, & Heckler, 2004). Similar to interpersonal and brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), viewer-program relationships may evolve over time and generate feelings of commitment, intimacy, and emotional attachment to a program and its characters (Russell et al., 2004). Considering that broadcasters now incorporate social TV strategies to enhance the viewing experience as well as to increase and sustain viewer engagement (Nielsen, 2014), this research aims to investigate the mechanism through which social TV helps develop and maintain viewer-program relationships along with the dynamics of such relationships. Specifically, by employing the investment model, a well-established theoretical model drawn from social psychology and relationship literature, this research examines the impact of social TV participation on the antecedents of viewer engagement, the development of committed viewer-program relationships, and the emotional consequences of anticipated relationship breakups when the program comes to an end.

2. Literature review

2.1. TV program commitment

In social psychology, commitment refers to an individual's long-term orientation towards a relationship, including feelings of psychological attachment and intent to persist (Rusbult, 1983). The commitment level is the state of psychological attachment to a relational partner or an attitudinal position (Kiesler, 1971); it is considered the most proximal predictor of relationship stability, pro-relationship transformation, and willingness to depart from one's immediate self-interest (Rusbult, 1983). Commitment plays a central role in shaping motivation and behavior in an ongoing relationship (Rusbult, 1983; Van Lange et al., 1997). Empirical evidence shows that commitment is best regarded as a mediating variable that predicts a wide range of behavior in the relationship paradigm (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992).

In this research, commitment is applied to capture the intensity of viewer engagement in a viewer-program relationship. Program commitment is therefore defined as *a viewer's long-term attitudinal disposition toward a program, often reflecting emotional or psychological attachment to the program*. There is no doubt that viewers' relationships with programs almost certainly differ in some ways from their interpersonal relationships; nevertheless, it is reasonable to suggest that the relationships they form and maintain with a variety of programs have qualities similar to those of interpersonal relationships (Russell et al., 2004). Despite the different explanatory territories this applied concept may have due to the nature of the media context, program commitment is believed to reveal the dynamic media user variables and a variety of relationships viewers develop with programs.

As previous studies suggested that social TV activities could help raise awareness of TV programs and enhance the viewing experience (Lim et al., 2015; Nagy & Midha, 2014; Nielsen, 2014), the synergies between TV and program-related digital platforms are expected to increase the engaged audience base. Similarly, some researchers have demonstrated how users' virtual experiences with a brand may lead to brand loyalty and commitment (Chan & Li, 2010; Moon, Kim, Choi, & Sung, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). To investigate the effect of social TV on the development of bonding relationships in the viewer-program dyad, we turn to the literature on the investment model.

2.2. Investment model

As an extended concept of interdependence theory, the investment model of interpersonal relationships employs interdependence variables to analyze one's tendency to remain in a relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The model identifies three predictors of relationship commitment; namely, satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives (Rusbult, 1980; 1983). First, satisfaction level describes the positive versus negative feelings experienced in a relationship. Individuals' satisfaction increases their commitment to maintain an ongoing relationship. Second, investment size refers to the magnitude and importance of the intrinsic and extrinsic resources that are attached to a relationship. Intrinsic investments are the resources that go directly into the relationship, such as time, emotional effort, and self-disclosure. Extrinsic investment refers to initially extraneous resources that become inextricably linked to the relationship, including mutual friends, shared memories, objectives that are uniquely associated with the relationship, and more (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Because intrinsic and extrinsic investments cannot be readily removed once invested, investments are found to increase the commitment level and help to keep individuals in their relationships (Rusbult, 1983). Third, the quality of alternatives is the perceived desirability of the best available alternatives to a relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Individuals are more likely to be committed to their relationships when available alternatives are limited in number or are less attractive compared to the existing relational partner (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2002).

Taken together, individuals become more committed in a relationship when they perceive higher levels of satisfaction, greater investment size, and alternatives that are inferior to their current associations. Commitment level is a consequence of increasing dependence. This psychological viewpoint has garnered great support in predicting the development of commitment and relationship maintenance (Rusbult, 1983). The investment model has also been applied to help understand the development of consumer-brand relationships. For example, Sung and Campbell (2009) tested the overall power of these investment model variables in determining consumers' commitment toward their relationships with brands. The results showed that consumers develop a higher level of brand commitment when greater satisfaction and investment are present combined with lower-quality alternatives. Building on these results, Sung and Choi (2010)