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Factors driving young users' engagement with Facebook: Evidence from Brazil

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ABSTRACT

User engagement has recently been the focus of attention for marketing planners who want to capture the enormous opportunities provided by social media. In this study, we investigate the drivers of social media user engagement by extending an existing model of social media participation by Cheung, Chiu and Lee (2011). We included in the model three social influence factors, five uses and gratifications factors, and one social presence factor. Results from an online survey with a sample of young Facebook users in Brazil ($n = 1126$) reveal four significant factors, i.e. a) subjective norm b) social identity, c) entertainment value, and d) maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity. Our empirical results also show an improved model fit over the existing model of user participation used by Cheung et al. (2011). This research adds significance to the literature by extending an existing theoretical model to study a new phenomenon in a different cultural context. We also provide practical recommendations for managing brand fan pages on how to foster user engagement with social media.

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1. Introduction

User engagement has been recognised as a prerequisite for the success of virtual environments including social media (Verhagen, Swen, Feldberg, & Merikivi, 2015), and recently there is growing body of research examining user engagement particularly among students and young people (e.g. Byun & Loh, 2015; Cruz-Benito, Therón, García-Peñalvo, & Pizarro Lucas, 2014; Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014; Lim, Hwang, Kim, & Biocca, 2015; Pellas, 2014; Wiebe, Lamb, Hardy, & Sharek, 2014). However, studies examining the drivers of user engagement with social media are still limited. One exception is Verhagen et al. (2015), who use the theory of uses and gratification to link the characteristics of virtual environments, and perceived benefits of using these environments with user engagement intentions. In contrast, prior studies on motivation of social media participation have employed a combination of various theories such as 'social influence', 'uses and gratification', and 'social presence' (e.g. Cheung, Chiu & Lee, 2011; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004).

There is evidence about the influence of sociocultural factors on the design of social networking site (SNS, K.-S. Shen, 2013). However, there is also a lack of studies about the use of SNSs in cultures other than Asia and North America (Cho & Park, 2013). Yet, cultural differences could have considerable influence on social media users' attitudes and communication style (Cho & Park, 2013), and possibly on motivations to engage with social media. For this reason, knowledge on the specificities regarding other cultures would be critical in explaining the participant's engagement in SNSs. In the scope of this research, focussing on users in Brazil would bring interesting reflections for theoretical development about factors affecting use of Facebook in different cultural contexts. The results reported by two separate studies we previously cited show contrasting results: Dholakia et al. (2004) report that their model explained 54% of the variance of its dependent variable using the data of user participation in virtual communities in the US. Cheung et al. (2011) included an additional construct (social presence) to the model using the data of a sample of Facebook users in Hong Kong, yet the explanatory power of their model fell considerably, explaining only 28% of the variance of the dependent variable. The difference in the models' explanatory powers may be attributed to two possible reasons: a) different characteristics related social media investigated in the two studies, i.e. between general virtual communities and Facebook; b) different cultural

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contexts of the two studies, one in the US and the other Hong Kong. According to [The Hofstede Centre \(2015\)](#), Brazil ranks higher in the scores of Uncertainty Avoidance (76), Indulgence (59) and Individualism (38) than Hong Kong (29, 17 and 25, respectively), but lower in the term of Long Term Orientation (44 versus 61). Brazil also ranks very differently from the US on all the dimensions of Hofstede's culture framework. Thus further research of the conceptual model in a new context such as Brazil is required to uncover interesting reflections for theoretical development about factors affecting user engagement with social media.

This research addresses the research gap by extending an existing conceptual model of social media participation ([Cheung et al., 2011](#); [Dholakia et al., 2004](#)) to study social media engagement in a new and important cultural context. Our study makes three important contributions to the literature. First, our investigation provides empirical evidence of extending the research model first developed by [Dholakia et al. \(2004\)](#) and later modified by [Cheung et al. \(2011\)](#) to study a new construct (user engagement) in a new and important cultural context (Brazil). Our results show an improved model fit than that reported in the previous study ([Cheung et al., 2011](#)). Second, by integrating 'social influence', 'uses and gratifications', and 'social presence', we reveal the unique driving factors of social media engagement, thus improving the current understanding of the key drivers of social media user engagement, extending the study by [Verhagen et al. \(2015\)](#). Third, our research has practical implications for companies wishing to foster user engagement with their brands through social network sites.

We test our hypotheses using survey data collected from a sample of young Facebook users in Brazil. In addition to the cultural differences from the commonly researched contexts such as North America and Asia, Brazil is an especially appropriate and important field context for testing the conceptual model, because Brazil is a country strongly influenced by social networking ([Mintel, 2014](#)). Statistics in April 2014 show that the country has the third largest number of Facebook users in the world, just behind the US and India, and there are more than 86 million Facebook users in Brazil, a penetration of 84% amongst the country's Internet users ([Mintel, 2014](#); [Socialbakers, 2014](#)). Facebook in Brazil is not just a social networking site, it is an instrumental tool for nearly every aspect of life in Brazil, including e-commerce transactions which are increasing rapidly ([Mintel, 2014](#)). Mintel's research suggests that about 15% of users who have clicked on Facebook advertisements have purchased at least once online in the past 12 months, compared to just 8% for the total population. For the consumers aged 16–24 years – the largest age group of Facebook users in Brazil ([Socialbakers, 2014](#)), the percentage reached a staggering 28% ([Mintel, 2014](#)). As argued in Mintel's report, Brazil is leading the way into the future of e-commerce on Facebook, and other countries could learn a lot from the Brazilian experience. Thus, understanding what drives young Brazilian users' engagement with Facebook is important not only for scholarship but also for social media marketing practice in Brazil and beyond.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Research into the use of social media including social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter has drawn upon a wide variety of sources ranging from personal behaviour theories, social behaviour theories, to mass communication theories. A recent literature review by [Ngai, Tao, and Moon \(2015\)](#) show that these include: 15 theories related to personal behaviour, such as personality traits theory, technology acceptance model, and the theory of planned behaviour; 13 theories related to social behaviour, such as social capital theory, social exchange

theory, and social influence theory; and 3 theories of mass communication such as media richness theory, and uses and gratifications theory (U&G). Social media usage intention and behaviour are among the major outcome variables investigated in the literature (e.g. [Fischer & Reuber, 2011](#); [Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011](#); [Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011](#)). User engagement is one of the key factors for the success of the information system ([Hwang & Thorn, 1999](#)) and potentially is also the case for social media. Recent research in marketing shows that engaged consumers exhibit high levels of satisfaction, loyalty, connection and emotional bonding with a specific object, such as a brand or a social networking site ([Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013](#)). In our attempt to identify the key factors that influence user engagement, we first review the conceptualisation of the user engagement construct, followed by a review of social influence theory, U&G, social presence theory and relevant research to develop our hypotheses.

2.1. Conceptualisation of user engagement

Being engaged 'is to be involved, occupied, and interested in something' ([Higgins, 2006](#), p. 442). [Hwang and Thorn \(1999\)](#) use 'engagement' as a general term that refers to both user involvement and participation in an information system, whereas there has been a proliferation of definitions of engagement proposed in the literature in recent years. For example, [Porter, Donthu, MacElroy, and Wydra \(2011\)](#) focus on behaviour that reflects online community members' willingness to participate and cooperate with other members, while [Van Doorn et al. \(2010\)](#) propose five dimensions of customer engagement, i.e. valence, form or modality, scope, nature of engagement's impact, and customer goals. [Mollen and Wilson \(2010\)](#) define online engagement as 'a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website' (p.923). [Brodie et al. \(2013\)](#) suggest that engagement is a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels, but they consider it as a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions. In contrast, [Calder and Malthouse \(2008\)](#) build on [Higgins' \(2006\)](#) conceptualisation of the term and emphasise that engagement is a state of involvement and connectedness between the user and the engagement object (for example, the media), and they believe that engagement is a motivational force to make something happen, while the actual behaviour is the consequence of engagement, not engagement itself. Thus in this study, we focus on the behavioural intention aspect of user engagement to examine young Brazilian users' intentions to be involved with the participation and socialization experience in Facebook ([Calder & Malthouse, 2008](#)).

2.2. Theory of social influence

The theory of social influence explains the effect of others on the individual's behaviour ([Kelman, 1958](#)). Compliance happens when an individual accepts the social influence to obtain a reward, support or approval from significant others, avoiding punishment. Internalisation occurs when one finds that he or she share the values of other group members ([Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002](#)). Identification happens when an individual under social influence attempts to establish and maintain a satisfying self-defining relationship to another person or group. Prior studies often use subjective norm, group norm and social identity to reflect these social influence processes (e.g. [Bagozzi & Lee, 2002](#); [Cheung et al., 2011](#); [Dholakia et al., 2004](#); X.-L. Shen, Cheung, & Lee, 2013; [Venkatesh & Davis, 2000](#)).

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