



Consumer participation and gender differences on companies' microblogs: A brand attachment process perspective



Kem Z.K. Zhang^{a,b,*}, Morad Benyoucef^b, Sesia J. Zhao^c

^a School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, 96 Jinzhai Road, Hefei, Anhui 230026, China

^b Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier East, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada

^c Management School, Anhui University, 111 Jiulong Road, Hefei, Anhui 230601, China

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research model to explicate that the level of consumers' participation on companies' brand microblogs is influenced by their brand attachment process. That is, self-congruence and partner quality affect consumers' trust and commitment toward companies' brands, which in turn influence participation on brand microblogs. Further, we propose that gender has important moderating effects in our research model. We empirically test the research hypotheses through an online survey. The findings illustrate that self-congruence and partner quality have positive effects on trust and commitment. Trust affects commitment and participation, while participation is also influenced by commitment. More importantly, the effects of self-congruence on trust and commitment are found to be stronger for male consumers than females. In contrast, the effects of partner quality on trust and commitment are stronger for female consumers than males. Trust posits stronger effects on commitment and participation for males, while commitment has a stronger effect on participation for females. We believe that our findings contribute to the literature on consumer participation behavior and gender differences on brand microblogs. Companies can also apply our findings to strengthen their brand building and participation level of different consumers on their microblogs.

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1. Introduction

Microblogging sites have grown to be a highly prevalent social technology in recent years. As one of the most well-known microblogging sites, Twitter attracts over 271 million active users per month.¹ According to Klososky (2012), "social technology is not a subject for any business to ignore" (p. 41). Many marketers believe that microblogging sites can be adopted as a new marketing weapon (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010; Li & Shiu, 2012), hence it is possible for companies to make use of these sites to establish successful relationships with consumers and obtain positive outcomes. Companies can create microblog accounts, also known as brand microblogs, to attract consumers' attention. Information on these microblogs is known to spread very fast. For instance, when Google set up its account on Twitter, it got 16,000 followers almost immediately (Hsu, Liu, & Jung, 2010). Currently, the number of Google's Twitter

account followers has reached 8.9 million,² which means that if Google releases a short message, more than 8.8 million people will receive it.

Although establishing brand microblogs may be potentially helpful for many companies, there is a lack of empirical evidence showing how companies can achieve successful outcomes on these microblogs (Pentina, Zhang, & Basmanova, 2013; Wang, Zhang, & Lee, 2013). In this study, the positive outcome we are interested in is consumer participation. Prior research contends that it is important to understand participation in online communities because participation is essential to the survival of these communities (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Koh, Kim, Butler, & Bock, 2007). Examining participation on brand microblogs can also help companies understand how to attract consumers' attention and to strengthen their influence in social media (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Zhang, Zhao, Zhang, & Lee, 2014). Building upon prior research (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2010), this study defines participation with three dimensions. We refer to participation as the extent to which consumers who follow brand microblogs intend to (1) read messages from the microblogs, (2) forward these

* Corresponding author at: Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier East, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada. Tel.: +1 613 562 5800x8105.

E-mail addresses: zhang@telfer.uottawa.ca (K.Z.K. Zhang), benyoucef@telfer.uottawa.ca (M. Benyoucef), sesia@ahu.edu.cn (S.J. Zhao).

¹ <https://about.twitter.com/company> – Accessed on September 17, 2014.

² <https://twitter.com/google> – Accessed on September 17, 2014.

messages to their own social networks, and (3) comment on the messages.

The *first objective* of this study is thus to build a research model to explain consumers' participation on brand microblogs. Drawing upon the perspective of brand attachment process, we propose that participation may be a result of consumers' brand attachment process. According to Jahn, Gaus, and Kiessling (2012), the brand attachment process can be characterized with the relationships among four factors, namely self-congruence, partner quality, trust, and commitment. That is, if consumers identify high levels of self-congruence and partner quality with a brand, then they are more likely to develop trust and commitment toward the brand. In this study, we propose that trust and commitment can further predict consumers' participation on brand microblogs.

The *second objective* of this study is to examine whether and how male and female consumers participate on brand microblogs differently. Prior research shows that gender differences often exist in online users' behavior, such as Internet usage behavior (Teo & Lim, 2000; Wang, 2010), online shopping behavior (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008; Yeh, Hsiao, & Yang, 2012), and the adoption behavior of online services (Gefen & Straub, 1997; Zhou, Jin, & Fang, 2014). For companies, it will be important to examine gender differences because gender information tends to be accessible and identifiable and can be used as a valuable market segmentation tool (Simon, 2001). Although it is important to examine gender differences, little research has been conducted to investigate how men and women behave differently on microblogs. As an exception, Walton and Rice (2013) pointed out that women tend to disclose more information than men on microblogging sites because of their differences in self-disclosure. In this study, we examine gender differences in consumers' brand attachment process and their participation on brand microblogs. We expect that our findings will show how male and female consumers develop trust and commitment differently, and hence participate differently in this emerging context.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, we present the theoretical background for developing the research model and hypotheses. In Sections 4 and 5, we conduct an online empirical survey and use the structural equation modeling approach to analyze the data. Finally, in Section 6, we discuss the findings and implications of this study, as well as addressing the limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. Theoretical background

In this section, we review the literature on participation and brand attachment process which form the basis for our research model. Moreover, we discuss prior research on gender differences to understand why and how men and women may behave differently.

2.1. Participation

Participation in online communities has been an ongoing concern in the existing literature (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Fang & Neufeld, 2009; Zhang, Hahn, & De, 2013). Meanwhile, the definitions and operationalizations of participation are largely inconsistent. Some research simply refers to participation as the extent to which people intent to use or participate in online communities (e.g., Sun, Wang, & Peng, 2011; Zheng, Li, & Hou, 2011; Zhou, 2011). Further, Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalú (2010a) measured participation to show whether users actively participate and contribute new information. Mathwick (2002) emphasized participation primarily on users' posting and active responsive behavior. Another line of research suggests that it is also important

to consider users' lurking behavior because a majority of users are actually lurkers (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Lurkers can be "active" in the sense that they learn and find solutions to problems from browsing online communities, as well as passing along information to others (Madupu & Cooley, 2010). Increasing attention is thus paid to developing a more comprehensive understanding of participation. For instance, Koh et al. (2007) examined participation by measuring users' posting and viewing activities. A recent study from Bateman et al. (2010) pointed out that participation in online communities may involve three aspects of activities, namely reading messages, posting replies, and moderating discussions among community members. Accordingly, this study refers to participation on brand microblogs with three dimensions. Since forwarding messages is a more commonly adopted practice than moderating discussions in this circumstance, we define participation as the degree to which consumers intend to read, forward, and comment on messages of brand microblogs.

Given that participation is essential to online communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), previous studies have paid considerable attention to understand the antecedents of participation. Theoretical perspectives, including the technology acceptance theory (Chu, 2013), motivational theory (Sun, Fang, & Lim, 2011), commitment theory (Bateman et al., 2010), and social influence theory (Zhou, 2011), have been adopted to explain factors predicting this behavior. However, partially due to the multidimensional nature of participation, these studies often provide competing or inconsistent findings (e.g., Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). In addition, only a few of these studies examine consumers' participation in company-initiated online communities (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010b; Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007). Although recent research has shown emerging interest in understanding the usage or adoption of microblogging sites (e.g., Chen, 2011; Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012), little research sheds light on consumers' behavior on brand microblogs. Compared to consumer-initiated online communities, consumers have more interactions with companies in company-initiated communities (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008). For instance, on a brand microblog, a consumer can have frequent and direct interactions with the company (e.g., forwarding and commenting on its messages). The company may also spend more effort on the microblog, especially taking an active role in building their brands and influencing consumers (Barwise & Meehan, 2010; Malhotra, Malhotra, & See, 2012).

2.2. Brand attachment process

After analyzing prior research on branding, Keller and Lehmann (2006) identified several key stages to explain brand antecedents and consequences. These stages include (1) what companies do, (2) what consumers think and feel, and (3) what consumers do. In this respect, the brand attachment process corresponds to the second stage. It delineates consumers' perceptions and feelings toward a brand. As a relationship-based concept, brand attachment considers the bond between a consumer and a brand (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Jahn et al. (2012) explained that the brand attachment process can be characterized with four factors. More specifically, self-congruence (the "me-ness" factor) and partner quality (the "we-ness" factor) convey the extent to which consumers are attached to a brand. Consumers' trust and commitment toward the brand are the consequences of these attachments.

In the marketing literature, prior research suggests that a cognitive contrast between consumers' self-concept and the image of a certain object (e.g., a brand) can determine their responses (Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000). In this respect,

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