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Brand followers' retweeting behavior on Twitter: How brand relationships influence brand electronic word-of-mouth

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ABSTRACT

Twitter, the popular microblogging site, has received increasing attention as a unique communication tool that facilitates electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). To gain greater insight into this potential, this study investigates how consumers' relationships with brands influence their engagement in retweeting brand messages on Twitter. Data from a survey of 315 Korean consumers who currently follow brands on Twitter show that those who retweet brand messages outscore those who do not on brand identification, brand trust, community commitment, community membership intention, Twitter usage frequency, and total number of postings.

1. Introduction

The phenomenal growth of social media has redefined the digital media landscape by changing how information in a networked environment is received and disseminated. Among a variety of social media platforms, Twitter, the popular microblogging platform, has received a great deal of attention for its capacity to broadly propagate information to a large audience. Users can post information via "tweets" from any place and broadcast these updates immediately to anyone "connected" ("followers") in their social network. They can also forward to their followers in real time a message received by another Twitter user, a maneuver known as "retweeting."

As this new information-sharing paradigm unfolds, marketers have increasingly recognized its potential to foster consumers' "sharing" of information or opinions about brands. This of course directly influences brand electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). In recent years, Twitter has launched *Promoted Tweet*, tweets purchased by advertisers, which can be retweeted, replied to, and "favorited" like regular tweets (Twitter.com Help Center). Another venue on Twitter for facilitating brand eWOM is brand pages. After becoming followers of brand pages, consumers can read the broadcasted brand tweets in their own accounts as they are automatically aggregated into a single list (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdhury, 2009). Retweeting brand posts to their followers makes it possible to exchange information about brands more quickly and easily. With 86 percent of companies active on Twitter (Bennett, 2012), marketers understand Twitter to be an effective eWOM tool that can directly influence target consumers, as well as other members of the consumer network.

The key to success of brand eWOM communication depends, to a large extent, on understanding factors that predict consumers' action to influence others' attitudes and behaviors, as well as information seeking for opinion seekers (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996). Consumers who opt into interactions with brands and observe consumer-brand conversations on Twitter are known as "brand followers." Brand followers are more likely to actively engage in eWOM, especially when they are highly loyal and satisfied with the brand (Chung and Darke, 2006). Accordingly, we attempt to investigate consumer engagement in brand eWOM activities on Twitter in terms of relationships the consumers have with brands.

Building on prior research in the areas of consumer-brand relationships, online brand community, and eWOM literature, we identify key predicting variables that may lead brand followers to engage in *brand retweets* on Twitter. We do so by comparing how such variables differ among those who retweet brand messages ("brand retweeters") and who do not ("brand non-retweeters"). Specifically, this study examines whether brand-retweeting behavior is influenced by variables concerning brand relationships (i.e., brand identification, brand trust, community commitment, and community membership intention) and is associated with

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Twitter usage frequency and number of postings. This present study has three primary objectives: (1) understand the nature of retweeting behavior in social media, (2) identify factors that facilitate—or function to stimulate—brand followers' retweeting behavior on Twitter, as well as the relative importance of these factors, and (3) better inform both researchers and practitioners on how they can improve the ways they encourage brand followers to spread a brand's message among Twitter users.

In this study, the authors surveyed a sample of Korean consumers who follow brands on Twitter. In South Korea, according to a study by Burson-Marsteller (2011), social media plays a powerful role in corporate communication and marketing, with 90 percent of companies using microblogs. A recent study by KPR Social Communication Research Lab (eMarketer, 2013) revealed that, in South Korea, Twitter is one of the leading social media platforms used by companies and public institutions. The findings of the study delve into the effects of consumer-brand relationship variables on eWOM in the up-and-coming social media environments. Finally, the findings shed light on the role of Twitter as an effective tool in developing close brand connections with consumers and eventually creating brand loyalty.

1.1. eWOM in social networking sites

We can define word-of-mouth (WOM) as consumers' interpersonal communication about products and services, and it is a commonplace that WOM plays a major role in influencing consumer attitudes and behaviors (Richins, 1984). WOM also takes place within a variety of online environments (known as eWOM), allowing information exchanges to be immediately available to a multitude of people and institutions (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Unlike conventional interpersonal communication, where the credibility of opinion providers is considered critical, eWOM facilitates information sharing with no face-to-face interaction (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006).

Among other online platforms, communities in social networking sites (SNSs) have received much attention in recent years for their ability to accelerate eWOM for brands. SNSs serve as a powerful, ideal venue for eWOM, a venue where consumers disseminate and seek out information from their established social networks (mostly labeled as "friends") through interpersonal interactions online (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Vollmer and Precourt, 2008). Product or brand-related information and opinions that are shared among personal contacts in SNSs may be perceived as more credible and trustworthy than other forms of eWOM communication (Chu and Kim, 2011).

In addition, individuals' voluntary exposure to brand information on SNSs exposes them to brand eWOM activities, possibly enhancing the eWOM's effectiveness. For example, consumers voluntarily engage in brand eWOM by becoming a friend or fan or clicking on the "like" or "share" buttons on Facebook. Such online eWOM can be driven by consumers' motivations to give a company "something in return" for a positive experience, as well as maintain and support the continued success of the company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Such behaviors occurring on SNSs are considered customer investments in response to marketers' social media efforts (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010).

Prior eWOM literature has conceptualized eWOM communication as comprising three key dimensions (e.g., Chu and Choi, 2011; Chu and Kim, 2011; Sun et al., 2006). *Opinion leadership* is the process by which individuals share information and influence others' attitudes and behaviors. *Opinion seeking* is whereby individuals search for information and advice from others when making a decision (Flynn et al., 1996). *Opinion passing* is the process of pass-along behavior (e.g., email pass-along) (Huang, Lin, & Lin, 2009; Norman and Russell, 2006; Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, &

Raman, 2004; Sun et al., 2006). On SNSs, users play a role as opinion leaders by posting messages and opinions on their accounts, updating their profiles or status, or commenting on pages/photos. They also become opinion seekers when they use such information provided by others. People seeking out information (traditionally called opinion seekers) are also likely to disseminate it, blurring the two roles (Sun et al., 2006). Online-passing behavior is more likely to occur in SNS contexts (Chu and Kim, 2011), where people aver their opinions and forward those of others with great ease. For example, consumers easily forward information about products or brand performance and pass along marketing messages by just clicking the "like" button on Facebook brand pages or by simply hitting the "retweet" button on Twitter. Online brand communities consist of a relatively small number of people who share common interests in a product or brand. In contrast, eWOM occurring within SNSs can convey brand messages to millions of SNS users. Given the potential to retain existing customers and attract new consumers on a global scale, opinion-passing behavior is regarded as an enhanced dimension of eWOM in SNSs (Chu and Kim, 2011). Such a dimension, however, has yet to be fully explored in various SNS contexts.

1.2. Retweeting: A unique form of eWOM on Twitter

Twitter enables companies to engage in interpersonal communication with their consumers on a one-to-one basis. Recent studies have found that companies frequently utilize interpersonal messages in their Twitter posts to develop close relationships with their consumers (e.g., Kwon and Sung, 2011; Lin and Peña, 2011). Relatedly, consumers generate company- or brand-related tweets on Twitter to express their sentiments, complaints, and opinions concerning brands (Jansen et al., 2009). Thus, Twitter is used as a social channel to promote communication and to help companies develop mutually beneficial relationships with consumers (Edman, 2010; Jansen et al., 2009).

As Twitter users directly receive messages from those in their personal connections, the impact of eWOM is considered similar to that of traditional WOM (Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, & Feldhaus, 2012). In addition, Twitter has been found to offer relational benefits by allowing users to build perceptions of one another and establish common ground for future conversations, and by promoting a feeling of connectedness with one another (Zhao and Rosson, 2009), thus, enhancing the power of eWOM. Combined with its ability to diffuse information in real time, Twitter allows the spread of information more rapidly than any other type of WOM communication (so-called "microblogging WOM"; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012).

Given the implications for WOM, a number of social network researchers have empirically studied the process by which users disseminate and share information via Twitter (e.g., Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Suh et al., 2010; Ye and Wu, 2010; Zhang, Jansen, & Chowdhury, 2011). In light of the diffusion process, researchers have tended to highlight the role of individuals ("influential") who are capable of influencing a vast number of audiences in the network (e.g., Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts et al., 2011). The concept of influence within Twitter is understood in terms of interpersonal activities that individuals engage in and that also lead others to become engaged in (Cha et al., 2010).

One form of information diffusion in Twitter that has become widespread is *retweeting*. Retweeting may occur nearly instantly after an original tweet (Kwak et al., 2010). Popular tweets can even propagate multiple hops away from the original source (Cha et al., 2010). When messages are repeated frequently and spread widely to a large number of recipients, they generally take on greater influence (Kwak et al., 2010; Phelps et al., 2004; Suh et al., 2010).