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Battle of the Brand Fans: Impact of Brand Attack and Defense on Social Media☆

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Abstract

Fans of a brand attack fans of rival brands on social media. Given the nature of such rival brand fan attacks, managers are unsure about how much control they should exercise on brand-negative comments on their owned social media touchpoints, and what brand actions drive these Attack, Defense and Across (ADA) posts. Multimethod analysis identifies ADA's impact across industries of technology, fast food, toothpaste, beverages, and sports apparel. Sentiment analysis identifies that fans posting in both communities stimulate both brand-negative and brand-positive comments. Despite their relatively low prevalence (1–6% of all posts), ADA posts induce broader social-media brand engagement as they substantially increase and prolong the effects of managerial control variables such as communication campaigns and new-product introductions. Brand managers, thus, have specific levers to stimulate the positive consequences of rival brand fan posting on their owned media.
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Keywords: Social media; eWOM; Rival brands; Brand engagement; Attack; Defense; Across pages; Sentiment analysis; Time series analysis

Introduction

> [On Pepsi Facebook page after Pepsi Super Bowl half time show in 2016]
> *Pepsi...watered down Coke! And Katy Perry? Yuck!? What's with the horrible halftime shows anymore? Need real musicians out there for a change!Was an awesome show Pepsi!! Put Coke to shame! Their commercial even sucked, WELL DONE! CONGRATS!!*

> *"Nike is a big liar big loser..dislike..Adidas forever"* post 2015 on Nike Facebook page.
> *"Nike is dead.."* same fan posting 2015 on the Adidas Facebook page.

As the above quotes show, brand fans not only show their feelings on the social media pages of the brands they love, but also post on the social media pages of rival brands. They attack a rival brand on its own Facebook page (e.g., attacking Pepsi for its halftime show), defend their brand against such attacks (e.g., the next Pepsi quote), and post across rival brand pages (e.g., Adidas fan posting on both Nike and on Adidas pages)[1]. Managers are understandably concerned with rival brand fans posting on the brand's owned media, badmouthing the brand

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[1] As detailed in the content analysis, *Across* concerns fans who actively post across brand pages. *Attack* is negative about the brand (or positive about the rival brand) in its own ecosystem. Finally, *Defense* is negative about the rival brand or positive about the focal brand, defending it from both *Across* and *Attack*.

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and its actions such as new product introductions, advertising campaigns, and public relation sponsorships (Chiechi 2016; Loten 2012). The implicit assumption is that such posts hurt the brand, at least on the social media platform they appear (Fournier and Lee 2009). A key question for managers is, thus, how to deal with such posts. Many hesitate to censor negative comments for fear of public backlash as experienced by high profile firms such as United Airlines and Walmart (Sullivan 2012). But what if the implicit assumption is incorrect? An alternative strategy is to stand back and let the brand's page followers defend against attacks, which may stimulate engagement. Thus, our research questions are: "What are the consequences of ADA in terms of the social media page volume and valence, two common social media performance metrics?" and "Which events, including the brand's and the competing brand's marketing, play a role in ADA and its consequences?"

Relevant previous literature is rich on the motivations behind consumers posting or commenting on brand's social media pages. First, key motivations behind eWOM are deemed to be consumers' self-enhancement and the desire to support or damage a company (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Kähr et al. 2016). While positive eWOM intuitively benefits the brand, negative eWOM does not necessarily hurt it (Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen 2010; Ein-Gar, Goldenberg, and Sagiv 2012; Ho-Dac, Carson, and Moore 2013). However, this stream of research has not yet quantified how such negative eWOM plays out on the brand's *owned social media pages*, where brand fans can react to it. Moreover, the focus has been on negative online reviews and complaints, which typically involve specific feedback on brands that the poster has possibly used, as compared to the general dislike (often without evidence of actual product experience) expressed in our opening quotes (and as verified in our empirical analysis). Second, (online) consumer engagement has been studied within a group of specific brand fans. Although previous studies have identified competitors and competitive actions as a possible "strong contextual force affecting customer engagement" (van Doorn et al. 2010, p. 258), these cross-competitive effects, their potential dynamics, and outcomes on customer engagement behavior have not yet been explored (Verhoef et al. 2009). The challenges of collecting and analyzing data from multiple brands appear to be the key reason for the focus on a solo brand's social-media platform (see "cross-sectional studies" in Brodie et al. 2013, p. 161). Our study overcomes these limitations by demonstrating cross-brand fan interaction over time and quantifying its drivers and consequences for rival-brand sets — thus giving specific empirical insights to manage this phenomenon.

We collect several years of Facebook page data from the main rival brands in mobile phone technology (Apple–Samsung), carbonated beverages (Coke–Pepsi), fast food (McDonald's–Burger King), toothpaste (Colgate–Crest) and sports apparel (Nike–Adidas). Our analysis proceeds in four steps. First, we identify which page comments represent Attack (negative about the brand and/or positive about the rival brand) and Defense (positive about the brand and/or negative about the rival brand in response).

Next, we classify page comments as Across by identifying users who posted on the pages of both rival brands (as Milad did in the opening quotes). Third, we combine the thus-constructed daily dataset of Across, Attack and Defense with brand-related events (as potential driving variables) and page-level total comments and sentiment (as outcomes). For each rival brand pair, Vector Autoregressive Models quantify how Attack, Defense and Across (ADA) behavior is dynamically driven by brand-related events and in turn how much ADA behavior affects brand-relevant outcomes. We find broad support for our hypotheses that marketing actions drive ADA and that ADA's impact is positive, rather than negative for typical social media performance metrics. As a result, brand managers obtain specific levers that drive different realizations of ADA.

Research Background

Electronic Word of Mouth and Its Consequences

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is commonly defined as any form of positive or negative statement about a product, service or company, produced by consumers and made publicly available through web-based services such as e.g., social media, websites, review platforms or internet forums (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Positive eWOM substantially increases sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Pauwels, Aksehirli, and Lackmann 2016). In contrast, negative eWOM should lead to lower product image (Ho-Dac, Carson, and Moore 2013), company value (Goldenberg et al. 2007) and sales (see e.g. Dellarocas and Wood 2008; Moe 2009). Later research, however, reveals that negative eWOM does not necessarily have negative consequences for the brand. On the one hand, lesser-known brands may benefit from negative eWOM through an increase of general awareness (Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen 2010). On the other hand, consumers who have a strong identification with a brand, show little or no reaction to negative eWOM (Ho-Dac, Carson, and Moore 2013; Wilson, Giebelhausen, and Brady 2017).

Motivations and Drivers of eWOM

Beyond the sentiment expressed in eWOM and its consequences for eWOM receivers, researchers have also analyzed consumer motivations, such as self-enhancement (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) as drivers of giving eWOM. Consumers wish to share their experiences with the brands, products, and also other consumers to either (1) support their favorite brand or (2) to take vengeance for a disappointing consumer experience (Kähr et al. 2016). In both cases, consumers perceive their eWOM articulation as an *instrument of power* to support or damage a company — what Kähr et al. (2016) refer to as 'brand sabotaging'.

Specific brand events may induce eWOM, such as new product introductions (e.g. Marchand, Hennig-Thurau, and Wiertz 2017), events (e.g. Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels 2009) and advertising campaigns (e.g. Pauwels, Aksehirli, and Lackmann 2016). Moreover, social media users also talk about company performance, management and ethical/legal issues. One initial marketing activity might lead consumers to share, promote, censor, or manipulate information, sending it

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