



# Why Nonprofits Are Easier to Endorse on Social Media: The Roles of Warmth and Brand Symbolism

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## Abstract

Brands often seek endorsements by consumers on social media (e.g., likes on Facebook). But is this marketing strategy feasible for all brands? To answer this question, this research investigates in seven studies the processes that underlie consumers' intention to endorse brands on social media. We suggest that consumers aim to signal their identity by endorsing brands online. Based on the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework and related research in (social) cognition and consumer behavior, we argue that consumers on social media primarily want to emphasize their warmth rather than their competence. Experimental studies 1, 2, and 3 distinguish between nonprofit and for-profit brands and show that brand warmth (and not competence) mediates the effect of brand type (nonprofit vs. for-profit) on consumers' intentions to endorse brands and branded content on social media. Experiment 4 demonstrates that this process is moderated by brand symbolism (moderated mediation). A high level of brand symbolism increases the positive effect of warmth on consumers' intention to endorse brands online, but only for for-profit brands. The fifth experiment shows that these effects are conditional upon the public vs. private distinction in consumer behavior: consumers prefer to publicly affiliate with nonprofit (vs. for-profit) brands but with regard to private affiliations, there is no difference between both types of brands. In experiment 6, the causal role of warmth (vs. competence) is further examined. Finally, we demonstrate that perceptions of brands' warmth and not competence reduce the efforts that brands need to make to achieve consumers' endorsements on their real brand pages on Facebook.

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## Introduction

On social media, such as Facebook, consumers often “like” or share brands and brand-related information. In doing so, consumers endorse these brands as their likes and shares on social media are visible to their peers. In order to benefit from consumers' tendency to endorse brands online, marketers are increasingly trying to engage consumers in attempts to “spread the word” about their brand (Van Doorn et al. 2010). They assume that using other consumers as a source of persuasive communication is one way to overcome consumer resistance

toward commercial messages (Kaikati and Kaikati 2004). Consumers are less likely to perceive that other consumers' brand-related activities have persuasive intent, which makes them more persuasive than brand information from marketers (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Willemssen et al. 2011). Especially the connection of consumers through a variety of social media (e.g., social networking sites, virtual communities, blogs) has fueled this development by enabling a wider and easier dissemination of public endorsements (e.g., Chu and Kim 2011; Godes et al. 2005; Libai et al. 2010). Thus many brands use social media marketing strategies that entail endorsements by their consumers. But are consumers' online brand endorsements a feasible marketing strategy for all brands, or do brands differ with regard to their inherent potential to acquire online endorsements from their consumers?

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To answer this question, we focus on brand-related drivers of consumers' tendency to endorse brands on social media. A considerable body of research is dedicated to the examination of drivers of user behavior on social media. This research has for example examined the uses and gratifications of social media use (Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel 2009; Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011), the design features of postings (De Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang 2012), impression management (e.g., Bazarova and Choi 2014; Hancock and Dunham 2001; Wilcox and Stephen 2013), and community aspects (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Morandin, Bagozzi, and Bergami 2013). Interestingly, only a few studies focus on the brand related aspects in this context. In this paper, we identify essential brand related drivers of consumers' online brand endorsements. We do this from the perspective that consumers' brand relationships are in many ways similar to interpersonal relationships (Fournier 1998; Labrecque 2014).

Consumers have a tendency to anthropomorphize brands and perceive them as somehow human-like entities that have their own motivations and intentions (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Epley et al. 2008; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). This notion is also reflected in Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone's (2012) *Brands as Intentional Agents Framework* (BIAF), which states that consumers' perceptions of brands map onto two different dimensions: warmth and competence. These same two dimensions have been found to underlie people's perception of other people (Fiske et al. 2002). In our studies, we take the perspective of this framework and suggest that this brand perception is a key factor in consumers' decision-making process to endorse brands on social media. In particular, we show that warmth, and not competence, of a brand is the main driving factor in consumers' decision to endorse brands online (e.g., like them on Facebook; cf., Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen 2012). Building on the work of Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010), we show that this results in an advantage for nonprofit brands over for-profit brands, because the former are perceived as more warm (but not necessarily less competent). We extend this framework by establishing a significant impact of brand symbolism in this context. This finding emphasizes that identity signaling plays an important role in consumers' decision to like brands on Facebook.

In sum, the present research has four key contributions: First, we extend the knowledge about brand-related social media use and show which features drive consumers' intentions to endorse brands online. In doing so, we are able to answer the question to what extent brands differ with regard to their inherent potential to evoke consumers' online endorsements. This allows us to assess the feasibility of consumers' brand endorsements as a marketing strategy for different (kinds of) brands.

Second, we empirically examine the identity and brand-related drivers of consumers' decision to like and thereby endorse brands on Facebook. Although some previous work (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Wallace et al. 2014) has provided a first investigation of these drivers, our paper is the first to examine these drivers in an experimental context, and shed light on the underlying psychological processes. The study of brands as a means to signal consumers' identities in

social media acknowledges the recent call for more research on the role of identity and identity signaling in consumer research (Reed et al. 2012).

Third, we extend the BIAF in two important ways. Our research shows that, of the two key components of this framework, warmth is the one that is fundamental to consumers' brand endorsements, just like it is primary in people's judgments of other people (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007; Ybarra, Chan, and Park 2001). In addition, we show that the role of brand warmth in this process is moderated by brand symbolism. Brand symbolism can enhance the effects of warmth on consumers' intention to endorse brands on social media, especially for for-profit brands.

Fourth, we extend the work of Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010) regarding differences between nonprofit and for-profit brands, by showing that the higher level of perceived warmth of nonprofits' lowers the threshold for endorsing them on social media. In other words, consumer online endorsements are easier to obtain for nonprofit brands than for-profit brands.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we provide the fundamental building blocks of our conceptual framework. Next, we describe six studies that test our predictions. In studies 1 and 2, we demonstrate that warmth mediates the effects of different types of brands (nonprofit vs. for-profit) on consumers' intention to endorse brands on Facebook. In study 3, we show that nonprofits' superiority in evoking consumers' online endorsements is not limited to likes of their brand pages, but is also reflected in consumers' intention to interact with branded content. We replicate the findings of the first three studies in study 4 and combine the effects of warmth with those of brand symbolism to show a process of conditional moderated mediation. In study 5, we show that these mechanisms operate when consumers publicly engage with brands on Facebook but not when they privately engage with them. This provides further support for the idea that endorsements of brands on social media serve goals related to identity signaling. In study 6, we investigate the causal effects of warmth and competence. Finally, study 7 relates consumers' perception of brands' warmth and competence to the ease of these brands to achieve endorsements by consumers and shows that warmth decreases brands' effort to acquire online brand endorsements.

## Conceptual Framework

We define consumers' online brand endorsements as online behavior that affiliates consumers with brands in ways that are public, positive, and perceived by others. Thus, liking a brand on Facebook, sharing branded content, creating consumer generated advertising (Campbell et al. 2011; Muñiz and Schau 2007; Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011), or visibly connecting oneself to branded online content (Ahn and Bailenson 2011) are all examples of consumers' online brand endorsements, as they are public, positive, and perceived by others. Conversely, private forms of brand engagement, such as visiting a website or online community, or subscribing to a newsletter should not be regarded as examples of consumers' online brand endorsement as they don't meet all of these three criteria.

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