



The effects of information cues on perceived legitimacy of companies that promote corporate social responsibility initiatives on social networking sites



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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites are increasingly used to promote corporate social responsibility initiatives. Consumers can like, share, or comment on corporate social responsibility messages on social networking sites, signaling public approval or disapproval and affecting an individual's perceived legitimacy of the organization. Especially for controversial companies, such as alcohol brands, both perceived legitimacy of a cause and consumer purchase intention might be enhanced by expressions of public support on social networking sites. However, few studies have explored this relationship. The findings from Experiment 1 suggest that the number of followers (low vs. high) affected perceived legitimacy and purchase intention. Experiment 2 revealed that the effects of comment valence on attitudinal and behavioral intention interacted with the number of followers. These findings advance our current knowledge of factors associated with perceived legitimacy of companies that promote corporate social responsibility campaigns on social networking sites. Implications for advertising research and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

Companies have increasingly invested in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as charity, sustainability, and programs that enhance consumer and employee welfare (Sprinkle & Maines, 2010). Considering that 83% of Americans expect brands to support social causes (Carmichael, 2012), knowing how to communicate and engage effectively with consumers through CSR initiatives is crucial.

Companies engage in CSR initiatives to gain legitimacy (Du & Vieira, 2012), repair image (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009), and increase purchase intention (PI) (citation withheld for blind review). Alcohol companies belong to a controversial category due to the addictive nature of alcoholic beverages and the detrimental social impact that addiction can have on families and communities (Grougiou, Dedoulis, & Leventis, 2016). For this reason, alcohol companies have actively promoted “drink responsibly” in their CSR campaigns (Barry & Goodson, 2010). However, due to perceived incongruence between certain behaviors associated with consuming alcoholic beverages and the promotion of responsible drinking, consumers might easily doubt the intention behind these CSR initiatives (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), making legitimacy harder to establish (Smith, Cukier, & Jernigan, 2014; Wolburg, 2005). Thus, controversial industries must better understand the channels that might help them establish legitimacy.

Gaining social support might be one way to increase legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). In a marketplace saturated by social media, a good platform for gaining social support for a CSR initiative is social networking sites (SNS). CSR reports and corporate websites typically reach a small audience and research suggests that expansion of promotional efforts through SNS pages (Jeong, Paek, & Lee, 2013) or advertising (Perks, Farache, Shukla, & Berry, 2013) could increase visibility. On SNS pages, consumers can express support for or disapproval of companies, and these expressions become visible through information cues (e.g., number of followers or user comments). These cues inhibit scrutiny of the source (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Sundar, 2008) because other consumers, not the company itself, generate them. For example, Anheuser-Busch's “Friends Are Waiting” video was part of a drunk-driving prevention campaign posted to Budweiser's Twitter account. This video received significant social support in the form of likes, views, and retweets and garnered positive press coverage for the company (Kim, 2016; Messner et al., 2013). Despite the importance of SNS activity to CSR campaigns and recent examples of successful CSR initiatives on SNS pages, the extent to which this type of public support might affect perceived legitimacy of a controversial brand and/or purchase intention is still unknown.

Content analyses and case studies have explored the potential for brand communication (Lin & Peña, 2011) and electronic word-of-mouth

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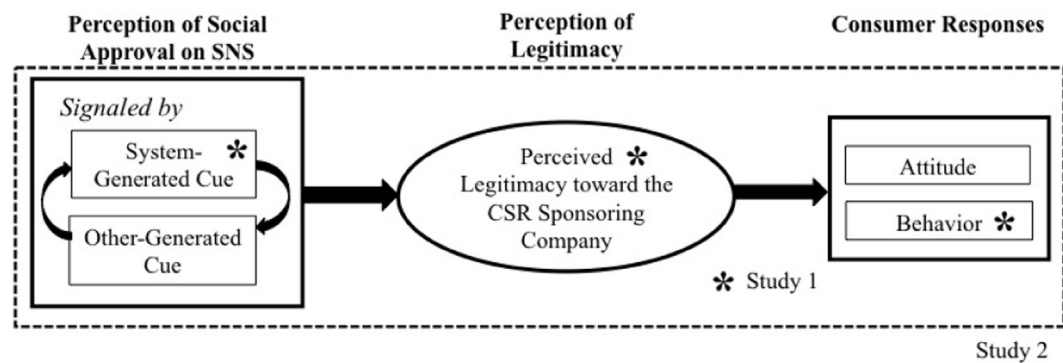


Fig. 1. The conceptual model of relationships among social approval, legitimacy, and consumer response when processing the CSR initiatives of alcohol companies on SNS platforms.

(Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009) on SNSs. Only a few experimental studies have examined the causal relationship between unique SNS features and marketing outcomes for CSR campaigns. Using experimental methods, the current study investigated the role of two social support cues in a CSR campaign on Facebook and Twitter: system-generated information and user-generated information. Although many studies have noted the importance of attaining legitimacy through CSR campaigns (e.g., Du & Vieira, 2012), few studies have actually examined the mechanism that leads to perceived legitimacy. To address this gap in the literature, the current study tested for mediating effects of perceived legitimacy between the information cues and responses to the CSR campaign.

Experiment 1 tested the role of system-generated information (i.e., number of followers) on purchase intention, mediated by perceived social norm and company legitimacy, with Twitter as the platform (Fig. 1). This experiment established that perceived social support based on the number of followers helped increase perceived legitimacy. Experiment 2 added user-generated information (i.e., comment valence) and observed its interaction with the number of followers on both Twitter and Facebook. These experimental conditions approximated real-world SNS settings where consumers can see both types of information. We predicted that the strong bandwagon cue (i.e., number of followers) would overpower comment valence effects when the number of followers was high but not when the number of followers was low. The underlying mechanisms were then tested once again. The findings have implications for what to expect and what to monitor when promoting social media campaigns on SNS pages, especially for companies that sell products that are perceived to be incongruent with the message of a CSR campaign.

2. Corporate social responsibility and SNS campaigns

The commercial use of SNSs has many benefits (Hutchings, 2012; Yoo, Choi, Choi, & Rho, 2014), and research shows that Fortune 500 companies and fast-growing corporations are using SNS pages as marketing tools (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Given this trend, the distinction between system-generated content and user-generated content is important. System-generated content is objective, often numerical information that the system generates (e.g., number of likes, follows, and shares). Westerman, Spence, and Van Der Heide (2012) stated that these cues could be used heuristically to signal how popular a corporation is. The common definition of popular implies a minimum level of approval, which can be considered an expression of a social norm (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). These heuristic cues can signal whether others approve of a company's campaign and whether that company adheres to social norms (Westerman et al., 2012). User-generated content consists of cues created by users that signal approval or disapproval.

3. Legitimacy theory in the context of CSR campaigns on SNSs

Legitimacy is a fundamental concept in organizational and social sciences (Breit, 2014; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Suchman (1995) defined legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Perceived legitimacy influences consumer decision-making, and greater perceived legitimacy has been found to increase positive evaluations of a company (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy has also been explained using resource-dependence theory (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). With limited resources, consumers will spend money on organizations they consider to be legitimate (Chung, Berger, & DeCoster, 2016). This trend motivates companies to engage in CSR initiatives that convey a socially desirable image.

In the case of a controversial product such as alcoholic beverages, companies are more likely to face obstacles to perceived legitimacy due to a reputation for having a negative impact on social and physical health (Grougiou et al., 2016). Despite consumer skepticism, CSR initiatives can help offset negative images generated by a controversial product. A previous study found that controversial companies were more likely to launch CSR campaigns than non-controversial companies in an effort to enhance legitimacy (Grougiou et al., 2016). Thus, especially for controversial brands, understanding how legitimacy might be established in the consumer mind is important.

Companies can use SNSs to gain legitimacy by improving dialogue and engagement with consumers (Seele & Lock, 2015). Cues that show CSR initiatives have gained social support should increase perceived legitimacy of a company. However, the mechanisms through which consumers evaluate CSR initiatives are still unknown. Additionally, even though the importance of legitimacy has received considerable attention in the literature (e.g., Du & Vieira, 2012; Seele & Lock, 2015), only recently have legitimacy measures been developed (Chung et al., 2016). Panwar, Paul, Nybakk, Hansen, and Thompson (2014) found that family-owned (vs. publicly-owned) companies garnered higher perceived legitimacy. However, the current study tested more generalizable elements of system-generated cues (i.e., number of followers) that signal social approval, their potential interaction with user-generated cues (i.e., user comment valence), and the mediating role of perceived legitimacy in CSR campaigns promoted on SNS pages.

4. Number of followers: Antecedent to perceived legitimacy as a signal of social approval

SNS platforms provide opportunities to engage with organizations by following a page (Hofer & Aubert, 2013). The assumption is that followers support the organization and want to receive their messages (Beaudoin, 2011). Furthermore, previous studies have shown that system-generated cues (e.g., number of friends or followers) can influence public opinion. For example, individuals who have many friends on SNSs are judged to be

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