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The influence of social media interactions on consumer–brand relationships: A three-country study of brand perceptions and marketing behaviors



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ABSTRACT

Companies are increasingly allocating more of their marketing spending to social media programs. Yet there is little research about how social media use is associated with consumer–brand relationships. We conducted three studies to explore how individual and national differences influence the relationship between social media use and customer brand relationships. The first study surveyed customers in France, the U.K. and U.S. and compared those who engage with their favorite brands via social media with those who do not. The findings indicated that social media use was positively related with brand relationship quality and the effect was more pronounced with high anthropomorphism perceptions (the extent to which consumers' associate human characteristics with brands). Two subsequent experiments further validated these findings and confirmed that cultural differences, specifically uncertainty avoidance, moderated these results. We obtained robust and convergent results from survey and experimental data using both student and adult consumer samples and testing across three product categories (athletic shoes, notebook computers, and automobiles). The results offer cross-national support for the proposition that engaging customers via social media is associated with higher consumer–brand relationships and word of mouth communications when consumers anthropomorphize the brand and they avoid uncertainty.

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms have emerged as a dominant digital communication channel via which consumers learn about, share information on, and interact with brands they consider, purchase, and evaluate (Chappuis, Gaffey, & Parvizi, 2011; Qualman, 2013). Over 2.7 billion people globally are online, or approximately 40% of the world's population (ICT, 2014). Over half of online adults in the U.S. use two or more social networking sites (Pew Internet, 2014), with sites such as Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn now commonly used to navigate content on the Web in addition to or instead of traditional search engines (Bughin

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et al., 2011). And with near 100% penetration of mobile-cellular phones worldwide (ICT, 2014), social media are increasingly accessed and used at all times and places. Marketers are therefore adapting their strategies to reach increasingly networked consumers, and are placing more emphasis on competing for consumers' social media attention to drive customer engagement.

Through social media, marketers can interact in two-way communications with existing and potential customers and gain rich, unmediated consumer insights faster than ever before. Marketers also see the value of social media networking, brand referrals and information sharing. According to Facebook, the average user has 130 friends on the social network, and when people hear about a product or service from a friend, they become a customer at a 15% higher rate than when they find out about it through other means (comScore, 2011). Additionally, social media offers potential for generating awareness and interest through viral or rapid spreading of product and service experiences and opinions (Berger & Milkman, 2012). As a result, companies are proactively engaging in new social media marketing strategies and tactics (Neff, 2014). General Motors has moved 25% of its global marketing spending on the Cadillac brand into digital platforms compared to 17% three years ago, with an emphasis on video distributed through digital and social media (Learmonth, 2012). American Express has 1.5 million card members participating in its Sync program that lets members match their cards to their Facebook, Foursquare, and Twitter social media accounts for browsing offers and making transactions (Klaassen, 2012).

While the availability of social media is now widespread and companies in many industries are integrating social media into their communication strategies, little marketing research has been done to reveal the effects of social media interaction on consumer attitudes and behaviors and its underlying processes. Most of the existing research only deals with the characteristics of social media and how the differences from traditional media are challenging marketing strategies (e.g., Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). These studies are more descriptive than empirical (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013), and the limited findings of the effects of social media interaction are mixed. While there is an enthusiastic call for encouraging more social media interaction for companies' survival in modern markets (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), results to date are inconclusive. For example, a study by SocialBakers (2014) shows that the amount of social media interactions leads to more visits to the brand's website, while others suggest that social media engagements are ineffective in stimulating brand loyalty and sales (Traphagen, 2015).

To leverage the interactive and engagement dimensions of social media, more and more marketers have changed their marketing objectives, focusing on building/maintaining a desirable consumer–brand relationship via social media interaction. Despite the importance of branding and relationship building in the digital world, little is known about how social media relates to consumers' relationships with brands, and whether social media-based brand relationships are associated with desired outcomes such as customer satisfaction and recommendations. Fournier and Avery (2011) even warned brands to be cautious about social media involvement because the brands might be “uninvited crashers” of social media, implying that building brand relationships via social media is more complicated than simply encouraging more interactions. These questions particularly puzzle global brands that are facing multi-cultural customers. Can the same social media strategy work across borders? There are intense debates about centralized vs. localized social media presences among international firms (Gale, 2013; Smith, 2012). Therefore, empirical studies that look into social media interaction effects on brand relationships in diverse cultures are needed.

The current research addresses these gaps and explores the relationship between social media interactions and consumer perceptions of their relationship with the brands, and consequently how those interactions relate to desired marketing outcomes. More specifically, we sought to answer the following questions about social media and customer–brand relationships: To what extent are social media interactions associated with *perceptual* brand outcomes, in particular customer perceptions of brand relationship quality? In the context of social media, are the aforementioned brand perceptions associated with *behavioral* marketing outcomes such as brand evaluation and willingness to recommend? Also, what role does brand anthropomorphism play in this process? And to what extent do cultural differences influence the relationship between social media interaction and brand relationships? As Smit, Bronner, and Tolboom (2007) suggest, research is needed on the influence of marketing tools on brand relationships. So whether and how social media engagement is associated with customers' brand perceptions, satisfaction with their purchases, and willingness to recommend them to others, are important questions this study seeks to address.

This research makes a number of contributions. First, we explore whether social media interaction (presence, frequency, amount) influences the perception of brand relationship quality and marketing behavioral outcomes using real cross-national data. Second, we investigate boundary conditions (brand anthropomorphism and uncertainty avoidance) that could potentially facilitate or impair the relationship between effects of social media interaction and brand relationship building. Third, our results reveal a possible dark side of high social media engagement, which is counterintuitive to common practice and helpful for guiding marketers to plan an optimal social media strategy.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Consumer–brand relationships, brand relationship quality and social media

The relationships organizations are able to manifest between customers and their brands have become an important focus in marketing (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Fournier, Dobscha, & Mick, 1998). The win–win of consumer–brand relationships is that consumers derive satisfaction through greater attachment to brands, and that firms that better understand and respond to customer needs generate more brand loyalty and profitability. To achieve these goals requires more connections and interactions between consumers and brands so as to foster meaningful relationships between them.

From a research perspective, the strength and depth of the person–brand relationship has attracted increasing interest in marketing (see Sirgy, 1982). Belk (1988) and Kleine, Kleine, and Allen (1995) both suggested that people often regard their possessions as part of themselves and an important component of their sense of self. Phau and Lau (2001) showed that consumers

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