Does brand-consumer social sharing matter? A relational framework of customer engagement to brand-hosted social media

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ABSTRACT

Despite the considerable expansion of brand-hosted social media, it is still not clear whether and how brand-consumer social sharing contributes to virtual media engagement. Drawing on the theory of close relationships, this study provides a conceptualization of the gratifications that are derived from brand-consumer interactions, which is referred to as Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value. Using a sample of brands' Facebook page users, this study validates a scale for measuring the construct, which comprises four dimensions: brand intimacy, brand individual recognition, brand influence, and brand community belonging. In addition, satisfaction and brand gratitude, seen as media-driven variables, are found to mediate the impact of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value on virtual media engagement. Most notably, the findings reveal that the contribution of the gratitude-based route is higher than the satisfaction-based route. Implications for further research on social media are discussed.

1. Introduction

The development of social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest) offered brands new opportunities to connect with their customers. In particular, through brand-hosted media, such as brands' Facebook pages, brands acquired the capacity to support activities, such as providing customer service, product information, special offers, and various types of entertainment (Breitsohl, Kunz, & Dowell, 2015). Along these lines, a vast stream of research on online brand communities has flourished. Most research has focused on understanding the active participation of community members, and the literature highlights the collective process of value creation (e.g., Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Schau, Muñiz Jr., & Arnould, 2009; Schembri & Latimer, 2016; Zaglia, 2013). Consumers are found to increasingly perform the role of producers of communal value through online brand communities by contributing to brand culture and proposing product improvements (e.g., Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007; Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). By contrast, the dialogue between a customer and a brand, uniquely allowed by brand-hosted media, has received little attention in the literature (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). Whether these interactions can provide value for consumers and favor engagement with brand-hosted social media remains unclear. Nonetheless, in a context in which brands seek to reinforce branding and relationship building in digital environments (Fournier & Avery, 2011), a better understanding of the gratifications derived by consumers in their interaction with brands on social media platforms is of prime interest.

The current research addresses this gap in the literature and provides a conceptual framework that integrates the psychosocial theory of close relationships (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002, 2003) and the media gratifications perspective (Rubin, 2009) to evaluate the benefits that consumers derive from brand-consumer social sharing. This study formally refers to the social aspects of brand-consumer mediated interactions in the context of brand-hosted social media. In addition, by recognizing brand-consumer interactive communication as a form of brand relationship investment (De Wulf, Oderkerken-Schroder, & Iacobucci, 2001; Koch & Benlian, 2015), this research explores how brand-consumer social sharing is likely to favor media engagement. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions: How can brand-consumer social sharing be approached through media gratifications? What are the underlying mechanisms that mediate the influence of brand-consumer social sharing as reflected by the corresponding media gratifications on media engagement? Specifically, are the relational frameworks that depend on brands' relationship investments relevant in terms of mediating effect? Further, this study aims to investigate whether and how brand-consumer social sharing is associated with customers' engagement toward brand-hosted media.

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Using a sample of Facebook brand-page users, this study makes a number of contributions to the literature on social media. First, it develops a conceptual framework to understand the fundamental nature of brand-consumer social sharing when their interactions are mediated by a brand-related virtual media. Second, it elaborates and validates a theoretically grounded scale for measuring the media gratifications derived from brand-consumer social sharing. Third, a relational model of the influence of brand-consumer social sharing on media engagement that comprises two distinct media-driven routes is proposed and empirically validated. The remainder of this paper is structured to include a review of the relevant literature and hypotheses, methods, and findings. Finally, the paper concludes discussing the implications of its main results and directions for future research.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses development

2.1. Dimensions of brand-consumer social sharing value

An extensive body of literature focused on how consumers derive benefits from the use of media and brand communication channels (e.g., Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, & Marshall, 2011; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001). This stream of research emphasizes the multidimensional nature of media gratifications (e.g., Rubin, 2009) by developing a theory of user value based on usage and experiences. Among the benefits derived from a brand communication channel, social gratifications have been consistently identified as a major component of media experience (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). In this respect, media and marketing researchers assign numerous meanings to the social gratifications derived from a communicational device, which include gaining insight into the circumstances of other individuals, finding a basis for conversation and social interaction, having a substitute for real-life companionship, helping perform social roles, and being provided with an opportunity to socialize (e.g., Calder et al., 2009; Chiu & Huang, 2015; McQuail, 1983). A review of the major empirical conceptualizations of virtual media social gratifications proposed in the marketing literature is presented in Table 1.

This review shows that, even when applied to a brand community-context, most of these conceptualizations do not address the aspect of social gratifications based on brand-consumer interactions. As a notable exception, the conceptualization from Baldus et al. (2015) identifies brand influence as a customer value associated with brand-consumer social sharing. In addition, customers are shown to derive value from like-minded discussions with other customers who share the same views about a brand (Baldus et al., 2015; Marbach et al., 2016); however, this conceptualization does not tackle the fact that lurkers, as passive users of social media, may derive value from observing interactions between other consumers and the brand itself. More generally, the existing literature on brand communication channels and social media fails to recognize brands as social actors endowed with a relational agency (Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang, & Mallin, 2013; Simon & Andrews, 2015), thus underrating the potential of media gratifications in terms of relational benefits.

However, this perspective is consistent with the marketing literature on brand relationships, which shows that people relate to their brands similarly to how they relate to the people around them (Fournier, 1998), a core assumption producing comparable effects on the strength and nature of such relationships (e.g., Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Furthermore, recent developments in communication studies suggest that the most prominent features of relationship development can be achieved irrespective of the type of communication channel, namely, through face-to-face or technology-mediated communication, albeit with some nuances (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2013; Tong, Kashian, & Walther, 2011).

Against this background, the concept of *Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value* is introduced to represent the social gratifications derived from brand-consumer virtually mediated interactions, which are likely

Table 1
A review of major empirical conceptualizations of virtual media social gratifications in the marketing literature.

Authors	Research type	Media type	Brand-related media	Customer value concept	Social gratifications themes		
					Consumer-to-consumer interactions	Brand-consumer interactions
Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004)	Empirical: Quantitative	Various internet venues including brand usenet newsgroups	Yes	Individual motives for participation in a virtual community	Maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement	
Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004)	Empirical: Quantitative	Web-based consumer opinion platforms	No	Individual motives to engage in eWOM communication	Concern for other consumers, self-enhancement, advice seeking, socialization	Helping the company
Calder et al. (2009)	Empirical: Quantitative	Various media sites	No	Gratifications derived from online experiences	Social Facilitation, Self-Esteem and Civic Mindedness, Participation and Socializing, Community	
Schau et al. (2009)	Empirical: Qualitative	Nine brand communities	Yes	Collective value creation derived from interacting practices	Impression management, social networking, community engagement	
Abdul-Ghani et al. (2011)	Empirical: Qualitative	Online auction site	No	Benefits as bases of engagement with the online auction site	Benefits from interacting with sellers and friends	
Baldus, Voorhees, and Calantone (2015)	Empirical: Quantitative	Online brand community	Yes	Intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community	Connecting, helping, seeking assistance, self-expression, validation, like-minded discussion	Brand influence
Hartmann, Wiertz, and Arnould (2015)	Empirical: Mixed methods	Online gardening community	No	Outcomes of practice experiences	Task empathising, social empathising, governing, badging, impression management	
Marbach, Lages, and Nunan (2016)	Empirical: Qualitative	Social media brand communities	Yes	The ratio of perceived benefits to perceived sacrifices resulting from media engagement	Impression management, like-minded discussion	