



Consumers' use of brands to reflect their actual and ideal selves on Facebook

Candice R. Hollenbeck ^{a,*}, Andrew M. Kaikati ^{b,1,2}

^a Terry College of Business, University of Georgia, 148 Brooks Hall, Athens, GA 30602, United States

^b Terry College of Business, University of Georgia, 111 Brooks Hall, Athens, GA 30602, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

First received in 5, July 2011 and was under review for 7 months

Available online 16 September 2012

Keywords:

Consumer identity

Self-concept

Self-expression

Actual self

Ideal self

Social networking

Social media

Facebook

ABSTRACT

How do consumers represent their identities on online social media platforms? In this article, we focus on consumers' use of brands on their Facebook pages as subtle cues to represent their selves. Although recent research suggests that consumers present an actual, not an ideal self, our data reveal that veridical presentations of the actual self through brands rarely exist. Furthermore, we contribute to an understanding of how multiple selves interact to inform brand connections. We offer insights into how and why consumers either blend or integrate their actual and ideal selves or choose one of them exclusively when these selves conflict. Additional contributions and future directions in the areas of self, branding, and social media are discussed.

© 2012 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Scholars have investigated the presentation of the self online since the early days of the internet (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000). One key question of interest in this stream of research has concerned whether people present an accurate version of themselves online, a more idealized version of themselves, or both (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Early studies of online impression formation focused on relatively anonymous online environments, such as chat rooms, bulletin boards, product discussion forums, and gaming websites. These studies generally concluded that, due to the anonymity of these environments, users tend to construct idealized versions of themselves without fear of disapproval and social sanction from those in their off-line social circles (e.g., Bargh et al., 2002; Walther, 1996). For instance, a study of a prominent online gaming site shows that players create virtual, alternate selves who embody aspects of the players' ideal selves (Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007).

As the media landscape has changed dramatically in recent years, new online platforms have altered the ways in which people interact with one another. At least 75% of adults who use the internet use social media (Stephen & Galak, 2010; Urstadt, 2008). Social networking sites (SNSs), which fall under the umbrella of social media, have recently become prominent. SNSs such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, attract

more than 90% of young adults and teens, and represent over a quarter of all internet traffic (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010).

Consistent with the growing research on human brands (Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011; Thomson, 2006), there is a renewed interest in how people present themselves online, especially in the context of these SNSs. A great deal of interest is centered on Facebook, the largest SNS, boasting 640 million members worldwide, with 165 million of these members residing in the United States (Stone, 2010). There are key characteristics of Facebook that distinguish it from other forms of social media, and even from other social networking sites such as Twitter and MySpace. Facebook users are "primarily communicating with people who are already part of their extended social network" (Boyd & Ellison, 2009, p. 210), and these users, or "friends," are all visible within their networks. In other words, Facebook represents a means for individuals to continue their offline relationships and conversations in an online medium. In addition, within each network lies a certain degree of visibility through features including wall posts and public displays of connections. Indeed, Facebook use is shown to be significantly associated with the maintenance and creation of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Recent research on Facebook examined the conveyed personalities of users' profiles to test the validities of the *idealized virtual identity hypothesis* (that Facebook users' profiles display idealized information that does not reflect their personalities) and the *extended real-life hypothesis* (that Facebook users' profiles display information to communicate their real personalities) (Back et al., 2010). The research concluded that consumers present an actual, but *not* an ideal, version of themselves on this social networking platform. The authors' proposed explanation for this finding that an idealized version

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 706 542 3762; fax: +1 706 542 3738.

E-mail addresses: chollenbeck@terry.uga.edu (C.R. Hollenbeck), akaikati@uga.edu (A.M. Kaikati).

¹ Both authors contributed equally to this work.

² Tel.: +1 706 542 9385; fax: +1 706 542 3738.

of the self is not reflected in users' profiles is that creating idealized identities should be hard to accomplish, primarily because "friends provide accountability and subtle feedback on one's profile" (Back et al., 2010, p. 372). In other words, Facebook "friends" might question the validity of information if it does not reflect their perceptions of the person.

With the current research, we aim to build on this literature studying consumers' expressions of self via Facebook to complement and extend these findings. Specifically, we focus on consumers' use of brands as subtle cues to represent their selves. Brand mentions are arguably the most relevant and important aspect of this medium to marketers, and can include "liking" a brand by publicly linking it to one's profile, as well as mentions of brands in other subtle ways, such as through narratives, photographs, and profile activities and interests. While it has been noted that consumers may use brands to identify themselves with specific subcultures and/or identities online (Stern, 2004), we have a limited understanding of what purpose these brand linkages serve in the expression of consumer identities in SNSs. Thus, we aim to shed light on two important questions. First, how do users present their identities *through brands* on Facebook—do they represent the actual self, the ideal self, or both? As a limiting condition to recent research concluding that Facebook profiles reflect actual but not ideal selves, we propose and show that consumers may present *both* actual and ideal versions of themselves through the brands that they publicly associate with on Facebook. Second, and perhaps more importantly, how do consumers use brands to blend their actual and ideal selves when these identities are congruous, or cope when these identities are incongruous? As we will discuss later in more detail, Facebook has a number of characteristics (e.g., its ubiquitous nature, high visibility, direct connection to a sizable and heterogeneous network of known individuals) that provide unique and interesting conditions for investigating the interaction of multiple selves and the incorporation of brands in consumer self-expression.

We aim to make at least three important contributions with this article. First, we respond to a call for further research on identity and brands. Kirmani (2009, p. 274) notes that research is needed "to pursue issues dealing with the intersection of identity and brands" to offer theoretical and substantive insights in this area. According to congruity theory, consumers tend to prefer brands that are congruent with certain aspects of their identities (Sirgy, 1985). However, this literature is relatively silent on how multiple identities interact to inform brand preference. We aim to extend this theory by shedding light not only on how consumers choose brands that are congruent with their selves but *also* how and why consumers publicly link themselves to brands to resolve conflicts engendered by different salient aspects of the self.

Second, we extend the current knowledge on how consumers use brands as cues to represent themselves, in the context of the most well-known and most used social networking platform: Facebook. Whereas most prior research has examined brand-self congruence in the context of offline measures, such as brand perceptions and purchase intent, we examine the ways in which consumers directly and publicly link themselves to a brand to present their selves on a prominent social networking platform. This is important as it has been noted that the particular self that consumers choose to express may be dependent on contextual factors (Schenk & Holman, 1980).

Third, this research builds on the recent literature by providing an improved understanding of consumers' self-presentations on SNSs. To complement recent research showing that Facebook profiles reflect only actual, and not ideal, versions of the self (Back et al., 2010), we show that by using brands as subtle cues, consumers do indeed communicate idealized versions of their selves, and even more so in aggregate than their actual selves. Overall, this research builds on a strong foundation of work employing qualitative methods to explore new media (e.g., Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, & Winer, 2010).

The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows. Next, we review the literatures on brands and the self and self-expression with regard to different aspects of the self. Then, we introduce our methodology and findings. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications for firms and future research directions.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Brands and the self-concept

Self-concept is defined as a person's perception of him or herself (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Importantly, the self consists of multiple aspects, or dimensions (James, 1890; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Although the self-concept is relatively stable over time, the self is also malleable in that it may be influenced by social roles and cues, causing people to behave differently in varying situations. Thus, any of these dimensions can be activated at any time due to a number of factors that may become salient as a function of a situation (Aaker, 1999).

According to self-concept theory, people behave in ways that maintain and enhance their sense of self. One way to do this is through the use of brands (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008, 2011), which are imbued with symbolic meanings that develop as early as middle childhood (Chaplin & John, 2005). Through these meanings, brands can serve as a means for a consumer to express different aspects of his or her self (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Levy, 1959; Torelli, Monga, & Kaikati, 2012). Indeed, the congruence between brand and self-image is shown to be positively related to consumers' evaluations of products (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982). For instance, self-congruity has been shown to significantly influence promotion effectiveness (Close, Krishnen, & LaTour, 2009), quality perceptions of stores in shopping malls (Chebat, Sirgy, & St-James, 2006), and brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006). Furthermore, consumers choose brands with appealing personalities to enhance their selves (Swaminathan, Stille, & Ahluwalia, 2009) and may develop more positive self-perceptions in line with the brand's personality even after using a brand for only a brief amount of time (Park & John, 2010).

With the current research, our aim is gain a deeper understanding of how and why consumers choose to link themselves to brands on Facebook. Our first question is: Do consumers link to brands on this platform to reflect their actual selves, their ideal selves, or both? Recent research concluded that only actual, and not ideal, selves are reflected in Facebook profiles (Back et al., 2010). However, that research was conducted in the context of Facebook users' general profiles, which contain more explicit statements about the self, including descriptions of one's activities and behaviors, and not on Facebook users' utilization of brands as more subtle cues about their selves. In the next section, we discuss brands as reflections of self.

2.2. Brands as reflections of actual and ideal selves

While there are numerous conceptualizations of the self, the prominent facets of the self-concept that we focus on here are the actual and ideal selves. Scholars have long debated the relative influence of the actual versus ideal selves on consumers' evaluations of and preferences for branded products (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Landon, 1974). One important aspect of brands is that they can be used by a consumer to express to others their actual (i.e., who they are) and ideal selves (Belk, 1988; Dolich, 1969; Holt, 2002; Landon, 1974), with the ideal self representing either an expansion of self (self-representation; Belk, 1988) or a contraction of self (self-presentation; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; more information on this point will be provided in the findings section).

In the context of Facebook, there is reason to expect that consumers will reflect their actual selves by linking themselves to brands.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات