REGULAR ARTICLES

How brand post content contributes to user’s Facebook brand-page engagement. The experiential route of active participation

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Abstract Creating and developing a firm-hosted virtual brand community forms part of a relationship marketing strategy; therefore, it makes sense to evaluate its effectiveness in terms of relational outcomes. In an attempt to know how marketers can foster the relationship with the brand through virtual communities, we posit and estimate a model of relational efficacy for a firm-managed Facebook brand page (FBP) in which the brand posts created by the firm influence the behavioural engagement of individual users through the utilitarian and hedonic values derived from their interactive experiences within the FBP. The findings highlight that information posts stimulate user behavioural engagement through the utilitarian experiential route. Aside from any experiential route and adopting a more direct path, interaction posts are the main drivers of engagement behaviour. Image posts contribute towards the perception of utility, but in no way affect engagement. Finally, in order to gain a deeper insight, we explore the moderating effect of user brand purchase intensity on the relations posited in the model.

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Introduction

The marketing landscape is changing. The new marketing environment, dominated to a large degree by the emergence of the Internet and social networks, is imposing a shift from conventional relationship marketing towards a "transcending view of relationships" (Vargo, 2009) or an "expanded view of relationship marketing" (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012), in which the customer’s interactive experiences and "customer engagement" play a central role and in which engaged customer involvement in the firm’s activities is more proactive, interactive and co-creative (e.g., Brodie et al., 2011; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000).

Virtual brand communities constitute an exceptional research context in which to explore firms’ capacity to...
produce interactive experiences and promote relational engagement among customers (Relling et al., 2016). In these online spaces, individuals come together around some distinct interest (e.g., a brand) to contact and interact with each other in order to exchange, share and pool resources, such as information, knowledge, experiences, entertainment, socio-emotional support and friendship, through diverse computer-mediated communication systems (e.g., Jin et al., 2010a; Preece, 2001). In this sense, a virtual brand community is, first of all, an "online community based on social communications and relationships" (de Vaik et al., 2009, p. 185), a "web of personal relationships" (Rheingold, 1993) or a "fabric of relationships" (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 38). At the very least, a virtual brand community provides a "social structure to the C2C relationship in the consumer-brand-consumer triad" (Wu and Fang, 2010, p. 573).

With the rapid diffusion and widespread use of social network sites (SNS), more and more firms are investing in SNS-based brand communities to build relationships and to encourage users to exchange knowledge about their experiences with the brand or the firm (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2014). Millions of consumers are connected to their favourite brands through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and others (Statista, 2016). Unfortunately, this in no way means that all these communities are successful and that all their individual members are active participants. The report by Hampton et al. (2012) on The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project concludes that, on average, Facebook users “get more from their friends on Facebook than they give to their friends” and that the typical Facebook user is “moderately active” in performing specific Facebook activities. Such results concur with the findings obtained by Gummerus et al. (2012, p. 870), Pöyry et al. (2013, p. 232) and van Varik and van Oostendorp (2013, p. 456), amongst others, in the case of virtual brand communities. In fact, by adopting a naïve technically-oriented approach and by paying insufficient attention to the social interactions required to build a true community, many initially attractive online communities may have failed to retain and enduringly engage their members and, not surprisingly, as a result have become “cyber ghost towns” (Preece, 2001). In any case, regardless of its level of success, what makes a company’s social site (such as a company-hosted Facebook page) recognizable as a community is that it is a structured set of social relationships among members that share a common interest, i.e., they are admirers of a brand (e.g., Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Pöyry et al., 2013; Zaglia, 2013; Munnukka et al., 2015; Relling et al., 2016).

Given such a general framework, our research focuses on the relational context defined by a Facebook-page brand community (which is founded, managed, and controlled by a firm) in order to pinpoint the key drivers of user brand-page engagement (as a good indicator of community success). Specifically, our research question is how marketers can reach customers and stimulate their community engagement in the Facebook page context. Thus, we centre on those determinants of relationship marketing strategy success in Facebook that can be directly controlled by the firm, such as so-called “brand posts”. The present work seeks to estimate a relational efficacy model of a Facebook brand page (henceforth, FBP), which will allow us to (1) gauge the extent to which brand posts (henceforth, BP) or posts created by the firm running the Facebook page help improve page users’ overall relational experience and, through this indirect pathway, actually serves to foster user engagement behaviour and (2) ascertain whether the orientation or content type of BP can determine the kind of experiential value (utilitarian or hedonic) obtained by the users and their level of page engagement. We thus explore the degree to which each type of BP encourages user brand-page engagement through the utilitarian and hedonic experiential routes. In addition, we explore the moderating influence which the user’s brand purchase intensity (i.e., how much of the brand they buy) might have on the model’s structure and paths, one aspect not to taken into account thus far in the context of FBP relational efficacy.

Previous literature on the context of FBPs has empirically analyzed the response of page users to brand posts. For instance, de Vries et al. (2012), Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013), Sabate et al. (2014) and Luarn et al. (2015), amongst others, examine how the content type (among other characteristics) of a BP directly impacts on the “popularity” of that BP (as indicated by the number of likes, comments and shares on the BP). Compared to the works mentioned, our research evidences two significant differences in terms of approach and methodology which should be highlighted.

First, while the unit of analysis of previous works is the BP, the unit of analysis in the current work is the brand page and the page-user behaviour. Our research focus is customer behaviour in the relational context of a virtual brand community, in which each individual member holds links with the community as a whole, with the other members of the group, with the brand and with the firm (McAlexander et al., 2002). The dependent variable in our model is not, therefore, the community’s direct and global response to each BP or the efficacy per brand post, but each user’s overall response to the brand page (i.e. user brand-page engagement) or the relational efficacy per page user. Moreover, contrary to previous works, which evaluate objective indicators of BP content type and engagement, the independent variables in the current research correspond to users’ appraisals vis-à-vis the interest aroused in them by various types of BP depending on their content, and the dependent variable is the users’ subjective evaluation of their active involvement in the page’s relational activities. In other words, we measure the number of likes, comments and shares per page-user, not as an objective figure, but rather as the user’s subjective evaluation of their actual behaviour.

Secondly, we conjecture that BPs do not promote user engagement directly. Rather, BP content influences user engagement and brand page success through a key mediating construct: the user’s brand-page experiences. We thus follow the recommendation of Brodie et al. (2011), Gummerus et al. (2012) and Malthouse and Calder (2011), according to which the engagement construct should be based on the relational experiences of individuals interacting with the brand page. Therefore, we develop an alternative (but fully compatible and complementary) model in which user relational experiences within the FBP play a central and crucial role as a mediator in the relationship between BP interest and user brand-page engagement. In this vein, we refer to the “experiential route of user behavioural engagement”.

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