

Consumer social media activities and the impact on consumer-brand relationship

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Introduction

Companies are increasingly integrating nascent technologies in particular social media applications to develop new capabilities that favor stronger relationships with customers. Social media could be defined as the online means of communication, conveyance, collaboration and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities and organizations enhanced by technological capabilities and mobility (Tuten & Solomon, 2014, p 24). In fact, social media has become the control tower of many brands communication (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2012; Manthiou et al., 2013), forcing marketers to seek new ways of reaching and engaging their customers (Gallaughier & Ransbotham 2010; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner 2010). Thus, social media seems to play a key role in brand's communication success (Phan, Thomas, & Heine, 2011). However, while business practitioners mention many promising opportunities behind social media like increasing customer engagement, building brands, improving people or community interest in related products and services, channeling traffic to brand website or boosting sales, many questions remain on the way social media influences customers' decisions and behaviors. Addressing these questions will go a long way toward designing brands social media strategy by digging a little deeper into how customers are experiencing and using these platforms and what that could change at the brand level.

Research issue and questions

The aim of this research is to identify if and how consumer's activities in social media influence consumer-brand relationships.

The following research questions summarize the expected investigation process:

1. How to characterize and conceptualize the main activities consumers perform on brand enabled social media?
2. To what extent the consumer social media activities influence his or her brand perception on three levels: brand awareness, brand image and brand identification?
3. To what extent brand perception change may impact brand preference and loyalty?
4. What is the potential moderating role of (1) brand's relevance in social media, (2) brand's congruence across channels, and (3) consumer motivational orientation in the relationship between consumer's activities and brand perception?

Theoretical development: the conceptual framework

Based on literature, we built the following framework that represents a consumer-centric and processual perspective of social media activities impact. Our integrated analytical approach considers three moderating effects.

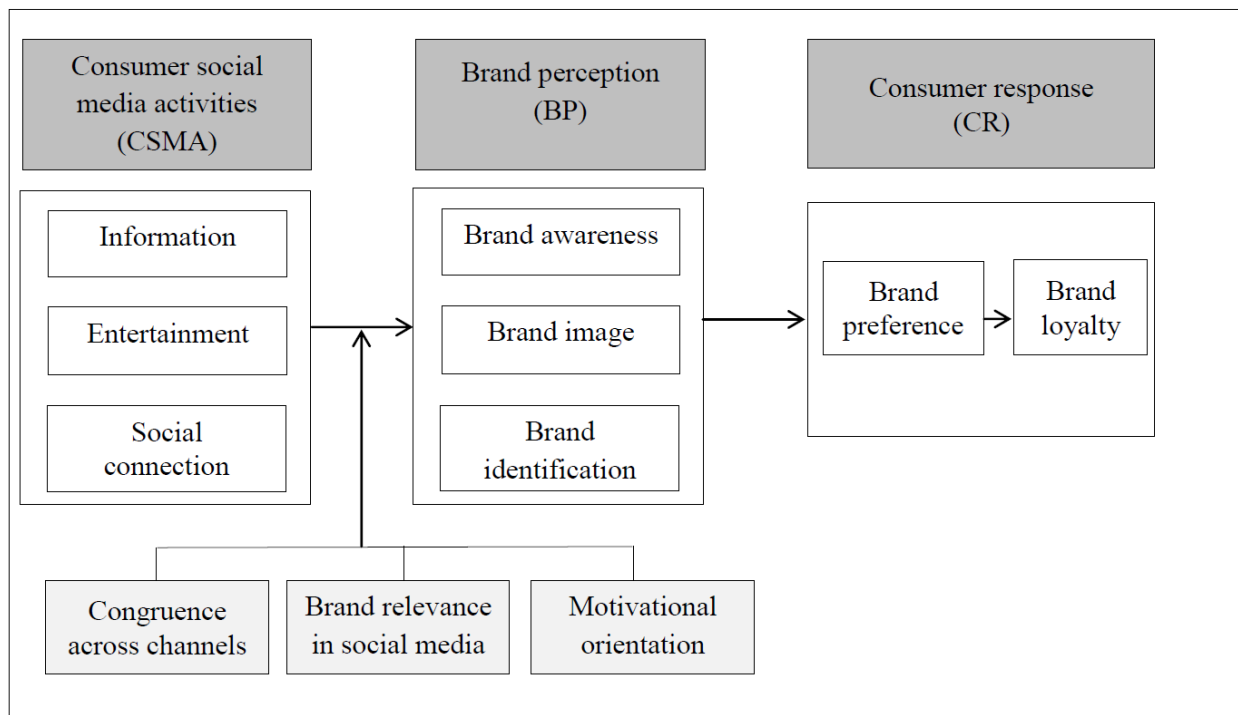


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Consumer social media activities (CSMA)

The core activities consumers engage in social media are converse, share, post, tag, upload content, comment, be entertained and so on (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). They are categorized into three broad consumer social media activities: seeking for information, having social connection and being entertained (Heinonen, 2011). In the current research proposal, we look at these social media activities from these three different perspectives and consider seven distinct dimensions, based on Kim & Ko (2012) and Tuten & Solomon (2014): social trendiness, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), customization, social interaction, community participation, social commerce and social entertainment.

Information

This activity refers to information acquisition, generation, sharing and processing by consumers. The first dimension at this level is trendiness. Social media provides the latest news and hot topics of discussion (Naaman, Becker, & Gravano, 2011) and is perceived as a more trustworthy source of information than corporate-sponsored communications (Foux, 2006). Successful brands update their Facebook site three times a day and are constantly tweeting on Twitter (Kim & Ko, 2012). In this study, trendiness is defined in terms of dissemination of the newest and trendy information about the different brands. The second dimension of information is electronic Word-of-mouth which represents: “a statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product, brand or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). eWOM is seen as increasingly important by organizations concerned with reputation management (Rokka, Karlsson, & Tienari, 2013) since it includes both positive and negative comments from consumers. Consumers are converted into brand ambassadors as they can spread the word and influence others across the social media sites (Martin & Todorov, 2010). Previous studies have supported the strong impact of eWOM on

brand awareness and image (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006) and on brand trust, satisfaction and attachment (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005). In this article, eWOM refers to the extent to which consumers of different brands pass along information and upload content on social media. Finally, social Commerce describes the use of social media to assist in the online buying and selling of products and services (Manthiou et al., 2014). Social commerce leads social shopping behaviors when social media users interact and collaborate during the shopping experience. Social commerce channels include reviews and ratings (on review sites or branded e-commerce sites), deal sites and deal aggregators (aggregate deals into personalized deal feeds), social shopping markets (online user-recommended products, and the ability to communicate with friends while shopping), and social storefronts (online retail stores that sometimes operate within a social site like Facebook with social capabilities) (Tuten & Solomon, 2014).

Social Connection

Social connection is the second category of activities the consumer may perform on social media. The first dimension of social connection is related to community participation. It depicts the channels of social media which focus mainly on the relationships and common activities users participate in with others who share the same interest or identification (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). Social media users fulfill a sense of belonging to the community, identity expression through the community, and a sense of affiliation with others in the community (Casaló *et al.*, 2010; Dholakia *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, social communities promote multi-way communications, collaborations, and the sharing of experiences and resources on social media (Manthiou et al., 2014). In this research, social community refers to the extent to which consumers of different brands engage in activities of collaboration for relationship building and maintenance.

Social interaction is the second dimension within social connection category. Interaction on social media is fundamentally changing communication between brands and customers (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). Help and support is provided when consumers need it, room for discussions is offered, and involvement through communication tools is granted (Manthiou et al., 2014). Therefore, brands need to be active in discussions and helpful with practical matters so as to promote interaction. Creating this relationship can increase credibility and affinity (Manthiou et al., 2013). In this study, interaction is defined as information sharing and opinion exchange with others which covers also the notion of customer social service. In addition to community participation and social interaction, customization is another dimension of these activities category. Customization is defined as the ability to tailor products, services, and the transactional environment to individual customers (Schrage, 1999). By personalizing their site, brands can customize and express individuality which builds stronger brand affinity and loyalty. For maximum impact, customization platforms should be linked to social media to allow users to show their customized products and influence their peers (Martin & Todorov, 2010). In addition, customization depicts high quality and leads to a better match between customer and products (Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnnavolu, 2002). It can also minimize the time customers spend browsing to find what they want. These advantages of customization make it appealing for customers to visit the social media channel again (Martin & Todorov, 2010).

Entertainment

Entertainment results from the fun and play arising from the experience on social media (Agichtein et al., 2008). From a hedonic perspective, social media users are viewed as pleasure seekers, feeling entertained and experiencing enjoyment that occurs in social media activities (Manthiou et al., 2013). For instance, some online communities allow members to play games or participate in contests, leading to pleasure and entertainment (Smith 2011). Entertaining actions can motivate customers' participation, promote their excitement and concentration, and make them enjoy the experience on social media (Liu & Arnett, 2000). Entertainment boosts social media success because it motivates users to participate, promote their excitement and keep them coming back (Liu & Arnett, 2000; Manthiou et al., 2014).

Brand Perception

In theory, considerable previous research has proved the effectiveness of marketing actions on brand evaluation (Aaker 1996; Keller 1993; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). For instance, Yoo, Donthu & Lee (2000) investigated the impact of marketing activities on brand awareness and brand associations. Kim & Hyun (2011) examined the impact of marketing mix elements on brand image and identification. Buil, de Chernatony & Martínez (2013) explored the relationships between marketing communication programs and their impact on brand cognitive variables such as awareness, quality and associations. Social media marketing influence consumer throughout the whole cognitive process starting by building brand awareness, enhancing brand image and increasing brand identification (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). Brands increase awareness by maintaining an active presence in the social media space where consumers are "live". Moreover, social media marketing is used much like advertising or events to enhance brand image and brand identification and eventually persuade consumers to develop a positive behavior towards brand purchase (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). Therefore, the following general hypothesis was developed:

H1: Consumer Social Media Activities (CSMA) positively influence brand perception

Moderating variables

The purpose of the modeling step in this article is to reveal the logic of cognitive, affective and behavioral processes generated from consumer activities in social media and related to relationship with the brand. The theoretical framework posits that the effect on brand relationship is indirect and goes through mediating variables related to consumer cognition about the brand. Based first on literature and similar approaches adopted for examining the effect of other environments (internet, store experience...) and second on brands experiences and market research reports on activities typologies, we decided to consider some moderating variables. These variables, to be measured from consumer's perspective, seem to be potentially relevant to increase our model predictive power and strengthen its causal structure.

Congruence across channels

Congruence refers to the idea that two or more entities go well together, a "structural correspondence" (Mandler, 1982). In advertising research, many studies considered this variable. Recently, researchers have applied congruence to less traditional media, showing its effect on consumers evaluation: congruity between the advertised product in banner ad and the web site context (Moore, Stammerjohan & Coulter, 2005; Kim & Choi, 2012), congruence

between the banner ad and the blog context (Segev, Weirui & Fernandes, 2014), congruity between different communication tools (Navarro-Bailon, 2012). Since Mandler (1982) argued that highly congruent information fits more with consumers' category schema than incongruent information, highly congruent information will be seen favorably by consumers. In contrast, increasingly incongruent information tends to increase consumers' difficulty in processing disparate content, hence leading to more negative evaluation. Thus, high congruence across channels - e.g. between the brand social media, the advertising, the web site and the brand in-store - should generate positive effects on brand perception. Therefore, we posit:

H2: Congruence across channels moderates the effect of CSMA on brand perception (brand awareness, brand image, and brand identification)

Brand relevance in social media

In an economic context where brands digital initiatives are intensive and many times related to 'nice to have' or 'me too' strategies, the main challenge and one of the critical factors to succeed in social media is to ensure relevance. In fact, consumers expect an intelligible and beneficial frame to share, interact and experience their brands. Transposing from the literature on brand extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990), we introduce brand relevance in social media as the degree to which the brand is perceived as pertinent to expand in the social media sphere. In other words, brand relevance from a consumer perspective is supposed to cover two levels: 1) the extent to which the brand is pertinent to exist in social media, and 2) the extent to which the brand is relevant in the way it animates social media. This second level may refer to brand content quality and community management competencies.

H3: Perception of brand relevance in social media moderates the effect of CSMA on brand perception (brand awareness, brand image, and brand identification)

Consumer motivational orientation

In theory, motivation refers to the intensity, persistence, and direction of effort allocation. Marketing literature identifies two fundamental motivational orientations: utilitarian, functional, task oriented for efficiency or recreational, experiential, hedonic for fun (Babin et al. 1994).

These different aspects have been widely examined mainly in contexts of shopping behavior or sometimes consumer online navigation. Previous models considered the motivational orientations to better explain consumer behavior in service and shopping contexts (Bitner 1992; Kaltcheva and Weitz 2006). In fact, the perception of consumer environment effect was shown to be dependent on desired level of goal achievement and control. In this research, we assume that brand perception may be different according to consumer motivational orientations. In other words, the motivations behind joining and being active on brand social media platforms are supposed to moderate the consumer perceptions of the brand.

H4: Consumer motivational orientation (task oriented or recreational) moderates the relationship between CSMA and brand perception

Consumer Response

In this study, we will focus on two important consumer responses, although some authors have focused more on the financial or shareholder perspective of brand evaluations (Aaker and Jacobson 1994). First, brand preference is an important consequence of brand evaluations and strong brand equity (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Park & Srinivasan 1996). It means that in the existence of several competing brands in the market, consumers tend to prefer and feel more attached to one of the brands based on what they know and feel about the brand, often described as customer-based brand equity (Keller 2003). Second, brand loyalty is among the most foundational benefits of brand equity (Keller, 2003; Keller & Lehman, 2006), although some scholars see it as a part of brand equity itself (Aaker, 1991). Brand loyalty has usually been measured as the extent to which consumers declare having been buying or will be buying a particular brand in the future. In the social media context, however, the links between following brands (e.g. in Facebook or Twitter) and actual brand purchasing loyalty have been seriously questioned (Schultz & Block, 2012). Thus we postulate:

H5: Brand perception positively influences consumer responses (brand preference and brand loyalty)

Methodological design

To investigate the effects of Consumer Social Media Activities (CSMA) on Brand Perception (BP) and its consequences in terms of Consumer Response (CR), we intend to lead a two-step field study. First, an exploratory qualitative survey and second an empirical study. The exploratory qualitative study will be dedicated to scales sharpening and items wording of some targeted concepts within the proposed framework. This step will mainly concern CSMA and considered moderating variables. The scope of activities performed by consumers on social media should be specified within each category (information, entertainment and social connection) to better capture the phenomenon and align with assumed effects in our model.

Concerning moderators (congruence across channels, brand relevance in social media and motivational orientation), the objective is to work on scales psychometric structure and adaption with a focus on adequate items. Pilot testing will be conducted among consumers under three phases. The initial phase of pilot testing implies focus groups of six to ten people. Participants will be asked to answer a series of open-ended questions about their perception of brands initiatives in terms of communication and social media and also their motivational orientation, tailored to explore each of the main components of these constructs.

In parallel, a sample of experts (consulting firms, market research agencies and brand or marketing managers) will be involved in semi-structured interviews to contrast metrics used to monitor social media with pilot study results. Contacts with some companies like GfK, Fullsix, Vanksen, Millward Brown or Makheia have been already initiated. In addition to that, a professional network has been established within luxury sector including brands like Hermès or Taittinger thanks to previous research collaboration. Other potentially relevant contacts in industries like consumer goods, telecommunications...will be approached. Finally, participants will be invited to evaluate through a brief questionnaire the intelligibility and

relevance of previously items generated. Based on scales generated during the qualitative step, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses will be also conducted for moderators (see initial reference scales in appendices).

The second step of the methodological process is about conducting a quantitative survey among consumers and followers of prominent and dynamic brands (related to different sectors) on social media. The study will be launched among consumers in different countries by considering some conditions related to socio-demographic distribution and the total population of the country. Questions will be under a format of seven points Likert scale. To test the hypotheses described above, it is first necessary to validate the existing measurement scale structures on the definitive sample. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis will be successively performed for CSMA, BP and CR adopted scales. Then, we test the whole model with structural equation modeling method (see figure about summarized research development process in appendices).

Research contributions

Increasing number of studies has charted the theoretical and managerial implications of social media for brand building (Gallaughier & Ransbotham 2010; Kozinets et al. 2010) and also the many management opportunities and challenges it entails (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Fournier & Avery 2011). Yet, until today limited empirical research and attention has been paid on the effects of how consumer's social media activities (CSMA) influence brand perception and how they consequently affect other important branding goals including brand preference and loyalty. This lack of research is interesting in the sense that successful social media marketing and engagement typically assumes a strong element of consumer involvement, participation and interaction. We address this important gap in literature by seeking to offer a more holistic framework demonstrating the impact of consumer social media activities towards the brand, and therefore signaling potential for successful marketing actions and investment.

Based on our preliminary conceptual model, we anticipate that consumer's brand perception depend on consumer social media activities regarding the brand and that this link is moderated by factors including the congruence of companies' social media presence across various channels, brands relevance in social media from consumer point of view, and also consumer's motivational orientation towards the brand. Understanding these relationships may help companies in focusing their marketing investment in several ways. First, by discerning which consumers social media activities influence brand perception and consequent business goals. Second, by suggesting whether brands should direct their social media activities congruently across most available channels or instead focus their attention on fewer channels. Third, by suggesting whether the currency and relevance of the brand in social media landscape has a role in building brands. Fourth, by proposing that the degree of consumer motivation towards the brand may play an important role regarding the brand evaluation process. Finally, taken together these findings also set the stage for new research directions for better understanding the social media marketing dynamics.

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Initial reference scales

Consumer Social Media Activities	
Information	Trendiness (Kim & Ko, 2012)
	1. Contents shown in “X” brand’s social media is the newest information.
	2. Using “X” brand’s social media is very trendy.
	Electronic Word of mouth (Kim & Ko, 2012)
	1. I would like to pass along information on brand, product, or services from “X” brand’s social media to my friends.
	2. I would like to upload contents from “X” brand’s social media on my blog or micro blog.
	Social Commerce (Tuten & Solomon, 2014)
	1. “X” brand’s social media assists in the online buying and selling of products
	2. “X” brand’s social media leverages social shopping behaviors when users interact and collaborate during the shopping experience
	3. Reviews and ratings on “X” brand’s social media enhance social shopping behaviors
Social connection	Social Interaction (Kim & Ko, 2012)
	1. “X” brand’s social media enables information sharing with others.
	2. Conversation or opinion exchange with others is possible through “X” brand’s social media.
	3. It is easy to deliver my opinion through “X” brand’s social media.
	Community Participation (Tuten & Solomon, 2014)
	1. “W” brand’s social media focuses on building relationships
	2. Social communities on “X” brand’s social media feature multi-way communication (e.g. conversation, collaboration, and the sharing of experiences and resources)
	3. Community, conversation, and collaboration are provided by “X” brand’s social media
	Customization (Kim & Ko, 2012)
	1. “X” brand’s social media offers customized information search.
	2. “X” brand’s social media provides customized service.
Entertainment	Social Entertainment (Kim & Ko, 2012)
	1. Using “X” brand’s social media is fun.
	2. Contents shown in “X” brand’s social media seem interesting.

Brand Awareness (Kim & Hyun, 2011)
1. I am always aware of “X” brand.
2. Characteristics of “X” brand come to my mind quickly.
3. I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of “X” brand.

Brand Image (Kim & Hyun, 2011)
1. “X” brand is a leading company.
2. “X” brand has long experience.
3. “X” brand is a representative of the industry.
4. “X” brand is a customer-oriented company.

Brand Identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel a strong sense of belonging to brand X 2. I identify strongly with brand X 3. Brand X embodies what I believe in 4. Brand X is like a part of me 5. Brand X has a great deal of personal meaning for me
Brand Preference (Kim & Hyun, 2011)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Although another brand has same features as "X", I would prefer to purchase from "X" 2. If another brand is not different from "X", it seems smarter to purchase from "X" 3. Although there is another brand as good as "X", I prefer to buy from "X"
Brand Loyalty Aaker (1991) and Yoo et al. (2000)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I will suggest "X" brand to other consumers. 2. I would love to recommend "X" brand to my friends. 3. I regularly visit "X" brand. 4. I intend to visit "X" brand again. 5. I am satisfied with "X" brand in every visit. 6. "X" brand would be my first choice.
Congruence over channels (adapted from Speed & Thompson, 2000)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a logical connection between the brand in social media activities, the brand advertising, the brand web-site and the brand in-store . 2. The social media, the advertising, the web-site and the in-store installation communicate the same brand image 3. The brand social media content, the brand advertising, the brand web-site and the brand in-store fit together well 4. The brand social media, the advertising, the web-site, and the brand in-store stand for similar things.