

The Effect of Brand Intimacy on Consumer Responses: An Application on a Social Media Context

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Introduction

The increased popularity of such social media as Facebook and Twitter among consumers has opened up opportunities for the development of new business models of online branding and social commerce (Zhou et al. 2013). In particular, consumers look increasingly to social media to form opinions about unfamiliar brands (Newman 2011). However, while social media has been becoming an important tool for branding and customer marketing, there remain many questions concerning the best ways for brands to represent themselves or address their customers in this highly interactive and personal environment of conversation. This important gap in knowledge may be due to the lack of adequate social relationship constructs in many traditional models of electronic commerce (Choi et al. 2011; Liang et al. 2011; Pöyry et al. 2013). New social relationship constructs could improve understanding of the consumer responses to marketing stimuli in the social media environment. The present research-in-progress aims to address this issue by analyzing the influence of a yet under explored construct—*brand intimacy*—on social media. The question that then emerges is: how and when can brand intimacy improve consumer responses on social media?

In the context of this study, we define brand intimacy as the degree to which the brand interacts in a psychologically close way to its customers. In the literature of

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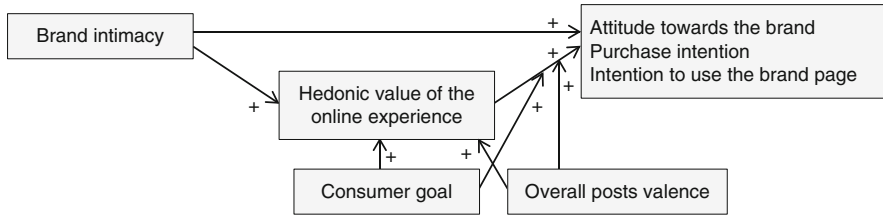


Fig. 1 Research model for the effect of brand intimacy on consumer responses

online marketing and information systems, intimacy, in a more general sense, usually refers to how close individuals feel to similar users in online communication and has been related to the level of social presence available on different media (Kumar and Benbasat 2002; Wang et al. 2007). Brand intimacy, however, refers more specifically to the form of self-presentation of the brand within social media (for example, as either an impersonalized entity or a named employee responsible for addressing customers) and to its language (more formal and distant vs. more informal and affectionate). The importance of the level of intimacy the brand decides to use in its communication resides in the probability of influencing customer perceptions about the brand, and therefore their attitudes and purchase intentions.

In this study, we argue that a high (vs. low) brand intimacy level should contribute to a more (vs. less) pleasurable online consumer experience. Using different Facebook brand pages as the context for an experiment, we test a model of influence of brand intimacy in which the hedonic value of consumers' experience on social media mediates consumers' responses. We also test some boundary conditions to this influence, in particular, the type of consumer goal and the overall valence of other customers' posts on the media. Thus, the results of this study not only contribute to the literature on online marketing and social commerce, but are useful also in informing brand managers about how and when they should expect to obtain better responses in addressing customers in a more (or less) intimate way.

Model

In the context of social media, we argue that increased brand intimacy may lead to a more pleasurable online experience with the brand page. Hence, satisfied users are more likely to engage in more favorable behaviors towards the brand, such as attitude towards the brand and purchase intention. Another expected response to this, in the specific case of Facebook brand pages, is a continued intention to use the brand page, an outcome that is relevant in promoting customer engagement with the company (Zhou et al. 2013) (Fig. 1).

Some studies have already shown that feelings of human contact and personal connection with a company's website may influence the attitudes of online shoppers by increasing interest and trust (Choi et al. 2011; Gefen and Straub 2003). Brand intimacy is expected to improve these feelings, as well as the flow associated to the experience on social media (Huang 2006). As a consequence, and based on previous work that has linked increased feelings of sociability in the online experience to the hedonic value and to patronage intentions of websites (Wang et al. 2007), we also expect this hedonic value to be a mediator of the effect of brand intimacy on consumer responses.

- H1: The brand intimacy on social media positively influences the consumer's responses, such as his/her attitude towards the brand, his/her purchase intention and his/her intention to continue using the brand page.*
- H2: The influence of brand intimacy on the consumer's responses is mediated by the hedonic value of the consumer's experience on the social media.*

Moreover, we expect the type of consumer goal in the community to moderate this effect. Several studies indicate there is congruence between hedonic and utilitarian factors in an online consumption experience and the type of dominant motivation among consumers (Cai and Xu 2011; Childers et al. 2001). For example, it has been shown that shoppers seeking products of hedonic nature are more sensitive to the website's social presence compared to those seeking utilitarian products (Choi et al. 2011). Accordingly, we expect that brand intimacy on social media might have a stronger effect when the customer enters the online community with a hedonic goal (like enjoyment) rather than a utilitarian one (such as finding the solution to a problem), because of the consistency between the type of goal and the hedonic value provided by the online experience.

- H3: The influence of brand intimacy on the consumer's responses is moderated by the type of consumer goal, so that this influence is stronger when the customer seeks a hedonic goal rather than a utilitarian one.*

On the other hand, we also expect the effect of brand intimacy to be conditioned to the valence of communication on social media. As argued, increased flow and feelings of human connection with the brand should imbue the online experience with a greater hedonic value. However, intimacy and social presence should also increase the transmission of emotions in the online communication (McKenna et al. 2002). These emotions are not always positive on social media, especially when several unsatisfied customers post complaints or negative remarks about the brand or the product. In this situation, we expect the influence of brand intimacy to be hindered by existent negative opinions and to be non-beneficial to the brand when there are too many negative posts on social media.

- H4: The influence of brand intimacy on the consumer's responses is moderated by the valence of other consumers' posts on the social media, so that this influence is reduced when posts are negative (rather than positive) overall.*

Research Methods

We tested the research hypotheses through two studies. In Study 1, hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 were tested using a 2 (brand intimacy: low vs. high) \times 2 (consumer goal: utilitarian vs. hedonic) between-subjects experimental design. The experimental setting was the Facebook brand page for a fictitious hotel in New York, presented online to a sample of 200 qualified participants on Amazon MTurk. Two brand pages were built: in the high intimacy condition, the brand profile was represented by an employee who addressed customers by their first names and used personal language; in the low intimacy condition, the brand profile was represented by the hotel logo, which addressed customers by their last names and used impersonal language. The contents of the page were based on real posts and comments from actual hotel pages on Facebook, but names and pictures were changed and adapted to the study's objectives. Except for the manner in which the brand profile presented itself and addressed customers, everything else in the two pages was identical—such as number of likes, main contents of posts, customers' replies, and page cover. The consumption goal was manipulated by directing participants to imagine themselves either searching a hotel for a vacation (hedonic goal) or a business trip (utilitarian goal).

Study 2 was also a 2 \times 2 between-subjects experimental design ($n=200$), similar in design to Study 1, manipulating two levels each of brand intimacy and consumer goal. However, this time we included many more negative posts on the Facebook page in order to create a more unfavorable overall feeling about the brand (60% of posts were complaints, compared to just 20% in Study 1). Therefore, H4 could be tested comparing results from Studies 1 and 2. All stimuli were pretested. The questionnaires included seven-point scales adapted from the literature. For interested readers, standard statistical descriptions of these measures can be obtained by contacting the authors.

Results and Discussion

We analyzed the results from the two studies using MANCOVA tests and mediation analyses using PROCESS (Hayes 2012). Participants who failed the attention question filter or looked at the brand page for fewer than 15 s were removed prior to the analyses (mean visualization time of valid answers = 117 s). Our final sample population consisted of 174 participants for Study 1 and 167 for Study 2. Summarizing both samples, 48% of participants were male and 52% were female; 54% had degrees of bachelor or higher; 82% were at least 25 years old.

Manipulations in Study 1 were checked with *T*-tests, confirming the difference between levels of brand intimacy ($M_{\text{low}}=4.98$, $M_{\text{high}}=6.30$; $p<.01$) and consumer goal ($M_{\text{business}}=3.46$, $M_{\text{vacation}}=4.80$; $p<.01$) between scenarios. To test H1, a

MANCOVA ($n=174$) using gender, age, education, involvement with hotels and Facebook usage as covariables was used to analyze the effect of the manipulations over the proposed dependent variables. As predicted, the results demonstrated the positive effect of brand intimacy on the consumer's attitude towards the brand ($M_{low}=5.30, M_{high}=6.12; p<.01$), his/her purchase intention ($M_{low}=4.87, M_{high}=5.83; p<.01$), and his/her continued intention to use the brand page ($M_{low}=4.08, M_{high}=5.22; p<.01$), supporting H1.

Results from the MANCOVA also demonstrate a significant interaction between brand intimacy and consumer goal for the consumer's attitude towards the brand ($F(1164)=4.15; p<.05$), his/her purchase intention ($F(1164)=4.15; p<.05$), and his/her continued intention to use the brand page ($F(1164)=6.9; p<.01$). This interaction is such that the positive effect of brand intimacy is more pronounced when the consumer has an enjoyment goal when accessing the page rather than a utilitarian one (for example, consumer's attitude towards the brand: $M_{low,business}=5.24, M_{high,business}=5.83; M_{low,vacation}=5.36, M_{high,vacation}=6.38$), therefore supporting H3. Among the tested covariables, involvement and Facebook usage were identified as significant, in the sense that high users of Facebook and those less involved with the service's category showed responses more favorable towards the brand than others.

Moving to the test of hedonic value as a mediator in the effect of brand intimacy on consumers' responses (H2), we tested a moderated mediation model using the PROCESS SPSS application provided by Hayes (2012). We estimated the conditional process model using a bootstrapping procedure (5000 bootstrap samples) in order to address potential concerns with nonnormality of the distribution of the indirect effect (MacKinnon et al. 2004). Results showed that the hedonic value of the online experience partially mediated the effect of brand intimacy on the consumer's attitude towards the brand (indirect effect = .10; SE = .04; 95% CI = .04 to .19) and his/her purchase intention (indirect effect = .14; SE = .42; 95% CI = .07 to .23), while fully mediating the effect on his/her continued intention to use the page (indirect effect = .30; SE = .06; 95% CI = .18 to .45). H2 was therefore supported.

Finally, H4 was tested by analyzing the results of Study 2. As before, manipulation checks confirmed the difference between levels of brand intimacy ($M_{low}=4.85, M_{high}=5.46; p<.01$) and consumer goal ($M_{business}=3.51, M_{vacation}=4.68; p<.01$) between scenarios. MANCOVA results showed that even though there was a small significant increase in the measure of hedonic value of the online experience associated with brand intimacy ($M_{low}=3.73, M_{high}=4.15; p<.05$), general consumer responses were consistently lower than in the previous study and, more importantly, mean differences between scenarios of low and high brand intimacy were not significant (for consumer's attitude towards the brand: $M_{low}=3.56, M_{high}=3.71; p=.59$; for purchase intention: $M_{low}=3.35, M_{high}=3.44; p=.74$; for continued intention to use the brand page: $M_{low}=3.53, M_{high}=3.53; p=.99$). Therefore, the overall negative valence of the posts in the brand page greatly reduced the influence of brand intimacy, confirming the hypothesis of moderation (H4) (Fig. 2).

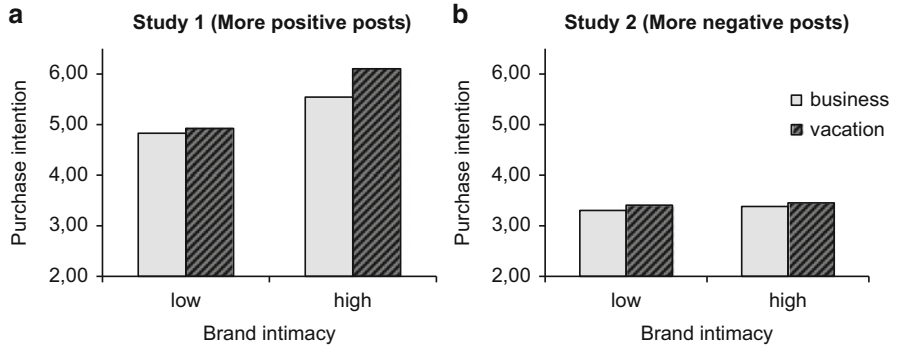


Fig. 2 Purchase intention as a function of brand intimacy and consumer goal

References available upon request.