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# Social Networks and Media Brands: Exploring the Effect of Media Brands' Perceived Social Network Usage on Audience Relationship

Sylvia Chan-Olmsted, Moonhee Cho, and Mark Yi-Cheon Yim

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## 1 Introduction

The proliferation of social media such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* has brought dramatic changes in consumer's media consumption behavior. With more and more consumers participating in some forms of social media, these platforms have become important means of consumer engagement for many marketers. In a Harvard Business Review survey, almost 80 % of the companies indicated they were using or plan to use social media for business (HBR Analytics Services 2010). Another survey conducted among a sample of American social media users, 93 % of them indicated that a company should have a presence in social media and about 85 % said that a company is required to not only have a presence in social media but also interact with customers through social media (Cone Business in Social Media Research 2008).

Comparing to traditional media which are one-directional, social media allow consumers to actively engage in a communication process not only as information receivers but also as message creators, thus enabling better information sharing and opinion exchanges. From a branding perspective, such a two-way communication mechanism creates viable channels for ongoing dialogues and long-term bonds between companies and customers (Williamson 2009). Tsai (2009) suggests that social media provide an opportunity not only to acquire or distribute information but also to develop relationships; and relationships cultivated through social media are effective in building brand loyalty because they are based on mutual interests

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S. Chan-Olmsted (✉)  
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA  
e-mail: [chanolmsted@jou.ufl.edu](mailto:chanolmsted@jou.ufl.edu)

M. Cho  
University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA

M.Y.-C. Yim  
Canisius College, Buffalo, NY, USA

and mutual gain. Empirical studies have repeatedly found that an investment in customer relationships contributes to not only a brand's consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) but also its profitability by reducing marketing costs and/or increasing net sales (Wang et al. 2009). Thus, the utility of social media as branding tools can be meaningfully understood in the context of brand relationship marketing and brand equity. Among all social media, social networks like *Facebook* is the most utilized platform by both consumers and marketers. There are now more social-networking accounts than there are people in the world (10 billion). It was forecasted that *Facebook*, which passed Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft in user engagement in 2010 with users spending 12.7 % of their time, will have \$4 billion in ad revenues worldwide in 2011 (eMarketer 2011).

Social networks' branding potential, especially in the context of relationship building, seems to offer traditional media which were handicapped by the one-way communication mechanism an opportunity to connect with audiences more effectively in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Research has empirically confirmed that branding is more important for services than for physical goods (Brady et al. 2005). Under this premise, the branding utility of social networks is especially important for media brands. Nevertheless, social networks, while can complement and be integrated with traditional media content, to a certain degree, also compete with these same media products for consumers' time and attention. In addition, as media brands are intangible, experience goods that typically possess more ambiguity and volatility in the process of consumer brand evaluation; it is unclear how social networks contribute to the development of brand relationship for this type of products.

The purpose of this study is to verify empirically the contribution of social networks as a branding tool for media products from the relational perspective, considering the traditional media's inherent inability for two-way communication. Specifically, it will investigate if the perceived use of social networks by a media brand plays a role in enhancing its brand equity and in consumer's intention to develop a relationship with the brand. With increasing market competition, importance of audience loyalty, online media popularity, and media brand extensions into other product and service categories, more insight on how social media usage might contribute to consumers' intention to build a reciprocal relationship with the media brands will validate media managers' more long-term branding decisions in the world of Web 2.0.

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## 2 Literature Review

As indicated, among all social media, social network sites (SNSs) like *Facebook*, *MySpace*, and *LinkedIn* are the most utilized platform by both consumers and marketers. There are now more social-networking accounts than there are people in the world. In fact, *Facebook* has overtaken *Google* as the most visited website globally (Tsotsis 2010). The use of SNSs for marketing purposes is becoming a norm for many businesses. Industry analysts estimated that worldwide SNS ad revenues, excluding money that companies spend developing and managing their social network presences, would reach \$5.97 billion in 2011, a 71.6 % increase

from 2010. Many firms have seen returns on the increased investment for the online platform according to a recent survey (eMarketer 2011).

The use of SNSs and its effectiveness for branding might differ between physical and intangible goods. As indicated, Brady et al. (2005) found that branding is more important for services than for physical goods and that there is a direct relationship between the level of intangibility and the importance of branding. In a sense, intangible products possess more ambiguity and volatility in the process of consumer brand evaluation. Because of the lack of standardized, observable features, brands play a more significant role as a source of differentiation for intangible products (Wang et al. 2009). Studies have shown that intangible products have fewer cues for consumers to evaluate, thus elevating the importance of brand image (Murray and Schlacter 1990; Turley and Moore 1995). The ambiguity in the brand assessment process is especially evident in the case of media content brands which are experience goods that are more likely to be influenced by other's opinions or external information (Reinstein and Snyder 2005). Under this premise, SNSs should be an effective means of branding for media content brands.

## **2.1 Relationship Marketing and Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE)**

Relationship marketing is broadly defined as “marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 22). In a world of audience fragmentation and increasing competition, a more long-term relationship with viewers might be the key to developing competitive advantages. The premise of brand relationship is that a brand is considered as a relationship partner of consumers and interdependent with them. That is, a brand is referred to as an active contributing member of relationship dyad rather than passive being of marketing transaction (Fournier 1998). Numerous studies have found constructive outcomes from good relationships with consumers. De Wulf et al. (2001) assert that investment in customer relationship through relationship marketing tactics such as preferential treatment, interpersonal communication, and tangible rewards brings behavioral loyalty. It was further suggested that the quality of relationship, as reflected by trust and satisfaction, can have a direct impact on brand equity (Wang et al. 2009). The effect of brand relationship on brand equity is important as it justifies the marketing investment a brand makes that may not lead directly or explicitly to specific consumption or purchasing behavior. Brand equity refers to the value of a product with its brand name compared with the same product without its brand name, and it is usually considered as marketing effects outcomes (Ailawadi et al. 2003; Keller 2003). Keller and Lehmann (2006) summarized that brand equity can be explained with three distinctive perspectives, customer-based, company-based, and finance-based. Keller (1993) further defines customer-based brand equity (CBBE) as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on customer response to the marketing of the brand” (p. 8). Eventually, better CBBE leads to higher profit potential because the brand might attain increased market share and favorable price structure (Aaker 1991; Keller 2002).

## 2.2 Perceived Brand Relationship Investment

To better understand the dynamics of the relationship between a company and its customers, some scholars focus on the aspect of reciprocity in a relationship (Bagozzi 1995; De Wulf et al. 2001; Smith and Barclay 1997; Yoon et al. 2008). Smith and Barclay (1997) argued that a company's relational investment such as devotion of time, effort, and resources forms psychological bonds that lead customers to stay in the relationship as well as expect reciprocation. Perceived relationship investment is defined as "a consumer's perception of the extent to which a retailer devotes resources, efforts, and attention aimed at maintaining or enhancing relationships with regular customers that do not have outside value and cannot be recovered if these relationships are terminated" (De Wulf et al. 2001, p. 35). Various studies have affirmed the benefit of customer's perceived relationship investment. Baker et al. (1999) found a positive association between seller's relationship efforts and customers' satisfaction. Some specifically identified a positive influence of perceived relationship investment on relationship quality and behavioral loyalty in the case of online marketing communications (De Wulf et al. 2001; Yoon et al. 2008). However, in the context of media brands where there is often no direct risk in purchasing decisions and ambiguity in brand evaluations, do the potential functions of SNSs in facilitating brand relationship and the importance of customer's perceived relationship investment of a brand still hold true? This study attempts to verify empirically the contribution of SNSs as a branding tool from the relational perspective with the following hypotheses:

- ▶ H1: Consumer's perceived social network usage of a media brand is positively associated with the perceived relationship investment of that brand.
- ▶ H2: Consumers' perceived relationship investment of a media brand is positively associated with the brand's consumer-based brand equity (CBBE).

## 2.3 Relation Intention

As stated above, brand relationship is formed between customers and brands. While it is obvious for a company to want to develop and maintain relationships with customers, customers do not always want to build a relationship with brands. This might be especially true in the case of media content products as the relationship between a media brand and its consumers has been one-directional historically. The popularity of social media, however, offers a new mechanism for media brands to change the dynamics of relationship building between audiences and media. In fact, one might argue that there might be more synergistic effect on relationship development through social networks for media content brands because of the importance of contextual information, connection with casts, and peer opinions in the consumption process.

Given that customers can be influenced to choose a certain brand because of marketing related factors such as low prices, switching costs, convenience, inertia, or current trend, rather than by affinity toward the product or company (Burnham et al. 2003), relationship intention is important in predicting profitability (Kumar et al. 2003). Defined as “an intention of a customer to build a relationship with a firm while buying a product or a service attributed to a firm, a brand, and a channel” (Kumar et al. 2003, p. 669), relationship intention leads a firm’s profitability in the long run. In the context of media content brands, relationship intention can translate into willingness to try new content from the same brand and/or active audience engagement with the services/products offered by the brand.

Kumar et al. (2003) suggested five dimensions that form relationship intention in an online communication environment: involvement, expectation, forgivingness, feedback, and fear of relationship loss. In general, involvement is considered as the extent to which a person has willingness to engage in relationship activity. High involvement in brand relationship brings great satisfaction as well as high level of identification with the brand. It also makes a customer feel guilty or uncomfortable when purchasing competitive brands. Expectation is developed when customers purchase a brand. Put another way, a customer who has higher expectations about and care for brand is more inclined to develop a relationship with the brand. As for the dimension of forgiveness, the notion is that a customer having the desire to build relationship with a brand is more tolerant of the brand and more forgiving, meaning that the customer will still give another chance to the brand even though his/her expectations were not met. As for feedback, it was suggested that a customer with high relationship intention is more likely to communicate on expectations to the brand. The customer gives both positive and negative feedback without any reward or paycheck in return. Therefore, a customer who is willing to give his/her opinion to firms without any expected benefits has a high degree of relationship intention. Finally, in terms of fear of relationship loss, a customer concerning about the consequence of losing relationship with a brand typically has high intention to build a relationship with the brand. In a comprehensive typology for consumer switching cost, Burnham et al. (2003) stated that brand relationship loss costs are “the affective losses associated with breaking the bonds of identification that have been formed with the brand or company with which a customer has associated” (p. 112). Kumar et al. (2003) found that brand equity positively influences relationship intention of customer. In other words, if a customer is aware of a brand and holds a positive brand image, he or she is more likely to develop a relationship with the brand. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.

- ▶ H3: A media brand’s CBBE is positively associated with consumer’s intention to develop a relationship with that brand.
  
- ▶ H4: There is a direct relationship between a consumer’s perceived relationship investment of a media brand and his/her intention to build a relationship with that brand.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Data Collection and Sample

Considering that SNS users rely on Internet connections for the platform and online survey is popular in social science studies with cost-efficiency and wide coverage of geographic areas (Deutskens et al. 2006; Wimmer and Dominick 2006), this study conducted a web-based survey using a national online consumer panel maintained by a leading U.S. market research firm. Two qualifying questions that assessed the panelists' social media usage level and familiarity were used to include only those who have had experience with social media from the 1,600 panelists contacted. A total of 340 responses were utilized for data analysis, yielding the final incident rate of 21 %. The majority of the sample consists of Caucasians (87.9 %), female (65 %), and married (57 %). The sample also reflects a diverse range of demographic backgrounds. Specifically, 5.9 % of the participants were in the age group of 18–24, 21.8 % in 25–34, 20.6 % in 35–44, 25.9 % in 45–54, 19.1 % in 55–64, and 6.8 % in 65 or older. In terms of education, about 18 % of consumers completed high school, 25.9 % held college education, 13.5 % hold a 2-year college degree, 27.6 % attended a 4-year college, and 14.4 % completed graduate or professional degree (see Table 1).

As for the media brands studied, using the list of the top 100 “most social brands” in 2009 that rank ordered over 2,000 consumer brands based on their daily social media activities (Virtrue 2009); five leading media brands, CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, and ESPN, from the intangible product category of television services were identified. A pre-test was conducted among a group of 25 respondents to refine the survey wordings as well as to select the final media brand pair to be tested. CNN and CBS were chosen for the study because the pair has the most significant variance in brand equity and perceived social media usage in the pre-test.

#### 3.2 Measurement Scales

Yoo and Donthu's (2001) overall brand equity scales were modified to measure brand equity of the media brands tested. Cronbach's alphas for both CNN and CBS were .92. Consumer's evaluation on the perceived relationship investment (PRI) for media brands was measured with three items developed by De Wulf et al. (2001), yielding the Cronbach's reliability coefficient of .94 (CNN) and .95 (CBS). Kumar et al.'s (2003) relationship intention items based on the aforementioned five dimensions were adopted to construct the valid components and test hypotheses related to relationship intention. The scale items were refined to reflect the nature of the media products. A total of 13 items including 1 validation item were tested in the study. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for reliability were .81 (CNN) and .85 (CBS). To measure the perceived SNS usage of media brands, this study asked the respondents to evaluate to what extent they think each brand uses SNSs. All the

**Table 1** Demographic analysis of sample

	Age (%)		Education (%)
18–24	5.9	Completed high school	18
25–34	21.8	College education	25.9
35–44	20.6	2-year college degree	13.5
45–54	25.9	4-year college degree	27.6
55–64	19.1	Graduate/professional degree	14.4
65 or older	6.8		

items were measured on 7-point Likert scales with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree (see Table 2).

### 3.2.1 Analysis Procedure, Assumption Check, and Reliability/Validity

To test the proposed model as suggested by the specified hypotheses (see Fig. 1), structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed using AMOS 18.0. The procedure consisted of assumption check, testing measurement models, and testing the suggested model, including reliability and validity checks. The suggested hypotheses were confirmed by identifying whether each path coefficient among latent variables is significant. The testing procedure was repeated based on two target media brands—CBS and CNN. This test–retest structure of testing allowed researchers to have more rigorous findings. The basic assumptions for confirmatory factor analysis were tested by examining Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure ( $> .50$ ) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity index ( $p < .001$ ), which were satisfactory. The sample normality was also satisfactory, indicating that all Skewness ( $-.78 < \text{Skewness} < .59$ ) and Kurtosis values ( $-.84 < \text{Kurtosis} < .32$ ) were within the range of  $\pm 1.96$ , and thus, the Maximum Likelihood Estimation method was used in the analysis. The scale reliability was examined based on Cronbach's alpha values, indicating that all the latent variables were beyond .70, which is the suggested guidance (Hair et al. 1998). As for scale validity, both convergent and discriminant validity of each latent variable were tested. Convergent validity was judged based on whether the factor loadings of all the items used in latent variables were significant (Anderson and Gerbing 1988) and whether each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the ideal guidance of .50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Discriminant validity was confirmed based on whether the AVEs for each latent variable were greater than its squared correlation ( $\phi^2$ ) (Lichtenstein et al. 1990). The results showed that the samples used in the final analysis were successful in all validity tests. See Table 2 for all scale items and relevant checks.

### 3.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Before performing the model estimation, the measurement models of each latent variable were tested using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). While latent variables of "brand equity" and "perceived relationship investment (PRI)" showed

**Table 2** Scale items with reliability and validity

Item	Standardized loading		AVE		$\phi^2$	
	CNN	CBS	CNN	CBS	CNN	CBS
<i>Brand equity</i> ( $\alpha = .92/.92$ )						
It makes sense to watch this channel instead of any other channels, even if they are the same	.84	.82	.79	.80	.00-.45	.01-.44
Even if another channel has the same features as this channel, I would prefer to watch this channel	.93	.96				
If there is another channel as good as this channel, I prefer to watch this one	.90	.89				
<i>Perceived relationship investment (PRI)</i> ( $\alpha = .94/.95$ )						
This channel makes an effort to increase regular audiences' loyalty	.90	.94	.84	.86	.00-.40	.00-.38
This channel makes an effort to improve its tie with regular audiences	.95	.94				
This channel really cares about keeping regular audiences	.90	.90				
<i>Relationship intention</i> ( $\alpha = .81/.85$ )						
I get involved in the process when I watch it	.89	.85	.79	.92	.00-.45	.00-.43
I get a great deal of satisfaction when I watch it	.92	.93				
I like to be identified as its audience	–	.90				
I do not care if the quality of the channel is below normal	.94	.98				
I do not care if the quality of the channel is below that of the competition	.92	.91				
I have my expectations about its content when I watch this channel	.80	.87				
I care about the quality of this channel	.87	.87				
When I think about stop watching this channel, I fear I might lose relationship with it	.90	.93				
When I think about stop watching this channel, I fear I might lose relationships with the people I interact with while watching it	.88	.90				

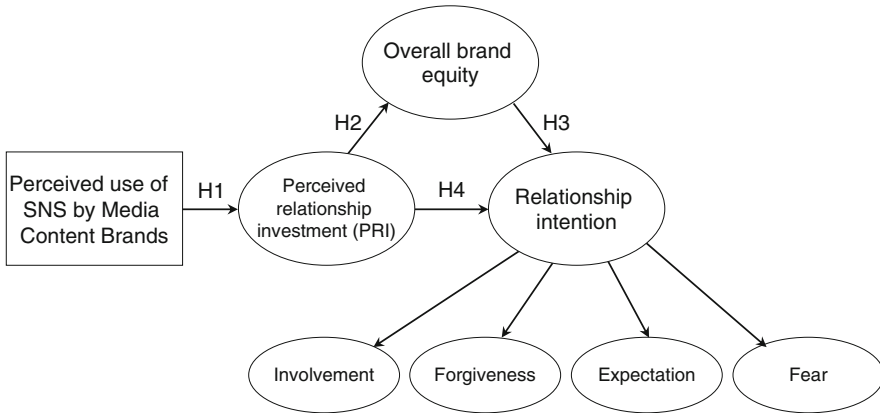
AVE average variance extracted.  $\phi^2$  = the squared  $\phi$  correlation

All the coefficient values were significant at  $p < .001$

In the reliability reports, the former indicates CNN, while the latter indicates CBS

proper model fits, the measure of relationship intention yielded an inadequate fit. Thus, Modification Indices (MI) were examined to find justifiable re-specification (Bagozzi 1983). Referring to the MI results, two items in “involvement for media brands” of CNN and one item for CBS were freed to estimate, while in both brands, the component of “feedback” consisting of two items were freed. Upon these modifications, goodness-of-fit indices were significantly improved (CNN:  $\chi^2(14) = 45.80, p < .001, CFI = .98, NFI = .98, RMSEA = .08$ ; CBS:  $\chi^2(21) = 68.67, p < .001, CFI = .98, NFI = .97, RMSEA = .08$ ).





**Fig. 1** Proposed model—the influence of perceived SNS use by media content brands

## 4 Results

Combining the re-specified measurement model, the SEM analysis was executed. All the model estimations based on the samples evaluating CNN and CBS showed goodness-of-fit indices, respectively (CNN:  $\chi^2(83) = 320.09, p < .001, CFI = .94, NFI = .93, RMSEA = .09$ ; CBS:  $\chi^2(97) = 389.71, p < .001, CFI = .94, NFI = .921, RMSEA = .09$ ). The significance of path coefficient values in the model suggested whether the proposed hypotheses were supported or not. The hypotheses testing results were reported in Table 3. As indicated by the SEM results, all the paths were significant as expected. Specifically, perceived use of SNSs significantly affected perceived relationship investment (PRI) in both media brands, supporting H1 ( $\beta_{CNN} = .25, \beta_{CBS} = .34$ ) and brand equity served a role as a partial mediator between PRI and relationship intention, supporting H2 ( $\beta_{CNN} = .58, \beta_{CBS} = .52$ ), H3 ( $\beta_{CNN} = .55, \beta_{CBS} = .57$ ), and H4 ( $\beta_{CNN} = .43, \beta_{CBS} = .41$ ). All the paths were significant at  $p < .001$  and consistent for both CNN and CBS.

In summary, in the case of media content brands, consumer’s perceived social network usage of both CNN and CBS is positively associated with the perceived relationship investment of CNN and CBS. In addition, consumers’ perceived relationship investment of CNN and CBS is positively associated with the CBBE of CNN and CBS, which is positively associated with the consumer’s intention to develop a relationship with the two brands. Finally, there is a direct relationship between a consumer’s perceived relationship investment of CNN and CBS and his/her intention to build a relationship with the brands. One interesting difference between CNN and CBS is in the PRI measure of “forgiveness.” While it was a significant component of PRI in CBS ( $\beta = .14, p < .05$ ), it was not the case for CNN ( $\beta = .07, p = .38$ ).

**Table 3** Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Significance	
	CNN	CBS
H1: Perceived use of SNS → PRI	.25***	.34***
H2: PRI → Brand equity	.57***	.52***
H3: Brand equity → Relationship intention	.55***	.57***
H4: PRI → Relationship intention	.43***	.41***
<i>PRI</i>		
→Involvement	.97***	.94***
→Forgiveness	.07	.14*
→Expectation	.88***	.83***
→Fear	.46***	.48***

*PRI* perceived relationship investment

\*Significant at  $p < .05$

\*\*\*Significant at  $p < .001$

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to verify empirically the contribution of social networks as a branding tool for media products from the relational perspective. Based on a survey of national consumers in the United States, all four hypotheses about the branding benefits of social networks for media brands were supported. The tested model validated the value of social networks as a brand relationship marketing tool and the importance of brand equity in enhancing “relationship intention” between the viewers and media content brands such as CNN and CBS (CNN:  $\beta_{indirect\_effect} = .36, p < .001$ ; CBS:  $\beta_{indirect\_effect} = .31, p < .001$ ). Specifically, this study suggests a means of developing competitive advantages through an investment in better relationships with audiences utilizing the popular social medial such as social networks. While previous research has emphasized the importance of branding in relationship development and for intangible products, this study provides the first empirical validation on the value of relational branding in the context of media content brands, a product category that is high in ambiguity (in the brand evaluation process) and historically lacking a relational mechanism with its one-directional delivery of products.

Considering the trend toward audience fragmentation and diminishing loyalty, the growth of social media in revolutionizing the capability of media brands to develop relationships with its audiences provides a welcoming new direction for media branding. As the finding suggests, perceived relationship investment of a media brand not only contributes to its brand equity but also the audience’s intension to establish a reciprocal relationship with the brand, making the investment a valuable marketing strategy in today’s competitive media marketplace. In addition, the positive impact of CBBE on audiences’ relationship intention illustrates the importance of media branding and the competitive advantage of established media brands in brand extensions. As suggested,

there might even be a valuable synergistic effect in developing brand relationships with audiences via social networks for media content products because of the easy integration between social networks and media contents and the capability of social networks to connect audiences and content/ingredients of content, as well as providing contextual information for better enjoyment of the content.

This study has several limitations. First is its lack of generalizability to all members of the population considering the nature of online panel study. The survey used a panel sample who received small rewards upon their completion of survey, thus the respondents might not be representative of the general social network users and the results might be limited in external validity. Additional research is encouraged to replicate and confirm the findings with a more representative sample. The scale validity about “perceived relationship investment” is somewhat unclear as it produced inconsistent outcome for CNN and CBS for one of its dimensions. Further empirical tests on more media brands are suggested for this measure. The proposed model should also be tested on different media product categories or platforms such as newspapers or cable services. The degree of intangibility or platform specific characteristics might affect the model different. Finally, it is important to note that the effect of branding with social networks here was examined from the perspective of reciprocity and relationship, not variation in the content or design of social networks. In other words, the focus here is on the perceived “efforts” of a brand, not its message or platform variation. Future studies might investigate the effect of social networks or other social media platforms on branding outcomes by examining more media brands concurrently or in different combination, types, and content of social media marketing programs in the context of media brands.

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