

Signaling Warmth: How Brand Warmth and Symbolism Affect Consumers' Online Brand Endorsements

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1 Introduction and Theory

In their efforts to promote their brands, products and services, advertisers often enlist endorsement by other parties, such as celebrities or experts (e.g., Biswas, Biswas, and Das, 2006; Rice, Kelting, and Lutz, 2012). Increasingly, brands and organizations are also seeking endorsement by their consumers on social network sites, for instance by a like on Facebook. These endorsements can be stimulated by the endorsed brands (e.g., by raffling prizes among people who like the brand's page on Facebook), but may also occur spontaneously. While externally motivated endorsements are easy to explain, the question remains why consumers decide voluntarily to endorse brands without getting something in return. Therefore, in the present chapter, we examine factors that might play a role in consumers' decisions to endorse brands on social media. More concretely, we investigate to what extent the perceived warmth of a brand and brand symbolism affect consumers' intentions to endorse a brand on social media.

It is not surprising that marketers appreciate the merits of consumers' online brand endorsements such as likes on Facebook. The continuing skepticism and resistance against 'traditional' persuasion tactics have driven increased motivation to facilitate consumers' endorsements (e.g., Campbell and Kirmani, 2008; Laran, Dalton, and Andrade, 2011). Consumers dislike the feeling of being persuaded and tend to show resistance when marketers attempt to influence them directly (Knowles and Riner, 2007). Using consumers as a medium for persuasive communication is one way to overcome this (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). Consumers are less likely to perceive that other consumers' brand related activities have persuasive intent, and regard them therefore as more trustworthy and persuasive than direct brand information from marketers (Brown et al., 2007).

But why do consumers decide to endorse brands on social media? To answer this question it is important to reveal in what way consumers might benefit from doing so. Consumers buy brands not only for the quality of their products and services, but also because they symbolize something (Levy, 1959; Solomon, 1983). More specifically, consumers express and construct desired identities by using products that match these identities (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988, 2013;

Escalas and Bettman, 2005), and they use brands in order to converge to others (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2003) or diverge from them (Berger and Heath, 2007). Also, when observing others, consumers tend to make inferences about others based on their consumption behavior (Belk et al., 1982; Scott et al., 2013). Thus, consumer behavior and consumers' interactions with brands act as identity signals, which communicate information about oneself to others (Reed et al., 2012; Wernerfelt, 1990). Recently, this body of research was extended to the social media domain. Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) demonstrated in a qualitative study that consumers use brands on Facebook deliberately in order to create and manage their self-identities.

In line with the notion that consumers' online brand endorsements are – at least in part – driven by the desire to signal one's identity, we conducted an experiment to explore drivers of this behavior. Based on the perspective of the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF, see next section; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone, 2012), we demonstrate that warmth and not competence is the main driver of consumers' online brand endorsements. As a boundary condition, we also investigated to what extent the decision to endorse a brand depends on its level of brand symbolism (Escalas and Bettman, 2005) and show that a brand also needs to be able to signal the values that consumers' aim to express by means of their online brand endorsements. In other words, a high symbolic value of a brand enhances the positive effects of warmth on consumers' online brand endorsements.

1.1 Warmth and Competence

The BIAF (Kervyn et al., 2012) is based on the well-established Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002). According to this model, people's perception of individuals and groups can be described on two dimensions: warmth and competence. The idea behind this model is that people shape the way in which they perceive their social environment based on these two dimensions. By perceiving warmth we can answer the question whether another individual or group has positive intentions towards ourselves. Perceived competence, in contrast, can answer the question whether this other individual or group is able to carry out these intentions. In line with the idea that people form similar relationships with brands as they do with people (e.g., Fournier, 1998), the BIAF (Kervyn et al., 2012) proposes that the social perception dimensions warmth and competence are also applicable to our perception of brands.

Supporting this notion, recent research demonstrates that consumers are more likely to identify with brands, when they perceive these brands to have a warm (vs. cold) personality (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). For this and several other reasons, endorsing brands that signal warmth might be perceived as a more useful or versatile "signal" than endorsing competence signaling brands:

Warmth is an universally positively evaluated attribute and therefore almost always of great interest for others (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002). Moreover, perceptions of warmth have been found to be more important than perceptions of competence with regard to people's affective and behavioral reactions (Fiske et al., 2007). They are also prior to other influences: before judging the competence of others, we judge their warmth (Ybarra et al., 2001). Furthermore, signaling competence to others might be more "risky" as judgments of competence are more sensitive to context (Kervyn et al., 2012) than judgments of warmth. Being perceived as intelligent, for instance, may be positive in some contexts, but threatening or dislikeable in others. As a result, the influence of competence judgments on the impressions of others may vary considerably. Thus, when people strive to express their (desired) identity by means of endorsing a brand online, the easiest and most effective way to make a favorable (first) impression would be to endorse a brand that signals warmth rather than competence. Moreover, Facebook is considered to be a social network site that primarily focuses on personal self-promotion (and thus identity signaling), rather than on professional self-promotion (van Dijck, 2013), which makes it likely that competence does not play a role in consumers' decision to endorse brands on social networks like Facebook. As a consequence of any or all of these reasons, the social benefits of endorsing warm brands will almost always be higher than the social benefits of endorsing competent brands. Based on these assumptions we hypothesize:

H1: Perceptions of (a) warmth and (b) competence of a brand will have a positive effect on consumers' intention to endorse the brand on social media, but the effect of warmth is stronger than that of competence.

1.2 Brand Symbolism

A brand's capability to signal consumers' identity depends on the degree to which it can communicate something about a person who is using or consuming it. Escalas and Bettman (2005) established this identity signaling function of a brand as *brand symbolism* and showed that brands differ with regard to their symbolic value. They demonstrated that this difference in symbolism plays a crucial role in how consumers construct their identity by means of their brand usage and that brand symbolism also positively affects consumers' formation of self-brand connections. They also found that in-group and out-group brand associations affected consumers' self-brand connections significantly stronger when a brand was highly symbolic. White and Dahl (2006) extended this framework by demonstrating that consumers are not always motivated to avoid out-group membership but rather tend to avoid being associated with dissociative reference groups. The dissociative reference groups most strongly

negatively affected product choices, self-brand connections and consumers' evaluations. A subsequent study demonstrated that these negative effects were stronger for brands that are relatively higher in symbolic value (White and Dahl, 2007). Emphasizing the central role of brand symbolism in consumers' identity signaling, Berger and Heath (2007) demonstrated that consumers want to diverge from other's product choices as means for communicating desired identities to others. Additionally, this effect is stronger in product domains that are perceived to be high in symbolic value and thus symbolizing people's identity.

Research suggests that consumers use brands to highlight certain aspects of their own identity, and downplay other aspects (e.g., Aaker, 1999). This notion is supported by a recent qualitative study that demonstrates that consumers behave similarly in the online domain and use brands on Facebook as subtle cues to signal their identity (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012). As we suggest that consumers endorse brands on social media to signal their warmth, we assume that they are less likely to endorse a brand if it were – according to them – not be suited as identity signal. That is, we suggest that the effect of warmth on consumers' intention to endorse can be enhanced by brand symbolism. We, thus, predict an interaction effect between warmth and brand symbolism and hypothesize the following:

H2: The effect of warmth on consumers' intention to endorse brands on social media will be stronger for highly symbolic brands than for brands with low symbolic value.

2 Method

2.1 *Participants and Design*

Ninety-one students from the University of Amsterdam (75.8% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.14$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.60$) participated for course credit or financial compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of the single factor design with two levels (high vs. low symbolic brands).

2.2 *Pretest*

To find suited brands for the brand symbolism manipulation, we conducted a pre-test on brand symbolism for ten for-profit brands before the actual experiment among a different sample. We chose these ten brands based on the 100 strongest brands in the Netherlands (BrandAsset Consult, 2013). For the sake of comparability of the brands, brands that do not produce physical products (e.g., YouTube) were excluded from the analyses, as well as brands

that produce addictive substances such as tobacco or alcohol. 40 participants rated the extent to which the 10 brands were symbolic on the brand symbolism scale (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). This scale consists of two items and was measured on 5-point Likert scales: ‘How much does this brand symbolize what kind of person uses it?’ (not at all symbolic / highly symbolic); and ‘to what extent does this brand communicate something specific about the person who uses it?’ (does not communicate a lot / communicates a lot).

We chose the two most symbolic and the two least symbolic brands to serve as the high/ low symbolism manipulation in the actual experiment: Apple and Nivea (highly symbolic brands) and Philips and Hansaplast (low symbolic brands), which represent the product categories of electronics and personal care products. T-Tests revealed that the high symbolic brands were indeed perceived to be more symbolic ($M = 3.39$; $SD = 0.79$) than the low symbolic brands ($M = 2.03$; $SD = 0.73$), $t(39) = 11.98$, $p < .001$.

2.3 Procedure

The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics. After they answered several demographic questions, participants were asked to evaluate some brands with regard to several characteristics in the subsequent task. The experiment consisted out of two blocks per condition (i.e., one block per brand). Each block started with the logo of the respective brand and was followed by the instruction: ‘In this part of the experiment, we will ask you some questions about brand X.’ Afterwards, participants first indicated their perception of warmth and competence of the brand. Then, they answered questions about how symbolic they perceived the brand to be and finally indicated how likely they were to like the brand on Facebook. The two blocks of each condition were presented in random order.

2.4 Measurements

2.4.1 Warmth & Competence

We measured participants’ perception of the brands’ warmth and competence by a set of 7-point Likert scales, as used by Aaker, Vohs and Mogilner (2010). The warmth scale contained three items: warmth, generosity and kindness (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .77$ for all brands). We measured competence by another set of three items: competence, efficiency and effectiveness (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .85$ for all brands).

2.4.2 Brand Symbolism

Brand symbolism was assessed by means of the brand symbolism scale of Escalas and Bettman (2005), which we also used in the pretest (Cronbach's $\alpha > .61$ for all brands).

2.4.3 Intention to Endorse

Participants were asked to indicate their intention to like the brands of their experimental condition on Facebook on a 100-point slider scale. We intended a measurement of consumers' overall online brand endorsements in order to avoid being susceptible to effects of individual brand characteristics and limiting our results by only focusing on one brand per analysis. Therefore, we calculated the mean of consumers' scores on their intention to like their condition's brands as dependent variable in the subsequent analyses. Cronbach's α for this measure was good ($= .71$ for low symbolic brands; $= .77$ for high symbolic brands).

2.5 Manipulation Check

To ensure that our manipulation worked as intended, we conducted a manipulation check with the brand symbolism measurements as described earlier in this section. T-Tests confirmed that the brands of the high symbolism condition were perceived to more symbolic ($M = 3.15$; $SD = 0.75$) than the brands in the low symbolism condition ($M = 2.44$; $SD = 0.89$), $t(89) = 4.19$, $p < .001$.

3 Results

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a linear regression analysis, with consumers' intention to endorse as dependent variable and perceived warmth and competence, brand symbolism (low symbolic condition $= -.5$; high symbolic condition $= .5$) and the warmth X brand symbolism interaction as predictors. In line with hypothesis 1, warmth had a positive effect on consumers' intention to endorse brands on social media, $\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 2.74$, $t(4, 86) = 2.11$, $p = .038$. Also competence positively affected consumers' intention to endorse, but this effect did not reach statistical significance, $\beta = 0.20$, $SE = 2.64$, $t(4, 86) = 1.59$, $p = .117$. There was also no main effect of brand symbolism $\beta = -0.39$, $SE = 7.53$, $t(4, 86) = 1.20$, $p = .038$. There was, however, an interaction effect of warmth and brand symbolism as predicted by hypothesis 2. In other words, the main effect of warmth was moderated by brand symbolism $\beta = 0.69$, $SE = 1.89$, $t(4, 86) = 2.07$, $p = .042$.

3.1 Moderation Analysis

To gain more insight into this interaction effect and test for moderation, we performed 5,000 bootstrap resamples using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS. Providing further support for hypothesis 2, this analysis revealed that the effect of warmth on consumers' intention to endorse brands on social media was smaller for brands that are low in symbolic value (conditional effect = 1.90, boot SE = 3.76, 95% BCBCI [-5.58, 9.38]), compared to highly symbolic brands (conditional effect = 9.62, boot SE = 2.80, 95% BCBCI [4.06, 15.18]; Figure 1).

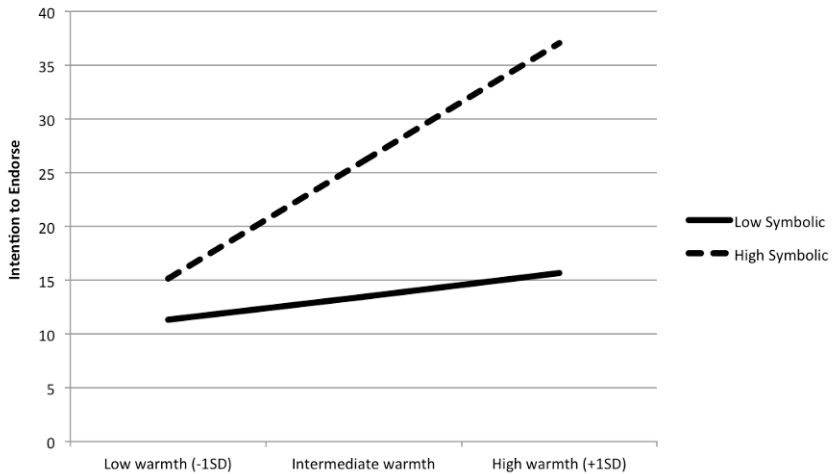


Figure 1: Consumers' intention to endorse as a function of warmth and brand symbolism

4 Conclusion and Discussion

In this experiment, we investigated two factors that affect consumers' online brand endorsements. First, we demonstrated that consumers primarily want to express their warmth by endorsing brands that they perceive to be warm rather than competent. Second, we showed that this effect of warmth is enhanced by a brand's symbolic value.

While earlier correlational research suggested that warmth is a central driver of consumers' brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), the present research extends this framework by demonstrating that warmth also drives consumers' expression of this relationship. We also show that it is only one of

the two domains of the BIAF that affects consumers' online brand endorsements. As a boundary condition of this occurrence, we also demonstrated that a brand's capability to communicate something about the person who uses it, can considerably enforce this identity signaling behavior.

4.1 Limitations and Future Research

We only used for-profit brands in this experiment. Research, however, showed that consumers perceive for-profit brands differently from nonprofit brands. Aaker and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that while perceptions of for-profit brands rather map onto a competence dimension, perceptions of nonprofit brands map onto a warmth dimension. It might thus be that our findings are not applicable to nonprofit brands. Future research should investigate this question.

Another interesting venue for future research would be the effects that consumers' online brand endorsements have on other consumers. Although we argued earlier that consumers' online brand endorsements would be a strong technique of marketing, which might be able to rule out the disadvantages of direct attempts of marketing communication, there is no research yet that directly investigated this issue. While literature in the domain of online reviews suggests that information that originates from other consumers is more trustworthy and therefore more persuasive than direct attempts of persuasion (e.g., Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2012), research on conspicuous brand usage suggests that consumers' online brand endorsements might not always have a positive effect on other consumers, but only on those who already have a positive attitude towards the endorsed brand (cf., Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013). The efficacy of online brand endorsements on other consumers might also depend on whom of a consumer's ties and how many of them endorsed a brand. It is thus not entirely clear if and how consumers' online brand endorsements affect other consumers. We therefore propose these questions for future investigations.

4.2 Practical Implications

Our research does also have important practical implications. We advise that brands should examine how consumers perceive the brand's warmth and symbolic value before deciding to embark on a marketing strategy that might entail consumers' online brand endorsements. For-profit brands that are perceived to be warm might have the highest potential to evoke consumers' endorsements. They also can considerably strengthen this potential if they are able to symbolize this warmth to other consumers. For those brands, it might be worthwhile to invest in marketing strategies that involve consumers' online brand endorsements. For brands that are perceived to be low in warmth, it might

be difficult to persuade consumers to endorse them. In this case, also a high symbolic value of the brand does not noticeably increase consumers' intention to endorse this brand online. These brands should therefore rather focus on other ways of marketing, or might first invest in a marketing strategy that increases the public's perception of warmth of the brand.

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