

Understanding Social Media: The Effect of Product Type and Brand Information on Consumers' Social Media Use

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Introduction

Social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter provide unlimited means for internet users to interact, express, share and create content about anything, including brands. For instance, consumers watch or even post brand-related videos about Absolut Vodka on YouTube, they talk about Monster energy drinks on Twitter and upload pictures of their new Nike sneakers to Facebook. These are just a few examples of how consumers contribute to the marketing content of brands using social media. But what is the impact of these activities on consumers' purchase decisions?

Providing more insights into this issue is critical to marketers. Previous academic research in marketing examining social media has mainly focused on understanding the motivations behind using social media (see Muntinga et al. 2011). These motives could be, for instance, related to collecting information, personal identity, social interaction, and/or entertainment. Understanding consumers' motivational differences in consumers' activities related to social media contributes to the management of social media and has great implications on marketing practices. However, there is a need for a better understanding of the situations in which companies could increase consumers' engagement in social media, as well as when they could have a more positive impact of purchase decisions. Companies want active and engaged consumers who deliberately engage in online activity, and who are more likely to influence opinions of others. They want consumers who will at least receive the communication from the company positively.

To deepen our understanding of social media and its impact on consumers' decisions, this research will seek to answer several questions. What is the relationship between brand's message content and social media activities? Is more specific and measurable information about a brand resulting in more or less engagement in social media activity than experiential information? And (how) does the message content vary by product category?

Literature Background

Given the tremendous growth of people who use social media, companies are scrambling to try and figure how to utilize social media to reach the millions of consumers who use it on a daily basis. Thus, a better understanding of not only how to reach those customers, but also of how to increase those customers' engagement in social media is imperative for businesses.

Research in marketing has made distinctions between types of information about brand attributes, including tangible/intangible attributes (Darley and Smith 1993), and search/experience attributes (Nelson 1974). The key difference between search and experience attributes concerns the consumers' need to try the product to assess the validity of the

information related to that attribute (Wright and Lynch 1995). Information about search attributes (e.g., ingredients, price) can be collected and reliably interpreted from labels, advertising, and word-of-mouth, without having to try the product (Darby and Karni 1973; Wright and Lynch 1995). Experience attributes (e.g., taste of a candy bar and sound of a stereo system), on the other hand, can be assessed only by directly experiencing the product. Wright and Lynch (1995) show that people paid more attention to information about brand attributes when it was “media-congruent,” which in turn resulted in higher purchase intentions. Specifically, advertising seems to be more effective for search attributes, whereas product trial is more effective in communication information about experience attributes. Although social media appears to be a major force in the formation of brand-beliefs, no study could be found that systematically examines the differences between different types of attribute information.

Additionally, research indicates that brand information should be considered in conjunction with the product type (Micu and Coulter 2012). Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) proposed two broadly different types of products: (1) primarily utilitarian products (e.g., hair dryers, washing machines, and lawn mowers), with tangible, objective features that offer functional benefits, fulfill utilitarian needs, and are meant to solve problems (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1993), and (2) primarily hedonic products (e.g., jewelry, perfumes, massages) with subjective, non-tangible features that fulfill experiential needs, and whose consumption produces enjoyment and pleasure. Products have in general both a hedonic and a utilitarian side (Voss, Spangenberg, and Grohmann 2003), but a distinction between products that are dominant on either the hedonic dimension or the utilitarian dimension can be made (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). For utilitarian (but not hedonic) products, providing search attribute information in advertising (which is more credible than experience attribute information) results in a more positive product experience. For hedonic products, experience attribute information facilitates imagination, which is so important in judging a hedonic product (see Dewi and Ang 2001). This in turn results in more positive product evaluations (see Micu and Coulter 2012). Social media, as opposed to advertising, can offer both high credibility (because of the consumer-generated content) and high imagery (as consumers share their own product experiences). How will the product type and attribute information interact in the context of social media?

To summarize, this research investigates how product type (hedonic versus functional) and message content (search versus experience attribute information) would affect the consumers’ engagement in social media, as well as their brand attitudes and purchase decisions.

Procedure

To answer the research questions stated above, we will conduct both research using both secondary and primary data. The secondary data are provided by a large marketing research company and provides information about the success of different brands/ messages in social media by product category. The primary data research will consist of: (1) a qualitative study meant to identify people’s motivations for engaging in different activities using various social media venues and how this engagement varies by product type and category and (2) a quantitative study which involves an experimental design that will manipulate the brand type (hedonic versus functional) and the brand information (search versus experience attribute

information) on different social media venues. Consumers' reactions (with regard to type of activity they engage in, brand liking, and purchase intentions) will be measured.

Conclusions

Nowadays, there is a growing interest in digital interactivity, especially in consumer activity in social media. Social media is empowering customers, and their role is shifting from being passive recipients of information to becoming active generators of information (Stewart and Pavlou 2002). As consumers are increasingly performing activities previously controlled by companies, the entire marketing landscape is changing. Thus, companies need to better understand what motivates the consumers' online behavior in order to create mutual benefits from the use of social media.

The current research will provide marketers and brand managers with valuable insights into consumer behavior in a social media-dominated era by examining how the brand information and product type affect consumers' engagement in social media.

References

Will be provided upon request