

The Effects of “Social” Consumer Attributes on Engagement in Social Network Sites

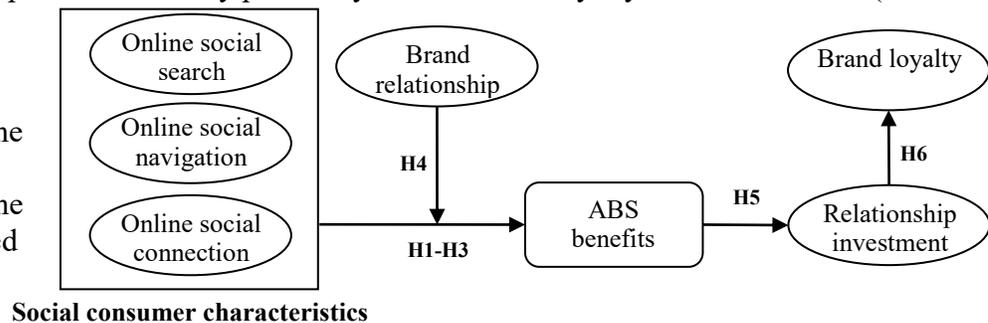
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Background. Social network sites (SNSs) are in the center of the current apparel brand’s marketing efforts to engage customers and promote products. Particularly, a growing number of apparel companies implement their brand communities via various SNSs in order to develop a meaningful interaction and relationship with their customers. In consumer side, industry reports recently indicated the emergence of a new consumer group, social consumers (Rucker, 2010). Social consumers seek product/brand information through SNSs, share their ideas about products and brands on SNSs, and value the information provided by like-minded people through online communities. This study proposes a research model that suggests the positive impacts of social consumer attributes on engagement in SNS for apparel brands. Among many SNSs, this study focuses on the brand communities embedded in SNSs (i.e., brand pages on Facebook). Apparel brands’ communities embedded in a SNS will be referred to as ABS hereafter.

Literature Review. This study focuses on the three key characteristics of social consumers: online social search, social navigation skill, and online social connection. Online social search behavior is the consumer’s tendency to use SNSs to learn about brands and products. Social navigation skill in this study is defined as the consumer’s navigational skill for SNS (“I’m extremely skilled at using SNS”). Online social connection is the consumer’s tendency to believe that online communication is an important part of her social life. Taken all together, it is suggested that the stronger consumers exhibit these three social consumer characteristics, the more likely they perceive the benefits of ABS (**H1 - H3**). Further, it is hypothesized that consumers’ existing brand relationship quality (BR) strengthens the effect of social consumer characteristics on the perceived benefits of ABS (**H4**). Also, based on the social penetration theory arguing that people will continue to strengthen the relationship with partners if they perceive that the relationship is beneficial (Altman & Taylor, 1973), it was hypothesized that, when consumers perceive that a particular apparel brand’s SNS is beneficial for their lives (e.g., “this brand’s Facebook page gives me loyalty incentives for my continued participation”), it may create a positive perception of the brand’s relationship effort (**H5**). Finally, the consumer’s perceived relationship investment may positively influence her loyalty toward the brand (De Wulf et al., 2001), expressed by the willingness to pay price-premium for the brand (**H6**).

Method. An online survey was employed to test the hypothesized



relationships. Perceived benefits of ABS were measured as the two well-established theoretical dimensions including experiential and functional benefits of ABS. All measurement scale items were adapted from the literature and measured using a 7-point Likert scale. Data were collected through a U.S. marketing research firm. The sample consisted of U.S. adult consumers (18 or older) who had browsed and/or participated in the brand page on Facebook for apparel brands during the past two weeks. Respondents were asked to indicate the brand they had visited and participated in the brand page on Facebook during the past two weeks. The apparel brand name the respondent typed was automatically embedded in the survey questions pertaining to the brand (e.g., “The information provided by {#brand}’s Facebook page is useful”). A total of 249 respondents completed the survey. About 70% of respondents were female and more than three quarters of the respondents were white-Americans. The largest number (41.7%) of respondents was aged 31-40, followed by 18-30 (27.1%), 41-50 (19.9%), and 51-60 (8.5%).

Results. After verifying the acceptable fit of the measurement model as well as construct validity, a structural equation modeling was used to test hypothesized relationships. Fit indices of the structural model were: $\chi^2(253) = 583.679$, $\chi^2/df = 2.307$, CFI = 0.940, RMSEA = 0.073, TLI = 0.929. Online social search had a positive impact on both experiential benefits ($B = 1.57$, $t = 5.10$, $p < .001$) and functional benefits ($B = 1.27$, $t = 5.55$, $p < .001$). Social navigational skill also had a positive effect on both experiential ($B = 0.75$, $t = 3.02$, $p < .01$) and functional benefits ($B = 0.50$, $t = 2.71$, $p < .01$). However, online social connection influenced none of the benefits of ABS. The moderating effect of BR was tested only on the supported relationships, and it was found that BR strengthened the relationship between online social search and functional benefits ($\Delta\chi^2 = 7.35$, $p < .01$). Further, both experiential ($B = 0.15$, $t = 2.09$, $p < .05$) and functional ($B = 0.76$, $t = 9.14$, $p < .001$) benefits of SNS for apparel brands positively influenced the perceived relationship investment, which in turn influenced the willingness to pay price-premium for the brand ($B = 0.83$, $t = 12.27$, $p < .001$).

Discussion. The findings of this study generally support the research model showing the positive impacts of social consumer characteristics on the perceived benefits of SNSs for apparel brands and highlight the role of SNSs in apparel brands’ relationship marketing. However, the insignificant effect of online social connection on ABS benefits suggests that an online communication-prone individual does not necessarily perceive ABS as beneficial and form a positive attitude toward ABS. Therefore, future research may examine the key characteristics that may better characterize social consumers and their impacts on ABS engagement. In addition, although this study posited BR as a moderating variable serving as a basis for participating in ABS, there exists a possibility that BR can actually result from the engagement in ABS. Therefore, a longitudinal analysis tracking the changes in consumers’ relationship with a brand (i.e., BR) and ABS engagement may validate the conclusion of the relationship.

Reference

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