

A Work Project presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Masters Degree in  
Management from the NOVA School of Business and Economics.

# **The importance of relationship closeness expectations in brand-page communication in social networking sites**

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January 2013

**BOOKLET I**

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# **The importance of relationship closeness expectations in brand-page communication in social networking sites**

## **Abstract**

While there is extensive research regarding the way users in social networking sites (SNSs) connect and communicate with each other, literature on consumer-brand relationships in SNSs is scarce. This paper hypothesizes and tests the impact of varying the source of communication in Facebook brand pages on key characteristics of brand equity, examining whether this impact is conditioned by relationship closeness expectations. More specifically, two experiments assess how relationship closeness expectations vary according to brand category and brand affiliation and how the use of a spokes-character as the source of communication in brand pages versus communicating institutionally affects consumer's attitudes towards two real-world brands. To measure these variables, structured questionnaires were conducted with three groups of undergraduate students. The results suggest that the appropriateness of opting for a more "informal" source of communication in brand pages such as a spokes-character varies depending on whether this is in(congruent) with existing relationship closeness expectations. Implications for researchers, brand and social media managers are presented.

**Key words** – relationship theory, social networking sites, spokes-characters, Facebook

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The continuous growth of social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and share information amongst each other, contributing to the creation, maintenance and dissolution of both online and offline relationships. One need to look no further than their unifying role in events such as the Arab Spring or Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign as well as the part they played in numerous divorces and employee terminations.

There is a wide diversity of tools included in the notion of social media, ranging from blogs to social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g., Facebook), content communities (e.g., Youtube), collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life) and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). For brands, the unlimited potential of these new technologies in allowing for customers to be both more available and easier to reach and engage with is already clear and, as of September 2012, Youtube, Facebook, Coca-Cola, MTV and Disney are the 5 top brands with the highest combination of Facebook fans, Twitter followers and Klout score<sup>1</sup>. Between them, they have more than 290 million fans/followers<sup>2</sup>.

Facebook which is clearly top of mind when one thinks of social media, with its more than 1 billion monthly active users<sup>3</sup>, is also the most popular tool for marketers, being used by about 83% of companies<sup>4</sup>. However, both Facebook ads and Facebook pages seem to be under delivering when it comes to brand engagement<sup>5</sup>. This might be explained, in part, by Facebook's recalibration of its EdgeRank News Feed Optimization formula, which affects how post content from fan pages syndicates into

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<sup>1</sup> The Klout score is a tool which incorporates more than 400 signals from seven different networks (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, Klout, foursquare and Wikipedia) in order to determine social media activity. [http://klout.com/corp/klout\\_score](http://klout.com/corp/klout_score)

<sup>2</sup> fanpagelist.com

<sup>3</sup> Data from September 30, 2012 - <http://investor.fb.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=715607>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?R=1009273>

<sup>5</sup> <http://socialmediatoday.com/paulfabretti/358088/facebook-isn-t-just-working-brands>

users' news feeds<sup>6</sup> and has made it so that a brand's status updates will only appear in a fan's Facebook stream if he/she has been active in the brand's Facebook page in a continuous way. This means that users who have no further interaction with a brand page beyond "*liking*" it will, with time, stop receiving its updates in their newsfeed.

Adding to this is the fact that, literature on SNSs, especially that on Facebook, has revealed that the majority of "*Friendships*" represent, on the one hand, pre-existing offline connections as opposed to new relationships forged online (Ellison et al., 2007, 2011; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lampe et al., 2006) and, on the other, "*in person*" relationships (Mayer and Puller, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Fournier and Avery (2011: 194) summarize this very clearly when stating that "*social media was made for people, not for brands*". The fact that SNSs such as Facebook and MySpace were originally designed in order to connect people with each other online and not as new media channels for marketers to sell branded products makes it much more difficult for brands to leverage them to their advantage.

With this in mind, this paper examines the effects of humanizing brand page-based communication through the usage of a spokes-character, arguing that it will positively impact brand attitude and behavioural intention, also contributing to an increase in fan engagement, when congruent with consumers' closeness expectations. It will begin by drawing on the existing literature regarding relationship theory in consumer research and social networking sites, brand personality and spokes-characters. This will be followed by the presentation and analysis of the results of the experiments undertaken, as well as a discussion on the theoretical and managerial contributions of the findings and recommendations for future research.

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<sup>6</sup> sentinelprojects.com

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 RELATIONSHIP THEORY IN CONSUMER RESEARCH**

The notion of consumers relating to and attributing symbolic meaning to brands has been given a considerable amount of attention in consumer research. Consumers seem to have no problem viewing brands as if they were human characters (Levy, 1985) and credit them as having charisma (Smothers, 1993) and personality (Durgee, 1988; Batra et al., 1993; Aaker and Fournier, 1995; Aaker, 1997).

Fournier's 1998 article "*Consumers and their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research*" is the cornerstone of the research on the nature and functions' of consumers' relationships with brands and how both consumers and brands influence the way these relationships evolve over time. On it, the author argues for the role of brands as viable relationship partners, active contributing members of the consumer-brand relationship dyad; for the validity of consumer-brand relationships at the level of lived experience and for the specific and distinct nature of this relationship.

In the context of this theoretical framework, consumer's evaluative conceptions of brands are based on trait inferences formed by the various brand management decisions and marketing mix activities, behaviours that the brand pursues as part of its partnership role (Bengtsson, 2003). Not all are supportive of relationship thinking with regards to brands, however, with some authors raising concerns and even excluding the possibility of an existing relationship with brands that would parallel human relationships (Bengtsson, 2003). Others question the mere existence of any kind of relationship between consumers and businesses (O'Malley and Tynan, 2000). Relationship marketing has additionally been criticized for its inability in levelling the role of consumers in market exchanges (Fitchett and McDonagh, 2000).

The current paradigm of co-creation in brand marketing is deeply rooted in relationship theory research and its defence of consumers as active meaning makers

(Fournier, 2009). Fournier (2009) defines three important avenues that have been advancing relationship theory research. The first is the identification of the relationship dimensions that allow for mapping of the consumer-brand relationship space. A second stream of research is looking at people's perceptions and the higher-order relationship models organizing them. Here, it has been shown that there is a manifestation of different types of consumer-brand relationality in the form of partnerships, benign acquaintanceships and negative relations, resulting in unique emotion constellations (Fournier et al., 2008). Finally, works such as that of Fournier et al. (2004) have been gathering insights into relationship phenomenology through leveraging contract theory.

## **2.2 RELATIONSHIPS ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNSs)**

Boyd and Ellison (2008: 211), define social networking sites as “*web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system*”. Some SNSs are designed with specific audiences in mind. There are SNSs that target specific geographical regions (e.g. Cyworld, for Korea), religious, ethnic (e.g. AsianAvenue, MiGente, BlackPlanet), political, sexual orientation groups and even pets (e.g. Dogster, Catster).

Due to the inherently interpersonal nature of SNSs, real world contact often follows the formation of online relationships, an online-to-offline trend showcased by most SNSs (Ross et al., 2009), meaning they exhibit mixed mode relationships, in the sense that participants move from computer-mediated to face-to-face communication (Walther and Parks, 2002). In the particular case of Facebook, however, research has shown that it exemplifies an offline-to-online trend, meaning that the majority of “Friendships” on Facebook represent, on the one hand, pre-existing offline connections

as opposed to new relationships forged online (Ellison et al., 2007, 2011; Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Lampe et al., 2006) and, on the other, “in person” relationships (Mayer and Puller, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). This also establishes the more shared-geography-based nature of personal relationships in SNSs versus the shared-interests based nature of personal relationships in earlier online communities (Rheingold, 1993).

Friending practices differ in terms of motivation depending on the previous strength of the ties involved. From indiscriminate friending involving previously non-existing ties, such as those emerging from application-based games such as Farmville (Ellison et al., 2011), to social browsing involving latent ties (connections that are achievable but have yet to be socially activated (Haythornthwaite, 2005); e.g.: casual acquaintances), such as those based on a shared birthplace or a mutual friend (Lampe et al., 2006), to more common friending practices involving previously existing strong ties such as being close friends, there is a wide variety of connection strategies amongst Facebook users (Ellison et al., 2011).

Research on SNSs has mainly focused on their role in social interactions, descriptive user analysis, usage motivations, impression management and identity presentation, networks and networks structure and privacy issues (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Wilson et al., 2012). Social networking sites (SNSs) have, in the recent years, started attracting the attention of both marketers and marketing scholars (Trusov et al., 2009). However, virtually all relationship-based SNS-related literature, whether in the marketing field or in others, such as psychology, sociology or IT, focuses on the behaviour and actions of users and how they interact with each other and not on how they engage with brands and vice-versa.



### 2.3 BRAND PERSONALITY

The concept of brand personality is known and accepted by many marketing academics and by most advertising practitioners (Aaker and Fournier, 1995) and the contribution of brands to the consumer's self-conception has long been a theme in marketing and consumer behaviour research (Sirgy, 1982; Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Previous literature on brand personality suggests its contribution to an increase in a brand's personal meaning to the consumer (Levy, 1959), in the development of the emotional part of a brand (Landon, 1974), in consumer usage and preference (Sirgy, 1982), in brand differentiation (Crask and Laskey, 1990), in the emotional connection to the brand (Biel, 1993) and in the levels of brand trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1994).

Aaker (1997: 347) formally defined the construct brand personality as "*the set of human characteristics associated with a brand*". As such, a brand could, for example, be sophisticated (e.g., Revlon), exciting (e.g., Disney) or rugged (e.g., Marlboro). This definition has been criticized by Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) as it allows for the inclusion of on the one hand, human characteristics such as physical attributes and inner values and, on the other hand, of non-physical attributes such as gender, social class and intellectual abilities. Brand personality should therefore be more appropriately considered as "*the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands*", as presented in the "*Dictionnaire Fondamental de la Psychologie*" (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003).

The literature routinely refers to the role of brand personality in symbolic consumption and in the creation of affective bonds between consumers and brands (Keller, 1993; Aaker and Fournier, 1995; Aaker, 1997). Aaker et al. (2004) showcased how relationship expectations can be originated by brand personality and how this can impact the strength of consumer-brand relationships in the long-run. Brand personality

can be communicated to the consumer even through indirect contact with the brand (Plummer 1985), by the way of a product/service's benefits and attributes, advertising, distribution, price and brand identity signs such as name, logo, etc. (Batra et al., 1993; Kapferer, 1994).

## **2.4 SPOKES-CHARACTERS**

For years, advertisers have used different techniques in order to imbue brands with human personality traits including personification (assigning human-like traits to non-humans - e.g., Geico's talking gecko; Aflac's duck; the M&M characters), anthropomorphization (attributing both human traits and human form to non-humans – e.g., The Pillsbury Dough Boy, Mr. Clean and the Kool-Aid man) and creation of user imagery (communicating information about the lifestyle of the user e.g., the Oxo family) (Kardes et al., 2010; Keller et al., 2011). Despite this, there has been little empirical examination and support of the importance of brand personality and its consequences in this context (Jin and Sung, 2010).

According to Garretson and Burton (2005), spokes-characters are humanlike visual images through which a brand's benefits, attributes or personality can be symbolically conveyed. In communication with consumers, their purpose can be to promote a brand's personality, create brand identification and differentiation (Phillips, 1996), with the ultimate goal being the development of an emotional tie with the consumer (Zacher, 1967). Callcott and Lee (1995) developed a multi-dimensional framework for spokes-character definition along 4 parameters: the physical **A**ppearance of the character (human or non-human), the **M**edium it appears in (print, film, radio and merchandise), advertising or non-advertising **O**origin, and spokes-character **P**romotion of the product (active or passive) (**AMOP**). This framework was enhanced by Phillips and Goyerick (1999) who did a content analysis of spokes-character ads, uncovering four

distinguishing variables: quantity and weight, high or low involvement product categories, gender and race.

Personality, physical characteristics, humour and consumer experience are considered the main factors in spokes-character likeability (Callcott and Phillips, 1996) and Garretson and Niedrich (2004) found that relevance to product, expertise and nostalgia were the three main factors influencing consumer attention to spokes-characters. Hoy et al. (1986) and Van Auken and Lonial (1985) have studied the impact of spokes-characters on youth. Since then, literature has focused on the influence of spokes-characters on memory and attitudes (Neeley and Schumann, 2004; Phillips and Lee, 2005). Pierce (2001) reported a link between spokes-character' gender and product type congruence and positive consumer attitudes, Garretson and Niedrich (2004) examined how spokes-character expertise positively impacted character trust and Sung and Kim (2010) established a relationship between brand personality traits, including sincerity and excitement, and brand trust.

### **3. EXPERIMENT 1 - CONSUMERS' RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS: COMPARING MOBILE PHONE OPERATOR AND LAPTOP PROVIDER BRANDS**

Sela et al. (2012) examined consumers' relationships with their retail bank and health insurance provider brands, having inferred that the first were perceived as being relatively close and the second relatively distant. Additionally they concluded that, in the case of the closer brand category, brand affiliation had a moderating role in relationship expectations with the results of customer respondents being significantly higher than their non-customer counterparts. As for the distant brand category, results from customers revealed no significant differences when compared to non-customers in either category.

In order to choose the categories to use in the main experiment, Experiment 1 tested two brand categories with which the familiarity of the respondents (undergraduate students) would be very high: mobile phone operators and laptop providers. It was hypothesized that these two categories are ones in which consumers generally expect their relationships with brands to be relatively close (mobile phone operators) and relatively distant (laptop providers) and thus similar conclusions to those by Sela et al. (2012) would be reached. Therefore:

***H1:** Customers of mobile phone operator brands will have significantly higher closeness expectations than customers of laptop provider brands.*

***H2:** Customers of mobile phone operator brands will have significantly higher closeness expectations than non-customers.*

***H3:** Customers of laptop provider brands will not have significantly different closeness expectations from non-customers in either brand category.*

### **3.1 METHOD**

One hundred and forty undergraduate students from a Portuguese business school (mean age = 19, range 17-22; 54% females) were randomly assigned to a 2 (brand affiliation: customer vs. non-customer) x 2 (brand category: mobile operator vs. laptop provider) between-subjects design and asked to consider one of four self-generated real-world brands: their mobile operator, a mobile operator they were not affiliated with, their laptop provider, or a laptop provider they were not affiliated with (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Overview of the participants in Experiment 1 (n=140)**

|                       | Customer       | Non-Customer   |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Laptop Provider Brand | Group 1 (n=35) | Group 2 (n=35) |
| Mobile Operator Brand | Group 3 (n=35) | Group 4 (n=35) |

Following the procedure used by Sela et al. (2012), participants were asked to rate the extent to which they expect their relationship with the brand to be characterized

by closeness, shared beliefs, shared goals, equality, openness, warmth, fairness, care, comfort, friendliness, mutual respect, and a sense of being teammates, each a dimension identified in prior literature. Participants rated their expectations from the relationship on 7-point scales (1 = I would not expect that at all; 7 = I would certainly expect that) and responses were aggregated to form a closeness expectations index ( $\alpha = 0.9$ ). Results for the brand Apple ( $n=9$ ) were removed due to being exceptionally high for both customers and non-customers ( $M_{\text{Apple}} = 5,82$ )<sup>7</sup>.

### 3.2 RESULTS

After performing Levene's tests of homogeneity of variances on the results (all  $p > 0.05$  meaning equality of variances can be assumed), a factorial ANOVA on the variable "*closeness expectations*" revealed a significant main effect of product category ( $F(1, 131) = 4.85, p < 0.05$ ) as well as a category x brand affiliation interaction ( $F(1, 131) = 5.16, p < 0.05$ ). Specifically, participants thinking about their affiliated brands (i.e., customers) expected their relationship with their mobile phone operator to be significantly closer than their relationship with their laptop provider ( $M_{\text{Customers Mobile}} = 5.06$  versus  $M_{\text{Customers Laptop}} = 4.31$ ; ( $F(1, 66) = 10.44, p < 0.01$ ), supporting **H1**<sup>8</sup>. In contrast, closeness expectations of noncustomers did not vary as a function of the brand category ( $M_{\text{Mobile Non-Customers}} = 4.37$  vs.  $M_{\text{Laptop Non-Customers}} = 4.38$ ; ( $F(1, 65) < 0.01, \text{NS}$ ). Essentially, the expectations of mobile phone operator customers were significantly higher than those of noncustomers ( $F(1, 70) < 9.71, p < 0.01$ ), supporting **H2**<sup>9</sup>, but in the case of the expectations of laptop provider customers, these were not different from those of noncustomers in either the mobile ( $F(1, 64) < 0.05, \text{NS}$ ) or the laptop category ( $F(1, 61) < 0.08, \text{NS}$ ), supporting **H3**<sup>10</sup>. Table 2 summarizes these results.

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<sup>7</sup> This is not very surprising when considering Apple's dominating presence and brand personality.

<sup>8</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 13.2 in Booklet 2.

<sup>9</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 13.2 in Booklet 2.

<sup>10</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 13.2 in Booklet 2.

**Table 2 - Main Results of the Analysis of Experiment 1**

| Hypothesis | Subgroups Analysed                                | Mean (1) | Mean (2) | Oneway ANOVA | Sig.  | Result |
|------------|---|----------|----------|--------------|-------|--------|
| H1         | Laptop Customers (1) vs. Mobile Customers (2)     | 4.31     | 5.06     | F = 10.442   | 0.002 | ✓      |
| H2         | Mobile Customers (1) vs. Mobile Non-Customers (2) | 5.06     | 4.37     | F = 9.708    | 0.003 | ✓      |
| H3         | Laptop Customers (1) vs. Mobile Non-Customers (2) | 4.31     | 4.37     | F = 0.048    | 0.827 | ✓      |
|            | Laptop Customers (1) vs. Laptop Non-Customers (2) | 4.31     | 4.38     | F = 0.079    | 0.780 |        |

✓: There is evidence to support the hypothesis.

### 3.3 DISCUSSION

These results are consistent with the prevailing relationship norms defined by both mobile phone operator brands and laptop provider brands through their marketing strategies. These become clear if we look at, for example, how advertising for mobile phone operator brands is generally much more emotionally driven and oriented towards establishing closeness with the consumer than that for laptop provider brands, which is typically more technically-based and less relationship-oriented. Moreover, how brands of both categories interact with their customers in the eventuality of a problem is another showcase for how these two types of consumer-brand relationships differ from one another. While mobile phone operator brands have their own stores where a variety of services are offered to consumers, including addressing doubts, concerns or problems related not only to the services provided but also to the products themselves, laptop provider brands are much less involved with after-sales services, the majority of the heavy lifting being typically left up to the retailers. These are just two of the elements that help shape consumer's closeness expectations.

This experiment also confirms the role of brand affiliation and brand category as determinants of closeness expectations. Note, however, that due to the use of real-world brands the results could potentially have been affected by consumers' prior attitudes towards them. The results of this experiment were additionally used as support for the identification of domains in which consumers expected their relationships with brands

to be relatively close (mobile operators) and relatively distant (laptop providers) and were the basis for the selection of brands for Experiment 2.

#### **4. EXPERIMENT 2 - VARYING COMMUNICATION SOURCES: INSTITUTIONAL BRAND VERSUS SPOKES-CHARACTER**

Spokes-characters may function as mediators in consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), possibly affecting consumers' brand evaluations (Callcott and Lee, 1994). Folse et al. (2012) examined how the usage of spokes-characters' impacted indicators of consumer-brand relationship strength such as brand trust and brand attitude, concluding that there could be positive influences in terms of consumer's trust and attitude towards the brand. Sela et al. (2012) analyzed the effects of pronoun change in marketing communications on consumers' perceptions of brands, showing that both attitude towards the brand and the behavioural intent of recommending the brand were dependent on the congruence between the pronoun used and the consumers' closeness expectations in regards to their relationship with the brand. Moreover, they were moderated by brand type and people's affiliation with the brand.

This study is an attempt to extend these conclusions in terms of attitudes towards the brand and behavioural intent of recommending the brand to the analysis of the option of having a spokes-character as the source of communication of the brand in SNSs or using the institutional brand itself to communicate. Additionally, it looks at whether these influences are moderated by people's affiliation with the brand (i.e., customers vs. non-customers) and brand category. Therefore, it is posited that:

**H4:** *Customers in the close relationship expectations situation will have more favourable (a) attitudes toward the brand and (b) behavioural intent of recommending the brand when a spokes-character is used as the source of communication as opposed to the institutional brand.*

**H5:** *Customers in the distant relationship expectations situation will have less favourable (a) attitudes toward the brand and (b) behavioural intent of recommending the brand when a spokes-character is used as the source of communication as opposed to the institutional brand.*

**H6:** *Non-customers' (a) attitudes towards the brand and (b) behavioural intent of recommending the brand will not be significantly affected by the use of a spokes-character as the source of communication as opposed to the institutional brand.*

#### 4.1 METHOD

##### Participants and procedure

A pre-test was conducted with thirty undergraduate students in order to verify language appropriateness and understanding of the questionnaire. Very minor changes in the formulation of some questions were done as a result. Six hundred and twenty-two undergraduate students (mean age = 19, range 17-26; 54% females) from two Portuguese business schools in two different cities participated in this experiment<sup>11</sup>. The study thus had a 2 (source of communication: spokes-character vs. institutional brand) x 2 (brand affiliation: customers vs. noncustomers) x 2 (brand category: mobile operators vs. laptop providers) between-subjects design (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Overview of the participants in Experiment 2 (n=622)**

| Lisbon Respondents (n=343) |                |                |                       |                |                |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Institutional Brand        |                |                | Spokes-character      |                |                |
|                            | Customer       | Non-Customer   |                       | Customer       | Non-Customer   |
| Laptop Provider Brand      | Group 1 (n=43) | Group 3 (n=76) | Laptop Provider Brand | Group 2 (n=34) | Group 4 (n=34) |
| Mobile Operator Brand      | Group 5 (n=58) | Group 7 (n=30) | Mobile Operator Brand | Group 6 (n=37) | Group 8 (n=31) |
| Porto Respondents (n=279)  |                |                |                       |                |                |
| Institutional Brand        |                |                | Spokes-character      |                |                |
|                            | Customer       | Non-Customer   |                       | Customer       | Non-Customer   |
| Laptop Provider Brand      | Group 1 (n=30) | Group 3 (n=32) | Laptop Provider Brand | Group 2 (n=31) | Group 4 (n=36) |
| Mobile Operator Brand      | Group 5 (n=35) | Group 7 (n=30) | Mobile Operator Brand | Group 6 (n=54) | Group 8 (n=30) |

Participants looked at one of four mock Facebook profiles (see Appendix I for an example): some looked at either a mobile operator's or a laptop provider's profile

<sup>11</sup> Questionnaires from respondents who either failed to respond to a significant portion of the questionnaire or did not have a Facebook account were deemed not valid and are thus not included.



where the source of communication was the institutional brand, whereas others looked at either a mobile operator's or a laptop provider's profile that used a spokes-character as the source of communication. After this, they were asked to indicate their attitudes toward the brand and whether they would recommend it to a friend. This was followed by a series of questions regarding their engagement intention with the brand page and their relationship with Facebook. At the end of the experiment, participants were asked about their affiliation (i.e. whether they were customers of the brand).

Seeing as the stimuli for this experiment were mock Facebook profiles and in an attempt to be as realistic as possible (the quantity of text in each post is usually small), the researcher opted to test the difference in communication sources also through the usage of visual elements rather than only text-based ones due to concerns that these would not be sufficiently noticeable to participants. Therefore, the following elements were manipulated: the cover and profile pictures (visual), the name of the profile, the welcome message and some of the copy of the posts [e.g. "*Do you usually work until late?*" (institutional) vs. "*Do you usually work until late like us?*" (spokes-character)] (text). In order to be certain that respondents' answers would be influenced by the usage of the spokes-character as the source of communication and not by the introduction of the spokes-character itself, the institutional communication versions of the profiles also included pictures of the spokes-character. Taking into account the results of Experiment 1 as well as their performance in Portugal, the brands chosen for this experiment were Vodafone (mobile phone operator) and Toshiba (laptop provider).

### **Dependent Variables**

All dependent measures, with the exception of engagement intention, were item scales drawn from prior measures in the literature. After participant exposure to the mock profiles, attitude towards the brand was assessed with four semantic differential scales: My attitude toward the brand is... "*bad/good*," "*negative/positive*,"

*“favourable/unfavourable,”* and *“like it/dislike it”* with a coefficient  $\alpha$  of .95 (Folse et al., 2012). Recommendation intention was measured with one item: *“I would recommend this brand to a friend”* (Folse et al., 2012). Engagement intention was assessed with six items, based on the official Facebook engagement measures<sup>12</sup>: *“I would click on the content (images, videos, links) of this brand page on Facebook”*, *“I would ‘like’ one or more posts of this brand page on Facebook”*, *“I would comment on one or more posts of this brand page on Facebook”*, *“I would mention this brand page on Facebook on my profile”*, *“I would share one or more posts of this brand page on Facebook”* and *“I would make one or more posts on this brand page on Facebook”* with a coefficient  $\alpha$  of .88. Finally, Facebook usage was assessed with six items from the Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison et al, 2007): *“Facebook is part of my everyday activity”*, *“I am proud to tell people I’m on Facebook”*, *“Facebook has become part of my daily routine”*, *“I feel out of touch when I haven’t logged onto Facebook for a while”*, *“I feel I am part of the Facebook community”* and *“I would be sorry if Facebook shut down”*, with a coefficient  $\alpha$  of 0.86. To measure brand affiliation, participants were asked whether they were existing customers of the brand and, finally, demographic information, such as age and gender, was requested to detect potentially relevant population differences.

## **4.2 RESULTS**

After performing Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality (mostly  $p < 0.05$  meaning the results do not follow a normal distribution) and Levene’s tests of homogeneity of variances (with several  $p < 0.05$  meaning equality of variances cannot be assumed)<sup>13</sup> and taking into account the results had different sample sizes, the researcher opted to conduct both parametric (t-tests for independent samples) and non-parametric (Mann-

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<sup>12</sup> Facebook Page Insights: <http://ads.ak.facebook.com/ads/creative/insights/page-insights-guide.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> For more information please refer to Appendices 14 and 16 in Booklet 2.

Whitney U) tests on the results. Three dependent variables were analysed: “*brand attitude*”, “*brand recommendation intention*” and “*brand page engagement intention*”. The results were first analysed separately for the two groups of respondents and combined after verifying that virtually all groups were homogeneous<sup>14</sup>.

Starting with “*brand attitude*”, a t-test focusing on existing mobile customers revealed significantly higher results in the presence of a spokes-character as the source of communication than when the source was the institutional brand ( $t_{Mobile\ Customers}(173) = -5.374, p < 0.001$ ). A Mann-Whitney test confirmed these results ( $U_{Mobile\ Customers} = 2490, p < 0.001$ ), supporting **H4a**.<sup>15</sup> Looking at existing laptop customers revealed the same results in the opposite direction, with higher brand attitude values being associated with the institutional source of communication [ $(t_{Laptop\ Customers}(114) = 5.385, p < 0.001)$ ; ( $U_{Laptop\ Customers} = 312, p < 0.01$ )], supporting **H5a**.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the results relating to non-customers of both mobile and laptop revealed no significant differences in terms of brand attitude when either source of communication was used [ $(t_{Mobile\ Non-Customers}(119) = -1.069, NS)$ ; ( $U_{Mobile\ Non-Customers} = 1538.5, NS$ )] and [ $(t_{Laptop\ Non-Customers}(128) = 1.114, NS)$ ; ( $U_{Laptop\ Non-Customers} = 3677, NS$ )], supporting **H6a**.<sup>17</sup> In examining the “*brand recommendation intention*” and “*brand page engagement intention*” results, similar conclusions to those found for attitudes were reached, thus supporting **H4b**, **H5b** and **H6b**.<sup>18</sup> with the exception that the “*brand page engagement intention*” results for mobile clients for the Porto group were non-significant ( $(t_{Porto\ Mobile\ Customers}(87) = -1.10, NS)$ ; ( $U_{Porto\ Mobile\ Customers} = 836, NS$ ))<sup>19</sup>, meaning that the use of the spokes-character did not have a significant positive

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<sup>14</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 15 in Booklet 2.

<sup>15</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 16.1.1 in Booklet 2.

<sup>16</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 16.1.1 in Booklet 2.

<sup>17</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 16.1.1 in Booklet 2.

<sup>18</sup> For more information please refer to Appendices 16.1.2 and 16.1.3 in Booklet 2.

<sup>19</sup> For more information please refer to Appendix 14.3.4 in Booklet 2.

effect as had happened with the other variables and in the NOVA SBE group. A series of t-tests for independent samples and Mann-Whitney tests revealed no significant differences associated with either gender or Facebook usage (all  $p > 0.05$ ).<sup>20</sup> Table 4 summarizes the hypothesis-related results.

**Table 4 - Main Results of the Analysis of Experiment 2**

| Hypothesis | Subgroup Analysed    | MI   | MS   | T-Test | Sig.  | Result | MRI   | MRS    | Mann-Whitney | Sig.  | Result |
|------------|----------------------|------|------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|--------------|-------|--------|
| H4a)       | Mobile Customers     | 5.48 | 6.08 | -5.374 | 0.000 | ✓      | 73.77 | 111.64 | 2490.000     | 0.000 | ✓      |
| H4b)       | Mobile Customers     | 5.59 | 6.12 | -3.988 | 0.000 | ✓      | 77.94 | 107.38 | 2877.000     | 0.000 | ✓      |
| H5a)       | Laptop Customers     | 5.86 | 5.04 | 5.385  | 0.000 | ✓      | 85.08 | 52.00  | 1235.000     | 0.000 | ✓      |
| H5b)       | Laptop Customers     | 5.47 | 4.74 | 3.969  | 0.000 | ✓      | 80.54 | 57.10  | 1566.500     | 0.000 | ✓      |
| H6a)       | Mobile Non-Customers | 4.37 | 4.59 | -1.069 | 0.287 | ✓      | 56.14 | 65.78  | 1538.500     | 0.123 | ✓      |
|            | Laptop Non-Customers | 4.53 | 4.35 | 1.114  | 0.267 |        | 90.45 | 88.03  | 3677.000     | 0.754 |        |
| H6b)       | Mobile Non-Customers | 4.60 | 4.70 | -0.391 | 0.696 | ✓      | 59.18 | 62.80  | 1720.500     | 0.557 | ✓      |
|            | Laptop Non-Customers | 4.20 | 4.17 | 0.177  | 0.860 |        | 89.97 | 88.77  | 3729.000     | 0.871 |        |

**MI:** Mean Institutional Brand Respondents; **MS:** Mean Spokes-character Respondents; **MRI:** Mean Rank Institutional Brand Respondents; **MS:** Mean Rank Spokes-character Respondents ✓: There is evidence to support the hypothesis.

### 4.3 DISCUSSION

Experiment 2 examined whether the use of a spokes-character as the source of communication on a brand profile in a social networking site influences people's attitudes towards and recommendation intention of two real-world brands. On the basis of these results it was verified that, as predicted, the usage of a spokes-character had a significant positive effect on customers' attitudes and recommendation intention in the mobile operator category, because they expect the brand to be a close relationship partner, but a negative effect in the laptop provider category, because the brand is expected to be a more distant relationship partner. Additionally, the effect among noncustomers was attenuated in both domains.

Interestingly, these results were also mostly verified in terms of engagement intention, meaning that mobile customers showed a significantly higher intention to engage with the mock Facebook brand page (either through posting on it, mentioning it in their profiles, clicking on its content or liking, commenting on and/or sharing its posts) in the presence of the spokes character as the source of communication, with

<sup>20</sup> For more information please refer to Appendices 17 and 18 in Booklet 2.

laptop customers exhibiting the opposite behaviour. The only exception to this was the results for mobile clients from the Porto group, which might reflect Vodafone's strong brand presence having a moderating effect on the use of a spokes-character to communicate. In fact, if we compare the results for clients of both brand categories in both groups, the higher mean differences are associated with the laptop clients ( $MD_{Lisbon\ Customers\ Laptop} = 0.73$  vs.  $MD_{Lisbon\ Customers\ Mobile} = 0.56$  and  $MD_{Porto\ Customers\ Laptop} = 0.74$  vs.  $MD_{Porto\ Customers\ Mobile} = 0.29$ ).

This study is perhaps a first step in getting a better understanding of the importance of closeness expectations in brand-page communication in social networking sites. Facebook users mostly interact with their real-life friends, with whom they have higher closeness expectations and from whom they allow and expect more playful communication. In the same way, and despite users' apparent disinterest in engaging with brands (which was also manifested in the answers given to items 1.3 and 1.4 of Part 4 of the questionnaire, with about 60% of respondents having answered they only "like" 10 or less brands on Facebook and 43% stating they look for or visit brand pages less than once every two weeks), they show higher intention to engage with brands with whom they expect a closer relationship when their communication efforts are congruent with these expectations, the same being valid for brands with whom they expect a more distant relationship. This showcases the ever-growing need for companies to devote more time to crafting their social media communications taking into account customers' relationship closeness expectations.

## **5. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

The present research contributes to the literature on the impact of using specific sources of communication in interpersonal cognition by suggesting that the source of communication can convey meaning and influence attitudes and recommendation

intention through implicit assessments of (in)congruity between the source of communication and prior relationship expectations. This means that humanizing communication in social networking sites through the usage of spokes-characters can actually hurt the communicating brand when it is inconsistent with expectations.

Additionally, this research contributes to literature on the effects of using spokes-characters in marketing communications by examining the impact of brand affiliation (i.e., customer versus noncustomer) as a determinant factor of closeness expectations. Brand customers, whose psychological involvement with their affiliated brands is much higher than that of non-customers, generally tend to make a bigger effort to process brand information, which resulted in the effects of the experiment among this group being particularly pronounced.

Finally, this work contributes to the literature on consumers' relationships with brands in online contexts, namely social networking sites, and their reactions to brand behaviours that are in(congruent) with previously established expectations. As people sometimes truly think of brands as if they were other people (Fournier, 1998), they will respond to differences in communication choices on the part of the brand. Moreover, people's previous relationship status with the brand (i.e. customers versus noncustomers) can impact their reactions, resulting in different and sometimes even opposite reactions to the same communications. Whereas most prior work in this area in the online context used hypothetical brands (i.e. Aaker et al, 2004), this paper examines the attitudes of actual customers toward two real-life brands with which they have actual working relationships.

## **6. MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

Given the importance of producing consumer-brand relationship theory research that provides practical applications for firms (Fournier, 2009), studying consumer-brand

relationships in the context of social networking sites (SNSs) is a highly relevant attempt to add impact to previous research and make it more concrete. The main finding that the choice of source of communication of a brand page in a social networking site can impact consumers' attitudes as well as recommendation and engagement intentions underlines the fact that, when developing a social media marketing strategy, marketers need not only consider their consumers as relationship partners in general but should also take into account how the product category of their brands affects how different types of consumers relate to them. Depending on consumers' relationship expectations, the same communications can be evaluated differently, as brands in different categories are considered to be different relationship partners and thus expected to behave differently from each other. Given the relative ease in creating and managing different social networking site profiles for the same brand it may make sense, for example, for brands which encompass several product categories for which consumers have opposing closeness expectations to have distinct brand pages with different sources of communication.

## **7. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While this research has focused on the effects of relationship closeness expectations in the context of brand pages in social networking sites, future research might focus on other relationship-related dimensions. Brand pages where a specific dimension of brand personality is emphasized through the visuals and copy associated to the source of communication, for example, might elicit different reactions from consumers, namely if the dimension emphasized is in(congruent) with the brand's real personality. Other markers of closeness such as colloquial versus formal copy style might also be explored. Finally, considering that only real-world brands were used and that the experiment subjects were all undergraduate management and economics

students from two Portuguese business schools, researchers might repeat the experiments with sets of respondents that are more representative of the general population and using fictitious brands.

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**Appendix I - Mock Facebook Profile representing mobile operator (Vodafone) and communication based on a spokes-character (Zoozoos)**

facebook Pesquisa pessoas, locais e coisas Vodafone - Zoozoos Página Inicial

**Vodafone - Zoozoos**  
56.743 gostos · 745 falam sobre isto

Equipamento electrónico  
Bem-vindo à página oficial de Facebook da Vodafone! Nós somos os Zoozoos! Descobre connosco o excitante mundo da Vodafone.  
;) [www.vodafone.pt](http://www.vodafone.pt)

Sobre Fotos

Destlaques

Publicação Foto / Vídeo

Escreve alguma coisa...

**Vodafone - Zoozoos**  
30/10

Hoje fazemos 20 anos em Portugal – e é tudo graças a ti. Duas décadas a comunicar, inovar e partilhar, contigo e para ti. Obrigado por passares este dia connosco! :D

Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar

**Vodafone - Zoozoos** fez uma pergunta.  
30/10

Qual é para ti a melhor razão para escolher Vodafone?

- É a melhor marca!
- Preços baixos para produtos de alta qualidade.
- Quaisquer problemas são resolvidos rapidamente.

**Vodafone - Zoozoos**  
30/10

Ugh... Há dias... Tanto trabalho para fazer e tão pouco tempo! Costumas trabalhar até a altas horas como nós?

Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar



Vodafone - Zoozoos

29/10

Amas as 2as feiras? Agora vais! Hoje damos-te €30 de desconto no Samsung Galaxy Gio. Não deixes passar esta oportunidade. Aproveita as promoções especiais que temos para ti à 2a. Sabe mais em <http://bit.ly/V1oL98>

Todas as 2<sup>as</sup> feiras vê as promoções que temos para ti!



Samsung Galaxy Gio

Era: €109,9  
**€79,9**

[Ver detalhes](#)

Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar



Vodafone - Zoozoos partilhou uma ligação

24/10

Queres ter o novo single dos No Doubt? Então podes ir ao nosso site e fazer download do mesmo, gratuitamente. Mas atenção: é só hoje! :)



No Doubt - Push And Shove ft. Busy Signal, Major Lazer

Music video by No Doubt performing Push And Shove. © 2012 Interscope Buy now! <http://smarturl.it/PushAndShoveAlbum>

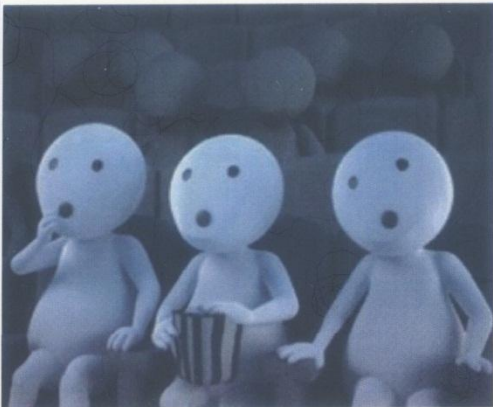
Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar



Vodafone - Zoozoos

20/10

Nós já fomos ver o novo James Bond! Qual foi o último filme que foste ver ao cinema?



Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar

Criar Página

Agora

Outubro

Setembro

2012

2011

2010

2009

Fundada



Vodafone - Zoozoos partilhou uma ligação

27/10

Já ouviste falar do Vodafone Cloud? Descobre tudo neste vídeo:



Vodafone - Cloud  
[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

Vodafone - Cloud

Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar



Vodafone - Zoozoos

23/10

Já é sexta-feira!! Este fim-de-semana vai estar sol e é uma boa altura para eu ir jogar golfe. E tu, o que vais fazer?



Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar



Vodafone - Zoozoos

19/10

Qual é a coisa que mais gostas no teu telemóvel?

Gosto · Comentar · Partilhar