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Catharsis Affordance of Social Media in a Brand Crisis

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Catharsis Affordance of Social Media in a Brand Crisis

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Abstract

Catharsis Affordance of Social Media in a Brand Crisis

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On social media, consumers may react to brand transgressions with negative sentiment and intentions to stop purchasing. However, there may be a gap between consumer attitudes, intention, and purchase behavior. This research explores the role of social media in this attitude-behavior gap to help explain why consumers purchase brands after a brand crisis or a brand transgression. With qualitative interviews (n=18) of social media users, the emerging grounded theory is that of "catharsis affordance". Catharsis affordance is defined here as *consumers' emotional outcomes resulting from their social media behaviors of: a) exploring information on the issue facing the brand, b) connecting with other consumers, and c) sharing reactions to these brand issues*. Vicarious catharsis effects can occur via by simply watching other consumers' reactions towards brand issues, brand crises, or brand transgressions. Therefore, catharsis affordance helps reduce consumers' negative feelings toward purchasing branded products and services in light of a negative issue facing the brand.

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Introduction

Social media has become crucial in public relations management for brands since a variety of news and issues about brands emerge on social media and consumers can freely participate in activities related to brands. Correspondingly, public relations practitioners are losing control of their brand-related information reported on social media as its spread is accelerated by users' interactive participation. With the loss of companies' brand control in social media, some of the brand issues might turn into bigger problems as public relations and brand crises. Social media and communication technology have moved the power of communication from public relations practitioners to social media users (Smith, 2010). Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) described the concerns many companies have with being reluctant or unable to develop strategies and manage their brands on social media effectively while the power of social media increases - for better or worse. Scholars have paid attention to the public relations consequences of firms' ignorance or mismanagement of the opportunities and threats presented by creative consumers (Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy, & Kates, 2007). Losing brand control in social media engenders a public relations mess, brand crisis, and possibly loss of sales.

Interestingly, some brands are not impacted as much as expected after losing control of their brand issues and encountering a public relations crisis on social media. It turns out that consumers keep buying the company's products even after a public relations mess on social media due to their brand issues. For example, United Airlines' poor response to the passenger-dragged off the plane incident turned into a PR disaster and resulted in a dramatic drop in its stock price. Even after the huge public relations mess, United Airlines reported its fourth-quarter and full-year 2017 performance, saying

they were proud of their revenue increase and business growth. Many companies have experienced a big public relations crisis, but their businesses thrive in the end (e.g., Dove's advertisement with racism controversy, L'Oréal's racism, Pepsi's advertisement with Kendall Jenner). There exists a gap between what consumers say on social media about how they feel toward the brand issue and/or what they are going to do and what they actually do at the point of purchase (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Belk et al., 2005; Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2010; Carrigan &Attalla, 2001; Follows & Jobber, 2000; Shaw et al., 2007).

This thesis paper started with the principal research questions, "Why do people purchase the brands even though they express their negative feeling and intention of avoidance buying their products and services after encountering their brand issues on social media?" And, "What effects does their social media activity bring on their actual purchase behavior of the brands with issues?

Traditionally, the gap between consumers' attitude, intended action and actual behavior at the point of purchase has been studied in ethical consumerism. Yet, the intention-behavior gap (Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2010) has been scarcely studied in the context of social media. Specifically, it has not been studied why people continue to be customers of the brands they don't like and show their disappointment toward their issues on social media.

Before bridging the gap between consumers' attitudes, behavior intention, and actual purchase behavior, it is important to first investigate the outcome of social media activity from a consumer standpoint. The outcome of consumers' social media activity possibly helps better explain why they behave differently at the point of purchase. With the framework of social media affordances, this paper newly suggests a catharsis

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affordance, an emotional benefit gained by exploring information of brand issues, connecting people and sharing reaction to brand issues on social media.

Catharsis affordance has not been studied yet but has been predicted to exist by pre-studied affordances such as networked information access and identifiability. We note the potential of social media as a channel to foster a catharsis effect for consumers as they can address a company's faults and share their feelings with other users on social media. In other words, social media affords consumers "access" to information about brand issues, "connect" with other consumers and "share" their emotional expressions and thoughts toward the brand, which offers catharsis affordance as an outcome. The catharsis affordance of social media possibly assists consumers to have less reactance toward buying the brand at the point of purchase in the future.

Catharsis affordance, the potential of social media relieving negative feelings from brand issues, can also occur indirectly. Its effect can appear by having a chance to listen to and feel a connection with other people reacting to brand issues, without making an action of showing an individual's own expression. It is called the "vicarious catharsis effect." Either the direct or vicarious catharsis effect reduces their uncomfortable feelings produced by the issue, which may induce less reaction toward purchasing the brand's products and services. However, it is in question as to how long the catharsis helps make their brand evaluation safe from the negativity of the issue. People keep evaluating the brand and update their evaluation from each issue while they continue to purchase the brand's products and services. When they are ready to leave the brand (e.g., with better economic status and alternatives), their brand evaluation, updated with issues, would play an important role in their next purchase decision.

Accordingly, the research questions about the catharsis affordance were summarized in the following three composite research questions:

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RQ1: Do people have an emotional release by expressing their feelings and thoughts toward the brand issue on social media (i.e. catharsis)?

RQ2: Do people have emotional release only by watching others' reaction on social media (i.e. vicarious catharsis)?

RQ3: If a catharsis and/or vicarious catharsis effect exists, how does it affect consumers' feelings toward purchasing the brand's product or service?

With respect to the catharsis affordance, we explore the role of involvement leading consumers to decide to go for the brands even after encountering their brand crisis on social media. Therefore, our last research question is that:

RQ4. What role does involvement play with respect to catharsis affordances, consumers' purchase intention and their actual purchase behavior?

This thesis aims to explore the catharsis affordance that is expected to help develop our understanding of the gap between consumers' expressed attitudes toward brand issues on social media and their actual purchase behavior. The findings from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of different social media affordances and its impact on the relationship between consumers and brands. It also provides practical insights into public relations and brand crisis management.

This thesis presents the following sections. First, a literature review was conducted in a variety of research areas. By combining findings from the literature review, we came up with four main research questions. To answer the research questions, we designed an in-depth interview, the most applicable method for grounded theory research. After conducting the in-depth interview in person and analyzing the interview data, we discovered insightful themes which help better explain our principal research question about the role of social media on the gap between consumers' attitude toward

brand issues, their intended action expressed on social media, and actual behavior at the point of purchase.

Literature Review

To start, we conducted a literature review of the brand issues on social media and the gap between consumers' attitude toward the brand issues and actual behavior which are the main objects in this research. Following that, we reviewed past studies of social media affordances to integrate and interpret our knowledge in the context of social media and consumer behavior. As a result, we newly suggested a catharsis affordance. The concept of catharsis affordance will be discussed further and developed into a classification of two types: (1) catharsis effect, and (2) vicarious catharsis effect (i.e., reading other consumers' negative expressions about brands on social media). To complement our finding of catharsis affordance, we did a review of consumer involvement and explored its role with respect to catharsis affordance of social media and consumer behavior.

BRAND ISSUES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A brand crisis can occur whenever there are "unexpected events that threaten a brand's perceived ability to deliver expected benefits, thereby weakening brand equity (Backhaus, 2015)." This broad concept of brand crisis becomes more applicable these days with social media, as a variety of social media channels stimulate the unpredictability of a brand crisis while preventing companies' control of their crisis. Traditionally, the internet simply functions as a channel where consumers expend content: they read it, they view it, and they use it to buy products and services (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). However, social media technology allows users to become individually distinctive sources of information online 'sharing opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives with others' (Marken, 2007, p. 10). When it comes to brands, social media affords another power to consumers in that their

activity with social networks can impact a brand's reputation, sales, and even survival. The point here is that communication about brands occurs on social media, with or without the permission of the companies in question. What is more important to note is that any brand-related news can be turned into a brand crisis when the public perceives it as a negative issue and reacts to the brand.

Kietzmann et al. (2011) also highlighted the role of social media in a brand crisis by describing the example of United Airlines' accident of breaking Dave Carroll's guitar in 2008. It might not be the first time that a musical instrument was damaged during a flight. However, the impact of the issue turned into a brand and public relations crisis after the owner produced a music video about the experience and shared it on YouTube. The video portraying United Airlines in a very unfavorable manner went 'viral' and gained almost 9.5 million views (Carroll, 2009). As BBC Business Editor Tim Weber (2010) described: "These days, one witty tweet, one clever blog post, one devastating video—forwarded to hundreds of friends at the click of a mouse—can snowball and kill a product or damage a company's share price." Consequently, a brand crisis depends on the publics' perception and social media plays an important role in the formation of publics' perception and its spread.

Again, focusing on the potential of social media that facilitates consumers' impact of transforming a brand issue into a crisis, this research adopted the term, 'brand issue'. Here, 'brand issue' is defined as a brand-related point, matter, or dispute, the decision of which is of special or public importance. It is any event with controversy and/or negativity that can turn into a brand crisis or not. As United Airlines' issue with Dave Carroll's guitar was the case that one flight service mistake turns into a crisis on brand image and evaluation, it is important to pay attention to any brand issues that make noise and stoke controversy on social media. The understanding of how the public perceives

and reacts to brand issues on social media is crucial for preventing them from turning to bigger crises just as understanding how the public copes with and interprets crises is a foundation for developing knowledge in crisis communication (Schwarz, 2012). Recalling this research goal is to discover the catharsis affordance of social media which relieves individuals' uncomfortable feeling from any brand-related events, not only limited to a brand crisis, we selected to use the phrase, 'brand issue.'

THE GAP BETWEEN CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE BRAND ISSUE AND ACTUAL BEHAVIOR

As reviewed, social media makes consumers more aware of brand issues and have their own activities regarding the issues, such as clicking emoji buttons, leaving comments and sharing with other users. It becomes easier in public to see how consumers react to brand issues, which makes stakeholders and public relations managers aware of its impact on their business. Interestingly, however, consumers keep purchasing products and services of the brand encountering public reaction to their issues on social media. There is a gap between consumers' attitudes toward brand issues, what they say they are going to do (e.g., future intention not to purchase the brand anymore) and actual behavior at the point of purchase (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977).

The intention-behavior gap has been previously studied in ethical consumerism by Auger and Devinney (2007) and Carrigan and Attalla (2001). There are three separate insights from the social psychology literature: a) implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999), b) Actual Behavioral Control (ABC) (Ajzen and Madden, 1986; Sheeran et al., 2003), and c) Situational Contexts (SC) (Belk, 1975) to consumer behavior. Using these Carrington, Neville & Whitwell (2010) designed an integrated, holistic conceptual model of the intention-behavior gap of ethically minded consumers. Actual Behavioral Control

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refers to the capability of an individual to perform a given behavior, which may not be equivalent to the consumer's perceptions of control (PBC) and their willingness. When making the purchase decision, a gap between the consumer's perceptions of control and their actual control underpins the intention-behavior gap (Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2010). Like actual behavioral control, situational context is another influencing element that functions as 'unwanted distractions' (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006). Both actual behavioral control and situational context can be barriers or facilitators to the translation of intentions into purchase action.

Regardless of whether the brand issue is an ethical issue or not, it is applicable to better explain the gap between consumers' attitude toward brand issues on social media and their actual behavior by understanding the role of these three elements, influencing and interrupting the processes to desired consumer behavior. For instance, consumers get distracted or simply forget the brand issue at the point of purchase (implementation intentions); the actual action is different to what they had imagined (ABC versus PBC); the stimulus around them at the moment of purchase decision-making derails their desired intentions (situational context). Besides those three elements, our research investigates if there is another factor originated from social media, influencing the disparity of what consumers say how they feel toward the brand issue, what they are going to do, and what they actually do at the point of purchase. Considering the social media environment is different from traditional media, it is suggested that it is important to study what effects social media can bring on the gap between consumers' attitude toward brand issues and their actual purchase behavior. Findings from this research will help better explain why people decide to repurchase products and services of the brands even after expressing unfavorable attitudes toward their issue.

SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES

Scholars have appropriated Gibson's affordance lenses to explore the dynamic potential of social media technology. According to Gibson (1979), affordance represents the notion of "opportunities for action" as perceived by an organism in its environment. Besides the action potential that can be taken given a technology (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001; Leonardi, 2011; Majchrzak &Markus, 2013), the researchers studied the symbiotic relationship between the action to be taken in the context and the capability of the technology (Lee, 2010; Maier & Fadel, 2009; Norman, 2007; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty & Faraj, 2007) An affordance perspective helps describe social media's role but also provides several advantages of theory development (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane & Azad, 2013). From the past studies, we focus on two particular affordances – networked information access and identifiability, two traditional predictors of online deliberation which significantly affects the brand issue on social media from a public relation perspective.

Networked information access refers to accessibility to information through social networks. Networked information access is tied to visibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) of social media in that users gain the ability to make their behaviors, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections that were once visible to others before new media technology. Researchers have noted that social media's ability to provide increased visibility into both behaviors and information (Boyd, 2010; Grudin, 2006), which results in increasing networked information access. Identifiability is opposite to anonymity as its level varies on how much users reveal personal information in their social media profiles. Both identifiability and networked information access shape discussion networks and influence deliberation in different ways (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013).

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The level of networked information access is likely to facilitate the speed of brand issues reporting on social media, but also the online deliberation which calls for users' interaction. Research has found a positive relationship between the size of the network in which individuals discuss civic issues and participatory as one's network size increases and the probability of interaction with sources of new information grows (Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004). McLeod et al. (1999) explained that lager networks afford people more possibilities to find individuals with whom they share interests and feel comfortable interacting with, which increases the chances of a public discussion opening. Thus, when it comes to brand issues reported on social media, we can anticipate that the more networked information access social media affords, the more people are likely to have interaction and deliberation toward the brand issue.

Identifiability is another social media affordance that is likely to influence the online deliberation about brand issues. The level of identifiability vs. anonymity depends on the environment and interface of each social media channel. For example, Facebook and YouTube represent an interesting contrast on these dimensions (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Facebook affords opportunities for ''pervasive awareness'' whereby individuals regularly provide their personal information such as photos, interests, political affiliation, birthday, and friends (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011), but also receive information from other users' networks (Hampton, Lee & Her, 2011).

In contrast, YouTube users are not required to disclose personal data to log in, and their participation is much more anonymous than Facebook as users are not notified about their network's activities (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). The point here is that identifiability affects social media users' participation in online deliberation and their choice of social media channels. To gain the public's awareness, individuals are likely to open a discussion on a social media channel characterized with identifiability, like

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Facebook. On the other hand, Facebook will be not used by those who are reluctant to open themselves up in public and interact with other random users.

Scholars have studied social media affordances by developing different levels and types of affordances, but it is limited to a few areas such as organizational and political communication (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). We argue that two social media affordances, networked information access and identifiability, are of consequence to the communication around brand issues because they afford consumers behaviors that were difficult or impossible for consumers to achieve before social media technology. For instance, an individual can get informed of a brand issue when the posting about the issue pops up on their social media channel by other networked users' activities. While accessing the news, a user can watch other users' activity including clicking an emoji, commenting and sharing, which are related to identifiability. Still, these two social media affordances do not explain the gap between consumers' attitudes toward brand issues and their actual purchase behavior. At this point, by combining the two affordances, we suggest another social media affordance in a psychological perspective and name it catharsis affordance. Catharsis affordance refers to an emotional outcome afforded to consumers by exploring information of a brand issue, connecting people and sharing their emotions and thoughts toward the brand issue on social media.

Similarly, therapeutic affordances of social media have been discovered to enhance patients' management of chronic diseases and improve their health outcomes (Meroli, Gray & Martin-Sanchez, 2014). According to the current research, therapeutic affordances include social media's ability to "explore" information, "connect" people, and "narrate" illness experiences. It is also noted that newly studied therapeutic affordance involves a combination of networked information access and identifiability

affordances. Meroli et al. (2014) suggest therapeutic affordances to theorize how the interactions enabled by social media may help explain an individual's health self-management and achieve health outcomes. Although therapeutic affordances are in the context of people with chronic pain (PWCP) self-managing their condition, its finding implies the psychological affordance of social media that can be applied to consumer sides. Consequently, in the perspective of putting the affordance lenses and the catharsis theory together, we argue that social media affords catharsis, an outcome of emotional release, by being available for exploring information about a brand issue, connecting people and providing a platform for people to share their emotional expressions and thoughts.

Catharsis Affordance

A thousand years ago, a catharsis was first mentioned in Aristotle's poetry. This catharsis explains how violence in tragic plays gives emotional cleansing from feelings of fear and pity. The catharsis effect was believed by scholars to be beneficial for both individuals and society. Freud brought up the therapeutic concept of catharsis by arguing that continuously repressed emotions can result in psychological symptoms, such as hysteria or phobias (Wegman, 1985). The hydraulic model of anger involves Freud's therapeutic ideas and becomes the basis of the modern theory of anger catharsis. According to the hydraulic model, it is suggested that frustrations lead to anger, and that anger builds up inside an individual as a closed environment before it is released.

Most scholars have endorsed the catharsis hypothesis to recommend ways of satisfying angry impulses without physical danger. They suggest turning aggression away from its human targets to inanimate objects, such as twisting a towel or punching a pillow. However, their catharsis beliefs have lacked empirical findings that cathartic

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activities are more likely to have the opposite effect (Geen & Quanty, 1977; Warren & Kurlychek, 1981). Among the studies to understand why the opposite effect occurs (Bushman, Baumeister & Stack, 1999; Bushman, 2002; Sherry, 2007; Gentile, 2013), it was argued that there is no self-fulling prophecy effect of media endorsement for catharsis. For example, people who read a pro-catharsis message and then hit a punching bag were actually more aggressive than people who read an anti-catharsis message.

When it comes to a brand issue on social media, social media has a different context from the existing studies of media catharsis effects. Past studies were limited in that the media content was aggressive, but not related to the cause of anger built up in people. In the context of the brand issue on social media, social media channels afford opportunities to reveal their negative feelings directly to the brand by clicking like buttons, commenting and sharing the issue with other users. Since their social media activity targets the cause of their anger, it is sound to expect more effectiveness of media catharsis compared to that of watching media that is irrelevant to the cause, but violent. On social media networks, their activity targets the public including other random social media users, but it is noticed by the brand. Moreover, Nanay (2017) argues that catharsis is a purgation of vicarious (or other-centered) emotions triggered in tragedy. In the stage of social media, observing other people's anger toward brand issues possibly brings emotional release without prompting more behavioral action.

Catharsis effect is not restricted to the aggression which is the extreme of negative feeling. Catharsis effects include happy feelings post-tragedy viewing, including when people feel better after watching a sad movie (Koerner, 2013). While watching sad films, oxytocin is released in people's brains and makes people feel empathy for others, which prompts them to care about others. Exercising empathy through the sad media content encourages a feeling of being connected to people and helps them deviate from the

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negative emotion. Interestingly, social media is the very place for getting connected to people over distance with their social network. Another study reveals that students with high trauma anxiety adopted the catharsis function of imagined interactions as a way to relieve their tension (e.g., four items of imagined interactions were "During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, imagined interactions helped me in clarifying my thoughts and feelings," "Imagined interactions about Katrina helped me relieve tension and stress," "Imagined interactions helped me reduce uncertainty about other's actions and behavior," and "In dealing with the aftermath of the hurricane, imagined interactions helped me feel better by releasing pent-up or repressed feelings."). Also, James et al. (2008) found that the catharsis effect was significant for the variable of social networking such as cell phone problems. A possible explanation for their finding was that respondents who were able to contact their friends and family through the use of cell phones may have evoked the catharsis effect by relieving stress. To sum up, catharsis is associated with uncomfortable feelings such as tension, anxiety, and sadness, and is not only limited to extreme anger.

POTENTIAL EFFECT OF CATHARSIS AFFORDANCES ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

How does social media afford consumers the catharsis effect? There are two potential ways: (1) people can alleviate their stress from the brand issue by venting their negative feelings various ways on social media (e.g., clicking emoji buttons, commenting, sharing and engaging in proactive actions such as boycotting online), (2) people can relieve their stress in a vicarious way of observing other social media users' activities reacting to the issue, without their own action. The indirect path (i.e. vicarious catharsis) would be effective only when an individual is on side of others' reaction since people feel more comfortable and positive with others' support rather than opposition. To

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discover the catharsis affordance and its potential effect on future purchase intention and actual purchase behavior, we brought up our research questions.

CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT

Consumer behavior, including decision making and actual action, is influenced by a variety of factors. The process of consumer behavior is also complicated as we reviewed that consumers' attitude does not always translate to behavior consistent with their attitude and intention. For a long time, scholars have explored the factors influencing consumer behavior to understand the process and predict the outcome such as purchase intention and actual behavior (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Fukukawa, 2003; Auger & Devinney, 2007; Rhami et al., 2017). While brand issue functions as one of the factors influencing consumers' brand evaluation and their purchase decision making, there would be other elements significantly influencing the consumers' decision to purchase the brand. Therefore, catharsis affordance may not sufficiently explain why people continue buying products and services after negatively reacting to the brand issues on social media. In other words, besides emotional benefits from the catharsis affordance, there might also be more factors possibly leading consumers to choose the brand, which has a controversial issue on social media.

Among a variety of possible factors, we focus on involvement, which has different applications to consumers. Scholars have suggested that a person can be involved with advertisements (Krugman 1962; 1965; 1967; 1977), with products (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Hupfer & Gardner, 1978), or with purchase decisions (Clarker & Belk, 1978). For example, involvement with ad leads an individual to give more counterarguments to the ad (Wright 1974). Involvement with products is likely to lead an individual to search for more information and spend more time to make the right choice

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(Celsi & Olson, 1988; Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). A person involved with a purchase is more likely to search for more information and spend more time to make the right choice (Clarke and Belk, 1978). These three involvements can be classified into three categories: personal, physical and situational (Bloch & Richins, 1983; Houston & Rothschild, 1978). Houston and Rothschild (1978) suggested to group psychical characteristics of products and situational factors together into situational sources of involvement (SI). Accordingly, they classified consumer involvement into situational involvement (SI) and enduring involvement (EI). Compared to situational involvement, enduring involvement is relatively stable and enduring as its personal relevance is derived from past experiences and stored in the long-term memory (Celsi & Olson, 1988).

Following Houston and Rothschild's framework mostly accepted in involvement studies, this paper focuses on involvement by distinguishing between situational involvement and enduring involvement (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Richins & Bloch, 1986). Situational involvement creates stimuli and contingencies in consumers' decision environments that might activate personally relevant goals and values (Richins, Bloch & McQuarrie, 1992). Sales promotions, coupons, and free giveaways are examples of external stimuli that likely increase the level of involvement by offering attractive contingencies at the point of purchase decision. A comparatively cheap price is more likely to increase situational involvement in the product category of high price. In contrast, enduring involvement comes from intrinsic sources which are relatively stable and enduring as its personal relevance is derived from past experiences and stored in the long-term memory (Celsi & Olson, 1988). When prior experience with a brand's product is good, a consumer possibly makes a repurchase but also tries another product from the same brand.

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The level of consumer involvement is determined by a combination of situational and intrinsic sources of involvement. As involvement plays an important role in consumers' decision making, it helps complement the explanation for the gap between consumers' attitude, intended behavior and actual purchase behavior, which catharsis affordance of social media may not fully offer. Therefore, besides exploring the effect of catharsis affordance on consumer behavior decisions, we suggest with importance to examine the role of consumer involvement as well.

Therefore, our next research question is:

RQ4. What role does involvement play with respect to catharsis affordances, consumers' purchase intention and their actual purchase behavior?

Although we expect to uncover the catharsis affordance of social media which helps reduce reaction to purchasing products and services of the brand, we doubt how long the catharsis effect can last. The catharsis effect from consumers' social media activities may not keep their brand evaluation safe in the long term. If the catharsis affordance of social media is not effective for long to protect the brand's evaluation, companies should carefully examine the impact of the issues they go through. Little is studied on how to predict when the negativity of brand issues functions as a detrimental factor that leads consumers to leave a brand. Unlike United Airlines overcoming the damage from the incident of dragging a passenger off the plane, high priced teen apparel brand Abercrombie & Fitch is still suffering the long-term impact of their brand issue which started from the CEO's comments about customers who didn't fit their skinny sizing. The impact of Abercrombie & Fitch's issue is proved by the increasing number of

U.S. stores closed every year. To sum up, it is of great consequence to examine further if catharsis of consumers' social media activity lasts long to prevent consumers from leaving the brand even after encountering their brand issues on social media. If not, what is the situation in which consumers would like to leave the brand?

Summary

This thesis research proposes to uncover the catharsis affordance that social media affords to consumers and investigate its potential to better explain the gap between consumers' reaction to brand issues on social media and their actual consumption behavior. As social media offers an environment with networked information access and public awareness, consumers are afforded to express their attitude and thoughts but also watch other people's reactions to brand issues. Such affordance brings the catharsis effect that consumers can have an emotional release and feel better by addressing brand issues together with other consumers. Thus, the emotional benefits from the catharsis affordance of social media offers can be another possible explanation of consumers' purchase inconsistent with their reaction to brand issues on social media. In more detail, the emotional release from accusing brands of their issues on social media can help reduce reaction to purchasing their products and services, what consumers do outside of social media. However, it is questionable how long the catharsis effect of social media lasts to keep brands safe from the negativity of their issues in the long-term. Moreover, consumers are likely to stop their purchase at the end when the brand issues keep happening with repetition and are being reported on social media.

Methods

GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH

With aims to understand the implicit meanings of consumer behavior rather than to predict behavior, qualitative methods are necessary to start this research (Braybooke, 1965). In-depth interviews are especially useful when researchers are unaware of interpretations, codes, norms, affects, or rules guiding consumer behavior (Dexter, 1970). Specifically, this work is grounded theory research, as the process is designed to develop an integration of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This study's goal is to uncover another interpretation of social media activity about brand issues and its effect on consumer behavior by drawing and integrating theoretical explanations from the catharsis theory and social media affordances. Still, grounded theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also determine how things will change upon conditions and to the outcome of the change (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

PARTICIPANTS

For this study, a total of 18 research participants were recruited from undergraduate classes at the University of Texas at Austin who were compensated with extra credit for their interview participation. Of those, 14 participants were females and 4 participants were males. The participants were between the ages of 21-24, which is junior or senior school year, and planning their career after graduation. The ethnicity of participants was diverse with 1 African American, 5 Asians, 6 Hispanics, 5 Caucasians and 1 a mix of Caucasian and Hispanic. Thirteen of the participants have income by having part-time or full-time jobs. Their monthly expenditure (participants were asked to estimate how much they are spending for themselves per month, not including basic

living costs) was $556 on average. To maintain anonymity and privacy, we did not collect anything other than the basic demographic information including gender, age, English proficiency, whether they have income or not, monthly expenditure and so on. More detailed information about the sample is in Table 1.

When it comes to social media activity, all the participants reported daily usage of social media for one hour at least on average. Facebook was the mostly frequently used, Instagram followed, then Twitter, Snapchat and YouTube were similarly used after that. Also, the most common reason for using social media was reported as "information seeking," "entertainment," and "social interaction" next. As a summary, Table 2 contains all other information gathered to understand social media activity as background.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Discovery-oriented project goals dictated the use of phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander & Polio, 1989) over more structured approaches to inquiry. For this research, the interviews were designed to permit an understanding of the subjective meanings of consumers' lived experiences with brand issues reported on social media, and their consumer behavior. While maintaining the flexibility of the interviews, the interview questionnaires were prepared to derive depth and discover the hidden effect of consumer's social media activity. The psychological effects of social media activity on the consumer side have not yet been studied, what we name 'catharsis affordance'. Therefore, it requires a grounded theory of brand catharsis effects to emerge with in-depth interviews.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Each one-on-one in-depth interview was conducted in person, with the prepared questionnaires that are categorized by (a) participants' social media activity, (b) brand issues on social media, (c) involvement and evaluation, (d) their action toward brand issues on social media and its catharsis effect, (e) trust of brand news on social media and (f) future purchase intention. Those question items are depicted in Table 3.

Participants were asked to recall brand issues reported on social media and provide more information about them. The interviewer asked them to describe what they remembered from the brand issues, how the public perceived the issues and how they felt toward them. When a participant had difficulty recalling specific brand issues, the interviewer suggested only the brand names commonly mentioned by other participants, such as Dove and United Airlines. If it was successful recalling what happened to the brand, follow-up questions were asked. When the participant failed to remember the brand issue clearly, the interviewer gave time to think of another brand issue and move on to the follow-up questions only after successful recall.

DATA ANALYSIS AND THEME DEVELOPMENT

A thematic analysis approach was used to determine if consumers perceived the catharsis effect from their social media activity regarding the brand issues, how the catharsis was manifested, and how the catharsis effected their future consumer behavior. This approach helped to identify, analyze and report the common themes and experiences respondents had through their social media activity regarding brand issues.

Thematic analysis began first by coding for intriguing psychological and behavior patterns that were found during the interviews and field notes. A list of the initial codes included: attitude toward the brand issues reported on social media, public opinion of the

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brand issues, attitude toward the public opinion, their social media activity regarding the brand issues, their feelings after engaging in their social media activity and expected feelings after expressing a more active reaction toward the brand. Via axial, open, and selective coding, we identified a set of themes with different emergent patterns (Wolcott, 1990) by grouping similar findings and observation. Axial coding is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories (p. 96)." While open coding breaks the data into categories, axial coding puts the data back together by making connections between the categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Kendall, 1999). To draw a holistic but integrated picture of our research findings, we integrated axial and open coding. For the final stage of data analysis, we used selective coding to complete after core concepts emerging from the coded data categories and subcategories which were identified through axial and open coding (Price, 2010).

In addition, we did idiographic analysis (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Thompson, Locander & Polio, 1990; Thompson et al., 1994) to explore the role of involvement influences on consumer behavior, which the catharsis affordance cannot control. First, the participants were asked about their consumer involvement level with a classification of each situational (e.g. price) and enduring source (e.g. prior experience). Then we selected those with high situational involvement and/or enduring involvement and analyzed their interview data in detail.

Again, the purpose of this study was to explore the catharsis affordance of social media and its effect on consumers' purchase decision making and their actual purchase behavior in the future. With that goal during the interview, informants provided rich insights about the catharsis affordance and the relationship between social media, consumers and brands by sharing their live experiences and future purchase intention.

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Results

Seven major themes were found in the study: catharsis effect, vicarious catharsis effect, no catharsis by disconnection, personal relevance (i.e. motivation to seek for catharsis or vicarious catharsis), separation of brand issue from consumption issue, consumer involvement (which is classified by situational involvement and enduring involvement), right responses to brand issue and no repetition is needed (i.e. consumers' expectation after brand issues).

THEME 1. CATHARSIS EFFECT OF CONSUMERS' SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

Participants' reported *feeling better* after proactively expressing their reaction to brand issues on social media. Not only expressing their emotions and thoughts, they also interacted with other random social media users. To show their agreement and support, some informants 'liked' and/or 'retweeted' other people's activities regarding brand issues. They recalled their experience of *releasing negative emotions* by addressing what was wrong with the brands on social media and venting their annoyance/anger/disappointment regarding the brand issues. Such experiences of addressing brand issues on social media represents the catharsis effect, a positive emotional outcome of releasing their negative emotions produced by the issues.

> It does not really happen often to make myself commenting or posting about issues. But once I got really annoyed and threw what was on my mind out, I felt somehow better. I don't know ... but feeling like getting kind of better just by opening and expressing my mind.

Some informants pointed out that they had more emotional benefits when other social media users supported their reactions with positive emoji buttons (e.g., smile, like,

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love) and/or comments. Their point of having emotional benefits from other users' agreement, in other words social support, is not surprising (Thoits, 1984). On one hand, the fear of counterargument was reported as a significant factor hindering the informants' activity on social media.

> After commenting? Well, a big part of it is how other people react to my comments. Obviously, if no one likes it or no one comments back to me, I'm like well... feeling dumb. If others believe after like 'Oh I agree' I would be satisfied with my confidence. So, when posting something controversial, I will make it I assure …Disagreement with others brings more insecurity. (Jinny)

THEME 2. VICARIOUS CATHARSIS FROM OBSERVATION WITH CONNECTION

Catharsis is based on emotional connection (Koerner, 2013), which reflected by most of the interview participants. Most of the participants reported that they felt connected with a vicarious sense of agency from other users sharing their emotions and thoughts as their representatives. They described their feelings of 'being with' and 'supportive of' but also 'supported by' other individuals who openly expressed reactions to brand issues on social media. The informants reported perceiving an emotional release by observing others already doing what they would and/or should do on social media. Such a description implies vicarious catharsis effect in that they attain an emotional outcome by watching the venting of negative emotions such as anger. As it is visible what is commonly valued and shared with users on social media, they likely have emotional benefits from feeling social connections and sharing their feelings which is a reaction to brand issues in the context of brands on social media. To sum up, they who experience the vicarious catharsis effect had agreed with the people who were actively expressing their reactions to brand issues on social media.

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I was happier after finding out other people knew and were talking about it. I felt being with them and somehow supported. At that moment, on social media, I was supporting them though. (Jinny)

Considering that observation was reported as an activity the informants do most with the lowest effort, it is also suggested that vicarious catharsis is probably more pronounced on social media. Since it is inevitable to watch other users' activity in the social media environment, consumers possibly perceive catharsis effects without consciousness and doing their own actions.

THEME 3. DISCONNECTION – NO CATHARSIS

However, the catharsis only appeared when the interview participants felt social connection by perceiving brand issues negatively with a similar degree as that of other social media users' reactions. Some participants reported their opinions that some of the brand issues reported on social media were not that as seriously bad as many people reacted. Some said people's reaction to brand issues is sometimes out of proportion, with exaggeration. They explained that people are likely to react to brand issues proactively when brands behaved differently from what they think the brand should be. When such a reaction level is not equivalent to how the informants felt toward the brand issues, they perceived disconnection with public opinion. For example, Arie disagreed with people's general reaction toward Dove's advertisement by arguing that their reaction was an exaggeration and Dove's intentions were not bad:

Before people pointed out, I didn't see it. Dove, they might do it subconsciously. They were good advertisers. They did have positive body images before. And I think their intention was not really bad as much as people reacted to it. (Arie)

Another informant, Kelly, reported that it was hilarious to watch others' reaction to Dove, since he perceived aggressiveness and exaggeration of their social media activity toward the brand issue. His opinion about the Dove's issue was subtle, not negative enough to tackle. According to Kelly, public opinion is generally exaggerated:

> Sometimes it is hilarious to see people's reaction. They do like to react more when the brand does not do what they expected. So, I can see some exaggeration from people's reaction. People like to make it big and exaggerate. To me, it looks like black comedy. (Kelly)

To sum up, those informants reported finding it hard to have a catharsis effect by watching other people's social media activity about brand issues since they didn't agree with the public's general reaction level and had no social connection as a result.

THEME 4. SEPARATION BRAND ISSUES FROM CONSUMPTION ISSUES

To better explain why people keep purchasing the brand even if they get annoyed with their issues on social media, we scrutinized their perception of brand issues upon brand issue types. Dove, Pepsi, United Airlines and Wendy's are brands recalled by a majority of the interview participants when asked to recall brand issues on social media. The participants distinguished Dove, Pepsi and Wendy's as one group and United Airlines' issue. They interpreted that Dove, Pepsi and Wendy's had issues not directly related to their products and services. For example, Dove's advertisement (Slawson, 2017) was controversial on social media in that their advertisement was racist. Pepsi decided to pull their Kendall Jenner ad after being met with widespread backlash on social media, with critics accusing them of appropriating a nationwide protest movement

following the police shootings of African Americans (Smith, 2017). The interview participants also accused Wendy's of controversial social media activities such as criticism of the #Metoo movement (Nordine, 2018) and the rap battle with Whataburger (Sault, 2017). It was their marketing activities in common that Dove, Pepsi and Wendy's encountered the public's unwelcoming reaction.

However, the incident of United Airlines' passenger dragged off the plane was in a different context to the informants. It was the issue directly related to their service which consumers are more likely to evaluate when purchasing flight tickets. In fact, many of the interview participants recalled their shocking reaction to the United Airlines' issue. They used the word 'crappy', 'literally crazy', 'surprised' and 'intimidating'. Those strong words imply strongly negative feelings that the incident was awful. Some of them added that they hope not to face a similar issue in future when using their airlines. It represents that their concern that a similar incident can happen to them since it was one of their services. In other words, United Airlines' issue brought an effect on their service evaluation, which other brands, Dove, Pepsi and Wendy's did not have.

As a result, the participants encountered brand issues reported on social media with the classification of either a product/service related or unrelated one. This classification likely influences consumers' purchase decision making. To a consumer who takes an advertisement and product separately in consideration for their consumption activity, Dove and Pepsi's controversy would not be perceived negatively to reconsider purchasing their products. However, product/service related issues like United Airlines have a high possibility of leading consumers to think back and evaluate carefully if it is right to keep purchasing their products and services.

I just go for what is on sale. Soap is soap. I don't really care their advertisement putting in racism content. I would not go out of my way to buy it but I wouldn't go out of my way not to buy it. by not buying it. I would be indifferent to the issue. (Kim)

Upon the types of the brand issues, there are different emerging patterns of separating brand issues and consumer behavior. As Kim shared her story, when the issue was not directly related to the brand's product/service, many of the participants were more likely to separate the issue from their purchase decision making. While expressing their uncomfortable feeling toward the socially controversial advertisements on social media, they did not develop it as a significant reason to stop using the brands. They would like to talk about the advertisements with their friends and other social media users by telling what the brand should have not done and missed. However, they possibly keep using the brand as they separate their evaluation of the advertisements from that of their products and services for their consumption.

On the contrary, when it comes to brand issues related to their product or service (e.g., United Airline's unfriendly service), many of the interview participants showed their reluctance to use the brand in the future. They reported feeling uncomfortable to purchase the brand's product and service which is controversial between other consumers. Unless the brand is the only option they have, they expressed their willingness to seek alternatives.

THEME 5. PERSONAL RELEVANCE, A MOTIVATION TO SEEK FOR CATHARSIS OR VICARIOUS CATHARSIS

To informants who showed little involvement with brand issues on social media regardless of their reaction level, the question, "what situation would make them to be involved in the issues?" was asked. Commonly, personal relevance with brand issues was

reported as their motivation to be willing to participate in brand-related activity on social media. When consumers perceive brand issues as personally related and offensive, they reported they would be more likely to engage themselves in the issues on social media. For example, Juan did not interpret Dove's controversial advertisement with racism as negative as other people felt, and he still expressed a stronger reaction when imagining the scenario that Dove's advertisement did matter with his race specifically. At that point, he reported more willingness to express his reaction, how he was offended by the ad on social media. Deborah MacInnis, Ph.D., a professor of marketing at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business, stated "People buy a brand because it says something about who they are and what they believe in," which helps better explain the background of Juan's response. As Juan reported, consumers are not likely to purchase products and services of the brands whose values threaten their identity and personal values.

THEME 6. CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT, WHY PEOPLE KEEP PURCHASING THE BRAND

As reviewed, catharsis affordance offers consumers an emotional release by allowing to explore information, connect with other social media users and express their reaction to brand issues on social media. Such a positive emotional outcome may lead consumers to feel less reactive to purchasing the brand's product or service. Still, it does not fully explain why people keep using the brand of which they expressed a negative attitude and intention of not purchasing. At this point, we suggest the role of consumer involvement in overriding their intentions to avoid purchasing the brand.

6-1. Situational Involvement.

United Airlines, one of the brands recalled by the most informants, makes their position competitive with comparatively cheaper prices in a typically high-priced airline market. Their price difference increases situational involvement of consumers. With consideration that all the participants were college students and their income could not be as much as that of graduates with full-time jobs, they were expected to perceive a relatively high impact from situational involvement. As expected, most participants reported that it would be inevitable to keep using United Airlines because of their economic status and its relatively cheap flights compared to other airlines. Although they recalled their reaction and negative attitudes toward United Airline's passenger being dragged off the airplane, they reported their future purchase intention to buy United Airlines for their convenience and comparatively cheap price. One of the informants, Lauren described her feelings of internal struggle when thinking about choosing United Airlines because of the limited options in her situation, including her economic status.

> If United Airlines had to make their prices lower in order to keep customers coming to them. Like ... I'm not going purchase a 200 dollar more flight on Southwest if I can just take United. Like … obviously I don't like United because of what it happened. But I would be still engaged in if I can save some money. But I would feel guilty of using it. (Lauren)

Consequently, it is suggested that high situational involvement positively influences future purchase intention, regardless of brand issues. This finding suggests another explanation for the gap between consumers' attitudes and intended action expressed on social media, and their actual behavior. While an individual reacts to a brand issue with an unwillingness to purchase their products and service, high situational involvement possibly leads them to keep using the brand at the moment of a purchase

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decision. However, companies should doubt if their sales are retained by consumers' high situational involvement after they are accused of controversial issues on social media. When situational involvement decreases, consumers likely leave the brand, or have been waiting to be ready to move on to other brands as Lauren said.

#6-2. Enduring Involvement.

Regardless of situational involvement, some of the participants with high enduring involvement strongly reported their future purchase intention of the brands having issues on social media. Especially, their satisfaction and good memory of the products of the brands mainly motivated them to stay with the brands. For example, the relationship of Juan and Dove represents the positive effect of enduring involvement on future purchase intention. Juan has used Dove since he was born because his mother always bought their products. Besides his long memory of using Dove with together with his family, he had been satisfied with their product quality. He was a type of brand loyal customer who willingly tries different products from the brand with the trust that their goods will be good enough as it has been satisfying so far.

When Juan was recalling Dove's advertisement issue, he stated:

> "You are a great company, one of the largest companies very well known. You should have more social corporate responsibility within the positions.
> They should be more aware ... " (Juan)

When Juan was asked about using products from Dove,

> "Do I use Dove? Yeah, I do use Dove. Big fan… There are always Dove bar soap in my bathroom. Ever since I was born, my mom used the same Dove bar. Now I move to college and went to store and found myself buying a woman's bar soap because it has more moisturizer and I still use it. If it's a bar soap, definitely Dove! Dove's advertisement is not my main interest. My main interest

is being cleaned and satisfied by the products. So I can handle my priority. And now I am so committed to the brand now, so ,.. " (Juan)

THEME 7. BRANDS SHOULD NOT REPEAT BRAND TRANSGRESSIONS

Most of the informants reported that they are unlikely to purchase brands when a brand issue happens with repetition. Many informants showed their purchase intention of the brands with their own reasons such as high situational involvement (e.g., competitive price) and enduring involvement (e.g., brand loyalty, prior experience), even after encountering brand issues with controversy and the public's reaction on social media. However, their purchase intention was reported not to continue when it comes to the point of the controversy repeating. This pattern finding implies that the negativity of brand issues on social media will not last long enough to protect their brand evaluation. MacInnis (2015) explained that "If there's a brand does something bad, people feel betrayed but also wearing it would signal that they agree with the values of the company."

Such a negative feeling like betrayal from a brand is called brand embarrassment (Grant & Walsh, 2009; Walsh, Albrecht, Hofacker, Grant & Takahashi, 2016) With brand embarrassment that exceeds certain degrees acceptable to consumers, they would express their dismay by following their own action like not using the brand anymore. As an example, high priced teen apparel brand Abercrombie & Fitch is suffering the long-term impact of their value issue which started from the CEO's comments about customers who didn't fit their skinny sizing. Even after the CEO's apology, their continuous drops in sales proved that customers were already leaving their brand (Figure 1). Customers do not talk about the extent they can wait and stand with brand issues, they show in their actions which would appear gradually but obviously in long term sales.

While sharing their experiences and thoughts of brand issues, some participants provided an insight for brand crisis communication in a way of reducing negativity of brand issues. They reported putting value on their response to issues and actions to fix them. Cathy expressed her willingness to listen to what and how the company responded to the public in that their responses represented that they care about their customers' voice. While comparing two cosmetic brands' different response to issues that the public perceived as racism (e.g., Dove vs Tarte), Cathy pointed out the importance of a brand's appropriate feedback which significantly impacts her future purchase decision making. To her, Dove's advocacy to their advertisement controversy with racism was persuasive and their action of pulling the ad led to another opportunity to stay with Dove.
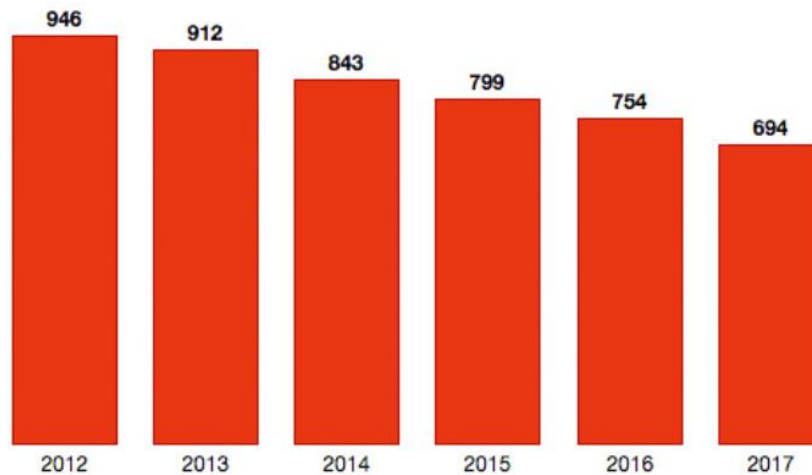

Figure 1. Abercrombie & Fitch Sales

Discussion

Catharsis affordance was observed as the informants reported perceiving their emotional benefits by exploring information, connecting people and expressing their feelings and thoughts reacting to brand issues on social media. Interestingly, they also had an emotional release by only watching other people's reaction to brand issues on social media. This refers to vicarious catharsis effects. In summary, both the catharsis and vicarious catharsis effects are grouped as catharsis affordance of social media. Besides catharsis affordance, there was a finding about the role of involvement that overrides people's intention of avoiding purchasing the brand leads to actual purchase behavior.

There are additional discoveries from this research, which complement our main findings to explain why people keep purchasing a brand they express negative feelings about on social media. One of the findings is that the informants represent a hierarchy in their social media activities related to brands. We also suggest typology of consumers with their purchase intention predicted by their reaction to brand issues and involvement types.

HIERARCHY MODEL OF CONSUMERS' BRAND-RELATED ACTIVITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Except observation, social media activity requires self-presentation with action-wise efforts at some degree, which is monitored by the public with shared networks. For example, Facebook affords users a public space on their profiles, in which contacts can leave messages, post videos or pictures, and share other users' contents openly (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). An individual's posting can be noticed by any people sharing the networks at some point (e.g., another friend of my Facebook friends can see my posting once my friends like and/or leave comment on my posts). Therefore, social media activity calls for self-presentation with the public's awareness at some degree unless a user only

watches others' activity without leaving his or her trace. To sum up, observation is the lowest level of social media activity users can do without action-wise effort. It is also noted that the interview participants showed different levels of willingness to perform other social media activities which require more action-wise effort and self-presentation than observation. Paragraphs with the style
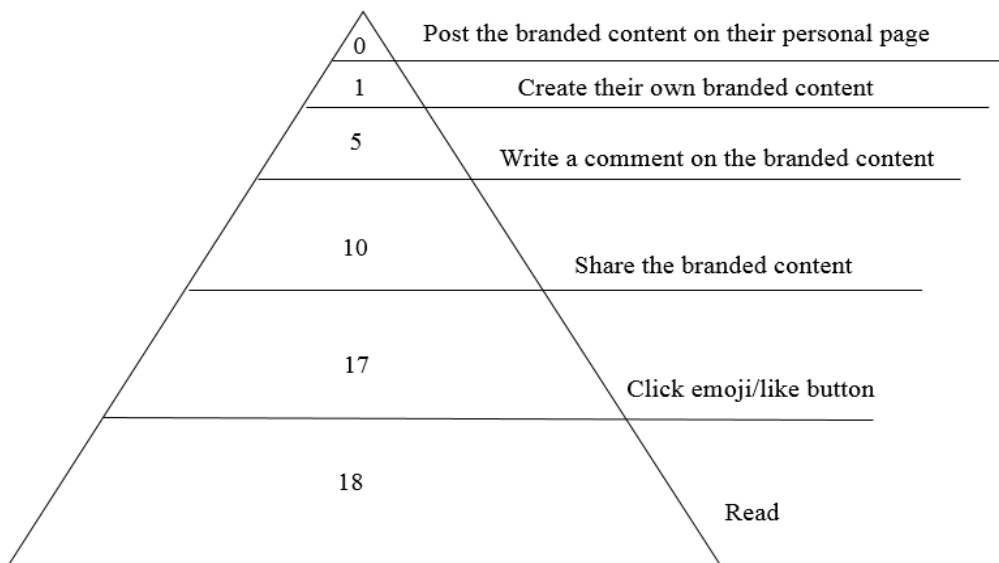
Figure 2. Hierarchy Model of Consumers' Brand-Related Activity on Social Media

According to the participants' report of their social media activity with branded content, there is a hierarchy model (Figure 1): the more the activity is self-presentative in public, the less people are willing to be active. All participants read the branded content and other users' comments, but rarely participated in personal activity like posting the content on their personal pages or creating their own branded content. Interestingly, they were more likely to share the branded content compared to leaving a comment on the content. One possible explanation is that companies do social media marketing to offer

users benefits such as coupons, discounts, or free giveaways when asking them to share their brand content (Lipsman, Mudd, Rich & Bruich, 2012; Kabadayi & Price, 2014). During the interview, some participants mentioned that sharing was for their benefit, not to express their brand attitude or loyalty. To obtain the attractive benefits, they sometimes participated in sharing the posts about the brands they barely knew and had not used before.

Another suggested explanation is that commenting is more self-presentative in that a user opens up about his or her stance. Scholars have studied how an individual's personality affects his or her social media activity in the context of self-presentation (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Seidman, 2013; Michikyan, Subrahmanyam & Dennis, 2014). As conscientious individuals are cautious in their online self-presentation (Seidman, 2013), it sounds plausible that they are less likely to express their attitudes toward the brand issue on social media with 'pervasive awareness (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013)'. Unlike the action of sharing, commenting unavoidably represents where the person stands, which may be supported by or objected to by other users. At this point, it is noted that some of the interview participants reported their reluctance to express their opinion in a public space due to the fear of contradiction. Belonginess, a major motivation to use social media (Seidman, 2013), underpins the fear of contradiction that individuals may feel before opening their stances on social media. Again, support followed by other users' agreement possibly boosts the catharsis affordance as the informants noted, whereas counterarguments stimulate a user's hesitation to show active reactions to brand issues on social media.

In the case of Jane, she said that she would like to stand up for her opinions in specific fields in which she feels professionally confident enough to encounter any debate with other social media users. Like Jane, Rose also pointed out the small number of

social media followers that represents her social influence level, is not enough for her voice to be heard and bring an affect to society. This was one of her explanations for why she did not feel like doing a proactive movement on social media. It was not only Rose who felt her own activity insignificant to influence brands and society. Many of the interview participants mentioned other users' activity, reacting toward brand issues, was enough. Thus, they did not feel it was necessary to add their reactions to the crowd. However, it was noted that they were carefully watching social media to get updated about brand issues as well as the public's reaction. Consequently, the hierarchy model of consumers' brand-related social media activity implies a high possibility that vicarious catharsis effects are from observing activity that might be pronounced in the real world of social media.

EMERGING TYPOLOGY

Based on the themes that emerged from the data, we constructed a typology to help better explain the research findings in a holistic but integrated landscape. According to our data analysis, types of consumers' future purchases vary depending upon the sources of consumer involvement (i.e. situational vs. enduring) and level of reaction to the brand issue (Figure 3). As a result, the typology incudes two axis points; the x-axis represents types of high product involvement, and the y-axis encompasses levels of reaction to brand issues (high vs. low). It also contains four quadrants portraying different consumer types with future purchase intention: waiting, status quo, rational and protected. Each quadrant has a variance in the degree of future purchase intention (e.g., low and high) toward the brand whose issues they encountered on social media. The proposed typology is in Figure 3 and a detailed explanation follows below.

WAITING

Quadrant 1 represents consumers who highly reacted toward brand issues but have a high possibility to stay with the brand due to their high situational involvement. Even though they might show relatively high purchase intention toward the brand, they are interested in leaving for another brand since they perceived the brand issues negatively. In other words, this consumer group represents their waiting for the time when they become less restricted by situational involvement. It is likely unpredictable if they would like to stay with the brand when their situational involvement decreases. Again, situational involvement is unstable compared to enduring involvement in that the involvement level varies depending upon the situational sources around consumers, including what companies cannot control (e.g., socioeconomic status).

STATUS QUO

Consumers who have high enduring involvement but also a reaction to their brand issues are depicted in Quadrant 2. This consumer group used the brand with high involvement and their experience was satisfying until the issues occurred. They expressed their disappointment mainly from what the brand does not do what they expect as consumers, which can get worse from disparity between the brand value they have pursued and newly reevaluated brand value with brand issues. They also shared their moment of having an internal struggle in the stage of making a purchase decision. When deciding to keep using their products and services, this consumer group reported they would not put more involvement in the brands. For example, consumers are not likely to follow the brand as much as they did, and for their convenience, they might buy their products and services but with less effort related to enduring involvement (e.g., brand

preference, brand loyalty). Therefore, this consumer group is characterized by status quo, likely staying with brands without developing their involvement.

RATIONAL

Consumers in Quadrant 3 are classified as rational. They expressed relatively low reaction to brand issues on social media while having assorted situational sources of high involvement. Their perceived negativity of brand issues does not interrupt their involvement but also future purchase decision making. The informant in this consumer group expressed themselves as "rational" in that they separate brand issues from their consumption life and lead it to their economically smart choice. They are likely to consume brands for their consumption rather than consuming their value. Hence, what is good to consume is a key factor for them to be rational from other issues and to select a brand right for their consumption.

PROTECTED

Lastly, Quadrant 4 consists of consumers who are less likely react to brand issues on social media and maintain high enduring involvement with the brand. These consumers express high future intention as their involvement is high enough to stay with the brand, but they also do not perceive their issue as seriously bad. This consumer group is likely to have had good prior experiences with the brand and show their brand loyalty at some point. Therefore, they have relatively higher chances of being protected by other brand issues in the future.

High Product Involvement Sources

	Situational Involvement	Enduring Involvement
High Reaction	Quadrant 1 Waiting	Quadrant 2 Status Quo
Low Reaction	Rational Quadrant 3	Protected Quadrant 4

Figure 3. Typology of Consumers with Future Purchase Intention Predicted by Product Involvement and Reaction to Brand Issues.

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Limitations & Direction for Future Studies

LIMITATIONS

All the informants were college students and earned extra course credit for interview participation. Most of them were advertising and public relations or business major. Due to their majors, the gender distribution was not balanced, as there were a greater number of female students in the sample. While many of the college students have income from an internship or part/full time jobs, the sample is not representative of all consumers. Still, it is important to note that they are potentially considerable consumers who will mainly be involved in a consumption life in the near future. Our sample age was quite evenly distributed between 21 to 24, in which students usually are preparing for society and working life after graduation. Another limitation of the sample is the size is not big enough to generalize our research findings. Thus, the research sample is a limitation that will be resolved in future research.

Another limitation is this research is that we used a deep listening approach to data analysis rather than using and coding the complete transcripts. Since this research's main objective is the catharsis, an emotional outcome of releasing negative feelings, selective coding with a deep listening approach was appropriately adequate to achieve the research goal.

To increase the credibility of our interpretative claims and findings, several techniques are suggested to employ (Erlandson et al, 1993). Member checks can increase the credibility of the interpretive claims and theme findings. Different colleagues can review interview transcripts and interpretive summaries in a peer debriefing process.

FUTURE STUDIES

There are broad opportunities to develop this research about the catharsis affordance of social media as a channel to help reduce negative feelings generated by brand issues. To replicate these research findings with quantitative data, it is suggested to design experimental studies which provide different levels of social media affordances (e.g., the image of brand issue report on social media vs. the image of brand issue report on social media with comments and shares) and investigate interaction effects of other variables. Examples of such different stimuli are identifiability and networked information access. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) discovered the potential of social media fueling deliberation and more symmetrical participation among users by offering greater affordances of identifiability and networked information access such as Facebook. Their findings also suggest practical insights to the management of brand issues on social media in that online deliberation significantly influences brand issues from a public relations perspective. Given that Facebook's identifiability and networked information expands the flow of information to other networks, whereas the politeness of users' online deliberation is lower in the more anonymous and deindividuated YouTube (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013), future studies should investigate how different social media affordances affect the flow of brand issues and the formation of public opinion as well as catharsis affordance.

Furthermore, the hierarchy model of consumers' brand-related should be tested in a bigger sample to generalize the findings from this current research. If the hierarchy of consumers' social media activity is replicated, the potential of vicarious catharsis gains more plausibility in that observation is the most pervasive action on social media and stimulates its vicarious catharsis in a more pronounced way to consumers. Moreover, it is also suggested to investigate which social media activity brings the catharsis effect, the

outcome of an emotional release. For example, future studies can compare the degree of direct catharsis effect through an individual's own expression, with that of vicarious catharsis effect through observation of others' reaction without a person's actions.

Future research should also explore gender differences which may be a significant factor to the effect of catharsis affordance. As scholars have studied gender differences in several areas of emotional functioning (Brody, 1985), there is likely to be gender differences in perceiving catharsis on social media. Following studies might examine further if the gender difference appears on how long the catharsis from social media activity lasts to the point of purchase decision making. For instance, it is possible that female perceives more catharsis affordance, but their catharsis won't last longer than male's, which implies no gender differences in consumer behavior.

Again, this research exposes the role that consumer involvement plays on the gap between attitude toward brand issues, future purchase intention and actual purchase behavior. It also studied the possibility that the effects of product involvement appear in a different manner upon its classified sources (e.g., situational source vs. enduring source). Potential studies should consider the use of other quantitative approaches to assess the effect of situational involvement and intrinsic involvement separately. These findings are expected to make an important contribution to catharsis affordance studies and our knowledge of consumer behavior.

Conclusion

This thesis research discovers the catharsis affordance of social media and its effect on consumer's future purchase intention and actual purchase behavior. It also advances the studies of the catharsis effect on media as it extends the type of media which was limited to violent content in previous studies. We found that the original concept of catharsis effect, the benefit of emotional release, was effective on social media in that social media affords emotional benefits by allowing people to express their emotions and thoughts through social connection. Therefore, after having an emotional release by addressing brand issues on social media, consumers seemed to have higher chances of reducing their reactance toward purchasing the brand. However, it was found that consumers would not be patient with the brands making issues repetitively, which implies the catharsis affordances of social media might not be effective in a longer term.

As expected, commonly distinctive themes were represented in each stage of how consumers react toward brand issues on social media and relate it to their purchase decision. Social media affordances including networked information access and identifiability help share their feelings and thoughts with other social media users. Interestingly, individuals feel togetherness and supportive of them, even by observing others who proactively react toward brand issues on social media. Thus, in an indirect way, the potential of the catharsis effect has been discovered that comes from the feeling of connection and empathy with those people venting anger on social media. The participants also reported feeling better by releasing negative emotions toward the brands, which refers to more direct catharsis. In summary, social media affords consumers to explore information about brand issues, connect with other consumers, and share their emotional and cognitive expressions, which results in the catharsis effects.

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There were a variety of stages of consumers' social media activities upon their motivation and involvement with brand issues. Types of brand issues also matters to consumers when considering brands for their consumption. They are likely to perceive product/service-related issues more importantly to reconsider their brand purchase, whereas they separate brand issues from their purchase decision-making process when the issues are not associated with their product and service. With high consumer involvement, individuals are likely to be willing to remain as the consumers of brands regardless of the controversy around the brands. The catharsis of social media activity possibly helps reduce reactance toward a future purchase of the brand. However, in the long term, the brand evaluation will not be safe from the negativity of the brand issue, especially when similar issues happen with repetition. Such an understanding of consumers and their social media activity would be practically important. Findings from this research suggest guidance for future studies in academia, but also crucial insights for public relations and brand crisis managers. The ideas suggested in this research also have application beyond understanding the psychological effects of social media and tracking of consumers' social media activity regarding a brand crisis

Table 1. Informant Table

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Monthly expenditure	Income	Social Media Usage	Average time on Social Media
21	Female	African American	$200	No	Daily	1-3 hours
21	Female	Asian	$650	Yes	Daily	1 hour
21	Female	Hispanic	$150	Yes	Daily	5 hours
22	Female	Asian	$2000	Yes	Daily	less than 1 hour
21	Female	Hispanic	$1000	No	Daily	4 hours
22	Female	Asian	$200	Yes	Daily	3 hours
21	Female	Caucasian	$1000	Yes	Daily	more than 2 hours
21	Female	Caucasian	$400	No	Daily	1 hour
22	Female	Hispanic	$300	Yes	Daily	2 hours
23	Male	Asian	$1200	Yes	Daily	5-10 min
22	Female	Asian	$500	Yes	Daily	1 hour
22	Female	Caucasian	$500	Yes	Daily	3 hours
24	Female	Hispanic	$250	Yes	Daily	More than 1 hour
22	Female	Caucasian & Hispanic	$150	Yes	Daily	Maximum 2 hours
22	Male	Hispanic	$250	Yes	Daily	2-3 hours
22	Male	Caucasian	$500	No	Daily	4-5 hours
22	Female	Caucasian	$150	Yes	Daily	1 hour
20	Male	Hispanic	$600	No	Daily	1 hour

Social Media Channel used the most	Reasons of using social media	Interaction with branded content on social media	The most trustful resources of brand issues reported on social media

Table 2. Informants' Social Media Activity Table

Instagram	C, E	A, F	Witnesses
Facebook, Instagram	D, F	A, C, F	Newspaper Media
Facebook, Twitter	A, B, D	A, C, F	Newspaper Media
Facebook	B	A, F	Newspaper Media, The brand PR report
Facebook	A, D, F	A, C, F	The person directly involved, Other social media users
Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram	B, D	A, B, C, F	Newspaper Media, Other social media users
Facebook, Instagram	A, B, C, D, F	A, B, C, F	The person directly involved, The brand PR report
Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube	A, D	A, C, F	Other social media users
Facebook	B	A, F	Newspaper Media
Facebook	B	F	Other social media users
Facebook, Instagram, YouTube	B, C, D	A, B, C, F	The person directly involved
Facebook	C	A, F	Newspaper Media
Instagram	B	A, F	Newspaper media - A mix of multiple outlets
Snapchat, Twitter	B, D, F	A, C, F	Witnesses
Facebook, Instagram	A, D	A, B, C, E, F	The person directly involved
Snapchat, Instagram	A, D, E	A, B, C, F	Witnesses
Instagram	A, B, D	A, B, C, F	Witnesses, Other social media users
Twitter	A, C, D, F	A, F	The person directly involved, Witnesses, Other social media users

Note.

Reasons of using social media: A. Social interaction, B. Information seeking, C. Pass time, D. Entertainment, E. Relaxation, F. Communicatory utility

Interaction with branded content on social media: A. Clicking emoji buttons, B. Comment, C. Share, D. Post on their personal pages, E. Create their own the branded content, F. Read the branded content without action

Table 3. In-depth Interview Questionnaires Table

	Questionnaires

Social Media Activity	1. How often do you use social media?
	
	2. Which social media channel do you usually spend time the most? (please rank it in an order)
	Follow-up: A. What is the average time you spend on social media?
	
	            B. How much time are you spending on the social
	
	            media channel you said you use the most?
	
	3. Why are you using the social media?
	When participants cannot answer, give the example of
	        A. Social interaction
	        B. Information seeking
	        C. Pass time
	        D. Entertainment
	        E. Relaxation
	        F. Communicatory utility
	
	4. Do you have any interaction with branded content on social media?
	Follow up: Which interaction do you do with the brand?
	        A. I have showed my attitude toward the branded content on social media by clicking emotion buttons.
	        B. I have commented about the branded content on social media.
	        C. I have shared the branded content on social media.
	        D. I have posted the branded content on social media.
	        E. I have created the branded content by myself and posted on social media.

	F. I have read the branded content but not tried any action afterwards. (e.g. Like, Share, Comment, Post, Create your own branded content, etc) 5. Do you follow any brand page or/and branded content on social media? Follow up: which brand? which industry/product usually? (Participants are allowed to check their social media to answer this question)
Brand Issues on Social Media	6. Do you remember any brands' issues on social media? Follow-up: Which brand were they? 　　　　　　　Explain about their issues 7. Which social media channel was the first place to hear the brand issue? 8. How was people's reaction in general? Follow-up: How did you feel about it? 　　　　　　　Your feeling? Opinion?
Involvement & Evaluation	9. Among the brands you reminded, choose one (e.g. XYZ) in your mind and please answer the below questions regard to the brand (XYZ). 10. How often do you purchase the service/product, what the brand XYZ offers? Follow-up: What about the brand XYZ? If so, why do you purchase the brand XYZ? 11. Do you satisfy with the product/service of the brand XYZ? 12. If you have not purchased the brand XYZ, what do you think of their general product/service quality?
Action toward Brand Issues on Social Media &Its Catharsis Effect	13. Have you ever done any action/reaction toward the brand issues on social media? 　Example: Clicking emoji, Leaving a comment, Sharing the news, Writing a post, Watching others' activity, Community actions (anti-consumer page, boycott) Follow-up: If not, have you ever thought about it?

	Follow-up: If not, why don't you? What is the reason? 14. How did you feel after the action? 15. Or how do you feel after imagining yourself doing the action?

Trust of Brand News on Social Media	16. Which resources do you trust most about the brand issues reported on social media? (7-scales)
	
	Example: The person directly involved 1—2—3—4—5—6—7
	Newspaper media 1—2—3—4—5—6—7
	Witnesses 1—2—3—4—5—6—7
	The people of the person who experience
	                    1—2—3—4—5—6—7
	The brand PR report (e.g. company announcement)
	                    1—2—3—4—5—6—7
	Other social media users 1—2—3—4—5—6—7

Future Purchase Intention	Would you choose the brand XYZ when you need the service/product? Follow-up: If yes, why? If no, why wouldn't you purchase the brand?

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