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Abstract

An understanding of how consumers interact with brands online is still in its infancy. This study will attempt to explain what motivates consumers to follow brands on social media, looking specifically at the role country and region of origin of products plays in explaining the relationship. Given the personal nature that attracts people to social media to build relationships, it is believed that the personal nature of brands originating from the social media users' home country will heighten the likelihood that consumers track certain brands and may enhance the relationship that evolves between the brand and the consumer. A model is proposed to explain the relationship, with survey data from U.S. consumers used to begin to establish any links between product origins and brand tracking behavior through social media.

The Role of Country of Origin in Brand Following on Social Media Among U.S. Consumers

Introduction

Social media used as another outlet in developing brand relationships with consumers has been practiced for at least five years now. A watershed moment is arriving when the \$5 billion mark in annual spending by top brands in social media is surpassed soon. Yet, an understanding of how consumers interact with brands online is still in its infancy. This study will attempt to explain what motivates consumers to follow brands on social media, looking specifically at the role country of origin of products plays in explaining the relationship. Given the personal nature that attracts people to social media to build relationships, it is believed that the personal nature of brands originating from the social media users' home country will heighten the likelihood that consumers track certain brands and may enhance the relationship that evolves between the brand and the consumer. A survey of consumers was conducted in spring 2013.

Literature Review

Social media use for brand information

The Web 2.0 technologies have bred a wealth of social media websites, popular examples of which are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These platforms provide sufficient opportunities for both companies, which attempt to foster relationships and interact with customers, and customers who go out of their way to search for useful information to help make informed purchase decisions (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Facebook's penetration is around half the total population in the U.S. and United Kingdom and more than a third in other parts of the world. Twitter is considerably less, with 5-6 percent penetration in the U.S. (Rosenthal 2013). This behavior is an international phenomenon, with 469 million registered Tencent Weibo users and 368 million Sina Weibo (the Facebook/Twitter equivalents) users in China in 2012 (Chang Beattie 2012).

Some statistics might provide a more straightforward picture of social media use and brand marketing. In 2011, more than half of social media users followed brands on social media (Van Belleghem, Eenhuizen, and Veris 2011) and companies spent about \$4.3 billion on social media marketing across the globe (Williamson 2011). All of the

Advertising Age Top 100 Advertisers have established Facebook pages for their brands (Lipsman, Mudd, Rich, and Bruich 2012). For 2014 Super Bowl ads, more than half (58%) contained hashtags (#), up from 50% in 2013 (Novet 2014). A study by DEI Worldwide (2008) found 70% of consumers visited social media sites to get information, 49% of these consumers made a purchase decision based on the information they found through the social media sites, 60% were likely to use social media sites to pass along information to others online, and 45% of those who searched for information via social media sites engaged in word of mouth. More recently (Stambor 2014), almost 25% of U.S. social media network users have made a purchase on a retail website after clicking from a social media network. Certain social media sites produce more lucrative purchases than others, with Pinterest's average order value of \$123.50 almost three times larger than a Facebook order (Stambor 2014).

There are various marketing strategies companies can use to target social media users who might be potential customers. One specific way of establishing a social presence and engaging customers is to create brand fan pages on social media. Companies can place brand posts containing photos, videos, messages, quizzes, anecdotes, and other materials on these brand fan pages, while customers can become fans or followers of these brand fan pages, and indicate that they like the brand posts, comment on, or retweet them (de Vries et al. 2012). Word of mouth recommendations from these experiences can also result. These dedicated brand pages offer brand fans a place to express their passion about the brand and unite them by their shared interest in the brand (Kozinets 1999). Brand fan pages also showcase part of the customers' relationship with the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002), help to strengthen the brand–customer relationship (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), serve as a source of information, and sometimes provide social benefits to the fans (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004). Customers' interactions with brands on social media have a much stronger impact on their behaviors than traditional forms of marketing and advertising (e.g. Chiou and Cheng 2003; Villanueva, Yoo, and Hanssens 2008). Those who become fans of brand fan pages are more likely to be loyal and committed to the company, and are more willing to receive information about the brand (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006). Moreover, these brand fans are inclined to visit stores that sell specific brands more often, generate more positive word of mouth, and feel more emotionally attached to the brand than those who are not brand fans on social media (Dholakia and Durham 2010).

Past studies examining the relationship between brands on social media and their customers have focused on the strategies that different companies adopted (e.g. Lipsman et al. 2012; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012; de Vries et

al. 2012; Lis 2011) and user-generated content (e.g. Christodoulides, Jevons, and Bonhomme 2012; Smith, Fischer, and Chen 2012; Vanden Bergh, Lee, Quilliam, and Hove 2011) rather than the effects of brand involvement on consumers (e.g. Naveed 2012; Chi 2011; Kim and Ko 2012; Yousif 2012). While knowing what strategies different companies are using to target potential customers helps build a more comprehensive landscape of what customers are confronted with on social media, it is more important to have a better understanding of what effects, if any, these strategies might have on customers.

By surveying 220 social media users in two Pakistan cities, Naveed's (2012) study examined the impact of social media on consumers' brand involvement, brand commitment, and purchasing behaviors. The results indicated that although less than half of the respondents believed that social media was a more trusted information source than traditional mainstream media, social media played a significant role in affecting most respondents' brand involvement. Naveed's article outlines a model of social media influences on brand behavior that provides a launching point for adding the roles of COO and ROO for this research.

In order to examine the influence of user motivation to engage in online social networking on responses to social media marketing, Chi (2011) surveyed 502 college-aged Facebook users in Taiwan on their perceptions of two different social media marketing strategies, social media advertising and virtual brand communities. She found that virtual brand communities was a more effective marketing strategy because respondents had higher trust and better attitudes toward virtual brand communities and the brand that built the community. According to Chi (2011), the findings could be partially explained by the fact that social media users' online social needs were gratified by the content provided in the virtual brand communities.

Kim and Ko (2012) examined the relationship for luxury products among 362 Korean consumers' perceived social media marketing activities, value equity, relationship equity, brand equity, customer equity, and purchase intention. Their study found that for five perceived luxury brands marketing activities-entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization and word of mouth had positive relationships with value equity, relationship equity, and brand equity, while purchasing intention was positively affected by value equity and relationship equity.

Yousif (2012) examined the extent to which 384 Jordanian Facebook users were interested in the advertising messages posted by companies, the effect of these messages on users' purchasing willingness, and their

evaluation of Facebook as a medium of advertising. The result showed that the content of the advertising messages was viewed as both exciting and reliable, that these messages motivated the participants to buy, and that Facebook was regarded as a successful medium for product promotion.

In an attempt to explore what role individual-level factors play in consumers' decisions to follow brands on Facebook, Logan's (2013) study surveyed 502 social media users in the United States. The results showed that young adults (aged 18-34) are willing participants in brand-related activities on social media and most of them have a general favorable attitude toward brand messaging on Facebook. Moreover, this study indicated that participants' perceived social media self-efficacy, subjective norms about social media, perceived usefulness of social media advertising, and attitudes toward advertising in general have positive relationships with the intent to follow brands on Facebook.

Country of product origin (COO)

As it relates to marketing, the concept of country-of-origin effects (COO) suggests that including mention of where a product comes from in marketing messages may have some influence on how it is perceived and on audience response to the marketing efforts. Originally proposed by Schooler (1965), COO research has identified instances of both positive and negative effects based on identification of the country a given product is associated with.

Quite an extensive literature has developed since Schooler's initial study, to the degree that a google-scholar search for mentions of the term *advertising* along with *country-of-origin* after 1965 results in 17,700 hits (search conducted November 19, 2012). Even allowing for flaws in the googling process, the volume of writing on the topic is great enough to be nearly unmanageable. However, several useful literature reviews done over the years can be used to give some order to the area. Bilkey and Nes (1982) cover over a decade of initial research on COO and conclude basic distinctions between less-developed and more-developed countries explain much of those studies findings. A second literature review by Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) looks at studies through the late 20th century, finding that country-of-origin tends to affect perceived quality more than attitude or purchase intention. Like Bilkey and Nes, they also point to a country's level of economic development as explaining much in the literature. Finally, Dinnie (2004) reviews 40 years of COO writing and research, organizing it into three eras, the last of which covers basically the years after Verlegh and Steenkamp's work and which includes recognition of services as well as

product marketing and adds notions of post-industrial economies to the developed and less-developed distinctions of the two earlier reviews.

In a study of technology product brand image among Chinese consumers (Souiden, Pons, and Mayrand 2011), country-of-origin's image plays a considerable role in influencing brand image. Prior work by Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000) and Meng, Nasco, and Clark (2007), based on comparative approaches, has found cultural variations in the level of COO effects and it has been suggested that differences may be due to the individualistic versus collectivistic nature of different nations. These differences cross country boundaries, giving further evidence to consider regions of product origin as an influence on consumer preference and choice.

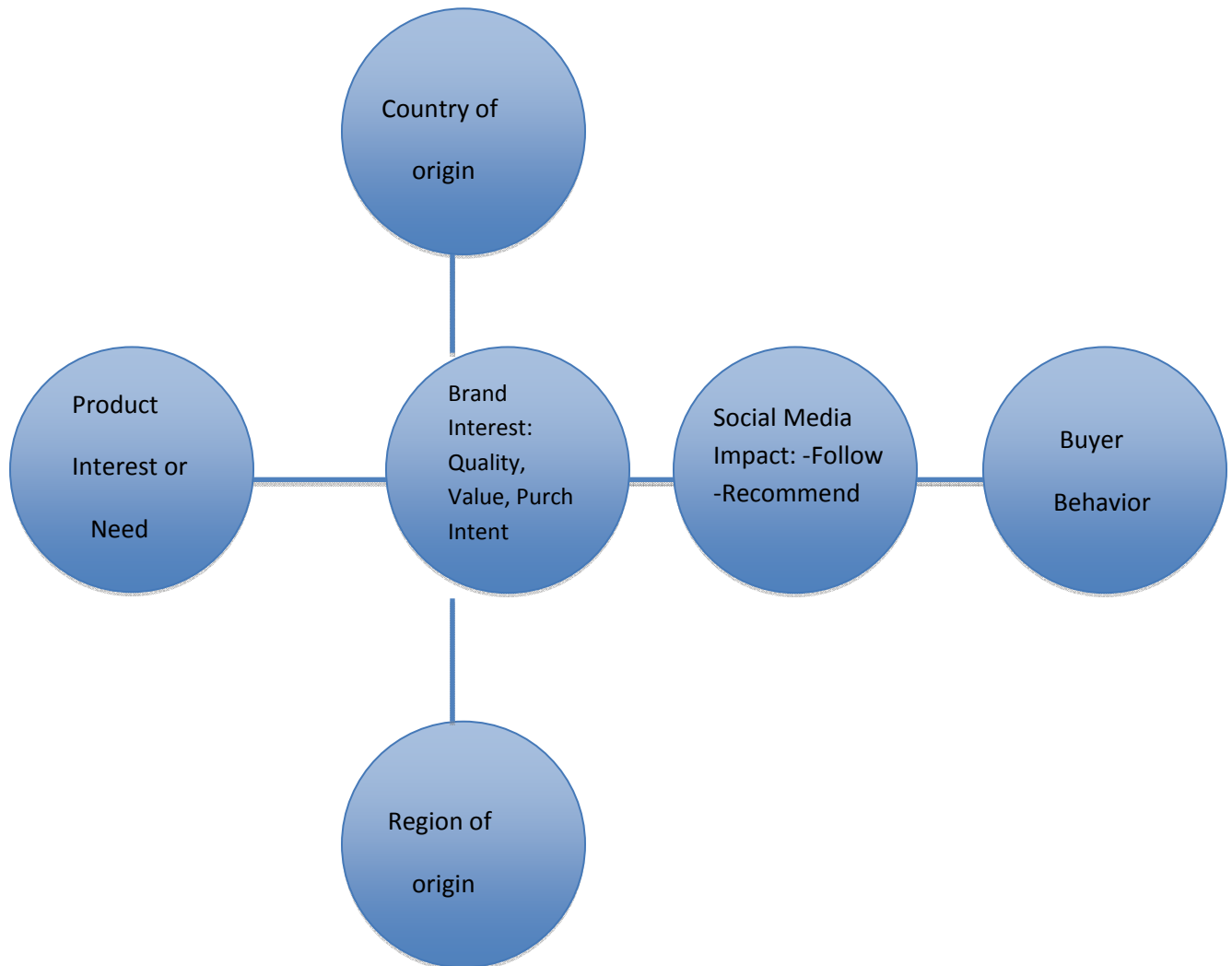
Region of product origin (ROO)

Lost among the large quantity of research in the general area of country-of-origin is the fact that much of the original writing on the topic referred to effects of *regional* as well as country-specific effects (e.g., Schooler 1965; Schooler and Sunoo 1969; Schooler 1971). For example, China, with the world's largest population of 1.3 billion, is experiencing extraordinary growth especially in consumer spending power. Although extremely brand loyal and loyal to Chinese-made products, a growing number (25%) express skepticism of their country's products (McEwen, 2007). Now, with globalization a reality, the European Union growing in size and importance, and the increase of "hybrid" products that may actually be produced, assembled, or identified with several countries (Hamzaoui and Merunka 2006; Kouba 2008), the notion of region effects may have new relevance, as consumers may use factors other than national boundaries in assessing a product's origin. Thus, an objective of the research reported here is to examine region of origin as a variable that may influence consumer decisions and advertising effectiveness, particularly as it relates to social media brand tracking.

Incredibly, there have been very few empirical investigations of region effects in the past. Van Ittersum, Candel, and Meulenberg (2003) use the term "region of origin" in research that considers how regional images and attitudes toward a region can affect food product choices. Leonidou, Hadjimarcou, Kaleka, and Stamenova (1999) provide survey data looking at consumer perceptions of product quality by region, concentrating mainly on self-perceptions of Asia as a region. Nes and Ghauri (1998) treat Eastern Europe and Western Europe as distinct regions in a region of origin framework, but there appears to be no published research that deals specifically with the EU or larger Europe as a region of product origin.

Building off a theoretical framework developed by Naveed (2012) in his study of social media impact on brand preference, adding COO and ROO effects to an original consumer interest in the product because of need or want would likely result in the following process model from left to right (See Figure 1):

Figure 1: Model depicting COO and ROO influences along with social media impact



A consumer, starting with an interest or need for the product, would then proceed to narrowing choices to several brands. COO, one new variable in the proposed model, has been found to have a more direct effect on perceived product quality of a brand rather than value or purchase intent. Region of origin, another new variable in the model, may influence brand value or purchase intent or have a stronger influence on perceived quality. Given the personal nature that attracts people to social media to build relationships, the personal nature of brands originating from the social media users' home country or region will heighten the likelihood that consumers track

certain brands and may enhance the relationship that evolves between the brand and the consumer. Then social media can impact the process, getting consumers to either follow or recommend the brand, ultimately leading, at least in the hopes of marketers employing social media strategies, to buyer behavior in the form of purchase or inquiring with a sales force. This study will focus on recommending the brand as the key social media influence.

While no specific hypotheses are formulated for testing here, and the work described subsequently ought to be treated as more exploratory than definitive, some initial queries into topics related to product origin are clearly called for. Advertisers, advertising agencies, regulators, and marketing scholars are all likely to have interests in such matters. As a means of addressing them, a primary research study is offered and a few tentative conclusions will be suggested.

Research Question

The above literature leads to the pursuit of the following research question for this study:

1. What role, if any, does country and region of product origin play in the decision to follow and recommend brands through social media?

Ratings of products from one's own country as well as ratings of products from various regions of the world have been found to motivate consumer behavior. The question is whether social media behavior mirrors those influences and can marketers' use social media to enhance or diminish the influences of product origin depending on how certain consumers perceive such products' origins.

Method

A questionnaire was distributed to college students in the U.S., via a website link. Measures (5-point Likert agreement scales) captured social media habits generally and specific to acquiring product brand information, and attitudes toward following brands through social media using measures adapted from previous research addressing social media habits and interactions with brands (Naveed 2012; Soh, Reid, and King 2009). Brand following was measured by asking respondents to list all the brands they currently followed through social media. Responses were coded both for what specific brands were named as well as what country the product originated from, identified by

coders searching brand background online. Respondents were asked why they tracked certain brands as an open ended question. Specific inquiries were also taken of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram usage.

Measures of region of origin focused on 5 product categories (autos, clothing, computers, food and appliances) which provide a range of purchase involvement conditions and have been studied in previous research (Kim and Ko 2012; Chinen and Sun 2011; Parkvithee and Miranda 2012; Keenan and Pokrywczynski 2009). Respondents were asked about overall product quality in the category by ranking each of the 6 regions of the world studied: Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, South/Central America, and the U.S./North America for each of the five products. In addition, country of origin measures included overall ratings of product quality, price/value and preference for two of the largest industrialized nations and suppliers of products worldwide: the U.S. and China.

Results

A total of 226 respondents participated in the survey from the U.S. balanced equally by gender, primarily college aged (18-25). Given the heavy use of social media by this age demographic, it seemed an appropriate sample group.

Social media usage habits overall revealed some interesting, but not always surprising results. Respondents on average spent 15 hours per week on social media, with one respondent claiming 100 weekly hours. Facebook and Twitter were the two most frequently used sites. Facebook was ranked as most used by 70% with another 23% ranking it second most used. Twitter followed with 24% listed as most used, and 45% second most. Instagram was often ranked third followed by Pinterest (See Table 1).

On average, respondents followed two brands, with 28% listing 3 or more brands followed regularly. Foreign brands were listed 31 times, while 295 U. S brands were listed. Japan had the most brands mentioned by country (6), followed by Canada, France and Sweden with 4 each. Broken down by region of origin, North America had 299 brand mentions, Europe 15, and Asia 10, with no brand mentions originating in South America or Africa. Based on this data, clear country and region of product origin effects seem to be in play in explaining which brands are followed by this sample of consumers.

Next, measures of social media brand tracking habits and opinions were factor analyzed to identify underlining dimensions. Factor analysis with varimax rotation produced a four factor solution that explained about 50% of the variance in the social media uses and brand tracking measures (See Table 1). Factor 1 was called

“Emotion” because it included measures that linked following a brand to “expressing one’s personality” and “feeling committed” to a brand. Factor 2 was called “Purchase related inquiry” because it included measures such as “finding beneficial info” and “sometimes changing my mind about a brand after following.” Factor 3 was called “Brand experience” since “clarity” “reliable info” and “pleasing brand site” measures loaded here. Factor 4 was called “Entertainment value” with only two items, but those focused on “entertainment that makes me laugh” and “fashionability” gained from a brand website. Scores for items on each factor were summed to create composite measures.

Table 1 here

These four measures of social media brand tracking habits and attitudes were included as factors using multiple regression to show the relative contributions of these and country and region of origin ratings on five product categories brand tracking behaviors. Country of origin ratings of “product quality,” “value” and “preference” for products in the U.S. were used. Region of origin measures were ratings of five product categories for three major product producing regions: North America, Europe and Asia. In addition, the number of brands tracked by respondents was included to assess the relationship between volume tracking and recommendation.

Since one of the most coveted outcomes of social media strategies by marketers is to get consumers to recommend a brand to a friend, this measure was used as the dependent variable in the regression. With about one-third ($n=70$) of respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed they would recommend a brand they follow on social media to a friend, there appeared to be adequate variance to produce an insightful solution. In total, 23 variables were included in the equation, which explained 50 percent of the variance in the dependent variable: brand recommendation (See Table 2).

Table 2 here

Five significant contributors (3 @ $p < .05$, 2 @ $p < .10$) were found to explain consumers’ likelihood to recommend brands they follow to a friend. The “Brand Experience” factor, representing clear, easy to find, useful information about the brand on social media was the strongest contributor, followed by a country of origin measure “product preference for U.S. goods.” Total number of brands tracked was another significant explainer of brand recommendations, followed by region of origin ratings of cars from two countries, North America and China.

Interestingly, no other product ratings were significant regardless of region, and Europe, known for good cars and fashionable clothing, played little influence in brand recommendations among the U.S. consumers sampled.

Conclusions & Discussion

Based on the origin of specific brands tracked by respondents in this study, combined with results that showed several significant contributors to explain a social media brand tracking outcome most marketers desire, brand recommendations, country and region of product origin have some impact on brand following. The relative contribution of COO as the second largest component of multiple regression analysis explaining recommendation tendencies among social media brand trackers helps expand earlier theoretical models predicting the influences of social media on consumer behavior. The finding that COO product preference was a more powerful explanatory variable than COO product quality or value measures adds new evidence that COO can influence more than just perceived product quality perceptions, as previous research has shown.

ROO showed a smaller but still significant role in explaining brand recommendation behavior through social media. Although further research is needed to flesh out the relatively understudied concept of ROO, the results hint that some value may be added by looking at product origin more broadly than by country. The findings of region evaluations in one product category, autos, while the remaining four product categories assessed here provided little evidence of influence, suggests that ROO may only be useful in big ticket purchases like cars.

Equally, if not more impactful than product origin is the makeup of social media content, represented by the “Brand Experience” of having clear, useful, relevant information delivered through those social media channels and brand websites. These results should put marketers at ease about the resources that are being devoted to online and social media content since there appears to be a payoff in the form of brand recommendations. Whether these recommendations ultimately lead to brand purchases are beyond the scope of this study, but suggest further research to make that connection would be the logical next step.

Identifying four dimensions of social media branding tracking habits and attitudes advances the understanding of the motivations behind following brands. Of particular note in this study is the finding of the small impact that “Entertainment” has on brand tracking and recommendations. Given the resources marketers seem to direct toward video, storytelling and the like on social media, the evidence here does not support the belief that this strategy is influential.

A review of respondents' reasons why they track certain brands provide some reasons beyond COO and ROO that are worth note. Although 40 (18%) respondents provided no insights on their brand tracking, the most frequent reason mentioned was related to accessing special promotions: price deals, contests, free giveaways or special events. Pinterest was often mentioned in connection with special events and new products, offering visuals to capture the emotion of the event or to deliver crucial product info. Local food and retail brands were often mentioned to get access to special deals only made available to social media "members."

The next most frequent reason cited for brand following was to learn more about products or the companies they already preferred or purchased. Following a brand allowed them to find out about new product lines or extensions before others.

A few mentions focused on liking brands for entertaining content provided through Facebook or Twitter. Only one mention among this respondent group related to following politicians, despite the massive efforts by most politicians these days to use social media to communicate and raise money. The lack of political mentions may be because of the emphasis in survey on products. However, plenty of non-product mentions of sports teams, television shows and celebrities were generated from the sample. Social media political tracking needs more investigation.

Several interesting insights came from non-followers of brands in this sample. In explaining why brands aren't followed one individual said: "I have not followed any products in the last year because I feel that they try to force interaction too much." Another respondent commented that he only followed sports teams, adding, "I don't follow brands because I don't think that a twitter page makes a company better or worse." Clearly not all in this respondent group buy into brand following on social media.

Finally, a unique reason for following brands was provided by one female respondent, "I follow handbags, accessories and jewelry in luxury brands because I wanna be an employee in their companies and be familiar with their way to market products." To each his or her own reasons for brand tracking on social media raises the challenge of future research to find consistent patterns on why consumers track brands on how marketers can provide the kind of persuasive appeals to drive recommendations that ultimately end in purchase.

Sample size and a college aged demographic are among the limitations that can be improved with future research. Connecting purchase behavior to the product origin and social media variables measured here would

provide a link to a more important outcome for marketers than the brand recommendation outcome that was used in this study.

Managerial Implications

Brand Experiences, manifested in ratings of the official brand page as “clear,” “reliable,” and “pleasant” as a strong contributor in explaining consumers’ willingness to act as brand ambassadors by recommending brands to friends and family suggest marketers continue to attend to issues of usability, relevance and timeliness in providing social media content about their brands. One significant ($p=.09$) country of origin measure and one region of product origin measure suggests that emphasizing where products originate can be a positive contributor to brand liking on social media. Understanding at the same time how products from different countries and regions of the world are perceived by your target market is important before emphasizing “made in” too prominently.

Table 1
Factor scores for social media uses & gratifications

Items	Fact Emotion	Fact Purch Inq	Fact Brand Experi	Fact Entert ment
Liking brand on social media expresses one's personality.	.68			
I search brand on social media for beneficial info.		.67		
I sometimes change my mind about brand to purchase once I visit the official account page of a particular brand		.68		
I visit the official account page at least two times each week for brand info.		.79		
I seek approval/reviews thru social media before buying.	.46			
I am very committed to buying the products of the brands that I have followed/liked on social media.	.50			
I have followed/liked the official account page of the rival brands of my favorite brand on social media.		.56		
The official account page of a brand on social media is more interesting than the content of other media.		.47		
The official account page of a brand on social media is a good source of up-to-date product information.	.62			
The official account page of a brand on social media helps me get special product price news.	.72			
The official account page of a brand on social media tells me what people who share my lifestyle will buy and use.	.50			
The official brand account page on social media is confusing. (reversed)			.73	
From the official brand account page of a brand I learn about what is fashionable and what to buy to impress others.				.40
The official account page of a brand is unreliable. (reversed)			.71	
The official account page of a brand on social media usually makes me laugh and has great amusement value.				.84
The official brand account page is annoying. (reversed)			.74	

Eigenvalues: 4.2 1.8 1.3 1.2
% Variance explained 25% 11% 8% 7%

Table 2

Multiple regression-Predictors of “recommend followed brand to friend”

Variables	Beta	Signif
Brand tracking: Brand Experience	.60	.0001
Brand tracking: Emotion	.10	n.s.
Brand tracking: Purch related inquiry	.04	n.s.
Brand tracking: Entertaining	.07	n.s.
Country of origin-US product preference	.19	.028
Country of origin-US product quality	-.08	n.s.
Country of origin-US product preference	-.02	n.s.
Total # brands tracked	.15	.04
Region of origin: North Amer. Cars	.21	.09
Region of origin: Asian Cars	.22	.09
Region of origin: Europe Cars	.16	n.s.
Region of origin: North Amer. Clothes	-.05	n.s.
Region of origin: Asian clothes	-.04	n.s.
Region of origin: Europe clothes	-.11	n.s.
Region of origin: North Amer. Electronics	-.05	n.s.
Region of origin: Asian electronics	-.11	n.s.
Region of origin: Europe electronics	.08	n.s.
Region of origin: North Amer. Food	.02	n.s.
Region of origin: Asian food	.001	n.s.
Region of origin: Europe food	.05	n.s.
Region of origin: North Amer. Appliances	-.19	n.s.
Region of origin: Asian appliances	-.08	n.s.
Region of origin: Europe appliances	-.13	n.s.

R=.71 R²=.50 p=.0001

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