

An Integrative Typology Of Relational Benefits And Costs In Social Media Brand Pages

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Abstract

The paper focuses on consumer-brand relationships in the social media environment, and suggests a typology of the benefits & costs consumers perceive when interacting with social media brand fan pages. Based on a series of focus groups and with the use of an online questionnaire, qualitative and quantitative data were collected from four focus groups and from 1,792 consumers-users of popular brand fan pages on both Facebook and Twitter. Study results indicate that consumers-users of brand fan pages on Facebook and Twitter, perceive social, functional, enjoyment, special treatment, self enhancement, advice, and status benefits. Privacy concern, information overload, and ad irritation are consumers' perceived costs. As the same seven factors of relational benefits and three factors of relational costs have been confirmed across all Facebook and Twitter brand fan pages, it can be argued that the structure and dimensions of relational benefits and costs are cross-medium and brand invariant, and are perceived in the same way by Facebook and Twitter users. Considering the rapid development of social media and their penetration in business marketing actions, this study contributes to the digital marketing literature by providing a better understanding of relational benefits, relational costs and consumer-brand relationships in a social media context.

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relational benefits, relational costs and consumer-brand relationships in a social media context.

Keywords: Relational Benefits & Costs, Brand fan pages, Social Media

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1. Introduction

Since its emergence, social networking sites have not only introduced radically new means and ways of interaction between individuals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), but have also altered the digital marketing landscape (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). Consumers increasingly use social media platforms to interact with the firms they love and purchase from, as well as with other consumers who may have insights about these firms (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). On the other hand, due to their popularity and interactive nature of social media, companies are increasingly creating brand fan pages (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeftang, 2012; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Martins & Patricio, 2013) on popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, to provide their customers with online interactive services, deliver a variety of interesting content, and create and enhance relationships with them (Kabadayi & Price, 2014; Kang, Tang, & Fiore, 2014; Rohm, Kaltcheva, & Milne, 2013; Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, & Maplestone, 2016).

One of the most promising conceptual approaches within the relationship marketing literature, which explains in a significant degree the success or failure relationships between service providers and their customers, is the relational benefits and costs approach (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999).

Even though social media have been recognized as potentially the most powerful medium for relationship building (Hudson et al., 2016; Labrecque, 2014), there is a lack of systematic work based on conceptual frameworks, simultaneously capturing and examining what benefits and costs consumers perceive through the use of social media brand pages.

Considering this gap, the present paper presents a large-scale study aiming to identify a typology of the benefits and costs consumers perceive from interacting in Facebook and Twitter brand pages, thus extending the relational benefits and costs frameworks in the context of social media.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Social media brand pages

Traditionally, companies have tried to reach and build up relationships with consumers through conventional marketing activities such as public relations, reward programs, and direct marketing (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). The emergence of social networks brought major changes in digital marketing practices and in online company-customer relationships, by enabling the establishment of social media brand pages, where companies frequently develop direct relationships with their fans (Martins & Patricio, 2013). Social media brand pages can be found in the literature as "brand fan pages" (De Vries et al., 2012; Jahn & Kunz, 2012) or as "company social networks", which according to Martins and Patricio (2013, p. 568) are "a group of people (followers, fans) connected to a company or brand within the boundaries of a social network site". Recent research shows that the marketing budgets directed towards social media are constantly growing, suggesting that brands are increasingly interested in

establishing social media brand pages, interacting with their fans, helping shape their experiences, and even leveraging their voices for a greater marketing impact (Hudson et al., 2016). Such pages are mainly company driven and used as an explicit brand communication and interaction channel (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Through such pages, companies offer activities and content related with the brand or the core product/service, while the consumer-brand interactions are now more complex as they represent a multi-party conversation about the brand rather than a brand-dictated monologue (Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera, 2010; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014).

2.1 Relational benefits and costs in an online environment

According to the theory of relationship marketing, in order for a relationship to last and develop, both parties should receive some sort of benefits, in addition to those stemming from the core-product/service. Based on this assumption, two widely adopted and used typologies were proposed by Gwinner et al. (1998) (i.e. “confidence benefits”, “social benefits”, and “special treatment benefits”) and by Reynolds and Beatty (1999) (i.e. “social benefits” and “functional benefits”). Several subsequent studies have confirmed the existence and importance of these benefits in various offline traditional contexts. With the emergence of Internet, e-commerce, and virtual communities (i.e. forums), a number of authors has confirmed the existence of the above relational benefits in the online environment, or identified new ones such as “self enhancement benefits” (e.g. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), “status benefits” and “perceived enjoyment” (e.g. Li, 2011), “advice benefits” (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), and “cognitive benefits”, “social-integrative benefits”, “personal integrative benefits”, and “affective benefits” (e.g. Wang, Chan & Yang, 2013).

Apart from benefits, the development and maintenance of a relationship between customers and firms is supposed to generate for or require from the customer some sort of sacrifices and costs (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Several studies suggest that the use of online environments such as e-commerce and personal social networking websites is accompanied by a series of consumer concerns, unpleasant experiences and feelings, related with and derived from company marketing and promotional actions, such as “privacy concern” (e.g. Ku, Chen, & Zhang, 2013), “information overload” (e.g. Chen, Shang, & Kao, 2009), “spam emails” (Joshua, 2011; Robert, Oleg, & Nigel, 2008) and “ad irritation” (e.g. Baek & Morimoto, 2012). Furthermore, literature has suggested that the use of collaborative environments such as social media is also accompanied by some kind of costs such as “difficulty of use” and “effort costs” (time and monetary sacrifices of contributing content in social networks) (Parra-Lopez, Bulchan-Gidumal, Gutierrez-Tano, Diaz-Armas, 2011).

On these grounds, this study focuses on identifying and validating a typology of the benefits and costs consumers perceive from participating in Facebook and Twitter brand fan pages.

3. Methodology

3.1 Stage 1: Qualitative study – Focus Groups

At the initial stage of this research inquiry we undertook an exploratory study through focus groups to gain rich insights on relational benefits and costs from users of social media fan pages. Participants had to be social media users who have personal profiles on both Facebook and Twitter for over two years, and are connected with at least ten popular brands on both Facebook and Twitter for the last year. These criteria were chosen in order to assure that participants would have an adequate level of familiarity both with social media and fan

pages on Facebook and Twitter. The recruitment of the participants has been carried out through the use of a screening questionnaire designed according to the needs of the study, including questions about users' demographics and familiarity with social media and brand pages on both Facebook and Twitter. In order to obtain a reliable, balanced and representative sample of users, the distribution of the screening questionnaire was handled by a professional market research company which gave us access to a large pool of user profiles. Totally, thirty-two participants were recruited, allowing us to conduct four highly interactive focus groups and obtain valuable descriptions.

3.2 Stage 2: *Quantitative study - Survey*

The previous process along with an extensive review of the literature provided supporting evidence to the relevance of the construct components proposed, and allowed the modification and adaptation of items feeding consequently the development of the research instrument for the main quantitative study. As such, this study includes and tests the following seven benefits: “Social”, “Enjoyment”, “Special Treatment”, “Status”, “Self Enhancement”, “Functional” and “Advice”, and three costs “Advert Irritation”, “Information Overload” and “Privacy Concern” (Table A). All items of the questionnaire were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ‘*strongly disagree*’ to ‘*strongly agree*’. Following a screening process, social media fan pages, created by firms/brands themselves having regular posting activity and a relative large number of fans/followers in both Facebook and Twitter, were identified. Subsequently, of the fifteen firms that were invited by email to take part in the research, four leading firms/brands operating in retailing (computer/technology), telecommunication services and FMCG accepted the invitation and allowed the survey instrument to be uploaded on their social media fan pages on Facebook and Twitter. This proved to be an efficient way to gather large samples from both Facebook and Twitter fan pages of each firm as shown in Table B. In total, this study collected survey data from purposive samples of 946 and 846 respondents following Facebook and Twitter fan pages respectively in Greece.

4. Findings

In study 1, the aim was to explore and identify the factor structure of relational benefits and costs by performing exploratory factor analyses (EFA) on data from Company 1 Facebook and Twitter samples (N=243 and N=226 respectively). The suitability of the data for factor analysis was established by consulting KMO measures of sampling adequacy and Barlett’s Tests of Sphericity. The EFA revealed a seven-factor solution for relational benefits consisting of Social, Enjoyment, Special Treatment, Status, Self Enhancement, Functional and Advice Benefits. EFA also demonstrated the existence of three factors for relational costs as identified in focus groups: Ad Irritation, Information Overload and Privacy Concern. In all four EFA (Tables C & D), the obtained factor solutions exhibited strong and significant factor loadings, defined as loadings above .50 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). At this stage, Cronbach’s alpha reliability scores being well above .70 supported the internal consistency of the measurement scales.

In study 2, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to verify the factors of relational benefits and costs identified in EFA, and assess the psychometric properties and the unidimensionality of the measurement scales using three Facebook and three Twitter samples. Based on the goodness-of-fit indices, the hypothesised models of relational benefits and costs reflected a good fit for the data (Tables C & D). In each performed CFA, almost all item loadings were well above the recommended threshold .70 and statistically significant

suggesting the convergent and construct validity of the factors. Three items were marginally below .70 and one item was marginally below .60 in one Facebook sample. However, given the strong EFA and CFA results in other samples, no further action was taken. As shown in Tables C & D, the reliability and validity of the measurement scales were further established through the analysis of composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) and using the procedures recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981).

5. Discussion and Managerial Implications

This paper is an attempt to identify and test a typology of relational benefits and costs, outlining and confirming their dimensions across popular social media platforms utilised by firms operating in three unique sectors. Based on the study's results, the same seven-factor structure of relational benefits and the same three-factor structure of relational costs were identified in all Facebook and Twitter samples. Thus, our research provides strong supporting evidence that fans and followers of Facebook and Twitter brand fan pages, perceive the same relational benefits and are faced with the same relational costs. These findings lead to important managerial implications.

Study results indicate that social, functional, enjoyment, special treatment, status, self enhancement and advice benefits are important benefits that are perceived by consumers while participating in social media brand pages. Similarly, privacy concern, information overload and ad irritation are crucial factors which are negatively perceived. Therefore, marketers should design and implement activities that promote greater benefits among users of their social media fan pages, while ensuring that the content of fan pages does not create concerns and negative perceptions for their consumers.

First of all, social media channels provide marketing managers the opportunity to have deeper interactions with consumers in ways that previous media could not deliver. An important type of benefits that was identified in all Facebook and Twitter samples is social benefits. Social benefits are based on the interaction among fan page users and between customers and the brand itself. The value of social benefits is multiplied when the instant nature of social media brand fan pages enables users to interact almost immediately with other users. Social benefits can be developed by providing more opportunities for member-to-member interactions and by adding social features that are valued by the members. These interactions can be strengthened by a firm's seeding conversation or planting provocative ideas. Also, fan page events or even interactive games such as knowledge games can trigger discussions about relevant topics. Companies could also reinforce their actions towards the strengthening of social ties among fan page users by motivating them to share their experiences with others and touching them emotionally. Lastly, the social nature of brand fan pages makes them an effective forum to exchange opinions about the brand, and to learn from customer conversations. Firms can identify new consumer needs, arising from consumer feedback on brand fan pages and rapidly improve or adjust marketing efforts accordingly.

Regarding the enhancement of enjoyment benefits, brand fan pages should deliver entertaining content to its fans. Online events and contests are some of the means brand fan pages can utilize to accomplish this. By offering enjoyable content, fan pages can put consumers in a good mood, increase perceptions of enjoyment benefits and make consumers experience the brand in a more positive way.

Considering the fact that functional and advice benefits are perceived by users of Facebook and Twitter brands pages, firms should adjust their social media activities towards this direction, by offering useful, daily, innovative and informational content. As Facebook and Twitter are two different platforms, each one with its fans, differentiating and adjusting the offered content, could enhance users' perceived functional benefits. Furthermore, as

Facebook and Twitter are a world of information, by providing useful content to their fans, companies can increase the attractiveness of their pages, make their fans feel that they gain value, and also lead them to increase their level of interaction and sharing activity.

Special treatment benefits can arise from both monetary and non-monetary incentives. Regarding monetary incentives, perceptions can be enhanced through rewards and incentives, sales promotions, contests and coupons for in exchange for members' participation in the fan page, and exclusive content. On the other hand, in order to enhance perceptions of non-monetary incentives, firms should adjust their communication with their fans, by interacting personally with each one of them, answering to each comment or question separately, by mentioning the name of the user. By providing special treatment benefits, marketers can generate positive word of mouth among consumers, which in turn can reinforce the consumer-brand relationship, and lead to customer retention.

Finally, regarding the enhancement of the perceptions of status and social enhancement benefits, marketers could strengthen the information sharing capability of their fan pages. Thus, fan page users will have the opportunity to tell others about their experiences with the company's products, and feel that they are a valued member of the fan page.

Likewise, brands should adjust their social media strategy to moderate users' perceived relational costs. With respect to information overload, when consumers get overloaded by the information provided by the fan page they may turn against the fan page, and in turn against the brand, e.g. by spreading negative word of mouth or not considering the brand when making a purchase. Marketing managers, while planning social media strategies and activities, should consider information overload issues since these could easily destroy any efforts made and could lead to negative outcomes for the brand. Towards this direction, limiting the frequency of Facebook page and Twitter updates and avoiding over-pushing are actions that should be a guide for a company's social media presence. When posting updates, companies have to make sure that they are providing useful content, not overly promotional advertising for their products and services.

Additionally, as study findings show that users are concerned about their privacy, marketers may put more efforts to understand users' perceptions and concerns on security-related factors and how the factors are formed and influence users' attitude. Furthermore, firms should define a clear policy about users' personal data on Facebook and Twitter, and inform their fans about the handling of their profile information. Moreover, competitions that require from users to give access to their profile data, could be adjusted towards this direction.

Finally, study's findings indicate irritation caused by advertising messages as a consumer perceived cost. Towards this direction, brand and marketing managers should realize that social media fan pages are not for selling. When posting updates, companies have to make sure that they are providing useful content, not only promotional advertising for their products and services.

In conclusion, the findings of this research provide a deeper understanding of the structure of the relational benefits and costs in the environment of social media brand fan pages that can guide brand managers' relationship building efforts when designing and implementing their social media marketing activities.

To our knowledge this is the first time that an integrative typology of consumer-brand benefits and costs related to social media is established.

6. Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study identified and validated a typology of the benefits and costs consumers perceive from participating in social media brand fan pages created by companies. As there

are various social media, each one with different characteristics and audiences, and every social media platform transmits messages to the audience differently, the results of the study cannot be generalized on all available social media platforms. Although participants that took part in this study, have adequate activity on several social media brand pages on both Facebook and Twitter, users of other popular (e.g. Instagram) and emerging social media platforms (e.g. Pinterest and Snapchat), should be reached to provide a better-grounded view of customers' perceptions of relational benefits and costs in social media brand pages. Also, a longitudinal examination of social media participation is needed, in order to observe how users' perceptions of benefits and costs are affected from changes and new added features of social media. The extension of the present study on other platforms, combined with a longitudinal observation, may reveal additional benefits and costs, perceived in different social media platforms.

Furthermore, quantitative studies are welcomed to measure the impact of relational benefits and costs on behavioral intentions towards the social media brand pages and behavioral outcomes towards the brand. Also, a quantitative measurement of the impact of page characteristics on perceived relational benefits and costs would be an interesting research direction. Further quantitative studies might also be able to identify distinct members segments, according to their different participation motives and page characteristics they value most. Such insights might specify each member's value creation potential and help define segment-specific strategies. Also, an observation of the behavior of fan-page members on their friends who are not fans but can follow what their friends are doing, would provide managers with valuable information about the potential fan base of their pages.

Finally, following the technological trends, the examination of the impact of new technological possibilities like mobile applications on users', motives, behavior, benefits and costs, would be an interesting direction for future research.

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Table D: Relational Benefits EFA Results for Study 1; CFA Results for Study 2

Constructs	Items	Study 1: EFA								Study 2: CFA							
		FB C1		TW C1		FB C2		FB C3		FB C4		TW C2		TW C3		TW C4	
		FL	CA	FL	CA	FL	CR/ AVE	FL	CR/ AVE	FL	CR/ AVE	FL	CR/ AVE	FL	CR/ AVE	FL	CR/ AVE
Social Benefits	1. I am recognized by certain users of the fan page	.833	.931	.922	.974	.747	.917	.975	.992	.972	.991	.984	.984	.986	.996	.983	.996
	2. I have developed friendships with other users	.798		.947		.778	.554	.984	.933	.970	.991	.949	.870	.978	.969	.976	.967
	3. Users know my name	.772		.924		.734		.983		.969		.960		.992		.995	
	4. I enjoy certain social aspects of the relationship with other users	.769		.929		.823		.978		.955		.869		.981		.988	
	5. I am familiar with the fan page administrator	.682		.845		.684		.954		.930		.851		.982		.990	
	6. It's fun to communicate this way with other people in the fan page	.678		.955		.785		.947		.970		.950		.985		.956	
	7. I meet nice people this way	.640		.947		.817		.968		.975		.943		.981		.995	
	8. I believe a chat among like-minded people is a nice thing	.627		.909		.644		.917		.932		.924		.986		.988	
	9. I enjoy certain social aspects of the relationship with the company	.625		.776		.665		.987		.988		.956		.988		.974	
Enjoyment Benefits	10. Using the fan page provides me with a lot of enjoyment	.853	.930	.861	.852	.935	.926	.962	.980	.986	.992	.976	.975	.910	.965	.972	.994
	11. I enjoy using this fan page	.847		.826		.955	.721	.967	.907	.995	.961	.973	.888	.936	.848	.991	.972
	12. I have fun using the fan page	.794		.759		.903		.949		.988		.973		.913		.991	
	13. It's boring for me to use the fan page	.765		.741		.562		.935		.953		.800		.929		.991	
	14. Participating in the fan page entertains me	.691		.712		.829		.949		.980		.976		.915		.985	
Special Treatment Benefits	15. I get better prices than non-fan page users	.832	.917	.842	.889	.808	.941	.964	.987	.979	.993	.921	.981	.979	.993	.982	.996
	16. The company does services for me that they don't do for non-fan page users	.827		.813		.834	.726	.966	.928	.982	.959	.973	.895	.979	.957	.992	.974
	17. I get discounts, coupons & special deals that non-fan page users don't get	.789		.795		.725		.976		.988		.982		.987		.989	
	18. I am given priority over customers who are non-fan page users	.764		.692		.924		.981		.981		.944		.980		.984	
	19. I get better service than non-fan page users	.678		.761		.897		.944		.980		.895		.967		.991	
	20. I get faster service than non-fan page users	.649		.830		.903		.947		.965		.957		.979		.984	
Status Benefits	21. My popularity among the other users is increased	.832	.972	.920	.952	.923	.961	.919	.966	.935	.971	.863	.939	.924	.974	.987	.992
	22. My status among the users is increased	.819		.927		.957	.860	.961	.876	.938	.893	.890	.793	.964	.903	.979	.968
	23. I am becoming a more valued member of the page	.798		.886		.898		.962		.948		.900		.954		.983	
	24. My image among the users is improved	.781		.917		.930		.901		.959		.909		.958		.986	
Self Enhancement Benefits	25. I can express my joy about a good buy of a product that company sells	.835	.960	.918	.964	.833	.927	.938	.980	.980	.990	.908	.946	.939	.986	.993	.980
	26. I can tell other fan page users about a great experience with the company	.808		.934		.939	.761	.975	.926	.987	.961	.898	.814	.993	.946	.967	.925
	27. I feel good when I can tell other fan page users about my buying success	.786		.955		.821		.977		.983		.888		.984		.923	
	28. My contribution to the fan page shows others that I am a clever customer	.745		.907		.892		.959		.972		.914		.974		.962	
Functional Benefits	29. I value the time saving benefits the fan page provides me very highly	.774	.920	.895	.931	.871	.926	.993	.993	.957	.983	.990	.985	.992	.996	.962	.989
	30. I value the convenience benefits the fan page provides me very highly	.744		.899		.830	.758	.990	.972	.973	.934	.971	.942	.992	.986	.983	.958
	31. I benefit from the advices the fan page gives me	.725		.882		.924		.979		.974		.990		.991		.985	
	32. I make better purchase decisions	.704		.826		.854		.982		.961		.929		.996		.984	
Advice Benefits	33. I receive tips from other fan page users about the products that company sells	.876	.957	.907	.935	.953	.936	.991	.998	.948	.946	.998	.998	.980	.974	.981	.954
	34. I receive advice from other fan page users that helps me solve problems with the products that company sells	.864		.905		.923	.880	.995	.995	.946	.897	.999	.997	.969	.950	.928	.912
					$\chi^2 = 839.73$ (p<0.001), df=489, CFI=.957, TLI=.951, NFI=.904, RMSEA=.056		$\chi^2 = 1075.23$ (p<0.001), df=502 CFI=.962, TLI=.958, NFI=.932, RMSEA=.075		$\chi^2 = 1086.21$ (p<0.001), df=492 CFI=.971, TLI=.967, NFI=.948, RMSEA=.067		$\chi^2 = 990.53$ (p<0.001), df=503 CFI=.961, TLI=.956, NFI=.924, RMSEA=.068		$\chi^2 = 579.84$ (p<0.001), df=506 CFI=.995, TLI=.995, NFI=.964, RMSEA=.027		$\chi^2 = 600.68$ (p<0.001), df=506 CFI=.995, TLI=.994, NFI=.969, RMSEA=.030		

Note: FB=Facebook, TW=Twitter, C=Company, FL=Factor Loadings, CA=Cronbach's alpha, CR=Composite Reliability, AVE=Average Variance Extracted.