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Catching COBRAs

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Introduction

Background, overview of chapters, and conclusion

1.1 Prologue

"The moment of Sputnik," communication theorist Marshall McLuhan argued in 1974, marked the beginning of a new era in communication and society. When the first artificial satellite was placed into Earth's orbit in 1957, the diffusion of information accelerated to an unprecedented speed. Essentially, Sputnik made communication a decentralized, participatory process. McLuhan accordingly stated that "the possibility of public participation becomes a sort of technological imperative" (1974, p. 56). McLuhan is known for his ideas about the future of technology, media, and society, many of which, some forty years later, have become an integral part of everyday reality (see Logan, 2010). His prediction that Sputnik heralded a networked information technology that would inevitably enable participating publics and consumers who are also producers is particularly enchanting for this dissertation.

That is because this dissertation is about the Internet: the digital multimedia platform popularized by the World Wide Web. More specifically, it is about social media, the array of online channels that arose from increasing bandwidth and a series of technological advancements known as "Web 2.0." Accurately predicted by McLuhan so many years ago, with social media an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2004) has arrived. Social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter enable people to "seamlessly shift from consumer to contributor and creator" (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 143) of content about anything, including brands. Given the significance of such behaviors for marketing and branding, this dissertation concentrates on people's consumption of, contribution to, and creation of specifically brand-related content: Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities (COBRAs).

1.2 COBRAs

Social media enable consumers to engage in a wide variety of brand-related activities. Examples include: looking through Whole Foods Market's pins on Pinterest (pinterest.com/wholefoods); viewing commercials on YouTube, such as Nike Football's advertisement *My Time Is Now* (see Nudd, 2012); participating in Dunkin' Donuts New Year's Contest on Facebook (facebook.com/DunkinDonuts); discussing the pros and cons of Vibram Five Fingers running shoes on Reddit (tinyurl.com/bbnp9zs);

asking other "denim maniacs" questions, such as whether to soak one's new Nudie Jeans in vinegar to set the dye, on MyNudies.com; writing a review of Roberto's Very Mexican Food in Del Mar (California, U.S.A.) on Yelp (tinyurl.com/b9ywpvg); parodying Old Spice's successful commercial *The Man Your Man Could Smell Like* and uploading the video to YouTube (search YouTube for "the man you could smell like parody"); and creating consumer-generated advertisements and uploading them to Tumblr (see Figure 1.1).
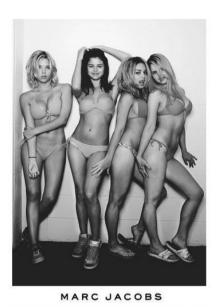

Figure 1.1 **Consumer-generated ads for luxury brand Marc Jacobs and retail brand American Apparel.**

Note: image of Marc Jacobs courtesy of Tumblr user Alyssa Basbas ("theradicalteen"); image of American Apparel courtesy of Tumblr user Rachel Leah ("soul-vacations").

A literature review at the start of this dissertation project, in 2008, revealed that the emerging body of research on social media marketing and branding lacked a concept that adequately captured the diversity of consumers' online brand-related activities. In response to this absence, the COBRA framework was developed (see chapter 2, pp. 29-30, for a detailed discussion). As a simple but comprehensive, unifying framework, it views consumers' involvement with brand-related content on social media along a continuum of varying kinds and degrees of consumer activity (cf. Levy & Windahl, 1985). All of consumers' online brand-related activities can be grouped into one of three dimensions, namely *consuming*, *contributing*, and *creating*. These COBRA types form the basic elements of this dissertation.

Because it is set up broadly, the COBRA framework encompasses other behavioral constructs that are relevant for social media marketing and branding such as electronic word-of-mouth (e.g., Verlegh, Ryu, Tuk, & Feick, 2013), consumer engagement (e.g., Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012), social interactions (e.g., Chen, Wang, & Xie, 2011), and consumer-generated content (e.g., Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011). Moreover, it should be noted that the COBRA concept was specifically developed to go beyond purchase behavior. Purchase behavior is essentially the manifestation of a positive attitude towards a brand or a company (Vivek et al., 2012). COBRAs, however, can be both positively and negatively valenced. Consumers can for instance write something positive about a product, brand or company on their Facebook profile, but can also use this profile to vent negative experiences.

1.3   The economic impact of COBRAs

Since roughly the mid 1990's, academics and practitioners have spoken highly of the Internet's potential to engage with consumers in "true communication on a mass scale" (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 366; Ainscough, 1996; Berthon, Pitt, & Watson, 1996; Peterson, Balasubmaranian, & Bronnenberg, 1997). Companies have long struggled to unlock this potential. At the turn of the 21st century, many organizations' online presence was typically limited to brochure-like websites (Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002). With the advent of social media, around 2004, the transition of the Internet into a truly participatory environment really changed thought and practice of marketing and branding (e.g., Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Varadarajan & Yadav, 2009).

The rise of social media coincides with the arrival of a "new age of orality" (Gleick, 2012, p. 71). This age gives influence and control to all participants in the communication process (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Through their collective brand consumption (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2005) and brand value creation (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), consumers have gained power at the expense of marketers (Kozinets, 1999; Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson, 2012). Consequently, brands are increasingly social constructs, to a large extent shaped by consumers' brand-related interactions, many of which take place on social media (Muñiz & Schau, 2011; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2009; 2010). For marketing and branding, this implies that controlling the brand is no longer possible or desirable. Responsive dialogue and long-term consumer engagement are to be preferred over classic push marketing models based on sender-controlled monologue and usually short-lived effects (e.g., Kozinets, 1999; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010; Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

This view on marketing and branding is supported by the billions of people worldwide that voluntarily engage in COBRAs (Economist, 2012; Van Belleghem, Thijs, & De Ruyck, 2012) and the economic impact of these behaviors. These are very well documented. Consumers' brand-related activities on social media have been widely demonstrated to positively and substantially affect brand attitudes, brand

loyalty, brand purchase behavior, and brand equity (e.g., Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Ertimur & Gilly, 2012; Manchanda, Packard, & Pattabhiramaiah, 2012; Prendergast, Ko, & Siu Yin, 2010).

1.4   From "something" to COBRAs

Realizing that social media offer interesting opportunities for branding, many companies have established a presence on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, or are experimenting with other social media. Marketing communication budgets are increasingly shifting towards social media. In the United States, yearly spending on social media marketing is currently around 2 billion dollars and this amount is projected to reach 5 billion dollars in 2016 (VanBoskirk, 2011). But despite their confidence in social media as a brand-building tool (Forrester Research, 2012), brand managers usually lack clear focus on what it is they want to achieve with social media (Bernoff, 2012; Flatt, 2012). After nearly a decade of social media, most of them still seem to have little notion about how they can successfully use social media in a way that meaningfully stretches beyond doing "something" (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Muñiz & Schau, 2011).

"Something" is usually anything from sweepstakes for consumers who "like" a brand on Facebook, special Twitter offerings, to branded co-creation contests on RedesignMe. Yet most companies' communication activities on social media are hardly "social": social media are predominantly used for trumpeting messages (Greer & Ferguson, 2011; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2011). The dominant marketing communication activity on social media continues to be advertising (e.g., Owyang, 2012), despite the fact that research quite consistently shows that most consumers do not notice (Goodrich, 2011), click on (Yoo, 2009) or value digital advertisements (Sumner, 2012; Truong & Simmons, 2010). Advertising is essentially a sender-controlled, push-based instrument that does not match social media's consumer-controlled, pull-based environment (cf. Christodoulides, 2009; Fournier & Avery, 2011; McCoy, Everard, Polak, & Galletta, 2007). As Parent and colleagues (2011) put it, social media are "making push-based marketing anachronistic" (p. 219).

While many organizations understand that social media have significant commercial potential and increasingly take their marketing and brand-building activities online (Yan, 2011), few seem to recognize the branding potential of "working consumers," as Cova and Dalli (2009) label consumers who engage in COBRAs (Burmann, 2010). Brand managers who do understand that the best way to use social media to their brands' advantage lies in the strategic management of COBRAs generally lack the knowledge to do so effectively (e.g., Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008; Koegel, 2012; Muñiz & Schau, 2011; Parent et al., 2011; Stokes, 2012; Yan, 2011). As a result, exploiting the marketing and branding potential of COBRAs continues to be quite a challenge.

1.5   Purpose and structure of this dissertation

The aforementioned is aptly expressed by Sheldon (2007) as he states that "people are creating their content everywhere online…but the difficulty is in trying to persuade them to do it with your brand" (p. 23). This dissertation aims to alleviate this difficulty by deliberately taking a step back. Rather than adding to the already substantial body of effect-oriented studies, it considers more deeply the question of what determines consumers' online brand-related activities. Specifically, it is argued that:

•   Social media enable consumers to engage in a diversity of brand-related activities, which vary in terms of "activeness" with brand-related content;
•   These brand-related activities have different antecedents;
•   Only when academics and practitioners understand these antecedents can they effectively encourage and cultivate consumers' online brand-related activities.

This dissertation thus aims to "catch COBRAs" by developing an understanding of the antecedents of consumers' online brand-related activities. Shedding light on the appeal that COBRAs have for consumers (antecedents) rather than for companies (consequences), it not only provides practical insights into how to encourage and facilitate consumers' engagement in COBRAs, but also fills an important hiatus in the academic literature on marketing, branding, and consumer behavior.

Because it takes a consumer-centric perspective on social media, this dissertation is theoretically grounded in the Uses and Gratifications approach (U&G) (e.g., Levy & Windahl, 1984). U&G is the predominant user-centric theoretical framework in communication research. It is used for studying why and how individuals voluntarily and selectively use media to meet specific needs and desires rather than for studying the effects that media have on individuals (McQuail, 2010). Commonly applied to traditional media, it has gained renewed scholarly attention with the advent of the Internet (e.g., Morris & Ogan, 1996) and social media (e.g., Taylor, Lewis, & Strutton, 2011). Wholly in line with U&G's assumptions, these interactive media compel their users' active participation (Ruggiero, 2000). U&G conceptualizes "active" as a "variable construct, with audiences exhibiting varying kinds and degrees of activity" (Levy & Windahl, 1985, p. 110). This definition fits the COBRA-construct's three levels of brand-related "activeness" (consuming, contributing, and creating). In addition, U&G assumes that media use is the consequence of various factors working in concert, such as user- and content characteristics and motivations (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). This dissertation therefore aims to answer the following research question:

On social media, *who* does what, with *which* brands, and *why*?

This research question guides the subsequent chapters of this dissertation. These chapters are article-based, because this dissertation reports four studies that have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals, conference proceedings, or are submitted for publication. These studies consecutively investigate consumers' motivations for engaging in COBRAs (*why*: chapters 2 and 3), the characteristics of brands that engender COBRAs (*which*: chapter 4), the characteristics of consumers that create brand-related content (*who*), and how *who* and *why* interrelate to drive consumers' creation of brand-related content (chapter 5). Taken together, these chapters' findings provide academics and practitioners alike with valuable exploratory insights into the antecedents of brand-related social media use. In doing so, this dissertation contributes to the theoretic and practical advancement of social media marketing and brand communication.

1.6   Overview of chapters

1.6.1   Chapter 2 - Introducing COBRAs

This chapter presents a qualitative exploration of consumers' motivations for consuming, contributing to, and creating brand-related content. The rationale behind this study is that academics and practitioners must be aware of the motivational differences that may be at the core of different brand-related activities to be able to successfully excite consumers' engagement in COBRAs. Understanding consumers' motivations may help them to better anticipate the needs underlying particular activities. For instance, should online brand community participation be motivated differently than the creating of consumer-generated advertisements, different strategies to facilitate those motivations would be needed for both activities.

Within the academic realm of social media marketing much of the existing motivation research is limited in scope and design. Separate scholarly contributions examined the motivations of isolated activities such as posting product reviews, participating in online brand communities, or creating consumer-generated advertisements. No studies investigated the motivations of individual activities within a single study. Because literature thus lacks an overview of motivations for the full spectrum of brand-related social media uses, and because of the predominantly quantitative nature of the existing motivation studies, it is not clear if (a) different COBRAs are driven by different motivations, and (b) all motivations for COBRAs have been discovered. Hence, this chapter simultaneously and qualitatively explores consumers' motivations for engaging in different COBRAs.

This chapter reports the results of twenty unstructured interviews that were conducted using an Instant Messaging application built especially for the purpose of the study. The interviewees for this study had been engaged in a variety of

COBRAs with a variety of brands on a variety of social media platforms, and had a diverse socio-demographic background. Results of this study indicate that the general (sub)motivations that hold for mass media use and generic social media use also hold for brand-related social media use. The predominant motivations for COBRAs are *information*, *entertainment*, *personal identity*, *integration and social interaction*. In addition, two motivations that were previously unknown in literature are revealed: *empowerment* and *remuneration*. Various differences are observed in the motivation structures of different COBRAs. However, by nature, this qualitative research – although rich and insightful – does not allow for assessing the predictive value motivations for different COBRAs and determining the exact motivation patterns underlying different COBRAs. Chapter 3 therefore provides a quantification of these motivations.

1.6.2   Chapter 3 - Explaining COBRAs

This chapter argues that although chapter 2's qualitative approach has successfully revealed consumers' motivations for engaging in COBRAs, quantitative research is best suited to draw conclusions about the predictive value of motivations for COBRAs and the motivation patterns that drive COBRAs. A survey was used to collect data among members of various brand pages on a single social media platform, namely the Dutch social networking site Hyves (N = 4,151). This was done for two reasons. First, social networking sites such as Hyves are currently the most commonly used social media application and marketers' favored social media tool. Second, Hyves' many, often lively, brand pages offer its users the possibility to engage in all three COBRA types (consuming, contributing, and creating).

Findings indicate that: (1) consumers' motivations play an important role in explaining COBRAs: the six motivations taken into account explain up to half of the variance in COBRAs; (2) the variance explained by motivations is dependent on the COBRA type: less variance remains unexplained as behaviors become more active. For consuming brand-related content, motivations explain 28%, while for contributing and creating brand-related content, motivations respectively explain 46% and 53% of the variance; (3) there are important similarities between different COBRAs with regard to their motivation patterns: information and entertainment are shown to be the basic underlying motivations for consuming, contributing, and creating on Hyves. Whether consumers view other consumers' product reviews, engage in conversations about a brand, or upload user-generated brand-related content, they do so to be informed and entertained; (4) after information and entertainment come the "secondary" motivations personal identity, integration and social interaction, and empowerment. Results however show only minor differences between COBRAs with regard to these motivations' relative importance.

This chapter contributes to the social media motivation literature by demonstrating that motivations explain a great deal of variance in COBRAs. This depends on the COBRA type: motivations gain relevance as behaviors become more active. Thus, while active behaviors such as creating brand-related content are to a large extent intrinsically motivated, relatively passive behaviors such as viewing brand-related pictures are predominantly extrinsically motivated.

Nevertheless, for all three COBRA types, a large portion of variance remains unexplained. Two factors may explain additional variance. One factor is consumer characteristics, which is addressed in chapter 5; another is the brand itself – after all, each COBRA pivots around a certain brand. Chapter 4 therefore examines whether brands with which consumers are particularly willing to engage on social media share certain characteristics that might make them better suited for a social media approach.

1.6.3   Chapter 4 - Social mediable

Could it be that some brands have better "social media DNA" than other brands – and if so, what does this DNA look like? This is an important question, because brand managers who are considering a social media strategy for their brands must know whether their brand would be suited for such an approach. However, despite the growing body of literature on social media marketing, little theory exists to inform academics and practitioners about whether certain brands are more "social mediable" than others, that is, better able to engage consumers in COBRAs. This chapter therefore investigates whether brands' ability to do so hinges on certain characteristics. It argues that social mediable brands can be characterized by particular dimensions of brand personality (which describes brands in terms of human characteristics and is commonly employed to shed light on the symbolic differences between brands) and brand relationship quality (which describes a brand's ability to build and maintain relationships with consumers).

A survey was used to collect data among the members of various brand pages on the world's largest social networking site, Facebook (N = 315). Results show that brands with which consumers engage share certain characteristics. First, regarding brand personality, consumers predominantly perceive such brands to be emotional personalities (traits: romantic and sentimental). The COBRA type contributing is additionally driven by the brand personality dimension "activity" (traits: active, dynamic, innovative) and creating is additionally influenced by the dimension "simplicity" (traits: ordinary and simple). Second, regarding brand relationship quality, consumers predominantly perceive social mediable brands to be brands with which they feel strongly connected identity-wise ("self-connection," defined as having things in common with a brand and recognizing parts of one's own identity in a brand's identity. For instance, rebellious brands such as Harley-Davidson and Diesel may particularly appeal to nonconformist consumers) and with which they

have a "passionate attachment" (defined as consumers' missing of a brand when not in use or no longer existing). For both brand personality and brand relationship quality, results reveal only minor differences between COBRAs.

In addition, this study's results suggest that the variance explained in COBRAs by "brand," as represented by the constructs personality and brand relationship quality, decreases with COBRAs increasing in activeness. Brand personality explains 14% in consuming and 7% in creating; and brand relationship quality explains 16% in consuming and 10% in creating. This may indicate that the brand itself, as an extrinsic motivator, is a more prominent predictor of relatively passive behaviors than it is of active behaviors, while, as stated in chapter 3, intrinsic motivations are more prominent predictors of active behaviors than of passive behaviors.

As explained on page 7, this dissertation is guided by the question "On social media, *who* does what, with *which* brands, and *why*?" Chapters 2 and 3 shed light on *why*: consumers' motivations to engage in COBRAs. This chapter sheds light on *which* by examining the characteristics of social mediable brands; brands that have better ability than other brands to engage consumers in COBRAs. What is missing, then, is *who*: to what extent do particular consumer characteristics affect COBRAs? Zooming in on one particularly important COBRA-type, namely *creating* brand-related content, chapter 5 therefore investigates *who*, and also how *who* combines with *why*.

1.6.4   Chapter 5 - Who creates brand-related content, and why?

This chapter focuses on one particular COBRA type, namely consumers' creation of brand-related content. By creating brand-related content, consumers can exert great influence over other consumers' attitudes and behaviors. Given the large body of research into identifying influential consumers, understanding who create brand-related content is considered an important factor to a successful social media strategy. Based on analyses of the roles of different types of consumers in social networks, this chapter uses three personality constructs that have been shown relevant for social media: mavenism (the propensity to collect and spread brand-related information to others), connectivity (the extent to which someone bridges different consumer collectives), and persuasiveness (the ability to frequently and successfully convince others).

Because the previous chapters have demonstrated that motivation is a key factor to be understood for brand-related social media use, this chapter also takes intrinsic motivations into account. The remuneration motivation, an extrinsic motivation, was not considered because research shows that consumers are likely to be either primarily intrinsically or primarily extrinsically motivated; and chapter 3 showed that remuneration had little predictive ability for creating brand-related content. Thus, the motivations considered were: information, entertainment, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and empowerment.

This chapter aims to understand which motivations drive mavens, connectors and persuaders to create brand-related content. In addition, since the field has limited understanding of how consumer characteristics and motivations combine to drive consumers' creation of brand-related content, this chapter also addresses the notion that (a) consumer characteristics influence (b) consumer motivations, which in turn influence (c) the creation of brand-related content.

Survey data were collected among the members of 28 brand fan pages on the Dutch social networking site Hyves ($N = 2,495$). Results indicate that mavens create more brand-related content than connectors and persuaders and that there are differences with respect to mavens', connectors', and persuaders' motivations to create brand-related content. Mavens are predominantly driven by integration and social interaction and information motivations; connectors are predominantly driven by personal identity and empowerment motivations; and persuaders are primarily driven by the integration and social interaction and entertainment motivations. This chapter additionally demonstrates that the influence of mavenism, connectivity, and persuasiveness on consumers' creation of brand-related content is to a large extent mediated by intrinsic motivations. This corroborates previous chapters' findings that intrinsic motivations are the most important drivers of brand-related social media use – especially for such highly active consumer behavior as creating brand-related content. Connectivity is shown to affect creating brand-related content independent of motivations. This finding aligns with research stating that specific personality traits may explain variance in concrete behaviors when they are highly relevant for that behavior. Moreover, this result also attests to the notion that, as outlined at the start of this dissertation, brand-related social media use – like all media use – is the consequence of a complex system of a multitude of antecedents working in concert. Ultimately, to fully understand how brand-related social media use is shaped, all these antecedents need to be accounted for.

1.7   Conclusion and discussion

This dissertation was initiated to provide academics and practitioners with a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents of consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRAs). Inspired by the assumptions of the Uses and Gratifications approach (U&G) and based on its premise that all media use is the consequence of various factors working in concert, it aimed to answer the question:

On social media, *who* does what, with *which* brands, and *why*?

Having revealed the motivations for COBRAs (*why*; chapters 2 and 3), the characteristics of the brands that consumers engage with on social media (*which*; chapter 4), who create brand-related content, and how *who* and *why* interrelate (*who*; chapter 5), several conclusions for theory and practice can be drawn. This section begins by reflecting on the major theoretical contributions of this dissertation. It then outlines

how companies can be strategically guided by this dissertation's findings. Finally, several limitations and subsequent directions for further research are discussed.

1.7.1 Theoretical contributions

Largely similar motivations

According to some scholars, the arrival of each new technology and each new medium may satisfy new needs and desires. For instance, Chaffee and Metzger (2001) with regard to the Internet state that "in an environment that enables people to locate information easily and efficiently, users' motives may shift…to more specific need satisfaction" (p. 373; see also Massey, 1995; Ruggiero, 2000). Chapters 3 and 3 therefore shed light on the needs underlying brand-related social media use. While chapter 2 adds the motivations empowerment and remuneration to the motivational palette confirmed by prior U&G studies, it also shows that the motivations underlying COBRAs are to a large extent similar to the motivations underlying traditional media use and generic social media use. Chapter 3 also shows that there are important similarities between the motivations for COBRAs. Similar to other media use, COBRAs are primarily driven by information and entertainment, and subsequently by other motivations. The importance of these "secondary" motivations differs only slightly between COBRAs. Chapters 2 and 3 thus confirm Ainscough's (1996) observation that "At the end of the day those people who visit an Internet site are still people and still subject to the same motivations…and the same desires as people looking at your TV commercial" (p. 47).

The importance of brand-related activeness

Chapter 3 sheds light on the predictive value of motivations for COBRAs. Quantifying chapter 2's results, it demonstrates that the predictive value of motivations is high: motivation is thus a key factor in predicting consumers' online brand-related activities. The most important theoretical contribution of this chapter however is the fact that the predictive value of motivations depends on the type of COBRA. Results show that as COBRAs increase in "activeness" (i.e., from consuming to contributing to creating), motivations gain predictive value. The variance in creating that is explained by motivations is almost twice the variance in consuming that is explained by motivations. Thus, active brand-related social media use appears more purposefully, directed towards satisfying needs, than passive brand-related social media use; and passive brand-related social media use is much more driven by external factors than active brand-related social media use. While the activeness of media use is a fundamental building block of U&G (Levy & Windahl, 1985), this idea that the extent to which an activity is driven by motivations depends on the activeness of that activity has never been demonstrated before and therefore is a valuable addition to the U&G literature.

A host of antecedents working in concert

The finding that active COBRAs are very prominently driven by motivations implies that consumers who create brand-related content, for instance a consumer-generated Marc Jacobs advertisement (see Figure 1.1), are inspired to do so by a strong interest and involvement in the activity itself. By creating brand-related content, they specifically aim to satisfy certain needs: they are highly intrinsically motivated. External factors such as brand characteristics and consumer characteristics are much less important drivers of such behavior. In line with U&G, this finding implies that when creating does not – or no longer – bring a consumer the intended need satisfaction, there is a very good chance that he or she will not perform it again. Conversely, relatively passive COBRAs such as viewing a consumer-generated Marc Jacobs ad on Tumblr are less prominently driven by intrinsic motivations. These behaviors, then, are usually less purposeful and goal-directed and, unlike active COBRAs, more motivated by external factors that are apart from the brand-related activity. In line with U&G, when consuming does not satisfy a need, this does not inevitably cause a consumer to never perform it again. Rather, extrinsic motivators such as money, time constraints and deadlines, media availability, threats, expected evaluation, discounts, media multitasking, certain brand characteristics, and product types can stimulate a consumer to continue to perform it.

A great deal of social media research currently attempts to explain the (generic) use of social media, for instance of the social networking site Facebook, in terms of user personality – a factor that is independent of the activity. These studies show that as antecedents of behavior, the general "Big Five" factors of human personality exhibit limited ability to predict social media use. This aligns with this dissertation's main finding about the predictive abilities of intrinsic motivations. Because motivations are "more closely tied to behavior" than personality (Baumgartner, 2002, p. 287), studies in the realm of (brand-related) social media use should therefore first and foremost take motivation into account. However, despite their importance as a driver, motivations are unlikely to be the sole driver of brand-related social media use. As this dissertation shows, when highly specific and relevant for concrete behaviors, consumer characteristics may drive brand-related social media use independent of motivations. This, then, is in line with U&G, which asserts that each form of media use, including COBRAs, is the consequence of a host of factors working together. While the influence of most external drivers will be mediated by motivations, researchers who wish to gain a full understanding of the antecedents of COBRAs should aim to integrate all of these factors within a single unifying framework.

The relative (un)importance of the brand as driver of COBRAs

Following the idea that a brand can also be a relevant extrinsic motivator of COBRAs, this dissertation also sheds light on the characteristics of brands with which consumers are willing to engage on social media. It demonstrates that certain brand characteristics contribute to brand's social mediability. Additionally, in line with its main finding, this dissertation shows that the brand itself, as an extrinsic motivator, has little predictive ability for COBRAs, and that the behavioral variance explained

by these brand characteristics depends on the type of COBRA. A brand's symbolic meaning explains more variance in relatively passive COBRAs (i.e., consuming) than in relatively active COBRAs (i.e., creating). This aligns with this dissertation's finding that intrinsic motivations explain more variance in active behaviors, while extrinsic motivations (i.e., the brand) explain more variance in passive behaviors.

Previous research has suggested that consumers' engagement with brands, both offline and online, is predominantly driven by the need satisfaction that consumers receive thereof, rather than by the object of engagement, that is, the brand. This dissertation refines this insight by demonstrating that whether brand-related behavior is more prominently driven by need satisfaction or the brand itself depends on the activeness of a brand-related behavior. Consumers who consume brand-related content are relatively more prominently motivated by the brand and relatively less prominently motivated by intrinsic motivations – that is, need satisfaction. Consumers who create brand-related content are relatively less prominently motivated by the brand, and relatively more prominently motivated by intrinsic motivations. In short: albeit in general relatively unimportant as a motivator of COBRAs, the brand itself is more important for consuming behaviors than for creating behaviors.

1.7.2 Practical implications

Social media allow consumers to consume, distribute, create, and publish brand-related content in their own right, with substantial effects. This development poses a great challenge for marketing practitioners. Fundamental for their successful exploitation of social media, rather than relying on push-based marketing tactics, they need to inspire consumers to engage in COBRAs. Because "The raison d'être for any marketing theory is its potential application in marketing practice" (Parasumaran, 1982, p. 78), this dissertation presents several insights that may help them do so effectively.

Intrinsic motivation as the "remedy for impossible"
Shedding light on consumers' motivations for engaging in COBRAs, all of this dissertation's chapters attest to the notion that intrinsic motivation is a key element to be understood by companies wishing to encourage consumers to engage in COBRAs. As many companies experience difficulty in persuading consumers to engage in COBRAs, intrinsic motivation, then, may be the instrument to alleviate this difficulty – or, as Harrison (2012) states, "the remedy for impossible." In that regard, three of this dissertation's findings warrant managerial attention.

First, it is demonstrated that information and entertainment are the basic drivers of all brand-related social media use. Thus, by consuming, contributing, and creating brand-related content on social media, consumers aim to fulfill needs for brand-related information and entertainment. For marketing and advertising practitioners, the challenge is to facilitate these needs and make sure that consumers can indeed

satisfy them. Because if a COBRA fails to satisfy a consumer's need for information and entertainment, a consumer is unlikely to perform this behavior again, or will quickly abandon it. To facilitate consumers' viewing of a social media advertisement, brand managers need to imbue this ad with relevant brand-related information (e.g., where to buy a brand, how to customize it, how other people use the brand). To facilitate consumers' creating of consumer-generated advertisements and posting these on Facebook, they need to make sure that this activity is entertaining (e.g., fun, exciting, relaxing, and joyful).

Second, while meeting consumers' needs for information and entertainment is a precondition for COBRAs, other motivations also require a brand manager's attention. Facilitating the satisfaction of personal identity, integration and social interaction, and empowerment needs can further stimulate COBRAs. For instance, an application that allows users to engage in social interaction (conversations) or social identity formation (integration, that is, the "need to belong") can encourage a consumer's consumption of brand-related content; and allowing consumers to present themselves to others, express themselves, and work on their skills and hence gain self-assurance may facilitate their participation in virtual brand communities and their creation of consumer-generated advertisements.

Third, findings indicate that for relatively active behaviors such as creating brand-related content, intrinsic motivations are more prominent drivers than extrinsic motivations. For practitioners, this implies that they may better encourage active COBRAs by facilitating consumers' needs than by focusing on extrinsic motivators. Not only is this important because factors such as the brand or consumer personality are simply not very important antecedents of consumers' creation of brand-related content on social media; but predominantly because research demonstrates that there is a negative impact of extrinsic motivation on intrinsic motivation. According to research by Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999), as a person's extrinsic motivation increases for an activity, his or her intrinsic motivation decreases. This so-called *overjustification* effect implies that when consumers who are intrinsically motivated to share or create content are offered rewards, for instance through reward referral programs, their intrinsic motivation may be gradually replaced by extrinsic motivation. For brand managers, it is important that behaviors remain as much intrinsically motivated as possible.

Conversely, for relatively passive activities such as consuming brand-related content, intrinsic motivations, stemming from the activity itself, are less important drivers than external factors such as money, deadlines, media availability, brand characteristics, and consumer characteristics. This implies that inspiring passive COBRAs such as viewing brand-related videos may benefit more from a focus on extrinsic motivators than from facilitating consumers' needs. For such behaviors, rewards, deadlines, media availability, the product, and also the brand itself are relatively important. Consumers may be persuaded to engage in such behaviors by means of reward programs as well as the "correct" symbolic brand characteristics (e.g., a brand's personality, brand relationship quality, image, or reputation).

Is every brand fit for social media?

This dissertation sheds light on the influence of the intangible – symbolic – characteristics of brands that induce a consumer to engage in COBRAs. Although it is demonstrated that the brand, in general, has little power to inspire COBRAs on its own accord, some symbolic brand characteristics are shown to contribute more to a brand's social mediability – it's ability to induce COBRAs. Brands that are perceived as having an emotional brand personality and brands that evoke self-brand connections and a sense of passionate attachment appear to engender more COBRAs than brands that do not.

For brand managers, this finding has two possible implications. The first relates to the idea that there are indeed certain products and brands with which consumers are more prone to engage on social media. In this view, brand managers considering a social media strategy for their brands need to research their products and brands and investigate whether consumers perceive it as social mediable. If so, a brand may be successfully taken online. If not, then they may first need to imbue their brands with these perceptions. There is some academic evidence that online service products can be engineered in such a way as to evoke more word-of-mouth (Aral & Walker, 2011). It may be equally possible for a brand or product's intangible features to be modified in such a way so as to become more engaged with online.

The second, perhaps more far stretching managerial implication relates to the idea of positive feedback loops. While it is not unlikely that social mediable brands engender more COBRAs than other brands, the reverse is also possible. Brands that have already established a social media presence and engage their consumers in COBRAs can also already be perceived as more social mediable than other brands. These brands may subsequently engender more COBRAs, which may make them even more social mediable, causing more COBRAs – and so forth. Such a dynamic feedback system is very common in marketing, branding, and communication. In this view, a social media presence may not solely prove an effective strategy for brands with specific perceived characteristics. Any brand may establish a social media presence and hence be perceived as social mediable, with the corresponding characteristics. Effectively, this means that when managed properly, all brands may thrive on social media.

Who to inspire

Shedding light on the *who* of brand-related content creation, this dissertation explores how the influential network member types mavens, connectors, and persuaders create brand-related content. It demonstrates that mavens (individuals who seek and diffuse brand-related information) create most brand-related content, followed by connectors (individuals who bridge different consumer collectives) and persuaders (individuals who are good at convincing others). In doing so, this dissertation contributes to the ongoing discussion in literature about the efficacy of different seeding (network targeting) strategies, which gradually seems to shift towards the conclusion that seeding different types of network members who are

influential in their own right (as opposed to very influential but also extremely rare "opinion leaders") is most effective.

Brand managers can be guided by these findings in a number of ways. First, it is beneficial for them to seed their marketing activities aimed at encouraging the creation of brand-related content to consumers that collect and disseminate brand-related information. These mavens create more content than other influential consumer types and their content can "go viral" quickly. Academic and popular literature has long recognized the existence of mavens and as a result, the body of literature on how they can be identified is large. Mavens may be identified by looking at sociodemographic profiles, psychological markers, or employing standard self-report methods such as that recently developed by Boster, Kotowski. Andrews, and Serota (2011). Alternatively, consumers high on connectivity also create a substantial amount of brand-related content. Such consumers can be identified by looking at available online (meta)data such as the amount of Facebook friends, followers on Twitter or LinkedIn connections someone has.

Second, this dissertation's findings with regard to the interplay of consumer characteristics and consumer motivations demonstrate that the influence of consumer characteristics is mediated by intrinsic motivations. Because motivations are more closely tied to behavior, brand managers can more easily address them than personality characteristics. Effectively, this means that brand managers who wish to deploy mavens may benefit more from researching these consumers' intrinsic motivations for engaging in COBRAs than investigating, for instance, their demographic profiles. This dissertation's findings, then, may help them do so effectively.

1.7.3   Limitations and directions for future research

Like any research, the studies reported in this dissertation are subject to limitations. Some of these have already been addressed in the aforementioned sections; others are extensively discussed in the individual chapters. This section does not discuss all of these chapters' conceptual and methodological restrictions. Rather, it discusses three limitations in view of their potential as path for future research.

First, where most communication research is "…about effect. It could have been otherwise – consider the study of art, for example – but it is not" (Katz, 2001, p. 9475), this dissertation has chosen not to be. Taking a step back from the parade of passing effect-oriented studies, it solely deals with the antecedents (who, which, why) of brand-related social media use. By doing so it has gathered valuable theoretical and practical insights. Adding *with what effects* to this dissertation's research question, however, would significantly contribute to the field's understanding of COBRAs. This would also be in line with U&G, which after all aims to examine the consequences of media use in the context of the antecedents of media use (e.g., Rubin, 2002).

Thus, knowing how motivators of COBRAs (intrinsic and extrinsic) – personality characteristics, product types, and brand characteristics – are linked to the marketing effects of consumers' online brand-related activities would certainly help to further understand the dynamics of online branding.

Second, this dissertation sheds light on the predictive value of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and provides an initial understanding of the interactions between these types of motivations in the context of brand-related social media use. As touched upon earlier, the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations has been subject to some research and it has been demonstrated that when extrinsic motivation increases for an activity, intrinsic motivation decreases (Amabile, 1997; Deci et al., 1999). While this dissertation shows that as the activeness of brand-related social media use increases, the value of intrinsic motivation increases and the value of extrinsic motivation decreases, this understanding continues to be fairly undetailed. Future research may want to further investigate the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in the context of brand-related social media use, and examine how this interplay is associated with different levels of brand-related activeness (cf. Kietzmann et al., 2012, p. 116).

A third direction for future research lies in O'Guinn and Muñiz' (2010) remark that "A sea-change in mediated communications has clearly enabled multiple parties to play significant roles in the construction of the contemporary brand" (p. 133). As stated earlier in this introductory chapter, branding has long been held to be a one-way process in which companies believed they could give a brand its meaning and use push-based techniques to impose this preferred meaning on consumers. This idea of branding has largely become obsolete, as brands are increasingly social constructs. Spurred by a great many social (e.g., the detachment from group-based society) and technological developments (e.g., social media), consumers have become marketers in their own right, giving brands meaning as they interact with each other about brands, always and everywhere. Brand meaning is more and more the outcome of the continuous interactions of multiple parties including institutions, marketers, interested collectives, employees, competitors, consumers, and social forces (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2011; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010). This dissertation only slightly touches upon this issue. It argues that COBRAs can shape brand attitudes and brand perceptions and suggests that the relationship between COBRAs and several brand characteristics may be characterized as a positive feedback loop. A similar idea has been put forward in studies into the nature and effects of brand storytelling on YouTube (Pace, 2008), word-of-mouth in virtual brand communities (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010), and conversations around consumer-generated ads (Campbell et al., 2011). But brand meaning is not only created by consumers and not only on social media. All relevant actors in society, offline and online, continuously co-create and negotiate brand meaning (cf. Jenkins, 2006). How this happens has never been empirically examined. Future research is therefore urged to investigate how collective brand consumption and collective brand meaning production interdepend.

For the author of this dissertation, this all-encompassing "social construction model of brands" (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010) represents the essence of McLuhan's (1974) prediction, cited on the first page of this work, that a networked technology would come to coalesce the notions of "consumer" and "producer." In McLuhan's spirit (see Logan, 2010), then, researchers who take on the challenge to investigate this model are encouraged to employ interdisciplinary approaches and a variety of methods.