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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2022-06-23

Deposited version:

Submitted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Unreviewed

Citation for published item:

Souto, D., Salgueiro, M.F. & Rita, P. (2014). The effects of social network sites on brand awareness and attitude. In Christos Sarmaniotis (Ed.), Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Marketing Issues, ICCMI 2014. Athens

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.mkt.teithe.gr/iccmi2014/>

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## The effects of social network sites on brand awareness and attitude

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### **Abstract**

*Brands are increasingly targeting Social Network Sites' (SNS) massive audiences and incorporating the new media channel in their communication plans. Despite its growing adoption, few research efforts have been devoted to evaluate SNS' concrete consequences for the brands. In the current study we evaluate SNS' effects on generating brand awareness and positive brand attitude, two important measures on delivering efficient communication efforts. An online quantitative survey with brand page users of leading brands at Facebook was implemented. Structural equation modeling was used for model estimation. Results have verified a significant, positive and direct impact of brand page participation on brand awareness. Brand attitude also substantially benefits from brand page participation, but this relationship is mediated by brand awareness. Related implications are discussed.*

**Key words:** Brand Awareness; Brand Attitude; Facebook; Structural Equation Modeling; Social Media

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Social Network Sites have evolved into a relevant part of the internet experience, accounting for more than 1.5 billion users worldwide. This massive audience is mostly present at Facebook, which covers almost 50% of total online population (Worldometers, 2013; Facebook, 2013), who stay connected, on average for 20 minutes each time they access the platform, generating, daily 4.5 billion likes and 4.7 billion shared items (Facebook, 2013).

At Facebook, brands communicate directly with their audiences through their 'Like pages'. There are currently 70 million 'Like pages' (Facebook, 2013). The 50 largest ones account for more than 650 million users (FanPageList, 2013).

The evident brand interest and increasing investments, contrast with the insufficient knowledge available on the effects of SNS for the brands.

The current paper addresses this research opportunity, focusing on investigating the SNS's consequences for brands. For that, we have placed the research question within the theoretical ground of brand building and we work on the assumption that brand participation at Facebook brings positive value over two of the most important brand building dimensions: awareness and attitude.

### **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research in SNS is relatively recent. Researchers have initially devoted attention to understand the impact that this new media could bring to its users social capital, through the new dynamics of interaction and self-expression available at SNS (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). Research has focused on understanding its structural aspects, uses and motivations (Lampe et al., 2006; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008).

From the perspective of brands, research is very scarce. Some studies have focused on investigating the antecedents of brand page participation, identifying specific motivations (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010) and content related patterns (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Cvijikj, & Michahelles, 2013). Others have approached the consequences of participation, finding support for positive brand effects associated with future intentions (Jahn, & Kunz, 2012; Wallace *et al.*, 2012). However, there are no studies that evaluate SNS effects on awareness and attitude, two of the most important brand building dimensions on communication plans.

### 3. THEORETICAL MODEL

The conceptual model proposed includes three constructs: brand page participation at Facebook, brand awareness and brand attitude (as presented in figure 1)

*Brand page participation*: at brand pages users assume different behaviors. Some are indifferent to brand contents, others passively read/watch it, just like in traditional media and finally, others tend to *participate* through liking, sharing and commenting the contents (Shao, 2009). In the current study we are interested on evaluating the specific effects of brand page participation, which is the feature that distinguishes the SNS from other media. As such, in the current study we expect that different patterns of participation, imply different effects on brand awareness and attitudes, derived from the increased consumer-brand contacts (Jahn, & Kunz, 2012; Wallace *et al.*, 2012), hypothesized as follows:

*Awareness*: it captures the potential availability of a brand in the mind of the consumer. It is created through consumer's repeated and memorable exposure to brand elements, like the name, slogan, logo, character or packaging. These exposures contribute to increase consumers' sense of comfort and familiarity with the brand and to strengthen its links with the product category, usage and consumption occasions (Keller, 2003). Awareness is understood as a precondition for brands to be considered within the repertoire of purchase options, being often positioned as a dominant choice heuristic for brand selection (Hoyer, & Brown, 1990; Keller, 2003).

As from the moment Facebook users join a brand page, they become exposed to branded messages containing information about the brand portfolio, innovations, online and offline activities. As such, it can be expected that, as users' exposure to brand communication increases, they tend to become more familiar with the brand, better recalling and recognizing its portfolio and innovations. This understanding supports the hypothesis that:

H1: Brand page participation has a positive and direct impact on brand awareness.

*Brand Attitude*: it is defined as the evaluative dimension of brand image, being derived from consumer's beliefs towards brands' benefits and attributes (Keller, 2003). It is considered relatively enduring and capable of energizing behaviors (Spears, & Singh, 2004), being often confirmed as an antecedent to purchase intention (Bagozzi, 1981; Mitchell, & Olson, 1981; Spears, & Singh, 2004). This justifies the central role that brand attitude occupies in traditional (Shimp, 1981) and online advertising (Ha, 2008).

In the context of brand pages, the content posted privileges positive brand messages. The conversations that take place between users and brands are in most occasions tuned in a positive level and evoke product attributes, benefits and category associations. The interaction with these contents is expected to influence the fan's overall evaluation over the brand, functioning in a similar way as traditional and online advertising. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2: Brand page participation has a positive and direct impact on brand attitude.

Furthermore, research in communication has proven that repeated exposure to brand communication and extended length of exposure reinforces the brand memory traces, generating a greater sense of familiarity, associated with feelings of warmth and proximity towards the brand (Seamon, Brody, & Kauff, 1983;

Janiszewski, 1993; Keller, 2003). Studies support that increased sense of brand familiarity has direct impact on brand attitude, as it improves brand evaluations (Hoyen, & Brown, 1990), justifying the hypothesis that:

H3: Brand awareness has a positive and direct effect on brand attitude.

Finally, the indirect effects are evaluated through the following hypothesis, combining H1 and H3 to evaluate the effects that brand page exerts on brand attitude by means of brand awareness.

H4: Brand page participation has a positive and indirect effect on brand attitude.

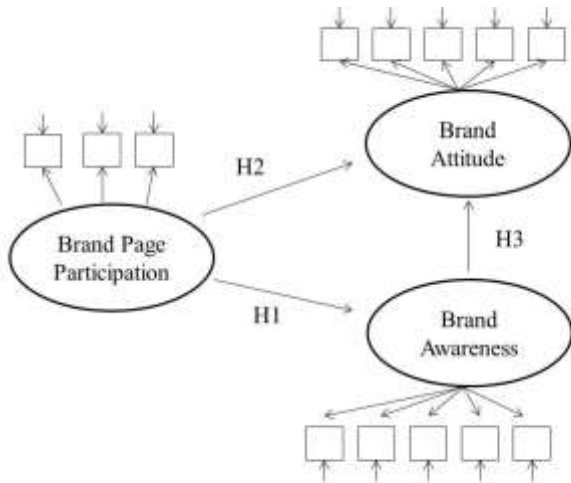


Figure 1: Conceptual model with direct hypotheses being represented

#### 4. RESEARCH METHOD AND RESULTS

A quantitative empirical study was conducted in November 2012 and 203 valid questionnaires were obtained. The data were collected among Facebook users, who were members of six pre-selected brand pages, from personal care and beauty segments. The segments and respective brands were selected based on brand page size and level of participation (Facebook, 2013). The respondents were recruited via Facebook ads. A banner was used to invite them to participate in an online research, available through a direct link to the Qualtrics Platform.

Half of the participants were below 25 years old, 22% were between 25 and 34, 11% between 35 and 44 and the remaining were above 45 years old. The majority of the participants visit Facebook on a daily basis, 36% spend less than an hour in every visit, 21% spend between 1 and 2 hours and the remaining 43% spend more than 2 hours. With regard to the selected brand pages, around 64% of the participants had been registered for less than three months (34% for less than one month) and the remaining one third had been registered for more than 4 months.

Awareness was measured through five items adapted from Yoo and Donthu (2001) and Low and Lamb (2000). Attitude was measured through five items adapted from Spears and Singh (2004). Brand page participation was measured through three items: *how often do you press the 'like' button to posts, photos or videos at the brand page, ... comment posts or ... share with friends the content published at the brand page.*

The questions presented intentionally referred to the interaction at the brand page as the reference towards which respondents should express their opinions. As for example, in order to measure awareness, the

respondents were asked: 'The interaction that you have with the brand at the brand page helps you to ...'. In doing so, we wanted to assure a proper evaluation and guarantee that the right direction of effects was captured.

Prior to testing the hypotheses, the measurement model was accessed through confirmatory factor analysis, using Lisrel 8.8 (Jöreskog, & Sörbom, 2006). The measures of fit suggest there is an acceptable model-data fit:  $\chi^2 = 83.94$ ;  $df = 62$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.042$ ;  $SRMR = 0.058$ ;  $CFI = 0.99$ ;  $NFI = 0.98$ ;  $IFI = 0.99$ ;  $RFI = 0.98$  (Schumacker, & Lomax, 2010). The constructs were also accessed, obtaining acceptable results for reliability (CR between 0.91 and 0.97), convergence (AVE between 0.70 and 0.86) and discriminant validity, with square root of AVE for each construct being greater than the correlations among constructs (Fornell, & Larcker, 1981).

In the second phase, the hypotheses were tested. The results of all hypotheses tests are summarized on Table 1 and discussed in the following section.

Table 1: Results of hypotheses testing

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Standardized Coefficient (SC)</i>	<i>T-Values</i>	<i>Hypothesis support</i>
<i>Direct Effects</i>			
H1: Participation → Awareness	0.47*	6.52	Supported
H2: Participation → Attitude	0.08	0.96	Not Supported
H3: Awareness → Attitude	0.67*	7.56	Supported
<i>Indirect Effects</i>			
H4: Participation → Awareness → Attitude	0.32*	5.48	Supported

\* Significant at the 5% level

## 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Findings from our study provide insights for theory and practice. We investigate the effects of brand page participation at SNS for brands, exploring its effectiveness on delivering awareness and improved brand attitude.

The results validate H1, revealing that participation with the brand page significantly influences brand awareness. This relationship is supported by the strongest magnitude of verified effects. It shows that when users engage with the brand page, their recall and recognition towards its portfolio and communication elements is significantly enhanced.

In the second hypothesis (H2), we evaluate the direct impact that participation with the brand page has on brand attitude. The findings reveal that although there is a positive relationship, it is not significant. Thus, H2 is not supported. These findings initially challenge the academic literature, requiring further contextualization, which is provided in hypothesis 4.

In hypothesis 3 (H3), we evaluate the impact that brand awareness has on brand attitude. The results indicate there is a positive and significant relationship between the two latent constructs, supporting H3. Academic studies in the area of advertising offer theoretical support for these findings, as they verify that repeated and extended exposure to brand communications reinforce brand awareness and its memory traces. As a consequence, a greater sense of familiarity is generated, being associated with feelings of warmth and proximity towards the brand (Seamon et al., 1983; Janiszewski, 1993; Keller, 2003). This sense of brand familiarity has a direct impact on brand attitude, as it improves the brand evaluations (Hoyen, & Brown, 1990).

In hypothesis 4 (H4), the indirect effects of brand page participation on brand attitude are proven to be positive and significant. The mediation is also accepted. Following Baron and Kenny (1986) recommended procedures for studying mediation effects, the results reveal that brand awareness imprints a complete

mediating on brand attitude. These results highlight the importance of fostering brand awareness as a base strategy to improve brand attitude.

As we review the findings, we conclude that current study's primary contribution is to identify a positive and significant effect of brand page participation on building brand awareness and brand attitude. These constructs constitute important pillars of brand communications, with proven positive impact on purchase intentions (Hoyer, & Brown, 1990; Keller, 1993; Bagozzi, 1981; Mitchell, & Olson, 1981; Spears, & Singh, 2004). As a consequence, the present study helps to validate the role of SNS in the promotional plan.

The findings justify the recommendation that companies involved in SNS increasingly concentrate on fostering participation, which should occupy a central role on their social media agendas. As brands join SNS, they are challenged to prospect their audiences. In this initial phase, the number of fans is accepted as a measure of success. However, prospecting users is not sufficient and participation should not be neglected to a secondary place, as it implies positive consequences for brand awareness and attitude.

The mediating role of brand awareness on brand attitude helps to position it at the center of SNS' communication objectives. The frequency that branded communication takes place on the fans' walls, might offer insights for the effects verified.

We acknowledge limitations in our research. The study is limited to brand pages from personal care and beauty segments. The respondents were predominantly young (53% where between 18 and 25 years old), with a rather intensive level of Facebook usage (43% of respondents, use it for more than 2 hours each time). Also, another limitation to be considered is derived from the way that brand page participation was measured. A self-reported questionnaire was used to measure the frequency at which users performed active interactions with the brand page (like, comment, share). We suggest that these limitations are addressed in future research, exploring the theoretical model across different brand segments and users targets.

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Formatada: Português (Portugal)