Chapter 22
A Cross–Cultural Perspective on Motives and Patterns of Brand Recommendation in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how today, social media enable users to comment on brands in a multitude of ways. Although it is undoubted that this can have a substantial influence on the way brands impact on consumers, comparatively little is known about what motivates consumers to recommend brands in social media and whether there are cultural differences therein. This article aims to determine the factors leading to either positive or negative communication about brands on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and brand-related blogs based on a representative sample from Germany and the US, each with 1,000 adults. Complementary to an analysis of factors determining a general inclination to recommend, a principal component analysis of the diverse motives to do so exhibits patterns being largely consistent in a cross-cultural perspective, however, with differences in specific practices concerning gender, age, and formal education. A cluster analysis as well as taking a look at "influencers" provide a basis for developing differentiated strategies of brand communication and management respectively.

INTRODUCTION

Dyadic processes of interpersonal informal communication among individuals as a source of information have been discussed in the scientific literature for more than 70 years, dating back among others to Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) who found that interpersonal communication was crucial for making voting decisions. Later in 1967, Arndt introduced the term word-of-mouth communication (according to Buttle 1998, p. 242) or WOM in short for this essential and widespread human activity, regarded also as an essential element in influencing consumer behavior.

During the era of mass media, opinions of family, friends, and acquaintances were often the only sources for consumers to obtain informal, non-commercial, and credible information on brands and/or products (cf. Herr et al. 1991). However, with WOM being complemented by web-based eWOM around the beginning of the new millennium, a paradigm shift took place. Since then, consumer-to-consumer brand and/or product related communication is accessible to a broad audience via online media or the internet respectively (cf. Cheung and Lee 2012, p. 219). Today, social media enable users to comment on companies and products in a multitude of ways distributed throughout their contacts' network rapidly and almost effortlessly. Thus, bringing the traditional concept of WOM communication to a new level going far beyond the exclusive context of a dyad (cf. Kapoor et al. 2013, 44). Consumers can communicate with a very large number of other consumers without geographical or temporal boundaries to share experiences or to engage in recommendations for brands and/or products and the companies that provide them (cf. Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010, p. 312; Neuhold 2012, p. 16).

As such, social media have also emerged as an important channel for consumers to learn about other consumers' experiences, find out about brands and/or products, to discover deals and purchase incentives as well as to reach out directly to brands and service providers to voice their satisfaction or complaints, or simply to ask questions. Consequently, brand recommendation in social media became a substantial issue in brand management and marketing respectively (cf. Nielsen, 2012 and earlier already Dye, 2000; Godin, 2001; Balter and Butman, 2005). However, comparatively little is known on what exactly motivates consumers to recommend brands in social media. In a review article Kapoor et. al. (2013) emphasize the need to better understand the motives of eWOM communication within the context of brand recommendations in social media and thus to complement the studies on motives of brand communication in virtual communities (e.g. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), and on review sites (Bronner and de Hoog, 2010) respectively.

In this paper we aim to determine the factors leading to either positive or negative brand communication on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter as the leading platforms for brand communication in social media (cf. Comscore, 2011; Hansson, Wrangmo, and Sølien, 2013) as well as on brand-related blogs or consumer opinion forums in general.

On the one hand, overall patterns of brand communication and usage of social media in particular cannot be assumed the same across cultures and consequently nations. The inclination to self-disclosure by commenting on one's experience with brands, the readiness to also openly criticize, and the willingness to enact consumer power in a collective way are only some aspects of brand communication that may be at least influenced by cultural values becoming explicit in power distance, individualism versus collectivism, or indulgence versus restraint (cf. Hofstede, 2015). The latter being just one of several schemes of "dimensions" on which cultures may be mapped. On the other hand, do global brands have to come up with internationally compatible campaigns. Therefore, we base our analysis on a survey among a representative sample from Germany and the US. Although far from covering all possible contexts

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