How Social Media is Transforming the Fashion Consumers: The Effects of “Social” Consumer Attributes on Brand Engagement in Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media has given rise to the new consumer group, namely, social consumers. This study identified the distinct characteristics of social consumers (i.e., online social search, online social navigation, online social connection) and examined the impacts of social consumer attributes on the engagement with fashion brands via brands’ SNSs (BSNSs). A sample of 141 U.S. consumers who had browsed and/or participated in a fashion brand’s BSNS (i.e., the Facebook page for fashion brands) was used to examine hypothesized relationships. The analyses involved running a confirmatory factor analysis and a structural equation modeling. The result indicates that the impacts of the social consumer attributes on the benefits of BSNSs (i.e., experiential and functional benefits) as perceived by consumers were significant, except the link between online social connection and functional benefits. In addition, consumers’ existing relationship with a brand served as a moderating variable, strengthening the impacts of social consumer attributes on BSNS benefits. The perceived benefits of BSNSs positively affected perceived relationship investment which in turn influenced brand loyalty. Practical marketing suggestions are provided for fashion brands.

Keywords: brand relationship, social consumers, social media, social networking sites

1. Introduction

Taylor was recently connected to her favorite fashion brand Loft’s Facebook page so she could receive time-sensitive promotional offers from Loft more conveniently. When the offer she likes is posted, she “Likes” it and comments on that post so she directly communicates with the brand. One of Taylor’s recent favorite things to do is to share her outfit of the day (#OOTD) with some of her favorite fashion brands like
Loft, Madewell, Zara, and Rebecca Minkoff on her Instagram page. Many of these brands ‘regram’ her photo on their brand’s page, and it makes her feel deeply connected to the brand she loves and rewarded for her loyalty toward the brand.

The fashion consumer is changing. The way consumers interact with fashion brands is strikingly different than they did a decade ago. As described in Taylor’s story above, consumers are actively engaged in the communication with a brand and influencing their power by “becoming friends,” “following,” and “tweeting” via fashion brands’ social networking sites (SNSs). For this reason, many of current fashion brands utilize SNSs as the first point-of-contact with their customer to inform demand and to initiate a dialogue on products (Milnes, 2016). The proliferation of social media has given rise to the new consumer group, namely, social consumers (Rucker, 2010; Schneider, 2016). These consumers use social channels and networks to learn about brands and make their purchase decisions. Social consumers value the information provided by like-minded people who share common interests with them and desire a conversation with a brand in SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In the fashion context, social consumers are often characterized by their strong interest in fashion and active engagement in SNSs (Netbase, 2013). These consumers consider SNSs as one of the most trustable information sources of their shopping and actively share their opinions on fashion products and brands via SNSs.

While industry reports have constantly discussed this new market segment and contended that fashion consumer behavior is changed in a fundamental way with new digital media, there seems no universal agreement among practitioners and academic researchers as to who “social” consumers are and how the unique attributes of this market segment influence the engagement with a brand in SNSs and consumer-brand relationship. To address these gaps in the literature, this study identifies the distinct characteristics of social consumers and examines the impact of social consumer attributes on the engagement with fashion brands via brands’ SNSs (BSNSs). In this study, Facebook was chosen as a representative platform of BSNSs because of its prominence in fashion brands’ marketing communications (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Morrison, 2010). According to the recent industry survey of nearly 4,000 brands worldwide, 82% of brand marketers agree that social media marketing is core to their business and rate Facebook as the most effective channels followed by Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram (McCorkle, 2016). Although precise statistical data are not available, most of top retail brands have developed their own pages on Facebook, cultivating their brand communities and engaging their customers in diverse ways.

II. Literature Review

1. Social Consumer Attributes

Recognizing the lack of a clear definition of social consumers, the social consumer in this study is defined as the consumer who uses SNSs to learn about products or services and to share the consumption experiences with others via SNSs. The most prominent characteristic of social consumers is that they consume information and learn about brands and products through SNSs (Solis, 2010a). While the traditional information source used for product/brand search was mainly mass-media, such as TV and print advertising, social consumers use social media like BSNSs when searching the product/brand information. In addition, social consumers are skillful in navigating through different platforms of SNSs (Das, 2015). They experience little difficulty in performing a variety of SNS activities, such as sharing or uploading photos, commenting on other posts, and sharing links or videos in SNSs. They also
exhibit strong online “socialness” such that their individual social life is largely influenced by online communication (Ledbetter, 2009). These consumers constantly communicate with others in SNSs and expect brands also to listen, engage, and respond quickly through BSNSs (Das, 2015; Schneider, 2016). Based on the literature, this study focuses on the three attributes of social consumers, namely, online social search, online social navigation, and online social connection. Online social search behavior is the consumer’s tendency to use SNSs to learn about brands and products. Online social navigation is the degree to which a consumer is skillful in navigating SNSs. Online social connection is the consumer’s tendency to believe that online communication is an important part of his or her social life (Ledbetter, 2009).

In their study of BSNSs for apparel and restaurant brands, Park and Kim (2014) identified two major benefits offered in BSNSs: Experiential benefits and functional benefits. Experiential benefits of BSNSs include social interaction with a brand as well as other consumers (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Mathwick, Wiertz, de Ruyter, 2008) and hedonic benefits derived from browsing and participating in SNSs (e.g., watching video clips uploaded by a brand) (Chan & Li, 2010; Sung et al., 2010). Functional benefits of BSNSs include product/brand information (Dholakia, Blazevic, Wiertz, & Algeshemier, 2009; Mathwick et al., 2008) and monetary incentives offered in BSNSs, such as coupons and promotional codes (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). The current study proposes that consumers with stronger social consumers attributes are likely to perceive greater benefits of BSNSs because (a) they utilize BSNSs to a greater extent and more frequently (online social search), (b) they are more proficient in using BSNSs (online social navigation), and (c) they spend more time in SNSs and have greater chance of engaging in BSNSs (online social connection). Taken all together, it is hypothesized that social consumer attributes are positively related to the perceived benefits of BSNSs. Thus,

H1a: Online social search will have a positive impact on perceived experiential benefits.
H1b: Online social search will have a positive impact on perceived functional benefits.
H2a: Online social navigation will have a positive impact on perceived experiential benefits.
H2b: Online social navigation will have a positive impact on perceived functional benefits.
H3a: Online social connection will have a positive impact on perceived experiential benefits.
H3b: Online social connection will have a positive impact on perceived functional benefits.

In addition, the role of social consumer attributes on BSNS engagement may be different for consumers who already have a strong relationship with a brand versus those who have a marginal relationship with a brand (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). If consumers already have a strong relationship with a certain brand, they may perceive greater benefits of the brand’s SNS since they are already highly involved in that brand. These people are more likely to engage in the communication with others who like the same brand and more highly value the information provided in the brand’s SNS. Hence, this study hypothesizes that consumer-brand relationship will strengthen the impact of social consumer characteristics on BSNS benefits. Thus,

H4a: Brand relationship quality will strengthen the impact of online social search on experiential benefits of BSNSs.
H4b: Brand relationship quality will strengthen the impact of online social search on functional benefits of BSNSs.
H4c: Brand relationship quality will strengthen the impact of online social navigation on experiential benefits of BSNSs.
H4d: Brand relationship quality will strengthen the impact of online social navigation on functional benefits of BSNSs.
H4e: Brand relationship quality will strengthen the impact of online social connection on experiential benefits of BSNSs.
H4f: Brand relationship quality will strengthen the impact of online social connection on functional benefits of BSNSs.

2. Brand Relationship Outcomes

BSNSs serve as an essential platform where consumers directly interact with a brand and build deeper connections to a brand (Alter, 2016). Therefore, it is plausible to expect that the perceived benefits of BSNSs largely contribute to consumers’ perceptions of the relationship investment made by the brand. As noted by many researchers, BSNSs have become a major venue that fosters a meaningful interaction between consumers and a brand (Harter, Plenge, & Hegen, 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). This social interaction of BSNSs can create a positive perception of a brand’s relationship investment. Also, when consumers are entertained by browsing or participating in a BSNS and perceive enjoyment from that experience, it can create a positive perception of the brand’s effort toward enhancing the relationship with them. Thus,

H5a: Perceived experiential benefits of BSNS will have a positive impact on perceived relationship investment.

In addition, diverse product/brand information and monetary incentives offered in a BSNS can play a critical role in creating psychological bonds that encourage consumers to stay in the relationship with a brand via the brand’s SNS (Park & Kim, 2014). Thus, this study hypothesizes that, when consumers perceive that a particular fashion brand’s SNS is beneficial for their lives, it may create a positive perception of the brand’s relationship effort. Thus,

H5b: Perceived functional benefits of BSNS will have a positive impact on perceived relationship investment.

According to the theory of reciprocal action (Gouldner, 1960), individuals feel obligations to others partly because of the moral norm. That is, individuals feel they should give benefits to those who give them benefits. Researchers suggest that the norm of reciprocity is also present in consumer-marketer relationships. For instance, De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001) support the view that consumers exhibit loyalty to certain marketers in reciprocation of these marketers’ friendliness. More specifically, when consumers perceive the efforts of retailers to maintain a relationship, they demonstrate stronger behavioral loyalty. In a similar vein, Porter and Donthu (2008) argue that the consumers’ beliefs that the company is making certain efforts in the online community positively influences their favorable beliefs about and trust in the company. Industry reports also reveal that consumers who use social media are more likely to make purchase decisions (Das, 2015; Roesler, 2015). Based on these previous findings, it was hypothesized that the brand’s relationship investment perceived by consumers affects consumers’ behavioral loyalty toward the brand. This study specifically chose the willingness to pay price premium as a measure of behavioral loyalty because it has been found as an outcome of consumers’ participation and engagement in the brand’s online community (Elliot, Li, & Choi, 2013). Thus,

H6: Perceived relationship investment will have a positive impact on willingness to pay price premium.
III. Method

1. Data Collection

An online survey was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. Data were collected through a U.S. marketing research firm specializing in consumer online surveys. The sample consisted of U.S. adult consumers (18 or older) who had browsed and/or participated in a fashion brand’s SNS (i.e., the Facebook page for fashion brands) during the past two weeks. The time frame of two weeks was determined to prevent potential recall loss in terms of their experience with a BSNS. Respondents were asked to indicate the fashion brand they had visited and participated in the brand’s Facebook page during the past two weeks. The fashion brand name the respondent typed was automatically embedded in the survey questions pertaining to the brand (e.g., “The information provided by {#brand}’s Facebook page is useful”). The remaining survey was composed of questions under separate sections about following topics: Facebook page, online communication behavior, and demographic information.

A total of 141 respondents completed the survey. About 70% of respondents were female and more than three quarters of the respondents were white-Americans. The largest number (41.7%) of respondents was aged 31-40, followed by 18-30 (27.1%), 41-50 (19.9%), and 51-60 (8.5%). The majority of respondents (70.3%) reported that they attended some college, or earned bachelor’s or a higher degree of education. While the proportion of the respondents was distributed fairly evenly throughout all income groups, the largest number of respondents (16.3%) reported their annual household income as $70,000-79,999, followed by $60,000-69,999 (11.3%) and $50,000-59,999 (9.2%). Nearly half of respondents (50.4%) reported that they visit the Facebook page for the fashion brand they chose once or twice per month, followed by 3-5 times (29.1%) and over 10 times a month (16.3%). Also, 45.2% of respondents indicated that they spend less than 5 minutes per visit on the Facebook page for the fashion brand of their choice, followed by 6-10 minutes (20.5%) and 11-20 minutes (19.2%).

2. Measures

All measurement scale items were adapted from the literature (see Table 1). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (7). The initial version of the survey was pre-tested with a convenience sample of 81 undergraduate students recruited from three different courses within the department of Retail, Hospitality, and Tourism Management at a large, southeastern U.S. university. Based on the results of a pre-test, content validity of the measurement items was examined, and small revisions of wordings were made. The composite reliabilities of the final constructs ranged from 0.856 to 0.927.
Table 1. Measurement items and construct reliabilities

| Construct                      | Measures                                                                 | Source                      | Composite reliability |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Online social search          | • I often browse social network websites to learn about brands or products.  
                               | • Social network websites are a source of information I use when I am deciding to buy something. | Lumpkin & Darden (1982)   | 0.856                |
| Online social navigation      | • I am extremely skilled at browsing/participating in brand pages on Facebook.  
                               | • I consider myself knowledgeable about efficient techniques for browsing/participating in brand pages on Facebook.  
                               | • I know how to do what I want to do on brand pages on Facebook. | Mathwick & Rigdon (2004) | 0.893                |
| Online social connection      | • If I couldn’t communicate online, I would feel ‘out of loop’ with my friends.  
                               | • If I lost Internet access, I think I would probably lose contact with many of my friends.  
                               | • Without the Internet, my social life would be drastically different.  
                               | • I would communicate less with my friends if I couldn’t talk with them online. | Ledbetter (2009)          | 0.907                |
| Brand relationship quality    | • ![brand] says a lot about the kind of person I am.  
                               | • ![brand]’s image and my self-image are similar in many respects.  
                               | • ![brand] plays an important role in my life. | Algesheimer et al. (2005) | 0.867                |
| Experiential benefits         | • The social aspects of ![brand]’s FB page is valuable.  
                               | • On ![brand]’s FB page, I get to know other people who are interested in this brand.  
                               | • I enjoy the conversational interactions on ![brand]’s FB page.  
                               | • I enjoy communicating with other members on ![brand]’s FB page.  
                               | • I enjoy browsing and/or participating in ![brand]’s FB page.  
                               | • Browsing and/or participating in ![brand]’s FB page enriches my life.  
                               | • Overall, I enjoy browsing and/or participating in ![brand]’s FB page. | Park & Kim (2014)          | 0.927                |
| Functional benefits           | • The information provided by ![brand]’s FB page is valuable.  
                               | • The information provided by ![brand]’s FB page is useful.  
                               | • ![brand]’s FB page provides information at an appropriate level of detail.  
                               | • On ![brand]’s FB page, there are good features that help me to accomplish my tasks.  
                               | • ![brand]’s FB page provides special offers (e.g., discounts, promotions) to me.  
                               | • ![brand]’s FB page provides updates on upcoming sales.  
                               | • ![brand]’s FB page gives me loyalty incentives for my continued participation. | Park & Kim (2014)          | 0.919                |
| Perceived relationship investment | • ![brand] makes efforts to increase customers’ loyalty.  
                               | • ![brand] makes various efforts to improve its tie with customers.  
                               | • ![brand] really cares about keeping customers. | De Wulf et al. (2001)     | 0.904                |
| Willingness to pay price premium | • I would be willing to pay a higher price for ![brand] over other similar brands.  
                               | • I prefer to purchase from ![brand] even if another brand advertises a lower price. | Chaudhuri & Ligas (2009)   | 0.902                |
IV. Results

1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The fit of the measurement model was examined using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Seven problematic items with weak factor loadings or high standardized residual covariances were eliminated for further analyses. The final model resulted in acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(252) = 490.410$, $\chi^2/df = 1.946$, CFI = 0.925, RMSEA = 0.082, TLI = 0.911. The construct validity of each latent construct was evaluated by both convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was confirmed by (a) strong composite reliability for all constructs ranged from 0.856 to 0.927 and (b) significant ($p < 0.001$) factor loadings for all measurement items with $t$-values between 10.422 and 15.437. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all dimensions ranged from 0.696 to 0.822, exceeding the recommended threshold value of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was tested by examining whether the AVE was larger than the shared variance between all possible pairs of latent variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This test revealed that the construct, perceived relationship investment, was highly correlated with both experiential benefits and functional benefits. The shared variance between perceived relationship investment and experiential benefits (0.728) was larger than the corresponding AVE (0.681). Likewise, the shared variance between perceived relationship investment and functional benefits (0.783) was larger than the corresponding AVE (0.696). The weak discriminant validity of these constructs will be further discussed in the discussion section.

2. Structural Equation Model

After verifying the acceptable fit of the measurement model as well as construct validity, a structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test hypothesized relationships. Fit indices of the structural model were: $\chi^2(261) = 542.474$, $\chi^2/df = 2.078$, CFI = 0.912, RMSEA = 0.088, TLI = 0.898. With regard to the effects of social consumer attributes on perceived benefits of BSNSs, the majority of social consumer attributes were significantly related to both experiential benefits of BSNSs and functional benefits of BSNSs. However, online social connection did not predict perceived functional benefits of BSNSs ($p$-value = 0.060), rejecting H3b. In addition, both experiential ($\beta = 0.403$, $t = 4.417$, $p < .001$) and functional benefits ($\beta = 0.568$, $t = 5.990$, $p < .001$) predicted perceived relationship investment, which in turn, affected willingness to pay price premium ($\beta = 0.822$, $t = 10.548$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H5a, H5b, and H6 were supported. Table 2 summarizes the results of SEM analyses.

Table 2. Results of SEM tests

| Hypotheses                      | Structural path                              | Standard estimate | $t$-value |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| H1a Online social search        | Experiential benefits                        | 2.220             | 3.670***  |
| H1b Online social search        | Functional benefits                          | 1.677             | 4.319**   |
| H2a Online social navigation   | Experiential benefits                        | 0.716             | 1.912*    |
| H2b Online social navigation   | Functional benefits                          | 0.526             | 1.946*    |
| H3a Online social connection   | Experiential benefits                        | 0.947             | 2.227**   |
| H3b Online social connection   | Functional benefits                          | 0.556             | 1.877     |
| H5a Experiential benefits      | Perceived relationship investment            | 0.403             | 4.417**   |
| H5b Functional benefits        | Perceived relationship investment            | 0.568             | 5.990***  |
| H6 Perceived relationship      | Willingness to pay price premium             | 0.822             | 0.548**   |

$p < 0.001$, $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$
3. Test of Moderating Effects

The moderating effect of brand relationship quality on the link between social consumer attributes and BSNS benefits was tested through a multi-group analysis. First, the research sample was split into high- and low-group based on the brand relationship quality. Since the mean score for respondents’ brand relationship quality was 4.69, those who rated higher than 4.69 on brand relationship quality (n = 67) were categorized into the “high” group and those who rated lower than 4.69 (n = 74) were categorized into the “low” group. Next, comparative analyses of each path between the two groups (i.e., high vs. low group) were conducted. The difference in chi-square values between the unconstrained model and the constrained model determines whether brand relationship quality acts as moderating variable.

The chi-square test revealed that brand relationship quality strengthened the impact of online social search on experiential benefit ($\Delta \chi^2 = 4.629, p < 0.05$) while it did not strengthen the impact of online social search on functional benefit ($\Delta \chi^2 = 3.64, p = 0.056$). Therefore, H4a was supported while H4b was not supported. Also, brand relationship quality strengthened the impact of online social navigation on both experiential benefits ($\Delta \chi^2 = 6.126, p < 0.05$) and functional benefits ($\Delta \chi^2 = 4.49, p < 0.05$), supporting H4c and H4d. Because the moderating effect can be tested only when the direct effect is supported, for online social connection, its impact on experiential benefit only was tested. The result indicated that brand relationship quality did strengthen the impact of online social search on experiential benefit ($\Delta \chi^2 = 4.2, p < 0.05$), thereby supporting H4e.

V. Discussion

This study explored the online social consumers to delve into their attributes and brand engagement via BSNSs. The proposed research model rested on the premises that social consumer attributes including online social search, online social navigation, and online social connection positively affect the perceived benefits of BSNSs, which in turn influence perceived relationship investment and behavioral brand loyalty. The findings of this study generally support this research model.

One of the major findings of this research is that it identifies the three distinct attributes of social consumers and empirically tests their effects on brand relationship outcomes. First, the three social consumer attributes emerged in the literature review were validated in a quantitative analysis by establishing both convergent and discriminant validity. Next, the significant relationships between three attributes and BSNS benefits were confirmed. The insignificant effect of online social connection on functional benefits may be attributed to a highly experiential nature of the “online social connection” construct. Because of their inclination to socialize with others in BSNSs, those who have a high level of online social connection (“My social life would be largely dependent on online communication”) might be more likely to value the social aspects of BSNSs (“I enjoy communicating with other members on BSNSs”) rather than the functional aspects of BSNSs. This result also suggests that fashion brands understand their target customers with varying degrees of online social characteristics so that their BSNS can be tailored to the target groups’ specific needs. It may be beneficial for a brand to comprehend the types of benefits sought by users and utilize BSNS focusing on those benefits.

With regard to the effects of BSNS benefits on perceived relationship investment, both experiential benefits and functional benefits significantly affected perceived relationship investment. This result shows that various facets of the benefits of BSNS can positively influence consumers’ perceptions that the brand devotes their efforts to enhance
the relationship with customers. Therefore, fashion brands should focus on providing long-term benefits in their BSNSs to develop more meaningful and persistent relationships with their customers. Beyond simply posting brand news and replying to consumers’ posts in BSNSs, brands should strive to build deeper connection with their customers through BSNSs. Marketers have reported that current fashion consumers are inspired by other consumers’ fashion styling via SNSs and more influenced by online “influencers” than commercial models (Eror, 2017; Lowry, 2014). Having customers share their personal stories with a brand and connecting them might be an effective way to generate brand community engagement. Also, BSNSs like Instagram and Pinterest can serve as a powerful tool to visually present brand personality. With visual storytelling in BSNSs, fashion brands can engage consumers with the brand’s culture, lifestyle, and products.

When consumers perceive the integrity in a brand’s relationship efforts via BSNSs, it will also result in brand loyalty. The significant impact of perceived relationship investment on brand loyalty found in this study highlights the importance of creating a psychological tie between consumers and a brand via BSNSs. Solis (2010b) argues that “as brands become more social, and in turn, as experiences are socialized, the ability to forge emotional connection is instrumental in cultivating community development, loyalty, and advocacy.” Hence, fashion brands should utilize BSNSs so they create a meaningful social experience that fosters a strong consumer-brand relationship and translates into brand loyalty.

VI. Limitations & Future Research

Some limitations need to be addressed regarding the present study. First, as previously noted, the construct “perceived relationship investment” was correlated with experiential benefits and functional benefits. Although the scales for perceived relationship investment and BSNS benefits were established in previous studies (De Wulf et al., 2001; Park & Kim, 2014), a future study can consider developing the measurement scales of these constructs that converge in a proper way and yet do not relate too highly with each other.

Also, researchers could further explore other distinctive characteristics of social consumers. Especially, the insignificant impact of online social connection on functional benefits suggests that consumers’ online socialness alone may not predict their engagement with a brand via BSNSs. If this is the case, what other attributes might explain the social consumers, particularly in the fashion context? Future research can be conducted to identify a comprehensive list of social consumer characteristics.

Lastly, this study focused on Facebook in exploring the fashion brand’s SNS, but other types of SNSs, such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and the brand’s blog, could be explored in future research. Obviously, some of these SNSs (e.g., Twitter vs. Instagram) are different in nature and facilitate a different kind of interaction and communication. Researchers may identify unique benefits derived from specific types of BSNSs and examine their relationships with social consumer attributes as well as relationship outcomes.

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