

Chapter 11

How to Drive Brand Communication in Virtual Settings: An Analytical Approach Based on Digital Data (Consumer Brand Alignment and Social Engagement)

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes an analytical approach that explores brands in virtual environments by creating indicators of consumer brand alignment and comparing them with measurements of social engagement. In particular, it combines indicators that estimate the correspondence between brand identity and brand image with measurements of engagement that emerge from platforms that monitor social media (Talkwalker and Social Mentions). The premise is that to gain objective awareness of the reputation a brand has achieved online, it is essential to filter the commitment that it produces on social media with assessments of the relations that consumers have with it. The latter is expressed through indicators of consumer brand alignment that are elaborated investigating virtual communities and adopting an interdisciplinary method that integrates netnography and text mining. The results generated by the approach illustrated in this chapter can be useful to devise adjustments to brand communication. The analysis is applied to twenty-nine important brands belonging to the fashion industry.

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INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND PERCEPTION IN ONLINE MARKETS

The life of a brand is being increasingly played out in online markets, where it seeks to unfold all its relational potential (Aaker, 1999). Indeed, the brand presents itself as driver of virtual consumer communities which function as interactive *loci* populated by consumers who share information, perceptions and, thus, also sensations (Szmigin, Canning & Reppel, 2005). These *loci* must not go unnoticed by companies; the intensity with which they are experienced and the information they provide make it possible to reconstruct consumer behaviors and thus to explore how consumers relate with brands (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2011). In this connection, recent studies show that the analysis of the consumer engagement that a brand produces takes on particular importance for companies that invest to create, develop and enhance virtual brand identity together with that projected through the use of more traditional interactive spaces (stores and media communication). Consumer engagement synthesizes "the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions" (Hollebeck, 2011, p. 6). If investigated in online contexts, this engagement takes on, according to Mollen and Wilson (2010), the form of "cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value" (p. 5). The cognitive engagement identifies the "consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in a particular consumer/brand interaction," while the emotional engagement translates into "a consumer's degree of positive brand-related affects in a particular consumer/brand interaction" (Hollebeck, Glynn & Brodie, 2014, p. 154). Both are distinct from behavioral engagement, which most attracts the attention of businesses; this is in fact given by the time and energy the consumer spends in interacting with the brand. The three levels are not independent one from the other but are closely interrelated. Today there are monitoring platforms that make it possible to measure the "rumor" a brand generates on the web, thus leading to a determination of the level of brand engagement stemming from social media. The information that these analyses provide become of strategic importance for the determination of branding policies once integrated with data describing the relation the consumer establishes with the brand (Murdough, 2009). The authors intend to compare measurements that express the engagement the brand generates on the web with indicators that derive from the comparison between the brand perception as it emerges from the accounts of consumers in virtual communities (Kozinets, 1999) and the brand characters that the company communicates through digital media. These indicators estimate the alignment that the brand image, as it appears in the mind of the consumer has respect to the brand identity, as it is transmitted by the company. They contribute to filling a research gap since the many studies on brand image, even though they explore the impact of marketing choices on brand perception, do not compare the ensuing brand associations with those that company communicates (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Häubl & Elrod, 1999; Schoormans & Robben, 1997; Czellar, 2003). Indeed, the exploration of how much consumers and company share in terms of brand representation is a source of strategic information; it is in fact, the emerging state of brand sharing that underpins the level of brand equity and thus, the differential response to the marketing of a brand (Keller, 1993). The level of brand alignment is a useful filter of the brand engagement. They can be seen as strictly related. High engagement accompanied by low alignment, for example, reflects a negative situation: people speak a lot about the brand without having a brand identity aligned to the brand image. In other words, companies and consumers use a different brand language, and the online brand engagement acts as a sounding board that can amplify the perceptual gap. All this has a negative impact on consumer brand equity. At the same

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