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The Mediating Effect of Bridging Social Capital Between Social Media Usage and Affective Attitude:
An Explanatory Model

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ABSTRACT

In this work, the authors develop and test a theoretical model that investigates the mediating effect of bridging social capital between usage of a brand specific social network site and consumer attitude towards the brand. Specifically, they see how usage of online social network sites drives consumer purchase intent, using university football as a domain to test the model. They find that bridging social capital is indeed a mediating construct between the university's sports social networking site usage and affective attitude towards the team brand. As social network site usage increases, both injunctive norms (perceptions about the expectations of referent others) and descriptive norms (perceptions of the actual behavior of referent others) increase. They show that these influence emotional reward, in the form of increased bridging social capital, which in turn influences affective attitude towards the brand. The findings contribute to understanding how consumer tribes form on online forums and how subjective norms influence affective consumer attitude.

KEYWORDS

Brand Communities, Social Capital, Social Media Design Decisions, Social Network, Theory of Planned Behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

Social network sites (SNSs) such as FaceBook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram allow individuals to create identities and maintain connections with other members in several different contexts including professional networking, romantic connections, political opinionating and special interest groups. Initial research in the area treated SNS usage primarily as a dependent construct, investigating factors such as social identity, personal characteristics, message framing and social norms as potential drivers of online SNS usage (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011; Y. P. Chang & Zhu, 2011; Chen & Liang, 2006; Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). There has also been more limited work that has treated SNS usage as an antecedent factor driving dependent constructs such as social capital, self esteem and

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life satisfaction (Brewer, 2018; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Other past work has prescribed how firms' messaging on SNS drives online shopping. For example, it was found in (Li, Browne, & Chau, 2006) that negatively framed online messages by firms positively impacted levels of online shopping. Recent research has focused on the effect of consumer reviews on purchase intent (Hong, Xu, Wang, & Fan, 2017), where review depth, age and reviewer expertise all have been found to have an effect. However, there is a lack of understanding of the mechanism underlying the effects of levels of brand specialized SNS usage on consumer purchase intent, which drives purchase behavior (J. F. George, 2004; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In a competitive industry where every firm has access to developing an SNS, such as a Facebook page specific to their brand or product or an online forum, what mechanisms would influence consumer intention to purchase? Since purchase intent drives actual behavior, the answer to this can prescriptively affect how firms focus their resources on both the development of features within their specialized SNS and the implementation of their SNS amongst their audience. In this work, we contribute to this question, by examining these linkages in the domain of university football. We investigate if college team brand specific SNS usage drives the users' affective attitude towards the brand, and their subsequent intent to purchase game tickets and sports apparel related to the brand.

We look at three theories that may help explain this linkage between SNS usage and purchasing intent: *consistency* or *balance* theory, *the theory of planned behavior* theory and *social identity* theory. Consistency theory asserts that an individual will maintain consistency between their attitudes and those of referent others (Heider, 1946; Wakefield, 1995). The theory of planned behavior indicates that brand attitudes and the subjective norms among reference groups regarding purchase, are both among the drivers of purchasing intent (I. F. Ajzen & Fishbein; Dick & Basu, 1994; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977) which in turn drives actual behavior. According to social identity theory, individuals classify themselves into social categories and perceive a sense of connectedness with groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) which enhances individual self-esteem.

Some recent research has focused on the impact of social media usage on social capital, which refers to the resources accumulated through relationships with others (Coleman, 1988b). In most of these studies *e.g.,* (Ellison et al., 2007; Phua, 2012), the usage of generic social media sites such as Facebook has been shown to positively affect loose ties or bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). (Phua, 2012) found that fan identification towards a sports team context also positively affects social capital. The next step in the evolution of this literature would be a comprehensive model that investigates the linkages between SNS usage, social capital, identification with the brand and purchasing behavior. The model we test specifically looks at *bridging social capital* as mediator between social media usage and the affective component of user attitude towards the brand. We test a structural equation model in the domain of university football in the USA, that investigates how usage of a team specific SNS drives intent to purchase game tickets and sports apparel. We find that bridging social capital is a mediating construct that explains the effect of SNS usage on fan identification towards the team. Our findings are applicable in a broad context where brand specific social networking sites influence purchase behavior.

On the theoretical front, we contribute to an understanding of what may *motivate* behavioral intent, not just from a cognitive (rational) viewpoint, but also from an affective (emotional) reward viewpoint. Enhanced bridging social capital has intrinsic affective benefits to the individual, such as enhanced self-esteem, which in turn influences behavioral intent. We also discuss how bridging social capital can serve as a more formal construct to explain the formation of neo tribes (Maffesoli & Foulkes, 1988) and a more parsimonious construct to explain the formation of brand communities according to social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we examine earlier work in the area and develop our model. Section 3 explains the measures used and the study we undertook. Section 4 presents the data analysis. The discussion, limitations and conclusion are in section 5.

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