

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA IN BRAND MANAGEMENT

BARNABAS, N. GBAM (PhD)
NTA Television College, Jos.
Plateau State, Nigeria.
banabasgbam@gmail.com
+2347037681520

Abstract

Increasing and improving brand recognition is key to why Marketers create awareness via the social media platforms. This perspective makes social media users to be familiar and have easy accessibility to branded products. The objectives of the investigation is to take into cognizance the influence Social Media platforms have on brand management, loyalty and patronage. Also the study seeks to examine the extent consumers make purchase decisions using online medium. It is on this premise that the study randomly sampled the perspectives of 150 social media users and Marketers of products within Jos Metropolis. In conformity to the trend of statistical analysis, Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (V:20) was used to test the research questions set with results confirming that Consumers and Social Media Users are being empowered with brand quality and information on products. Also, the outcome of the investigation further confirmed that social media blogs is an effective tool for promoting brands. Companies and Users should take advantage of the tools of social media to connect with their audience and lastly, strategic and open social media plan could prove influential in morphing consumers into being brand loyal as deduced from the study.

Keywords: Social Media, Brand Management, Users and Platforms

Introduction

For some time now, firms and organizations have come to understand and see that among the many valuable assets they possess, one of the most valuable is the brand names associated with their products or services. In our increasingly complex world, all of us, as individuals and as business managers, face more choices with less time to make them. Thus a strong brand's ability to simplify decision making, reduce risk, and set expectations is invaluable. Creating strong brands that deliver on that promise, and maintaining and enhancing the strength of those brands over time, is a management imperative. Without question, branding is a complex management area that deserves study from a variety of different perspectives and academic traditions.

For over two decades it has been argued that the brand is an important value creator and should therefore be a top management priority. However, the definition of what a brand is remains elusive.

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), a **brand** is a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition." Technically speaking,

then, whenever a marketer creates a new name, logo, or symbol for a new product, he or she has created a brand.

In fact, however, many practicing managers refer to a brand as more than that—as something that has actually created a certain amount of awareness, reputation, prominence, and so on in the marketplace.

According to Keller (1993), Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey (1998), because brands are valuable assets to firms, the target of managers is to create strong brands with a rich and clear knowledge structure in consumer memory by authoring compelling brand stories. In wider terms, brand stories contain a plot, characters playing a role in the plot, a climax, and an outcome that causes empathy in listeners and helps them to remember the story (Schank 1999; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012; Woodside 2010).

According to Hoffman and Novak (1996), a usual practice of brand managers is to use one-to-many marketing communications, such as advertising, to pass their brand stories on to consumers). While consumers have always appropriated and modified these firm generated brand stories to create their own versions of relevant brand stories, their voices were not strong in the past and could be safely ignored by brand managers if they chose to do so.

But with the emergence of the social media, brand managers have lost their pivotal role as authors of their brands' stories (Kuksov, Shachar, and Wang 2013). Instead, consumers who are now empowered to share their brand stories easily and widely through social networks have gained a more important voice that brand managers can no longer afford to ignore — even for firms that decide not to actively participate in social media themselves.

Moreover, firms need to accept making mistakes due to the loss of control. Consumer-generated brand stories interpret past or anticipated brand experiences (Boje 1995; Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989), and they can be positive (e.g., a homage to a brand or a spoof that makes well-intentioned fun of firm generated brand stories) but also negative (e.g., consumer complaints). While consumer-generated brand stories can appear in various formats offline and online, we especially focus on those told online through social media (i.e., forums, blogs, social networks, video-, photo-, and news-sharing sites such as Facebook, tweeter, instagram etc).

Consumer sharing their experiences about brands told through social media are much more impactful than stories spread through traditional channels because they utilize social networks, are digital, visible, ubiquitous, available in real-time, and dynamic and reach a wide variety of audiences. (Hennig-Thurau, Kevin, Gianfranco, and Dwayne (2004).

Social media is a phenomenon that has become an important aspect in marketing mix and revolutionizing the way companies interact with customers. It is a new research field and a quick literature scan reveals that not many studies exist. Nevertheless, these few existing studies without scientific evidence with industry data, have rushed to conclude that the emergence of social media has led to the demise of the traditional advertising mainstream media. It is to this effect that this study seeks to understand the role of social media in brand management.

For, theoretical framework, the conventional view of brand management is based on information processing theories of consumer behavior and understands the brand as a firm-owned and controlled asset that can be built in consumers' minds through carefully coordinated marketing activities. The

brand is a cognitive construal, a knowledge structure of brand-relevant information, and brand identity is firmly under the control of the brand manager (Keller 1993).

Brand identity consists of carefully selected attributes, benefits, and attitudes that are communicated to consumers through purposeful marketing activities, such as brand stories told through advertising (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000). The assumption is that a brand's identity will be understood in the same way by all members of the target audience. Thus, there is only one collectively held meaning for the brand as determined by the firm. In other words, brand image is congruent with the brand's identity. Since consumers understand this intended meaning of the brand, it serves as a useful decision-making heuristic, reducing risk and saving time. The resulting brand knowledge or customer-based brand equity can be leveraged for creating and capturing incremental shareholder value (Keller 1993). This mindshare view of branding has the advantage of offering clear guidance to brand managers, as well as an illusion of control. Not surprisingly, it has dominated brand management practice for the past decades (Holt 2004).

Also, significance to this study is Consumer Culture Theorists, inspired by a postmodern and thus less controllable view of the marketplace, have developed an alternative perspective of branding that fundamentally questions the nature of brands and with it the control that firms have over their management. Rather than thinking of brands as controllable knowledge structures, and of consumers as passive absorbers of brand knowledge, they understand brands as a “repository of meanings for consumers to use in living their own lives” (Allen, Fournier, and Miller 2008), and all stakeholders of the brand, including consumers, as active co-creators of these brand meanings. This view explicitly ascribes an important role to culture as the original source of general categories of meanings that people use to make sense of the world. These categories of meanings are shared among certain meaning-making groups and encapsulate understandings about the way the world works and how people should live

their lives (Arnould and Thompson 2005). These shared cultural meanings are then transferred to brands through multiple brand stories, as different stakeholders make sense of the brand's role in the world (Holt 2004).

Players in the broader cultural production system, such as writers, artists, movie makers, designers, and of course the mass media, also ascribe meanings to brands by literally using them as resources in the stories they produce (McCracken 1986). Moreover, individual consumers use possessions and specifically brands as resources to construct and express their identities, and in the process might even go so far as to change and customize them to fit their individual identity projects (Belk 1988; Holt 2002).

Finally, brand community researchers have shown how certain brands can be at the center of so-called brand communities that transcend geographic and societal boundaries by providing a source of group identification (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), resulting in a plethora of brand stories that emphasize the brand's linking value (Cova 1997).

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of the Social Media in brand management.

This research aims to achieve the following objectives.

1. To examine the extent consumers make purchase decisions using online platforms.
2. To evaluate social media platforms such as Facebook and other consumer blogs in products patronage among consumers.
3. To ascertain the extent the social media platforms has aided products branding.

Research Questions

In order to assess the effectiveness of social media platforms as a means of influencing brand marketing the following questions must be answered through this research study.

1. To what extent does consumer knowledge of social media influence products awareness and patronage among consumers?
2. How does exposure to social media enhance products branding?
3. How are social media sites and blogs used as effective marketing tools to promoting branded products?

Conceptual Review of Related Works

Social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein 2012 defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Furthermore, social media depend on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes in communication between organizations, communities, and individuals. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012)

Social Media and Branding

Weber compares the traditional way of looking at brand equity (which will be examined in section number 2.7) in terms of brand recall - and points to that in the era where social networks have become an important media channel, Brand equity is a living thing and should be measured not in terms of brand recall but by dynamic measures such as customer word-of-mouth.

A strong brand ought to be based on the dialogue you have with your customers and prospects- the stronger the dialogue- the stronger the brand. The social web allows companies to have these kinds of dialogues more efficiently and less expensively than in the past (Weber 2009).

Weber's (2009) view on how the blog should be used as a marketing tool, is that through this means of communication it is not possible to control your message. But you can present your view on a specific matter, and by that you are able to become part of the conversation. Blogs can be used

for different reasons. For small start-up companies, to have a blog is a way for an executive in the firm to talk about the industry, to talk about the market space, to establish credibility, to get the search engines going. All these help not only with customers, but also with media and PR efforts since reporters and writers look through the blogs all the time for people to quote and interview. Blogs are used as references (Weber 2009).

If then you are an executive and want to raise your profile and the company's profile, a blog is a great way to help secure speaking engagements, contributed articles, and quotes in major media. All of that adds credibility, which eventually can lead to the interest of new customers, who may be used to buying other brands, products or services but may feel more comfortable with you. An executive may also want to blog to get a feel of what is taking place in the field, and get a direct line with your customers (Weber 2009).

Blogs are seen as the next step. Chua and Parackal (2009) have done some incisive research into CEO blogs, which give some leaders a chance to provide audiences with an idea of their philosophy. But, in an era of competing media and short attention spans, Facebook updates, fan pages and Tweets become part of the branding toolbox. All you have to do to know much about a product is to make a comment about the product on face book, or tweet about it. And you'll get replies from the perspective of as many consumers or someone that knows a bit more than you about the product.

Another angle to having the social media as a tool in branding can be seen from the millions of Facebook, tweeter and instagram users all over the world. Facebook's commercial potential was always present, from the minute founder Mark Zuckerberg took the service away from its North American college-campus roots and allowed non-students to create profiles in 2006. It has become more commercialized (and arguably less concerned with user privacy) (Krishnamurthy and Willis, 2009) since then, in order to capture business and profits through advertising.

A Conceptual Framework of Social Media's Impact on Brand Management

Social media affect brand management because consumers have become pivotal authors of brand stories. Both firm-generated brand stories and consumer-generated brand stories are told through a plethora of communication channels (both traditional and social media channels) in a dynamic and evolving process. The characteristics of these different channels may influence the creation of brand stories by posing restrictions on, for example, the amount or type of content that can be created (e.g, Twitter message versus YouTube video). Consumer-generated brand stories can add to a firm's pursued brand, but they can also add new meaning to a brand that contests the brand's aspired identity. While firm-generated brand stories typically are consistent and coherent over time, consumer-generated brand stories are more likely to change over time and may give the brand another meaning.

In the meantime, consumer-generated brand stories that are spread through social media may also affect consumers' social networks. New connections between consumers could arise because consumers exchange their brand stories and pick up, refine, and further disseminate the brand stories told by other consumers. Likewise, consumers interact with brands by telling brand stories, and consumer-brand networks are established that can be observed by other consumers and the firm. Additionally, networks of brands may occur because consumers tell stories about multiple brands or when brands ally with each other or antagonize each other in telling their stories.

Finally, the impact of social media on consumer-generated brand stories and brand performance may depend on market characteristics (e.g., visibility of consumption; competition; Fischer, Völckner, and Sattler 2010), firm/brand characteristics (e.g., organizational structure; brand architecture), and consumer–brand relationship characteristics (e.g., brand attachment). These characteristics may influence how strongly brands are affected by social media and how effectively they can navigate the social media environment. For example, high visibility of consumption should make brands more susceptible to social media because of the public nature of the consumption process and, consequently, consumers' high purchase decision involvement. Conversely, for brands that are mostly associated with private consumption, social media should be less important.

Current Knowledge on social media influence in brand management

Brand communities, offline and online, have received a lot of research interest over the past 15 years and are in fact quite well understood. As brand communities essentially connect consumers and enable many-to-many communication, they can be regarded as precursors of today's online social networks. Therefore, key findings from the brand community literature are also useful for understanding the relevance of social media for brand management. Literature on eWOM is relevant because it covers consumers' evaluations of a brand through online reviews, which are a specific form of consumer-generated brand stories. Online reviews are distinct from consumer generated brand stories shared through social media in the sense that they are usually told through Web 2.0 technologies that do not rely on network structures. Consequently, literature about (social) network analysis is also relevant for this review. Research on product-harm crises highlights the effects of negative events on product/brand performance and has investigated the moderating role of consumer–brand relationship characteristics on the impact of product-harm crises on brand performance. Since many consumer-generated brand stories cover negative events, this stream of research is also relevant for this article.

We grouped the articles we identified into the three topics covered by the conceptual framework in Fig. 1: (i) consumers as pivotal authors of brand stories, (ii) networks of consumers and brands as a result of consumer-generated brand stories, and (iii) the coordination of brand stories.

Consumers as Pivotal Authors of Brand Stories: Most consumers will share brand stories through social media when they have had either a very positive or negative experience with the brand. As a result, many academics advocate that before even considering entering the social media space actively, a firm should be certain that it has its branding fundamentals right and is able to deliver the brand promise through all consumer touch points (Barwise and Meehan 2010). But, firms may want to go a step further by actively stimulating and promoting positive consumer-generated brand stories. Furthermore, in the case of negative consumer-generated brand stories, firms may want to react to such stories to impede potential brand dilution. Thus, firms do not want to act purely as observers but also as moderators (Godes 2005). The underlying assumption is that consumer generated brand stories will eventually impact “soft” and “hard” brand performance measures (e.g., brand associations and attitudes, brand value). We thus start our literature review by discussing findings related to the influence of consumer-generated brand stories on brand performance.

Impact of Consumer-Generated Brand Stories on Brand Performance

Recent studies have investigated whether a brand can benefit from consumer-generated ads (Ertimur and Gilly 2012; Thompson and Malaviya 2013). Generally, these studies find that brands can benefit from consumer-generated ads under certain circumstances.

When information is released that consumers, rather than the firm, created the ad, such attribution benefits the brand (i) if the ad viewers' ability to scrutinize the message is low (i.e., constrained cognitive resources), (ii) if ad viewers learn background characteristics about the ad creator that enhance the perceived similarity between them and the ad creator, and (iii) if ad viewers are highly loyal toward the brand (Thompson and Malaviya 2013).

Moreover, findings show that consumers respond to consumer generated ads created in contests and unsolicited consumer generated ads by engaging with the ad rather than the brand (Ertimur and Gilly 2012). Ad viewers perceive unsolicited consumer-generated ads as authentic but not credible, while they perceive consumer-generated ads created within a contest as credible but not authentic (Ertimur and Gilly 2012).

Vanden Bergh et al. (2011) investigate the impact of YouTube-hosted, consumer-generated ad parodies on consumers' attitude toward the brand being spoofed. Combining content analysis with survey research, they find a positive relation between ad parodies containing humor and truth (i.e., consumers' perceptions of ad parodies exposing advertisers' false or exaggerated claims about their products) and attitudes toward the spoof. In contrast, offensiveness and attitudes toward the spoof are negatively correlated. Interestingly, the ad parodies do not influence consumers' attitude toward the brands that the parodies spoofed. This result matches the finding from Campbell et al. (2011) that conversations around consumer-generated ads focus on the ad itself and do not discuss the underlying brand.

However, we know from brand community research that participation in brand communities leads to a variety of beneficial outcomes for the brand, including stronger loyalty and purchase intentions (Algesheimer Dholakia, and Andreas 2005). Moreover, research on eWOM shows that online reviews affect firm performance (i.e., sales, cash flows, stock prices and abnormal returns) in both the short- and the long-term (e.g., Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen 2010; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Dhar and Chang 2009; Luo 2007, 2009; Tirunillai and Tellis 2012).

These findings from related research suggest that consumer generated brand stories may indeed affect a brand's success in the marketplace substantially, but we lack strong empirical studies that demonstrate such effects. Thus, there is much to investigate with regard to the impact of consumer-generated brand stories on brand performance. We lack knowledge on what types of consumer-generated brand stories (e.g., spoofs, mash-ups, customer complaints, stories by brand enthusiasts) affect brand performance with respect to measures such as awareness, attitude toward the brand, preference, loyalty, attachment, and sales. Do some types of consumer-generated brand stories affect brand performance only in the short-term (e.g., ad parodies), while others influence brand performance in the long term (e.g., customer complaints)? Furthermore, it is likely that not all brands are affected equally by either positive or negative consumer-generated brand stories. What brands are most affected by consumer-generated brand stories considering market, firm/brand, and consumer-brand characteristics? For example, how important is the public

consumption of a brand to its susceptibility to consumer-generated brand stories? What role does brand equity play for the effectiveness of positive and negative consumer-generated brand stories? A thorough understanding of the impact of consumer-generated brand stories on brand performance is essential to making an effective decision on whether and how to react to such stories.

Methodology

Population of Study

The general population for this study are online users and Marketers within Jos metropolis, using majorly Jos North and South Local Government areas in Plateau state. The reason for this choice is because of their disposition to the internet and ability to evaluate and assess the quality of online platform usage. A total number of 150 participants were sampled from these target population for this study. Out of these, 90 were males while the remaining 60 were females. The population of the study comprised residents of Jos metropolis. The mean age of the participants was 23.68 years with a standard deviation of 5.369 and was drawn from four (4) different residential areas in the Jos North and Jos South local government area, namely, Angwa Rukuba community, Rayfield community, Bukuru and Angwa Rogo community.

Method of Data Collection

The study employed both primary and secondary method of data collection. For the primary method of data collection the researcher designed and printed 150 copies for conducting the main research work. Four (4) research assistants helped in the distribution of the questionnaire to participants across the four (4) communities surveyed in Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas during the research. These four areas are major areas within both Local Government Areas.

The administration of the questionnaire lasted for three (3) weeks due to the fact that the research assistants had to carefully explain the nature of the research to participants. Participants completed the administered questionnaire and were assured of confidentiality of their responses by the researcher. The data was then coded for statistical analysis using the SPSS, while there was a review of related materials to have an insight into previous works.

Result and Discussion

Research Question I

1. To what extent does consumer knowledge of social media platform influence products awareness and patronage among consumers?

The research question will be answered from items 12 and 13 in Section B of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Do you ever seek branded products information from others online?

Response	Frequency	Percent
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No	40	26.7
Yes	110	73.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 2 Do you ever take product information advice from your friends on social networks like Facebook?

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	53	35.3
Yes	97	64.7
Total	150	100.0

Results for the tables above revealed that in table 1, majority of the respondents; 110 (73.3%) indicated that respondents said they seek branded products information from others online. Further, in table 2, 147 (73.5%), majority of the respondents indicated that they actually take branded product information from their friends on social networks.

It is seen from the result of the analysis that reference groups influence the purchase of branded products.

Research results on reference group influence may be applied basically in the field of advertising and personal selling. The meaning and value of a brand do not only originate from its ability to express the personality of its owner, but play an important role in helping its user to create his/her self-identity (McCracken 1988). Online users tend to form a bond especially when they are on the same platform, even if they are miles away. The fact that they keep in constant contact with each other creates a sense of responsibility and loyalty towards each other. A critical source of the interpretation of a brand's meaning is the reference group. A brand may satisfy the need for self-expression as well as can be the means of social integration. It may appear as the symbol of personal completion, may provide self-esteem and makes distinction from others possible.

Research by Mangleburg-Doney-Bristol (2004) showed that there is an excellent opportunity to imply reference group theory in product promotion, too. Research focusing on adult consumers show that when people shop with accompanying fellows, they buy more and spend more as well (Mangleburg-Doney-Bristol, 2004)

Research Question II

How does exposure to social media enhance products branding?

The research question will be answered from items 10 in Section B of the questionnaire.

Table 3. Have you ever bought a branded product that you were told/ heard about on social media?

	Frequency	Percent
No	72	48.0
Yes	78	52.0
Total	150	100.0

Responses showed that participants claim to have purchased branded products that were introduced to them by their friends online. Majority of the respondents (78%) agreed that they purchased products because they were told about such products or made aware of the products online. Consumers in particular are more empowered by social media, as these technologies enable them to share their brand stories widely with peers. Social media affect brand management because consumers have become pivotal authors of brand stories. What better way to know about a product than to hear about it from a fellow Facebook user, who goes on and on about how awesome such product is. It tends to make you build a certain level of trust for such products because someone whom you trust also uses such. Furthermore, it's easier to log onto the branded products website or blog and hear for yourself more about the product than just watch a 30 second advert about such product without a chance to ask questions as you can from a fellow Facebook user or from the product blog.

Research Question III

How are social media sites and blogs used as effective marketing tools for promoting branded products?

The research question will be answered from items 16-17 in Section B of the questionnaire

Table 4: What do you think of companies (brands) that communicate on social media?

esponses		Frequency	Percent
Valid	promotes brand loyalty	72	48.0
	increases sales	35	23.3
	more information about the brand	43	28.7
Total		150	100.0

Table 5: What do you think of companies (brands) that have fan pages on social media?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	wise choice	16	10.7
	current with market trend	25	16.7
	target to the younger generations	40	26.7
	reach a wider range of consumers who give direct feedback on the brand	69	46.0
Total		150	100.0

In order to get a response to this question, respondents were asked their opinions concerning the effectiveness of social media as tools for marketing and promoting branded products. 72 (48%) of participants believe that using social media to manage brands creates some form of brand loyalty, while 43 (28.7%) of the participants believe social media is a way of getting more information about the brand. As observed by Lidsky (2005), Increasingly, consumers and businesses have become more experienced with marketing, more knowledgeable about how it works, and more demanding. A well-developed media market pays increased attention to companies’ marketing actions and motivations. Consumer information and support exists in the form of consumer guides (Consumer Reports), Web sites (Epinions.com), influential blogs, and so on.

Conclusion

The rise of social media dramatically challenges the way firms manage their brands. Key features of this social media environment with significant effects on branding are a shift from the firm to consumers as pivotal authors of brand stories in the branding process; a high level of interactivity manifested in social networks of consumers and brands; and a multitude of channels and brand stories that cannot be easily coordinated. As brand control now largely resides outside of the firm, the focus is on protecting the brand’s reputation, making brand management more similar to public relations. Firms can follow three distinct strategies to brand management: they can follow the path of least resistance by listening carefully and responding (harshly said: giving in) to consumer demands by getting feedback from their fan pages online; they can play the consumers' game by trying to gain cultural resonance through demonstrating a deep understanding of the online cultural environment in which their brand operates and fitting in seamlessly (e.g., T-mobile's “Life's for Sharing” campaigns); or they can attempt to leverage social media's connectedness and get consumers to play the brand's game by creating branded artifacts, social rituals, and cultural icons for consumers to appropriate and work on behalf of the brand (e.g., the Old Spice campaign), there by appealing to the wide range of social media users who also is dominated by over 60 percent of youths and youngsters.

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