The impact of user interactions in social media on brand awareness and purchase intention: the case of MINI on Facebook

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to analyze how social media activities, in specifically the Facebook page of a car manufacturer, and user interactions with these brand related activities affect the perception of brands and ultimately influence consumers purchase decision. Based on an online survey with users of the corporation's Facebook fanpage, and in accordance to hierarchy of effects theory the author's findings show the positive effect of fanpage engagement on consumers' brand awareness, word of mouth (WOM) activities, and purchase intention. The findings further indicate that annoyance with the fanpage due to information overload leads to negative effects on fanpage commitment and to decreased WOM activities. From a theoretical standpoint the results of this study contribute to understanding of the value-enhancing potential of social media campaigns.

Design/methodology/approach – To answer the authors' research questions and test their hypotheses, a study was set up in cooperation with the car brand MINI. To test their hypotheses, the authors applied structural equation modeling with AMOS 18.

Findings – The article analyzes the influence of brands' social media activities and participants' social media involvement on the purchase decision process of consumers. Their findings demonstrate that engagement with a Facebook fanpage has positive effects on consumers' brand awareness, WOM activities and purchase intention. Results further indicate that annoyance with the fanpage leads to negative effects in respect to the overall commitment to and involvement with the fanpage and WOM. The authors' research shows that social media activities indeed affect the purchase decision-making process.

Originality/value – New marketing communication reality presents new challenges and opportunities for companies as purchase decisions are increasingly influenced by social media interactions. People rely more than ever on their social networks when making those decisions. Nevertheless, outcomes of social media activities are still disputed in practice. The effects of social media campaigns on consumers' perception of products and brands as well as the effects on purchase decisions have yet to be better understood. This study therefore investigates how social media activities, in specific the Facebook appearance of a car manufacturer, affect the perception of brands, and ultimately influence the purchase decision process of consumers while considering the risk of creating annoyance. From a theoretical standpoint the results of this study contribute to understanding of the value-enhancing potential of social media campaigns and demonstrate how the perception of brands is influenced through this new communication channel. For brand managers this study is of value, as it shows that social media activities do have a positive influence on brands as they support their management of the purchase process.

Keywords Social media, Branding, User generated content

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

1. Introduction

The social media revolution has altered the communication landscape and has significantly impacted marketing communication. The growing importance of applications like Facebook, Youtube and others in consumers' lives has an increasing influence on their communication habits. With consumers spending more and more time in the social media realm, an increasing share of communication occurs within these new social network environments. In respect to marketing communication, this means that brand related interactions and exposure to marketing campaigns increasingly take place within social media (SM). The emerging communication setup has thereby transformed consumers from being passive participants in marketing to

being active creators and influencers (Kozinets *et al.*, 2008, Merz *et al.*, 2009) and has shifted some power over brands directly to the consumer (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Bernoff and Li (2008) refer to this increasing influence of the user as "the growing groundswell of customer power" and "cultural shift in a customer-centric direction". Traditional one-way communication in marketing has been transformed into a multi-dimensional two-way peer-to-peer communication reality (Berthon *et al.*, 2008).

This new marketing communication reality presents new challenges and opportunities for companies as purchase decisions are increasingly influenced by social media interactions. People rely more than ever on their social networks when making those decisions (Hinz *et al.*, 2011). Since an increasing part of this network is situated within the social media space and a large part of the communication within the network is happening in this space, SM platforms exhibit an important role in consumer decision-making. Facebook and Co. become new key players for branding activities.

Nevertheless, outcomes of social media activities are still disputed among practitioners and managers (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). The effects of social media campaigns on consumers' perception of products and brands as well as the impact on purchase decisions have yet to be better understood (Edelman, 2010; Barwise and Meehan, 2010). The potential drawbacks of SM activities like the spread of negative word of mouth and information overload causing disturbance and annoyance (McCoy *et al.*, 2007), and the difficulties in measuring an added-value of such efforts have kept many marketing executives sceptical. However, since brands cannot take the risk of being absent in such an influential communication channel, despite the risks and doubts, companies are investing increasingly into their social media activities (Divol *et al.*, 2012).

This study therefore investigates how social media activities, in specific the Facebook appearance of a car manufacturer, affect the perception of brands, and ultimately influence the purchase decision process of consumers while considering the risk of creating annoyance. From a theoretical standpoint the results of this study contribute to our understanding of the value-enhancing potential of social media campaigns and demonstrate how the perception of brands is influenced through this new communication channel. For brand managers this study is of value, as it shows that social media activities do have a positive influence on brands as they support their management of the purchase process.

2. Consumers as co-creators of brands

Marketing literature in the last decade has undergone a shift towards a service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This logic puts the customer back into the centre of marketing theory as it implies that the value of an offering (product or service) is defined and co-created with the consumer instead of being embedded in the output *per se* (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

This new perspective on marketing is also reflected in contemporary understanding of brands. Brands are now viewed as an ongoing social process (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Füller *et al.*, 2012), whereby value is co-created in the interplay and negotiations of various stakeholders (Merz *et al.*, 2009). Brand value is therefore "also co-created through network relationships and social interactions among the

ecosystem of all the stakeholders" (Merz *et al.*, 2009). Brand literature has evolved from a brand logic that viewed brands as simple markers of identification and value as embedded in goods determined by the value-in-exchange, to a new logic that views brands as being complex social phenomena (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Pitt *et al.*, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2003) and the value of the brands as its collectively perceived value-in-use (Franke and Piller, 2004; Schau *et al.*, 2009).

The social nature of brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and the relevance of relationships in co-creating brand value (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Füller *et al.*, 2012) enhance the importance of social media as a marketing channel. Social media favours relationship and community building as well as it promotes active engagements of consumers. The direct involvement social media enables in respect to the creation of brand value gives consumers ever more power to influence brands and posits challenges for brand managers' efforts to manage their brand. With the increasing relevance of social media platforms in the daily life of consumers, their marketing potential for brands increases as well. Therefore it has to be clarified where and how social media effects brand perceptions and brand related decisions of consumers.

3. Purchase decision-making process

Consumers have to make countless decisions every day and thereby have to cope with increasing information overload. They therefore develop certain habits and "heuristics", which are shortcuts and "rules of thumb" used in decision making, to cope with this mental overload (Scammon, 1977; Jacoby *et al.*, 1977; Jacoby, 1984). Brands are the most common rule of thumb in the contemporary marketplace. They facilitate many purchase decisions and offer reassurance as they connect current and future decisions to experiences, satisfactions, and knowledge (Keller, 2008; Kapferer, 2008). Hence, brands play an important role in consumer decision-making and guide consumers in the process of making a purchase decision.

The consumer decision-making process comprises the various steps a consumer passes through when making a purchase-decision (Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979). This process encompasses all steps from the recognition of a need through the pre-purchase search for information about potential ways to satisfy the need, the evaluation of alternative options to the actual purchase and the post-purchase processes including experience and evaluation of the product.

Similar to the framework of the decision-making process are the "hierarchy of effects" (HOE) models in communication and advertising. Instead of describing the series of steps a consumer runs through when making a purchase decision, those models focus on the mental stages of the relationships of consumers with a specific product or brand (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999; Ray, 1973). Hierarchy of effects refers to the fixed order in which consumers perceive, process, and use advertising and other marketing communication information: first cognitively (thinking), second affectively (feeling), and third conatively (do) (Barry and Howard, 1990). This means that the consumer first attains awareness and knowledge about a product, subsequently develops positive or negative feelings towards the product and finally acts by buying and using or by rejecting and avoiding the product (Kotler and Bliemel, 2001). This kind of persuasive model argues for a hierarchical order in which things happen, with the implication that the earlier effects have a stronger impact on consumer's decision making

(Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999). Based on this idea a variety of models have been proposed, differing in most cases only in nomenclature or order of effects (Barry and Howard, 1990; Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999).

The most well-known and widely applied hierarchy of effects model is AIDA, which consists of the purchase decision or attitude building phases awareness, interest, desire and action. Another widely recognised model is the one by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) (see Figure 1). Their model includes the seven phases awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction and purchase. At the beginning of the modelled process, the consumer is unaware of the brand. In the next phase he/she forms simple awareness. Subsequently, the consumer receives (e.g. through advertising or word-of-mouth) or searches for brand related information through which he/she builds knowledge about the brand offering. After the "thinking" stage, the consumer decides in the affective stage if she/he likes the product or not and builds preferences based on favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards the brand. At the end of the affective stage the consumer develops a conviction of the usefulness of the purchase, hence an intention to purchase. Even though not included in most HOE models (Barry and Howard, 1990; Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 2008), consumer loyalty and advocacy ideally follow the purchase phase.

Decisive for the sequence and flow of the single steps in the decision process is the involvement of consumers to the product or brand. According to Zaichkowsky (1985) involvement is defined as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests.", and depends on situational factors. In respect to the decision

Figure 1 Hierarchy of effects (HOE) model

making process, involvement can influence the HOE in two ways. First, depending on the level of involvement consumers need differing amounts of time to go through the phases (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). This means that for high involvement products like cars, consumers usually take more time when they for example search and process information and therefore need longer to get to the subsequent phase. Second, the level of involvement potentially also influences the sequence of the HOE stages (Kotler and Bliemel, 2001; Barry and Howard, 1990). With low involvement products the affective and conative phases could precede the cognitive one as consumers do not "think" when buying the product but build attitude after the purchase in the stage of using. Since the current study investigates the effects of the Facebook appearance of a car maker, the underlying processing conditions can be viewed as systematic and in line with the HOE sequence (Smith *et al.*, 2008, Petty *et al.*, 1983).

4. Conceptual model and hypothesis development

For our conceptual model we choose three distinctive constructs to analyse how marketing activities in social media influence the consumer purchase decision-making process, modelled through the HOE (see Figure 2). These include brand awareness, word-of-mouth and purchase intention, each related to one of the three mental stages - the cognitive, the affective, and the conative stage – respectively. Brand page commitment and annoyance serve as independent variables.

Brand page commitment (BPC). Brand page commitment refers to a psychological attachment of participants to the community building efforts of a brand in social media environments, e.g. the creation of a Facebook fanpage of the brand (Kim *et al.*, 2008; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Brand page commitment can be viewed as the active and psychological involvement of a consumer with the social media activities of a brand.

Annoyance. When consumer commitment and enjoyment of social media content by companies or brands turn into annoyance, the consumer turns away quickly. Social media marketing is considered to be less intrusive, and thus less annoying, than some traditional marketing techniques since consumers have more control over their exposure to the content. Therefore companies – using this marketing channel – have to be diligent in entertaining consumers with their marketing efforts in order to keep their attention.

Whereas enjoyment has been referred to be a pleasurable response to the exposure to (entertainment) media (Tamborini *et al.*, 2010), annoyance is the unpleasant emotional reaction to subjective overexposure to a certain kind of media. Annoyance may result from unwanted exposure to advertising (McCoy *et al.*, 2007) or intrusive direct marketing (Lee and McGowan, 1998). Therefore, companies have to be diligent in approaching consumers in social media in order to avoid annoyance. Social media content that disturbs and ultimately annoys consumers is not only ineffective from a marketing perspective, but can even have negative effects for the brand. We propose:

H1.   Annoyance with the content of a brand page has a negative effect on BPC.

Brand awareness (BA). Two of the main purposes in branding are the "labeling" of a product through marketing means and
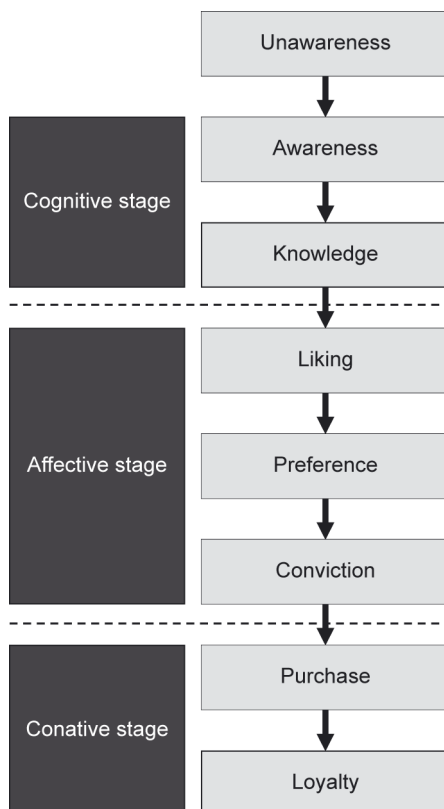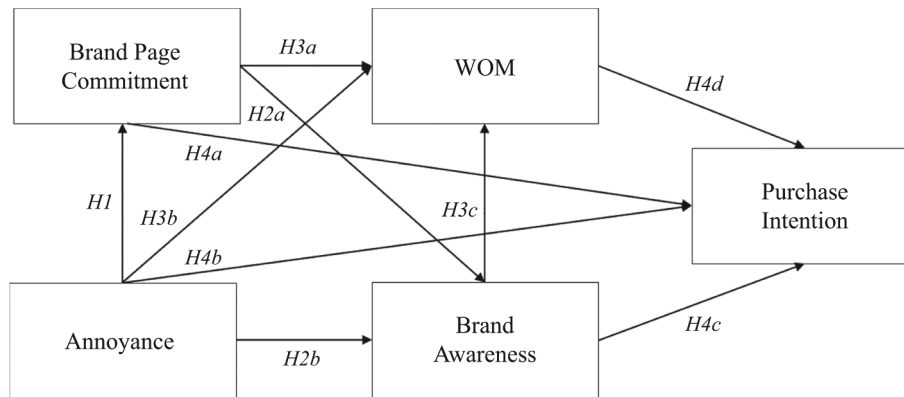
Figure 2 Conceptual model

making consumers aware of the label. The created BA "is related to the strength of the resulting brand node or trace in memory, as reflected by consumers' ability to identify the brand under different conditions" (Keller, 2008). In other words brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in consumers' minds.

The importance of brand awareness in consumer decision-making has three major reasons (Keller, 1993). First, it is important that consumers think about a brand when making a purchase decision within the product category of the brand. Raising brand awareness increases the likelihood that a brand will be a part of the consideration set, representing the basket of brands, which are considered when making a purchase decision (Baker *et al.*, 1986; Chakravarti *et al.*, 2003). Considering the HOE, brand awareness represents the first phase and the prerequisite that consumers reach the subsequent stages. Second, brand awareness can influence decisions about brands in the consideration set, even if there are basically no other associations with the brand. It has been shown that consumers tend to adopt a decision rule to purchase familiar and well-known brands (Roselius, 1971; Jacoby *et al.*, 1977). Especially in low involvement situations it has been demonstrated that basic brand awareness alone may be sufficient to influence the choice of a brand, even if well-formed attitudes are missing (Hoyer and Brown, 1990; Bettman and Park, 1980). Third, brand awareness influences the formation and strength of brand associations making up brand image. A necessary condition for consumers to create associations with the brand is the presence of the brand in consumers' minds. The strength of the presence or mental node decides how easily different kinds of information can become attached to the brand (Keller, 2008).

Brand awareness is created by anything that causes the consumer to experience the brand – advertising, promotion, publicity, public relations, etc. Social media represents one way to expose consumers to the brand and thereby create brand awareness. It follows that the more actively consumers engage with the social media activities of a brand, i.e. the higher the brand page commitment is, the higher the awareness of the brand is. A negative relationship can be expected between annoyance and brand awareness. We state:

H2a. Brand page commitment has a positive effect on brand awareness.
H2b. Annoyance with the content of a brand page has a negative effect on brand awareness.

Word of mouth (WOM). WOM is a naturally occurring phenomenon in consumer behavior (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). It refers to all kinds of interpersonal communication (positive and negative) about a company, brand or product between a receiver and a communicator, who is perceived as non-commercial (Arndt, 1967; Goyette *et al.*, 2010). WOM serves as one source of information for consumers in the purchase-decision making process as it provides information on product performance and the social and psychological consequences of a potential purchase decision (Mooradian *et al.*, 2012; Brown *et al.*, 2007). Since consumers are familiar with the source of WOM, the received information is considered to be more reliable, credible, and trustworthy (Solomon, 2011). As a consequence, WOM as a source of information is more effective in influencing consumers' decision-making than other marketing communication channels (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). WOM includes positive as well negative information on a product or brand.

In respect to the HOE model, WOM has a strong influence on the cognitive and affective stages, especially knowledge and liking, and is a potential consequence of the loyalty phase. Especially loyalty, and similarly brand evangelism (Füller *et al.*, 2012), is closely related to WOM. When consumers are loyal to a product or brand they tend to talk about it and thereby spread (positive) WOM. They can even become ambassadors of a brand as they actively show and convince others of their object of loyalty. Hence, WOM plays an important role in the HOE attitude model as an input and output component.

The accessibility, reach, and transparency of the internet has extended consumers' options to gather information and engage in WOM (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Social media applications present an option to spread WOM and expose consumers to WOM. Whereas the speed of classic oral word-of-mouth communication used to be rather slow, social media and its immediate reach of literally millions of consumers has increased the diffusion of WOM substantially. The desire to communicate to others, which includes negative and positive WOM, is one of the main reasons to use social media.

The degree of involvement with social media applications like Facebook fanpages, i.e. the level of brand page commitment, as well as brand awareness could therefore be an indicator of positive WOM activities. Since brand awareness is the first step in the HOE, it is also the first important prerequisite of WOM. It follows that the stronger a presence of a brand in consumers' minds is, the likelier is it for consumers

to think and talk about a brand. Annoyance can be expected to have the opposite effect on positive WOM. We propose:

H3a. Brand page commitment has a positive effect on positive on WOM activities.

H3b. Annoyance with the content of a brand page has a negative effect on WOM activities.

H3c. Higher levels of brand awareness have a positive effect on WOM activities.

Purchase intention. At the end of the affective stage of the HOE model, consumers build an intention to purchase the brand (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). Purchase intention refers to the mental stage in the decision making process where the consumer has developed an actual willingness to act toward an object or brand (Wells *et al.*, 2011; Dodds *et al.*, 1991). Marketing communication's primary goal is to get consumers to form an intention to purchase the marketed product. Hence, the effectiveness of social media activities of firms will be measured against this goal. SM should therefore positively influence consumers purchase intention (Keller, 2008; Kapferer, 2008). In line with the HOE, we argue that:

H4a. BPC has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention.

H4b. Annoyance with the content of a brand page has a negative effect on purchase intentions.

H4c. Brand awareness has a positive effect on purchase intentions.

H4d. WOM has a positive effect on purchase intentions.

5. Empirical study and analysis

5.1 Data collection

To answer our research questions and test our hypotheses, a study was set up in co-operation with the car brand MINI. A link to an online questionnaire was broadcasted through a posting on the MINI Facebook brand page notifying all visitors of the German speaking MINI Facebook brand page. After purification of missing values, 311 cases remained for further analysis. Of the respondents 51 per cent were male and 49 per cent female. Of the respondents 50 per cent were aged between 14 and 28 and 32 per cent were aged between 29 and 39. Only 18 per cent of the respondents were over 40, while the average age was 30.4. 69 per cent of the respondents already owned a MINI, 81 per cent declared themselves as fans of MINI, 36 per cent stated to be fans of cars in general and 6 per cent of all participants are employees at MINI.

5.2 Measures

The questions and items used were set up and refined based on literature and measured on seven point Likert-scale. Brand page commitment was measured using six adapted items from Ellison *et al.* (2007) and Kim *et al.* (2008), capturing the extent to which participants actively engage in and are emotionally connected to activities on the MINI Facebook brand page. Word-of-mouth (WOM) was captured by four items slightly adapted from Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004). Brand awareness was measured through three items adopted from Yoo *et al.* (2000). We thereby did not only measure the awareness of the brand MINI itself but also of the range of MINI models. Annoyance was captured with three items measuring the acceptance of shared content while purchase

intention was captured by three items in accordance with the MINI sales funnel. To assure that participants' involvement with the Facebook fanpage influenced the variables, we specifically asked for the effect of the experience with and participation in the MINI fanpage. The questions therefore all started with the phrase "because I'm a member of the MINI Facebook fanpage,..." so that participants related the questions directly to the Facebook activities of MINI.

5.3 Results

To test our hypotheses, we applied structural equation modelling with AMOS 18. First, the measurement model was assessed to evaluate the internal consistency and reliability of the applied constructs. The psychometric properties of the latent constructs and the wording of the items are displayed in Table I and indicate an appropriate structure. All indicators have good factor loadings and the respective factor reliabilities exceed the required reliability in structural equation modelling of 0.6 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The average variance extracted from the constructs can be judged as satisfactory with values over 0.5 (except for purchase intention with still tolerable 0.46) and thus, the convergent validity of the constructs can be seen as fulfilled (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Discriminant validity was estimated by calculating the Fornell-Larcker-Ratio (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), which must not exceed 1.

To evaluate the overall causal model, multiple fit indices were examined: the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (df), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the normed fit index (NFI), and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA). These test statistics supported a satisfying overall fit of the model with CMIN/DF = 1.62; GFI = 0.931; CFI = 0.971; NFI = 0.928; AGFI = 0.904; RMSEA = 0.045 (see for example Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 1998; Browne and Cudeck, 1993).

Concerning the path analysis of our model, Figure 3 displays the results of our analysis. Annoyance is found to negatively and significantly impact brand page commitment (-0.27^{***}) thereby supporting *H1*. Brand page commitment positively influences brand awareness (0.40^{***}) and WOM (0.35^{***}). Hence, *H2a* and *H3a* are fully supported. No influence of annoyance on brand awareness (-0.06n.s.) could be found, but results show that annoyance negatively impacts WOM (-0.09†). While no support is provided for *H2b*, our results support *H3b*. Further, a significant relationship can be found between brand awareness and WOM (54^{***}) providing support for *H3c*. Finally, purchase intention is found to be positively and significantly influenced by brand page commitment (0.23^{**}), and by brand awareness (0.25^{**}), however no negative impact was found for annoyance (0.00n.s.) and no positive impact could be found for WOM (0.15n.s.). Hence, only *H4a* and *H4c* are supported. In total our model is able to explain 7 per cent of variance in brand page commitment, 18 per cent of variance in awareness, 61 per cent in WOM, and 28 per cent in purchase intention. Further, alternative models were calculated to obtain support for the validity of the final model. No other paths were significant when applying different models. Neither, did the chi-square values of the alternative models significantly improve the model fit. On the contrary, our final model achieved the best fit to the observed data.

Table I Psychometric properties of the applied scales

Construct	Item	Loading	Mean	SD	CR	AVE	FLR
Brand page commitment	*As a member of the MINI Facebook fanpage*				0.85	0.50	0.75
	. . . I get informed about MINI news daily	0.74	3.30	1.86			
	. . . I feel as a part of the MINI-Facebook Community	0.75	3.76	1.82			
	. . . have a close relationship to other MINI FB-Fans	0.64	4.55	2.07			
	. . . I participate in activities on the page very often	0.57	3.27	1.84			
	. . . I miss something if I do not visit regularly	0.81	2.63	1.71			
	. . . it is fun for me to inspire others about MINI	0.64	1,97	1.02			
Word of mouth	*Because I'm a member of the MINI Facebook fanpage*				0.91	0.67	0.73
	. . . I talk very positive about MINI	0.65	5.03	2.02			
	. . . can recommend MINI to my friends and relatives	0.79	4.60	2.12			
	. . . I try win my friends and relatives as MINI fans	0.82	3.28	2.09			
	. . . it is fun for me to inspire others about MINI	0.90	4.49	2.18			
Brand awareness	*Because I'm a member of the MINI Facebook fanpage*				0.88	0.72	0.68
	. . . I have no difficulties to remember MINI	0.70	4.15	2.19			
	. . . know all MINI models	0.93	4.30	2.16			
	. . . I can distinguish the different MINI Model	0.92	4.16	2.27			
Purchase intention	*Because I'm a member of the MINI Facebook fanpage*				0.72	0.46	0.52
	. . . I plan to buy a MINI	0.60	2.80	2.11			
	. . . I have arranged a test ride	0.70	1.74	1.49			
	. . . I have bought a MINI	0.71	1.95	1.87			
Annoyance	*I think it is disturbing if . . .*				0.82	0.61	0.48
	. . . my wall is overloaded with MINI Topics	0.85	3.65	2.11			
	. . . the same MINI topic is forward multiple times	0.72	4.02	1.49			
	. . . MINI posts product ads all the time	0.77	3.32	1.87			

Figure 3 Parameter estimates for final structural model
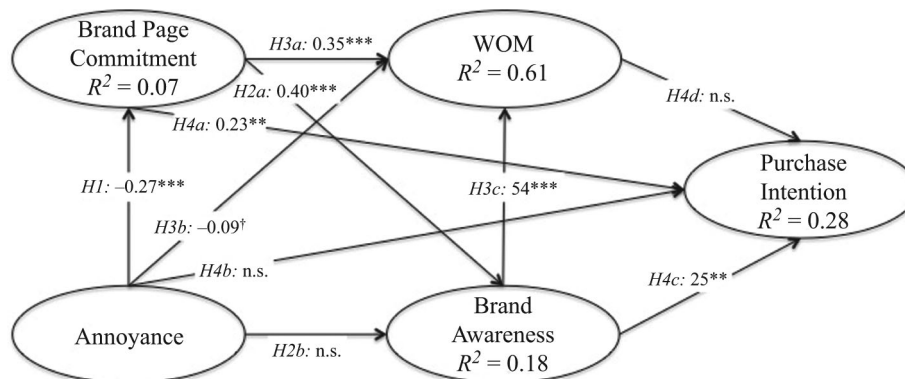
Notes: *< 0.05; **< 0.01; ***< 0.000; < 0.01[†]; CMIN/DF 1.62; GFI 0.931; AGFI 0.904; CFI 0.971; NFI 0.928; RMSEA 0.045

6. Discussion and implications

In this article, we analyse the influence of brands' social media activities and participants' social media involvement on the purchase decision process of consumers. Our findings demonstrate that engagement with a Facebook fanpage has positive effects on consumers' brand awareness, WOM activities and purchase intention. Results further indicate that annoyance with the fanpage leads to negative effects in respect to the overall commitment and involvement to the fanpage and WOM.

Our research shows that social media activities indeed affect the purchase decision making process. We could thereby demonstrate that they influence the different phases described in the hierarchy of effects model (Smith *et al.*, 2008; Petty *et al.*, 1983). Social media activities influence all three mental stages: the cognitive phase, the affective stage, and the cognitive stage. The HOE model thereby represents a possible mental process that a consumer goes through when making a purchase decision. The real process will most of the time deviate from the one modelled by the HOE. The described phases, in one form

or the other, are still part of every decision-making process, independent of product category, time or prior experience. Our findings thereby indicate that social media is a viable and relevant marketing communication channel for brands.

Based on this, our study supports prior findings that social media content influences the economic outcome of brands (Zhu and Zhang, 2010) and that WOM and social media are inextricable forms of marketing (Kozinets et al., 2010). We extend these prior findings in showing their applicability in respect to the Facebook presence of a brand. We thereby also applied a more holistic approach to the impact of social media activities for brands as we studied the whole purchase decision process and not just specific outcomes like sales or purchase intention.

With postmodern information overload, annoyance has become an issue for all marketing communication efforts. When consumers get annoyed by the marketing activities of a brand, they can quickly turn against the brand, e.g. by not considering the brand when making a purchase or by spreading negative word of mouth. Social media in general is considered to be less intrusive than other marketing communication efforts as consumers can more easily decide the extent of exposure to marketing content. Nevertheless, social media fanpages could easily annoy fans by posting too much and thereby spam the message boards of users. Annoyance in respect to social media content is an under researched area. More research is needed to better understand the effects of annoyance in online and social media environments and to investigate more what causes annoyance in a social media environment. This would be an important contribution to the explanation of consumer behaviour in respect to social media marketing and to the understanding of the effect of social media brand activities on purchase behaviour. Our results indicate that annoyance with social media content has negative effects on the evaluation of brands in the purchasing process and reduces WOM. This study is thereby a first attempt into explaining potential effects of social media annoyance on consumer purchase behaviour. It thereby also indicates, that it is often not just the amount of negative or positive WOM (Kozinets et al., 2010; Liu, 2006) that counts, but what has to be considered as well is the level of annoyance that social media appearances cause with consumers.

From a managerial perspective, the findings in this study underpin the relevance of social media for brand management. While managers may still doubt the usefulness of social media involvements, our study points in the direction of social media as an important and integral part of the marketing communication strategy.

The positive effects of consumers' social media engagements on brand awareness, WOM activities and purchase intention are strong arguments for the relevance of social media in respect to the management of brands. Social media should not be something companies engage in because everyone else is doing or because it is thought to be important for a modern and open image of brands. Also, brand managers today use social media activities mostly as means to gather information and learn about consumers and their attitude towards the products and the brand. Those reasons to be active in social media are relevant, but managers have to realize that social media is a viable marketing instrument as well, which, if applied correctly, can have positive economic effects for the brand and the company.

With respect to annoyance, this study points to a thus far neglected topic in association with marketing efforts in social media. When discussing the downside of social media and user-generated content, the focus has mostly been on the impact of negative WOM (Liu, 2006; Kozinets et al., 2010). Marketing managers, when planning social media activities, should evaluate annoyance issues since these could easily deteriorate any efforts made and could lead to negative outcomes for the brand. Social media has unique dynamics and users react sensitive to its content. Managers need to understand those dynamics and the users within social media environments and need to respect the social media norms of engagement. This understanding is vital for having long term marketing success in social media.

7. Limitations and outlook

This study also has limitations that lead to future research opportunities. Our study was conducted with the Facebook fanpage of MINI and hence only members of this fanpage were included in our sample and the provided results stem from a single fanpage. Therefore a sampling bias may affect our findings. Other brand pages from different product categories should be investigated in the future.

Also, other factors influencing the purchase decision process could be included to refine the model and deepen the understanding of social media's influence on the decision-making process. Another interesting aspect in context of social media and the purchase decision process is the viability of the HOE. Especially the sequence of the phases should be analysed and possibly revised if it is altered by social media involvement. This could lead to a new understanding of our communication and information processing habits in respect to social media and other new forms of media.

Annoyance is a highly relevant topic for brands in respect to social media. Longer term experience with this new form of media is missing. More research is needed to further investigate what causes annoyance and how it can be avoided. Similarly, more research is needed to better understand the causes and effects of social media related enjoyment and entertainment on brand attitudes.

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefits of the material present.

The communication landscape has been markedly transformed with the advent of social media. As consumers spend more of their time connecting via applications like Facebook and YouTube, the impact of social media interactions on purchase decision making has grown accordingly.

Various scholars acknowledge that the social media phenomenon offers both challenges and opportunities for business organisations. Social media has become a communication hub to an extent that "brand-related interactions" and marketing campaigns are increasingly being conducted within its different platforms.

On the one hand, consumers have been transformed from passive recipients of marketing activities to a position of being able to actively create and influence. Peer-to-peer communication has shifted marketing from being a one-way process to what has been defined as a "multi-dimensional two-way" that is more customer-centric.

One key consequence of such developments is the fact that value of products, services and brands is now co-created through the interplay of the various stakeholders using social networks and through other communication forms. With brands becoming more socially defined, firms are recognising that social media has become a key marketing channel. Brand management is now a greater challenge because consumers have more power to influence how brands perform. The potential for unfavourable word-of-mouth (WOM) and negative response to information overload are among the issues brand managers might have to contend with.

The role of brands in simplifying the purchase decision process is extensively acknowledged. Such is the amount of information consumers have to handle, any strategy which eases the "mental load" is welcomed. Brands are crucial in this respect as consumers are able to draw on past knowledge, experience and satisfaction to confidently make present and future choices.

Various steps are involved in decision-making with need recognition at one end and post-purchase evaluation and beyond at the other. This has focused some attention on

various hierarchy of effects (HOE) models originally developed for communication and advertising. A central tenet of these frameworks is that consumers think, feel and do when marketing information is processed. Scholars claim that the cognitive, affective and conative responses and actions are sequential.

One proposition is that the effect is most potent during earlier stages and other models have emerged on this basis. The number of phases is subject to variation in these alternative frameworks, as is their order. Among the most widely recognised model is AIDA, an acronym which describes the decision-making stages as awareness, interest, desire and action. Others are similarly constructed but incorporate additional stages like knowledge acquisition, preference and purchase. It is purported in several studies that loyalty and advocacy are post-purchase steps, although most HOE models do not incorporate this.

How a HOE model is utilized is subject to the level of consumer involvement with the product or brand, different researchers claim. Involvement is determined by such as interest and complexity, and will decide the length of time taken to navigate the different phases. Automobile purchasing is cited as a high involvement example where more information needs to be processed and thus takes longer. It is likewise mooted that involvement might influence the sequence in which HOE steps occur. One suggestion is that the cognitive phase could follow the affective and conative stages for low involvement products. The rationale for this is that such products demand less initial thinking.

In the current study, Hutter et al. explore how marketing through social media platforms impacts on consumer purchase decision-making. The constructs brand awareness, WOM and purchase intention are included because of their relevance to at least one of the cognitive, affective or conative phases.

Brand awareness is important since it indicates that the brand exists in a consumer's mind. This is a prerequisite to subsequently being included in any "consideration set" when a purchase is being made. Furthermore, studies revealing consumer bias towards familiar brands suggest that awareness may alone determine choice. Another significant point is the fact that presence in a consumer's mind shapes the development of key brand associations which provide the foundation for attachment. Exposure creates awareness and social media provides an effective means of achieving such objectives.

The strength of WOM lies in the fact that its sources are deemed credible. Such information is thus the most influential on consumer decision-making. Its impact is equally salient on the HOE model. The authors point out how WOM has input and output functions through its impression on cognitive and affective phases and possible role as a determinant of loyalty. A marked increase in WOM has occurred with the social media revolution.

Many observers accept that purchase intention reflects the efficacy of any marketing initiative and the same applies here for the evaluation of a company's social media endeavors.

Hutter et al. additionally consider brand page commitment which is defined as a "psychological attachment" consumers may develop to brand building activities on social media platforms. The extent to which a consumer is involved with such as a Facebook fanpage or similar features on other social media platforms can even indicate positive WOM. Annoyance is another variable included in the study. The premise here is that too much exposure to advertising information can irritate consumers who might respond unfavourably and develop negative views towards the brand. People enjoy greater control over advertising exposure in a social media context, making it less intrusive than other marketing techniques. However, marketers must still ensure that their activities are kept to tolerable levels to both prevent annoyance and make their strategy more effective.

To explore the issues further, a study involving visitors to the Facebook page of the car brand MINI was conducted. A usable sample of 311 included a virtually equal representation of males and females aged between 14 and over 40. The vast majority of respondents were MINI fans and 69 per cent were current owners of the brand. Subjects were asked for their response to questions and statements relating to the issues concerned which were presented so that they directly concerned MINI's Facebook activities.

Findings showed that:

- brand awareness, WOM and purchase intention are positively influenced when consumers engage with a brand's Facebook fanpage;
- annoyance with the fanpage has a negative impact on commitment and involvement with the fanpage and any resulting WOM; and
- a brand's social media activities influence all three phases of the HOE model.

Based on this work, the authors advise brand managers to make social media an integral part of their marketing communications. They refer to its value as a marketing tool as well as a channel for learning about consumer requirements and perceptions of their brand. The importance of understanding and complying with social media dynamics and rules of engagement is emphasized, along with addressing potential annoyance.

Further work is needed to better understand annoyance in a social media context and identify its primary causes. What might trigger enjoyment is equally worth of research. Academics might also consider brand pages from other product categories and additional factors which influence consumer purchase behaviour. Another suggestion is to further examine HOE to ascertain whether social media engagement could change the order of the model's steps.

(A précis of the article "The impact of user interactions in social media on brand awareness and purchase intention: the case of MINI on Facebook". Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)