



The Effect of Virtual Self Congruency on Consumer's Involvement in Social Media and the Motivation to Consume Social Media

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of virtual/ideal self image congruency on consumer's involvement in social media and the motivation to use social media. The research suggests a number of hypotheses that construct a model which is verified and tested through quantitative analysis. Research results confirm the existence of a positive effect of virtual/ideal self image congruence on consumers' enduring involvement in social media consumption (more specifically, on consumers' perception of the self expressive and hedonic values of social media consumption). Results also show a positive effect of consumers' enduring involvement in social media on their motivation to consume social media. The results provide academics with actionable tools to verify and enhance their understanding of their consumers' social media behaviors. Marketers can use this understanding in order to test and adjust their programs to the characteristics of their consumers, based on what they value and how they make their consumption decisions.

Keywords: Virtual Self, Image Congruency, Consumer Involvement, Social Media, Self Expression, Hedonic Consumption, Motivation.

Introduction

Social media marketers are always interested in understanding the psychological factors that lead consumers to feel that social media is relevant to them. Multi disciplinary research perspectives from social psychology, sociology, and behavioral sciences have been used by marketers to explain the formation of the behaviors that lead to consumers' engagement in social media consumption and the motivation to use social media on a continuance bases. The key focus of this study is to deepen the understanding of the effect of virtual/ideal self congruity and enduring involvement in social media on consumer's motivation to use these media on a continuance bases.

Literature Review

Zhao et al (2008) define identity as the part of an individual's self concept "by which we are known to others", and imply that the construction of an identity primarily takes place through an "identity announcement", followed by the "identity placement". In these phases, individuals communicate their aspired place in a social context which, if approved by peers, thereafter is offered a place in their context. In a physical world, consumption serves to produce a desired self through the images and styles conveyed by the individual's possessions.

Similar to the physical products, virtual consumption is used to confirm and project a virtual self image as people consume products and brands that are self-relevant to communicate a desired identity or a self image (Schau et al 2003). More specifically, the consumption and use of social media is similar to the one of physical products, as both function as mediators of cultural meaning (Jansson 2002). With the advent of new technology, social media allows consumers to present themselves using digital, rather than physical, referents in order to create an image of the self (Zhao et al 2008). For example, Facebook users can communicate any consumption pattern that they wish to associate themselves with, without even having to consume the good or service in question.

Currently, the available functions online enable users of social media to easily declare opinions and preferences, without necessarily even having to write or upload anything of their own. By just following or joining one of these applications, preferences as well as the possible meaning charged in these functions are clearly visible to all viewers with access to the user's profile. Côté (1997) and Zhao et al (2008) imply that individuals appear to be more likely to communicate their personal image indirectly through the declaration of opinions and preferences, and in the level of linguistic innovation as well as their friends list, photo or video albums, and wall posts, instead of an explicit self description. The inherent cultural meaning of goods therefore becomes an essential part of the communication in social media, as much of the communication is done through indirect symbols within the virtual community.

According to Kelemen et al (2001), the construction of such 'virtual community' is similar to that of any other community, online or offline. Virtual communities are constructed by individuals and are based on the experiences of individuals, thus giving virtual communities the same human characteristics as those of communities in the physical reality. The strength in any given community is based on its participants' level of engagement in its design, and on the level of sense-making and belonging the community manages to give its participants.

Many Researchers indicated that the characteristics of the virtual self image presented by consumers in virtual communities are relatively congruent with their ideal self image traits in the real world. However, this virtual self image is stripped from most unfavorable qualities which are inevitable in physical reality interactions (Shepherd 2005; Elliott & Davies 2006; Bååth 2011; Lindahl & Öhlund 2013). For example, Berg & Teriö (2010) reported that all their respondents claim that they think it is important that others perceive them in a "correct" or "good" way, and claimed that respondents tried to sort out information which they thought could be sensitive or might lead others perceiving them in an inaccurate way.

Berg & Teriö (2010) have even gone a step further to assume that the popularity of social media is a result of individuals' constant need to express their self image to their social surroundings. This opinion is in line with the symbolic self-completion theory of Wicklund & Gollwitzer (1982) which proposed that consumers lacking the indicators of an ideal self definition will display other compensating behaviors of the same self definition. Ideal self image congruency has been proved to cause higher enduring involvement in brands (Khaldi 2006) therefore, it can be concluded that consumers' feeling of self relevancy, or enduring

involvement, in social media consumption is a function of the congruence of their virtual-self image to their ideal-self image in this media.

H1: there is a positive effect of virtual/ideal self image congruence on consumers' enduring involvement in social media consumption.

Many researchers have confirmed that the concept of enduring involvement is a reflection of the perception of personal relevance for an object, activity, or event, to the individual in terms of her/his basic values, goals, and self-concept (Engel & Blackwell 1982, Bloch & Richins 1983, and Zaichkowsky 1985). This sense of involvement, or self relevancy, is caused by the self expressive and hedonic (fun or entertainment) dimensions which are considered the two main components of enduring involvement (Higie & Feick 1989; Khaldi 2006). This opinion was later confirmed by Seidman (2013) who concluded that the opportunity to express consumers' self-aspects online motivates a greater use of Facebook as a tool for personal disclosure.

Lim et al (2013) also concluded that social media involvement is considered to be the ultimate primary mediator of the effects of all other psychological factors on social media usage intentions. This conclusion was further stressed by Persaud (2013) who considered that any future research regarding social media should also take involvement with the page (i.e. Engagement with the page) into account as a possible mediating variable affecting consumer behavior online. In light of the above argument, it can be assumed that consumers' virtual self congruence will increase the perception of the self expressive value and the hedonic value of social media consumption which will eventually increase the motivation to use social media.

H1a: there is a positive effect of virtual/ideal self image congruence on consumers' perception of the self expressive value of social media consumption.

H1b: there is a positive effect of virtual/ideal self image congruence on consumers' perception of the hedonic value of social media consumption.

H2: there is a positive effect of consumers' enduring involvement in social media on their motivation to consume social media.

The Proposed Model, Sampling and Scales

The aggregation of research hypotheses suggests the construction of a model that illustrates the interrelated relationships between the intended variables as shown below in Figure 1. The proposed model is assessed through the usage of specific, actionable, and measurable behavioral scales which are used to compute the level of virtual self congruency, enduring involvement in social media (including the perceived hedonic value and the self expressive value of social media), and the motivation to use social media.

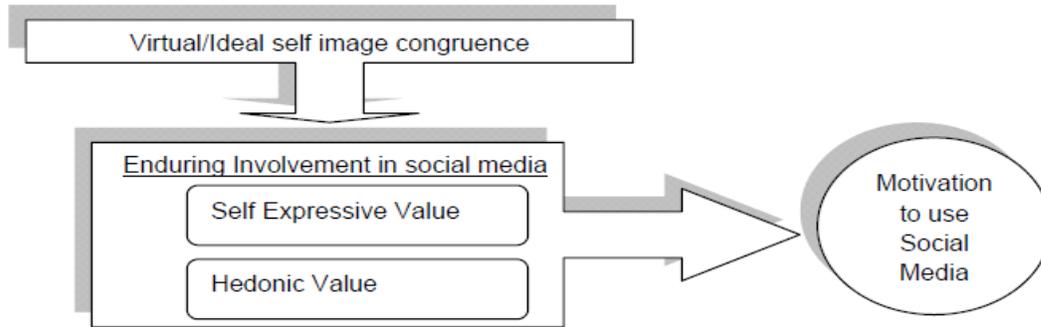


Figure 1 The Proposed Model of the Study

In order to test the suggested hypotheses and the proposed model of the study, a convenient sample of 300 university students were surveyed. After weeding out incomplete and unusable responses, 268 questionnaires were retained for analysis. All research variables were measured using a five point “Likert” type scale. The virtual self congruence scale was derived from Sirgy et al (1997) and Khaldi (2006) while the enduring brand involvement scale was adopted from Higie & Feick (1989) and Mahoney (2013). The motivation to use social media scale was also adopted from Mahoney (2013).

Data Analysis

Regression analyses revealed a positive effect of virtual/ideal self image congruence on consumers’ enduring involvement in social media consumption with positive coefficients ($b=0.670$ and $\beta=0.717$, Sig = 0.000) explaining about 51.4% ($R^2 = 0.514$) of the variance in consumers’ enduring involvement in social media consumption. Therefore, H1 is supported.

Regression analysis also revealed the positive effect of virtual/ideal self image congruence on consumers’ perception of the self expressive value of social media consumption with positive coefficients ($b=0.776$ and $\beta=0.754$, Sig = 0.000) explaining about 56.8% ($R^2 = 0.568$) of the variance in consumers’ perception of the self expressive value of social media consumption. Therefore, H1a is supported.

The positive effect of virtual/ideal self image congruence on consumers’ perception of the hedonic value of social media consumption was also proved through regression analysis with positive coefficients ($b=0.555$ and $\beta=0.511$, Sig = 0.000) explaining about 26.2% ($R^2 = 0.262$) of the variance in consumers’ perception of the hedonic value of social media consumption. Therefore, H1b is supported.

Finally, the positive effect of consumers’ enduring involvement in social media on their motivation to consume social media was also confirmed through regression analysis with positive coefficients ($b=0.822$ and $\beta=0.695$, Sig = 0.000) explaining about 48.2% ($R^2 = 0.482$) of the variance in consumers’ motivation to consume social media. Therefore, H2 is supported.

Results Discussion

Research results indicate a very powerful effect of virtual self image congruence on consumers’ enduring involvement in social media consumption, especially on consumers’ perception of the self expressiveness of social media which by far surpasses the effect of consumers’ perception of the hedonic value of social media. This conclusion confirms the previous opinion that the popularity of social media is a result of its various features that have

opened up new ways for consumers to communicate themselves that real life cannot offer to the same degree (Berg & Teriö 2010). The hedonic experience of social media consumption through the virtual consumption (or self-association) of products, ideas, and experiences is also considered to be important in increasing consumer involvement in social media consumption.

This hedonic virtual experience has the same psychological effects on consumer behavior as the physical hedonic experience as illustrated by Steinfeld et al (2008) who concluded that online socialization in the long run could lead to the same positive feelings as real life socialization. Finally, social media enduring involvement is shown to have a strong effect on the motivation to consume this media which is in line with most previous research where involvement increases the intentions and perceived importance of product or brand consumption (Pucely et al 1988; Schwer & Daneshvary 1995; Lee 2000). The findings of this research draw the attention to the importance of investigating consumer related psychological factors, rather than web related technical factors as influencing social media consumption.

The findings of this research confirm Seidman (2013) opinion that focusing on studying consumers' motivations for social media usage, rather than frequency of usage, aid in understanding the relationship between personality and social media usage. The current research also provides some insights for social media marketers to create media pages and messages that promote virtual self expression and interaction with the online society as well as enhancing the hedonic experience when consuming such messages or login to the marketers' pages online.

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