

What do Consumers Tweet about? The Role of Product Type and Brand Belief Type on User-Generated Content

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines brand-related user-generated content (UGC) by focusing on a specific social networking site, that is, Twitter. In two studies focusing on services (Study 1) and respectively goods (Study 2), we show, based on content analysis of tweets, that there are significant differences between utilitarian and hedonic products with regard to the type of brand beliefs included in the tweets. Specifically, for hedonic products, the discussion is dominated by experiential beliefs, whereas for utilitarian products, it is dominated by functional beliefs. Symbolic beliefs play an important role in UGC neither for utilitarian products, nor for hedonic products. The paper concludes with discussions, managerial implications, and directions for future research.

Keywords: *Twitter, Utilitarian and Hedonic Products, Functional, Experiential, Symbolic Beliefs*

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites have revolutionised modern human communication, enabling users to interact, express, share, and create content about anything, including brands. For instance, consumers watch or even post brand-related videos about Absolut Vodka on YouTube, they talk about Monster energy drinks on Twitter, and upload pictures of their new Nike sneakers to Facebook. This form of consumer engagement is called user-generated content (UGC) and is important for marketers because much of UGC is brand-related (Burmam & Ulrike, 2008) and has the potential to shape consumers' brand perceptions (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012).

With the continued growth of online participation in content creation and sharing, consumers are exerting greater influence over products and brands (Jevons & Gabbott, 2000; Riegner, 2007). However, a major challenge in utilising UGC lies in the significant amount of UGC available and the difficulty in identifying the more valuable content that is likely to make a real impact on businesses and other consumers. Indeed, examples of poor practices indicate that UGC does not always

work as brand managers might hope (Shenkan & Sichel, 2007). Therefore, a better understanding of UGC would be critical to marketers, who want active consumers who deliberately engage in online activities and communication thus, hopefully, remaining loyal to the firm and its brands.

This article contributes to the literature of UGC by exploring an underrepresented aspect of consumer communication on social media, that is, use of brand beliefs (functional, experiential, and symbolic) about different product types (functional and hedonic) in user-generated content. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of recognising that, for many products and under varied circumstances, purchase decisions are driven by brand beliefs other than purely functional, such as experiential and symbolic (see Keller, 1993). Although social media appears to be a major force in the formation of brand beliefs, no study could be found that systematically examines the role that these brand beliefs play in UGC across various product categories.

Attitude theory has long espoused the role of brand beliefs in attitude formation (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Brand beliefs are supposed to create an overall attitude towards an object or person and, subsequently, lead to intention

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and behaviour. The importance of brand beliefs in creating favorable behaviour towards brands is, thus, undisputed. However, it is not clear whether the nature of the product category affects attitude formation (see Chaudhuri & Ligas, 2006) and the role of brand beliefs in the context of social media. For instance, while functional brand beliefs (e.g., removes tough stains) may be appropriate for a utilitarian product category such as bathroom cleaners, are they also desirable in a hedonic product category such as beer? Also, what role do experiential and symbolic beliefs play in user-generated discussions in social media?

To answer these questions, we first provide a review of relevant literature and state our hypotheses. Next, we discuss the methodology and the results of content analysis. In this paper, we focus on Twitter as the source for UGC and analyse tweets for two services (Study 1), one hedonic (cruise) and one utilitarian (airline); and for two goods (Study 2), one hedonic (beer) and one utilitarian (deodorant). We conclude with discussions, managerial implications, and limitations of our study.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Given the tremendous growth of online user-generated content and the desire by marketers to better utilise this space, it is beneficial to identify the type of brand information that is shared via social media. In this paper, we focus on messages that include consumers' beliefs about different benefits offered by products or services, which have been shown to be an important motivator of consumers' behaviour.

Indeed, several researchers (Keller, 1993; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986) have advocated a brand management strategy based on identifying the extent to which consumers associate different brand benefits with specific brands. The brand benefits that underlie consumers' brand beliefs represent "the personal value and meanings that consumers attach to the brand" (Keller, 1993) and can be functional, experiential, and symbolic. Beliefs about functional benefits are the most intrinsic beliefs about product consumption and usually correspond to product attributes, such as the belief that Old Spice deodorant has a pleasant smell. Experiential beliefs are related to what it feels like to use the product, the cognitive and sensory stimulation of the consumer, and usually correspond to product attributes as well. For example, an experiential belief can be related to one feeling clean throughout the day when using Old Spice. Finally, symbolic beliefs are the most extrinsic advantages of product consumption. They usually correspond to non-product-related attributes and relate to underlying needs for social approval, personal

expression, or self-esteem. For instance, the belief that Old Spice can make someone "smell like a millionaire jet fighter pilot" is a symbolic belief about the brand.

In the consumer behaviour literature, these types of beliefs have been studied in various contexts. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of recognising that, for many products and under varied circumstances, purchase decisions are driven by considerations other than purely functional, such as experiential and symbolic. The distinction among functional, experiential, and symbolic beliefs is further significant because they may not be evoked or behave in unison. Indeed, previous literature indicates that the effectiveness of communicating these product beliefs depends on the media, with functional and symbolic beliefs being more effectively communicated via advertising, and experiential beliefs being better communicated by product direct experience (see Kempf & Laczniak, 2001; Wright & Lynch, 1995). However, no research to date has examined what role these beliefs play in social media.

Furthermore, these findings should be considered in the context of product type, as previous research has indicated that the effectiveness of these claims depends on whether the product is hedonic or utilitarian (see Micu & Coulter, 2012). Primarily utilitarian products (e.g., hair dryers, washing machines, and lawn mowers) have tangible, objective features that offer functional benefits, fulfill utilitarian needs, and are meant to solve problems (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993), whereas primarily hedonic products (e.g., jewellery, perfumes, massages) have subjective, non-tangible features that fulfill experiential needs, and whose consumption produces enjoyment and pleasure (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). The distinction between utilitarian and hedonic products has clear implications on how the consumer evaluates the good (Chaudhuri & Ligas, 2006). Specifically, for utilitarian products, tangible product features (such as functional) play a more important role in attitude formation than non-tangible (experiential or symbolic) features, which in turn are more important for hedonic products. However, research to date has not examined the role of the beliefs about these product features in UGC and the extent to which we can apply what we know from the attitude formation literature to the social media context.

Although different products can be high or low in both hedonic and utilitarian attributes (Crowley, Spangenberg, & Hughes, 1992; Voss, Spangenberg, & Grohmann 2003), this research focuses on products that are primarily or relatively more hedonic, respectively utilitarian. This approach is consistent with previous work (Dhar

& Wertenbroch, 2000; O'Curry & Strahilevitz, 2001; Okada, 2005) and it allows us to study how the aggregate perception of a good as either hedonic or utilitarian affects behaviours on social media in ways that are theoretically explainable and predictable.

Hedonic products deliver benefits primarily in the form of experiential enjoyment, whereas utilitarian products deliver practical, functional benefits. Thus, because of the nature of these two product types, it should be easier for people to create content that includes experiential beliefs for hedonic goods, respectively functional beliefs for utilitarian goods.

With regard to symbolic beliefs, research indicates that they help create brand personality (Keller, 1993), which in turn seems to be an important factor in a brand's success in social media. Indeed, a recent study conducted by Millward Brown indicates that brand personality correlates positively with the brand's number of fans in social media (Millward Brown: Knowledge Point, 2011). Additionally, previous research shows that symbolic benefits significantly affect positive word-of-mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Hur, Park, & Kim, 2010). Talking about a brand with other people is an important part of the process by which consumers use brands to help construct their identity (Holt, 1997, 1998). Thus, a plausible conclusion that emerges from these findings is that consumers are expected to use more symbolic (vs. functional or experiential) beliefs when engaging in discussions on social media.

Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1: For utilitarian products, we expect consumers to generate:

H1a: more UGC that includes symbolic versus functional beliefs.

H1b: more UGC that includes functional versus experiential beliefs.

H2: For hedonic products, we expect consumers to generate:

H2a: more UGC that includes symbolic versus experiential beliefs.

H2b: more UGC that includes experiential versus functional beliefs.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate our hypotheses, we used the Twitter social communication platform, one of the most popular microblogging services. Twitter allows users to publish

(tweet), reply to, and forward posts that cannot exceed 140-characters in length. Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has accumulated 288 million monthly active users (Twitter.com, 2015) and offers companies access to a very loyal group of customers. Indeed, 67% of brand followers indicate they purchase the brand they follow on Twitter (Malhotra, Malhotra, & See, 2012). Although we used Twitter in this research, we expect our results to be applicable to other microblogging services because they all share a set of similar characteristics: (1) short text messages, (2) instantaneous message delivery, and (3) subscriptions to receive updates.

Two studies were conducted to examine our hypotheses. Our units of analysis were individual postings, which we collected from a limited time-frame (January 2012 to December 2012) using a social media monitoring tool. In Study 1, the postings were randomly selected for two brands in the service category: Southwest airline (utilitarian) and Disney cruise (hedonic) by using the keywords "Southwest," respectively "Disney cruise." In Study 2, we examined whether our results could replicate within different product categories. Thus, we selected two goods, one utilitarian (Old Spice deodorant) and one hedonic (Dos Equis beer) and used the keywords "Old Spice" and "Dos Equis" to collect the data. The postings were screened to ensure that they were produced by consumers and they did not have an apparent commercial objective.

Content was coded "yes" for functional belief if it contained functional brand information (e.g., "Southwest is cheaper") and "no" otherwise. Similarly, it was coded "yes" for experiential belief if the brand experience was mentioned, referenced, or featured in the posting (e.g., "So I got some new deodorant, old spice specifically, and it burns sooo bad, #ouch") and "no" otherwise. Finally, UGC was coded "yes" for symbolic beliefs if the posting mentioned symbolic brand information, related to non-product related attributes ("Upgraded my deodorant from Axe to Old Spice. I smell so sexy!") and "no" otherwise.

We used a content analysis to examine the content of communications (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). The content analysis has long been used by researchers interested in examining communications such as advertisements, media stories, and web sites (Kassarjian, 1977; Roznowski, 2003; Yun, Park, & Ha, 2008). To keep the sampling scope manageable, but still capture a reasonably representative set of UGC for our brands, one of the researchers coded one hundred postings chosen randomly from the entire pool of postings. Another researcher coded a smaller portion of UGC chosen randomly from the 100 postings. The inter-rated reliability was .9, thus falling above the

accepted level of .8 (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). Any discrepancies were solved through discussions among the researchers. Following coding, category frequencies were tabulated and statistical differences were assessed using Chi-square tests conducted across the three types of beliefs for each brand. If these tests yielded a significant Chi-square statistic, follow-up tests were run in order to establish which specific differences (functional versus symbolic, experiential versus symbolic, or functional versus experiential) were contributing significantly to that statistic.

STUDY 1

Procedure

Two services were chosen based on a pretest with 54 undergraduate students who rated various product categories on five 7-point semantic-differential items measuring the utilitarian dimension (e.g., not functional/functional) and the hedonic dimension (e.g., not fun/fun) (Voss *et al.*, 2003). Based on participants' scores, we identified cruises as hedonic, as they were rated significantly more hedonic ($M = 6.00$) than utilitarian [$M = 3.99$; $t(53) = 10.03$, $p < .001$]; and airlines as utilitarian, which were rated significantly more utilitarian ($M = 6.10$) than hedonic [$M = 2.98$, $t(52) = 14.32$, $p < .001$].

From each product categories, one brand was chosen for our study, Disney Cruise, respectively Southwest as the airline. These brands were deemed appropriate in

the service category because they are popular and thus generate enough discussions on social media to allow for a meaningful analysis.

Results

Analysis of data reveals some interesting differences between the utilitarian and the hedonic brand with regard to type of brand belief [Chi-square(2) = 46.52, $p < .001$]. Contrary to our expectations, for the utilitarian brand, Southwest, there was no mention of symbolic beliefs. Thus H1a is not supported. Instead, the discussions were dominated by functional beliefs (81.8%; e.g., “@[...] try southwest. They are usually cheaper and your bags fly free”), followed by experiential beliefs (18.2%; e.g., “Why do I feel like cattle whenever I fly southwest?”) [Chi-square (1) = 40.1, $p < .001$] (see Fig. 1). Thus, H1b is fully supported.

For the hedonic brand, Disney Cruise, the results do not support H2a, as the symbolic beliefs do not play an important role in UGC (8%; e.g., “I wanna go on a Disney cruise!! I’m such a big kid !!!!”). The discussions are instead dominated by experiential beliefs (57.0%; e.g., “I’m ba-ack!!! Had such an absolutely amazing time on our Disney cruise to Alaska”), followed by functional beliefs (35.0%; e.g., “Disney Cruise Line is by far one of the best for Families!”) [Chi-square (1) = 5.26, $p = .022$]. Thus, H2b is supported (see Fig. 1).

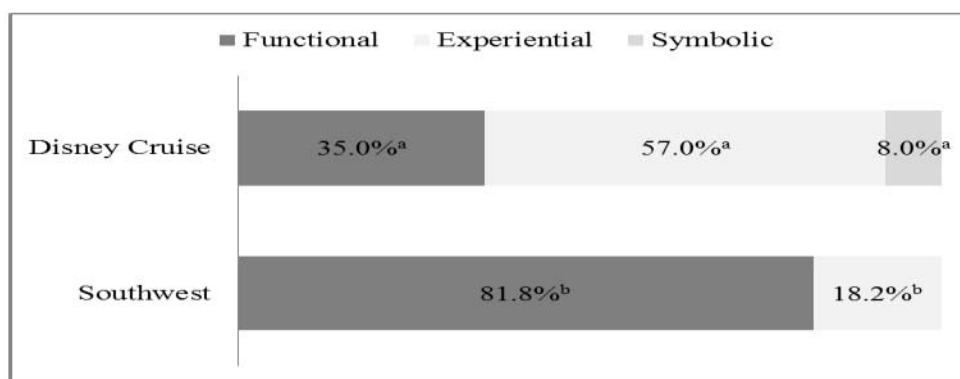


Fig. 1: Belief Type by Brand (% of tweets)

Note: The percentages with the same superscript are significantly different at $p < .05$

STUDY 2

Based on the same pretest as above, two products were chosen: beer as the hedonic product; it was rated significantly more hedonic ($M = 5.01$) than utilitarian

[M= 3.95; $t(53) = 3.57, p < .001$]; and deodorant as the utilitarian product, which was rated significantly more utilitarian (M = 6.74) than hedonic [M = 3.69, $t(53) = 16.01, p < .001$]. In order to investigate whether symbolic beliefs play a role in UGC, we chose two brands that have succeeded in creating a symbolic image in customers' minds through advertising, that is Old Spice (utilitarian) and Dos Equis (hedonic). These brands are also deemed appropriate for our study because of similarities with regard to their success in social media, both having about 2.5 million fans on Facebook when the data was collected.

The results show again a product type by belief type interaction [Chi-square(2) = 12.15, $p = .002$]. Contrary to our expectations, symbolic beliefs (29.0%; e.g., "Buying and wearing old spice deodorant was THE best idea. I smell like the sexiest of men") did not dominate the discussions (29.0%). However, as hypothesized in H1b, UGC including functional beliefs (50.0%; e.g., "Old Spice

is the world greatest deodorant") exceeded that including experiential beliefs (e.g., "I smell so good") [50.0% vs. 21.0 %, Chi-square(1) = 11.85, $p = .001$], providing support for H1b. Additionally, we found that functional beliefs were mentioned more than symbolic beliefs [Chi-square(1) = 5.58, $p = .018$] (see Fig. 2).

For the hedonic brand, Dos Equis, the results show that, as expected, experiential beliefs (44.0%; e.g., "That dos equis gave me a nice Lil buzz before work"), were tweeted more than functional beliefs (e.g., "Dos equis is the best beer!!") [44.0% vs. 34.0%, Chi-square(1) = 3.28, $p = .07$] and more than symbolic beliefs ("I'm gone drink some dos equis over the weekend so I can do incredible things lol," "After 10 Dos Equis beers, I think I'm the most interesting man in the world") [44.0% vs. 22.0%, Chi-square(1) = 9.06, $p = .003$] (see Fig. 2). Thus, H2a is not supported, but H2b is supported.

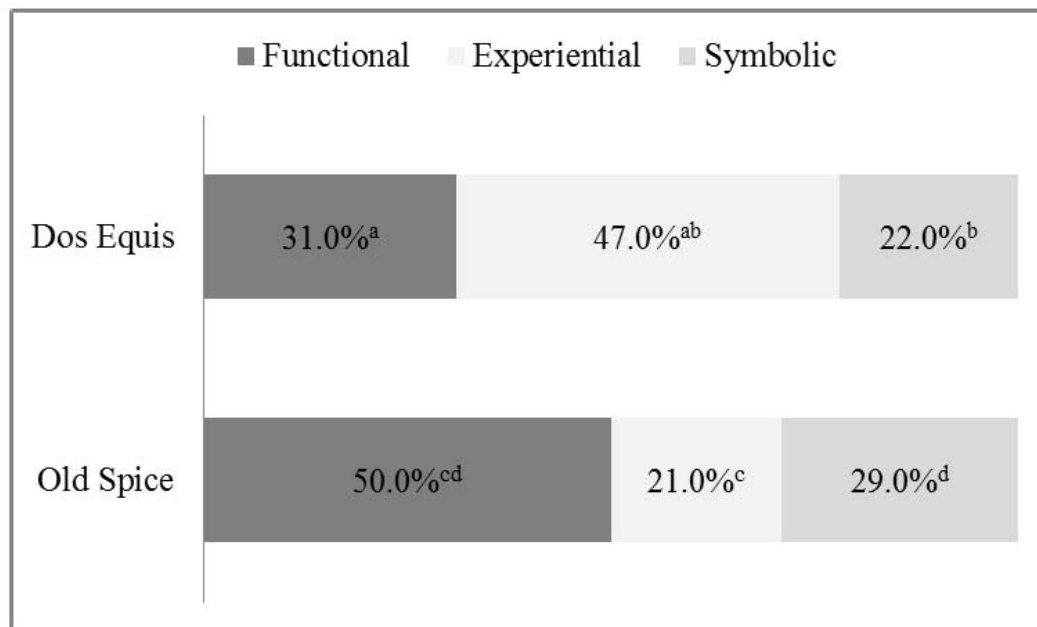


Fig. 2: Belief Type by Brand (% of tweets)

Note: ^a Percentages significantly different at $p = .07$; ^{bcd} Percentages significantly different at $p < .05$

DISCUSSIONS, MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Nowadays, there is a growing interest in digital interactivity, especially in consumer activity in social media. Social media is empowering customers, and their role is shifting from being passive recipients of information to becoming active generators of information (Stewart &

Pavlou, 2002). As consumers are increasingly performing activities previously controlled by companies, the entire marketing landscape is changing. Thus, companies need to better understand what motivates the consumers' online behaviour in order to create mutual benefits from the use of social media.

Our results indicate that product type (hedonic versus utilitarian) fosters UGC that may be different with regard to the type of brand beliefs that is shared on Twitter. Because the number of points that can be communicated by marketers in a tweet are limited by available space, the

selection of which attributes to include in tweets becomes a critical and difficult decision. We reported evidence that functional beliefs dominate discussions for the utilitarian services/goods, whereas experiential beliefs dominate discussions for the hedonic services/goods. The symbolic beliefs do not seem to play a major role in UGC, although they are included in UGC more when the brand's strategy is to develop a symbolic brand image.

These results are in line, but also contrary to the previous findings in the literature of brand attitude, creating new opportunities, but also new challenges to marketers in charge of managing a brand's social media.

Indeed, the insights provided in this study could help marketing managers to design their own viral marketing campaigns more effectively. First, managers need to be certain on the positioning of their offerings, because the consumers' perception of the offerings as more utilitarian, respectively hedonic, will have an effect on what brand beliefs consumers discuss in social media. Although our findings show very little engagement in discussions involving symbolic beliefs, it is important to note that findings from previous research indicate that symbolic beliefs help build brand personalities, which seem to be a necessary condition for social media success. Therefore, though studies have yet to find that symbolic beliefs are more important than other beliefs in UGC, no claim is being made that functional (experiential) beliefs are always superior for utilitarian (hedonic) products. Instead, past findings and those reported here beg the question: "Under what other conditions will functional and experiential beliefs be more superior than symbolic beliefs?" Identifying a full array of factors (in addition to the variables examined here) that determine which beliefs are more important to consumer in social media should be a primary goal for research in this area.

Previous research also indicates that differences may exist among various social media venues with regard to brand content. Indeed, Berger and Iyengar (2013) show that the channel of communication (e.g., face-to-face, social media, etc) affects what people talk about and how they talk about brands. For instance, YouTube and Facebook, as opposed to Twitter, may allow users to more easily share their experiential beliefs by posting pictures or videos. Thus, future research may examine differences among various social media venues with regard to belief types that are involved in discussions.

Future work should also look at different product types. As we suggest earlier, products can be both utilitarian and hedonic in nature (Voss *et al.*, 2003). This research focused on products that were primarily more hedonic,

respectively utilitarian. What happens in instances where the consumer holds both a utilitarian and hedonic perception of the brand? Do they discuss functional and experiential beliefs equally? Future research would not only identify which brand belief (or both?) the consumer shares via social media, but also which belief has a higher impact on the brand's bottom line.

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