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Brand content diffusion on Social Networking Sites: Exploring the triadic relationship between the brand, the individual, and the community

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INTRODUCTION

Dissertation overview

Dissertation Overview

Social media have changed the landscape of marketing communication (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013; Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), as evidenced by the increased importance of blogs (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010), online forums (J. Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007), and online consumer reviews (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder, 2011), and by the emergence of webcare as an important tool for brand reputation management (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Unlike traditional media, where most brand communication takes place via advertisements, social media enable consumers to be more active and take control of the communication about, and the interaction with, the brand. This is seen, for example, by how social media users not only consume brand content, but also actively contribute to it, and create it (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011).

A case in point is the emergence of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook or Twitter. These websites offer a space where users can create their own profiles or establish connections with other users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), and they are increasingly used as a source of news (Mitchel & Page, 2013) and for brand-related activities. On average, Twitter users follow on five or more brands (Schreiner, 2013) and frequently mention brands in their own messages (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Nagy & Midha, 2014). SNS users seek not only incentives, such as promotions or rewards, but also information about brands, as well as social interaction with their favorite

brands and with the community of brand followers (Kwon, Kim, Sung, & Yoo, 2015).

The relevance of SNSs for brand communication continues to grow as the popularity of these websites increases. For example, in 2005 about 8% of the online population in the United States used SNSs. Just nine years later, 73% of all the online population, and 90% of those in the 18-29 age group, were active SNS users (Pew Research Center, 2015). Brands and companies respond to this trend by integrating SNSs into their communication strategies, including the creation and promotion of SNS profiles (Araujo & Neijens, 2012). When publishing content on SNSs, brands often provide information about the company or its products (Kwon & Sung, 2011), and frequently adopt strategies that aim to establish a dialogue with stakeholders (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Users who subscribe to receive content from brands on SNSs not only read the content or write comments about it, but also have the ability to pass it along to their own friends or contacts on the SNS via mechanisms of information diffusion such as retweeting (on Twitter) or sharing (on Facebook).

When retweeting or sharing a message, a user generally passes the complete message along to his or her network of contacts on the SNS. This process usually happens in a public and non-targeted manner. In other words, the user who retweets or shares the brand message usually passes it along to all of his or her contacts, with the message also being highlighted on the user's own profile page on the SNS. Retweeting emerged almost spontaneously on Twitter, with users manually copying messages written by others and indicating that they were retweets (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). Twitter then turned this into an official process, including it as an option on its own user interface. Facebook deployed the option for sharing content, similar to retweeting, soon afterward. By making these mechanisms part of their user interfaces, Twitter

and Facebook helped accelerate information diffusion as an even larger share of SNS users could make use of them by simply clicking a button.

While these mechanisms for information diffusion may be considered structurally equivalent to email forwarding, they also lead to different communication practices, due to their more public nature, and also considering that they are used as a way to "validate messages and engage with others" (Boyd et al., 2010, p. 1). This validation is evidenced by the manner in which the message being retweeted or shared appears to the receiver: The receiver sees not only the message and the name of the user who (or the brand that) originally created it, but also information about which person in the receiver's network retweeted or shared the message, and how often the message has been shared or retweeted by other SNS users. This information could potentially make the brand message more credible when compared to, for example, an advertisement.

While these mechanisms of information diffusion can be of particular importance to both brands and consumers, academic research on their antecedents and consequences is still scarce. The following section outlines the focus of this dissertation, and why understanding this process is important to both academic research and practice.

FOCUS AND RELEVANCE OF THIS DISSERTATION

This dissertation advances academic research by presenting an investigation of the antecedents and the consequences of brand content diffusion on SNSs. The focus of the dissertation is not, therefore, on why consumers decide to talk *about* brands online (i.e. user generated content), but rather on why they decide to pass along messages *created by* brands via sharing or retweeting without additional incentives from the brand. This is an important distinction, as consumers who decide to pass along messages

created by brands using these processes are, for the most part, endorsing the message and the brand in a public manner.

Because an SNS user is passing along a message to a network of contacts on the SNS, we propose a conceptual model that investigates how the characteristics of the message, of the network and of the user influence brand content diffusion. This conceptual model is comparable to the idea proposed by viral marketing researchers of a triadic relationship between the brand (or in our case, the message created by the brand), the consumer, and the community to which the consumer belongs (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). We investigate these aspects both as antecedents and consequences of brand content diffusion. In other words, we explore what motivates SNS users to decide to pass along brand messages in the first place, and also how receiving these messages passed along by others influences the receiver's attitudes towards the brand, and towards the message itself.

Understanding the antecedents and consequences of brand content diffusion on SNSs via these mechanisms for information diffusion is important from both an academic and a practical perspective. From an academic perspective, investigating this topic helps advance viral marketing research, which aims to "influence consumers to pass along commercial messages to other consumers" (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011, p. 211) in order to maximize the brand's reach and influence. Considering the extremely large share of the online population using SNSs, and how frequently SNS users pass along content to others, retweeting and sharing are arguably ideal information diffusion mechanisms for viral marketing. Yet, despite their potential to viral marketing, research is still scarce on how these mechanisms of information diffusion are used in the context of brand content.

The importance of exploring these mechanisms of information diffusion goes beyond, however, merely the fact that they are frequently used.

The lower complexity to pass along information brought on by SNSs also changes the dynamics of information diffusion when compared to other environments (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012). We argue that these new dynamics also influence how viral marketing processes take place online, which calls for further investigation. Moreover, social media (and SNSs) empower consumers in their relationship with brands, and challenge the "one-to-many" premise of brand communication held by traditional advertisement (Gensler et al., 2013). We propose that these mechanisms of information diffusion also empower consumers in their relationships with the brand, as consumers can not only create their own content *about* brands, but also take an active role in passing along content *from* brands. Exploring this process, therefore, fills a critical gap in our understanding of how the brand-consumer relationship is changed by social media.

We fill these gaps in the literature by exploring the antecedents and consequences of this process to brands and to SNS users. In order to advance viral marketing literature, we draw from two similar, yet separate, lines of research: electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) research and viral advertising research. eWOM research explores why consumers talk about brands online, and is traditionally defined as a consumer-to-consumer process, based on messages created by consumers (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). This line of research can contribute with important insights into the motivations for, and the personality characteristics and the influence of, brand-related activity on social media in general, and SNSs in particular. However, as we explore a process in which the message is created by a brand and not by a user, it is then particularly important to understand how findings from eWOM are applicable in this context. More specifically, it is not yet clear whether what would motivate a user to express her or his opinion online, or pass along the opinions of other consumers, would be as relevant, or even as applicable, to the decision to publicly endorse a brand message by passing it along.

Moreover, eWOM can be positive or negative in tone (Arndt, 1967; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). For example, consumers engage in eWOM to help the brand, as well as to express their dissatisfaction with negative experiences (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). We focus specifically on the positive aspect of eWOM, and investigate the process of passing along brand messages as a way to (positively) help extend the reach of the brand message. The possibility of an SNS user adding negative comments to a message while passing it along certainly exists both on Facebook and on Twitter, however we expect it to follow processes and motivations that are different from the ones explored in this dissertation.

Viral advertising research investigates the diffusion of "business or user generated advertisements from consumer to consumer, based on ad content likeability, entertainment, and controversial characteristics" (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011, p. 211). Such research can bring therefore important findings regarding message characteristics that would motivate consumers to retweet or share brand content on SNSs. However, these findings need to be validated, for two reasons. Firstly, viral advertising research has mostly focused on the targeted diffusion of brand advertising, especially via email or with viral SNS campaigns. Consumers who decide to pass along brand messages by retweeting or sharing do so in a much more public and less targeted way, as the message will appear to all their SNS contacts and on their SNS profile page, instead of only to the people that they selected to send an email or to invite for an SNS campaign. Secondly, viral advertisement research focuses on ads, which are frequently videos, interactive advertisements or games. We argue, however, that brand messages on SNSs may not be fully comparable to advertisements as (1) consumers choose to receive them on an ongoing basis and, more importantly, (2) brands communicate information in these messages that may go beyond traditional advertising (Kwon & Sung, 2011). Moreover, viral advertising has highlighted the usage of emotional, funny, and even

controversial content in viral ads aimed at stimulating pass-along behavior
(e.g., Porter & Golan, 2006). It remains to be seen, however, whether and, if
so, how these findings are applicable in this new context, especially considering
the differences in content (i.e., interactive advertisements versus brand
messages) and in the diffusion mechanism (i.e., mostly private and targeted,
versus mostly public and untargeted).

The findings presented in this dissertation are not only relevant to
viral marketing, but they also help extend emerging research on SNS in
general, both on information diffusion and on self-disclosure and image
management. Information diffusion research on SNSs, and especially that on
Twitter, has so far investigated the diffusion of all types of messages from all
types of users (e.g., Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011; Z. Liu, Liu, & Li,
2012; Suh, Hong, Pirolli, & Chi, 2010). This includes content about news
events, politics, entertainment, and sports, as well as regular communication
between SNS users. Such a broad focus is neither sufficient nor specific
enough for research on brand communication, as the topics and the
motivations for passing along these messages are not directly applicable to the
consumer brand relationship. This dissertation addresses the lack of brand-
related focus in previous research, and helps to better understand the influence
of message, network and user characteristics that are specifically related to
brand content diffusion. Moreover, emerging research also suggests that
engaging in brand-related activities on SNSs is a way to articulate one's own
actual or idealized self on the SNS (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). By
investigating personality characteristics associated with this behavior, this
dissertation helps extend self-disclosure and image management research on
SNSs, shedding light on the psychological aspects of a brand-related activity in
which SNS users frequently engage, yet that has hardly been investigated.

From a practical perspective, there are several reasons why these
information diffusion mechanisms are of particular importance to brands.

Firstly, consumers who retweet or share brand content help extend the reach of the brand message beyond the community of users who already follows the brand on the SNS. This creates a good opportunity for brands to communicate with new audiences. Secondly, the message appears to the receivers as a regular message (i.e., not as an advertisement) and associated with the name of the user who passed it along. This may increase the message's credibility and influence, and therefore be an advantage for the brand. Thirdly, consumers who retweet brand messages demonstrate more positive attitudes towards the brand, including identification, commitment and trust, compared to those who do not retweet brand content (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). Therefore, understanding in detail the factors that motivate consumers to adopt this behavior might help brands meet the expectations of their most loyal and motivated consumers. Finally, this type of information diffusion, unlike advertising, costs the brand little or nothing, as it relies on the consumer's own willingness to pass along brand messages to his or her own personal network on the SNS. Understanding this process can, therefore, help brands create messages that are more likely to be passed along, and leverage the influence of the community of brand followers on the SNS.

This dissertation explores the antecedents and consequences of brand content diffusion on SNSs, and is organized as follows. The first three chapters explore the antecedents of this process, namely how (1) message, (2) network and (3) personality characteristics influence brand content diffusion via SNSs. The concluding chapter investigates the consequences of this behavior, particularly how it influences attitudes toward the brand, and toward the message. The following sections provide an outline of each chapter.

CHAPTER 1 – THE INFLUENCE OF THE MESSAGE

Research has indicated that message characteristics influence consumers' pass-along behavior, especially in viral advertising. On the one hand, consumers tend to pass along messages the more that these messages are able to trigger certain types of emotions (e.g., Chiu, Hsieh, Kao, & Lee, 2007; Dobele et al., 2007; Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, 2004). On the other hand, consumers also privilege the informational value of the messages when deciding whether to pass them along (e.g., Chiu et al., 2007; Huang, Lin, & Lin, 2009). Moreover, emerging research on Twitter suggests that links and hashtags, among other characteristics, also increase the likelihood of pass-along behavior (Petrovic, Osborne, & Lavrenko, 2011; Suh et al., 2010). This emerging research on Twitter, however, deals with generic content, written by all types of users, including celebrities, politicians and news organizations. Its findings, therefore, still need to be validated with regards to the specific mechanisms of brand content diffusion.

The study presented in Chapter 1 extends earlier research by investigating how message characteristics influence pass-along behavior of content from top global brands on Twitter. Employing automated data extraction and natural language processing procedures, the study categorizes 19,343 brand messages, and evaluates how message characteristics such as informational, emotional, and traceability cues influence pass-along behavior via retweets. The results indicate that informational cues are predictors of higher levels of retweeting. This is particularly the case when the informational cues provided specific details about products, or have links to the brand website, to SNSs, and to photos or videos. And although emotional cues do not motivate retweeting on their own, they do reinforce the effects of informational cues and hashtags when they appear in the same message. These results indicate, therefore, that Twitter users are especially interested in

messages that are rich in informational content, and are more likely to pass such messages along. These findings are particularly important to practice, considering that the way in which a message is written and the information that it contains are arguably the characteristics that are most under the brand's control.

CHAPTER 2 – THE INFLUENCE OF THE NETWORK

Diffusion literature has discussed at length the prominent role of interpersonal networks in processes of information or innovation diffusion, including the role of opinion leaders (for an extensive overview, see Rogers, 2003). Emerging research on Twitter draws from diffusion literature to investigate whether, and if so, how certain types of users are able to stimulate pass-along behavior for generic (i.e., not brand-specific) content. The results are mixed. Some studies found that a minority of users on the SNS indeed hold "significant influence over a variety of topics" and have a "disproportionate amount of influence" (Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010, p. 17). Other studies, however, found that most of the information diffusion is done by users who have average or below average influence, but are able to connect two otherwise poorly connected groups (Bakshy et al., 2011). Until now, empirical research has not explored in detail how these interpersonal network characteristics influence pass-along behavior of brand content.

The study presented in Chapter 2 investigates the influence of specific types of users on brand content diffusion, by following the diffusion cascade of brand messages on Twitter and identifying which users motivated others to retweet brand content. In total, the study analyzed data from 30 top global brand profiles and from about 46,000 users who had retweeted brand content, identifying which users they followed (26 million) and which users followed

them (87 million) in order to investigate network characteristics. Based on these network characteristics, the study categorized users as (a) influentials – individuals who have above average influence, including celebrities and public figures; (b) information brokers – individuals that connect groups that otherwise would have weak or no ties; or (c) strong ties – individuals that influence other individuals because of they have a strong connection.

The results indicate that influentials and information brokers are associated with higher levels of retweeting for brand content. In addition, although information brokers have a larger overall influence on retweeting, they are more likely to do so when influentials are mentioned in the brand tweet. This provides support to the strategy of connecting the brand with influential users, such as celebrities or public figures. Strong ties, however, were not found to be associated with higher levels of retweeting. This study extends earlier research by directly investigating, for the first time, how network characteristics and certain types of users influence the diffusion of brand messages via retweeting.

CHAPTER 3 – THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONALITY

Retweeting and sharing brand messages on SNSs happen in a mostly public manner, and may not only be influenced by message characteristics or interpersonal networks, but also by factors internal to the SNS user. SNSs are seen as spaces for self-presentation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and where users create their profiles as taste performances (H. Liu, 2007). Personality characteristics have been proposed as important factors that explain why people use SNSs in different ways, as well as how they articulate their identities, or how much they disclose about themselves (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). Until now, however, personality

characteristics have not been explored in the context of brand content diffusion, especially to understand why someone decides to publicly associate his or her image with a brand, by passing along brand messages.

The study included in Chapter 3 investigates how personality characteristics are associated with the decision to pass along brand messages on SNSs, drawing from earlier research on self-disclosure and self-presentation. Using a survey among active SNS users, this study explores the association between passing along brand messages and personality characteristics such as the Big Five personality traits and Need for Popularity. The study also contributes to the emerging literature on the differences between Facebook and Twitter usage, by investigating which personality characteristics are associated with preferring to pass along brand messages on one of the SNSs instead of on the other.

The results show that passing along brand content on SNSs is more prevalent among people who are more friendly and warm towards others (agreeableness) and who enjoy social exchange (extraversion). This suggests a strong linkage between passing along brand messages and the desire to engage with and help others, which is aligned with some of the most important motivators for eWOM (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The people who have a strong desire to be popular (need for popularity), however, are the most likely to pass along brand content. This indicates that this behavior is not only done for altruistic reasons, but is also very much associated with image management, which reinforces the idea of SNS behavior being a taste performances and self-presentation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; H. Liu, 2007), and the association with brands being part of an overall strategy that SNS users adopt to articulate their idealized self online (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

When it comes to differences between Facebook and Twitter, extroverts prefer to share brand messages on Facebook, while people who are

more self-disciplined and results-oriented (conscientiousness) are more likely to prefer to retweet brand messages on Twitter. A potential reason for this might be the differences between these SNSs. Twitter, on the one hand, is a space where activities are mostly public and the idea of an audience (of followers) is more pronounced, and where users try to balance their need for self-expression with the desire to create a personal brand (Marwick & Boyd, 2011a). This may lead to a more results oriented usage of the SNS, including for passing along brand content. Facebook, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on the idea of friendship groups, and interaction with friends. This may lead to Facebook being preferred by people who are more social (Hughes et al., 2012).

CHAPTER 4 – CONSEQUENCES OF BRAND CONTENT DIFFUSION

The studies presented in the first three chapters of this dissertation fill gaps in the literature by exploring the antecedents of brand content diffusion on SNSs, namely how message, network and personality characteristics motivate users to pass along brand messages. Although some previous studies focus on the effects of brand-related activity on SNSs, research focusing specifically on the actual effects of receiving brand messages passed along by SNS users is still scarce. Studies have focused on, for example, the influence of celebrities tweets on purchase intentions (Jin & Phua, 2014) and the influence of viral SNS campaigns with online games (Okazaki & Yagüe, 2012; van Noort, Antheunis, & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Although these studies provide important findings for online brand communication on SNSs, an important gap still exists in the literature, namely a lack of research into the effects of reading a regular message (i.e., not a viral campaign or advertisement) written originally by a brand (rather than by a consumer or a celebrity) and passed along by SNS users via retweeting or sharing.

The study presented in Chapter 4 aims to fill this gap in the literature. The study used a survey among active social media users to evaluate the influence of three aspects of the communication process: the message, the sender and the receiver. When it comes to the message, this study tests whether perceiving the brand message as entertaining or informative influences the receiver's willingness to pass it along further, and also his or her attitudes towards the brand. When it comes to the sender, this study investigates the nature of the relationship between the person who shared or retweeted the brand content in the first place, and the receiver of the message. Finally, this study evaluates how the receiver's own levels of opinion leadership and engagement in consumer-to-consumer eWOM influence his or her willingness to pass along brand-generated messages, as well as attitudes towards the brand.

The results indicate that message evaluation, the relationship with the sender and the receiver's own opinion leadership and opinion-seeking levels influence both willingness to pass along the message further and brand attitudes. More specifically, the more informative and entertaining that the receiver finds the message to be, the more willing he or she is to pass it along, and the better his or her attitudes toward the brand. Moreover, opinion leaders, who engage regularly in consumer-to-consumer eWOM, are more willing to pass along messages created by brands. Opinion seekers, who regularly seek advice from others online, are more likely to be more positive attitudes toward the brand. Finally, receiving a message from a close friend has a positive influence on attitudes toward the brand when compared to receiving it from other sources.

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KEY FINDINGS

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The emergence of SNSs brings forward new mechanisms of information diffusion such as retweeting and sharing that have opened up a wide range of opportunities for brand communication. We argue that these capabilities have not only helped to accelerate eWOM, but also have enabled consumers to become gatekeepers of their own personal audiences on SNSs, by actively selecting and passing along brand messages to their friends or contacts on the SNS. The studies presented in this dissertation set out to investigate the antecedents and consequences of this behavior, exploring both the brand and the user perspective. We summarize the key findings below.

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ANTECEDENTS:

WHAT STIMULATES BRAND CONTENT DIFFUSION ON SNSs?

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1. INFORMATION (AND EMOTION) STIMULATE BRAND CONTENT DIFFUSION ON SNSs

First and foremost, SNS users prioritize the actual content of the message. Brand messages that contain informational and emotional cues, combined with traceability cues that make them more findable, are the ones that are passed along the most, as observed in the retweeting of actual brand messages on Twitter (Chapter 1). This conclusion is reinforced by the findings that the *perception* of a message as informative and entertaining has the greatest influence on the willingness to pass along brand content further (Chapter 4).

Not only do these findings provide clear guidelines to brands from a practical perspective, but they also provide insights to academic research. Viral advertising studies often emphasizes the importance of hedonic motivations, such as how messages that are fun and entertaining, and that trigger emotions stimulate pass-along behavior of viral campaigns (Berger & Milkman, 2012;

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Dobele et al., 2007; Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006). While emotions and entertainment are very relevant, utilitarian motivations – namely how informative or useful a message is - also have a very strong influence on the consumer's decision to retweet or share brand messages.

This strong role of the utilitarian motivations may be related to how users construct their notion of audiences on SNSs. Earlier forms of viral advertising relied mostly on one-to-one and more private or targeted diffusion of messages, meaning that consumers were able to select who would receive their messages; therefore, the entertainment value was extremely important (Phelps et al., 2004; Porter & Golan, 2006). SNSs, however, merge different types of social groups (e.g., family, colleagues, and friends) and contexts (e.g., work and personal life) into one imagined audience, which leads SNS users to balance and self-censor their activities as for example Marwick and Boyd (2011a) found during their Twitter study. As a result, SNS users may need to also actively consider the informational value of brand messages when deciding whether to pass them along, especially because their (imagined) audience may be more diverse, and the act of retweeting or sharing on SNSs more public, than emailing a funny viral ad via to a few friends.

2. SNS USERS PASS ALONG BRAND MESSAGES TO HELP OTHERS (AND TO BOOST THEIR OWN IMAGE)

The personality characteristics associated with the brand content diffusion on SNSs (Chapter 3) paint a clear picture of what motivates users to pass along brand content. Agreeableness and extraversion are positively related to sharing brand content on Facebook and retweeting brand content on Twitter, which provides support to the idea that passing along brand content is related to a desire to engage with others and to help them. This also reinforces the connection between this type of pass-along behavior and eWOM,

considering that helping others is also a strong eWOM motivation (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Passing along brand content, however, is not solely associated with altruistic reasons. Respondents who exhibited the greatest desire to be popular were also the ones more likely to share or retweet brand content. This provides support to the idea that passing along brand messages on Twitter and on Facebook might not just be related to the desire to socialize or help others, but that it is also strongly linked to social enhancement and image management. Passing along brand messages, therefore, is also used as a strategy to boost one's own image and popularity. This suggests that passing along brand messages may be part of the larger usage of SNS profile pages as taste performances (H. Liu, 2007). This also reinforces the idea that when SNS users associate themselves with brands on SNSs, they are also articulating their idealized selves (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012), which is also related to the idea of social enhancement as seen, for example, in eWOM (Okazaki, 2009).

3. CELEBRITIES AND INFORMATION BROKERS HELP EXTEND THE REACH OF THE BRAND MESSAGE

That brand content diffusion has a strong social component is demonstrated not only by the personality characteristics associated with this behavior (Chapter 3), but also by the role that interpersonal networks play in stimulating further pass-along behavior (Chapter 2). As our findings show, certain types of users are able to stimulate their followers to retweet brand content. In particular, the findings provide evidence to the idea that two primary processes are at play: information brokerage (Burt, 2000) and meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989). Information brokers have the strongest overall influence when it comes to stimulating others to pass along brand messages, as they are able to connect two otherwise poorly connected groups. This reinforces the concept of how weak ties can enable information diffusion

(Granovetter, 1973), which is also seen in WOM research (J. J. Brown & Reingen, 1987). The fact that highly influential users, in particular celebrities and public figures, are also able to stimulate information diffusion on content created by brands provides evidence that the mechanism of meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989), which is often used in the context of celebrity endorsements, is also at play in brand content diffusion on SNSs.

Interestingly, the observational data do not indicate a significant influence of strong ties on pass-along behavior, at least when strong ties are operationalized as a large number of friends in common. This is unexpected considering earlier findings from viral advertising research, and may be due to earlier studies focusing on the diffusion of viral campaigns via mechanisms such as email (e.g., Chiu et al., 2007) or invites via SNSs (van Noort et al., 2012). This distinction may be important for several reasons. Firstly, SNSs need to be considered as a different space, with different rules, when compared to email. On SNSs, users select who they want to be part of their networks. On Facebook, users approve all friendships, and on Twitter they select from whom they want to receive updates (i.e., who they will follow). The fact that the network is therefore under the control of the user may reduce the relevance of knowing the sender closely, as is the case with forwarding email, or reading forwarded email. Secondly, information diffusion via retweeting or sharing is much less targeted when compared to actively deciding whom to forward an email, or whom to invite to an online game or viral campaign. When retweeting, and usually when sharing, the user passes the message along to all his or her contacts on the SNS. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the great importance of information and of the utilitarian dimension for this process (as indicated in Chapters 1 and 4), may also help explain these differences, as information brokers, because of their ability to connect groups that would otherwise be disconnected (Burt, 2000), may help facilitate the diffusion of information that is new to the group, and is therefore more useful

and more entertaining. Strong ties, on the other hand, although very important for the formation of brand attitudes (Chapter 4), might not have the same importance when it comes to stimulating others to pass along the messages further via retweeting or sharing.

CONSEQUENCES: HOW DOES BRAND CONTENT DIFFUSION INFLUENCE BRAND ATTITUDES?

4. INFORMATION AND EMOTION IN MESSAGES ALSO INFLUENCE BRAND ATTITUDES

The more that SNS users *perceive* the brand message as informative and entertaining, the more positive their attitudes toward the brand (Chapter 4). This indicates that these mechanisms of information diffusion go beyond just extending the reach of the brand message. When brand messages that are being passed along by retweeting and sharing are considered to be entertaining and informative, they influence how the receiver perceives the brand. More importantly, perceiving the message as informative and entertaining has a stronger influence on brand attitudes when compared to sender and receiver characteristics. This is a clear indication to brands that, by focusing on providing useful and entertaining content, they can ensure not only that SNS users will pass along the brand message, but also that the users (and the receivers of the messages) will have a more positive attitude toward the brand.

5. STRONG TIES INFLUENCE BRAND ATTITUDES WHEN THEY PASS ALONG BRAND MESSAGES

Strong ties do play an important role when it comes to the effects of reading brand messages shared by others (Chapter 4). Respondents who saw brand messages retweeted or shared by close friends displayed more positive brand attitudes when compared to other types of users. This reinforces earlier

research that indicated that the strength of the relationship influences the persuasiveness of viral SNS campaigns (van Noort et al., 2012), and is also in line with eWOM research findings that indicate that strong ties are important for decision making (J. J. Brown & Reingen, 1987). It also provides more details about how different types of users, or network characteristics, influence the process. Although information brokers and celebrities have the most influence in regard to stimulating others to retweet brand content (Chapter 2), close friends, or strong ties, have the most impact when it comes to the receiver's attitude towards the brand.

6. BRAND CONTENT DIFFUSION ENGAGES USERS WHO ARE ACTIVE IN EWOM

Finally, our findings indicate that SNS users who regularly engage in eWOM activities are the most influenced by this process. On the one hand, the more that an SNS user is an opinion leader, providing advice and sharing with other users his or her own experiences with brands and products, the more willing he or she will be to pass along brand messages after receiving them from others. On the other hand, the more that a user seeks advice from others in eWOM, the more positive he or she is about the brand when receiving brand messages shared or retweeted by others. This is of particular importance to brands, as it shows that opinion leaders are able and willing to engage with brands on SNSs, passing along brand content the more that they consider it relevant, and that opinion seekers also consider brand messages credible and influential when receiving them from others.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation explored brand content diffusion on SNSs, providing insights into the antecedents and consequences of pass-along behavior of brand messages by consumers via retweeting on Twitter, and sharing on Facebook. The research reported in it adopted a conceptual model that was used to investigate message, network and user characteristics and, in summary, found that this process is driven primarily by the perceived value of the message, happens most often when information is being transmitted between different social groups, and is performed by users who are highly conscious of their (public) audience and of their own image. The more a received message is perceived as informative and entertaining, the more potential it has to lead to more positive brand attitudes, and to more willingness to continue the diffusion cascade.

These findings help extend viral marketing research by integrating findings from eWOM and viral advertising research to explore a process that seems to be in the boundaries between these lines of research. Consumers pass along messages created by brands to their own audiences on the SNS, privileging aspects of the message that have been proposed by viral advertising such as entertainment and information, for the same reasons that consumers engage in eWOM. Moreover, the more that the SNS user participates in consumer-to-consumer eWOM, the more that likely she or he is to pass along brand messages on SNSs. This dissertation also helps advance information diffusion research on SNSs, by extending, specifically for brand content, earlier findings about the diffusion of general content. Finally, this dissertation also contributes to emerging research on SNS usage, by demonstrating a linkage between passing along brand messages on SNSs and image management and self-presentation.

OVERALL LIMITATIONS

While the studies in this dissertation provide important insights for online brand communication, advancing research on SNS and information diffusion, some overall limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the studies focused specifically on brand messages that were published as regular SNS content, and that were passed along by consumers primarily via retweeting (all chapters) but also by sharing (Chapters 3 and 4). Whereas this focus allowed the exploration of brand content diffusion by consumers on SNSs, future studies could compare the effects of brand messages passed along by consumers with both traditional online advertising and consumer-to-consumer eWOM.

Secondly, the exploratory nature of the studies included in this dissertation meant that brand content diffusion was investigated in general, combining all types of (mostly consumer) market segments with a particular focus on top brands. This provides a strong set of overall findings that help explain the process in general. Future research could refine these findings by focusing on how pass-along behavior differs across market segments, larger and smaller brands, or cultures and languages. This will not only provide even more detailed and actionable insights to practice, but will also help explore this process at a more granular level, for example by investigating message characteristics that are more specific to one market segment, or understanding how expectations about the informational or entertainment value of messages vary across cultures. Moreover, future research should also evaluate how pre-existing brand attitudes and identification, either positive or negative, may influence both the consequences and the antecedents of this process.

Finally, these studies explored brand content diffusion based on mechanisms of information diffusion that are at present available to all users, namely retweeting and sharing. Twitter and Facebook, however, continuously

evolve their platforms, and now allow users to include additional comments when sharing or retweeting messages, which may also be used for negative, rather than just positive, eWOM. Both SNSs also regularly deploy new ways for brands to advertise their products to consumers. For example, Facebook and Twitter enable brands to promote their content prominently on users' timelines with native advertising, also displaying how many of the user's contacts have liked an ad. Future research should also investigate these new mechanisms, and how they also influence the receivers of brand communication on SNSs.

Notwithstanding the limitations discussed above, this dissertation provides relevant and useful insights that will help researchers in their quest to understand how new capabilities created by social media are disrupting and changing the consumer-brand relationship.