chapter 1

introduction and dissertation outline
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Social media become increasingly important in the marketing strategies of many brands. In 2014, social media advertising accounted for 28.7% of the worldwide digital advertising spend, a value that is expected to increase to 34.5% by 2017 (Statista, 2015c). The rise of social media advertising partly relies on the various new ways of brand-consumer interactions that it enables (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Social media give brands the opportunity to establish bi-directional brand-consumer interactions in which brands can interact with their consumers and vice versa (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). Instead of only receiving information from brands, consumers on social media also actively engage with brands. Consumers on social media, for instance, write reviews about the products that they have purchased (e.g., Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder, 2011), create advertisements for brands (e.g., Lawrence, Fournier, & Brunel, 2013), and participate in the development of products (Fuchs, Prandelli, & Schreier, 2010). The former monologue between brands and their consumers has evolved into a dialogue.

This shift of paradigms has provided consumers with more power, which they increasingly use. Consumers now realize that they have a voice and that they can easily reach a great amount of other consumers via social media (Mainwaring, 2011). This is not always beneficial for brands. For example, consumers increasingly use social media to express their complaints about brands and products they bought. Hence, many brands recognize that they need to search the dialogue with their consumers to meet their changed demands (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). The new power of consumers also entails that consumers on social media jointly confront brands if they engage in questionable practices. In 2010, for instance, Greenpeace led a social media protest against Nestlé’s KitKat because the brand used to buy palm oil from companies that destroyed the Indonesian rainforest, which highly endangered the existence of orangutans. Hundreds of thousands indignant consumers shared the story on social media and successfully urged Nestlé to change their policy (Greenpeace, 2010).

Examples like the former illustrate that consumers’ engagement with brands on social media is not necessarily positive for brands. Brands, however, can also use consumers’ new power for their own benefits. Here, it is of particular interest for brands that social media enable consumers to endorse brands in various ways. They can, for instance, like brands on Facebook, re-tweet brand-related content on twitter, or post brand-related photos on Instagram. As of July 2015, Coca Cola, the most liked brand page on Facebook (except from Facebook itself) had 92.10 Million likes (Statista, 2015a). That is, Coca Cola could directly reach 92.10 Million unique Facebook users with their messages. Consumers’ online brand endorsements are thus a widespread phenomenon. Moreover, all
these endorsement behaviors are to a certain degree publicly visible to the network of the endorsing consumers or even to the general public, which gives consumers’ online brand endorsements additional potential to be used for advertising purposes.

Brands have recognized the potential advertising functions of their consumers’ public affiliations with them and are increasingly aiming to acquire public online endorsements by their consumers. In 2014, for example, Mercedes Benz started a campaign that let consumers customize a Mercedes GLA right on Instagram. Subsequently, consumers could share their own customized car on Instagram. This campaign resulted in 100,000 Instagram likes and 20,000 new followers (Sloane, 2015). Other ways that brands often use to acquire consumers’ endorsements are, for instance, raffling prizes among their endorsers or providing them with other benefits, such as exclusive news-content about the brand. Research, however, shows that such incentives of brands or consumers’ search for information only explain a small part of consumers’ motivations to endorse a brand (Wallace, Buil, de Chernatony, & Hogan, 2014). It is thus likely that there are other drivers of this behavior at play, which have not been investigated yet.

Surprisingly, research on this topic is still scarce. While brands are making the acquirement of consumers’ endorsements part of their online marketing strategy, and we can observe that many consumers endorse brands, our knowledge about why consumers actually endorse brands is little. This means that we are not yet able to answer important questions such as, for instance, how brands can increase the likelihood of consumers endorsing them, how consumers differ in their decision making process to endorse brands, or to what extent and why brands differ in their inherent potential to receive consumers’ endorsements. These questions are important since they can provide answers on the functions of and the processes behind this behavior. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to identify drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements.

As a first step to reach this goal, it is important to define what consumers’ online brand endorsements are and to show why they are important to study. Next to investigating the drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements, this dissertation will also introduce the concept of consumers’ online brand endorsements and integrate it into the literature. Online brand endorsements are one of the various different forms of engagement that consumers can have with a brand. The concept of consumer brand engagement has gained increasing attention by many scholars who introduced various valuable conceptualizations of consumers’ engagement with brands (for an overview, see Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014, p. 151). All these conceptualizations, however, are aiming to describe the phenomenon of consumers’ engagement with brands in a broader sense. Van Doorn et al. (2010, p. 01), for example, define
engagement as a “behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm that goes beyond purchase, and results from motivational drivers.” Building on this and comparable conceptualizations, a great variety of consumer behavior could be understood as consumer brand engagement. For example consumer behavior such as, negative product reviews, likes on Facebook, consumers’ complaints about a brand on twitter, or subscribing to a brand’s newsletter could be categorized as brand engagement. The same goes for the example of online protests against KitKat at the beginning of this chapter. By looking at these five examples, it becomes clear that they differ in terms of valence (positive or negative), visibility to others (public or private), and whether consumers have the intention that other consumers observe their engagement with the brand. That is, consumer brand engagement in its various conceptualizations might be too broad to investigate it as a whole.

Consumers’ online brand endorsements, the central topic of this dissertation, can obviously be categorized as consumer brand engagement. Such a broad conceptualization, however, does not provide a framework to investigate this phenomenon, as it does not account for the above-mentioned important distinctions in consumer behavior. In order to thoroughly investigate the phenomenon of consumers’ online brand endorsements, it is thus necessary to clearly define it and distinguish it from broader related concepts. At the beginning of this chapter, some examples of consumers’ online brand endorsements were mentioned. What all these examples have in common is that they are public, positive, and (aimed to be) perceived by others. Online brand-related consumer behavior that meets all three criteria is in this dissertation defined as online brand endorsement (for a more detailed definition, see Chapter 2).

Consumers’ online brand endorsements are a particular interesting marketing strategy as they have the potential to elude the limitations of traditional marketing communication such as consumers’ resistance to persuasion (Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015). When a consumer endorses a brand, the brand might benefit from this in at least two ways: First, the endorsing consumer herself might become more positive about the brand in order to maintain consistency with regard to the own initial – positive – endorsement behavior (cf., Cialdini, 2009; Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009). Furthermore, online brand endorsements have been shown to positively affect consumers in various ways such as, for instance, brand advocacy and positive word of mouth (Wallace, Buil, & De Chernatony, 2012), or self-brand connections and brand usage intent (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Second, the endorsement might be displayed to the peers of the endorsing consumer, which might have various positive effects on the consumers, which are exposed to these endorsements (for an example, see Figure 1). For instance, endorsements by other consumers are less likely to be identified to have a persuasive intent and are therefore perceived
as more trustworthy compared to information from marketers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2012). Moreover, compared to traditional persuasion attempts, consumers’ online brand endorsements are an indirect technique, which are in general considered to be less likely to evoke consumers’ resistance (Knowles & Riner, 2007). These and other assumed positive outcomes of consumers’ online brand endorsements make marketers keen to acquire endorsements by their consumers (for a detailed review of the effects of consumers’ online brand endorsements, see Chapter 2). In sum, this results in the following research question:

\textbf{RQ1:} What are consumers’ online brand endorsements, and why are they important?

In examining the drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements, this dissertation focuses on two particular domains: the brand-related drivers and the identity-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements. The assumption that is underlying this approach is that consumers’ online brand endorsements always have a certain identity signaling function since they are a very public kind of behavior. Consumers know that other people make inferences based on their public brand-related behavior (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013; Wernerfelt, 1990). If a consumer endorses a brand on social media, this endorsement signals to the consumer’s peers that the endorser is not apprehensive to be publicly affiliated with this brand. Even stronger, it signals that the endorser might have something in common with the brand as it becomes part of her social media identity. Endorsing a brand might thus also be seen as a public connection between the consumer’s self and the brand, which both can drive this behavior. This
notion finds support in recent literature that suggests that the underlying motives of consumers’ intention to endorse brands online might rather be found in the domain of self-expression and identity signaling (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Wallace et al., 2014).

This dissertation differentiates between two different types of brand-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements, which differ in their underlying motivational factors: affective motivations towards the brand (e.g., “I love this brand”), and identity assimilative motivations from the brand (e.g., “I want to be (perceived) like this brand”). The empirical work in this dissertation will not focus on the affective motivations towards the brand because these motivations are comparatively well studied and are not that closely related to consumers’ identity (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). The focus will therefore lie on the identity assimilative motivations from the brand. In particular, it is argued in this dissertation that the basic domains of social perception, warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) also apply to brand perception (cf., Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012) and are therefore very important drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements. Examining the brand-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements allows us to predict brands’ inherent potential to evoke these endorsements and to estimate for which brands online brand endorsements are a feasible marketing strategy. Consequently, the following research question is formulated:

**RQ2:** How do brands differ in their potential to evoke consumers’ online brand endorsements?

The role of self-identity in consumer behavior is gaining increasing attention (Belk, 1988, 2013; Kirmani, 2009; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). One important finding from this line of research is that consumers use brands in order to signal their identity to others (e.g., Belk, 2013; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007). For instance, consumers buy brands as part of the construction of their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) or deliberately use brands in order to diverge from others to make sure that they successfully signal desired identities (Berger & Heath, 2007). It has been recently demonstrated that consumers also use brands as identity signals on social media. They use brands on Facebook to create and manage their self-identity (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). However, it is likely that consumers differ in their tendency to use brands as identity signals on social media. The following research question is formulated:

**RQ3:** To what extent does consumers’ self-identity affect their willingness to endorse brands on social media?
All empirical chapters of this dissertation focus on consumers’ brand likes on Facebook as an example of consumers’ online brand endorsements. As of the second quarter of 2015, Facebook, the world’s biggest social network, had 1.49 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2015b). Brand endorsements on Facebook therefore have the potential to be a marketing technique that is applicable to a very broad global audience. Facebook provides an online environment where consumers naturally spread identity-related information, such as their daily emotions (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012), but also disseminate brand-related information. This platform, therefore, is offering an ideal environment for examining both the brand-related and the identity-related drivers of online brand endorsements.

**Dissertation outline and findings**
The remainder of this dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the theory behind the phenomenon of consumers’ online brand endorsements. It is a theoretical article with the aim to introduce the concept of consumers’ online brand endorsements to the literature by demarcating it from related concepts and discussing the antecedents and consequences of this behavior. Chapters 3 and 4 concern the brand-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements. Chapter 3 answers the question what consumers want to signal by means of their online brand endorsements. In doing so, it empirically examines the roles of warmth, competence and the symbolic value of brands. Chapter 4 is an empirical article that builds up on chapter 3 and examines the different roles of these effects for non- and for-profit brands. The central aim of this chapter is to predict the effort that brands need to make to acquire consumers’ online endorsements based on the brand-related drivers from chapter 3. Chapter 5 is devoted to the identity-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements. It aims to empirically demonstrate that consumers differ in their willingness to endorse brands online because they differ in the way they see and express themselves with regard to their social environments (i.e., self-construal). Finally, chapter 6 provides a summary and conclusion of this dissertation.

All chapters of this dissertation have been published or submitted for publication as journal article or book chapter. For this reason, every chapter can be read independently and has its own abstract, introduction, conclusion, references, and – for the empirical chapters – results. A graphical presentation of the outline of this dissertation can be found in Figure 2.
Chapter 2: Antecedents and consequences of consumers’ online brand endorsements

Consumers’ online brand endorsements are a quite new phenomenon, which is still relatively understudied. Chapter 2 serves as a first approach to establish this phenomenon in the literature and discusses three potential drivers of it. After a thorough definition of the concept of consumers’ online brand endorsement, this chapter demarcates it from related concepts. Moreover, it provides a comprehensive review of the theory around drivers and consequences of consumers’ online brand endorsements. In doing so, it identifies three different drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements: Identity-related drivers, brand-related drivers, and community-related drivers.

With regard to the effects of consumers’ online brand endorsements, this chapter distinguishes between effects on the audience and effects on the endorsing consumer. It is suggested that from the perspective of the endorsing consumer, online brand endorsements might potentially be a two-sided sword. The greater potential of this marketing technique seems to rely on the fact that consumers’ online brand endorsements are broadcasted to an enormous network of other consumers and their potential to be contagious.

Chapter 3: What do consumers want to signal?

In examining brand-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements, chapter 3 builds up on the *Brands as Intentional Agents framework* (BIAF; Kervyn et al., 2012) that suggests that much of our relationships with brands, can be explained by the same main dimensions as our perception of people: warmth and competence. By means of an experiment, it is demonstrated that warmth (vs. competence) of a brand has a positive effect on consumers’ intention to endorse the brand on social media. Warmth as an universal positive attribute is thus not only primary in the social judgments...
that people make (Fiske et al., 2007; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001) but is also a main driver of consumers’ online brand endorsements, which makes it an important attribute in consumers’ identity signaling.

As a boundary condition, it is investigated to what extent the decision to endorse a brand depends on its level of brand symbolism (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Results show that a brand also needs to be able to signal the values that consumers’ aim to express by means of their online brand endorsements. In other words, a high symbolic value of a brand enhances the positive effects of warmth on consumers’ online brand endorsements. This chapter is the first to provide causal evidence for the role of warmth in online identity signaling, a notion that has been suggested based on correlational data but has not been tested before in experimental work (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). In doing so, this chapter extends the BIAF (Kervyn et al., 2012) by showing that of the two key components of this framework, warmth is the one that is fundamental to consumers’ brand endorsements.

**Chapter 4: Non- and for-profit brands’ potential to acquire endorsements**

Chapter 4 builds up on the findings of chapter 3. In seven studies (six experiments and the analysis of secondary data) the predominant role of warmth (vs. competence) and the moderating role of brand symbolism are further examined. In particular, it is aimed to investigate the role of different types of brands (non-profit vs. for-profit) in this context and to examine whether different brand-related drivers affect the effort that brands need to make to acquire consumers’ endorsements on social media.

In particular, experimental studies 1, 2, and 3 distinguish between nonprofit and for-profit brands and show that brand warmth (and not competence) mediates the effect of brand type (nonprofit vs. for-profit) on consumers’ intentions to endorse brands and branded content on social media. Compared to for-profit brands, the higher level of nonprofits’ warmth is accountable for their increased likelihood of being endorsed. For-profits’ alleged superiority in the competence domain does not positively affect consumers’ intention to affiliate themselves with a brand. Experiment 4 demonstrates that this process is moderated by brand symbolism (moderated mediation). A high level of brand symbolism increases the positive effect of warmth on consumers’ intention to endorse brands online, but only for for-profit brands. The fifth experiment shows that these effects are conditional upon the public vs. private distinction in consumer behavior: consumers prefer to publicly affiliate with nonprofit (vs. for-profit) brands but with regard to private affiliations, there is no difference between both types of brands. Experiment 6 shows the causal effects of warmth (vs. competence). Finally, in the seventh study, it is demonstrated that perceptions of brands’ warmth and not competence reduce the efforts that brands
need to make to achieve consumers’ endorsements on their real brand pages on Facebook.

Chapter 5: Individual differences: The role of self-construal
While an increasing body of research suggests that consumers endorse brands on social media to signal their identity, there is only little knowledge about why consumers use this type of identity signaling to differing degrees. This chapter addresses this gap by examining the role of a culturally determined individual difference variable, namely self-construal. Self-construal refers to the extent in which people define themselves in terms of their relationships with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

This chapter demonstrates in four studies that consumers’ self-construal is associated with their intention to endorse brands on social media. In particular, high levels of interdependent self-construal positively affect consumers’ intention to endorse brands online. This effect is mediated by an increased perception of brands’ symbolic value. Moreover, this positivity bias towards symbolic brand cues is conditional upon consumers’ brand attitude. These findings demonstrate that consumers’ identity plays a central role in their brand perception and brand-related social media use.
References


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