Examining consumers' brand endorsements on social media

Bernritter, S.F.

Citation for published version (APA):
chapter 6

summary, conclusion, and discussion
The aim of this dissertation is to examine and identify different drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements. In doing so, it first identifies three different driver categories: brand-related, identity-related, and community-related drivers. These drivers are interwoven and linked to the identity of the consumer. This dissertation argues from this perspective that consumers’ online brand endorsements are a public form of identity signaling, which entails that the endorsed brand is or becomes part of the consumers’ (online) identity (cf., Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Building up on this notion, this dissertation aims to answer three central research questions. The first question is related to what consumers’ online brand endorsements are and why they are an important phenomenon. The second question lies in the domain of brand-related drivers of online brand endorsements and seeks to examine which characteristics of a brand affect its potential to acquire endorsements from consumers. The third question relates to the identity-related drivers of this behavior and has the aim to assess whether and how consumers differ in their willingness to endorse brands on social media. Since this dissertation consists of four independent articles, which all have their own conclusion section, this part of the dissertation will only focus on the main conclusions and discuss the most important implications for future research and practitioners.

To answer the first research question, this dissertation defines consumers’ online brand endorsement as consumers’ online engagement with brands that is positive, public and meant to be perceived by others. Chapter 2 identified three important drivers of this behavior, namely: brand-related drivers, identity-related drivers, and community-related drivers. The importance of consumers’ online brand endorsements for marketers relies on the possible positive effects of the endorsements on both, the endorser and those who are exposed to the endorsement. Chapter 2 concludes that the effects on endorsers might be equivocal. The advantages of consumers’ online brand endorsements compared to traditional marketing strategies rather affect consumers that are exposed to endorsements of other consumers.

The empirical part of this dissertation (chapters 3-5) mainly focuses on the brand-related and the identity-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements and how they interact. By identifying the brand-related drivers brand warmth, brand symbolism, and brand type, this dissertation is the first to provide a framework that makes it possible to estimate how much effort a brand needs to make in order to acquire consumers’ endorsements on social media. Chapters 3 and 4 show that nonprofit brands are more likely to be endorsed than for-profit brands because consumers perceive them to be warmer. The effect of warmth on consumers’ intention to endorse brands online is conditional upon the symbolic value of a brand, but only for for-profit brands. For these brands, a high degree of symbolism can enhance the positive effects of warmth, whereas for nonprofit brands...
brand symbolism plays no role. Moreover, chapter 4 demonstrates that the fact that online brand endorsements are a public kind of behavior affects consumers’ endorsement behavior. In public, consumers prefer to endorse nonprofit (vs. for-profit) brands. Contrary, in private surroundings, there is no difference between both kinds of brands. Finally, this dissertation also demonstrates that perceived warmth (vs. competence) not only increases consumers’ intention to endorse brands in a laboratory setting, but also lowers the effort that brands need to make in order to acquire real endorsements on their Facebook pages.

To answer the second research question of this dissertation, the findings suggest that consumers’ online brand endorsements are driven by consumers’ tendency to use brands on social media to express their warmth. Warmth, as universally positive attribute and primary point of social perception (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001) seems thus to play an even important role in consumers’ online identity signaling. We can thus conclude that brands differ in the basic domains of social and brand perception and that this difference is essential in determining a brand’s potential to acquire consumers’ online brand endorsements, in favor of those brands that consumers perceive to be highly warm. Brands also differ in their symbolic value. While this distinction is not important for nonprofit brands, for-profit brands can partly compensate for their disadvantages compared to nonprofits by having a high symbolic value.

The third research question of this dissertation regards the identity-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements and aims to answer to what extent consumers’ self-identity affects their willingness to endorse brands online. In this dissertation, it is focused on self-construal (i.e., the extent that people define themselves in terms of the relations they have with others; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) as representation of (cultural determined) self-identity. The results of chapter 5 show that a high level of interdependent self-construal has a positive effect on consumers’ intention to endorse brands on social media. This chapter also demonstrates the underlying mechanism of this finding: consumers with a high (vs. low) level of interdependence are in general more likely to give brands higher symbolic value, which in turn positively affects their intention to endorse these brands online. As a boundary condition, this research shows that consumers with an interdependent self-construal give brands symbolic value independent from their own attitude towards the brand. Contrary, consumers who score low on interdependence perceive brands that they like to be more symbolic than brands that they like less.

To answer the third research question of this dissertation it can be concluded that consumers differ in how they define and express themselves, which considerably influences their willingness to endorse brands. Interestingly, self-construal also greatly affects consumers’ brand perception in terms of how they perceive the symbolic value of brands. In chapters
3 and 4, the important role of brand perception and particularly brand symbolism in consumers' online brand endorsement was highlighted. With self-construal as cultural identity-related individual difference variable, this dissertation uncovers a factor that considerably affects how consumers perceive brands and how they differ in their decision making process to endorse brands.

Interestingly, this research also allows drawing some conclusions on the function of consumers' online brand endorsements. Online brand endorsements, theoretically, might have two different functions: First, consumers might endorse brands to differentiate themselves from others and present their unique identity to others, a function that would be clearly related to an independent self-construal. Or, second, they might aspire to present their own identity in the context of others to enhance and maintain relationships and show similarity with their own peers (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001; Kampmeier & Simon, 2001), which might rather be related to an interdependent self-construal. The results of this dissertation suggest that the latter is more likely.

This dissertation contributes to the literature in several ways. Chapter 2 integrates the phenomenon of consumers' online brand endorsements into the literature. Behaviors like this have previously been defined in terms of broader concepts like word of mouth or consumer brand engagement, which do not account for the valence, visibility, and intentionality of the behavior. By means of establishing the concept of consumers' online brand endorsements, this dissertation can provide more nuanced guidance for research that aims to examine this and related kinds of behavior. Moreover, Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the antecedents and consequences of consumers' online brand endorsements, which provides first insight into the mechanisms that are underlying this phenomenon.

In sum, chapters 3 and 4 have four key contributions: First, they extend the knowledge about brand-related social media use and show which features drive consumers' intentions to endorse brands online. This is important, as it makes it possible to predict to what extent brands differ in their potential to evoke consumers' online endorsements. The findings of chapters 3 and 4 enable us to assess the feasibility of consumers' brand endorsements as a marketing strategy for different (types of) brands. Second, they empirically examine the brand-related drivers of consumers' decision endorse brands on social media. This dissertation is the first to experimentally examine these drivers, and thereby shed light on the underlying psychological processes. Studying how consumers use brands on social media to signal their identity acknowledges the recent call for more research on the role of identity and identity signaling in consumer research (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). Third, they extend the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) in two important ways. It is demonstrated that, of the two crucial components of the BIAF, perceptions of
warmth are essential for consumers’ brand endorsements, just like they are primary in people’s judgments of other people (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2001). Additionally, it is shown that the effect of brand warmth in this process is moderated by the symbolic value of brands. Fourth, by showing that consumers’ online endorsements are easier to obtain for nonprofit brands than for-profit brands, these chapters extend the research of Aaker and colleagues (2010) on differences in consumers’ perception of nonprofit and for-profit brands.

Chapter 5 contributes to the literature in at least three important ways: First, it acknowledges the recent call of Kastanakis and Voyer (2014) for more research on cross-cultural factors that affect consumer behavior by being the first to show how self-construal drives consumers’ online brand endorsements. Second, it demonstrates how self-construal as cultural identity-related driver of consumers’ online brand endorsements interacts with the brand-related drivers brand symbolism and brand attitude. Finally, it demonstrates that consumers’ brand perception (i.e., brand symbolism) can be affected by their self-construal.

Future Research
This dissertation opens various possibilities for future research. Chapter 2 discusses a variety of antecedents and consequences of consumers’ online brand endorsements. Regarding the antecedents, the empirical chapters of this dissertation focus on the brand- and identity-related drivers of this behavior. To complete the testing of the proposed framework in chapter 2 and since research in this domain is still scarce, it would be important to conduct an empirical investigation of the community-related drivers of consumers’ online brand endorsements. A possible community-related driver might be consumers’ relationship with other consumers who engage in online brand endorsements. It might be, for instance, possible that consumers endorse brands that were also endorsed by other peers, dependent on how strong their relationship with these peers is (cf., Brown & Reingen, 2014).

Also regarding the consequences of consumers’ online brand endorsements scholarly knowledge is still limited. While the literature review in chapter 2 shows that the effects on consumers who are exposed to other consumers’ endorsements might be predominantly positive, the effects of endorsing on the consumer herself seem to be ambiguous. There might be certain omitted boundary conditions involved, which determine the effects of online brand endorsements on endorsing consumers.

In order to dig deeper into the role of consumer identity in online brand endorsements, another worthwhile opportunity for future research would be to investigate the effects of endorsing a brand on consumers’ self-perception. Research shows that people not only attribute characteristics of a brand to its users (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007), but that consumers can also
perceive changes of their own personality, based on the brands they use (Park & John, 2010). It would be interesting to investigate whether online brand endorsements are able to affect consumers’ perception of their own identity. Might, for instance, a consumer who endorses a particularly warm brand perceive herself to be a warm person?

Moreover, this dissertation does not find any effects of brands’ competence on consumers’ brand endorsements. Earlier research suggests that a balance of warmth and competence might be beneficial for brands (Aaker, Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012). In line with this notion, it would be interesting to examine whether there are situations in which the predominant role of warmth does not apply and where higher degrees of brands’ competence are more influential than their warmth.

**Practical Implications**

This dissertation also has some important practical implications. The results of this dissertation shed light on why consumers endorse brands online and how they differ in this matter. Brands can use this knowledge in order to estimate how much effort they need to make to acquire endorsements, how they can optimize their image in a way that makes the brand more likely to get endorsed, or how they need to approach different groups of consumers.

If brands decide to make consumers’ online brand endorsements part of their social media marketing strategy, they should know that warmth appears to be one of the key-factors to successfully acquire consumers’ endorsements. This is especially good news for nonprofit brands as they are naturally perceived to be very warm, but also for-profit brands can use this knowledge to increase their potential and lower their effort to receive endorsements from their consumers. The first action that a for-profit brand might want to take in this endeavor is to increase its warmth. Ways to achieve this might be, for example, to engage in corporate social responsibility programs (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012) or cause-related marketing strategies (Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012). A second approach to increase consumers’ likelihood to endorse the brand would be to increase its symbolic value. To achieve this, brands might aim to position the brand in line with in-group characteristics of their target group (cf., Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

This dissertation offers another interesting insight for practitioners. As shown in chapter 5, consumers’ self-construal is an important predictor of their willingness to endorse brands on social media. Here, consumers with an interdependent self-construal are more likely to endorse brands than those with an independent self-construal. Moreover, for consumers with an interdependent self-construal this process is independent from their own attitude towards the brand, whereas those with an independent self-construal are indirectly positively affected by their own brand attitude. Self-construal varies between cultures across the globe: In more Western societies...
such as the United States, an independent self-construal is predominant. Contrary, in more Eastern societies an interdependent self-construal is prevalent (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). This implies that consumers from Eastern societies might be generally more likely to endorse brands online than those from Western societies. Moreover, the findings suggest that brands’ potential to evoke Western consumers’ endorsements might become higher if brands aim to increase the brand attitude of these Western consumers, whereas this approach might not be necessary – and probably be working – for consumers in Eastern societies.

However, it is important to stress that the literature indicates that the effects of consumers’ online brand endorsements might be equivocal. While the effects of online brand endorsements on consumers who see other’s endorsements might be mainly positive, the effects on the endorsing consumers might be ambiguous. It might, for instance, be possible that a consumer endorses a brand, which directly leads to rather unbeneficial outcomes for the brand such as weakened brand preferences of, and decreased future support by the endorsing consumer (Chernev, Hamilton, & Gal, 2011; Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2014). Indirectly, however, the initial endorsement of the consumers will be broadcasted to other consumers and might affect those consumers in a desirable manner. Therefore, brands should not engage in social media marketing strategies that incorporate online brand endorsements by their consumers only based on the goal to influence and persuade the endorsing consumers. It appears that the greater potential of consumers’ online brand endorsements might rely on the fact that they are spread to an enormous network of other consumers and that they are potentially contagious. Here, consumers take over the distribution of advertising for the brand and give these persuasive messages the power to reach a public of unshielded consumers. This makes consumers’ online brand endorsements a potentially very influential technique.
References


