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« BFF »: Best Facebook Forever? The impact of social media attachment on the attitude towards brands presence on Facebook

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Abstract: Facebook is becoming central in brand communication strategies. However, whether and how it shapes consumer perceptions and reactions about brands remains unclear and unstudied. This study aims at filling this gap through a specific lens: brand attachment and facebook attachment are assumed to be antecedents of the attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook and subsequent behaviours on facebook that are related to the brand. Such links were studied through an online questionnaire directed at students who are fans of brand pages on facebook. One hundred and eighty-eight valid questionnaires were collected. Once the validity and reliability of the measures used were verified, structural equation models were run. They demonstrate that attitude towards the presence of the brand partially mediates the link between brand attachment and behaviours related to the brand on facebook and that it totally mediates the effects of media attachment on behaviours. The limitations of the study and research avenues are discussed.

Keywords: brand attachment, media attachment, attitude towards the presence of the brand, social media, facebook

1. Introduction

Since its launch from a dorm room in 2004, the social website facebook has evolved and now occupies a very important place in the everyday life of consumers worldwide as illustrated by statistics given by the firm itself. In fact, at the end of 2011, the firm could enumerate more than 400 million active users, 50% of whom logged on to the website at least once a day and more than 60 million status updates were posted daily. This very strong imprint is not only noticeable from the users' point of view. The presence of famous mass market brands such as Coca-Cola, Disney, Converse, Starbucks, etc. on facebook indicate that it has become incontrovertible in the trading world. Concretely, these brands have understood that social media is now necessary as "a component in their marketing strategies and campaigns to reach out to customers" (Akar/Topçu 2011). Indeed, the average value of a brand's facebook page fan equals 136\$ and a brand fan will spend more money than a non fan, reaching an average expenditure difference of 72\$¹. Social media has a tangible effect on marketing performance, namely sales (Stephen/Galak 2009). However, only a few academic studies have questioned the mechanisms underlying such a phenomenon (Akar/Topçu 2011), as most of them focus on student motivations to use facebook.

Yet, at stake are the links between the brand, its consumers and the media in the peculiar context of social media. Indeed "social media users do not consider activities with marketing purposes in social media applications as positive" (Akar/Topçu 2011). Thus, the perceived relevancy of the brands' presence on facebook is questioned. It is important to determine the extent to which consumer attitudes towards the presence of the brand are favourable since this impacts how active people will be towards brand actions and ultimately how loyal they will be (Akar/Topçu 2011). This is why, in this study, we take into consideration the users' perceptions of brand presence on facebook.

Moreover, closely linked to this idea of questioning the brands' strategies on facebook and given that "experiences made online are subsequently transferred offline and vice versa" (Kaplan/Haenlein 2010), we consider that it is relevant to orient this study accordingly by focusing on the attitude towards the presence of a brand on the social media rather than measuring the attitude towards the brand itself.

Furthermore, in the specific facebook context which is a social media designed for human relationships and mainly friendship, the bonds established with the consumer by both the

¹ Syncapse (2010), Value of a Facebook Fan: An Empirical Review, <http://syncapse.com/category/white-papers/>, viewed on June, 10th 2012.

brand and its fan page may be specific and need to be characterized. According to the literature, attachment is a critical construct that both reflects the strength of the bond connecting a consumer to a brand (*Thomson et al.* 2005) and the real relationship established between the user and the brand fan page (*Hazan/Shaver* 1994). Thus this research focuses on brand attachment and media attachment.

Based on the above, we arrive at the following research question: Are relationships (conceptualized as attachment) with the brand and the social media (facebook) good predictors of consumer attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook and their subsequent behaviours?

The objective of the research is to investigate whether both brand attachment and social media attachment impact the consumer's attitude towards the presence of the brand in the social media and subsequently the behaviours related to brands on this social media (such as "liking" the publications of the brand on the page, sharing and commenting on them, recommending the brand page, using promotional codes given on the brand page, etc). To this end, we first develop the theoretical inputs necessary to arrive at our research hypothesis; we then present our data collection methodology and our main results. We conclude by discussing our results, limitations of the research and future research avenues.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

"The pioneering work on attachment was conducted by *Bowlby* (1979; 1980) in the realm of parent–infant relationships. According to *Bowlby*, an attachment is an emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific object." (*Thomson et al.* 2005, p.77). Since this seminal work in psychology, marketing researchers have shown that people can form attachment to a variety of objects: possessions, places, gifts, experiences and also brands (for a review see *Kleine/Baker* 2004 or *Thomson et al.* 2005). They have assumed that objects and especially brands could be anthropomorphized and that people could "form relationships with brands in much the same way in which they form relationships with each other in a social context" (*Aggarwal* 2004, p.87; *Long et al.* 2012). Thus, attachment represents the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self (*Park et al.* 2010, p.2). It is a strong emotional relation to the brand (*Aaker/Fournier* 1995) which is complex, and evolves over time (*Lambert-Pandraud/Laurent* 2010, p.106).

2.1. From brand attachment to behaviours related to the brand on facebook

As stated earlier, in the context of facebook, brands have to find a way to insert their trade purposes into a friendship context so that they can be regarded and accepted as friends by consumers. To be accepted as friends, brands have to “humanize” themselves so as to “fulfil these many consumers’ enduring attachment and belongingness concerns.” (Long *et al.* 2012). In this logic, according to Thomson *et al.* (2005), the consumers’ attachment to the brand will thus be the most relevant construct to reflect the consequences of such “humanization” strategies in the consumers’ mind.

Previous research showed that brand attachment and attitudes are related concepts. “Consumers who are emotionally attached to a brand are also likely to have a favourable attitude toward it.” (Thomson *et al.* 2005). However, Park *et al.* (2010) pinpoint that brand attachment might be a better predictor of behaviours than brand attitude strength. Given our concern with brands being accepted as friends, we focused on attitude towards brand presence i.e. the extent to which people accept that the brand has a fan page. To our knowledge it has not been studied on facebook with the exception of Akar/Topçu (2011) who have investigated attitude towards social media marketing. Based on the above, we suggest that brand attachment should positively influence attitude toward the presence of the brand on facebook.

“The strength of emotional attachment to an object may be associated with investment in the object, that is, the willingness to forego immediate self-interest to promote a relationship (Van Lange *et al.* 1997; Thomson *et al.* 2005). Given the reasoned action theory (Fishbein/Ajzen 1975) and planned action theory (Ajzen 1985, 1987), if people favourably judge the presence of the brand on facebook, they will be more likely to respond favourably to one or more of its actions on facebook. Therefore, attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook should have a positive impact on consumer behaviours related to the brand. Indeed, individuals who are strongly attached to a brand will have a positive attitude toward the presence of the brand on the social media and will be more active and perform more behaviours related to it.

This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook mediates the impact of brand attachment on behaviours related to the brand.

2.2. From Media attachment to behaviours related to the brand on facebook

Given the very nature of facebook – namely the friendship context –social media seems to elicit links and feelings in the consumer with a strong perception of closeness. This strongly resembles a real relationship, potentially leading to real attachment between the user and the website (Hazan/Shaver 1994). Yet only a few marketing researchers have considered media

attachment. In line with previous works on brand attachment, *Valette-Florence et al.* (2010) defined it according to *Lacoeuilhe* (2000) as “a psychological variable that translates a lasting and changeless emotional relation (separation is painful) towards brand and that expresses a relation of psychological closeness to it.” The authors discarded some emotions from their conceptualization since they studied them as an antecedent to attachment to press magazines. However, here we adopt *Thomson et al.*'s (2005) view given its anchoring in the literature. We assume that media, like brands, can be anthropomorphized since they fulfil some functions interchangeable with the psychological functions of other people (*Long et al.* 2012). Indeed, in above mentioned studies about catalogues and magazines, the media represents proximity, people feel excited when thinking of the coming interaction with a new issue, they can elicit pleasure and arousal (*Simon* 2008) but also fear, possession and plenitude (*Valette-Florence et al.* 2010). We consider that facebook can be anthropomorphized even more than print media given its very nature i.e. its ability to make people live emotional experiences, create relationships between people and make them feel part of a group (*Akar/Topçu* 2011). Indeed “belongingness needs influenced individuals’ tendency to anthropomorphize non-human entities,” (*Long et al.* 2012). Some researchers even use the comparison of a drug addiction to characterize the link between users and the website (*Patterson* 2012). This is why we suggest that as with brands, if people are attached to the media, they will be more favourable to brand presence on this media and their subsequent behaviours toward the brand will be positive as well. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: Attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook mediates the impact of media attachment on behaviours related to the brand.

3. Methodology

The aforementioned hypotheses were tested using a quantitative survey. Data collection lasted for one week in May 2012 with students, since most of them are Facebook users and represent a homogeneous population. Based on the email lists of two business schools in south-eastern France, 680 students were invited to click on the link to the online questionnaire. To make sure that they actually belonged to our target, the respondents were filtered at the beginning of the questionnaire to make sure they werestudents, facebook users and brand page fans. If they did not fulfil to one of these conditions, the questionnaire was ended and the participant was thanked for his/her interest in our research. If they did, they were asked a few questions about their activities on facebook and they were asked to complete the questionnaire by focusing on a brand they had actually “liked”. As a result of this process, we collected 188 complete and

valid questionnaires. In our sample, 68 % were women (124) and 32% were men.² The mean age was 21.2 years old (S.D.: 2.63). Fifty-six percent were bachelor level students and 44% were Masters level students. Seventy-six percent of the respondents have been facebook users for more than 3 years, 60% logged in at least once a day, 70% spent from 0 to 2 hours a day and 72% were a fan of up to 3 brand pages.

To measure attachment to the brand, we relied on *Thomson et al.*'s, (2005) scale. To measure attachment to facebook, we adapted their same 10 items to our context and added to them adapted items from *Paxton/Moody's* (2012) scale to capture the social dimension of facebook attachment. The attitude towards presence of the brand on social media was measured with the six items devoted to facebook from *Akar/Topçu's* (2011) measure of the "attitudes towards marketing with social media". We designed our own items for the behaviour related to the brand on the social media, based on the possible actions a consumer can undertake on facebook (such as "liking" the publications of the brand on the page, sharing and commenting on them, recommending the brand page, using promotional codes given on the brand page, etc...). All items were measured on 7-point Likert scales anchored as 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree". Before starting data collection, the whole questionnaire was pre-tested with a sample of 26 students. This resulted in small changes in wording and good reliability in our measures.

4. Main results

First, the validity and reliability of the measures were assessed. Second, the two hypotheses were tested.

Validity and reliability of the measures

To assess the construct validity of the measures prior to model estimation, two steps were taken (*Byrne* 2001). First, Principal Component Analysis using Varimax Rotation was performed to eliminate cross-loading and to optimize scale validity and reliability. Second, the validity of the measures was assessed by conducting a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (*Arbuckle* 2003). Principal component analysis led us to retain a uni-dimensional measure of brand attachment (KMO = 0.907, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant and the cumulative percentage of explained variance was 67.23%). The reliability of this measure was verified *via* Cronbach's alpha (0.918). We also tested the dimensionality and reliability of the

² In our sample women are over represented compared to men. Indeed, this bias can be relativized by the fact that most brand pages fan on facebook are women (Opinionway: <http://www.opinionway.com/pdf/innovations/OpinionWay-DDB-Fans-de-marques-Facebook.pdf>).

attitude towards the presence of the brand on the social media scale. Results confirmed the unidimensionality of *Akar/Topçu's* (2011) scale (KMO = 0.774; total variance explained = 62% and Cronbach's alpha = 0.8). Finally, the structure of the measurement of attachment to facebook was tested and results of the ACP showed the bi-dimensionality of the scale. The two dimensions – media attachment and group attachment – explained 68% of the total variance and Cronbach's alphas were quite high (respectively 0.931 and 0.726). Confirmatory factor analysis enabled us to ensure the quality of the modal adjustment to data ($\chi^2/ddl = 2.544$; GFI = 0.997; AGFI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.000).

Test of H1

H1 assumes that the impact of brand attachment on consumer behaviours related to the brand is exerted *via* the attitude towards the brand presence on the social media. To test this mediating effect, two structural equation models were built. We used the same approach as *Lam et al.* (2004), who adapted *Baron/Kenny's* (1986) mediation test for data analysis with structural equations. This approach consists of specifying two models. The first model examines the direct link between the explanatory variable (brand attachment) and the dependent variable (behaviours related to the brand), $r = 0.556^{**}$. The second model plots the mediation of the relationship through attitude towards presence of the brand on the social media, for brand attachment \Rightarrow attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook, $r = 0.435^{**}$; for attitude \Rightarrow behaviours related to the brand on facebook, $r = 0.251^{**}$ and for brand attachment \Rightarrow behaviours, $r = 0.451^*$. It is therefore possible to conclude that attitude towards brand presence partially mediates the link between brand attachment and consumer behaviours towards the brand.

Test of H2

H2 assumes that the impact of media attachment on consumer behaviour towards the brand is exerted *via* the attitude towards the brand presence on the social media. In the first model for media attachment \Rightarrow behaviours related to the brand, structural equations displayed $r = 0.556^{**}$. In the second model, for media attachment \Rightarrow attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook, $r = 0.395^{**}$; for attitude \Rightarrow behaviours related to the brand on facebook, $r = 0.251^{**}$ and for media attachment \Rightarrow behaviours, r is non-significant. It is therefore possible to conclude that attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook fully mediates the effect of media attachment on subsequent behaviours related to the brand.

Test of the complete model

Finally, we tested an integrative model, including all the links, using a global structural equation model under AMOS 15.0 software. The multi-normality condition was bypassed thanks to use of a bootstrap procedure carried out on the sample. This test confirmed the significance of the estimated parameters and highlighted the significance of each tested structural link (Figure 1). The psychometric qualities of the model were mitigated according to the criteria suggested by *Hu/Bentler* (1999): RMSEA = 0.076, AGFI = 0.834 and CFI = 0.896. Results about variables relationships are presented in Figure 1.

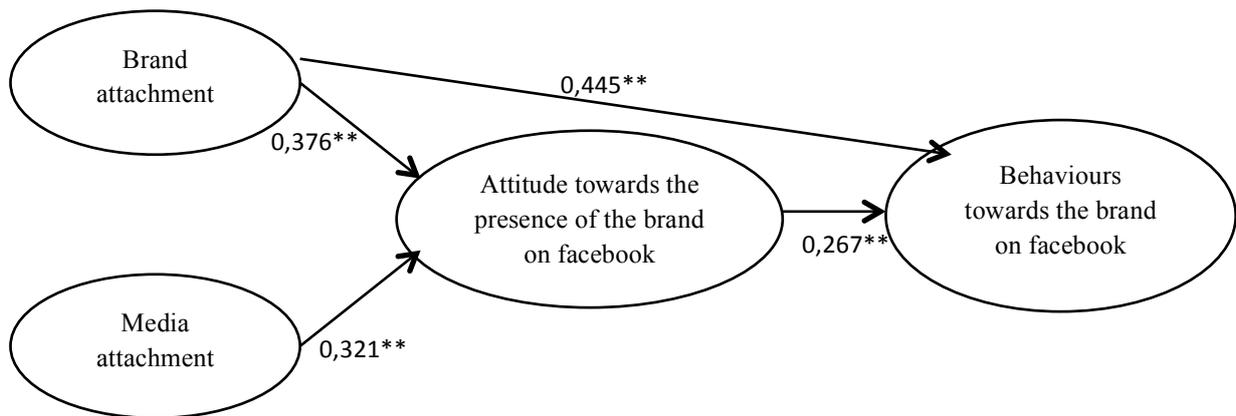


Figure 1: integrative model.

5. Discussion of the results

This research explores little studied variables, such as media attachment and attitude towards the presence of the brand in a recently emerged field, namely social media. Our results underline that brand attachment, but also, and this is a major contribution, media attachment, predict attitudes and behaviours towards the brand on social media. Even though our study was exploratory, the results provide interesting insights about the underlying mechanisms of brand strategy efficiency on facebook for both academics and managers.

First, our research highlights the central role of attachment as an explanatory variable for behaviours towards brands on facebook. Indeed, consumer attachment to the brand, on one hand, and to the media on the other, represent key predictors of a favourable attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook. It is interesting to note that brand attachment and media attachment almost equally explain the attitude towards the presence of the brand. Consequently they are important antecedents of behaviours (such as interactions with the

brand on the fan page, diffusion of brand “news” on consumer facebook pages, etc.) that express a consumer’s positive attitude towards the brand presence on social media.

Accordingly, attitude towards the presence of the brand is identified as an important mediating variable. Attitude can be influenced by different individual variables such as education level, age or facebook expertise and also by variables linked to the perception of brand parameters such as the perceived congruence between brand image and brand presence intensity on the social media (brand perceived as pro-active, modern, relational, etc.). Brand actions in this sense could in turn positively influence attitude towards brand presence on Facebook and consequently impact consumers’ behaviours towards the brand on facebook.

Furthermore, if from an academic perspective this research corroborates previous results about the antecedent role of attachment on behaviours through brands (*Park et al. 2010*), it also implies interesting managerial issues. It appears that when consumers experience a strong attachment to the brand on one hand, and to facebook on the other, they engage in a variety of behaviours on the brand fan page. By doing so, they actively contribute to the fan page activity, buzz and lively content (user-generated-content), so they act as ambassadors for the brand. These consumers, who can be identified either in the brand database (for the brand’s attached consumers) or according to their activities on facebook (for the media’s attached consumers), represent a privileged target for brand actions on social media.

6. Limitations and research avenues

In this research, consumers were asked to self-select a brand, namely their preferred brand on facebook. This might have induced a favourability bias and may have consequently over weighted the impact of brand attachment on attitude towards the presence of the brand on facebook. Following *Thomson et al. (2005)*, we could have asked them to rate their attachment to their most and least liked brands, but that did not make sense, in as much as one is unlikely to be a fan of a brand one dislikes.

Moreover, given the subjects’ brand self-selection we had no control over the characteristics of the brand. An alternative data collection methodology would use a common brand and ask consumers to report their emotional attachment and attitude towards the presence of it on facebook. Consequently, brand would be constant across all emotional attachment conditions (*Thomson et al. 2005*). Also, future studies should assess whether these brands are perceived

as hedonic or functional brands and investigate whether the impact of both attachments differs between the two types of brands (*Thomson et al. 2005*).

Our view of attachment, which is in line with many leading previous studies, is purely emotional. However, some authors recently suggested that “attachment is more than emotions; it is reflected by mental representations (rich cognitive schemata) that include brand–self cognitions, thoughts, and autobiographical brand memories” (*Park et al. 2010*). Accordingly, they define it along two dimensions: brand–self connection and brand prominence. It could be fruitful to replicate our study including a new conceptualization and a new measure of attachment and to compare the results.

Given that this study is exploratory, we tested a simple model. Although it fits the data quite well, to get a better understanding of the impact of attachment on the attitude towards brand presence on facebook, some individual variables should be included. Two of them are of particular interest. First, since the moderating role of expertise has been repeatedly shown in Internet studies, here we assume that facebook expertise could impact the effect of facebook attachment on the attitude towards brand presence on the website. Precisely, we think that being an expert will strengthen the positive relationship identified here. Second, in line with *Bowlby’s* work on parent–infant relationships (1979, 1980), many psychologists have investigated whether and how attachment style impacts people’s attachment to a variety of objects and close relationships (*Long et al. 2012*). *Bartholomew/Horowitz (1991)* describe four styles in terms of their level (low vs. high) on two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Here, it could be interesting to investigate the extent to which people differ in their attitude towards the presence of the brand according to their dominant attachment style.

Our research highlights that attachment to facebook is a relevant variable to use in the study of the presence of the brand on facebook. It provides researchers with a quite reliable and valid measurement tool of media attachment. We hope that these preliminary results as well as the suggested research avenues will stimulate contributions on attachment to social media, and more generally, to the scarce literature on media attachment.

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