

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SYMPATHY, USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND BRAND EQUITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine how sympathy spread messages by exploring Internet user behaviors as well as UGC's role in facilitating brand equity. Thereby the study suggests the research model which can be applied in other places, other contexts, and related fields. The study's method is to systematically review, compare the relevant studies, and develop research hypotheses. The main results of the proposed model are to explore the scales and determine the relationship between sympathy, user-generated content (UGC), and brand equity. Moreover, empirical research can, based on the proposed conceptual framework, be studied for different countries or platforms such as Twitter (a blog site), Facebook, Instagram (a social network), and youtube (a content community). The proposed model provides valuable insights into the role of using sympathy in social media to encourage UGC, in turn promoting brand equity. Consequently, the marketer, the owner of the company, should be aware of the importance of using empathy in social posts.

Key words: sympathy, user-generated content, brand equity, social media, UGC role.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of web 2.0, facilitating users to interact and multiply, create content (e.g., photo, audio, video, text, etc.) is transforming how we live and work. Social media is a primary connection for many people; it brings out tons of advantages and makes people feel more vulnerable and anxious. Nowadays, the consumer is more and more carefully with traditional advertisements, leading to the gap between what the company says (brand's identity) and what customer perceives (image of the brand). Hence, navigating social media communication while maintaining the user's integrity and peace of mind is becoming more difficult.

Cheong and Morrison (2008), Liu, Karahanna, and Watson (2011), Riegner (2008) indicated that consumers consider posts and sharings from Internet end-user more credible for engaging with. At the same time, brands recognized that one-way communication and informative approach are old news (Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch, 2017). This has forced marketers to rethink their strategy and realize how to navigate social media to empower the customer to take an active part in branding rather than just being a passive listener, promoting brand equity. This study's objective is to examine the factors determining the influence of empathy on UGC and brand equity. Also, the research is to explore how people express care and sympathy through UGC, how UGC uses impact sympathy, and finally, how UGC and sympathy translate into brand equity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. User-Generated Content

They are searching for how to do something new, not only interested in passively consuming content but also seeking out content that prompts change, in both themselves and the world around them. Therefore, it's increasingly common for companies to generate branded content themselves and encourage users to spread it out on social media. Customer reviews on the digital field, known as User Generated Content (hereafter UGC), are not new concepts. It has been spreading out as a phenomenon since 2005 (Bruns, 2016) and becoming an essential online marketing tool for several brands (Sign and Sonnenburg, 2012). We acknowledge UGC's definition presented by Daugherty et al. (2008), UGC is media content distributed online and produced by non-paid professionals. In the same vein, Krumm, Davies, & Narayanaswami (2008) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) indicated that UGC stands for content (data, information, and media) that are publicly and voluntarily created by non-conventional producers about a product or a brand. In a more recent definition, Tang, Fang, and Wang (2014) and Roy, Datta, & Basu (2017) regarded UGC as media content used to exchange trustworthy and credible information among Internet end-users. Similarly, Stoeckl, Rohrmeier, & Hess (2007) Bruns (2016) and Naab and Sehl (2017) reaffirmed UGC as various forms of media content contributed by non-professional generators without a monetary motivation. As already stated, the term "user generated content" will be defined according to the three criteria: (1) UGC refers to contributions by Internet end-users voluntarily, which include a variety of content (personalized text, images, audio, etc). (2) UGC must be published. (3) The majority of content generators are amateurs.

2.2. Sympathy

Sympathy is a broad concept that refers to the cognitive (the ability to understand), and emotional reactions (share the feelings of their peers) of an individual to another's observed experiences.

According to Smith (1759), sympathy is the effect that is generated when we put ourselves in others' circumstances and feel compassion for another person. It is a complicated phenomenon, which transforms the impression of sensation into ideas. Sympathy is also a multidimensional construct consisting of an effective and a cognitive component, which has been shown to be differentially related to behavioral outcomes (e.g., Lovett & Sheffield, 2007). Kohut (1984) used sympathy to collect and gather data by listening to others' experiences (affects, sensations, emotions).

Preston and de Waal (2002) defined sympathy as the ability to experience and understand others' feelings. But sympathy is not an emotion (Lauren, 1991), it is considered as original passions of human nature. Smith (1759) maintained that even the greatest ruffian also interests others' happiness and renders it to his pleasure, although he receives nothing from that. Still, the reason for general fellow-feeling we have with every man, merely because he is our fellow-creature.

According to Hogan (1969), the measures of empathy include four separate dimensions: social self-confidence, even-temperedness, sensitivity, and nonconformity. In sum, sympathy is a social emotion that refers to the cognitive and emotional reactions of an individual to the observed experiences of another.

2.3. Brand and Brand Equity

According to Nandan (2005), Brand equity is originated from the company; the brand image refers to consumer perceptions and encompasses. The brand is not a recently emerging word; it came from a Germanic word that means "to impress or burn a mark upon with a hot iron," which often comes in criminal marking during mid-15c and broadened by the 1580s to mark the quality of different ownership's contents. In the 1500s, the noun Brand was also known as "mark made by a hot iron," to distinguish the variety of goods makers. According to AMA (American Marketing Association), a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or any other features that identify and the goods or services of one seller as distinct from those of competitors. Seetharaman et al. (2001) and Shiva (2005) defined a brand as an asset that does not have a physical existence. The value of such a thing cannot be determined if it is not a specific transaction of sale or acquisition.

Lo (2012) considered brand equity as one of the most valuable intangible assets. There are different dimensions of brand equity, namely brand image (Keller, 1993), brand awareness (Keller, 1993), brand associations (Park and Srinivasan, 1994; Aaker, 1996; Yoo and Donthu, 2001), brand attitude (Lane and Jaconson, 1995), brand name familiarity (Lane and Jaconson, 1995), brand loyalty (Aaker, 1996; Yoo and Donthu, 2001).

2.4. Hypothesis Development and Conceptual Framework

Hodges and Myers (2007) regarded sympathy as understanding another's experience by putting oneself in other's circumstances. They also convinced that there is a positive correlation between feeling empathic concern and being willing to help others. Empathy also plays an essential role, known as "social glue" in adolescents' interaction (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Smith (1979) indicated that sympathy could not provide the cement of society; he still emphasized the demand for social order and justice, which "is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice." He conceived, "the very existence of society requires that unmerited and unprovoked malice should be restrained by proper punishment." Carlo et al. (2012) and Knafo, Zahn-waxler & Robinson (2008) showed that sympathy positively affects prosocial behavior. Still, we can identify an agreement that sympathy tends to prompt you to take action to relieve another person's suffering. It is sometimes about the individual wanting to be seen as a kind and understanding person than actually being kind and understanding.

Therefore, by creating content that evokes moral motivation such as sympathy, consumers are more likely to take action- generate content- sharing, responding, and prompting change within their communities. Based on the above statement, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Sympathy has a positive effect on user generated content

Since customers are no longer interested in content generated by brands, they want to participate in the companies' value chain through co-created content such as UGC (Pralhad, 2000). UGC allows brands to satisfy the increasingly severe "demand" of customers by enabling them to connect with others in cyberspace (Harrison et al. 2006), and empowering them with other's insight (Burmam & Arnhold, 2008). UGC's advertising is among the most trusted online content (Nielsen 2012, Nielsen 2013, Nielsen 2015). 86% of customers say that they are more likely to believe in an authentic review than content created by the brand and consider reviews an essential resource before making a purchase decision (Stackla's, 2007).

Besides, UGC also makes customers feel more powerful in defining the brand on their own (Christodoulides, 2009; Li and Bernoff, 2008) and enabling them to create a community that invested in the brand (McAlexander et al. 2002, de Chernatony and Christodoulides 2004). Besides, UGC affected customer's choice and perceived brand's personality by providing the opportunity to express themselves (Phau & Lau, 2001; Gray, 2007; Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Giddens 1991 and Sirgy 1982). Moreover, UGC increases the sense of belonging, brand loyalty, associations and identification (McPherson et al. 2001; McMillan and Chavis 1986). Based on the above statement, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. User-generated content has a positive effect on brand equity.

Personal and psychological factors are considered as factors that navigate customer's awareness and beliefs toward a brand (Madar et al., 2013; Rani, 2014). A higher level of moral judgments and social responsibility is applied in marketing decision, the more positive effect on the brand experience and brand trust is (Ford & Richardson, 1994; Hoch, 2002; Reo & Singhapakdi, 1997). Besides, Blackston (2000), Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2002) also argued that the customer's evaluation of a brand is based on their own experience and ethical suitability of the company's marketing practices. According to the Perception-Action Model (PAM) of empathy, social reaction plays a crucial role in recognizing and shaping others' emotions (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Many companies used corporate social responsibility (CSR) to create a strong association among stakeholders (Dowling, 2001). Additionally, promotion-related ethics also emphasizes the reputation of a brand and maintains its awareness and identification in the marketplace (Brunk, 2012; Brunk, 2010; Amofa et al., 2016; Pelsmacker 2007). Consumers tend to take ethical issues as an essential consideration during the purchase process (Creyer & Ross, 1997); moreover, branding is also evaluated from a moral point of view (Robin and Reidenbach, 1987). Regarding sympathy as an ethical principle of behavior, brands could use it in ethical brand positioning to differentiate themselves from other competitors. In turn, increase brand equity in general. Based on the above arguments, we posit the following:

H3. Sympathy has a positive effect on the brand equity.

So, the conceptual framework is as follow:

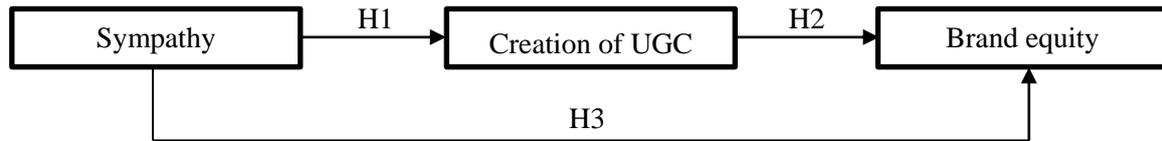


Figure 1 The conceptual framework

3. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current research on sympathy and brand equity in Vietnam is still very new. Especially in the field of user-generated content. Through systematically relevant analysis, this paper proposes the relationship between sympathy and brand equity directly. At the same time, this research compares the indirect relationship between sympathy and brand equity through user-generated content.

The next step after developing hypotheses and modeling is to test hypotheses in the context of Vietnam. Sympathy scales, user-generated content scales, and brand equity scales will be explored in detail in the study in Vietnam. The model in this study is the model applied in Vietnam. This model will set the stage for other studies in Vietnam in general and in the world in the research of sympathy, user-generated content, and brand equity.

At the same time, this study further supports the theory of sympathy, user-generated content, and brand equity. Also, the study's model provides other researchers with empirical studies in many different research contexts. Based on the subsequent empirical studies in the future, the company will know the direct effect of sympathy or the indirect impact of sympathy on brand equity via user-generated content.

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