Part K
Social Media and Digital Marketing

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Internet Technologies and Online Sales
User Reviews Variance, Critic Reviews Variance, and Product Sales: An Exploration of Customer Breadth and Depth Effects
  Xuefeng Liu, Feng Wang, Eric Fang
The Impact of Friendening on Sales
  Junni Zhang, Yuchi Zhang, Cheng Zhang, Xueming Luo
Competitive Poaching in Contextual Targeting Advertising
  Yiping Song, Chee Wei Phang, Shuai Yang, Xueming Luo, Catherine Tucker
The Effect of Online Review Variance on Product Evaluations: Information Diagnosticity Framework
  Ryan Langan, Ali Besharat, Sajeev Varki

Branding on Social Media
Social Transformation via Social Networking Sites? Consumer Motivation to Participate in Brand Boycotts via Facebook
  Whitney Ginder, Wi-Suk Kwon
Impact of Information Source and Promotion Characteristics on Consensus of Promotion Evaluations
  Hongbum (Anthony) Kim, Scott A. Thompson
Collaborative Brand Attacks in Social Media: Exploring the Antecedents, Characteristics, and Consequences of a New Form of Brand Crises
  Nadine Kammerlander, Philipp A. Rauschnabel, Bjoern S. Ivens
Visual Social Media and Image Associations Transfer to the Brand
  Gema Vinuales, Daniel A. Sheinin
User Reviews Variance, Critic Reviews Variance, and Product Sales: An Exploration of Customer Breadth and Depth Effects

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Keywords: user reviews, critic reviews, market breadth, market depth, variance

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question
Online user reviews constitute a new element of the marketing communication mix that has the potential to significantly affect product sales. A general consensus holds that a positive valence of user reviews benefits product sales, yet the effect of variance is less intuitive and current findings are mixed. We argue that user reviews variance actually constitutes a double-edged sword that can either hurt or help product sales, depending on the variance of critic reviews and other quality signals. Three complementary studies in multiple industries (movies, digital cameras, books) with multiple methods (secondary data analysis and behavioral experiment) reveal three key insights in this setting. First, after recognizing a high variance in user reviews, many potential buyers may simply exclude the focal product from their consideration sets for fear that the focal product may not be what they are looking for, which is termed the customer breadth effect. Second, high user reviews variance, in combination with high critic reviews variance, can elicit a sense of uniqueness and thus enhance purchase intentions of consumers, which is termed the customer depth effect. Third, quality signals (e.g., product cost and product extension) can strengthen the positive customer depth effect. The overall influence of user reviews variance on product sales thus depends on the relative strength of the customer breadth and depth effect. The eventual outcomes can be negative, insignificant, or even positive. These findings have critical theoretical and managerial implications.

Method and Data
In this paper, three empirical studies were conducted to test the hypotheses. The first two studies used movie data and digital camera data to examine the basic phenomenon whereas the third study adopted the experimental method to underpin the mechanism. Specifically, the first study used review data and sales data about 136 movies, and the second study used similar data about 179 digital camera models. In both studies, the simultaneous equations models were adopted to process the data. In study 3, we collected experimental data with a book as the focal product. ANOVA analysis was used to process the experimental data.

Key Contributions
First, we develop a theory about how variance of user reviews impacts sales. Specifically, we differentiate two consequences of high user reviews variance: a negative customer breadth effect and a positive customer depth effect. Therefore, this paper can draw our attention to a Janus-like nature of high user reviews variance: it can hurt sales by increasing perceived risk but help sales by amplifying perceived uniqueness. This finding can deepen our understanding of the role of user reviews variance substantially.

Second, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the interactive effects of user reviews and critic reviews. The significant interaction between user reviews variance and critic reviews variance suggests that these two
sources of information should be examined together, as ignoring one could result in biased estimations of the effects of the other. By focusing on the interactive effects of user reviews variance and critic reviews variance, this study responds to the call of examining the nature of how information from multiple sources works together to affect purchase and sheds light on how user reviews and critic reviews may impact important variables collectively.

Third, we also find that product quality signals can amplify the customer depth effect. The overall effects of user reviews variance can thus be negative, insignificant, or even positive, depending on which effect, the customer breadth or the customer depth effect, is stronger in different situations (e.g., whether a product is an extension or not). Therefore, our findings can reconcile conflicts in previous literature. Besides, this paper, along with others, provides insights about how online word-of-mouth interacts with other product quality signals in firms’ control (e.g., product cost) to affect sales.

**Summary of Findings**

Three complementary studies in multiple industries (movies, digital cameras, books) with multiple methods (secondary data analysis and behavioral experiment) reveal three key insights in this setting.

First, after recognizing a high variance in user reviews, many potential buyers may simply exclude the focal product from their consideration sets for fear that the focal product may not be what they are looking for, which is termed the customer breadth effect.

Second, high user reviews variance, in combination with high critic reviews variance, can elicit a sense of uniqueness and thus enhance purchase intentions of consumers, which is termed the customer depth effect.

Third, quality signals (e.g., product cost and product extension) can strengthen the positive customer depth effect. The overall influence of user reviews variance on product sales thus depends on the relative strength of the customer breadth and depth effect. The eventual outcomes can be negative, insignificant, or even positive.

*References are available on request.*
Research Question
This research investigates the causal impact of friends on purchase activity. Consumers are often influenced by their friends when making purchase decisions. As marketers leverage the ‘social value’ of friends via online retailing and social media platforms (Smith 2014), it is pivotal for managers to understand the causal impact of friends on consumer purchases.

Method and Data
We propose a two-phase model in a unified framework that identifies causality with observational data and quantifies the sales effects of having friends. The first phase of our model deals with biases in observational data in which treatment is not randomized: there may be systematic bias in groups with different treatment levels. Thus, we use propensity score matching to create two groups (a treatment group of having friends vs. a control group of not having friends) that are as virtually similar to each other as possible in terms of the full statistical distributions of all observed covariates; we then evaluate the sales effects of the treatment. By effectively mimicking a randomized experiment, when the treatment assignment is independent of the outcome, causality could be inferred from observational data conditional on propensity score matching.

The second phase deals with data truncation bias in the outcome data (i.e. sales). Specifically, sales purchase data is only observed and well-defined for consumers who “survive” (do not churn and still interact with the firm), but not for those who have churned. The statistics literature refers to such outcome variable truncation as ‘truncation by death’ (Zhang and Rubin 2003), another key bias confounding the causal inference of the treatment effects. In other words, sales data are undefined for consumers who do not survive (e.g., consumers may have defected from the company and there is no more record of their company transactions). Such zeroes for sales data are confounded and may be driven by either consumer absence or a refrain from spending. If this potential data truncation bias in the post-treatment period is not accounted for, misestimates of treatment effects would persist even in randomized experiments. Thus, our second phase develops a principal stratification to correct for possible sales data truncation.

Key Contributions
We aim to make two key contributions to marketing research. Substantively, by applying our model to an online social game dataset, we assess the extent to which friending impacts sales. Methodologically, extending propensity score matching-related research in marketing (Huang et al. 2013), we introduce principal stratification and demonstrate how to resolve the potential truncation bias that may arise when the treatment results in the truncation of the outcome variable. Our two-phase causality identification method is non-trivial for marketing research because the biases of non-randomly assigned treatment and outcome data truncation may confound the impact of marketing policies on sales even in randomized experiments. Also, we extend the literature by integrating a simultaneous model (with both the probability of purchase and spending amount conditional on the purchase decision) into a two-phase framework for identifying causality with observation data.

Summary of Findings
We apply our proposed method to a unique dataset from a massive multiplayer online role playing game that contains observations of both having friends and purchases. Our results

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show that having friends significantly affect in-game purchases. We find that consumers with friends have a greater probability of both making purchases and logging into the game. More interestingly, we find that conditional on making a purchase, consumers who have made friends may spend less during a purchase session. However, we find that having friends, on average, increases the total amount spent when considering both the impact of having friends on the probability of purchase and amount of cash spent on the purchase session together. In addition, we find that truncation by death is a significant issue in our context. Specifically, the estimates from only the propensity score matching method underestimate the impact of having friends on sales when compared with the results from our proposed unified framework.

*References are available on request.*
Research Question
Is CCT effective in increasing ad click-through and conversion rates? Will its effects be enhanced by adding a promotional incentive?

Method and Data
In this study, we employ a multi-method approach that comprises field quasi-experiments, focus groups, and laboratory surveys. These methods complement each other: the field quasi-experiments provide empirical validations of the effects of CCT and promotional incentive on ad CTRs and conversion rates based on objective field data; the focus groups and laboratory surveys help provide an understanding of the psychological factors that may explain the field empirical findings.

We did two field quasi-experiments. In Study 1, a stock software company ran the experiment for 97 days starting on June 1, 2012. In Study 2, a hotel chain ran the experiment for 86 days starting on November 2, 2011.

For the focus group part, eight participants (5 females) shared their thoughts in two separate group discussions. Based on the inputs from the focus group, we designed our follow-up laboratory surveys. A total of 154 subjects participated in the session and completed the surveys.

Key Contributions
Our findings help clarify for managers how this new Internet-enabled CCT to target competitors’ customers can be effectively leveraged. We show that CCT is productive for firms wishing to attract CTRs with their ads, which increases the chance of brand and product recognition by consumers (Hollis 2005). Garnering the attention of prospective customers (in this case, customers of competitors) is important in today’s increasingly competitive and saturated market. Moreover, companies that are tempted to offer promotional incentives in CCT must heed its differential impacts. Specifically, offering a (or more of a) promotional incentive can increase CTRs but not conversion rates as a result of CCT, compared with no (or less of a) promotional incentive.

Our study also contributes to theory in several ways. First, we clarify the theoretical mechanism through which the novel Internet-enabled CCT works in poaching consumers, i.e., by acting as an incongruous stimuli that kindles consumer curiosity. Second, extending theories of curiosity to the context of Internet advertising, our field studies and laboratory surveys shed light on the influence of curiosity as well as its boundary conditions in the context of online browsing. Third, we show that offering a (or more of a) promotional incentive may further enhance CCT’s potency by boosting consumer curiosity and thus ad CTRs, but not conversion rates, due to the brand loyalty factor, thereby enriching our understanding about the relationship between promotional incentives and brand loyalty in the setting of the novel Internet-enabled CCT poaching.

Summary of Findings
This paper, through two field quasi-experiment studies, demonstrates the effectiveness of CCT in increasing ad
CTRs but not conversion rates when compared to generic targeting. We also explore whether the incorporation of a promotional incentive amplifies the effects of CCT poaching. The answer is not straightforward because in a simple ‘poaching’ framework such incentives may be useful to persuade consumers to defect. Consistent with our hypotheses grounded in the incongruity theory of curiosity and brand loyalty perspective, our field quasi-experiment studies show that the effects of blending CCT with promotional incentives are neither simple nor straightforward. Rather, our analyses show that a promotional incentive is effective in amplifying CCT’s effects on consumer attention in the form of clicks, but is less successful in expanding CCT’s effects on consumer purchases.

The follow-up studies comprising focus group discussions and laboratory surveys gain theoretical insights into the effects of CCT and its combination with promotional incentives as well as to rule out plausible alternative explanations. The results indicate that curiosity constitutes the primary factor in boosting click intention for CCT ads, but becomes insignificant in influencing purchase intention for CCT ads. Furthermore, offering a promotional incentive in CCT poaching can boost consumers’ click intentions due to their heightened curiosity. However, consumer loyalty to the targeted competitor brand becomes salient and undermines purchases in the presence of a promotional incentive in CCT ads, i.e., consumer loyalty to the competitor brand reduces intention to make a purchase from the focal firm that employs CCT and incentives to poach. The results collectively suggest that contextually targeting competitors’ customers and offering a promotional incentive are worthwhile for gaining consumer CTRs but not immediate purchase conversions as a result of CCT poaching.

References are available on request.
The Effect of Online Review Variance on Product Evaluations: Information Diagnosticity Framework

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**Keywords:** Internet marketing, online consumer reviews, product cues, word of mouth, rating variance

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

This research examines how variance among online consumer reviews influences consumers’ decision confidence and product evaluations. Drawing on findings which demonstrate that people may perceive uncertainty as positive or negative (Laran and Tsiros 2013), we design three studies to elucidate the conditions under which consumer review variance serves to enhance or diminish consumers’ product evaluations. Based on accessibility-diagnosticity theory, we propose that the influence of online consumer review variance on consumers’ product evaluations varies depending upon the type of intrinsic (i.e., search/experience attributes; hedonic/utilitarian properties) and extrinsic (i.e., brand and reviewers credibility) cues consumers consider.

**Research Question**

How does variance among online consumer reviews influences consumers’ decision confidence and product evaluations?

**Method and Data**

We report the results of three online experiments to provide insights into the psychological processes and moderators surrounding the relationship between online review variance and product evaluation. The data for this study are collected from an online consumer panel.

**Summary of Findings**

Our findings show that greater variance among consumer reviews may enhance or weaken consumers’ product evaluations depending upon the cues consumers consider. The results indicate that higher levels of variance among online reviews leads to a greater reduction in consumers’ purchase intentions when they consider products with search compared to experience attributes. This relationship is also moderated by product type such that when decision risk is low, higher variance among reviews increases consumer purchase intentions for hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products. We also report evidence of a “blocking effect”; whereby reviewer credibility enhances consumers’ product evaluations when brand equity is low. However, this influence is muted when brand equity is high.

**Key Contributions**

We believe this study makes substantive theoretical and managerial contributions. First, this research offers an explanation for the mixed findings within the literature regarding the influence of variance among online consumer reviews. Given the correlational nature of the existing research and its failure to establish causality, we exploit the key advantages of controlled experiments over cross-sectional data to provide insights into the psychological processes and moderators surrounding the relationship between online review variance and product evaluation. Further, by demonstrating how intrinsic cues (in the form of attributes and product type) interact with consumer review variance, we extend research by Huang, Luri and Mitra (2009), which suggests that consumer’s process information related to search and experience goods differently in an online environment. Finally, this research broadens the work of Ho-Dac, Carson, and Moore (2013) by taking into account reviewer credibility. In doing so, we show that reviewer credibility does not have a significant influence on consumers’ purchase intentions when brand equity is high.

**References are available on request.**

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Social Transformation via Social Networking Sites? Consumer Motivation to Participate in Brand Boycotts via Facebook

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Keywords: social networking sites, brand boycotting, self-enhancement, brand loyalty

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question
Although consumer resistance expressed through boycotting is not a new phenomenon, the influence of online consumer-to-consumer communication through digital media like social networking sites (SNSs) and anti-branding websites is of growing concern to brand management (Albrecht, Campbell, Heinrich, & Lammel, 2013). SNSs are increasingly being used to initiate boycotts against companies that have committed social, political, and ethical malfeasance. Consumer-activists are able to draw awareness to their cause and virally spread their anti-brand sentiment to significantly more consumers than was possible in the pre-SNS era. Although research has explored consumer motivations to engage in brand boycotting, none has done so within the context of SNSs; thus, this study extends the boycotting literature to the emerging domain of Facebook. The following research questions are addressed: (1) Does the number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page influence intention to participate? (2) Does scope for self-enhancement mediate the relationship between the number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page and intention to participate? (3) Does susceptibility to interpersonal influence moderate the relationship between the number of likes and scope for self-enhancement? (4) Does brand loyalty negatively influence intention to participate in the brand boycott via Facebook?

Method and Data
This study used a 2 (number of likes: low vs. high) x 2 (brand boycott Facebook page: Gap vs. Chick-fil-A) between-subjects experimental design. Following previous experimental research on consumer boycotting (Sen et al., 2001) which manipulated others’ boycott participation by showing participants the percentage of consumers who intended to participate (low = 15%, high = 80%), this study manipulated the number of likes that the brand boycott page had received (low = 23 likes, high = 256,415 likes). For the purpose of stimulus sampling, two real brand boycott pages from Facebook were selected; Chick-fil-A is a boycott target due to the company’s donations to anti-gay groups, while Gap is a boycott target due to the company’s alleged use of sweatshop labor. The stimuli used authentic images of the above brands’ boycott Facebook News Feeds, except that the number of likes shown on the images was manipulated to reflect the respective experimental condition. A convenience sample of 128 university students participated in this online experiment. Participants completed a brand loyalty measure and then reviewed a brand boycott stimulus, randomly assigned among the four stimuli. Then, participants completed dependent measures (scope for self-enhancement and brand boycott participation intention), manipulation check measures, and a susceptibility to interpersonal influence measure.

Summary of Findings
Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to answer the research questions. The SEM fit indices demonstrate acceptable model fit (RMSEA = .076, TLI = .90, CFI = .90). The number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page did...
not significantly influence intention to participate in the brand boycott via Facebook ($\beta = -.022, p = .792$). The number of likes significantly influenced scope for self-enhancement from boycott participation, but this influence was negative ($\beta = -.37, p < .05$). Scope for self-enhancement positively influenced intention to participate in the brand boycott via Facebook ($\beta = .32, p < .001$). Brand loyalty did not influence intention to participate in the brand boycott via Facebook ($\beta = -.004, p = .901$). According to multiple-group SEM results, normative susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SII) did not significantly moderate the relationship between the number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page and scope for self-enhancement (low normative SII: $\beta = -.373, p = .065$; high normative SII: $\beta = -.374, p = .226$). However, informational SII significantly moderated this relationship in that the number of likes significantly influenced scope for self-enhancement for the high informational SII group ($\beta = -.571, p < .05$), but not for the low informational SII group ($\beta = -.096, p = .695$).

**Key Contributions**
This study fills a theoretically and managerially important research gap by extending the boycotting literature to SNSs and illuminating the possibility for differential boycott motivations within virtual environments. A significant relationship between the number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page and scope for self enhancement was found; however, this relationship was unexpectedly negative. This result could be due to a free-riding effect (Klein et al., 2004), whereby consumers may feel less responsible to participate as the number of other participants increase. Overall, scope for self-enhancement was the only significant determinant of participation intention, which illustrates that virtual brand boycotting may serve as a means for self and social identity enhancement (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Contrary to previous research (Albrecht et al., 2013; Sen et al., 2001), brand loyalty may not deter participation in brand boycotts via Facebook. These findings suggest that the theoretical frameworks applied within traditional consumer boycotting literature may not wholly transcend to virtual environments, and as the pervasiveness of SNSs continues to alter brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer communication, it is imperative that brands, companies, and academia develop a more comprehensive understanding of virtual brand boycotts.

*References are available on request.*
Online word of mouth (WOM) is becoming one of the most popular corporate promotional vehicles. Current research has focused on the role played by the volume of online WOM, arguing that high volumes of WOM communication provide greater benefits than low volumes of WOM. However, other research suggests that volume alone is not sufficient to ensure that WOM is influential. Specifically, prior research shows that it is not just what any one review says, but also the overall consensus among reviews that influences consumers. Consensus in WOM refers to the level of agreement between consumers’ reviews. In high consensus WOM, there is a high degree of agreement among consumers regarding the merits or failings of a product. On the other hand, low consensus occurs when consumers are divided in the assessments. Despite the documented importance of consensus to making WOM influential, there has been remarkably little research on what factors contribute to or detract from the formation of consensus. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of source and promotional characteristics on the degree of consensus in online consumer evaluations of promotions.

To investigate this research question, we gathered data on the evaluation of promotions posted on a C2C deal forum website, which allows consumers to post information about promotions that they have received. The information that is posted by users includes price, store name/website, discount amount, discount percent, discount type, limitations, and product information. The data were consisted with 11,354 promotions posted by 2,356 different members of the forum and rom this, a random sample of 1,000 deals was selected to be analyzed and coded. For this study, we calculated consensus as the dependent measure by dividing the evaluation score (from $-\infty$ to $\infty$) by each promotion’s total number of votes so that it enables to calculate how well users agreed upon their deal information evaluation.

To test our hypotheses, we used general linear regression models with the dependent variable being the absolute value of consensus, ranging from 0 (no consensus) to 1 (perfect consensus). The independent measures consisted with poster reputation score, number of votes that each posting received, number of views, and promotional deal characteristics including: time and quantity limits; uncertainty of deal redemption; and the deal offering being the cheapest.

The results from this study revealed that the larger group size initially increases positive consensus. Larger group size can also initially decrease negative consensus. Also, promotional characteristics that generate group pressure including time and quantity limit increase both forms of positive and negative consensus. Moreover, among promotional deal characteristics, promotional offer found out to be the lowest price among other retailers by forum users, it increases the positive consensus. Lastly, the deal poster reputation as the source of presenting the promotion, plays little role in formation of either positive or negative consensus.

This study provides insights into the drivers of consensus in online consumer evaluations of promotions. It first reveals how the drivers of favorable consensus differ from the drivers of unfavorable consensus. This study also confirmed the
promotion literature that the characteristics of promotions contribute to the formation of consensus. However, contrary to the predictions of the WOM literature, characteristics of the WOM sources found out to play little role in the formation of consensus in deal evaluations.

For marketers, this study provides insights into how to influence the formation of favorable consensus and inhibit the formation of unfavorable consensus. Marketers often struggle with how to counter negative reviews. Some marketers have sought to pressure websites to remove negative reviews or have even sued individuals who have posted negative reviews. However, these approaches have often led to further negative reactions in the press and among consumers. The results suggest rather than trying to deter consumers from providing further reviews, marketers may benefit from encouraging more reviews which can dilute the initial negative consensus.

References are available on request.
Collaborative Brand Attacks in Social Media: Exploring the Antecedents, Characteristics, and Consequences of a New Form of Brand Crises

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Keywords: social media, crisis, shitstorm, firestorm, eWOM, reputation

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question
Collaborative Brand Attacks (CBA) in social media are attacks, in which a large number of internet users consciously and jointly attack an organization, resulting in large amounts of negative user-generated content that is ultimately spread in the offline and online world. Synonyms for CBAs are “Shitstorms” or “Online Firestorms”. The number of such collaborative brand attacks has increased during the last years, independent from the industry, brand, or country. Even large brands like BMW, Domino’s pizza, or Chrysler have become victims of CBAs.

Given the prevalence of the phenomenon and the keen interest of academics and managers, this constitutes an important research gap. We thus aim to answer the following research questions:

Why and how do CBAs develop?
What are Implications of CBAs?
What are potential strategies to avoid harmful consequences?

Method and Data
A Delphi Study was conducted among Experts. The authors then analyzed multi-case study analysis qualitatively, based on a variety of recent CBAs.

Summary of Findings
We identified the main triggers, targets, and initiators of CBAs. One particularly important difference between CBAs and traditional crises is that CBAs can arise from vanities, such as carelessness of a low-rank employee. We furthermore conclude that steadily monitoring social media content is important for companies to identify CBAs in the very beginning, and that companies should react quickly on triggers. Our results show that deny- or ignore strategies are less effective in mitigating CBAs as compared to traditional crises. Rather we conclude that fast, user-focused, and transparent reactions at eye level with the customer should be preferred.

Key Contributions
The key contributions are: (1) definition and (2) systemization of CBAs and (3) adaptation of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to online crises. Furthermore, (4) recommendations to prevent and cope with CBAs are discussed, as well as future research directions.

References are available on request.
Visual Social Media and Image Associations Transfer to the Brand

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Keywords: social media, brands, visual communication, social community, shares

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question
This paper seeks to understand how social media users interpret visual content posted by brands in social media websites and what the implications for brand management are.

Method and Data
Online panel members and undergraduate students from a U.S. University participated in three experimental studies.

Summary of Findings
Social media users interpret and integrate collections of images curated by brands and used them to form brand judgments. The popularity of an image within the social media community (number of shares a picture receives) influences the weight given to the image unique associations when social media users integrate multiple visual stimuli in the process of interpreting the brand. Specifically, social media users anchor the interpretation of a brand on the most popular image in a profile. Self-construal moderates the influence of the social media community in the interpretation of a brand.

Key Contributions
From a theoretical perspective, this paper expands the social media literature to the visual communication context. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to understand how visual communication and social media variables interact in the formation of brand judgments. From a managerial perspective, this paper contributes to the practice of brand management. Brand management has become a marketer-user shared process and we argue that the creation of visual content should be the result of well strategized plan.

References are available on request.