

@brand to @brand: Consumer Evaluations of Interbrand Social Media Communications

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While prior research has assessed the role of social media communications on both brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer value co-creation, little is known of how consumers perceive value in interbrand social media communications. Brand-to-brand communications, or interbrand communications (IBCs), are becoming a common staple of the social media branding toolbox (<http://digiday.com/brands/brand-on-brand>). Consumers tend to follow multiple brands on social media (Labrecque 2014) and are now “invited” to observe and engage in these public interbrand communications.

Social media now give firms the ability to co-create intangible brand value within and across brand portfolios and industries, alongside traditional brand-consumer value co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Prior research on strategic brand alliances (co-branding) assesses spillover effects of tangible, new product opportunities on consumer attitudes toward brands (Simonin and Ruth 1998; Baumgarth 2004). However, social media strategies have empowered brands to build value beyond months-long bureaucratic approval processes of formal alliances that only create tangible brand outputs. Instead, seemingly—at least to the standard consumer—organic IBCs have potential to create intangible brand outputs and therefore, brand value.

The purpose of this research is to identify and examine the effects of IBCs—using social media—on brand co-creation of value via spillover effects. We simulated an IBC in a controlled experiment and used structural equation modeling to evaluate the spillover effects of IBCs on consumers’ attitudes to the brands. We randomly assigned 252 participants to a 2 (focal brand familiarity: low, high) x 2 (paired brand familiarity: low, high) x 2 (product category congruency: low, high) between-subjects repeated-measures design. Participants were given

brand attitude measures before completing a distracter task. Following the distracter task, participants were shown a brief IBC stimulus and then completed measures of IBC attitudes and IBC engagement (share/favorite/reply). After another distracter task, brand attitude measures were re-assessed.

Using structural equation modeling to correlate errors of the brand attitudes' repeated measures, we found IBCs have a positive impact on both consumer attitudes toward brands and toward consumer engagement with IBCs. Furthermore, we find product category congruency has a positive effect on attitudes to the IBC. However, while both brands benefit from the IBC interaction, we find the overall impact of IBCs is stronger for the paired brand than on the focal brand. Additionally, our results indicate IBCs have positive, symmetric spillover effects on consumer attitudes toward both brands but comparisons of measurement invariance models demonstrate that those effects are moderated by brand familiarity.

This initial research on IBCs has theoretical implications for social media, brand management, marketing communications, and value co-creation/service-dominant logic research. Our findings provide initial support for expanding the service-dominant logic view of brands (Merz, Vargo, and Yi 2009) as well as the potential for interbrand relationships to emerge on interactive platforms. The results of our findings also have practical implications for firms adding IBCs to their communications strategies. Although we find support for the positive impact of IBCs, our research is preliminary in nature and does not address moderating message characteristics such as duration of interaction, brand personalities, embedded media, hashtags, etc. We conclude with insights for extending research on IBC characteristics, spillover effects, and social media-mediated interbrand relationships.

References available upon request.