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“Twitter Me This, Twitter Me That.” The Marketization of Brands Through Social Networking Sites

Rachel S. Demerling

Introduction

Currently, Social Networking Sites (SNS) are one of the fastest growing arenas of the World Wide Web. Among the most popular are Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. At present, Facebook has 150 million users, followed by MySpace with 76 million users and Twitter with 4.43 million users (Swartz, 2008). Typical social networking sites allow users to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, as well as 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the systems (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). What is more, SNS are particularly unique because they produce “latent ties” that would not otherwise be made offline (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Scholarship on SNS has paid much attention to impression management, networks and network structure, online/offline connections as well as privacy issues (Barnes, 2006; Chester & Bretherton, 2007; Sampter, 2003). However, research on the role of SNS in the growth and expansion of the online economy is currently scant. Social networking sites have become increasingly popular social marketing tools for many companies. This newly emerging marketing tool contains reciprocal benefits for both the retailer and consumer. First, social networking sites enable surveillance, whereby invaluable consumer information is sold to market research firms who in turn sell it to retailers so they can use that information to determine their target demographic. This permits interactivity between the retailer and consumer because the retailer can elicit a direct response from the consumer through direct targeting. Secondly, the widespread uniformity of mass media culture has created a desire for individualism. Consumers yearn for products that are customized, reflecting their individuality, and differentiating them from the stifling conformity in society.

In this article, I show how the role of marketing has substantially changed with the advent of SNS to change the role of the consumer from a passive target to an active participant. Through the interactive relationship



companies establish with their online customers, users of SNS have become agents of their own consumption and co-producers of the brand. This is advantageous for the consumer because they have the ability to vocalize their preferences to retailers who can deliver their requests. However, it is the retailer who gains more in this relationship because once again, they are avoiding the costs of market research, advertising, manufacturing, and storage. Although the relationship between the retailer and consumer is unparalleled, it is one that is necessary with the increasing fragmentation in the public sphere. SNS have become hugely successful because they give individuals the opportunity to create identities online and retailers have complemented that by giving consumers control over the design and production of their products. However, this perceived control is merely an ideological fallacy of individualism that is predetermined and reproduces conformity in mass society.

Changing Role of Marketing

The past several years have seen the erosion of traditional advertising media and the emergence of interactive media. With the continuous growth of the social web, the role of marketing has drastically changed from a broadcaster sending out messages and information to a particular audience, to an aggregator bringing together content and participants in communities (Weber, 2007). However, a multitude of factors have prompted the shift away from traditional forms of advertising. Firstly, since the mid-1970's, the cost of advertising on television has out-paced the rate of inflation in many countries without an increase in audience. Clutter has also become a growing issue in traditional advertising because many advertisers choose to advertise with 10- or 15-second spots as opposed to the traditional 30- or 60-second spots. Moreover, fragmentation has occurred because the growth in independent stations has resulted in the erosion of the network share of audience. Lastly, technological changes such as the remote control, VCRs, and PVRs such as TiVo have resulted in channel surfing, which has further reduced advertising's effectiveness (Keller, 2008).

The introduction of the Internet in 1991 forever changed the role of marketing with its potential to reach unprecedented audiences. However, it was not until 1994 that the Internet became a commercial endeavor with the launch of banner advertisements (Robinson, Wysocka & Hand, 2007). Many big companies such as Yahoo began charging between \$30 and \$100 to run banner ads on their web pages. The cost of running ads on the Internet modeled prices for a one full-page colour advertisement in magazines for that time (McEleny, 2009). From this, sidebar ads began to popularize for two reasons. They are two or three times larger than banner ads and you cannot

scroll a sidebar ad off the screen like a banner ad. Another common web ad that emerged was the “pop up” ad. This form of advertising obscures the web page and requires the window to be closed or moved out of the way. In addition there are “pop under” ads, which are under the content of the web page and are less intrusive. While “pop up” and “pop under” ads annoy users and clutter up desktop space, they are more effective than banner ads and cost four to ten times more because the former get only five to six clicks per every 1,000 impressions whereas “pop” ads get approximately 30 clicks (McEleny, 2009). Although original forms of Internet advertising share some success in garnering the attention and business of users, they are expensive to run, unable to target key demographics, and cannot build brand loyalty nor attain consumer feedback. For that reason, when social networking sites emerged, their popularity and growth among retailers was inevitable because they solved the on-going marketing dilemma which was finding a medium that targets key demographics, is inexpensive, creates brand loyalty, and fosters interactivity between the producer and consumer.

Online social networking sites emerged in 1997 with a site called Six Degrees which allowed users to create profiles, list their friends and in 1998, surf the friends list. However, despite the sites initial success of attracting millions, it failed to become a sustainable business and in 2000, the site closed. It has been argued that Six Degrees was simply too ahead of its time while others have argued that there was little to do on the site after accepting friends (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). The function and role of social networking sites has transformed from one that connects individuals with similar interests to one that aides the growth and expansion of the online economy through surveillance. The increasing sophistication of statistical information gathering and data processing techniques, makes it possible for many brands to direct advertising campaigns towards specific “market segments” to determine their susceptibility to, or inclination towards their identities (Danesi, 2006). In 2001, Ryze.com was launched to help people leverage their business networks. This network was tightly linked to other SNS such as Friendster, LinkedIn and Tribe.net. In the end, all of the sites except Ryze.com acquired mass popularity (Festa, 2003).

The nature of SNS has evolved to include more focused networks, which allows companies to connect with their targeted audiences and transmit marketing messages. This technology has the ability to determine people’s interests and behaviour and connect them with other people who share a similar background. For instance, Amazon has the ability to analyze purchasing patterns and suggest other books that may be of interest to the customer, and Netflix can suggest other movie titles to their customers (Weber, 2007). Just like those sites, customers on social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace can be invited to be a fan on a retailers website or they can join

one they desire where retailers promote their products and may give fans coupons or codes to redeem savings or free products that match their interests. On Twitter, customers can follow specific companies who then “tweet” about promotions and products they wish to advertise. In addition, with SNS, users have the ability to provide retailers with feedback about their products through wall postings, blogging or “tweets.” In addition, users can engage in discussion with other users about such products and services. This provides the retailer with invaluable information about what their consumers like or dislike about their products, as well as what improvements can be made to increase sales.

With the rapid growth of the Internet and an increasing number of users, marketers have begun to turn their attention to this public domain as a fruitful opportunity to increase revenue. Currently in the United States, 200 million individuals aged 16 and older go online for an average of 17 hours per week. Of that, 88% go online for personal hobbies and interests (Morrill, 2009). Big-name advertisers have been lining up for a chance to advertise on some of the most popular SNS because they recognize that millions of adolescents with a large disposable income are spending more time updating their online profiles than watching television or paying attention to print ads. The “big 3” SNS which have seen insurmountable amounts of advertising revenue include MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn. In 2006, MySpace scored a \$900 million, three-year deal with Google. They also forged partnerships with major record labels Sony BMG, Warner Music Group and Universal Music. Facebook doubled their revenues to \$350 in 2008, while LinkedIn attracted banner advertisements from such companies as Porsche, Microsoft and MTV (Swartz, 2008). Evidently, the rising costs of advertising and marketing research coupled with changing patterns of technological use have prompted the shift away from traditional forms of advertising to the more cost-effective and interactive marketing that SNS facilitates.

Web Advertisements: Effective Marketing or Obtrusive Interruptions?

With the Internet becoming an increasingly popular medium for commercial use, advertising revenues have soared reaching \$23.70 billion in 2009, up from \$16.9 billion in 2006 (Morrill, 2009). According to the US Census, online retail sales have grown at a staggering rate from \$5 billion in the fourth quarter of 2009 to \$30 billion in the first quarter of 2009. However, the extent to which Web advertisements have a direct impact on consumer purchasing behaviour is an issue that continues to be debated. Social networking sites are becoming a distinct form of marketing because they contain advertisements, which are interactive and allow customers to partake in immediate response. Traditional online advertising consists of deliberate messages placed on

third-party websites available through Internet access. This excludes marketers' own website for promotional purposes, emails and shopping sites. On the other hand, "interactive advertising" is the paid and unpaid presentation and promotion of products, services and ideas by an identified sponsor through mediated means involving mutual action between consumers and producers (Leckenby & Hairong, 2000). Retailers advertising on the web have turned to SNS with the expectation that their ads will initiate a greater response which will in turn increase sales more so than traditional forms of Web advertising.

Literature on Internet communication questions the extent to which Web ads generate consumer response (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Leckenby & Hairong, 2000; Robinson, Wysocka, & Hand, 2007). Shankar and Hollinger (2007) argue that only a small fraction of consumers who are exposed to a Web advertisement remember the content, including the brand, nor do they interact with the ad. Moreover, Dreze and Hussherr (2003) found that Internet users avoided looking at ads while online, but that ads may be perceived in their peripheral vision. What is more, research shows that upon exposure to Web ads, consumers experience priming caused by implicit memory and build a more favourable attitude toward the advertised brand regardless of the levels of attention they paid to the advertisement (Yun, 2008).

Although consensus on the effectiveness of traditional web advertising is indecisive, when looking specifically at advertising on social networking sites, do we see an exceptional case in point? A study conducted by Brackett and Carr (2001) of US college students finds that although online advertisements are irritating, they predict a stronger acceptance and favourable attitude to online advertising over time. In addition, research looked at the way in which 2,000 social network users prefer to be contacted by brands and compared the responses from younger and older consumers. The study found that 36% of 16-24 year olds and 20% of 55-64 year olds said brands using forums and social networks to listen to their comments improved their opinion of the brand by 29% on average (McEleny, 2009). Moreover, brands creating groups only improved the opinion of the brand by 9.3% and 50% of people in the sample said they felt uncomfortable with brands befriending people on social networks. However, 31% of 16-24 year olds said brands that have profile pages where consumers can have direct contact and express their opinion improved their opinion of the brand (McEleny, 2009).

According to research gathered by Social Network Marketing UK in 2008, only 12 percent of Facebook users became a fan of a brand. While this has increased slightly in 2009, numbers remain relatively low. In the last year, paid advertising has become more prevalent on Facebook than Twitter, however, in terms of ad effectiveness, Twitter leads the way. A study by *SNM Report* suggests that while pay per click advertising is an effective traffic

generator, the ads may not be as effective as others since only 17% of Facebook users were aware of brand advertisements on their profile pages. Twitter is outpacing Facebook even though they have 220 million less users worldwide because Twitter is ideal for interacting with “followers.” It has a fast and easy way to advertise promotions, offers, discounts and sales to current or prospective clients (Morrill, 2009). An Internet Retailing report indicates that 66% of retailers who use SNS are unclear about the effect it has on their sales while 58% say the primary benefit of SNS is listening to and better understanding customers. While statistics may indicate that the presence of online retailers on SNS may do little to boost sales, according to the State of Retailing Online 2009 report, 34% of online retailers say social marketing helps increase sales. These retailers participate in forms of interactivity with users including network pages, customer ratings and reviews, and blogs (Morrill, 2009).

While it is difficult to measure the exact correlation between marketing on SNS and the increase in sales, it is undeniable that SNS have made a considerable impact in both garnering brand awareness and improving sales. Although not all SNS share equal success, it is evident that consumers are beginning to take advantage of the opportunity to interact with retailers who can deliver fast and up to date product information and availability. With that, it is evident that the more successful SNS are those where interactivity between the retailer and consumer is fast-paced and frequent. Thus, as traditional forms of advertising decline because of increasing costs, it is safe to assume that SNS will persist because they perform all of the functions traditional marketing cannot meet.

Marketing on Social Network Sites: Brand Extension or Re-Branding?

Many retailers acknowledge that in order to sustain customer loyalty and increase their profit margin, changing with the times is crucial in adopting new forms of advertising to keep pace with changing demographics. Brand positioning is “the act of designing the company’s offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customer minds” (Keller, 2008). This essence is crucial in attracting and maintaining a particular market, which is the set of all actual and potential buyers who have sufficient interest in, income for, and access to a product (Keller, 2008). In recent years, social networking sites have emerged as a new market for retailers to connect with a specific demographic that desire specific products and services. According to ReadWriteWeb.com, 56.8% of online retailers in the US currently have a presence on Facebook, 28.6% on MySpace and 20.4% on Twitter. Moreover, the time users in the US spend on social networking sites has risen 93% since 2006. Thus, 32% of online time is spent communicating on SNS

(ReadWriteWeb, 2009). As users increase their time on SNS, various retailers are recognizing such sites as a profitable marketing niche.

However, is this new form of marketing a company's attempt to extend their brand to a new audience through a new forum or does it constitute a form a re-branding? Traditionally, retailers have used giveaways for their products using either free or by one get one free coupons, in store taster promotions, trial giveaways, or order by mail giveaways. These marketing strategies were aimed at older audiences who were less connected with the products and also less informed about the product. These traditional strategies have become less effective with younger generations because they expect corporate marketing to parallel new forms of interaction and information brought forth by advances in technology. The success of company sales through the use of various social networking sites has become evident in the tactics they use to garner awareness about their products. In 2009, Burger King created an ad campaign on Facebook called the "Whopper Sacrifice" that promised a coupon for a free hamburger if participants deleted 10 people from their friends lists on the social network. It turned out to be a huge success where the application was installed nearly 60,000 times in days and nearly 20,000 Whopper coupons were sent out (Buckles, 2009). However, over 200,000 Facebook friends were deleted and shortly after Facebook deleted this campaign claiming it was a violation of user privacy. In 2008, Dairy Queen embarked into the world of social media by offering free five-dollar tasty treat coupons to customers who became fans on Facebook. In the course of one year following the birth of the campaign, the Facebook group had over 100,000 fans. Moreover, the computer company Dell has made \$3 million in sales from Twitter since it started "tweeting" about its outlet that sells refurbished computers in early 2009. In 2008, Cartier ran their "love by Cartier" product line and became the first luxury brand to run a MySpace advertising campaign. The company explained that they wanted to unite luxury with new technology (Buckles, 2009). Many questioned the company's motive for using this particular forum to launch their new campaign, but since MySpace has a high volume of users with an income of \$100,000 or more, it definitely serves as a lucrative market (Swartz, 2009).

In addition to brands advertising on social media, a number of brands have successfully managed to create a social experience rather than simply offering a freebie or giveaway. Charity Water used Twitter to raise \$250,000 for awareness of the global water crisis and used the money to drill fresh water wells. Members following the charity were able to tweet facts and show videos of the crisis from the site, which allowed their audience to interact with the cause. Other online marketing give-a-ways include re-tweeting a message that can be tracked and a winner is selected. This tactic was done by Squarespace, a business that helps users create and manage their own

website, offered an iPhone giveaway by using the hash-tag number and their name which allowed them to track messages about their promotion and also gave them the opportunity to release information about their new iPhone application because they had an audience listening to the brand and relating it to the iPhone (Swartz, 2009).

Consequently, advertising on social networking sites constitutes a form of re-branding because they are reproducing their product's image through the different communication strategies discussed above. Companies who join social network sites appear relevant to rapidly changing technological trends. The products being advertised have obviously not changed but they are being re-branded to allow consumers agency in their own consumption. Consumers are actively participating in the marketing process and given more choice in the way they choose to interact with the brand. Moreover, as it will be shown, this form of re-branding extends far beyond consumption to allow consumers to partake in the production of the product, which reflects widespread desires for customization and individuality.

Customers as Co-Producers of the Brand

In post-industrial societies reproduction occurs because the infinite relies on feedback. "Only affiliation to the model makes sense, and nothing flows any longer according to its end, but proceeds from the model, 'the signifier of reference,' which is a kind of anterior finality and the only resemblance there is" (Baudrillard, 1983: 101). With that, everyone is a producer and there is no longer an audience. This has led to a self-reproducing society. Long before the widespread emergence of the Internet, customers have always played a small role in transmitting and managing the reputation of a brand. Customers have been having conversations about the products and services of a particular brand, indicating the benefits, downfalls and possible improvements, which should be made to further increase sales (Weber, 2007). Moreover, before the Internet, few social spaces existed for customers to vocalize their questions or concerns and any conversations taking place were restricted to small circles of individuals or groups. If a customer was dissatisfied with a product, they could phone the company and file a complaint or write and submit an opinion piece to a local paper or magazine. In doing so, the company of the brand was not receiving constructive feedback as to how they could improve their product, making it more accessible to larger groups of individuals. The feedback, in the form of a customer complaint, would only be negative, providing the company with no information about how to improve their product to meet consumer needs.

However, the advent of SNS has forever changed the role of the consumer from a passive target to an active participant. Customers can com-

municate their preferences directly to the manufacturer who can assemble the product for a price comparable to that of a non-customized product. This form of interactive participation is described as cybernetic which refers to feedback based control. This power sharing serves as an alibi for the market-research role of interactive campaigns in building brand loyalty while at the same time enticing consumers to participate in the process of “co-creating unique value” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Companies invite customers to participate in the marketing process. A pioneering example of this “consultative approach” took place in the early 1990s, Phillips Electronics developed an online product for children where researchers invited adult and child participants to brainstorm ideas for new electronic products. Philips arranged discussion groups in which specialists and customers created new ideas (McKenna, 1997). Moreover, Dell’s customized computers, which are sold directly by the company on the Internet or by telephone, made this the most successful computer manufacturer of the 1990s (Keller, 2008). However, more recently, there are a number of retailers who are using SNS to successfully engage customers through social media. Zappos uses Twitter as a customer service platform, with a 24/7-phone line and email. Walmart takes advantage of product reviews while Starbucks has “My Starbucks Ideas,” a program that encourages customers to submit ideas for new products and services. Moreover, Best Buy uses a private social media network for internal communication with its employees to promote employee satisfaction and idea sharing (McEleny, 2009).

In addition, mass customization has emerged as the “flexible logic” of niche marketing to its logical culmination by tailoring products to the preferences and attributes of individual customers. The effects of this marketing technique are twofold. First, it advertises itself as a method of overcoming conformity and uniformity in mainstream culture, addressing the desire for “individuality.” Second, this promotion of individuality allows for greater levels of consumer surveillance (Andrejevic, 2002). Mass customization is not only beneficial for the customer but also advantageous to retailers because they can reduce inventory. This saves warehouse space by avoiding the buildup of unsold inventory (Keller, 2008). Mass customization popularized in 1993 when Nike’s website began allowing customers to create custom shoes bearing a word or slogan. Nike branded their service as freedom to choose and express yourself. More recently, Apple revolutionized the customized product by creating the massively popular MP3 player known as the iPod. Apple’s website allows customers to select the colour, gigabytes and engrave the actual device. This device enables individuals to feel as if they are personalizing their iPod and “expressing their individuality” (Newton, 2009). Thus, companies have and continue to benefit by re-branding their products to fulfill societal desires for individuality and allowing consumers to actively partake in the production process.

Social Networking Sites: The Ideological Fallacy of Individualism

With the increasing fragmentation of the public sphere, social networking sites are a highly effective method for facilitating interactivity between the retailer and consumer as well as providing consumers with desired individuality. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas describes the public sphere primarily as private people coming together as a public. The public sphere was a place where bourgeois individuals could engage “in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour (Habermas, 1991, p. 27). Participation in the public sphere was dependent upon the status of white, property owning males in the private sphere. That is, status as the head of the family and that of property owner qualified only white bourgeois men to partake in the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). As a result, there were limitations on public opinion with respect to voice and representation, which served to maintain and reproduce the interests of the privileged class. However, the modern public sphere has become increasingly fragmented because of the numerous voices involved such as women, men, same-sex persons, various ethnic and cultural persons, and persons with disabilities.

Although there are no longer limits on voice and representation in the public sphere, there is a struggle for voices to be heard. There are numerous specialized interests that are competing. Debates in the public sphere have grown to include same-sex rights, gender issues, and ethnic/racial issues. With the growth of specialized interests, it is becoming increasingly difficult for retailers to develop products and services that fulfill consumer’s desire and target key demographics. Even more, every individual has a different lifestyle and as a result desires a different product or service.

Formerly we were haunted by the fear of resembling others, of losing ourselves in a crowd; afraid of conformity; and obsessed with difference. Today we need a solution to deliver us from resembling others. All that matters now is only to resemble oneself, to find oneself everywhere, multiplied but loyal to one’s personal formula; to see the same credit listings everywhere, be on all movie screens at once. Resemblance is no longer concerned with others, but rather with the individual in his vague resemblance to himself; a resemblance born of the individual’s reduction to his simple elements (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 41).

With that, new forms of technology such as blogs and chat forums have emerged to give individuals an outlet to express and share their opinions with the larger population. Brown and Duguid (2000) argue that such forms are the crucial means by which an organization brings the heterogeneous world into line with its processes.

With the continuous growth and fragmentation of the public sphere, the role of social networking sites is to provide competing voices with a forum to express a multitude of opinions and desires. Categorization is a process, which the organization of modernity depends on. Differences in cultural values, economic resources, and personal interests cause consumer behaviour to be fundamentally varied and complex. Thus, marketing strategies that work with one group to sell a certain product may not necessarily work for another group who desires a different product. General products cannot reflect the interests of everyone, thus, SNS has alleviated this conundrum by providing an outlet whereby diverse consumers can convey their thoughts, requests, and desires for products that suit their lifestyles and fulfill their need for individuality.

Furthermore, by retailers using SNS to interact with consumers, they also have the ability to gauge current trends and consumer patterns. Fads and trends that exist eventually decline as popularity grows. For the upcoming holiday season, it is predicted that apple will sell 1 million iPods. However, although the popularity of the iPod has remained, many users are going back into the closet. Consumer behaviourist Tom O'Guinn conducted research in New York and elicited various responses such as "I started to feel like a walking iPod." Also, "I actually dug out an old pair of black headphones to use with mine." Closet iPod use is most prevalent among individuals who adopted the first generation of products. Thus, O'Guinn argues that while individuality was initially desired, the phenomenon in question is desired marginality" (Thibodeau, 2007). Consequently, although individuals follow the latest trends and fads, overexposure and mass consumption often causes consumers to reject certain products or turn to more unique and exclusive brands. Thus, SNS has the ability to observe such attitudes and react by introducing new products or re-introducing the same product.

With the continuous need for consumers to express their individuality, retailers have done an exceptional job using SNS to deliver this desire. However, this individualism is nothing more than ideological fallacy. Consumers are led to believe they have "choice" in creating, designing and assembling their products. However, the "choices" available are both limited and predetermined by retailers. For instance, consumers can customize their Dell computers, but they are selecting from a preset choice of colours, features and pricing. Moreover, consumers are led to believe that they can customize their iPods by selecting the colour, model and song list. But nevertheless, Dell computers and iPods are widespread and used by millions. Thus, by owning such "individualized" products, consumers are unconsciously conforming to mass society culture. Although, some individuals become aware of their participation in mass culture and discontinue their use of certain products, brands will reinvent new ways for consumers to stand apart from mainstream culture, all the while, selling them products that are "exclusive," "unique," and "personalized."

Conclusion

Although unparalleled, the benefits that SNS provides to both retailers and consumers are undeniable. The development of SNS revolutionized the way individuals consume by allowing them to become agents of their own consumption and co-producers of the brand. Despite the obviously greater advantage this process affords to retailers, this is not a relationship that will dissipate in the near future. The power and control that consumers have come to hold is essentially a prescription that appears to alleviate individuals from the effects of conformity to mass culture. In a society where there are seemingly infinite voices, competition to be heard is a continuous struggle. Thus, SNS have given individuals an avenue to express their desires and have their voice be heard. However, this ideological fallacy of individualism is not of central concern to consumers because although their choices for personal expression are predetermined, they feel a high degree of agency in the consumer process and production of the product, which creates a feeling of empowerment and individualism. In addition, this process is fostering brand loyalty because consumers are interacting with the brand through the process of customizing their product, which makes them feel like an integral part to the product's production. As society continues to grow, fragmentation will only worsen which means that traditional forms of marketing will further decline, providing SNS with a greater opportunity to thrive and flourish.

Author

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