Brand impact on purchasing intention. An approach in virtual social networks channels

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Abstract

Virtual networks are an exciting new channel that brands should use for promoting a more participatory and proactive context with interactive users. The goal is threefold, in response to a consumer perspective: (i) measuring the efficiency, in social networks of the constructs selected, (ii) measuring the influence of network's attitude in brand's attitude in terms of advertising effectiveness in social networks, and (iii) proving the influence between exchange of experiences eC2C (electronic consumer to consumer), brand's attitude, purchase's attitude, and eWOM (electronic word of mouth). A study with 345 social networkers was carried out. The results confirm a significant influence relationship between networks attitude and brand attitude and also brand attitude with the brand purchase and recommendation.

1. Introduction

Virtual social networks have offered new channels for branding. The main advantage of virtual social networks is the possibility for marketers to choose among different options for presenting the brand to specific customers. This channel gives the option of two-way communication. The tasks of the marketer are to separate their brand from the competitors, to gain purchases and to maintain a strong relationship with their consumers. One of the most important aspects in online branding is to make a good impression on the consumer, since consumers make very fast decisions on social networks, compared to a real store (Neelotpaul, 2010). The average customers use 30 seconds browsing a social site to analyze if this is of interest, and if they are not convinced within this period, they move on to the next brand (Young, 2010).

Companies, aware of the rise of social networks and leveraging the tools that they offer them, have started to integrate them into their marketing strategies. Therefore, virtual social networks are configured as one of the most suitable tools for those business strategies focused on customer orientation. They concerned about personalizing their message, the interaction with the user, and the maintenance of multi-directional communication with customers in order to win their loyalty (Castelló, 2010).

Nowadays, firms need to know how to deal with a user, even more elusive and restrictive, that bases many of his purchasing decisions on the eC2C (electronic Consumer to Consumer) exchange of experiences and on the content generated through networks (*User Generated Content,* UGC) (Royo and Casamassima, 2011). This change in communication between businesses and consumers has a positive impact on the consumer's favorable attitude towards the brand and its intention to purchase its products (Alexa, 2010; Vila and Kuster, 2011). And precisely this research is focused on this last point, circumscribing the study to the Spanish context. The main objective of this paper is to analyze the determinant factors of attitude and intent of social networks users, and to measure the effectiveness of brand impact on purchasing intention and on eWOM (electronic word of mouth).

2. Brand impact on purchasing intention. An approach to virtual social networks channel

Burt (1980) defined social network as a set of individuals who are united by the social relations among them. However, when transferring the concept of social networking to an interactive virtual context, we cannot find, at present, a concept absolutely accepted by the literature. In any case, social networks are closely linked to the concept of Web 2.0, a new way of web collaboration, a platform for "harnessing collective intelligence" (O'Reilly, 2005). Since the content is produced by users themselves (user generated content, UGC), the social net has become the hub of the reciprocity of views among consumers (Hernández et al., 2012).

Facing the emergence of these new media or virtual platforms (Huh et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2008), firms are using marketing strategies based on the analysis of the interaction or "digital sociability". The aim is to know consumers' needs and to estimate the brand potential to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in time and to defend against competition in the social networking (Wang and Wang, 2010).

To study brand impact on purchase intention, we have designed a model adapted to the reality studied and composed by various models and theories that have gained widespread support in the literature. The joint consideration of diverse models is in itself a contribution to the field of adoption of new technologies and an approach in social networks channel (Harris and Rae, 2009; Jansen et al., 2009). In subsequent lines, we will analyze the relationships between different variables. In this sense, we will summarize the main contributions and research done in this line, which reinforce the model defined here.

2.1. Relationship among perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, attitude towards the virtual social network and the intention to use virtual social networks

Several studies provide theoretical justification for, as well as empirical evidence of the direct links between perceived usefulness and intention to use. Specifically, Willis et al

(2008) obtained a positive and significant effect between the two constructs within virtual social networks. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Perceived usefulness of virtual social networks as a channel for B2C transactions, affects directly and positively the intention to use the virtual social network.

In this context, where this research is focused, the ultimate goal of using a social network as a shopping channel, is to increase consumer satisfaction by facilitating the necessary interaction (Lu et al., 2009); not only with other members of the network, but also with the company through its social network profile, leading to a perceived usefulness and, therefore, a proactive and positive consumer attitude (Curras et al., 2011). This implies the following hypothesis:

H2: Perceived usefulness of virtual social networks as a channel for B2C transactions, affects direct and positive attitudes towards the virtual social networks

Recent empirical studies have found that perceived ease of use affects positively and significantly on the attitude of use, understood as the will to use (Ramayah, 2006). The easier it is to interact with technology, the greater should be the user's sense of efficacy and, therefore, the more willingness to use (Lu et al., 2009). Reasoning-based on the assumption, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Perceived ease of use of virtual social networks as a channel for B2C transactions, affects directly and positively the attitude to use the virtual social network.

According to Muñoz (2008), perceived ease of use has a double impact on the perceived usefulness, due to the self-efficacy and instrumentality that the subject can get. The effectiveness is one of the intrinsic motivation factors of the person. Therefore, the effect of perceived ease of use is directly related to perceived usefulness. Also, perceived ease of use may also be instrumental, contributing to increased performance, benefit or interest (Muñoz, 2008). This increased efficiency saves effort, thanks to the ease of use, allowing achieving more satisfaction with the same effort. This instrumental effect occurs through perceived usefulness, as postulated by TAM model (Muñoz, 2008). Therefore, the following hypothesis is posed:

H4: Perceived ease of use of virtual social networks as a channel for B2C transactions, affects directly and positively the perceived usefulness when using the virtual social networks

2.2. Relationship between gratifications in use of virtual social network and attitude towards the virtual social networks

Virtual social networks are either a tool of socialization as an expression of identity or entertainment. So nowadays, the gratifications that users get in the use of social networking are invaluable because they can share photos, experiences, comments, and express or project their desired image. Users who participate in social networks can develop emotional links with other participants (Kuo and Yen, 2009), which, in turn, affect their attitude towards the social network. But above all, besides all benefits or gratifications, previous studies (Bigné et al., 2010) show that the perceived entertainment affects positively in the attitude towards social networks and this happens, especially, in the so-called "net generation" (digital natives generation). So, in the context of use of virtual social networks, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Gratifications (sociability, fashion / status, and entertainment) in the use of virtual social networks, affect directly and positively the attitude towards this virtual social network.

2.3. Relationship among subjective norm, perceived usefulness, perceived control and intention to use the virtual social network

In the context of study, subjective norm would refer to the user´s beliefs or perceptions related to the opinion of people who influence their behaviors (family, friends, colleagues, etc.); independently if the user uses social networks and perceives usefulness in doing so. The result arises from the experiences the individual has lived or from the beliefs assumed, induced or imposed throughout its life related to the behavior and results in terms of usefulness. Therefore, and according to the context of this research, we can relate, on the one hand, perceived usefulness in using virtual social networks (Madhavaram and Appan, 2010) and, on the other hand, the favorable or unfavorable predisposition towards the use of virtual social networks (Bigné et al., 2010). This allows us to state two new hypotheses:

H6: Subjective norm affects directly and positively perceived usefulness in the use of virtual social networks

H7: Subjective norm affects directly and positively the intention to use the virtual social networks

Perceived control on behavior reflects the individual's beliefs related to the possibility of access to resources and opportunities necessary to use the virtual social networking services. The Theory of Planned Behavior considers conduct intention or use as the best predictor of behavior, since it expresses the effort that individuals are willing to make to carry a specific action. Thus, behavioral intention, meaning the intention of using the social network, is a function of perceived control (Bigné et al., 2010). According to the literature, the following hypothesis can arise:

H8: Perceived control affects directly and positively the intention to use the virtual social networks

2.4. Relationship between attitude towards virtual social networks and intention to use them

The relationship between attitude towards the system, good or service and the intention to use is essential for behavioral models. In addition, several researchers have analyzed and proved this relationship in various contexts, mainly, in the virtual community (Royo and Casamassima, 2011). Therefore, it can be stated that the attitude has a positive effect on the intention to use, and it allows us to point out the following hypothesis:

H9: Attitude towards virtual social network affects directly and positively the intention to use the virtual social networks.

2.5. The influence both to attitude towards virtual social network and the eC2C exchange of experiences in brand attitude and the "eWOM" or brand recommendation intention

Nobody can deny the importance of virtual platforms, such as social networks, to disseminate information about products and brands, based on previous eC2C experience

of online shopping, thanks to the dynamism and social interactivity that characterizes them (Neelotpaul, 2010). Consumers, who use these virtual social networks and participate in this eC2C exchange, can affect the attitudes of other potential customers by creating, modifying or developing emotional links with that brand (Madhavaram and Appan, 2010) since the information provided is perceived as more reliable. From the above, the following hypothesis can arise:

H10: The eC2C exchange of experiences between users in virtual social networks affects directly and positively the attitude towards the brand

The importance of attitude's studies (understood in this research as attitude towards social networks) represents the beginning of explanatory models; by analogy, between this attitude and brand attitude. Indeed, the literature has shown that when a stimulus produces higher processing levels, both to the stimulus (online games, advertising, sweepstakes, etc.) and for the products, generates more favorable attitudes and a greater degree of brand memory (Alwi, 2009). At this point, it must be noticed that the objective of this research is to analyze the brand impact on purchase intention using social networks as a channel. In this sense, it would be known if the attitude of social network users is related to brand attitude located in the network. It tries to justify this relationship by considering the social network space as advertising space where brands unveil their products and may even sell those (Curras et al., 2011). That is why, it is appropriate to use the Dual Mediation Model to try to explain the relationship between attitude towards the network and brand attitude. In this regard, it has taken into account the core of the model that establishes a relationship among attitude towards advertising, brand attitude and brand purchasing intention. It allows to state that a transfer from the virtual social network attitude towards the brand attitude occurs in this field of study. So, the following hypothesis can be underline:

H11: Attitude towards virtual social networks, as a channel for B2C transactions, affects directly and positively brand attitude

On the other hand, eWOM can be defined as any positive or negative statement made by consumers to other potential customers about a product or a brand that, due to the characteristics of universality and interactivity of social networks, this information is made available to a connected crowd using the same virtual network (Möller and Eisend, 2010). This new type of communication or exchange of information, content (UGC) and eC2C experiences, has become the neuralgic center of the opinions reciprocity among consumers (Hernández et al., 2012). These opinions have a strong impact on the judgments or attitudes of customers or potential customers to the brand, who recommend (eWOM) brands to friends, family or other users using the same virtual platforms. This leads to formulate another hypothesis:

H12: Users of virtual social networks attitude towards the brand affects directly and positively eWOM or brand recommendation intention

Finally, the purchasing intention has been considered as one of the most relevant behavioral variables. This variable received a significant and positive influence from attitude towards the brand (Saadeghvaziri and Seyedjavadain, 2011). In this sense, it is noteworthy that, precisely because of the influence of interactivity, the attitude of the social networks consumer is more active at the reception of information, and this leads the formation of a particular brand attitude and purchase intention towards the brand (García and Nuñez, 2009). So, and according to the literature review, the following hypothesis can be stated:

H13: Virtual social networks users' attitude towards the brand affects directly and positively brand purchasing intention.

All relationships established in the hypotheses, previously proposed, can be summarized in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

To meet the research objectives and contrast the hypotheses, we developed an empirical study of a causal nature, through a personal interview with structured questionnaire. Data collection was developed using non-probability sample of convenience, eventually collecting 345 valid questionnaires. The study population consisted of individuals aged 14 years resident in Spain who claimed to participate (to be discharged or be users) of at least one virtual social network. Of the total sample, 58.6% were women and 41.4% men. A large percentage of respondents have completed university studies or are about to do so (69.3%), age 25 years (59.1%), and a similar income level or above the mean (20.3% and 38.8 % respectively). The achieved sample profile not differs from the profile of the population. The favorite social network was Facebook with 80.6% of users, followed by MySpace and Twitter with 15.9%.

To measure the variables under study, Likert-5 points scales have been used from the literature. They have been adapted to the characteristics of virtual social networks. Following the literature recommendations, we have conducted (with EQS) a confirmatory factor analysis to measure the psychometric properties of scales, using the robust maximum likelihood method to avoid problems with the data. We have calculated the indicators of goodness of model fit and the indicators that confirm its psychometric properties (X2: 2703.44 (df=979); NFI: 0.8; CFI: 0.9; IFI: 0.9; RMSEA: 0.06) according with Teo et al. (2008). This confirms the reliability of the scales used. All loads are significant on their predicted factor. The model has not problems of discriminant validity[1].

4. Results

Once the psychometric properties of the measurement instrument were evaluated, we proceeded to estimate, also by EQS, a structural model contained in Figure 1 that summarizes the hypotheses. Figure 1 shows the values of the standardized coefficients of the structural relationships and the respective levels of significance of their associated t-statistic.

Figure 1 shows graphically the final model accepted. As we can observe, the most robust relationships occur between brand attitude and purchasing intention and between brand attitude and brand recommendation intention (H12, H13); followed by the relationship between attitude towards the virtual social networks and the brand attitude (H11) and the relationship between subjective norm and perceived usefulness (H6), the relationship between gratifications in social network and attitude towards the network (H5) and the relationship between attitude towards the social network and intention to
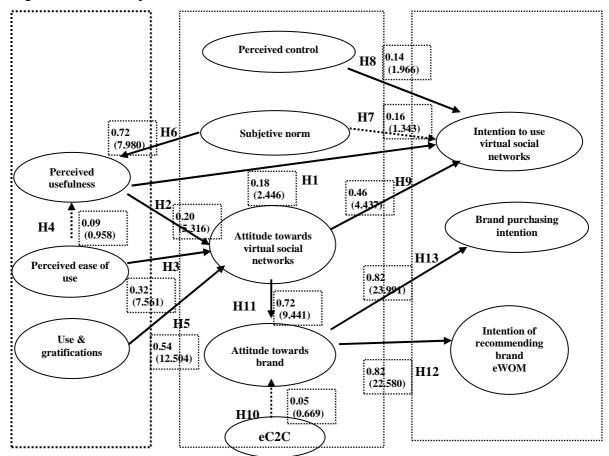
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[1] We have omitted the tables that show the psychometric properties of the estimated model, due to limitations space (in number of words). These tables will be sent to interested readers upon request.

use (H9). We also see that H4, H7 and H10, although they have a direct influence, it is not significant.

Figure 1. Final accepted model

5. Conclusions and implications

Internet and its last stage, the digital economy through virtual social networks, have contributed to a radical transformation of marketing practices. Sanz et al., (2012) argue that, considering the fact that Web 2.0 has allowed substantial increases in the power of customers, the use of the Web as a marketing tool is a logical choice of business model. There are indications that the impact of social networks is indeed very significant in several areas of economic activity and, in particular, the areas of marketing communication and product innovation (Wang and Wang, 2010). The interest of this research has focused on advancing the knowledge related to the study that the use of virtual social networks has on the brands laid on them.

Despite the recent significant developments, social networks have not yet been sufficiently analyzed from the point of view of the attitude of users towards the behavioral intention, both to use the net and to purchase the brand, and the influence that the exchange of experiences may have on this behavior (Hernandez et al., 2012). Neither, it has been sufficiently investigated the influence of users' attitudes towards the brand and intention to recommend (eWOM) through these virtual media. These aspects are particularly relevant, since social networks have become the most popular media, maintaining and creating ongoing links among users (Shin, 2010).

Thus, companies are using marketing strategies, based on analysis of interactivity or "digital sociability" (Wang and Wang, 2010) that seeks to understand consumer needs

and to estimate the potential of the company brand by visiting the company's virtual social networks. The aim is that companies use their virtual social networks as part of their communication strategies, and they become to use the net as supplemental sales channel.

In terms of managerial implications, we can advise companies that should be incorporated elements of participation (games, contests, sweepstakes, etc.), blogs and virtual communities into their profiles on social networking. The individual's interaction with these tools allow companies to gather information about tastes, preferences, trends, concerns and other personal and collective data to help them redefine and adapt their virtual social network profile and thus to improve the supply of its products / services. It is also important that users can, from their own virtual social network, recommend it to friends.

As any academic research, our paper has some limitations. The findings should be contrasted with other demographic groups that are online, attending at different factors as culture, type of job, gender, etc.

Finally, and regarding future research, although, this research has used a sample of individuals with extensive experience in virtual social networks (Bigné et al., 2010), we believe that it would be interesting to include, firstly, the analysis of the moderating effect of experience on the model considered, since it can change the results obtained. And secondly, it could be interesting to apply the proposed model to a sample of virtual social networks users via mobile, or IPAD 2.

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