Does brand-consumer social sharing matter? A relational framework of customer engagement to brand-hosted social media

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1. Introduction

The development of social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest) offered brands new opportunities to connect with their customers. In particular, through brand-hosted media, such as brands' Facebook pages, brands acquired the capacity to support activities, such as providing customer service, product information, special offers, and various types of entertainment (Breitsohl, Kunz & Dowell, 2015). Along these lines, a vast stream of research on online brand communities has flourished. Most research has focused on understanding the active participation of community members, and the literature highlights the collective process of value creation (e.g., Schau, Muniz & Arnould, 2009; Brodie et al., 2013; Zaglia, 2013; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Consumers are found to increasingly perform the role of producers of communal value through online brand communities by contributing to brand culture and proposing product improvements (e.g., Füller, Jawecki & Mühlbacher, 2007; Gensler et al., 2013). By contrast, the dialogue between a customer and a brand, uniquely allowed by brand-hosted media, has received little attention in the literature (Beukeboom, Kerkhof & de Vries, 2015; Hudson et al., 2016). Whether these interactions can provide value for consumers and favor engagement with brand-hosted social media remains unclear. Nonetheless, in a context in which brands seek to reinforce branding and relationship building in digital environments (Fournier & Avery, 2011), a better understanding of the gratifications derived by consumers in their interaction with brands on social media platforms is of prime interest.

The current research addresses this gap in the literature and provides a conceptual framework that integrates the psychosocial theory of close relationships (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002, 2003) and the media gratifications perspective (Rubin, 2009) to evaluate the benefits that consumers derive from brand-consumer social sharing. This study formally refers to the social aspects of brand-consumer mediated interactions in the context of brand-hosted social media. In addition, by recognizing brand-consumer interactive communication as a form of brand relationship investment (De Wulf et al., 2001; Koch & Benlian, 2015), this research explores how

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brand-consumer social sharing is likely to favor media engagement. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions: How can brand-consumer social sharing be approached through media gratifications? What are the underlying mechanisms that mediate the influence of brand-consumer social sharing as reflected by the corresponding media gratifications on media engagement? Specifically, are the relational frameworks that depend on brands' relationship investments relevant in terms of mediating effect? Further, this study aims to investigate whether and how brand-consumer social sharing is associated with customers' engagement toward brand-hosted media.

Using a sample of Facebook brand-page users, this study makes a number of contributions to the literature on social media. First, it develops a conceptual framework to understand the fundamental nature of brand-consumer social sharing when their interactions are mediated by a brand-related virtual media. Second, it elaborates and validates a theoretically grounded scale for measuring the media gratifications derived from brand-consumer social sharing. Third, a relational model of the influence of brand-consumer social sharing on media engagement that comprises two distinct media-driven routes is proposed and empirically validated. The remainder of this paper is structured to include a review of the relevant literature and hypotheses, methods, and findings. Finally, the paper concludes discussing the implications of its main results and directions for future research.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses development

2.1. Dimensions of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value

An extensive body of literature focused on how consumers derive benefits from the use of media and brand communication channels (e.g., Mathwick et al., 2001; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Abdul-Ghani, Hyde & Marshall, 2011). This stream of research emphasizes the multidimensional nature of media gratifications (e.g., Rubin, 2009) by developing a theory of user value based on usage and experiences. Among the benefits derived from a brand communication channel, social gratifications have been consistently identified as a major component of media experience (Calder, Malthouse & Schaedel, 2009). In this respect, media and marketing researchers assign numerous meanings to the social gratifications derived from a

communicational device, which include gaining insight into the circumstances of other individuals, finding a basis for conversation and social interaction, having a substitute for real-life companionship, helping perform social roles, and being provided with an opportunity to socialize (e.g., McQuail, 1983; Calder et al., 2009; Chiu & Huang, 2015). A review of the major empirical conceptualizations of virtual media social gratifications proposed in the marketing literature is presented in Table 1.

This review shows that, even when applied to a brand community-context, most of these conceptualizations do not address the aspect of social gratifications based on brand-consumer interactions. As a notable exception, the conceptualization from Baldus, Voorhees & Calantone (2015) identifies brand influence as a customer value associated with brand-consumer social sharing. In addition, customers are shown to derive value from like-minded discussions with other customers who share the same views about a brand (Baldus et al., 2015; Marbach, Lages & Nunan, 2016); however, this conceptualization does not tackle the fact that lurkers, as passive users of social media, may derive value from observing interactions between other consumers and the brand itself. More generally, the existing literature on brand communication channels and social media fails to recognize brands as social actors endowed with a relational agency (Pentina et al., 2012; Simon & Andrews, 2015), thus underrating the potential of media gratifications in terms of relational benefits.

However, this perspective is consistent with the marketing literature on brand relationships, which shows that people relate to their brands similarly to how they relate to the people around them (Fournier, 1998), a core assumption producing comparable effects on the strength and nature of such relationships (e.g., Fournier &Alvarez, 2012). Furthermore, recent developments in communication studies suggest that the most prominent features of relationship development can be achieved irrespective of the type of communication channel, namely, through face-to-face or technology-mediated communication, albeit with some nuances (Tong, Kashian & Walther, 2011; Jiang, Bazarova & Hancock, 2013).

Against this background, the concept of *Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value* is introduced to represent the social gratifications derived from brand-consumer virtually mediated interactions, which are likely to motivate the development of brand relationships and, therefore, trigger an active engagement of consumers in virtual brand communities. Drawn from the conceptual framework developed by Knobloch & Solomon (2002, 2003) in the field of close

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relationships, intimacy, interdependence, and a sense of brand community belonging are proposed in this paper to reflect the essential facets of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value.

Insert Table 1

Intimacy and interdependence

Following Knobloch and Solomon (2002, 2003), the point of departure of our analysis is the recognition that cornerstone theories within the study of close relationships highlight the importance of both intimacy (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Werner & Baxter, 1994) and interdependence (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) as prominent features of close relationships, which may affect the nature of interpersonal communication and influence relationship outcomes.

Broadly defined as people's perceptions of connectedness and closeness within a relationship (Sternberg, 1986), intimacy is considered to be a unique indicator of relationship progression and reflects people's perceptions of security within a relationship (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989; Guerrero & Andersen, 1991). Cordova & Scott (2001) argued that intimacy is not based on a single event, but it is based on the accumulation of interactions over time. At high levels of intimacy, people are aware of their partner's attitudes, appear to be more willing to engage in open communication, and are committed to maintaining the relationship (e.g., Rusbult, Olsen, Davis & Hannon, 2001). By extending this perspective to brand-consumer mediated communication, some studies have shown that the experience of human contact and personal connection with a company's website may influence the attitudes of online shoppers by increasing interest and trust toward the considered media (Wang et al., 2007; Choi, Lee & Kim, 2011). In addition, intimacy with web-based services, which can be described as a user's feeling of closeness and connection, was found to be a more powerful predictor of continuance intention than perceived usefulness (Lee & Kwon, 2011). These findings are compatible with the notion that intimacy is potentially a relevant dimension of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value.

Social theorists in relationship investment theory and interpersonal communication consider interdependence as another fundamental dimension to characterize strong relationships (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Interdependence entails the coordination of mutually rewarding interaction patterns (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). As individuals become increasingly interdependent, they exert greater influence over each another, recognizing their

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partners by expressing signs of attention and exercising power on them (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). In other words, highly interdependent partners exert their influence by facilitating each other's outcomes (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Regarding brand-consumer interactions, people have been found to favorably respond to the expressions of attention and empathy communicated by companies (Morales, 2005; Simon et al., 2015), starting with the individual recognition of their customer status (Mimouni-Chaabane & Volle, 2010). Conversely, having the opportunity to influence their brands is a strong motivation for consumers to engage in virtual brand communities (e.g., Füller et al., 2007), which goes beyond the case of extreme lead users (Baldus et al., 2015). Therefore, brand individual recognition and brand influence are considered two major facets of the interdependence dimension of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value in our value framework.

Brand community belonging

Knobloch & Solomon (2002, 2003) argued that "variation in the degree to which people rely on relational knowledge is an important aspect of dyadic understanding" (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003, p. 484). Relational knowledge refers to the relationship-specific data that individuals use as either a sender or a receiver to create and interpret messages that involve their communication partner (Planalp, 1985). When individuals are unsure about the status of their relationship, they lack clearly established norms for behavior (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). As partners acquire and rely on relational knowledge, they gain a higher ability to interpret each other's behavior, to predict the rewards and costs of the relationship, and to fit onto further interactions (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003). Hence, by reducing uncertainty, relational knowledge can improve the relationship's development (Knobloch, Satterlee & DiDomenico, 2010).

In the context of brand-hosted social media, consumers can easily interact not only with their brand but also with the brand's other customers, thus extending their opportunities to acquire relational knowledge about the brand. Previous research has shown that the interactions occurring on brand social networks increase the perception of similarity between members, that is, the degree to which brand's customers perceived themselves as similar in attitudes, behaviors, and expectations that relate to their brand (Yung-Cheng et al., 2010; Xiang, Zheng, Lee & Zhao, 2016). In turn, perceived similarity helps consumers enhance their sense of belonging to the

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brand's community, which formally reflects the consumer's identification with the brand and its affiliated members (Lin, Fan & Chau, 2014). Thus, within the context of a brand-hosted social media, the development of a sense of brand community is intrinsically related to the consumer reliance on brand-related relational knowledge, which is reinforced by actively interacting with other brand's customers.

The notion that brand-related relational knowledge supports a sense of belonging to a brand community can be extended to customers whose community participation is passive and mainly consists of lurking (Hartmann, Wiertz & Arnould, 2015). Interactions on brand social networks allow consumers to observe the brand's relational practices with other customers and acknowledge the nature of the relationship that their brand tends to establish with its customers.

To summarize, the sense of belonging to a brand community strongly relies on the internalization of attitudes and behaviors in relation to the targeted brand, and it is ingrained in the development of a better understanding of the brand's relational practices through both direct and indirect interactions with the brand itself. As a result, belonging to a brand community can be seen as a highly rewarding experiential value, which is intrinsically associated with the forms of brand-consumer social sharing that brand social media environments uniquely allow (e.g., Lin, 2008; Tsai & Men, 2013).

Trying to integrate our understanding of close relationships from the transposition of Knobloch & Solomon' framework to the context of brand-hosted social media, brand intimacy, individual brand individual recognition, brand influence, and brand community belonging are proposed to constitute major facets of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value.

2.2. Satisfaction and brand gratitude as media-driven mediators

Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value as a determinant of media engagement

While the media literature has consistently reported a positive link between media gratifications and media use (e.g., Calder et al., 2009; Rubin, 2009), the more recent research on virtual communities confirms the relevance of the value-based approach to explaining the user engagement phenomenon.

Customer research describes engagement as a "psychologically based willingness to invest in the undertaking of focal interactions with particular engagement objects" (Hollebeek, Conduit & Brodie, 2016, p. 393). When it is transposed to the media context, the engagement construct reflects the individual's commitment to an active relationship with a given kind of media (Calder et al., 2009; Mollen & Wilson, 2010). Consistent with this view, the consumer's online brand-related activities (COBRA) framework introduced by Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011) and extended by Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski (2016) defines and measures media engagement as a fundamental behavioral construct. This behavior-focused approach is adopted by a number of recent works on social media (e.g., Tsai & Men, 2013; Mosteller & Poddar, 2017) but differs from other definitions of media engagement that also include cognitive and affective dimensions (see, for instance, Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014). The present research targets the customers' participation in brand-hosted social media and is based on a behavioral conceptualization of media engagement that aligns with the one developed by the COBRA framework.

Considered as a key outcome for online offerings, customer engagement toward brand media has been found to provide enhanced explanatory and predictive power with regard to brand loyalty (e.g., Heehyoung et al., 2008; Hollebeek et al., 2014). As a consequence, marketing researchers have actively studied how consumers' contributions to online brand media can be encouraged. In that respect, they found that media consumption values exert a significant influence on media engagement in the context of virtual and other types of communities (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2015; Marbach, Lages & Nunan, 2016). Therefore, in line with the previous literature on virtual media, Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value is considered as a predictor of consumer engagement toward brand-hosted social media.

Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value as a form of perceived relationship investment

Drawing on the principle of reciprocity as a useful framework for investigating brand-consumer relationships, marketing researchers have demonstrated that the consumer perception of brand relationship investments is a powerful determinant of relationship quality and brand commitment (De Wulf et al., 2001; Palmatier et al., 2009). Perceived relationship investment is defined as the extent to which a customer perceives that his/her brand devotes attention,

resources, and effort to reinforce their relationship. As they have no outside value, brand investments cannot be recovered if the relationship is terminated (De Wulf et al., 2001). Relying on this conceptualization, Palmatier et al. (2009) compare the perception of a relationship investment with one of a benefit that encompasses a brand's small favors, policy adaptation, and extra effort.

While a variety of brand relationship investments have been described in the marketing literature (e.g., Huang, 2015), a brand's channel offering as well as diverse forms of personalized communication have been considered to be important irrecoverable resources, deemed to trigger reciprocal behaviors from customers (De Wulf et al., 2001; Porter & Donthu, 2008). In line with this view, the gratifications that consumers specifically derive from the use of a brand channel have been conceptually likened to manifestations of perceived relationship investment (Koch & Benlian, 2015; Simon & Andrews, 2015). In accordance, Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value is approached as a form of perceived relationship investment in the present study.

Satisfaction- and gratitude-based mediating routes

The investigation of the mediating forces that relate a perceived relationship investment to a variety of relational outcomes, including brand channel usage (Nysveen et al., 2005), has provided fruitful insights on how these investments affect the customer's engagement toward a brand. Specifically, these studies have highlighted the role of two mediators, satisfaction with the relational investment (Nysveen et al., 2005; Simon et al., 2015) and brand gratitude, seen as the emotional appreciation of the received investment (Palmatier et al., 2009; Huang, 2015; Koch & Benlian, 2015, Simon & Andrews, 2015). Each mediating route is governed by substantially different psychological mechanisms. Drawing on the confirmation/disconfirmation perspective in the satisfaction literature (e.g., Oliver, 1980), consumer satisfaction is expected to develop when the individual's expectations regarding the brand's investment are met. In turn, satisfaction with the investment is deemed to generate favorable outcomes, such as brand commitment (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002) and continued investment (Brady et al., 2005). In the context of online media, users appear to decide whether to continue media use based on their satisfaction with prior user experience (e.g., Venkatesh et al., 2011; Hu, Kettinger & Poston, 2015). These studies provide support for the satisfaction-continued-use relationship.

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In contrast, gratitude activates reciprocal behaviors from an affective appraisal of the brand relationship investment (Palmatier et al., 2009) that matches its relational nature. Formally, gratitude is a social and positive emotion that results from an individual understanding that another has intentionally provided a benefit (e.g., Emmons, 2004). Consistent with the assumption that other-agency and benefit value appraisals elicit gratitude (Wood et al., 2008), the gratifications derived from the use of a brand communication channel have been found to trigger consumers' feelings of gratitude toward the brand (Koch & Benlian, 2015; Simon & Andrews, 2015). In addition, prior studies that investigate the outcomes of brand gratitude in consumer contexts have shown that consumers who are grateful toward a company tend to engage in reciprocal behaviors that reflect commitment patterns, such as repurchasing that company's products or spreading positive word-of-mouth (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2009; Koch & Benlian, 2015). Since the consumer use of a brand media reflects his/her engagement with that brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Solem & Petersen, 2016), a brand's Facebook page-driven gratitude is expected to work as a driver of engagement with that brand's Facebook page.

Against this background, it is postulated that the influence of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value, as a form of perceived relationship investment, on engagement with the brand's Facebook page is mediated by satisfaction with the brand's Facebook page, and the feelings of gratitude that result from the page offerings, respectively. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Satisfaction with the brand's Facebook page mediates the positive influence of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value on engagement with the brand's Facebook page.

H2: A brand's Facebook page-driven gratitude toward a brand mediates the positive influence of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value on engagement with the brand's Facebook page.

Altogether, our conceptual model (see Figure 1) links Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value as a type of media gratifications to engagement with brands' Facebook page as a form of media behavior through the mediation of two media-related variables, that is, the satisfaction with the brand's Facebook page and the brand gratitude derived from the page.

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3. Research methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

A convenience sampling approach was applied and all of participants were recruited on a referral basis by undergraduate students. Strict guidelines were given to ensure a diverse sample of respondents with respect to age, gender, and education level. Responses were screened through two questions: "Do you have a Facebook account that you have accessed during the last month?" and "Have you stated an affinity for a brand by 'Liking' that brand on Facebook?" (Lipsman, Mudd, Rich & Bruich, 2012). Only respondents who answered "yes" to both questions were allowed to participate in the study. The link to the survey was e-mailed to the selected respondents. The respondents were advised to complete the questionnaire considering a brand that they have "Liked" on Facebook. The results show that respondents mainly selected brands or retailers from the following sectors: clothing and shoes (32%), beauty (22%), sports and leisure (15%), culture (9%), and food and beverages (6%).

The final sample (N = 294) consists of 168 women (57%) and 126 men (43%); 123 respondents are 18-25 years old (42%), 103 are 25-34 (35%), 41 are 35-44 (14%), and 27 are older than 45 (9%). The distribution of education level is as follows: 11% high school, 34% university degree, and 55% post-graduate degree. In addition, 81% of participants are currently employed, 5% are unemployed, and 44% are students. Facebook users' statistics exhibit a marked overrepresentation of young people. For instance, 90 % of young American adults aged under 30 use Facebook compared to only 35% of American adults aged 65 and older (Perrin, 2015). Therefore, a higher proportion of young adults compared to the general population, as it is the case in the present study, where 77% of respondents are between age 18 and 34, seems representative of the target group.

3.2. Measures

All the measurement scales were drawn from previous research (see the Appendix).

To measure consumer engagement with a brand's Facebook page, the COBRA-typology from Muntiga et al. (2011) was used, which comprises three dimensions labeled as follows: Consuming, Contributing, and Creating. As this typology concerns brand-related social media as

a whole, some items were slightly adapted to address the specificity of a brand's Facebook page. Based on the results of pretests of this measure, three items were selected for the Consuming-dimension, other three items for the Contributing-dimension, and two final items for the Creating-dimension. The participants indicated for each of the eight items the number of times that they have used the brand's Facebook page in the past 30 days, as specified by each item. Consistent with previous research based on the COBRA-typology (see, for instance, Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski, 2016), the engagement scale was operationalized as a reflective one, at both first and second order.

The other scales used in this research consisted of seven-point Likert-type measures that ranged from "completely disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (7). Brand social sharing gratifications were measured with three scales by Simon & Andrews (2015) for brand intimacy, brand individual recognition, and brand community belonging, and with the scale from Baldus et al. (2015) for brand influence. With respect to the mediator constructs, brand gratitude driven by the brand's Facebook page was measured with the scale of Simon & Andrews (2015), which uses items such as "When I think about the [brand's media] of this brand, I feel grateful to this brand." To measure satisfaction with the brand's Facebook page, the three-item scale from Shukla, Banerjee & Singh (2016) on consumption satisfaction was employed.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model

The psychometric properties of the constructs were evaluated by conducting confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 19.0b. The fit indexes indicate that the measurement model produces adequate fit to the data with χ^2 (263) = 346.7 (p< .01), comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, incremental fit index (IFI) = .98, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .98, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .033. Modification indices exhibit no evidence that the model fit would improve if one or more residuals among the indicator variables were allowed to correlate. All factor loadings, which are reported in the Appendix, are significant (p< .01) in support of convergent validity. Cronbach's alphas are above .7, demonstrating good reliability of the model (see the Appendix). In addition, discriminant validity is confirmed as the average

variance extracted exceeds the square of correlations between constructs (see Table 2). The descriptive statistics of the scales are reported in the Appendix.

Insert Table 2

4.2. Common method bias analysis

Since the measures for both independent and dependent variables are obtained from the same source, the common variance may overstate the strength of the observed relationships between the constructs in our model. However, since different scale formats have been used for the final variable (the number of usage times) and the other constructs (Likert-type scales), the probability that some of the co-variation observed among the examined constructs may be the result of consistency in the scale properties instead of the items' content is reduced (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the portion of common variance was controlled by examining the fit of a model in which all of the indicators are loaded on one factor. The logic that underlies the "single-factor procedure" (Podsakoff et al., 2003) is that, if the method variance is largely responsible for the co-variation among the measures, a confirmatory factor analysis should indicate that a single method factor fits the data. A one-factor model does not fit the data, which reduces concerns about common method bias ($\chi 2(299) = 4207,5$ p<.01; CFI = .42; TLI = .38; IFI = .42; and RMSEA = .21).

In addition, two other post-hoc methods were used: (1) an unmeasured common latent factor analysis, and (2) a common marker latent factor analysis, where the individual exchange norm scale (Scott, Mende & Bolton, 2013), measured by three items, was employed as a marker variable. As individual exchange norm can be considered as theoretically unrelated to substantive variables in our model, it can be employed as a marker variable (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). All tests revealed no common method bias. More precisely, the comparison between standardized regression weights for measurement models with the unmeasured common latent factor, the common marker factor, and the measure without any common factor (baseline model) revealed differences less than .08, falling below the commonly used threshold of 0.2 (Chin, Thatcher & Wright, 2012). These results suggest that common method bias does not pose a threat in this study.

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4.3. Structural model

As shown in Figure 1, the proposed model was estimated to assess path and explained variance estimates. The structural model yields a good fit, with $\chi2$ (288) = 401.8 (p< .01), CFI = .98, IFI = .98, TLI = .98 and RMSEA = .037. As Table 3 shows, all paths are significant at p<.01. The two second-order scales, that is, the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value scale and the scale of engagement with a brand's Facebook page, exhibit loadings between .71 and .83 for the former scale and between .50 and .70 for the latter, respectively. These results confirm that the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value Scale can be considered as a reflective first-order reflective second-order one (i.e., Type 1; Jarvis, Mackenzie & Podsakoff, 2003) since all loadings are above .5.

All the causality hypotheses are supported. Two routes are found to mediate the influence of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value on engagement with a brand's Facebook page: through satisfaction with a brand's Facebook page and brand gratitude. These results are meant to provide a set of nomological relationships for the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value scale. Overall, the proposed model explains 58% of the variance in brand gratitude, 14% in satisfaction with a brand's Facebook page, and 25% in engagement with a brand's Facebook page.

Insert Table 3

In addition to testing the causality hypotheses, post-hoc analyses were conducted to gain additional insight into the mediating effects of satisfaction and gratitude on the final variable. To test for mediation, the proposed model was first compared to an alternative model that included a direct effect path from the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value to engagement with a brand's Facebook page. The results of the different tests show that the addition of the direct effect path significantly improves the model fit compared to the hypothesized model ($\chi2(1)$ = 7.8; p<.01). Thus, the influence of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value on engagement with a brand's Facebook page is only partially mediated by the two media-driven mediators. Second, a potential link between the two mediators was investigated by comparing our model to an alternative model that included a path from brand gratitude to satisfaction. No relationship is found between the two mediators as the different tests exhibit no significant improvement of our model ($\chi2(1)$ = .01).

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Finally, standardized direct, indirect, and total effects approximated from the bias-corrected bootstrapping method were employed to assess the influence of each mediating route. As the estimation of interactions between latent variables remains controversial (Hayes, 2017), the use of bootstrap confidence interval is recommended for inference about the product of regression coefficients, which is required for testing indirect effects. The results show that the gratitude-based route accounts for 78% of the total effects, whereas the satisfaction-based route explains only 22% of the total effects.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Theoretical implications

The parasocial interactions associated with brand relationships have been underexplored in the marketing literature (e.g., Labrecque, 2014). This research provides substantial insights in the field by examining how the particular form of social sharing that occurs between a consumer and a brand in the context of brand-hosted social media specifically contributes to engagement with this media. More generally, this research sheds new light on the drivers of brand-hosted social media engagement by assessing the role of brand-consumer social sharing and ascertaining its nature in terms of media gratifications. Specifically, marketing research on social media could benefit from using the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value scale to fully assess the brand's relational outcomes due to its presence on social media.

Our discussion is organized around two theoretical contributions: first, the validation of the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value construct and, second, the identification of two routes that mediate the construct's influence on media engagement.

The validation of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value

A major contribution of this study is the introduction of a reflective second-order construct of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value, which measures the gratifications derived from brand-consumer social sharing in the context of a brand's Facebook page, a prototypical type of brand social media. Drawing on the conceptual framework from Knobloch & Solomon (2002, 2003) in the field of close relationships, the current research conceptualizes Brand-

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Consumer Social Sharing Value as the sum of four gratification dimensions, namely, brand intimacy, brand individual recognition, brand influence, and brand community belonging.

Such a conceptualization, in which brands are formally given the social status of partners in their conversational exchanges with customers, moves toward the understanding of parasocial interactions and provides a notable contribution to the literature on media gratifications. Compared to more traditional media, such as physical outlets, direct marketing or even classical Websites, brand-hosted social media not only permit two-way conversations between a brand and its customers (Labrecque, 2014) but also facilitate interactions between customers allowing both lurkers and active users to get a better understanding of brand relational practices. Therefore, the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value construct reflects a set of social gratifications that are in large part specific to the investigated media.

To illustrate this phenomenon, this study highlights the importance that consumers attach to experiencing a sense of intimacy with their brands, which can potentially develop through the brand-consumer interactions that occur on brand-hosted virtual media. Ingrained in close relationship theory, this view meets former definitions of brand relationship quality (e.g., Fournier, 1998), but it has not been explicitly assessed in the context of brand social media.

Furthermore, consistent with other studies that show the positive impact of virtual interactivity on consumer responses to exposure to brands (e.g., van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Yang, Kang & Johnson, 2010), our findings establish that consumers may derive significant gratifications from a brand-consumer conversation process, which involves the participation of each partner. The brand is expected to effectively recognize the consumer in his/her capacity as a brand's customer, and the consumer, in turn, seeks to influence the brand. This result is consistent with previous research in the field of relationship marketing quality (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Lindberg-Repo & Grönroos, 2004), which shows that the mutual participation of partners underlies the creation of relational interdependence, which, in turn, reinforces brand relationships. However, it should be noted that brand influence exhibits a slightly lesser contribution to the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value scale compared to the other three dimensions. This result could depend on the brand types selected by respondents in our study. As much as these brands are not associated with high technology products, the lead user's phenomenon may be less significant in such contexts, thus deflating the overall impact of the

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brand influence dimension. As outlined by Baldus et al. (2015), brand communities are no longer depending on lead users, who are mainly motivated by accessing new products.

Finally, the value of belonging to a brand community is found to be, both conceptually and empirically, closely related to media gratifications, which formally require psychological proximity and interdependence with the brand. Therefore, the mutual gratifications that are allowed by brand-consumers' conversational exchanges constitute the relational ground underpinning collective practices within brand-hosted communities. This conjecture could be useful to provide a more accurate examination of consumer-driven collective value creation within brand communities, which may go beyond the value created or anticipated by a firm (e.g., Schau et al., 2009; Thompson, Kim & Smith, 2016).

The identification of media-driven mediating routes

Another major contribution of this research is to demonstrate that Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value influences the engagement toward a brand-hosted social media through at least two distinct routes. Each route relies on a particular media-driven mediator, that is, satisfaction and brand gratitude, respectively. Media engagement is approached through a behavioral lens in this study, and the risk that both mediating variables may conceptually and empirically overlap with the dependent variable is considerably reduced, which adds value to this research (see Schivinski et al., 2016).

The role of media gratifications as drivers of user satisfaction has been consistently supported by the literature on social media; however, our study shows that Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value, with its unique agency, can be defined as the capacity to generate satisfaction with this type of media. In contrast, regardless of the media type, only a few studies have considered the gratitude potential of media gratifications (see, for instance, Simon & Andrews, 2015), thus providing value to the present research.

Most notably, our findings offer clear evidence of the higher contribution of the gratitude route compared to the satisfaction-based route, with Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value simultaneously explaining a major part of the variance in brand gratitude. On the contrary, Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value explains less than 20% of media satisfaction. The observed gap between the relative contributions of each route is likely to take into account the relational- as opposed to the instrumental - nature of the investigated media gratifications.

Presumably, other social media-driven benefits, such as informational gratifications or even monetary savings, which are fundamentally functional by nature, may give rise to a different pattern of contributions. In light of this phenomenon, marketing research on social media would take advantage of the introduction of both routes in media engagement models.

Overall, our findings demonstrate that the engagement with a brand social media – including reading the brand's posts, engaging conversation with the community's members, and actively supporting the brand – is part of the reciprocal responses of grateful consumers. Brand-consumer social interactions, as reflected by the corresponding media gratifications, generate gratitude in consumers which, in turn, is expected to trigger gratitude-driven reciprocal behaviors. Gratitude reciprocity can be extended to a large set of actions, which are favorable to the object towards which gratitude is expressed (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2009). Thus, grateful individuals do not only repay the benefactor in a quid pro quo fashion but also engage in actions that are more likely to promote the well-being of their benefactor (Fredrickson, 2004; Simon et al., 2015). Extending these findings to other potential forms of reciprocal consumer behaviors, this study suggests that, beyond improving media engagement, gratitude mechanisms may be the causal links liking a brand's Facebook page and purchasing intentions (Beukeboom, et al., 2015).

5.2. Managerial implications

In addition to advancing research through theoretical contributions, this work offers essential insights for practitioners. First, practitioners would benefit from understanding the types of gratifications that are derived by consumers from interacting with their brand on a brand-hosted media channel, such as a brand's Facebook page, or from simply scrolling through this page. Therefore, companies should strive to reinforce each of the four identified types of gratifications to enhance consumer engagement toward their Facebook page.

For instance, to reinforce brand intimacy, companies should post brand information several times a week and answer quickly to consumers' posts, thus emulating the conversations that occurs in close relationships. In addition, brands that issue frequent updates have been shown to have a higher number of followers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Brand individual recognition may be emphasized by quoting the consumer name in the answer, in every possible way. Further, in the case of comments posted on the brand page that could be damaging the brand's reputation, customers should be invited to continue the conversation in a private channel and offered goodies

or other small favors in return. Brand influence can be reinforced by thanking consumers for their comments and the improvement that such comments can bring to the brand's offerings, and also by explicitly linking certain brand novelties to consumers' posts that have previously been shared on the brand's Facebook page. The sense of belonging to a brand community is also strengthened every time a consumer observes its brand demonstrating respect to and psychological proximity with its customers in their mutual interactions.

Second, this study provides brands and retailers with strategies to leverage consumer gratitude from brand-hosted social media. Grateful customers are more likely to generate favorable responses, which are linked to higher purchasing intention (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2009). Since the conversational process between a brand and its consumers on a brand-hosted social media, such as a brand's Facebook page, is a good driver of brand gratitude, companies should include the management of virtual conversations in their programs designed to generate high levels of gratitude. Along these lines, sellers should provide customers with opportunities to reciprocate soon after they have shown signs of high levels of media engagement since customers who are strongly engaged with a brand social media have a higher chance of being grateful customers. For instance, companies could propose buying incentives to these consumers to take advantage of their presumably high levels of gratitude. However, it does not seem appropriate to include such consumers as targets of programmatic advertising. In such a case, companies would be at risk of being associated with greed or commercial manipulation, which, in turn, would damage the ongoing process of gratitude creation on the brand's social media (Palmatier et al., 2009).

Finally, consumers are more likely to be grateful to brand social media if they feel that their brand exerts an effort on their behalf by hosting such media channels (e.g., Tsang, 2006). In addition to provide an attractive brand-hosted media (see for instance de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012), companies should introduce narratives on how the brand attempts to meet the expectations of its community members since the ethical values that are transmitted and enacted as stories are more effectively internalized within a community (Statler & Oliver, 2016).

5.3. Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, which suggest opportunities for further research. This research uses a convenience sample, which is adequate in size to provide internal validity

for its findings, but limits their generalizability beyond the present study. In addition, this research focuses on a specific context, brands' Facebook pages, to establish the relevance of the theoretical integration of close relationship theory and media gratifications, as well as the nomological properties of the Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value construct. Thus, even if brands' Facebook pages have become a prominent communication channel for companies, it seems necessary to evaluate the generalizability of our relational framework across other brand-hosted social media, such as Twitter, Instagram or Pinterest.

In addition, a high amount of perceived effort on a brand's part has been shown to increase the gratitude associated with a brand relationship investment (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2009). Therefore, it would be interesting to examine whether the brand's perceived effort in hosting a given social media – see, for instance, the operationalization from Porter & Donthu (2008) in the context of brand virtual communities – can intensify the link between Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value and brand gratitude.

Finally, it is important to note that gratitude and satisfaction as media-driven variables only partly mediate the influence of Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value on media engagement. Therefore, future studies should explore the other possible mediators that are also dependent upon media experience. In particular, because brand trust has been identified as a major variable to intervene in the process of brand commitment (Palmatier et al., 2006; Kelleher, 2009; Porter & Donthu, 2008), possible media drivers of brand trust, such as brand information credibility (Tsai & Men, 2013), could constitute interesting potential candidates.

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Appendix

Constructs (scale sources): Items	Standardized loadings	t-Values	Cronbach alpha	Mean *(standard deviation)*
Brand Facebook page engagement (adapted from Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski, 2016)				
In the last 30 days, how often have you:				
Consuming			**0,89**	9,4
…. visited the Facebook page of this brand?	0,80	19,4		*13,4*
…. viewed pictures uploaded on this Facebook page?	0,99			
…. read the brand's posts issued on the Facebook page?	0,84	21,2		
Contributing			**0,77**	1,2
…. engaged in conversations with community members on this brand's Facebook page?	0,73			*3,3*
…. commented user comments on this Facebook page?	0,85	12,2		
…. asked questions to the community members of this Facebook page?	0,76	11,7		
Creating			**0,80**	0,4
…. posted favorable reviews on this brand's Facebook page?	0,87			*1,7*
…. uploaded brand-related video, pictures, or images on this Facebook page?	0,81	7,1		
Brand Facebook page-driven gratitude (Simon & Andrews, 2015)			**0,91**	3,9
When I think about the Facebook page of this brand,				*1,4*
…., I feel grateful to this brand.	0,82	20,5		
…., I feel thankful to this brand.	0,94			
…., I feel appreciative toward this brand.	0,93	28,2		
Satisfaction with the brand Facebook page (Shukla, Banerjee & Singh, 2016)			**0,92**	5,2
This brand's Facebook page provides me with exactly what I need.	0,88	19,8		*1,1*
Using this Facebook page is always a good experience.	0,96	22,0		
I am satisfied with my overall experience with this Facebook page.	0,85			
Thanks to using the Facebook page of this brand,				
Brand intimacy (Simon & Andrews, 2015)			**0,93**	3,8
…., I experience a form of connection between this brand and me.	0,93			*1,5*
…., I feel closer to this brand.	0,88	23,3		
…., I feel there is more intimacy between this brand and me.	0,92	26,4		
Brand individual recognition (Simon & Andrews, 2015)			**0,96**	3,5
…., I feel I'm better recognized as a customer by the brand.	0,94	35,5		*1,5*
…., I feel I'm treated with more consideration by this brand.	0,98	45,7		
…., I feel I am treated with more regard by this brand.	0,96			
Brand influence (Baldus, Voorhees & Calantone, 2015)			**0,91**	3,4
…., I can influence the brand and its products.	0,90	18,6		*1,5*
…., I can help improve the brand and its products.	0,93	19,3		
…., I feel that my comments and suggestions will influence the brand and its products.	0,81			
Brand community belonging (Simon & Andrews, 2015)			**0,95**	3,8
…., I feel a sort of connection with others who use this brand.	0,93	29,5		*1,7*
…., I feel connected to people who share the same interests as me.	0,96	32,8		
…., I feel close to people who share the same views about this brand.	0,93			

Table 1: A review of major empirical conceptualizations of virtual media social gratifications in the marketing literature

Authors	Research type	Media type	Brand-related media	Customer value concept	Social gratifications themes	
					Consumer-to-consumer interactions	Brand-consumer interactions
Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo (2004)	Empirical: Quantitative	Various internet venues including brand usenet newsgroups	Yes	Individual motives for participation in a virtual community	Maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement	
Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler (2004)	Empirical: Quantitative	Web-based consumer opinion platforms	No	Individual motives to engage in eWOM communication	Concern for other consumers, self-enhancement, advice seeking, socialization	Helping the company
Calder, Malthouse & Schaedel (2009)	Empirical: Quantitative	Various media sites	No	Gratifications derived from online experiences	Social Facilitation, Self-Esteem and Civic Mindedness, Participation and Socializing, Community	
Schau, Muñiz & Arnould (2009)	Empirical: Qualitative	Nine brand communities	Yes	Collective value creation derived from interacting practices	Impression management, social networking, community engagement	
Abdul-Ghani, Hyde & Marshall (2011)	Empirical: Qualitative	Online auction site	No	Benefits as bases of engagement with the online auction site	Benefits from interacting with sellers and friends	
Baldus, Voorhees & Calantone (2015)	Empirical: Quantitative	Online brand community	Yes	Intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community	Connecting, helping, seeking assistance, self-expression, validation, like-minded discussion	Brand influence
Hartmann, Wiertz & Arnould (2015)	Empirical: Mixed methods	Online gardening community	No	Outcomes of practice experiences	Task empathising, social empathising, governing, badging, impression management	
Marbach, Lages & Nunan (2016)	Empirical: Qualitative	Social media brand communities	Yes	The ratio of perceived benefits to perceived sacrifices resulting from media engagement	Impression management, like-minded discussion	

Table 2: Average variances extracted and square of correlations.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Consuming	**0,77**								
2	Contributing	0,14	**0,61**							
3	Creating	0,06	0,16	**0,71**						
4	Brand gratitude	0,08	0,09	0,04	**0,81**					
5	Brand Facebook page satisfaction	0,06	0,04	0,01 ns	0,08	**0,8**				
6	Brand intimacy	0,09	0,08	0,05	0,35	0,10	**0,82**			
7	Brand individual recognition	0,07	0,08	0,04	0,37	0,06	0,45	**0,92**		
8	Brand influence	0,01 ns	0,08	0,02*	0,37	0,07	0,26	0,36	**0,78**	
9	Brand community belonging	0,09	0,08	0,03	0,34	0,10	0,50	0,37	0,30	**0,88**

Notes:

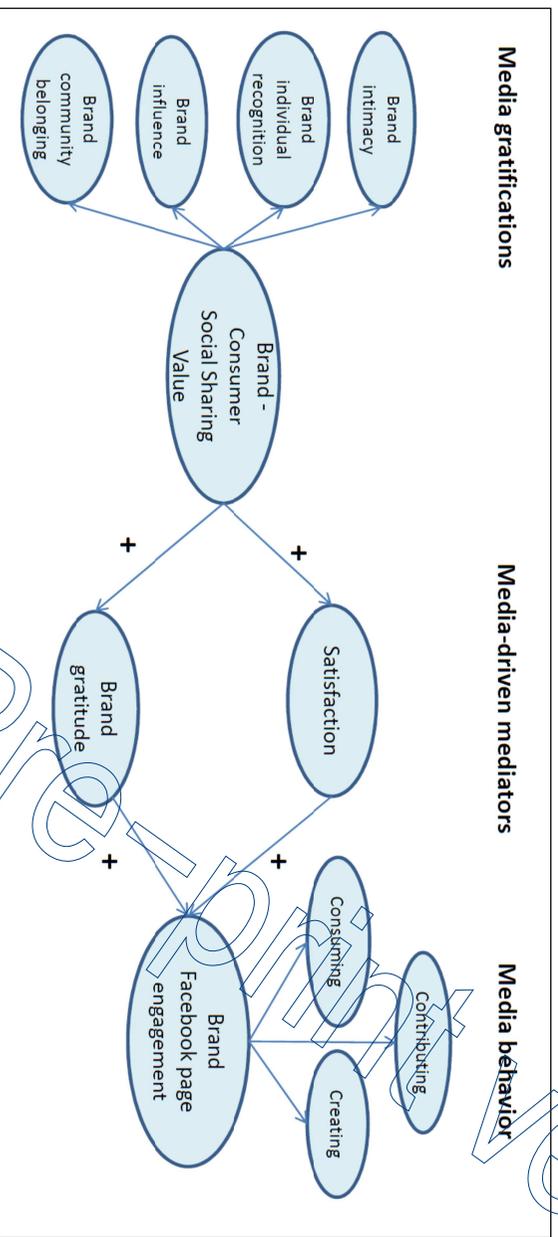Average variances extracted (AVEs) reported on the diagonal; square of constructs' correlations reported under.

*: p<0,05; ns: not significant; all other correlations significant at p<0,01.

Table 3: Assessment of structural relationships

Relationship			Standardized estimates	t-value	p	R^2
Brand intimacy	➔		0,83	10,4	***	
Brand individual recognition	➔	Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value	0,80	10,4	***	
Brand influence	➔		0,71			
Brand community belonging	➔		0,80	10,3	***	
Consuming	➔		0,58			
Contributing	➔	Brand Facebook page engagement	0,70	5,2	***	
Creating	➔		0,50	4,8	***	
Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value	➔	Brand gratitude	0,76	9,94	***	0,58
	➔	Brand Facebook page satisfaction	0,37	5,38	***	0,14
Brand gratitude	➔	Brand Facebook page engagement	0,40	4,54	***	0,25
Brand Facebook page satisfaction	➔		0,20	2,49	**	

Notes: ***p<0.001; **p<0.01.

Figure 1: Conceptual model

Media gratifications

- Brand community belonging
- Brand influence
- Brand individual recognition
- Brand intimacy

Brand - Consumer Social Sharing Value

Media-driven mediators

- Brand gratitude
- Satisfaction

+

+

+

+

Media behavior

Brand Facebook page engagement

- Consuming
- Contributing
- Creating

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