Facebook Likes as Endorsements: The Impact of Likes on Sport Brand Image and Purchase Intention

Natasha T. Brison, The University of Georgia
Kevin K. Byon (Advisor), The University of Georgia
Thomas A. Baker (Advisor), The University of Georgia

Saturday, May 31, 2014
Poster (Urban Room)

Research has revealed that “social media provides brands with one of the most personal, trusted, and direct points of access to consumers” (Drury, 2008, p. 277). With over one billion monthly active users (“Facebook Newsroom,” 2012), Facebook has emerged as a leader in social media and is extensively used to link businesses with consumers. Global brands such as Coca Cola and Visa have embraced social media as a way to connect with consumers (Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011). One of the most accepted methods companies are using to drive consumers to their Facebook page is a practice called 'like-gating'. Like-gating is defined as encouraging consumers to like or endorse companies on Facebook (Aronica, 2011).

Researchers and marketers have embraced the “Like” feature on Facebook as an endorsement of a brand (Swani, Milne, & Brown, 2013). Moreover, Kamen, Azhari, and Kragh (1975) stated that the “mere fact of being associated with a brand implies an endorsement of it” (p. 1), and having multiple Facebook likes could be tantamount to multiple endorsements. Hsu and McDonald (2002) revealed that using multiple celebrities to endorse a brand can facilitate the transfer of a specific, emphasized meaning to the brand. If multiple consumers endorse the brand, this will also influence the consumer’s belief that others have a common view of the brand (Mowen & Brown, 1981; Rice, Kelting, & Lutz, 2012; Swani, Milne, & Brown, 2013). Consequently, the higher the number of Facebook likes, the more credible the brand is in the minds of consumers (“Brands’ Facebook Pages Strengthen Customer Perception,” 2011). The potential endorsement effect of Facebook like-gating can also be understood by McCracken’s (1989) Meaning Movement and the Endorsement Process theory, which states that the qualities of the endorser move from the endorser to the product and from the product to the consumer. To empirically verify the Facebook like-gating effect, the current study was designed to examine the following two research questions: 1) whether a high number of Facebook likes would influence brand image more than a low number of Facebook likes and 2) whether a high number of Facebook likes would influence consumer purchase intention more than a low number of Facebook likes.

To test the research questions, participants were recruited from several undergraduate and graduate courses from sport management programs at two southeastern universities. We measured consumer perceptions of Facebook pages for a sport beverage brand to determine whether the meanings attributed to the number of Facebook likes transferred to the brand image and purchase intention. The first step in the study was brand selection. According to Laroche, Kim, & Zhou (1996), brand familiarity influences consumer perception; thus, a pretest was conducted to select a brand for the study with low familiarity. All Sport was selected based on the brand’s 1.76 score on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 “unfamiliar” to 5 “very familiar.” The study was conducted through the use of an online survey and participants (N = 490, 252 females, 238 males) were randomly assigned to one of three groups: No Facebook Likes (control group), Facebook High Likes, and Facebook Low Likes. Each group was asked to review product information and two advertisements for All Sport and evaluate the brand based on brand image and purchase intention. If the participant was in the No Facebook Likes group, the study concluded after that evaluation. However, participants in the Facebook High and Low Likes groups were then presented with manipulations of All Sport’s Facebook page with either a high number of likes (5.6 million) or a low number of likes (4,251). Since the average brand on Facebook has approximately 40,000 likes (Nutley, 2012), both numbers were either grossly above or below the average making them appropriate for this study. To assess the endorsement effect of Facebook likes, the Facebook High and Low groups were asked to re-evaluate the Facebook images based on brand image and purchase intention.

A 3x2 mixed design of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed in this study. The independent variable was number of Facebook likes (no number of likes, low number of likes, and high number of likes). The dependent variables were brand image and purchase intention. Two separate ANCOVAs were conducted to test the influence
of number of Facebook likes on a consumer’s cognitive and behavioral responses. In this study, although we selected a sport brand with relatively low familiarity, brand familiarity was treated as the covariate to partial out any variance to ensure that the results from this experiment were only due to the manipulation (i.e., varying levels of number of Facebook likes). Both ANCOVAs revealed that the covariate was not found to be significant ($p = .76$).

The first ANCOVA examining the effect of number of Facebook likes on brand image revealed a significant main effect $F(2, 473) = 62.26, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .21$. The mean score ($M = 6.78$) for the group exposed to high number of Facebook likes was found to be higher for brand image toward All Sport than those for the low number of Facebook likes group ($M = 4.46$) and control group ($M = 3.92$). The second ANCOVA investigating the influence of number of Facebook likes on purchase intention revealed a significant main effect $F(2, 473) = 13.10, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .04$. The mean score ($M = 5.91$) for the high number of Facebook likes group was found to be higher for purchase intention toward All Sport than those for the low number of Facebook likes group ($M = 5.21$) and control group ($M = 5.01$). Combined, these ANCOVA results indicated that participants who were exposed to the high number of Facebook likes were more likely to positively perceive the brand image as well as purchase the brand compared to those who saw the low number of Facebook likes or did not see any number of Facebook likes.

This study empirically tested the assumptions from prior studies and expanded on them by comparing the effects of a low number of Facebook likes compared with a high number of Facebook likes on purchase intention. In general, findings from the current study were consistent with prior studies that found a positive relationship between brand image and a brand’s presence on Facebook (“Brands’ Facebook Pages Strengthen Customer Perception,” 2011). Also, the findings from this study supported those from previous studies which found that Facebook likes would increase the likelihood that a consumer would purchase a product (Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012; Zhang & Pennacchiotti, 2013). The findings from this study also support the determination that sport brands can improve their image and increase consumer purchase intention for their products by implementing Facebook like-gating promotions.

Several limitations have been identified with regards to this study. First, this study was limited in that only one type of product (a lower-tier sport beverage) was examined. In the future, different types of products, including non-sport products, should be analyzed as a moderator to determine whether type of product will influence the strength of the relationship between number of Facebook likes and brand image and number of Facebook likes and purchase intention. Furthermore, this study focused on the number of Facebook likes and did not examine the influence of friend likes on consumer perception. Research is needed that examines the endorsement effect of friend likes to determine the influence that friends have on social endorsers via Facebook. The frequency of Facebook use and its influence on brand image and purchase intention may also be worth exploring.