



The Effects of Loneliness on Consumers' Attitudes Towards Brands' Social Media Strategies

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Companies are increasingly shifting their marketing dollars from traditional media to digital media, and are under increasing pressure from stakeholders to demonstrate an increased ROI as a result of this shift. The total digital advertising spending in the United States is expected to grow 19%, reaching \$129.34 billion in 2019, and surpass traditional media spending (EMarketer 2019). Despite this exponential growth, digital media still misses an opportunity to effectively reach online consumers, representing at least \$30 billion worth of lost revenue, considering the potential from the consumers' digital consumption time (KPCB 2014). This challenge for brands persists and negatively impacts the bottom line of companies; for example, just the mobile marketing segment alone within digital marketing represents \$7 billion worth of lost sales in 2018 (Kleiner Perkins).

The challenge suggests that marketers are still in the process of figuring out how to effectively integrate digital media into their marketing strategies. To achieve this goal, marketers need to better understand the unique needs and motivations of different online user segments and, more importantly, the strategies that they can use to attract the digital consumer segments to become brand fans. The focus in the present research is to explore and provide initial empirical evidence to how the different approaches might impact individuals with varying levels of loneliness.

With consumers facing a wide array of digital content options, it is important for marketers to know which digital marketing campaigns are appealing to the lonely consumers versus the connected consumers. Strategically, marketers may decide whether to promote on social media through the use of marketer-generated content (MGC) such as product updates and promotional offers, or user-generated content (UGC) such as consumer reviews and comments about their brand experience and brand moments.

One brand actively using both strategies is Adobe. Many of its Facebook posts for the Adobe Creative Cloud simply promote a specific feature of the software, and invite consumers to click on a video or go to a website to learn more. A second strategy employed by Adobe focuses on inviting expressive posting of user-generated content (UGC). One such example involved inviting consumers to enter the "Trailer Remix Challenge" by creating and submitting a trailer

remix for the launch of Terminator: Dark Fate (Facebook 2019). Similarly, while many Starbucks Facebook and Instagram posts simply highlight seasonal product launches and promotions, the brand has invited consumers to share their creativity with such programs as the #whitecupcontest (Starbucks 2014).

Given the two general paths to connecting with online consumers, we investigate the following research question: Will certain consumer segments be more attracted to either of the digital marketing strategies? Our focus narrows down to two consumer segments: the connected versus the lonely consumers. Feeling lonely or disconnected motivates greater digital usage among individuals as a coping strategy (Burke, Marlow, and Lento 2010; Kim et al. 2009; Kraut et al. 1998; Kross et al. 2013; Stepanikova et al. 2010). In a study examining the relationship between young adults' subjective well-being and their use of Facebook, researchers find that the lonelier people feel, the more they use Facebook over time; more Facebook use leads to lower life-satisfaction and self-perceived emotional well-being (Kross et al. 2013). Further, lonely individuals are found to develop compulsive online behaviors, which further isolates them from face-to-face social interactions (Junghyun, Robert, and Wei 2009) and spend more time on online communication (Hood, Creed, and Mills 2018). This negative feedback loop could subsequently ensnare the lonely into a deeper sense of loneliness.

It is unknown what type of digital media content (MGC or UGC) is preferred under the circumstance. The objective of this study is to study whether lonely consumers (vs. connected consumers) prefer the brands and products that are promoted through a pro-active digital marketing strategy featuring user-generated content (such as having consumers sharing their brand experiences and moments), or prefer the brands and products that are promoted through a passive digital marketing strategy featuring marketer-generated content (such as distributing product updates and promotional offers).

In the following sections, we begin by reviewing relevant research in this domain. Drawing on the literature on avoidance coping (Duhachek 2008; Duhachek and Iacobucci 2005; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Weiten and Lloyd 2008), we introduce a conceptual framework in which lonely consumers display a preference for those products and brands that are promoted via MGC, whereas connected consumer favor those products and brands that are promoted via UGC. Broadly, our research on the effects of loneliness on compensatory digital consumption yields the important finding that the level of digital connectivity may render different marketing

strategies (marketer-generated owned content vs. user-generated earned content) more effective than another.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Loneliness is an aversive self-threat (e.g.: Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Peplau and Perlman 1982; Weiss 1973), and will prompt consumers to react or cope (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Cacioppo, Hawkley and Patrick 2011; Higgins 1987; Ryan and Deci 2008). Coping involves the process that one undergoes to manage a psychological stressor (Duhachek 2008).

Common coping strategies include active coping and avoidance coping (Duhachek and Iacobucci 2005; Holahan and Moos, 1987; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Weiten and Lloyd 2008). Active coping or problem-focused coping focuses on directly addressing and eliminating the cause of the self-threat. For example, Joe realizes he needs a new car. With inadequate knowledge about cars, if Joe chose to utilize an active coping mechanism, he could proactively look up information about cars online and seek advice from friends before visiting an auto dealership. On the other hand, avoidance coping prefers shunning direct dealing with the root of the problem and passively managing one's emotional response to the self-threat. In this instance, Joe might choose to put off buying a new car, perhaps even if it meant paying for expense repairs that were unwarranted given the age of his current vehicle, all in order to avoid the discomfort of having to face up to his lack of car knowledge. In a different example, after having a paper rejected by a prestigious journal, which creates a threat to one's intelligence and competence, a scholar could choose to use avoidance coping - by burying the rejected paper and instead working on less important projects, or active coping - by focusing closely on addressing the concerns raised by the reviewers and ultimately resubmitting the work to another journal.

To cope, lonely people on social media may become posters (those who create content) or lurkers (those who consume online content; Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Hoffman, Novak, and Kang 2016). Posters directly connect with one another online via expressive posting, sharing product experiences, photos, and videos, whereas lurkers passively consume the online content such as receiving and reading product updates, following trending topics, and upcoming offerings, others' status updates, photos, and friends' conversations with other friends (Burke, Marlow, and Lento 2010; Hoffman, Novak, and Stein 2013).

Most Facebook users search for people with whom they already have an offline connection more than they browse for complete strangers to meet (Ellison et al. 2007), and online social relationships are weaker than those formed and maintained off-line (Cummings, Butler and Kraut 2002). Ross et al. (2009) called this an offline-to-online trend: Facebook friends meet offline and then add each other online later. Therefore, those lacking social networks in offline settings will have a small online circle, thus giving them less motivation to share online. Therefore, it is plausible that they are lurkers, as compared to the connected consumers who have a larger social network. In other words, there is a congruence between a brand's digital marketing strategic promoted via MGC and lonely people's lurking tendency. Lonely consumers are less motivated to share online because there is little prospect of establishing the desired connectivity through online sharing. In the same vein, when companies and brands ask consumers to share their brand moments and experiences, lonely consumers will be reluctant to share, relative to the connected consumers who have more satisfying offline and online relationships.

Based on the reasoning presented above, we therefore propose the following hypotheses:

H1 – Lonely consumers (vs. connected consumers) are less likely to favor a brand digital strategy requiring user-generated content (UGC).

H2 – Lonely consumers (vs. connected consumers) are more likely to favor a brand digital strategy featuring marketer-generated content (MGC).

EMPIRICAL TESTING

In the present paper, we focus on consumers' attitudes towards products and brands presented on Facebook to form brand connections. We examine three main reasons for using a brand's social media site Facebook: sharing personal brand experience, receiving product updates and news, and receiving discounts and coupons. The importance of the social and economic benefits for forging and maintaining a relationship between customers and service providers has been noted in prior literature (Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998). Indeed, among

the top reasons that consumers visit a brand's social media sites are getting deals and product information, and sharing their product experiences. In a study examining reasons for connecting with brands on social media, among 1176 consumers who followed brands on social media, 56% of the respondents reported getting regular coupons and promotions, 48% reported their interests in buying products, and 44% reported an incentive such as sweepstakes, discount, or a gift card as their top reasons (MarketingSherpa 2015). In another study conducted by Yes Marketing in June of 2018, 63% of consumers indicated that they followed brands on social media in order to receive sales information and 36% engaged with content to receive discounts from brands (Southern 2019).

We contextualize our study in companies' digital media strategies of using user-generated content (UGC) versus marketer-generated content (MGC). We expect to find that lonely consumers (vs. connected consumers) tend to have a significantly lower tendency to share their product experiences on the social media platform Facebook. Instead, lonely consumers are more likely to adopt a passive coping strategy of compensatory digital consumption by passively receiving information about the brand and information with financial benefits. On the other hand, connected consumers are more likely to get connected with a brand by sharing their personal brand experiences and moments on Facebook.

Method

Our study uses a 2 (perceived connectivity: loneliness, connectedness) X 3 (Facebook connecting strategy: share experiences, receive updates, receive promotions) mixed design. Perceived connectivity was a between-subject factor. Facebook connecting strategy was a within-subject factor. We used a balanced Latin Square design to arrange the order in which the three Facebook connecting strategies were displayed to participants. We recruited one hundred and thirty-three participants from Amazon MTurk and compensated them with a small monetary reward.

Procedure and Measures

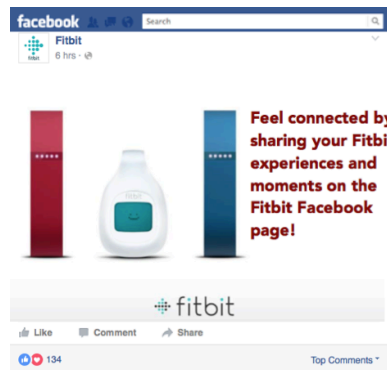
Following an established procedure as used in manipulating self-threats (Han, Ducheck, and Rucker 2015; Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles 2004), participants were first asked to recall a past personal experience when they felt lonelier (in the loneliness condition) than they should be or desired to be in that situation versus when they felt connected (in the connectedness

condition). Using a cover story of a writing test in which researchers were interested in how vividly people could write about their past experiences, they were told to use vivid descriptions about what exactly happened to them and how it made them feel at the moment. They had to write at least eight detailed sentences. Next, participants filled out two manipulation check questions (How lonely did writing about your past experience make you feel? How connected did writing about your past experience make you feel?) on a 7-point scale (1 = feeling very connected; 7 = feeling very lonely). We averaged the ratings from the two questions to form a composite score. Seven participants in the loneliness condition and one participant in the connectedness condition failed the manipulation check and were excluded from analyses. After two additional incomplete submissions were removed, there remained a total of one hundred and twenty-three participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.6$, 57.5% female).

Participants then read three Facebook ads for a brand Fitbit, each followed by a set of three questions to assess participants' ad attitudes on a 7-point scale (1 = bad, negative, unfavorable; 7 = good, positive, favorable; Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). The three Facebook ads differed in their connecting strategies: feel connected by sharing your Fitbit experiences and moments on the Fitbit Facebook page (coded as E); feel connected by getting the latest Fitbit updates and news on the Fitbit Facebook page (coded as U); and feel connected by getting the exclusive Fitbit discounts and coupons on the Fitbit Facebook page (coded as D). Getting connected by E is a form of expressive posting, and getting connected by U or D represent passive compensatory digital consumption wherein people cope with their lack of connectivity through passively receiving information from external sources. We used a balanced Latin Square design to counterbalance the order of treatment presentation, thus avoiding the within-subject confounds potentially introduced by order effects. Participants saw one of the three Facebook connecting strategies, randomly picked from the E-U-D, U-D-E, or D-E-U sequence. Lastly,

participants indicated their age and gender, and whether or not they owned or had owned a Fitbit (1 = yes; 2 = no).

Stimuli on Facebook connectivity strategy used in the Study



Manipulation check

We performed a manipulation check on the efficacy of the perceived connectivity manipulations, using the response that indicated the extent to which participants felt lonely or disconnected (1 = feeling very connected/not lonely; 7 = feeling very lonely/disconnected.)

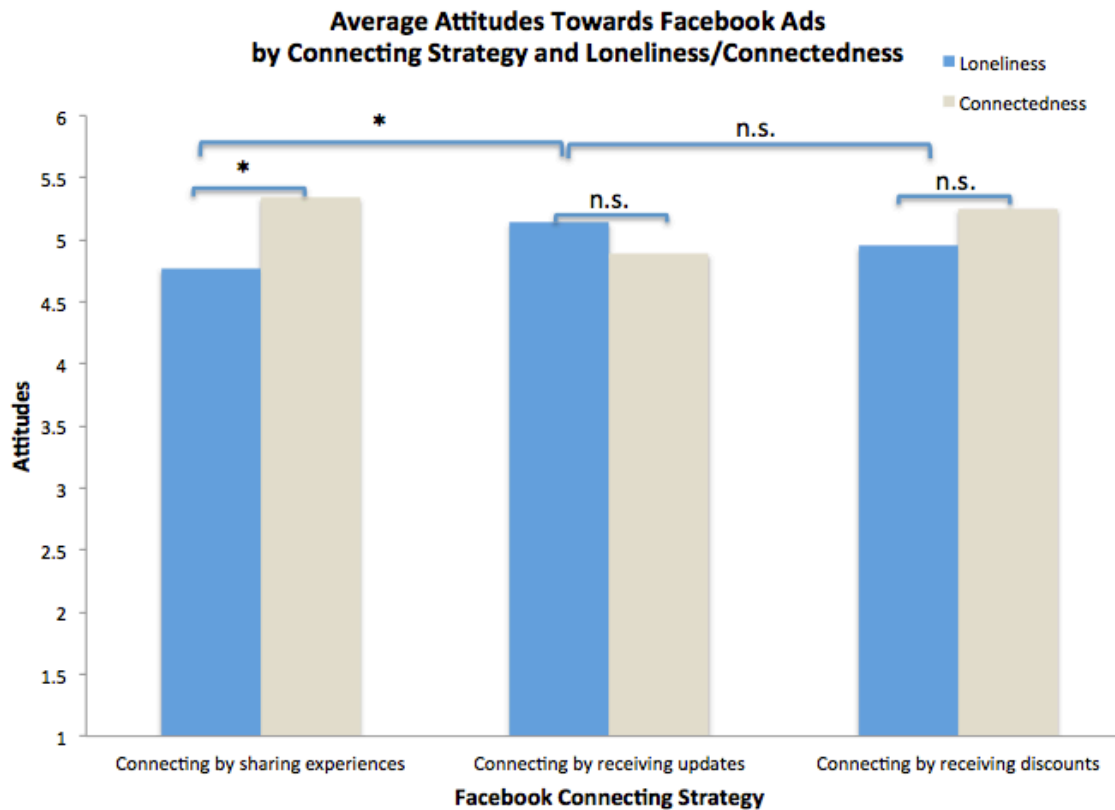
Participants in the loneliness condition reported significantly higher ratings than those in the connectedness condition ($F(1, 121) = 156.1, p < .001, M_{\text{loneliness}} = 5.19, M_{\text{connectedness}} = 2.52$). The ANOVA testing indicated that the manipulations were successful.

Results

We performed an ANCOVA to compare the mean differences between groups that differ on the between-subject factor of perceived connectivity and the within-subject factor of Facebook connecting strategy. We used prior ownership with Fitbit as a covariate. Age and gender were not significant covariates. An interaction between the two factors emerged, suggesting that the effect of various Facebook connecting strategies (E, U, D) on ad attitudes depended on participants' perceived connectivity (loneliness, connectedness), $F(2, 240) = 4.25, p < .05$. There was a significant main effect for Facebook connecting strategy ($F(2, 240) = 4.32, p < .05$) but a non-significant main effect for perceived connectivity ($F(1, 120) = 1.53, p = \text{n.s.}$).

Additional simple main effect tests indicated that participants in the loneliness condition had a less favorable attitude than those in the connectedness condition towards the Facebook ad featuring getting connected via sharing the experiences and moments using the product Fitbit ($F(1, 121) = 5.83, p < .05, M_{\text{loneliness}} = 4.77, M_{\text{connected}} = 5.35$). No differences were found between the two groups in terms of their attitudes towards the Facebook ads featuring either getting connected via receiving Fitbit updates and news ($F(1, 121) = 1.25, p = \text{n.s.}, M_{\text{loneliness}} = 5.14, M_{\text{connected}} = 4.89$), or getting connected via receiving Fitbit discounts and deals ($F(1, 121) = 1.41, p = \text{n.s.}, M_{\text{loneliness}} = 4.95, M_{\text{connected}} = 5.25$). For lonely participants, they have a much more positive attitude towards those Fitbit Facebook ads featuring getting connected by passively receiving product information or promotional offers ($t = -1.65, p = \text{n.s.}, M_U = 5.14, M_D = 4.95$) than the ads featuring getting connected by actively sharing their experiences and moments of

using the product ($t = -1.49, p < .05, M_E = 4.77, M_U = 5.14$; $t = .82, p < .05, M_E = 4.77, M_D = 4.95$).



Discussion

In support of our hypotheses, we find that lonely consumers (vs. connected consumers) tend to have a significantly lower tendency to share their product experience on the social media platform Facebook. Instead, lonely consumers are more likely to adopt a passive coping strategy of compensatory digital consumption by passively receiving information about the brand and information with financial benefits. On the other hand, connected consumers are more likely to get connected with a brand by sharing their personal brand experiences and moments on Facebook. Further, the connected consumers are equally likely as the lonely consumers to hold positive attitudes towards Facebook ads featuring getting connected by passive compensatory consumption of digital information.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

Today's digital users are by no means a homogeneous population with a single motivation. While previous marketing research suggests that consumers use consumption and spending to signal their desired state and identity (Belk 1988), little is known about how, why, and when the disconnected loneliness consumers (relative to the connected consumers) would attempt to bond with brands and products on social media as a strategy of coping. As one of the first explorative investigations in the field, we started to address this important issue. We contribute to the literature on digital marketing, and, in particular, on content marketing and sharing mechanisms. This research theoretically and empirically explains the effects of loneliness on consumers' preferences towards digital media use.

We add to the coping research by extending previous research to the area of digital media consumption. We show that lonely consumers use digital social media consumption to bond with the brand or product as a passive coping strategy. In the process, they repair the self-threats that arise from the perceived discrepancy between their desired level of connectivity and the status quo. The research provides managerial recommendations to marketers when they are designing digital marketing campaigns targeting certain consumer segments. Thus, the study offers managerial insights regarding how to leverage digital marketing for better brand and product connections. It is interesting to note that the now-trendy user-generated content marketing strategy is not equally appealing to everybody in terms of building consumer-brand connections.

One limitation of this research is that it is possible that the current finding may only generalizable to brands and products that are promoted on Facebook. It would be worthwhile studying other social networks and digital channels such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Another limitation is the use of Amazon MTurk as the sole method to test the hypotheses. Future research could involve the use of other experimental methods.

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