

Relationship Maintenance on Social Media: An Examination of Personified Brand Characters' Twitter Accounts

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Received: June 23, 2015

Accepted: July 10, 2015

Online Published: September 29, 2015

doi:10.5539/ijms.v7n5p1

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijms.v7n5p1>

Abstract

The interactive nature of social media provides marketers with better opportunities to have direct conversations with consumers. It thus calls for more strategic management of consumer-brand relationship on social media. The current study focuses on personified brand characters' Twitter accounts and its use in consumer-brand relationship. A content analysis was conducted to explore how the personified brand characters within two industries (insurance and food) maintained their relationships with consumers on Twitter. Five relationship maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, sharing tasks, social networking and assurance) and three message types (informational, socio-emotional, and instrumental) were examined. Results revealed that positivity and openness were adopted by most analyzed brand characters. Informational tweets were used the most, followed by socio-emotional tweets. The insurance industry adopted a higher portion of strategies of openness and sharing tasks as well as informational tweets; while the food industry adopted a higher portion of social networking strategy and socio-emotional tweets. In addition, positivity and assurance were positively correlated to socio-emotional tweets; while openness and social networking were positively correlated to informational tweets.

Keywords: relationship maintenance, relationship marketing, brand personification, consumer-brand relationship, social media, Twitter

1. Introduction

The evolution and prevalence of social media as one of the most effective ways for branding has led to its fairly recent synonymous association with business marketing (Baghaturia & Johnson, 2014). As social media serves as a supplementary marketing channel, brands can communicate as well as interact with their current and prospective customers (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth & Pioch, 2014). McCarthy et al. (2014) also note the literature support for social media as an avenue for brands to promote consumer relationships as well as build consumer communities. As a consequence of the rapid rise of social media, marketers consider how brand pages or even Twitter accounts can be leveraged to generate consumer engagement as well as enhance consumer-brand relationships (De Vries & Carlson, 2014).

Brand personification as a social media marketing strategy has grown in popularity (Kent (2014). Research has revealed that fictional brand characters generate more social media buzz than celebrities. For instance, Tony the Tiger, a brand mascot for Frosted Flakes since the 1950s gets more brand mentions than celebrities such as Ashton Kutcher, Justin Timberlake, Alicia Keys and Sophia Vergara all together (Glenn, 2013). Furthermore, research indicates that brand mascots inspire consumers to engage in conversation and distribute content (Kent, 2014). The increasing transfer of brand characters onto social media and the evolution of brands' social media marketing strategies beg the question of how brand personified characters on social media are used to manage consumer-brand relationship.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how brands use personified brand Twitter accounts to manage relationships with their consumers. Grounding this study is the Social Exchange Theory (Clark, 1984; Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993), which offers a perspective that can be used to examine consumer-brand relationship in the current social media age. The emphasis on brands' use of social media to develop and maintain consumer relationships in a mutually beneficial fashion is one way of investigating the personified brand characters on Twitter.

This study therefore conducts a content analysis of selected personified brand characters' Twitter accounts in a two-month period to examine how relationship maintenance strategies are used on Twitter as a means of brands managing meaningful relationships with their consumers. Each tweet from the selected Twitter account serves as the unit of analysis for this study.

Though there has been a rapid growth of research in social media marketing (Schweidel & Moe, 2014), little existing research has examined how personified brand characters on Twitter are used as part of marketing strategies. Especially with the ubiquitous nature of social media, it's relevant to examine how brands incorporate personified Twitter accounts as part of their relationship marketing tactics. In the realm of social media, brands need to consistently take steps to ensure interaction with their consumers given the interactive environment that social media provide.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Relationship Marketing

Marketing scholars have already recognized that building a long-term relationship with consumers is more valuable than just providing them with transactional satisfaction (Kotler, 1991; Grönroos, 1997; Gummesson, 2002; Webster, 1992). Accordingly, an increasing amount of academic attention has been paid to relationship marketing, which refers to "all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morga & Hunt, 1994, p. 22). Different from traditional models of transactional marketing, which just emphasize economic benefits, relationship marketing focuses on relational interactions between a company/brand and consumers (Tsai, 2009). By mainly adopting theories of interpersonal relationships from the social psychology field, relationship marketing scholars contend that relational exchanges should be the core elements of marketing activities (Tsai, 2009; Tsaur, Wu, Yen, & Wu, 2014). When conducted appropriately, relationship marketing is able to facilitate consumers' satisfaction (Mithas, Krishnan, & Fornell, 2005), loyalty (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007), and companies' performances (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999).

One of the main theories that relationship marketing is rooted in is the Social Exchange Theory (Clark, 1984; Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993). According to this theory, there are two basic types of relationships: exchange and communal relationship. The former emphasizes the consideration of costs and benefits (Clark & Mills, 1979). The calculation of self-interest is the main motivation to build and keep this type of relationship (Hess, Story, & Danes, 2011). Once the expected interests cannot be provided, such a relationship will terminate. The latter resembles one's personal relationships with his/her close friends or family members (Hess et al., 2011). These relationships are ordinarily meaningful and long lasting (Duck, 1991). Conventional transactional marketing concentrates on exchange relationships, while relationship marketing calls for more emphasis on communal relationships between brands and consumers.

Given the purpose of this study, the relevance of viewing how brands use personified brand Twitter accounts manage relationship with their consumers under the umbrella of relationship marketing is evident. Brands desire to maintain an enduring consumer brand relationship, which requires a consideration of relationship maintenance strategies.

2.2 Maintaining Consumer-Brand Relationships

Consumer-brand relationship is an essential concept in the literatures of relationship marketing. It is defined as "the psychological bonds formed between the consumer and the brand" (Tsai, 2009, p. 1194). Similar to an interpersonal relationship, a consumer-brand relationship will create a relational schema in one's mind (Baldwin, 1992), which influences his/her responses to the brand (Kim, Park, & Kim, 2014). To build and maintain strong consumer-brand relationships is the primary purpose of relationship marketing. When consumers are psychologically bonded with a brand, they would evaluate it favorably (Berscheid & Reis, 1998) and purchase it repeatedly (Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2006), even if the price is high (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) or the company engages in some misbehaviors (Metts, 1994).

The prominence of relationship maintenance, which focuses on the consistency of a relationship, has been emphasized by previous research (Dindia & Canary, 1993; Fisher & Brown, 1998). According to Ki and Hon (2009), the result of relationship maintenance is the "long-term, stable, quality relationships between organizations and their significant publics" (p. 29). Thus, organizations are encouraged to adopt certain strategies to maintain the relationship with their stakeholders. Stafford and Canary's (1991) framework of relationship maintenance strategies has been widely adopted by studies of interpersonal and organizational communications. Those strategies include positivity, openness, sharing tasks, social networking, and assurances (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Canary & Stafford, 1992). Positivity refers to the efforts "to make the relationship more enjoyable

for the parties involved” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14). Openness means involved parties unveiling information about themselves to benefit the relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Sharing tasks is defined as organizations and publics “taking joint responsibility” (Ki & Hon, 2009, p. 30). Social networking refers to organizations building affiliations with other groups in which the publics are also involved with (Cho & Huh, 2010; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Assurance is defined as the “attempts by the parties in the relationship to demonstrate they are committed to maintaining the relationship” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 15). By employing these strategies, an organization is more likely to enjoy a pleasant and consistent relationship with its stakeholders.

Previous research of companies maintaining consumer-brand relationship predominately focuses on websites and blogs (Cho & Huh, 2010; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Ki & Hon, 2009). It has been confirmed that a well designed website of a company can facilitate conversations with consumers which benefit the consumer-brand relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Similarly, a company’s blog provides opportunities for a brand to directly communicate with its customers in the way that is similar to interpersonal conversations (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Based on these studies, the current research attempts to explore companies’ relationship maintenance in social media. It is believed that the interactive nature of social media makes them even better than websites and blogs to promote straightforward dialogues between brands and consumers. A brand’s appearance in social media, such as a Facebook fan page or a Twitter account, will create an online brand community, which will strengthen the consumer-brand relationship (Lee, Lee, Taylor, & Lee, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to examine what companies do to maintain their relationships with target consumers in social media.

2.3 Consumer-Brand Relationship in Social Media

The progressive rise of social media and its role in brands’ communication has been the focus of substantive research. With the dawn of the social media era, brands and consumers alike have flocked onto the diverse social media platforms that exist for varying purposes. For instance, by 2011, nearly 83% of Fortune 500 companies had adopted a type of social media in order to connect with their consumers (Naylor, Lambertson & West, 2012). Other scholars suggest that social media are used by all types of organizations to communicate with their consumers (Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez & Luna-Reyes, 2012). For marketers, social media create an environment where there is direct interaction with consumers. This facilitates the establishment and maintenance of relationships and provides the opportunity to gain consumer insights through netnography research (Kozinets, 2002; Scarpi, 2010). Additionally, social media have transformed the communication, collaboration and connectivity opportunities for individuals (Labrecque, 2014).

Social media, overall, have redefined how brands communicate with their consumers (Lipsman, Mudd, Rich & Bruich, 2012; Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal & Huges, 2013), which is not surprising since social media are a form of “participatory online media” (Clark & Melancon, 2013, p. 132) where individuals contribute to conversations that occur online. Consumers play active roles in their relationships with companies/brands (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege & Zhang, 2013). Otherwise stated, brands and consumers have an equal opportunity to engage in the instantaneous dialogic communication through social media, which marks a shift in preceding consumer-brand communication. The social media environment, furthermore, facilitates a constant two-way communication between brands and consumers, which is an important element in the maintenance and enhancement of relationships (Clark & Melancon, 2013). Marketers have realized the benefits of social media as indicated by 85% of them citing the ability to engage in dialogues with consumers as one of the benefits of social media marketing (Mershon, 2012). One of the most important advantages of social media for brands is that it’s an important means through which brands can create and maintain strong relationship with their consumers (Trainor, 2012). For instance, Park and Kim’s (2014) in their study found that experiential and functional benefits of a brands’ social network website had a positive influence on the consumer’s view of how dedicated brands were in the relationship. This also facilitated the quality of the brand relationship as well as consumers’ willingness to spread good information about the brands’ social network sites. Similarly, Clark and Melancon’s (2013) study demonstrated that social media followers compared to non-followers had perceptions of greater relationship investment, perceived higher relationship quality, and had stronger customer satisfaction, loyalty as well as more positive word of mouth.

In sum, the role of social media in consumer-brand relationship is predominantly evident in terms of encouraging consumers to engage with brands. On the one hand, consumers become active rather than passive participants in a mutually beneficial relationship. On the other hand, brands may take advantage of the potential of social media in their retention of existing consumers by preserving ongoing relationships with them (Malthouse et al., 2013). To further cement the rationale in the discourse of the role of social media in consumer-brand relationship, Labrecque (2014) proposed the use of parasocial interaction (PSI) theory as a perspective for the construction of effective social media strategies. The change in consumer-brand relationship stemming from the interactive

nature of social media platforms is also reflected in the prospect that consumers become active contributors to the construction of brand stories (Gensler, Völckner, Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). It's therefore important to add to the paucity of literature that exists by investigating the role of social media in consumer-brand relationship.

2.4 Message Strategies on Twitter

Since diverse social media platforms differ in terms of applications and features, the opportunities they present for brands in their interaction with their consumers also vary. As such, brands employ specific social media platforms to accomplish specific marketing strategies. Twitter, as a social media platform, is one of the ways that brands can manage relationships with consumers.

Brands in the social media realm essentially utilize tweets as a means of developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with their consumers. Research in the marketing field has demonstrated that the development of strong customer relationships serve as a channel for acquiring a competitive advantage for firms as well as consumers (McKenna 1991; Gwinner, Gremler & Bitner, 1998; Reichheld, 1993).

Social network sites such as Twitter have drastically evolved the communication between organizations and their customers not only in relation to the “instantivity” of communication and feedback but also with the transparent nature of the communication. In other words, Twitter’s significance, like other social network sites, is in the facilitation of “asynchronous, immediate, interactive, low-cost communications” (Miller, Fabian & Lin, 2009, p.306). However, Twitter is distinct among other social media because of its brevity, broadcast nature, and access mobility (Zhao & Rosson, 2009). Twitter, in particular, promotes a high level of interaction among users that is needed to facilitate relationship marketing (Watkins & Lewis, 2013). Among the many features Twitter offers brands/companies is the ability to interact with customers directly, either through mass tweets delivered to all followers or through direct messages to a single consumer (König, 2013).

In considering the role of social media, and in particular, Twitter, in managing consumer-brand relationship, the content of the tweet or message type that brands adopt should not be overlooked. The message/content that brands share with their followers on social media is important to examine as part of their communication strategy since it is a significant element of the brands’ relationship maintenance strategy. The types of messages brands provide are important in terms of not only their contribution to consumer-brand relationship dynamics but also consumers’ overall interactions with the brands. Message content also alludes to the type of communication strategies that brands employ in their interaction with consumers. For instance, Swani, Milne, Cromer and Brown’s (2013) study looked at 277 Fortune 500 companies’ tweets to assess the relationships between different messaging strategies and message content for products versus services. Their findings revealed that the differences of the tweeting strategies between service and product brands were significant. Thus, companies may use different techniques to build their brands by heightening consumers’ engagement on Twitter. Leveraging the features Twitter offers can enable brands to deliver content to their consumers that enhance the brands in diverse ways. Swani et al. (2013) noted that depending on whether what was being marketed was a product or service; the type of information conveyed to the consumer would differ.

2.5 Brand Personification on Twitter

Corporate identity comes with the notion that each organization has its own personality and consumer perceptions of the identity that is communicated contribute to the responses that are made towards the organization’s activities and products (Simões, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005; Simões & Mason, 2012). Brand personality is “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Personalities and brand character attributes are some of the ways in which a company can be described and assessed (Ingenhoff & Fuhrer, 2010). Brand personification, generally, refers to “the use by a brand of a character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or other marketing related purposes” (Cohen, 2014, p. 3). As described by Aguirre-Rodriguez (2014), brand personification strategy involves “formulating and establishing a desirable brand personality that is then embodied in a personification, or human-like representation, of the brand” (p. 70). For instance, product animations, fictitious human brand characters, celebrity spokespersons as well as corporate leader spokespersons are some of the strategies that can be utilized in brand personification (Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014). Consumers’ perceptions of a brand may be shaped by brand personification strategies as consumers may associate the brand with human-like characteristics that define the brand’s image in their minds (Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; McCracken, 1989).

Substantive studies that have centered on the examination of an organization’s personality aspects have kept to brand personification and the use of the human metaphor (Chun & Davies, 2001; Davies et al., 2001; Keller & Richey, 2006; Okazaki, 2006). By using personification, animism, anthropomorphism as well as human characters and other elements, marketers usually endeavor to persuade their consumers to regard their brands as

living things (Kim, Park, & Kim, 2014). Kim et al. (2014) also note that connecting brands with human qualities steers consumers in developing emotional attachments parallel to other human relationships. Brands therefore stand to possibly gain strong consumer attachments through the use of brand personification.

As social media have altered brands' communication and marketing strategies, some brands have taken to having their brand characters or mascots feature on their social media pages such as Twitter and Facebook (Karlis, 2014). Twitter accounts exist for a number of brand characters that have been successfully received by consumers. Consumers have strong associations with brands characters, mascots as well as spokespersons which suggest that such brand personification should not be ignored on social channels (van Geldern, 2012). For example, Geico's brand character, the Gecko has a verified Twitter account. The Geico Gecko's twitter account presents various contents to its followers, ranging from its "personal opinions" to information about its daily activities.

Research also indicates that two of the most popular reasons that U.S consumers have for following brands on Twitter are because they are a customer of the company and because they want to be the first to know information about the brand (DEI Worldwide, 2008; Colye, Smith & Pratt, 2012; Constact Contact; 2011). There is a dearth of research investigating the role of social media into the development and maintenance of relationships between organizations and consumers (Clark & Melancon, 2013). Brand personification is an important strategy that brands employ as part of their communication strategy that has diverse implications in terms of consumer responses to the brand overall. In particular, with the influx of social media and the popularity of specifically Twitter for both brands and consumers, it's important to examine how brand personification integrated into a brands' Twitter communication strategy can play a role in particular to the development and maintenance of brand consumer relationship. Thus, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: What relational maintenance strategies are used by the personified brand Twitter accounts?

RQ2: What message types are used by the personified brand Twitter accounts?

RQ3: Is there any difference of relational maintenance strategies between the insurance and the food industry?

RQ4: Is there any difference of message types between the insurance and the food industry?

RQ5: Is there any relationship between relational maintenance strategies and message types?

3. Method

This study employed a quantitative content analysis to assess tweet threads of eight brands/companies Twitter accounts of their personified characters in order to investigate the research questions involving the message types and relationship maintenance strategies employed by personified brands through their character's Twitter accounts.

3.1 Sample

For the purposes of this study, the Twitter accounts analyzed were chosen based on a number of criteria. In order to come up with a list of Twitter accounts of personified brand characters/mascots/spokespersons to analyze, a general Internet search was conducted to compile a list of brand characters. Trade publications such as Adage, Daily Finance and others such as Acemetrix and CNBC were among the sources, which served as a basis for the initial compilation of brand characters.

The next step involved a search to determine whether the brand character had a verified Twitter account. The two industries chosen (Insurance and Food) had the highest number of verified English Twitter accounts among the approximately 20 Twitter accounts identified. The examination of these industries would also provide insight on the comparison between product and service brands. The final step of the sampling process was to decide the specific brands in each industry, which involved narrowing down this list to 8 brands/companies. Four insurance companies/brands and four food brands/companies were selected. The sales of each brand's company were checked through the Hoover database. Subsequently, the top four brands with the most company sales in each industry were chosen. It's reasonable to suggest that these companies perhaps have a more vested interest in communicating to its consumers in order to maintain and even expand its market share. On this premise, the sample for this study came down to M&M's chocolate candies from Mars (@mmchocolate), Tony the Tiger from Frosted Flakes (@realtonytiger), Buzz Bee from Honey Nut Cheerios (@buzzthebee), Mr. Peanut from Planters snack (@MrPeanut), Geico Gecko from GEICO (@TheGEICOGecko), Aflac Duck from Aflac (@aflacduck), Mayhem from Allstate Insurance (@Mayhem) and Flo from Progressive Auto Insurance (@ItsFlo). These Tweet accounts all enjoy a relatively large follower base (Geico: 20,376; Aflac: 61889; Allstate: 57,287; Progressive: 30,521; M&Ms: 54,536; Frosted Flakes: 17,519; Honey Nut Cheerios: 23,652; Planters Snack: 3,339).

Initial monitoring suggested that these eight companies had similar tweeting patterns and therefore, tweets from

these 8 personified Twitter accounts would be examined over a two-month period-October 2014-September 2014 in order to glean as much information from the most recent Twitter activity from these selected Twitter accounts. The unit of analysis is each tweet from each Twitter account. For the purposes of this paper, retweets and “@” replies to other twitter accounts would be counted in the analysis.

3.2 Coding Scheme

Each tweet spanning the two-month time period was coded on several variables based on previous research. Descriptive variables such as the name of brand, number of followers, number of tweets, number of retweets and date of tweet were coded. The two main variables examined were the message type and relationship maintenance strategy utilized by these personified brands on Twitter. A coding scheme developed based on previous research was used.

3.2.1 Operational Definitions

The variables relevant to this study that are analyzed are defined drawing on previous literature (Knight & Carpenter, 2012; Kwon & Sung, 2011). Message type refers to the content of each tweet analyzed along the dimensions of informational, socio-emotional and instrumental. Informational message type refers to content that presents either brand information/other information or resources or information that may be considered beneficial to the consumer. Socio-emotional message type, on the other hand, refers to tweet content that are meant to establish a show of appreciation or support to their consumers, agreement with consumers, jokes and understanding of a situation. Greetings or personal messages to consumers also fall under this type of message (e.g., Thanks to all our supporters!). Instrumental message type refers to the tweet content that direct consumers to performing certain tasks or invites consumers to participate in an action whether brand related or not. In other words, instrumental messages refer to the ones that provide tangible forms of help in performing a particular action.

The second variable examined in this study is the relational maintenance strategy used by these personified Twitter accounts. The categories for this variable are derived from previous literature on relationship maintenance strategy and where necessary, modified to suit the purposes of this study (Cho & Huh, 2010; Ki & Hon, 2006; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

The categories under this variable include positivity, which refers to “anything the organization or public does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14). In terms of Twitter, this means how brands try to make the messages their consumers are exposed to pleasant. Indicators include the use of positive emoticons, exclamation marks, provision of links, images, and videos. Drawing on Li’s (2010) conceptualization, openness/disclosure in this study refers to information provided by the brand/company consisting of any information related to the company/organization or brand character but excluding sale, promotions or information about its products/ services. Indicators include any information about the brand character or organization solely or which include a call for feedback or participation in relation to the information provided. Information about the brand character that seems personal about the brand character is also indicative of openness. Sharing tasks refers to information that presents a brands’ demonstration of corporate social responsibility by addressing societal concerns or brands’ efforts such as environmental activities, education activities or volunteer efforts (e.g., We joined X community for national clean up day) (Li, 2010). Social networking, for the purposes of this study, refers to tweets that demonstrate affiliations/partnerships both present and future with other brands and for profit/nonprofit organizations, unions, community groups, opinion leaders and celebrities (e.g., we are proud to be partnering with X brand on this issue) (Li, 2010). In particular, tweets that mention or show any other organization, brand or celebrity in any capacity will be considered indications of social networking. Lastly assurance refers to the brands’ attempts to let their consumers know that their concerns are attended to and shows the brands’ willingness to help (e.g., I’m sorry to hear that Mary. I’m here to help you).

3.3 Coding Procedure and Analysis

Two coders analyzed each tweet within the two-month time period (September 1, 2014-October 31, 2014) for the selected personified brand Twitter accounts. The total number of tweets analyzed in this study was 631. Coders first undertook a review of agreed upon coding categories and attempted a practice session with the developed coding scheme. Coders coded an initial 10% of tweets from each Twitter account in order to test for intercoder reliability. For the main variables in this study, a Krippendorff’s Alpha test yielded reliabilities of 0.93 (message type), 1.00 (positivity), 0.97 (openness), 1.00 (sharing tasks), 1.00 (social networking), and 1.00 (assurance).

4. Results

RQ1 asks what relational maintenance strategies are used by each personified brand Twitter account? A chi-square test discovered that Geico used positivity dominantly ($\chi^2 = 36.213$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), with 54 out of 61 tweets using positivity. Geico also showed a balance of using openness ($\chi^2 = 1.328$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$), with 35 using and 26 not using openness. Aflac used positivity ($\chi^2 = 56.934$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) and openness ($\chi^2 = 11.314$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) dominantly, with 102 out of 121 tweets using positivity and 79 out of 121 tweets using openness. No significant results were showed for Allstate. Progressive used positivity dominantly ($\chi^2 = 62.745$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), with 91 out of 102 tweets using positivity. Progressive also showed a balance of using openness ($\chi^2 = 0.039$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$), with 52 using and 50 not using it. M&Ms used positivity dominantly ($\chi^2 = 55.125$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), with 106 out of 128 tweets using positivity. Frosted Flakes used positivity dominantly ($\chi^2 = 24.821$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), with 61 out of 78 tweets using positivity. Frosted Flakes also showed a balance of using openness ($\chi^2 = 0.462$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$), with 36 using and 42 not using it. Honey Nut Cheerios used positivity dominantly ($\chi^2 = 10.889$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$), with 16 out of 18 using positivity. Honey Nut Cheerios also showed a balance of using openness ($\chi^2 = 0.889$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$) and social networking ($\chi^2 = 0.889$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$), with 7 using openness and 11 not using it, and 7 using social networking and 11 not using it. Planters Snack showed a balance of using social networking ($\chi^2 = 3.189$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$), with 20 using and 33 not using it.

RQ2 asks what message types are used by each personified brand Twitter account? A chi-square test discovered that Geico used significantly more informational and socio-emotional tweets than instrumental tweets ($\chi^2 = 15.770$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with 30 informational, 25 socio-emotional, and 6 instrumental tweets. Aflac used significantly more informational tweets than socio-emotional and instrumental tweets ($\chi^2 = 81.438$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with 87 informational, 20 socio-emotional, and 14 instrumental tweets. Allstate used significantly more informational tweets than socio-emotional and instrumental tweets ($\chi^2 = 58.514$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), with 67 informational, 3 socio-emotional, and 0 instrumental tweets. Progressive used significantly more informational tweets than socio-emotional and instrumental tweets ($\chi^2 = 58.765$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with 67 informational, 31 socio-emotional, and 4 instrumental tweets. M&M's used significantly more informational and socio-emotional tweets than instrumental tweets ($\chi^2 = 37.938$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with 56 informational, 62 socio-emotional, and 10 instrumental tweets. Frosted Flakes used significantly more informational tweets than socio-emotional and instrumental tweets ($\chi^2 = 71.154$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with 61 informational, 11 socio-emotional, and 6 instrumental tweets. Honey Nut Cheerios showed a balance of using informational and socio-emotional tweets ($\chi^2 = 0.222$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$), with 10 informational and 8 socio-emotional tweets. Planters Snack used significantly more informational tweets than socio-emotional and instrumental tweets ($\chi^2 = 55.509$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with 43 informational tweets, 8 socio-emotional tweets and 2 instrumental tweets.

RQ3 asks whether there is any difference of relational maintenance strategies between product and service industry. A chi-square test discovered that the insurance industry (service) adopted a significant higher portion of openness ($\chi^2 = 25.237$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), sharing tasks ($\chi^2 = 18.504$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), but a significant lower portion of social networking ($\chi^2 = 14.804$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) than the food (product) industry.

RQ4 asks whether there is any difference of message types between product and service industry. A chi-square test discovered that the insurance (service) industry adopted a significantly higher portion of informational tweets ($\chi^2 = 6.359$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$), but a significantly lower portion of socio-emotional tweets ($\chi^2 = 7.661$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) than the food (product) industry.

RQ5 asks whether there is any relationship between relational maintenance strategy and message type. Spearman correlation identified that positivity was negatively correlated to informational tweets ($r_s = -0.12$, $N = 631$, $p < .05$), but positively correlated to socio-emotional tweets ($r_s = 0.13$, $N = 631$, $p < .05$). Openness was positively correlated to informational tweets ($r_s = 0.29$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$), but negatively correlated to socio-emotional ($r_s = -0.23$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$) and instrumental tweets ($r_s = -0.15$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$). Social networking was positively correlated to informational tweets ($r_s = 0.13$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$), but negatively correlated to socio-emotional tweets ($r_s = -0.18$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$). Assurance was negatively correlated to informational tweets ($r_s = -0.36$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$), but positively correlated to socio-emotional ($r_s = 0.26$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$) and instrumental tweets ($r_s = 0.24$, $N = 631$, $p < .001$).

5. Discussion

With the continuous development of social media and its adoption for marketing purposes, brands undoubtedly need to ensure that they maintain a social media presence in order to remain connected to their consumers. Brands may therefore employ diverse marketing strategies in order to develop and preserve a competitive edge

in this digital age. This study demonstrates that brand personification can play a role on social media in the maintenance of consumer brand relationships.

The results reveal that the strategy of positivity is dominantly adopted by most personified brand Twitter accounts analyzed in this study. This implies that those brand characters make really strong attempts to maintain consumer-brand relationship by making messages pleasant. The provision of links, images and videos with text tweets increases the richness of information, making it more possible for consumers to feel pleasure in the conversations. The use of exclamation marks and positive emoticons presents the passion of the brand characters, indicating that they enjoy the conversations and expect consumers to have the same experiences. Such a result is parallel with the findings of previous research on corporate blogs (Cho & Huh, 2010). Although the personified brand Twitter accounts and corporate blogs are set up for different purposes, they share the same nature of brand promotion. In other words, the final goal for companies to use Twitter, blogs or other social media is to build favorable brand images and ultimately boost sales. Thus, to make consumers feel pleased is necessary for that final goal. The prevalence of positivity may also result from the fact that it doesn't take too much effort to adopt this strategy in the context of Twitter (like using exclamation marks and emoticons).

In addition to positivity, openness is also adopted to some extent by a few accounts. This indicates that some brand characters also maintain their relationships with consumers by disclosing information related to either the characters themselves or the brands/companies. Since these brand characters are personified, they tend to be regarded as partners or friends by consumers. The disclosure of "personal" information can facilitate consumers' trust on the brand characters, which fosters consumer-brand relationships. Except for positivity and openness, the current study identifies a scarcity of using other relationship maintenance strategies (sharing tasks, social networking, and assurance) by the analyzed Twitter accounts of brand characters. This points out that maintaining consumer-brand relationships through brand personification on Twitter is still limited. Although some personified brand characters have their own Twitter accounts, they are not fully utilized to manage relationships with consumers.

In terms of message types, informational tweets are employed the most by the analyzed brand characters. It seems that companies consider these personified Twitter accounts as extra channels to deliver information. For example, a large number of M&M's tweets are about their upcoming new product-the Crispy M&M's. The socio-emotional is the second most-adopted message type. Since consumers tend to have personal relationships with personified brand characters (Kim et al., 2014), it is reasonable for these Twitter accounts to use socio-emotional messages in the conversations to show their support for consumers. In fact, it is believed that in order to better manage consumer-brand relationship, social-emotional tweets need to be used more often. If so, consumers will be more engaged in the conversations with the characters and trust their relationships with the brands. This study also identifies the least usage of instrumental tweets. It can be explained that neither consumers nor companies consider these Twitter accounts of brand characters as the ideal place for instructions. The lack of instrumental messages may eliminate consumers' perceived expertise of the brand characters. Thus, it is recommended that more instrumental tweets be adopted in the future.

Furthermore, there is a difference between the insurance (service industry) and food (product industry) personified Twitter accounts in the use of relationship maintenance strategies on social media. The insurance industry uses more openness and sharing tasks, while the food industry employs more social networking. Previous research has indicated that product intangibility influences consumer behavior. When contrasted with tangible products, intangible services are often lack of sufficient cues for evaluation in media content, which heightens consumers' perceived risks of making purchase decisions (Brady, Bourdeau & Heskell, 2005). Cox and Rich (1964) suggest that additional knowledge and information helps with reducing the perceived risk. The insurance industry therefore may have adopted more of openness and sharing tasks in order to provide consumers with more information about who they are as a brand as well as demonstrating their commitment as a corporate citizen. An alternate explanation of this finding is that because insurance can be regarded as a high involvement service, brands' may feel a need to provide more information to their consumers to establish a stronger relationship on social media. In comparison, the food industry as a relatively low involvement product category may have chosen to demonstrate their alliances with other partners (organizations and celebrities), so that they can differentiate themselves from competitors and widen their consumer base.

This study also discovered that the insurance industry provides more informational tweets in comparison to the food industry which presents more socio-emotional tweets. These findings are similar those of previous studies (Knight & Carpenter, 2012; Swani et al., 2013). For instance, Knight and Carpenter (2012) demonstrated that company type determined the kind of social supported offered to consumers. The findings here for the service industry may be explained in the sense that these companies need to provide more information to their

consumers based on the nature of their industry. The food companies on the other hand may not have as much need to provide information to their consumers as opposed to engaging with their consumers through socio-emotional tweets.

The current study also explores the relationship between message types and relationship maintenance strategies adopted by the analyzed Twitter accounts. It is discovered that when adopting the strategies of positivity and assurance, the brand characters tend to use socio-emotional rather than informational tweets. In the contrast, informational instead of socio-emotional tweets tend to be used when the strategies of openness and social networking are employed. It is possible that the nature of the strategies determines the differences. Positivity and assurance are more emotional in nature. Consumers are expected to have more affective responses to these strategies. To achieve openness and social networking, sufficient information needs to be delivered. It is expected that consumers tend to cognitively process messages, which employ these two strategies.

6. Implications

The results of this study present interesting implications for both the academic field and marketing industry. Academically, this study contributes to the current literature on relationship marketing by illustrating how personified brand characters' on social media are used to maintain relationships with consumers. For marketers, the findings suggest that there is great potential for the use of personified Twitter accounts in relationship marketing. Aguirre-Rodriguez (2014) suggests that because brand personification plays an important role in the forming of brand personality traits, which serve as a foundation for a relationship with the brand, it is possible that a consumer would have a better relationship with a brand character in contrast with a real brand agent. As highlighted throughout this paper, social media is an important marketing tool which can be utilized as part of brands' marketing strategies. The results of this study, particularly for marketers, lend support to the rationale for the continued use of social media in developing and maintaining consumer-brand relationships. Furthermore, marketers can maximize the opportunities that these personified brand Twitter accounts offer in terms of employing more relationship maintenance strategies that can be used to engage with their consumers.

7. Limitations

While this exploratory study has interesting results, it is not without limitations. These limitations may also serve as future research prospects. First, the sample is limited to the insurance and food industry, allowing opportunities for the sample to be expanded to other industries. This expansion will permit a broader range of personified Twitter accounts to be examined, which may provide further insights into the use of personified Twitter accounts as a relationship marketing strategy. Secondly, the data collection occurs within a two-month period, one of which is consisted of a popular holiday. This may have biased the tweets collected. Future research could focus on a longer time period, which would permit some degree of generalizability. Future research could also tackle consumer responses to the use of personified Twitter accounts to gain insights from the consumer perspective contrasted with this study, which focuses primarily on the brands' perspectives.

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