BRAND PAGE PARTICIPATION: A NEW CONSTRUCT TO MEASURE USERS´ PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

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Resumo

The increasing adoption of Social Networking Sites (SNS) calls for the development of new marketing measures able to support managers on evaluating their brands´ performance. The present study addresses this research gap, proposing users´ level of participation at brand pages as a measure of brands´ performance and validating a new construct to capture that. Three empirical studies were conducted. First, the construct domain was defined based on the literature review and further explored by means of 10 in-depth interviews with Facebook users. In the following phase, an online survey with 203 respondents was used to assess the construct?s internal consistency and unidimensionality. Finally, a new dataset including 575 valid responses was used for validating the construct ability to be reproduced. Hence, a new construct is proposed and validated, targeted at offering managers and academics a clear tool to evaluate brands efforts in SNS.

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The increasing adoption of Social Networking Sites (SNS) calls for the development of new marketing measures able to support managers on evaluating their brands´ performance. The present study addresses this research gap, proposing users´ level of participation at brand pages as a measure of brands´ performance and validating a new construct to capture that. Three empirical studies were conducted. First, the construct domain was defined based on the literature review and further explored by means of 10 in-depth interviews with Facebook users. In the following phase, an online survey with 203 respondents was used to assess the construct's internal consistency and unidimensionality. Finally, a new dataset including 575 valid responses was used for validating the construct ability to be reproduced. Hence, a new construct is proposed and validated, targeted at offering managers and academics a clear tool to evaluate brands efforts in SNS.

Keywords
Brand page participation; Facebook; Brand audience

1. INTRODUCTION

Social Networking Sites have evolved into a relevant part of the internet experience, accounting for more than 3 billion users worldwide. This massive audience is mostly present in Facebook, which covers almost 50% of the total online population (Worldometers, 2017; Facebook, 2017), who stays connected, on average 20 minutes each time they access the platform, generating, daily 4.5 billion likes and 4.7 billion shared items (Facebook, 2017). In view of this expressive audience, brands started adopting SNS in their communication plans.

Brand pages are defined as embedded types of virtual brand communities (VBC) (Sung *et al.* 2010; Zaglia 2013), where companies share their marketing content, through regular posts. For joining the brand page, users need to click the *like* button available in the brand page, with no extra personal information being required. From the moment users join the brand page, they start receiving branded content, targeted at captivating their participation, through the offering of tangible, emotional and social benefits (Jahn and Kunz 2012; Mangold and Faulds 2009).

As the trend has evolved, brand pages started to represent an important share of brands digital efforts, overtaking, in many cases, email programs and brand websites. As far as brands´ interests towards SNS increase, the need for measurement scales able to help on monitoring brands´ efforts also increases. The few studies that address this research area focus on identifying observable measures available in brand pages and consolidate them (Hoffman and Fodor 2010).

The current study builds on this research gap, proposing a measurement scale to help brands on monitoring the effectiveness of their efforts at brand pages, in SNS. Envisioning that, the measurement scale proposed focuses on capturing users´ level of participation at brand pages. Two reasons support that proposition. First, the positive consequences of users´ participation are well established, being perceived as the bounding agent that keeps brand communities alive, as participation represents the means by which users collectively create and consume value through the various processes that it implies, generating positive impact on users´ brand purchase intentions (Casaló *et al*. 2008; Madupu and Cooley 2010; Dholakia *et al.* 2004; Schau, *et al* 2009). Second, else than being acknowledged as a trigger of positive effects, users' participation also signalizes brands´ capability to generate effective content, as proposed in uses and gratification theory (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011; Sung *et al*., 2010), with users choosing to consume media content as gratifications are perceived.

Thus, we propose and validate the construct of brand page participation (BPP). Churchill´s (1979) approach concerning the development of scales was followed, with the construct of brand page participation (BPP) being defined, measurement items being proposed and validated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The understanding towards users´ participation has evolved according to the development of media communications. In the context of traditional media, for example, participation is established within a dyad communication system (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) with brands creating contents to share with users and users *consuming* the content through reading and watching. In these contexts, users´ participation is captured by means of the number of TV sets tuned in a particular program (as in the example of television audiences) and expressed by means of audience exposure to brand messages.

The development of VBC has challenged this traditional communication flow, with the tools for interactivity enlarging the scope of users´ participation towards the *triad* consumer-brand-consumer, established among brand admirers (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In these contexts, consumers and brands collectively create value through participation. Users are expected to participate not only consuming content (eg. reading or watching), but also contributing and creating content.

Studies in VBC are unequivocal with respect to the importance of succeeding in achieving participation, but differ on the theoretical approach adopted to measure it. Adjei *et al.* (2010) for example, have approached the participation from the perspective of its quality, defined by the relevance of comments, frequency, length and recency. Other authors approach participation either as a measure of the perceived social support that users get from the community (Woisetschläger et *al*. 2008; Casaló *et al* 2008), or as an expression of users´ intentions towards the community, measured through the future intentions to participate (Algesheimer *et al.* 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006).

Differently from VBC, where brands are at the center of the community, uniting brand admirers, brand pages in SNS are embedded in users´ own social groups (Jahn and Kuntz 2012). This implies a change in focus (*the user*, instead of *the brand*) and scope of participants, as users´ own social groups are also exposed to users´ activities regarding brand pages. As a result, the communication flow is expanded into a quadriad format, with users´ own social groups integrating the context, as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Three different communication flows - from traditional media to social networking sites
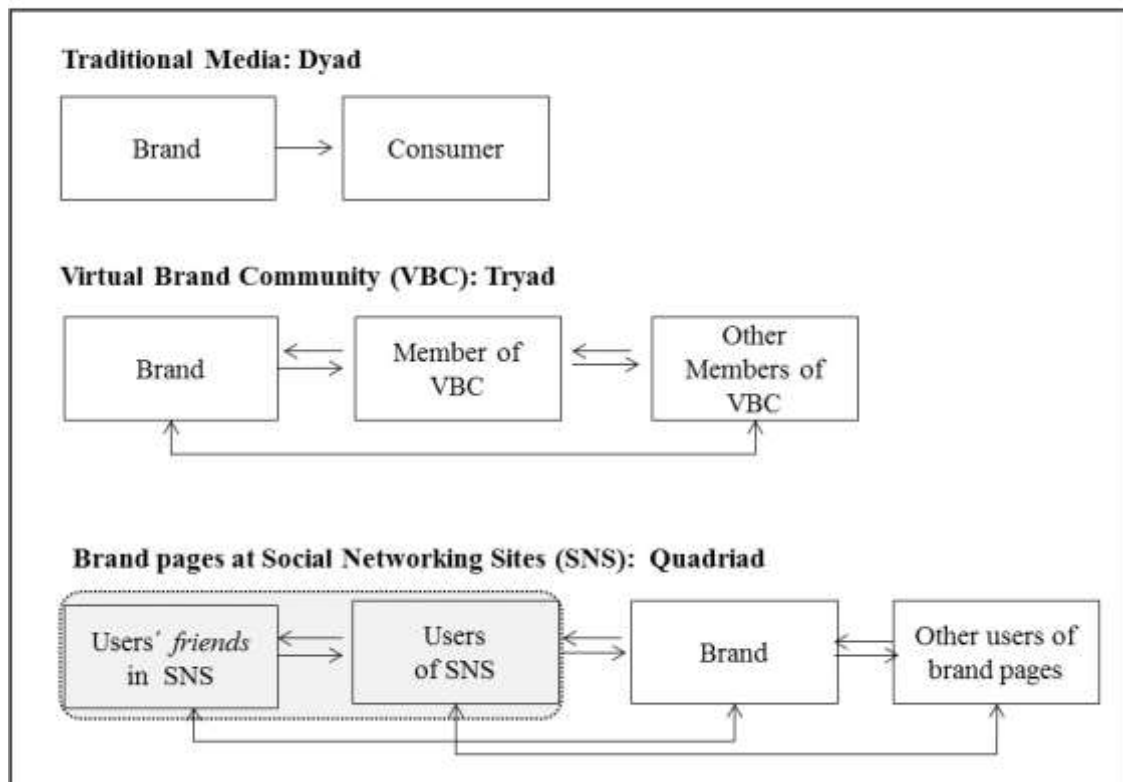
In the context of brand pages in SNS, there is some consensus towards defining participation as an expression of *usage patterns*, established through frequency and type of interaction (Pagani *et al*. 2011; Shao, 2009; De Vries *et al* 2012; Muntinga *et al*. 2011). Muntinga *et al.* (2011) proposes that participation in social media involves three types of usage patterns, namely: consuming content (eg. reading or watching), contributing to the brand page content (eg. commenting or liking a post), or creating content.

3. METHODOLOGY

Envisioning the research objectives proposed, the current study has followed the phases proposed in Churchill (1979). Therefore, once brand page participation was defined according to the literature, a sequence of three studies was implemented:

3.1. Study 1

The main objective was to further investigate the construct domain in view of the embedeness of brand pages in users´ social networks and explore the typologies of users´ participation. It consisted of a qualitative research conducted with Facebook users, by means of 10 individual in-depth interviews. The interviewees were recruited through the method of snow ball, with initial respondents referring others. The criteria for selection were that interviewees should be regular users of Facebook and fans of brand pages. The interviews were semi-structured, being conducted in-person and through online platforms (Skype), audio-recorded and lasted 45 - 60 minutes. Each interview was transcribed and the typed transcripts were analyzed using opened coding, followed by thematic coding around categories corresponding to the research questions.

3.2 Study 2

It consisted of an online survey with 203 valid responses being obtained. The aim was to assess the reliability and unidimensionality of the proposed BPP construct.

Regarding sampling procedures, data was collected among Facebook users who were members of pre-selected brand pages from consumer product goods´ (CPG) and within that it was focused on brands positioned in the segment of beauty and personal care. This segment was selected from the list of the existing CPGs´ brand pages in Portugal (Djomba, 2016). The criteria for selection were based on: *i)* the segment size, which together with food and beverages, accounts for more than 70% of the total number of brand page users; *ii)* the segment´s higher level of participation (Djomba, 2016). This measure is calculated as the ratio between the number of people that actively talk about the brand and the number of total brand page users. Both figures are available in brand pages. In the following phase, the same criteria were used to select the six brand pages included in the study. The final brand selection favoured international brands with worldwide presences, which besides having suitable resources to conduct a successful media strategy, also operated brand pages in Portuguese.

Respondents were recruited through a convenience sampling method, via targeted Facebook ads. A banner was positioned next to the users´ newsfeed, inviting them to participate in an online research, available through a direct link to the Qualtrics Research Platform.

Concerning the research questionnaire, the items used to measure brand page participation reflect the main functionalities available, concerning consuming, contributing or creating content. The following items were used: *E1)* Read brand posts; *E2)* Click ´like´ to posts, photos or videos in the brand page (BP); *E3)* Access video and music links that are posted; *E4)* Comment the posts published in the BP; *E5)* Share with friends the content published at the BP (Muntinga *et al.* 2011; de Vries *et al* 2012) and *E6)* read others comments to the brand posts The items were measured in a seven-point likert scale of usage frequency (1=never; 4= sometimes; 7=always).

3.3. Study 3

It consisted of an online survey with 575 valid responses obtained. It aimed at validating the proposed construct with a new dataset and assessing its reliability and convergence.

Study 3 has followed the sampling procedures adopted in study 2, except for the adopted recruitment process. In study 3, respondents were recruited through a household panel, managed by an external research agency. An email was sent to the respondents, who accessed the questionnaire through a direct link available at the agency owned research platform.

Concerning the research questionnaire, and given the acceptable results obtained in study 2, in study 3 the same measures were used.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Study 1

In order to further investigate the construct domain, the authors have organized the findings into two major areas, which are presented and briefly illustrated with transcripts extracted from the interviews:

-Users and their perspective on brand pages:

Interviewees revealed that as their level of Facebook usage evolved, it gradually developed into a *personal and multifaceted communication platform,* through which they managed their relationships, social identity expression and increasingly addressed their needs for self-enhancement, entertainment, information, remuneration and consumption (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2011).

The following transcript illustrates that:

> 'I use Facebook not only as a personal home page, but also as a network that integrates friends, shops and small businesses. In Facebook, besides being able to get information from a friend who was on a trip and posted a photo, I can also get information from shops offering discounts, from people who sell handcrafted objects, etc.´ (woman, 33 y/o).

Within this *multifaceted perspective*, the current study extends previous findings, revealing that users somehow combine their *private and professional*, *intimate and distanced* connections into <u>one</u> social audience. Within that, brand pages are embedded as a sort of *distanced participant*, sharing users´ interests and attention with friends, family, groups of interest, professional contacts and other brands.

The following transcript illustrates that:

> ´ I mainly use Facebook for personal reasons. Despite that, I also use it for professional reasons … I have 312 friends. I access it every day and I am connected all the time. I see pictures, read newspapers, and check conferences …. I have reunited at Facebook with friends that I had not seen for a long time and I keep contact with colleagues from work´ (woman, 31 y/o).

The findings on the positioning of brand pages as a distant participant within the overarching scope of users´ relationships set the conditions and limits for users´ participation to occur, as users are aware of the social exposure associated to their likes, comments and shares. This finding is further explored in the following paragraphs.

-Users and their participation in brand pages:

After users join brands at their brand pages, they are targeted with contents meant to evoke their participation, through *consuming*, *contributing* or *creating* content. During the interviews, users associate their participation (uses of brand page), with brand pages´ performance on delivering benefits (gratifications) associated to socialization, self-enhancement, entertainment, information and remuneration. These findings are supported by previous studies (Jahn and Kunz 2012) and reinforce the importance of perceived usefulness on users´ intentions to participate (Tan *et al*., 2012).

Moreover, the current study extends previous findings, revealing that users´ own social networks play a key influence on the type of activity adopted, with some activities being inhibited by the kind of social exposure associated to them and others being triggered by that. In both cases, the activities related to *contributing* and *creating* are submitted to users´ judgement on their suitability, fit and value in relation not only to themselves, but also to their own social groups and the image that they intend to convey.

As such, the findings reveal that interviewees position their *likes* as a *social sign of approval* and endorsement to contents, being aware of the social implications potentially associated, as is illustrated in the following transcript:

> ´What sort of posts deserve *like*? It has to be something that I like, to celebrate a victory, some product that you like because you think it is very good, also to support something cool that someone is doing and deserves to be shown´ (woman, 43 y/o).

In addition, the activities related to *commenting* are somehow associated with users´ intentions to further contribute for the brand and to other users in brand like pages. This activity is not often present in the transcripts, which might relate to users' predominant lack of interest in establishing relationships with other members of brand like pages (Zaglia *et al.* 2013). Some interviewees refer to the use of commenting as an efficient tool for complaining, as brands tend to promptly react in order to try to avoid reputational problems. Furthermore, commenting is also associated with the post format, as some posts challenge users to interact and others do not.

Finally, activities related to *sharing* content are presented by interviewees as a functionality meant for recommending and creating interactions with users´ own social networks. As such, users position their *sharing* activities as part of their efforts to create conversations by leveraging on contents that were originally generated by the brand.

Once that *like, comment* and *share* functionalities are established, *consuming* content through reading posts and accessing links seems to be the way that consumers most often interact with brand pages, enjoying the benefits of participation, without using it as means to socialize, as this implies self-exposure, which is not always appreciated.

Privacy concerns are often mentioned as an inhibitor for users to socialize the content that they consume. This finding is supported by former studies which position privacy as a moderator of users´ willingness to participate (Tan *et al*, 2012).

As illustrated:

> ´I usually do not click *like* to posts because I want to keep my privacy. I find it strange that brands publish things for everyone and that anyone can get to know who I am´ (woman, 40 y/o);

In conclusion, users´ *likes*, *comments and shares* are contextualized by the interviewees as functionalities meant for getting exposure and socialize, as suggested in former social media studies (Shao, 2009). Within that, users differentiate their *likes* and *comments* from their *shares*, as the latter represent users´ efforts to create their own interactions with their networks. However, c*onsuming* content seems to occur more independently from any social implications.

The findings help to support the quadriad type of communication flow occurring in SNS, with users´ own networks influencing the type and frequency of BPP. Furthermore, the results also endorse current study´s adaptation of Muntinga´s *et al.* (2011) *usage* typologies, with users most often associating their activities in brand like pages to the

contents´ characteristics and to their own expectations to socialize. Finally, the study validates the dimensionality of the construct, with functionalities associated to *consuming*, *contributing* and *creating* accounting for capturing the complete dimensionality of the construct.

4.2. Study 2

Concerning study 2 sample characteristics, half of the participants were below 25 years old, 33% were between 25 and 45 and the remaining above 45 years old. The majority of the participants visit Facebook on a daily basis, 36% spend less than an hour in every visit, 21% spend between 1-2 hours and the remaining spend more than 2 hours.

At this phase, the construct BPP was assessed for unidimensionality using principal components analysis in IBM SPSS V.22. Factor extraction was based on the existence of eigenvalues larger than 1, with one component being obtained. Furthermore, it was required that all factor loadings were larger than 0.5, and that a considerable amount of total explained variance was obtained. All items have estimated standardized factor loadings above 0.70 and a total variance explained of 34% was achieved.

Additionally, reliability was accessed using Cronbach´s Alpha. Brand page participation has achieved the minimum required level, with a coefficients of 0.86 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), being validated for its reliability.

4.3. Study 3

Among the 575 respondents, 25% were aged between 18 and 24 years old, 37% between 25 and 34 and 37% between 35 and 44. The majority visited Facebook on a daily basis, 26% spent less than ½ hour in every visit, 36% spent between ½ hour and 1 hour, 20% spent between 1-2 hours and the remaining 19% spent more than 2 hours. Regarding the brand page, around 46% of the participants had been registered on the brand page for more than 3 months.

The measurement model was estimated through CFA. The obtained fit measures suggest there is an acceptable model-data fit, as presented in Table 1.There is also evidence for reliability and convergence of the proposed BPP construct, with a composite reliability value of 0.87 and an average variance extracted (AVE) value of 0.54.

Table 1: Results from confirmatory factor analysis

		Standardized Factor Loading	CR	AVE
	Brand Like Page Participation (BPP)		0.87	0.54
E1	Read brand posts.	0.60		
E2	Click ´like´ to posts, photos or videos at the brand page (BP	0.70		
E3	Acess video and music links that are posted	0.71		
E4	Comment the posts published at the BPP	0.87		
E5	Share with friends the content published at the BPP	0.83		
E6	Read other´s comments to the brand posts	0.66		

Goodness of fit indices for measurement model: $\chi 2 = 61$; df= 9; RMSEA=0.10; CFI=0.98; NFI=0.98; IFI=0.98; GFI=0.95

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study proposes a new construct to measure the effectiveness of brand pages for brands operating in SNS. The results of study 1 support previous studies which relate users´ participation with gratifications obtained while consuming, contributing and creating content. Furthermore, it supports the understanding that the type of participation adopted by users is influenced by their perceptions regarding the level of social exposure intended to their friends at Facebook. These findings help to validate BPP as a measure that signalizes brands´ capability to generate gratifying content to their users. Else, they also support the multifaceted dimensionality of BPP, which encompasses users´ consumption of content as well as contribution and creation.

In study 2, a measurement scale for BPP was proposed and the construct was validated for its reliability and unidimensionality. These aspects were reassessed using a new dataset, through study 3, with results being consistent with study 2.

5.1 Contributions for theory and implications for practice

The current study builds on the need to identify and propose a construct which is able to help on monitoring brands´ efforts at SNS. In this sense, its main theoretical contribution is the proposition of BPP, which has its measures validated for reliability and internal consistency. Furthermore, the study suggests that managers incorporate BPP among their monitoring tools to be pursued when planning and monitoring their activities in SNS.

5.2 Limitations and future studies

The findings were obtained within a specific geography and brand segment, which reveal opportunities to be addressed in future studies. Furthermore, regarding the brand consequences investigated, future studies could enlarge the analysis, evaluating the impact of BPP on users willingness to further engage with the brand, for example through their involvement in processes related to advocacy and product innovation.

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