THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND IMMEDIACY IN CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOURS: A REVISED SOCIAL IMPACT MODEL

INTRODUCTION
The changes in behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of individuals as a result of their interaction with others have been studied extensively in social psychology where the concept of ‘social influence’ is widely accepted (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Social influence has also interested marketers as consumer-to-consumer interactions are believed to affect consumer behaviour, attitudes and feelings towards a product or brand (Libai et al., 2010). The increasing presence of brands in online environments (Fournier and Avery, 2011) plus the innate human need to anthropomorphise objects in order to facilitate interactions with the non-material objects (Brown, 1991) make brand-consumer interactions in online environments subject to similar effects.

Taking social impact theory (SIT) as a departing framework, this paper aims to provide a finer grained understanding of immediacy in brand-consumer interactions. Immediacy, as one of the social forces proposed by Latane’s SIT (1981), is a construct that has important implications when translated to online environments, in particular social media. Social media websites are those that “make it possible for people to form online communities, and share user-created contents (UCCs)’ (Kim et al., 2010, p.216). These characteristics make that the exchange of interactions between consumers and other actors present in this environment (e.g. brands) a central part of the nature of this type of website. In addition, online environments differ from offline environments in terms of how communication occurs, allowing both synchronous and asynchronous interaction (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), allowing users to interact with people they already know offline and facilitating meeting new people (Ellison et al., 2007). Internet-mediated communications also reduce the limitation that physical distance has on communication (Moon, 1999).

This makes that the immediacy of the sources in the form of time distance, social distance and physical distance are constantly being manipulated and changing for the user of social media websites. Yet, its effect as a determinant of social impact in social media environments remains an understudied subject. This paper introduces a conceptual model that takes the construct of brand immediacy as a factor influencing consumer engagement behaviour. Through a series of experiments, the effect of the different types of immediacy as suggested in SIT are tested. At this stage, the paper presents partial results from the testing of the conceptual model.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Social impact and immediacy
Social impact is considered as a manifestation of social influence, and is defined as the “changes in physiological states and subjective feelings, motives and emotions, cognitions and beliefs, values and behaviour, that occur in an individual, human or animal, as a result of the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of other individuals” (Latane, 1981, p.343). This construct that find its roots in in social psychology is used to explain the changes in behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of individuals as a result the presence and interaction with others (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Its influence is recognised as critical shaper of consumer behaviour (Mangleburg et al., 2004) and its effects are
acknowledged in marketing literature (Naylor et al., 2012; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Argo et al., 2005; Dholakia et al., 2004; Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975).

Social Impact Theory (SIT) was introduced by Latane (1981) and it introduces three social forces that are considered to affect consumer behaviour, emotions and cognitions as a consequence of the presence of others. These forces are strength, immediacy and number of sources. Strength refers to the characteristics (i.e. salience, importance, or intensity) that a source holds and that play a role at influencing a target (Latané, 1996, 1981). Immediacy can be defined as the distance relationship that exists between a source and the object being communicated about, the target of this communication or the communication itself (Nowak et al., 1990). The final social force in SIT relates to the number of sources exerting influence. The theory suggests that as the number of sources of influence increases, this will have a multiplying effect on the final impact.

SIT has been tested in both social psychology (DiFonzo et al., 2013; Doohwang Lee et al., 2011; DeWall et al., 2010; Miller and Cryss Brunner, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2008; Latané and L’Herrou, 1996, 1996; Latané, 1996; Jackson and Latane, 1982) and marketing literature (Kwahk and Ge, 2012; Naylor et al., 2012) resulting in supportive evidence that at least one of the social forces proposed by the theory (strength, immediacy and number of sources) affect consumers’ behaviour.

From the social forces identified in the theory, immediacy is a multi-dimensional construct that has generated contradictory results when tested empirically (Jackson, 1986; Mullen, 1985; Jackson and Latane, 1982) and this has resulted in overlooking the construct in recent studies that used the theory for empirical testing (Naylor et al., 2012; Thompson and Ward, 2008; Mangleburg et al., 2004). Different types of immediacies can exist between source and target, and can be categorise in time, temporal and social distances. To date the different types of immediacies as suggested in this theory have been tested empirically in a range of offline and online settings (Blaskovich, 2008; Miller and Cryss Brunner, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2008; Bourgeois and Bowen, 2001; Hart et al., 1999; Jackson and Latane, 1982; Bassett and Latane, 1976) and through computer simulations (Fink, 1996; Latané and L’Herrou, 1996; Latané and Liu, 1996; Latané et al., 1995).

The evidence from these studies suggest that the immediacy of a source can affect the impact that this source has on the target at behavioural (Chidambaram and Lai Tung, 2005; Miller and Cryss Brunner, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2008) and cognitive levels (Blaskovich, 2008; Argo et al., 2005; Bourgeois and Bowen, 2001; Knowles, 1983). Despite the extant efforts to test the effect of a source’s immediacy on a target, this has always been made using only one form of immediacy as explaining variable for changes in behaviour. However interactions between sources and targets occur in an environment where more than one form of immediacy is affecting the target at the same time, especially when these interactions occur in Internet-mediated environments.

**Consumer engagement behaviours**

Consumer engagement behaviours are defined as a behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm beyond purchase (Doorn et al., 2010). These manifestations can take the form of word-of-mouth activities, or other interactive activities such as sharing and commenting on both user-generated and brand-generated content (Doorn et al., 2010). Consumer engagement behaviours are a result of a state known as consumer engagement, that is currently of great interest for academics (Brodie et al., 2013, 2011; Mollen and Wilson, 2010) and has become one of the main goals of marketing practitioners when conducting social media marketing activities (eMarketer, 2013). The reason behind this interest is that consumer engagement has been associated with consumer trust (Hollebeek, 2011), satisfaction and loyalty (Bowden,
2009) and commitment (Chan and Li, 2010) all of them strong indicators of long-term sales, word-of-mouth and brand advocacy.

In this particular study, consumer engagement behaviours are operationalized using as variables the simulated intention to (1) follow the brand, as well as interacting with the brand content by (2) liking it, (3) commenting on it, (4) sharing it with others and by (5) participating in promotional activities.

There is some evidence that consumer engagement behaviours are subject to social influence. For instance, Chu and Kim (2011) found that susceptibility to normative and informative influence is significant to the generation of word-of-mouth communication, a manifestation of consumer engagement behaviour. Social loafing, which is the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually (Karau and Williams, 1993), has also been found to affect the motivation of online communities to engage in word-of-mouth communication (Ling et al., 2005). Even mere virtual presence of others have had an effect on consumer’s brand evaluations and purchase intent of certain brands and products (Naylor et al., 2012). This evidence suggests that other determinants of social influence such as immediacy, as suggested in social impact theory, may also have an effect on other forms of consumer engagement behaviours.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**

![Conceptual Model](image)

**METHOD**

A causal enquiry drives the methods of this research. Causal research explores the effect of a given variable/factor on another one (Bryman, 2012). In this case, the research aims to determine the effect of immediacy over consumer engagement behaviours. Experiment is the chosen method as it is well-suited to investigate a cause-effect relationship among variables, as well as the controlled manipulation of independent variables and the measurement of its effects on one or many dependent variables (Freedman, 2005). Experiments are strong methods for establishing causal relationships because of the nature of their design and the controlled environment that is associated with the manipulation and measurement of both dependent and independent variables.

**Experimental design**

This study is divided in three (physical, time and social distance) one factor experimental design with three levels of treatments each (control/low/high). Due to the nature of the
consumer engagement behaviours being used in this experiment, a moderating factor is also controlled for, in this case referring to the intensity of usage and commitment to the platform (Facebook) as they might moderate the propensity to perform the measured dependent variable (Smock et al., 2011).

**Measures**

**Independent variable**

Immediacy is defined in SIT as the distance relationship that exists between a source and a target (Nowak et al., 1990). From a consumer perspective, brand immediacy is therefore a set of factors that represent the relationship between a brand and the consumer. This relationship can be summarised in terms of physical, temporal and social distance. The first study will test the effect of physical distance over the dependent variables. This is consistent with the majority of studies using SIT, as they usually operationalize only one form of immediacy. The most common operationalisation of immediacy is physical distance, as it the most basic form to represent immediacy. Physical distance is learned earlier than other types of distances, and can be more clearly detected, less ambiguous and easy to communicate about than temporal or social distance (Trope and Liberman, 2010).

Physical distance was manipulated by showing the participants a message coming from a fictitious concert venue, and one was supposed to be Edinburgh based (high immediacy) and another based in London (low immediacy) and the controlled manipulation did not mention anything about the physical location of the venue. The images used for high/low/control can be referred to in Error! Reference source not found..

**Dependent Variable**

**Consumer engagement behaviours**

Consumer engagement behaviours are operationalized using as variables the simulated intention to (1) follow the brand, as well as interacting with the brand content by (2) liking it, (3) commenting on it, or (4) sharing it with others. Intention simulation is a valid approach to measure actual behaviour, since it approximates real situations (Francis et al., 2004). The scale used to measure the intention to act was based on a single item question measuring each of the featured interaction using a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from “Very Unlikely” to “Very Likely” modified from Facebook feature use by Smock et al. (2011).

**Confounding Variables**

**Facebook Intensity Usage**

The context where this research is social media websites, in particular the social networking site Facebook. The usage of this kind of platforms was measured using the Facebook intensity scale developed by (Smock et al., 2011; Yoder and Stutzman, 2011; Ellison et al., 2007).

**Procedures**

An online-based pilot test was conducted to verify the design of experiment one testing all H1 hypotheses. Pilot studies are a common practice in experimental designs and can help detect problems in the implementation of larger studies (Prescott and Soeken, 1989). In particular for this study, feasibility of the method, adequacy of the instrumentation and manipulations (low/high physical brand immediacy), were the objectives sought. A sample of 32 participants were recruited from postgraduate and undergraduate students. Although several authors do not give any recommendation on the number of sample size when conducting pilot studies
(Polit and Beck, 2004; Burns and Grove, 2001) at least ten participants or 10% of the final expected sample in the main study can be adequate for this type of studies (Nieswiadomy,2002; Lackey and Wingate, 1998). Since the main study is expected to be conducted with 60 participants, the 10% rule would have led with a sample size smaller than 10 participants per condition. The sample size for the study was used taking average known values ($\mu_0=3.12, SD= 1.11$) of consumer interactions on Facebook from previous studies, and expected values of ($\mu_1=4.12$) resulting in a sample size of 20 for each level (Smock et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2007).

Results

Pilot study and manipulation checks. A total of 32 participants completed the pilot test (12 female and 20 male) with an average age of 24 years. The manipulation check in the pilot test revealed that there was a significant difference on the perception physical closeness of the brand for participants in the high brand immediacy (HBI, M=3.60) than those in the low brand immediacy level (LBI, M=2.40) and the control group (M=2.33 F (2, 29) = 5.561, p < 0.01). Similar differences were also found in the perception of physical closeness of the content at HBI level (M=3.50) versus LBI level (M=2.40) and the control level (M=2.50, F (2, 29) =3.934, p < 0.05).

Brand immediacy effect on consumer engagement behaviours. A total of 62 participants completed the survey for the first study (33 female and 28 male) with an average age of 20 years. All H1 null hypotheses could not be rejected except for H1d (Participate) that revealed significant differences across HBI (M=4.48), LBI (M=2.58) and Control (M= 3.14, F (2, 58) =4.885, p < 0.05) levels. Results of a planned contrast analysis support H1d: participants in HBI condition showed higher intention to participate (M=4.48) at a significant level than those at LBI (M=2.58, t (58) = -3.019, p< 0.01) and those at the Control level (M=3.14, t (58) = -2.177, p< 0.05).

CONCLUSIONS

The results presented in this paper give an initial indication that some of the forms of immediacy as suggested in SIT (Latane, 1981) have an effect on specific consumer engagement behaviour. In particular, these results point out that perceived physical distance of a brand in online environments can affect the intention to participate in promotional activities with the brand. In addition, the non-confirmation of the other hypotheses, are an indication that these particular types of consumer behaviour (Liking a Page, Liking a post, commenting on a post and tagging on a post) are not affected by the perceived physical distance of a brand in social media environments. These results challenge offline studies testing immediacy as physical distance where a significant effect has been found (Pedersen et al., 2008; Bourgeois and Bowen, 2001; Hart et al., 1999; Wolf and Latané, 1983; Williams and Williams, 1983; Knowles, 1983) and provides support that in online environments social impact yield from physical distance is less relevant.

These results are still partial ones as the other forms of immediacy are still to be tested empirically over consumer engagement behaviours, and there is still a possibility that interaction effects with other forms of immediacy increase the effect of physical distance over those behaviours. This effect of one type of distance over another has already been observed in empirical studies that support construal level theory, where manipulations of one distance
(e.g. physical distance) increases the effect of other type of distance (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Bar-Anan et al., 2006; Fujita et al., 2006).
APPENDIX 1

High Brand Immediacy (HBI)

Low Brand Immediacy (LBI)
AM Conference 2014 – Doctoral Colloquium

Control

Star Stage

Haven't done a ticket giveaway in a while so here we go! Pair of tickets to the SOLD OUT [YOUR FAVOURITE ARTIST] London show up for grabs! Just share and tag the friend you would bring with if you if you win and name the best [YOUR FAVOURITE ARTIST] tune of all time! (Winner picked at random)

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REFERENCES


