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Full length article

Explaining consumer brand-related activities on social media: An investigation of the different roles of self-expression and socializing motivations



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ABSTRACT

People undertake various brand-related activities on social media that differ in levels of engagement. Companies, however, want to know how to motivate consumers to become involved in the relatively more engaging activities, as such activities are more likely to lead to increased sales. In this article, we focus on activities that are highly engaging (such as writing product reviews) or moderately engaging (such as rating products). Based on self-determination theory, the present research identifies different motivations for engaging in different brand-related activities on social media. We provide evidence indicating that the motivations of self-expression and socializing play primary roles in leading people to participate in highly engaging activities (i.e. creating one's own content online) and in moderately engaging activities (i.e. collaborating with others to contribute to content). These findings have implications for both theory and practice insofar as they specify how to stimulate consumers to perform relatively more engaging brand-related activities on social media.

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1. Introduction

Social media, a group of Internet-based applications that allow users to create and share content by interacting with one another (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013), has proliferated in the last ten years. Popular examples are social networking and microblogging sites such as, respectively, Facebook and Twitter. In the first quarter of 2016, there were more than 1.6 billion active Facebook users and 310 million active Twitter users worldwide (Statista, 2016; Twitter,

2016). Among its many uses, social media makes it easier for consumers to follow and interact with brands. For example, more than 50% of social media users follow brands on social media, and approximately 20% of all Tweets contain a brand mention (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Van Belleghem, Eenhuizen, & Veris, 2011).

Among the many activities consumers may carry out with regard to brands on social media, only some of them are of the greatest relevance to companies. Existing research (e.g. Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010) contends that the types of activity that matter most to companies are those in which consumers interact with brands by creating original content or by contributing to content created by others. For example, consumers sometimes write brand-related articles or product reviews, so that they *create* brand-related content independently (Schlosser, 2005). They can also comment on brand-related content, rate products or brands, and perform other actions in which they interact to *contribute* to brand-related content initially generated by others. These activities

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typically require high or moderate levels of engagement on the part of consumers, which refers to a positive psychological state that typically occurs during interactive or co-creative experiences consumers have with brands and entails aspects of cognitive effort, emotional involvement, and behavioral proneness (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; see also Hollebeek et al., 2014). Because of their inherent high or moderate levels of engagement (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016), brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities on social media have important marketing implications as they may benefit corporate reputation, store visits, sales, and profitability (e.g. Onishi & Manchanda, 2012; Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2013; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

Given the increasing investments that companies make in developing social media marketing strategies, which are expected to reach \$36 billion by 2017 (eMarketer, 2015), it is crucial for companies to know how to motivate consumers to become involved in social media and increasingly engage in brand-related *creating* or *contributing* activities. Identifying the motivations that prompt consumers to perform these activities is a crucial step. Academic research has explored the motivations behind consumers' participation in general activities online. These studies find a plethora of motivations such as entertainment, social interaction, information and self-expression (e.g. Berger, 2014; Chen, 2011; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011). However, studies to date do not examine motivations for *brand-related* activities on social media, which are specifically interesting to examine from a firm-perspective. Also, previous studies do not focus on the relative effects of the motives that might drive brand-related social media activities.

Thus, what is missing is a clear, overarching framework that can help better understand why and how certain motivations may lead to brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities. Our research fills this gap by providing a general framework that builds on self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is suitable because it identifies specific motivational categories that differ in their degree of autonomy. Motivations that have higher levels of autonomy are better able to prompt individuals to engage in more demanding tasks than motivations with lower levels of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Specifically, we make two major contributions: first, we theoretically categorize and empirically measure the high and moderate engaging brand-related activities (i.e. *creating* and *contributing*) that consumers typically carry out on social media, and show that these form two distinct categories differing in levels of engagement. At the same time, we likewise theoretically categorize and empirically measure the *motivations* that potentially underlie these activities. Second, we demonstrate that specific motivations that vary in levels of autonomy have a distinct role in driving activities that entail different levels of engagement. We find that, in addition to some common motivations (i.e. entertainment and remuneration), self-expression and socializing could primarily lead consumers to either generate online content by themselves (i.e. *creating*) or collaborate with other users in the content generation process (i.e. *contributing*). The knowledge obtained can help brand managers to develop effective social media strategies, while at the same time helping managers of social media platforms to facilitate higher user activity and content contributions.

This article proceeds as follows: first we describe previous research on motivations for social media activities, then describe brand-related activities on social media in more detail and explain the potential role of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in understanding the motivational drivers of these activities. Then we develop expectations based on this theory and test them across two studies. Finally, we discuss the empirical results and examine their implications.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Previous research

Previous research identified motivations behind consumers' participation in online general activities. Yet most studies mainly focused on motivations for more passive activities on social media. For instance, a number of previous studies focused on why and how people use Facebook (e.g. Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Sheldon et al., 2011) or similar social networking sites (e.g. Gao & Feng, 2016), showing that they used it for social interaction, and to exchange information to feel more connected to others (e.g. Chen, 2011; Sheldon et al., 2011). A recent overview on 'lurking' activities online has found different drivers, such as environmental influence, personal preference, individual-group relationship and security consideration (Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014). Another study focused specifically on why people use *Yelp.com* and found that information-seeking, entertainment, convenience, interpersonal utility, and passing time were motivations to read and write restaurant reviews on the website (Hicks et al., 2012). Moreover, other studies found a plethora of motivations for using social media or engaging in electronic word of mouth (eWOM), such as entertainment, information, social interaction, desire for economic incentives, concern for other consumers, and self-expression or enhancing the own self-worth (Berger, 2014; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Hoffman & Novak, 2012). Some other research focused on relatively more engaging activities on social media, such as uploading photos on Flickr (Zeng & Wei, 2013), sharing content on Twitter (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Toubia & Stephen, 2013), and sharing videos on YouTube (Lange, 2007). Social motives are also important for these types of activity on social media (Lange, 2007; Zeng & Wei, 2013), as are self-related motives (Toubia & Stephen, 2013).

Thus, findings from previous studies on motivations for different social media activities are fairly fragmented, revealing many different motivations for engaging in social media activities. Also, most studies to date have examined general consumer activities on social media, but have not investigated specific motivations for the different types of *brand-related* activities that consumers engage in. Additionally, studies have generally focused on aggregated measures of different types of activities (like eWOM) or only one type of activity, and then mostly the more passive activities, but not on multiple, although it is likely that motivations differ for different activities.

As might have become clear from the discussion on motivations for different types of activities, there exist many different (brand-related) activities consumers can engage in. A few studies started to classify different types of activity based on levels of engagement (e.g. Muntinga et al., 2011; Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2013; Shao, 2009). For instance, Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson (2013) identified different types of activity that consumers undertake when online, ranged according to the amount of time and effort required. Starting with activities that merely consist in the reading of content, they progress to activities that entail slightly more engagement and effort, and then to activities that consist in the creation of content itself. Activities that take more effort are also more valuable (Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2013).

In this research, we build on these few previous studies, but our focus is not upon general activities, but strictly upon *brand-related* activities on social media. Moreover, we solely focus on those activities that are most relevant to companies, which are the relatively more engaging activities. Consistent with prior work on brand-related social media activities (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016), we define *creating* activities as those

activities in which users generate and disseminate their own online brand-related content on social media (e.g. writing a brand blog or publishing branded videos). *Contributing* activities are activities in which users collaborate with others in the content generation process on social media (e.g. participating in online conversations about brands or contributing to a product's rating). *Creating* activities entail the most engagement because they require the greatest amount of effort and time, whereas *contributing* activities are moderately engaging because they require a moderate amount of effort and time.

Next, we introduce SDT that can help understand which motivations affect which type of brand-related activity.

2.2. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation. It distinguishes motivations depending on the degree to which they are autonomous, that is, the extent to which they emanate from the self, and thus lead to volitional actions (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory proposes a continuum of motivations that ranges from fully autonomous, or intrinsic motivations, to non-autonomous, or fully extrinsic motivations. When intrinsically motivated, people engage in certain activities for the inherent satisfaction of the activities themselves. Applied to our context, intrinsic motivation means that people might engage in brand-related activities on social media because they are entertaining and thus satisfying themselves. For example, someone can write a product review because (s)he thinks it is fun to do so. At the other end of the continuum, when fully extrinsically motivated, people engage in activities only to obtain certain external rewards. *Contributing* to existing or *creating* own content on a Facebook fan page to obtain rewards, such as a discount on the next purchase, are examples of fully extrinsically motivated behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Between these two extremes lie three other extrinsic motivational categories that differ in levels of autonomy. First, a highly autonomous motivation (i.e. integrated regulation) completely emanates from the self and typically causes behavior that is consistent with personal interests and values. Uploading pictures of brands to express one's personal identity is an example of an activity driven by a typical integrated motivation of self-expression (Belk, 2013). Second, a moderately autonomous motivation (i.e. identified regulation) partially emanates from the self and typically leads to behavior that is perceived as being an important means to some end. Consumers may engage in brand-related conversations in their favorite brand community as a result of their specific identified motivation of socializing with others. Such an activity might be regarded as personally important because it might be understood as a means to some personal end, such as a feeling of belonging and group identification. Finally, a slightly autonomous motivation (i.e. introjected regulation) is mostly determined by external factors and drives behavior that is accepted because it is useful to obtain external incentives (like information) or avoid punishments (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consumers might engage in creating or contributing activities because they want to obtain information and knowledge. For example, writing a comment by asking a question about a brand in web community, rating a product, or engaging in brand conversations increases one's knowledge about the brand.

2.3. Motivations for brand-related activities on social media

We argue that the two brand-related activities on social media, that is, *creating* and *contributing*, might be affected by motivations that differ in relative levels of autonomy. The two brand-related activities on social media might be affected by different

motivations that range from fully intrinsic (i.e. entertainment) to fully extrinsic (i.e. remuneration). The motivations in between these two extremes are self-expression, socializing, and obtaining information/knowledge.

In particular, we argue that *creating* and *contributing* might be affected by both purely intrinsic and purely extrinsic motivations. According to SDT, fully intrinsic motivation, such as the enjoyment of an activity itself, is the type of core motivation underlying gameplay and sport (Frederick & Ryan, 1995). We also believe that entertainment could be the core underlying motivation for engaging in brand-related activities on social media. People often engage in brand-related activities on social media because they are fun, enjoyable, or satisfying in themselves without the necessity of obtaining separable outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, a writer creates a product review or a blog about a new product because (s)he receives inner satisfaction from completing the action itself. Previous studies have indeed found that entertainment influences social networking site use (Cheung et al., 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011; Lovett & Staelin, 2016; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Sheldon et al., 2011).

Remuneration is a fully extrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005) and could be an important motive for engaging in brand-related activities on social media. If people can receive rewards, such as economic incentives, free samples, coupons, or specific software, they will be stimulated to engage in any type of brand-related activity, such as writing a review or when they actively participate in online conversations about the brand on social media (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Thus, remuneration should prompt people to engage in brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities on social media.

Furthermore, the motives of self-expression, socializing, and obtaining information and knowledge could differently affect brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities. Specifically, we argue that self-expression might be *more* related to *creating* activities than to *contributing* activities. Indeed, based on SDT, people driven by a self-expression motive are more likely to engage in an activity that entails a high level of engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000), such as creating new online content about brands. By engaging in brand-related *creating* activities on social media, one can express oneself by building or maintaining one's personal identity better than when engaging in *contributing* activities (e.g. Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003). For example, by posting brand-related content, one can relate the brand image to oneself and, in that way, communicate one's own personality and personal identity (Aaker, 1999). Previous studies indeed found that people express themselves by posting content on social media (Cheung et al., 2011; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; Park et al., 2009; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). In other words, *creating* brand-related content on social media is a way for consumers to use the brand image to express and present the self.

We also argue that socializing might be more related to *contributing* activities than to *creating* activities because it provides an excellent way for people to interact with others by talking about the brand. Thus, the main motivation for engaging in brand-related *contributing* activities might be to socialize. Socializing refers to staying in touch or communicating with people with the same interests as well as feeling connected to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Socializing is a moderately autonomous motivation, so people with this type of motivation are more likely to engage in activities that entail relatively moderate engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000), such as contributing to the online content generation process surrounding brands (Cheung et al., 2011; Park et al., 2009; Sheldon et al., 2011).

Finally, obtaining information and knowledge is a relatively less autonomous motivation for engaging in brand-related *creating* and

contributing activities. We expect its effect to be smaller than for self-expression and socializing, respectively (Lin & Lu, 2011; Park et al., 2009). People with this type of motivation have a reduced need to participate in an effortful activity, so they tend to adopt activities that involve relatively little engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Since both *creating* and *contributing* activities involve relatively more engagement, we expect the effect of obtaining information and knowledge to be small. For example, by writing brand-related information (e.g. a product review) one can learn more about a product or brand, but it is more likely that someone who is writing a product review will inform others (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Muntinga et al., 2011).

3. Study 1: development of measures and exploratory investigation of relations

Study 1 is designed to develop our measures for brand-related activities on social media and the different types of motivations. It furthermore provides insights into which motivations affect which types of activities the most. Study 1 consists of three stages. In the first stage, we developed the multi-item measures of brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities on social media and their potential underlying motivations. In the second stage, we checked the reliability of these measures, whereas in the third stage we estimated relationships between motivations and types of activities on social media.

3.1. Method

In the first stage, using past studies and interviews with 40 social media users, we developed multi-item measures of brand-related activities on social media and their underlying motives. These interviews were conducted using an open-ended questionnaire that asked respondents to list the activities they typically perform on social media and the reasons they do so. We created an initial list of eight different activities for creating and contributing activities based on previous research (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016). Moreover, we added three items (i.e. “Moderating brand-related discussions”, “Arbitrating brand-related discussions”, and “Discovering/planning other activities”), which were drawn from previous studies (e.g. Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011) and the interviews.

We developed a list of 30 items related to motives. To measure the motivation of self-expression, we used six items drawn from previous studies (Labrecque et al., 2011; Muntinga et al., 2011; Schau, Muñoz, & Arnould, 2009; Shao, 2009) and the interviews. The motivation of socializing with others was measured using six items that are all based on previous literature (Cheung et al., 2011; Park et al., 2009; Sheldon et al., 2011). To assess the motivation of obtaining information and knowledge, we used nine items adapted from past studies (Cheung et al., 2011; Sheldon et al., 2011). The entertainment motivation was measured through five items, all of which were based on past research (Lin & Lu, 2011; Park et al., 2009; Sheldon et al., 2011). Finally, we developed four items concerning the remuneration motivation from previous studies (Hars & Ou, 2002; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and the interviews.

In the second stage, the eleven items regarding brand-related activities on social media were included in a questionnaire which, by using a seven-point scale (1 = never, 7 = very often), assessed the extent to which social media users engage in the two types of brand-related activities. The thirty items regarding motivations were included to assess the underlying reasons for engaging in those brand-related activities, also by using a seven-point scale (1 = completely false, 7 = completely true). The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 161 social media users (50% males, 50%

females; age range: 18–39 years), who were recruited from a population of university students. The results of an exploratory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood procedure and Promax rotation allowed us to remove three statistically inconsistent items regarding the motivations of socializing with others and of obtaining information/knowledge (i.e. “It decreases the likelihood of being left out”, “I can receive specific support”, and “It makes me learn how to do things”; factor loadings <0.50).

In the third stage, we included in a new questionnaire the refined sets of items, composed of eleven indicators concerning activities and twenty-seven indicators concerning motivations (see Table 1). This questionnaire was administered to a new sample of 605 social media users (47% males, 53% females; age range: 18–39), who were recruited from the same population as above. The data from this broader collection were analyzed using a structural equation modeling procedure.

3.2. Results

Before analyzing the dataset from 605 respondents, we checked the assumption that creating and contributing activities differ in the level of engagement they require to be performed on a separate sample of social media users. Forty-five social media users (34% males, 66% females; age range: 20–31 years), drawn from the same population of respondents as above, participated in a test designed to check whether brand-related *creating* activities are more engaging than *contributing* activities. Respondents rated each of the basic activities described in the eleven items developed above on three dimensions: effort (i.e. “How much effort do you think is required to perform activity X?”; 1 = very little effort, 7 = a lot of effort), time (i.e. “How much time do you think is required to perform activity X?”; 1 = very little time, 7 = a lot of time), and engagement (i.e. “How engaging do you think activity X is?”; 1 = not engaging at all, 7 = very engaging). We combined the scores across the three dimensions (α 's ≥ 0.60) and across the basic activities (α 's > 0.80) to obtain a composite indicator of the average level of engagement associated with each type of brand-related activity. The results confirmed that the level of engagement associated with *creating* activities ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.24$) is significantly higher than that associated with *contributing* activities ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(44) = 9.24$, $p < 0.001$.

We performed a confirmatory factor analysis, using the maximum likelihood procedure, on the data from the sample of 605 respondents, regarding brand-related activities and their underlying motivations. In such a measurement model, single items regarding activities and motivations serve as observed variables measuring the intended latent constructs. Fit statistics were satisfactory according to recommended thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999): $\chi^2(618) = 1539.56$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/d.f. = 2.491$; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.958; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.932; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.952; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.050; Standard Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.050. Standardized estimates of factor loadings are all higher than 0.60, and each latent construct shows an adequate level of convergent validity (ρ indices ≥ 0.85) and average variance extracted (AVEs ≥ 0.59) (see Table 1). To assess discriminant validity, we constrained pairwise correlations between the latent constructs regarding the three social media activities and the five motivations, and compared the restricted models against the unconstrained model. The χ^2 difference tests confirm a significantly better fit for the unconstrained model than for the restricted model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

Table 2 reports bivariate correlations among latent constructs. Correlation coefficients show that both brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities and all motivations correlate significantly

Table 1
Results of the confirmatory factor analysis.

Factor/Item	Standardized estimate
I. <i>Entertainment</i> ($\rho = 0.94$, AVE = 0.75)	
It is enjoyable	0.86 ^{n.a.}
It is entertaining	0.86*
It is exciting	0.82*
It is fun	0.88*
It helps me amuse myself	0.92*
II. <i>Self-expression</i> ($\rho = 0.94$, AVE = 0.71)	
It allows other people to understand who I am	0.83 ^{n.a.}
It helps me represent what kind of person I am	0.85*
It helps me disclose who I am to the world	0.87*
It can craft my identity	0.83*
It lets me express myself	0.82*
It lets me shape my own identity/personality	0.82*
III. <i>Socializing</i> ($\rho = 0.93$, AVE = 0.72)	
I can stay in touch with people with the same interests	0.83 ^{n.a.}
I can communicate with people with the same interests	0.86*
I can meet new people with the same interests	0.84*
It makes me feel connected to others	0.86*
It lets me stay in contact with like-minded people	0.86*
IV. <i>Obtaining information/knowledge</i> ($\rho = 0.94$, AVE = 0.71)	
I can get information for free	0.77 ^{n.a.}
I can search for information	0.82*
It lets me keep up with the issues relevant for me	0.90*
It lets me keep up with trends	0.79*
It provides me with accurate accounts of news and events	0.87*
It provides me with a wide variety of information	0.87*
I can receive specific information for my interests	0.85*
V. <i>Remuneration</i> ($\rho = 0.93$, AVE = 0.77)	
I can receive rewards	0.92 ^{n.a.}
I can receive incentives	0.94*
I can receive gifts (such as free-samples, coupons, etc.)	0.81*
I can get something in exchange for my participation/contribution	0.83*
VI. <i>Creating activities</i> ($\rho = 0.92$, AVE = 0.63)	
Publishing brand-related weblogs	0.80 ^{n.a.}
Uploading brand-related video, audio, pictures, etc.	0.71*
Writing brand-related articles	0.89*
Writing product reviews	0.85*
Moderating brand-related discussions	0.84*
Arbitrating brand-related discussions	0.81*
Discovering/planning other activities	0.64*
VII. <i>Contributing activities</i> ($\rho = 0.85$, AVE = 0.59)	
Rating products and/or brands	0.65 ^{n.a.}
Joining brand profiles on social network sites	0.66*
Engaging in brand-related conversations	0.87*
Commenting on brand-related weblogs, videos, audio, pictures, etc.	0.85*

$n = 605$. * significant at 0.001 level. ^{n.a.} = not applicable. $\chi^2(618) = 1539.56$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/d.f. = 2.491$; CFI = 0.958; NFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.050; SRMR = 0.050. ρ = Construct Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

Table 2
Correlations among observed variables regarding social media activities and motives.

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Entertainment	1						
2. Self-expression	0.49	1					
3. Socializing	0.70	0.60	1				
4. Obtaining info/knowledge	0.59	0.40	0.64	1			
5. Remuneration	0.49	0.58	0.53	0.41	1		
6. Creating activities	0.43	0.49	0.40	0.27	0.49	1	
7. Contributing activities	0.64	0.51	0.61	0.48	0.55	0.78	1

$n = 605$. All correlations are significant at 0.001 level.

and positively. However, such coefficients indicate pairwise correlations between constructs and do not allow a clear understanding of how each motive relates to each type of activities when all motives and all activities are considered simultaneously.

Table 3
Standardized estimates from path analysis.

Structural Path	R ²	Standardized estimate	p-value
Entertainment → Creating activities	0.33	0.22	<0.001
Self-expression → Creating activities		0.26	<0.001
Socializing → Creating activities		0.00	0.958
Obtaining information/knowledge → Creating activities		-0.08	0.143
Remuneration → Creating activities		0.26	<0.001
Entertainment → Contributing activities	0.52	0.33	<0.001
Self-expression → Contributing activities		0.10	0.034
Socializing → Contributing activities		0.18	0.004
Obtaining information/knowledge → Contributing activities		0.04	0.377
Remuneration → Contributing activities		0.22	<0.001

$n = 605$. $\chi^2(618) = 1539.56$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/d.f. = 2.491$; CFI = 0.958; NFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.050; SRMR = 0.050.

We considered all constructs simultaneously in a structural model where each of the five motivations related to each of the two types of activity. Each of the involved constructs was statistically treated as a latent variable measured by individual items treated as observed variables. The analysis returned satisfactory fit statistics: $\chi^2(618) = 1539.56$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/d.f. = 2.491$; CFI = 0.958; NFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.050; SRMR = 0.050. The standardized structural estimates reported in Table 3, and summarized in Fig. 1, indicate that entertainment was positively related to both creating ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) and contributing ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$). Likewise, remuneration was positively related to both creating ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$) and contributing ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), while obtaining information/knowledge was not significantly related to any of the two types of activity (p 's > 0.10). More interestingly, self-expression was positively related to both creating activities ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$) and contributing activities ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = 0.034$). However, the association between self-expression and creating was stronger than that with contributing activities as the critical ratio for the difference between the two structural coefficients was significant ($Z = 3.39$, $p < 0.001$). This result implies that self-expression might be a better predictor of creating than of contributing activities. Finally, the motive of socializing was positively related only to contributing activities ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.004$), while it was not significantly related to creating activities ($p > 0.90$).

This study developed measures of the relevant constructs and provided evidence of the expected relationships. However, it only uses a correlational approach, so causal effects cannot be established. Uncovering these causal effects is particularly important to understand what really motivates consumers to perform *creating* and *contributing* activities on social media, precisely because those activities entail high or moderate levels of engagement and thus are most relevant to marketers. The following study focuses on the motivations that may differently affect consumers' propensity to engage in *creating* versus *contributing* activities. More specifically, it simultaneously tests the cause-effect relationships between the self-expression and socializing motivations, on the one hand, and *creating* and *contributing* activities, on the other.

4. Study 2: the effects of self-expression and socializing on brand-related creating and contributing activities

Study 2 focuses on the roles of self-expression and socializing as motivations for engaging in brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities. According to SDT, underlying the self-expression and

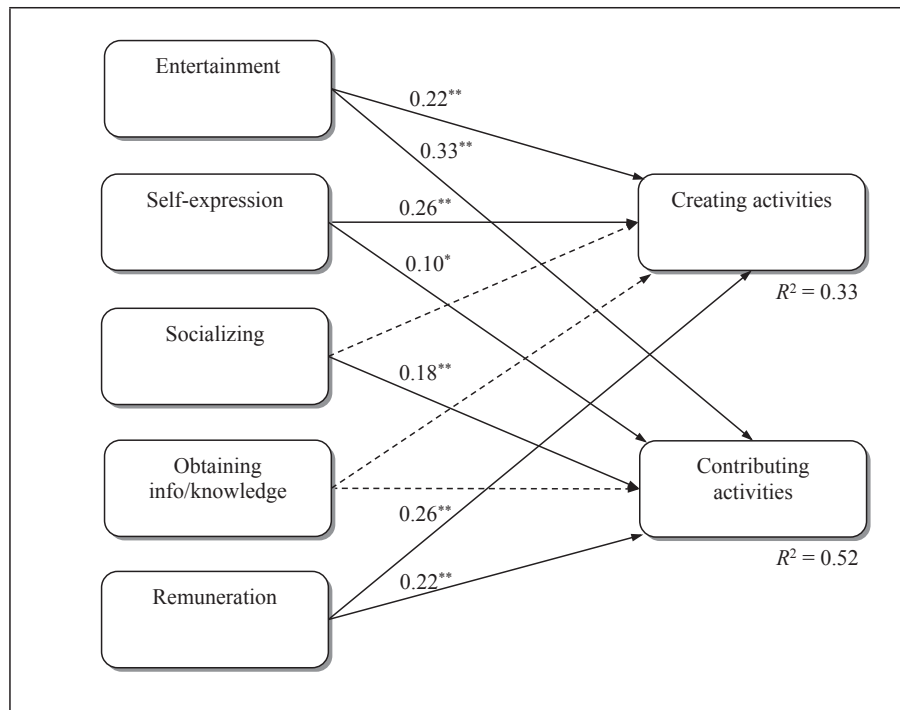


Fig. 1. Structural model with standardized path coefficients. $n = 605$. * significant at 0.05 level; ** significant at 0.01 level. Dotted arrows indicate non-significant relationships. Error terms, individual items treated as observed variables, and correlational paths are not displayed for clarity reasons. Fit statistics: $\chi^2(618) = 1539.56$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/\text{d.f.} = 2.491$; CFI = 0.958; NFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.050; SRMR = 0.050.

socializing motivations are the needs, respectively, for autonomy and for relatedness. The need for autonomy refers to individuals' desire to organize their own experiences and behaviors by themselves in a way that is consistent with their perception of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, people seek to express their own sense of freedom without interference from external sources such as rules or instructions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). On the other hand, the need for relatedness refers to individuals' desire to feel connected to others, and thus to love and care as well as to be loved and cared for (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). When the satisfaction of a particular need is thwarted or threatened, people are motivated to seek opportunities to (re)satisfy it (see Prentice, Halusic, & Sheldon, 2014; Sheldon et al., 2011; Sheldon & Gunz, 2009 for a discussion). This notion implies that the psychological need for autonomy becomes stronger when people experience a temporary threat to their sense of freedom, thus motivating individuals to satisfy this need by engaging in activities that help them express their personality. Similarly, the need for relatedness becomes stronger when people experience a temporary threat to their sense of social connection and belonging, thus motivating them to satisfy this need by engaging in activities that allow social interaction and that make them feel more connected to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Study 2 uses a model that combines the two previously outlined causal paths (i.e. the effect of the need for autonomy and the need for relatedness on consumers' engagement in either *creating* or *contributing* activities via self-expression and socializing). We aim to show that activating a need for autonomy in individuals boosts their motives to express themselves but not their motives to socialize with others – which ultimately lead them to engage in *creating* activities on social media more than in *contributing* activities. Conversely, we expect the activation of a need for relatedness to increase individuals' motives to socialize with others but not

their motives to express themselves. The augmented socialization motive, in turn, should prompt individuals to engage in *contributing* activities more than *creating* activities. Therefore, the motive of self-expression should mediate the effect of the need for autonomy on individuals' propensity to engage in *creating* activities, whereas the motive of socializing with others should mediate the effect of the need for relatedness on their propensity to engage in *contributing* activities.

4.1. Method

Ninety-one social media users (53% males, 47% females; age range: 19–29), who were recruited from a population of university students, participated in this study. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (type of need: need for autonomy versus need for relatedness versus no need) of a between-subjects experiment.

The type of need was manipulated using a false-feedback procedure (see Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005 for similar manipulations). Specifically, respondents completed a fictitious personality test on their computers and then received feedback that was seemingly based on their responses but that was in reality given at random. Respondents in the need-for-autonomy condition received a notice indicating that they have a personality that is passive and dependent on others. Specifically, they read the following feedback:

“Your responses reveal an influenceable personality, which could make you increasingly dependent upon others, insecure, and unable to express yourself later in life. Although you may have chances to fulfil your wishes, in the near future this temperament could make you less aware of your actual needs and interests. If your behavior does not improve, you might lose your autonomy and ability to make important decisions.”

Respondents in the need-for-relatedness condition received a notice indicating that they have a lonely personality and tend to be averse to building social relationships. Specifically, they read the following feedback:

“Your responses reveal a socially avoidant personality, which could create interpersonal relationship problems later in life. Although you may have friends now, in the near future this temperament could turn you away from them and other people around you. If your behavior does not improve, you might risk loneliness in the long term.”

Respondents in the no-need condition, which serves as a baseline, received a notice indicating that they have a stable personality that parallels the ‘average’ person of that age. Specifically, they read the following feedback:

“Your responses reveal a personality that tends to remain stable over time. Your temperament is balanced and presents no dominant trait. Your personality is practically in line with that of the ‘average’ individual in the population of your age.”

We pre-tested this manipulation using a separate sample of 67 social media users drawn from the same population as the respondents. After administering the manipulation, we asked the pre-test’s participants to indicate how receiving the assigned feedback made them feel.

To avoid potential demand effects coming into play, we did not measure the respondents’ sense of lacking autonomy and sense of lacking social connections directly, preferring a more indirect approach. Consistent with past research exploring individuals’ reactions to perceptions of lacking autonomy and lacking social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brehm, 1966; Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; MacDonald & Leary, 2005), we assessed more general feelings associated with these two psychological states. Specifically, to assess the extent to which the respondents felt as if they lacked autonomy we asked them to indicate to what extent they felt “frustrated”, “irritated”, “annoyed”, and “oppressed”, using a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = 0.77$). To assess the extent to which the respondents felt as if they lacked social connections we asked them to indicate to what extent they felt “dejected”, “depleted”, “isolated”, and “sad”, using a similar scale format (1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = 0.84$). A factor analysis confirmed that these two sets of items loaded on two separate factors, thus ensuring that our measures captured the different feelings of lack of autonomy and lack of social ties. Scores on each set of items were combined to form two composite measures of the feeling of lacking autonomy and the feeling of lacking social connections. Participants in the need-for-autonomy condition reported a significantly greater feeling of lacking autonomy ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.61$) than did participants in either the no-need condition ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.29$), $t(64) = 2.42$, $p = 0.02$, or the need-for-relatedness condition ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(64) = 2.32$, $p = 0.02$. The difference between the participants in the no-need condition and those in the need-for-relatedness condition was insignificant ($p > 0.50$). Conversely, pre-test participants in the need-for-relatedness condition reported a significantly greater feeling of lacking social connections ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.35$) than did participants in either the no-need condition ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(64) = 2.36$, $p = 0.02$, or the need-for-autonomy condition ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(64) = 2.02$, $p < 0.05$. The difference between participants in the no-need condition and those in the need-for-

autonomy condition was insignificant ($p > 0.50$). These results show that our false personality feedback procedure manipulated the intended needs orthogonally.

After reading the assigned feedback, the main study respondents participated in an ostensibly unrelated study on social media. The respondents first read a cover story about their university developing a social networking site for students; then, they had the opportunity to carry out some activities on this site to test its functioning. The choice of a university as the brand stimulus is based on previous literature on university branding (e.g. Chapleo, 2011). Furthermore, using the university that the respondents attend as a stimulus ensures homogeneous levels of brand familiarity and brand involvement across the participants. Next, the respondents viewed a webpage of the fictitious social networking site on their computers. The webpage was professionally designed to be as realistic as possible and was organized in two sections that were identical in size and shape but different in content. In the one section, the respondents were invited to share their personal experiences at the university by writing a short paragraph about their favorite courses. In the other section, the respondents read a message posted by a fictitious social networking site user who expresses interest in the university and asks for accurate judgments about the quality of the university. This section also displayed a fictitious cumulative rating of six different aspects of the university (i.e. the university’s accessibility, faculties, facilities and structures, student services, difficulty of exams, and job opportunities) using a five-star review system typical of online review platforms.

The participants could then engage in one of the following two activities: write a short paragraph about their past experiences at the university, thus *creating* new content; or rate the university on these six aspects, thus *contributing* to the collective evaluation of the university. After engaging in either the *creating* activity or the *contributing* activity, the respondents rated the extent to which each of the six items regarding the motivation of self-expression, and each of the five items regarding the motivation of socializing, were reasons to engage the actions they had just performed, using a seven-point scale (1 = completely false, 7 = completely true). Finally, the respondents were debriefed and thanked.

4.2. Results

The six items assessing the motivation of self-expression ($\alpha = 0.94$) were combined to form a composite index of the intensity with which the respondents experienced this motivation. The same procedure was followed for the five items assessing the motivation of socializing with others ($\alpha = 0.89$) to form a composite index of the corresponding motivation. These two variables serve as mediators in the analysis.

The type of need activated in respondents is expressed using two dichotomous variables. One dichotomous variable was coded as 1 when participants received feedback indicating that they have a passive and others-dependent personality and 0 otherwise, thus discovering whether a need for autonomy is present. The other dichotomous variable was coded as 1 when participants received feedback indicating that they have a lonely personality and 0 otherwise, thus discovering whether a need for relatedness is present. Therefore, a value of 0 on both dichotomous variables indicates that participants received feedback indicating that they have a stable personality, which serves as a baseline condition. These two dichotomous variables serve as independent variables in the analysis.

The type of activity the respondents performed was coded as 1 when they chose to perform the *creating* task (i.e. writing a short

paragraph about their favorite courses) and 0 when they chose to perform the *contributing* task (i.e. rating the university). This choice-based dichotomous measure of whether the respondents engaged in the *creating* activity or the *contributing* activity serves as a dependent variable.

We estimated a multiple mediation model that links need for autonomy (1 = present, 0 = absent) and need for relatedness (1 = present, 0 = absent) to our choice-based dependent variable (1 = *creating* activity, 0 = *contributing* activity) through the motivational mediators of self-expression and socializing. In a series of linear regression analyses, we found that need for autonomy exerts a positive direct effect on the motivation of self-expression ($b = 0.98, p = 0.006$) and an insignificant direct effect on the motivation of socializing ($b = 0.21, p > 0.50$), whereas need for relatedness has a positive direct effect on socializing ($b = 1.01, p = 0.005$) and an insignificant direct effect on self-expression ($b = -0.51, p > 0.10$). Furthermore, applying a logistic regression analysis, we found that self-expression has a positive direct effect on the dependent variable ($b = 1.64, p < 0.001$), whereas socializing has a negative direct effect on it ($b = -1.10, p = 0.001$), thus showing that self-expression and socializing motivate respondents to engage more in, respectively, the *creating* task and the *contributing* task. Finally, we found that need for autonomy positively affects the dependent variable ($b = 1.16, p = 0.03$), while need for relatedness negatively affects it ($b = -1.95, p = 0.006$). However, these effects become insignificant when self-expression and socializing are included in the model ($p > 0.05$).

To establish mediation, we estimated the indirect effects of need for autonomy and need for relatedness on the dependent variable, using the bootstrapping technique suggested by Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) and implemented through the PROCESS Macro, Model 4, developed by Hayes (2013). The results, summarized in Fig. 2, show that the indirect effect of need for autonomy on the dependent variable through the motivation of self-expression is positive and significant ($b = 1.61, 95\%$ confidence interval = 0.32, 3.88), whereas the indirect effect of need for autonomy on the dependent variable via the motivation of socializing is insignificant (zero fell in the 95% confidence interval = -1.40, 0.44). Conversely, the indirect effect of need for relatedness on the dependent variable through socializing is negative and significant ($b = -1.11, 95\%$ confidence interval = -2.46, -0.20), whereas the indirect effect of need for relatedness on the dependent variable via self-expression

is insignificant (zero fell in the 95% confidence interval = -2.48, 0.62).

Overall, Study 2 showed that the respondents' participation in *creating* or *contributing* activities online depends on their experienced need for autonomy or relatedness. Thus, the obtained results further support the proposed notion that consumers with either a need for autonomy or a need for relatedness experience a stronger motivation to either express themselves or socialize, and these two motivational forces, in turn, cause them to engage in either *creating* or *contributing* activities on social media.

5. Discussion

We identified motivations based on SDT (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) that affect consumer engagement in different brand-related activities on social media. These brand-related activities can be highly engaging (*creating*) or moderately engaging (*contributing*). These two types of activity matter most to companies owing to their potential marketing implications, as recognized in the literature (e.g. Onishi & Manchanda, 2012; Rishika et al., 2013; Trusov et al., 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). In Study 1, we first identified and measured motivations that might prompt consumers to engage in brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities on social media. Then, we estimated the relationships between motivations and activities using a correlational approach. The results revealed that, in addition to common motivations such as entertainment (the fully intrinsic motivation) and remuneration (the fully extrinsic motivation), certain motivations differently affect these two crucial types of brand-related activity on social media. In particular, self-expression is more related to *creating* activities, whereas socializing is more related to *contributing* activities.

In Study 2, we focused on such two particular motivations for engaging in brand-related *creating* and *contributing* activities, respectively. We exposed respondents to an experimental manipulation based on a false personality feedback to activate either a psychological need for autonomy or a need for relatedness, which thus increased their motivations of self-expression and socializing. These motivations in turn uniquely prompted respondents to either create or contribute to content about a university brand on an ad-hoc social network.

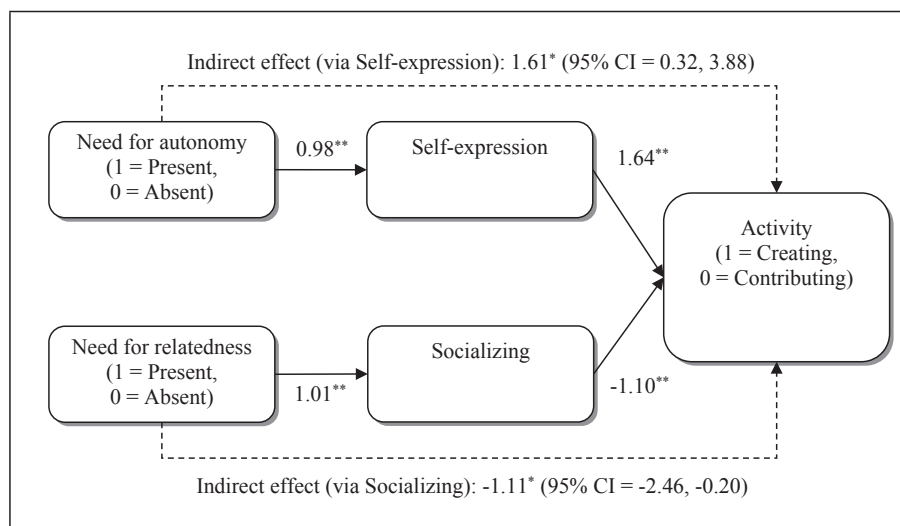


Fig. 2. Results of the multiple mediation model. $n = 91$. * significant at 0.05 level; ** significant at 0.01 level. Dotted arrows indicate indirect effects.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our research is the first to assess the intensity with which social media users engage in different brand-related activities (i.e. *creating* and *contributing* activities) as well as five underlying motivations (i.e. self-expression, socializing, obtaining information/knowledge, entertainment, and remuneration). Our work builds upon SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and offers a parsimonious explanation as to why social media users carry out brand-related activities that require different levels of engagement. In addition to the fully intrinsic motivation of entertainment and the fully extrinsic motivation of remuneration, which drive both brand-related activities on social media, we argue that specific motivations (i.e. self-expression and socializing) are the most important drivers that could lead to either one or the other type of brand-related activity on social media (i.e. *creating* and *contributing*, respectively). Our experimental results attest to the crucial role of the need for autonomy in driving *creating* activities, through the motivation of self-expression, and the crucial role of the need for relatedness in driving *contributing* activities, through the motivation of socializing.

5.2. Marketing implications

Engaging consumers in *creating* or *contributing* activities is a good way for companies to craft and distribute viral content about brands with positive consequences in terms of positive WOM, brand popularity, sales, and profitability. Our results provide companies with guidelines for stimulating consumers to engage in these activities. Companies could leverage their communication strategies to activate in consumers the basic needs for autonomy and relatedness, which may encourage them to engage more in, respectively, *creating* and *contributing* activities. To specifically motivate people to create brand-related content, firms could develop communication strategies that emphasize the self and the importance of making self-expressing choices, which could increase users' desire for autonomy. For example, firms could provide users with the opportunity to express themselves by hosting branding contests in which users can create and submit original content related to the packaging, the external design or features of new products, similar to co-creation activities (e.g. Bayus, 2013). To motivate people to engage in brand-related *contributing* activities, communication strategies could emphasize the importance of on-line friendships and network size, which should increase users' desire for relatedness. As a specific example, firms could explicitly mention in their communication, "Share our ad or this post with your friends."

Finally, our research provides guidelines for managers of social media platforms on how to design such platforms. It is crucial that social media platforms are designed in such a way that consumers can easily engage in *creating* or *contributing* activities. To facilitate brand-related *creating* activities, platforms could be designed so that consumers can readily upload photos and write comments about products and brands. To facilitate brand-related *contributing* activities, platforms should be designed so that consumers can easily rate products and brands and chat with others on brand-related topics.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Our research has limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, our data addressed the motivations and activities on social media in general (Study 1) and on a realistic social networking site (Study 2). We did not make any distinction between different types of social media, such as between general and

specialized social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn) or between media sharing and microblogging sites (e.g. YouTube and Twitter). Future research could investigate the potential moderating role of this variable to verify whether our results vary across different types of social media. That different networks lead to different effects has recently been shown (Babić Rosario, Sotgiu, De Valck, & Bijmolt, 2016).

Second, in Study 2 we used a university as a brand to ensure homogeneous levels of brand familiarity and brand involvement among respondents. "University" can be seen as a special case of brand and our results cannot be easily generalized to other types of brands (e.g. luxury products, fast moving consumer goods, cars, etc.). However, we think that the use of the university does not undermine the validity of Study 2. Rather, Study 2 suggested that the main finding of Study 1 on the differential role of self-expression and socializing in driving *creating* and *contributing* activities regarding general brands also holds for certain special brands such as the examined university (e.g. Chapleo, 2011; Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012). Moreover, one might argue our choice to use samples of university students could undermine the generalizability of our results. We think this is not a serious problem for two reasons: first, university students have often been used in consumer research as surrogate for non-student samples (e.g. Yoo & Donthu, 2001); second, university students are typically considered appropriate participants in social media research studies because they represent the majority of social media users (e.g. Erkan & Evans, 2016). Future research, however, could examine other segments of social media users.

Third, the motivations we analyzed in this research to explain certain brand-related activities seem quite general and, as such, could also apply in investigations regarding brand-unrelated activities. Therefore, future studies could explore whether our models are generalizable to other situations that are unrelated to brands and companies.

Finally, we did not consider the potential role of individual differences. Our studies specifically collected data in one European country from samples of young adult social media users. Future studies could consider samples of users of different nationalities (e.g. U.S., China) as well as belonging to different age ranges (e.g. adolescents and older adults). Future studies could also examine other individual differences such as personality traits. Indeed, personality traits might moderate the relationships between motives and brand-related activities on social media (e.g. Sheldon & Gunz, 2009).

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