

Brand Endorsement on Instagram: How do expertise and similarity affect endorsed and alternative brands via searching behavior?

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on brand endorsement on Instagram, examining the influence of the perceived expertise and similarity of a poster on searching behavior and purchase intention regarding a posted brand and a similar brand using survey data from a sample of Japanese Instagram social networking site (SNS) users. The research also tests the mediating effect of perceived expertise and similarity on a posted or similar brand through searching behavior as an indirect effect. It concludes with contributions toward the study of SNS and the direction of future research.

Keywords: Brand endorsement, Instagram, Spill-over effect

INTRODUCTION

A massive number of brand endorsements currently appear on social networking sites (SNSs). Whether on a brand site or a private blog, a large number of posters evaluate and recommend brands as a kind of endorsement. Following the sites where an endorser appears allows a huge number of consumers to participate in the brand endorsement process, which includes viewing, uploading, and sharing posts regarding the brand, potentially leading to a favorable attitude regarding the endorsed brand and making a purchase. In particular, Instagram, a popular SNS platform, which has distinctive characteristics and features, such as photo and

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video sharing, seems to correspond with endorsement success. Thus, brand endorsement on SNSs is crucial to successful SNS marketing.

Unlike brand endorsement in traditional advertising, wherein a celebrity endorses a brand, on SNSs, the endorsers appear to cover a broad range, from celebrities to experts and not famous, ordinary people. Experts and ordinary people as endorsers have grown with the emergence of personal blogs that review and recommend brands. More interestingly, in most cases, they seem to be more influential in endorsing brands than celebrities who frequently endorse brands in traditional advertising (Kerr et al., 2005; Ohanian, 1991).

In addition to the diversification of the endorsers on SNS platforms, such platforms have another distinctive feature regarding the ease of searching. For instance, when using hashtags, consumers can easily search for information about brands. Hashtag searches provide detailed information and real user experiences regarding the brand. More importantly, such searching enhances the likelihood of purchasing not only the endorsed brand but also similar alternative brands. The powerful search function allows followers to reach sites where similar and look-alike products appear. They are motivated to consider alternative brands easily via searching.

Studies of endorsements in traditional media investigate the effect of the specialized knowledge of experts and endorsers' attractiveness and trustworthiness. Recent studies have focused on celebrity endorsement appeal based on attractiveness (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016; Escalas and Bettman, 2017). SNSs encourage consumers to interact with celebrities, changing the previously one-sided relationship between celebrities and consumers in traditional media (Chung and Cho, 2017). Moreover, unlike in advertisements, many celebrities use social media as a means of personal communication without promotional intention (Chung and Cho, 2017). Additionally, many influential experts and average-looking endorsers post on SNSs. SNSs can allow users with shared interests to interact. Without offline relationships, users follow those with specialized knowledge to get useful information. Practitioners in digital marketing pay attention to specialized experts who are followed by small numbers of enthusiastic consumers as micro-influencers.

Ordinary people appear in advertising as influential endorsers (Kerr et al., 2005). Moreover, SNSs can turn ordinary people into influential endorsers for their followers. This effect seems to be led by common characteristics between the endorser and recipient. Therefore, this study endeavors to shed light on new aspects of endorsement on Instagram.

This study contributes to an understanding of the social influence on SNS. First, this study focuses on both experts and ordinary people to understand brand endorsement on SNSs. Past studies focused on celebrity and expert endorsement (Escalas and Bettman, 2017; Hung, Chan, and Tse, 2011; Ohanian, 1990). SNSs encourage users to more easily interact with experts than traditional media, which has a great influence on followers. Nevertheless, studies overlook the effect of ordinary people, who are assumed to be posters with perceived similarity to recipients, as shown by the findings of several studies of electronic word of mouth (Brown, Broderick, and Lee, 2007; Prendergast, Ko, and Yuen, 2010; Chu and Kim, 2011). Ordinary people become influential because of their commonality and similarity with their followers. Similarity allows consumers to infer congruence with consumption preferences and lifestyle, resulting in confidence that a product is worth buying. However, little is known about the effect of ordinary endorsers on brands. To fill the gap, this study explores the influence of both perceived expertise and perceived similarity with endorsers on consumer behavior.

Second, this study attempts to understand the effect of endorsement on similar alternative brands in addition to endorsed brands. A recommendation system in e-commerce proposes both searched and alternative brands for comparison (Jeong and Lee, 2013). As with SNSs, consumers are likely to search for similar and alternative brands via searching behavior, such as hashtags, and finally making purchases as a spill-over effect. Thus, this study focuses on similar alternative brands to measure the effect of endorsement.

Finally, this research incorporates searching behavior into the relationship between endorsement and resulting purchase intention. A consumer can search many kinds of information, ranging from a brand account on an SNS platform, online shopping site to read reviews before making a purchase, illustrated by the customer journey. Searching behavior is likely to determine which brand is chosen.

In sum, this study tests the influence of searching behavior on purchase intention for an endorsed and alternative brand, the mediating relationship between perceived expertise and similarity, and purchase intention via searching behavior, advancing the understanding of the hidden spill-over effect of social media and contributing to the knowledge on the underlying processes of endorsement on SNSs.

BRAND ENDORSEMENT ON INSTAGRAM

Unlike text-based media, such as blogs and Twitter, the visual platform, Instagram, which allows users to interact with others via photo and video sharing has grown rapidly (Smith and Sanderson, 2015). Instagram attracts users with visual material, encouraging them to enjoy photogenic scenes, which enhances attempts at self-presentation. Moreover, easy following without mutual agreement contributes to the frequent wide use and distribution of information similar to Twitter. Moreover, placing hashtags on posts makes them searchable for other users to easily follow. The characteristics of the platform affect how users present their ideal selves as well as their personal endorsement of the brand. Thus, easy connection and searching behavior on Instagram has facilitated a surge of brand endorsements. Not only celebrities but also experts and ordinary people tend to upload posts with recommendations.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Since the emergence of advertising, advertisers and marketing practitioners have invested in advertising and developed media strategies targeting specific consumers. Simultaneously, they adopted endorsers who recommend and guarantee brands in advertisements, as illustrated by celebrity endorsements (McCracken, 1989). They aim to build higher prestige and social status, which leads to consumers' favorable attitudes toward brands.

Many studies examine whether endorsements are successful in promoting the effectiveness of advertising in terms of various theories (Mittelstaedt, Rizez, and Burns, 2000). Several studies have examined the effect of celebrity endorsement, drawing on source credibility and attractiveness (Hung, Chan, and Tse, 2011; Hung, 2014; Ohanian, 1990). The related studies posit that the source of communicators affects messages' persuasiveness (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Subsequent studies demonstrated trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness as major dimensions of source credibility (Biswas, Biswas, and Das, 2006; Hung, Chan, and Tse, 2011; Mittelstaedt, Rizez, and Burns, 2000; Ohanian, 1990).

Attractiveness refers to the physical attractiveness of characters in advertising. Many advertisements adopt actors and fashion models who are physically attractive. Moreover, recent studies examine the effects of celebrities who are expected to have physical attractiveness (Hung, Chan, and Tse, 2011; Ohanian, 1990).

Expertise refers to endorsers being knowledgeable about products and the

benefits acquired from them. Experts that appear in advertising persuade consumers with specialized knowledge. Professions such as doctors, lawyers, and athletes are likely to perform these roles. In particular, when a consumer lacks knowledge regarding a product or service, they are likely to rely on expert's suggestions and advice.

Trustworthiness refers to consumers' confidence in a source's recommendation and advice (Ohanian, 1991). When consumers perceive an endorser as objective and honest, they are likely to trust information from them.

Ohanian (1991) demonstrates that expertise has a significant impact on purchase intention, whereas trustworthiness and attractiveness do not appear to. This suggests that adopting experts is an important influencing factor regarding a purchase compared with trustworthiness and attractiveness. As for celebrities' effect, Ohanian (1991) argues that the frequent appearance of celebrities in advertising likely prevents a significant result for celebrities' attractiveness. If celebrities have specialized knowledge for a particular product, they also seem to be influential as expert endorsers.

In contrast, some studies have demonstrated that ordinary people can be effective endorsers. Kerr et al. (2005) found advertisements adopting unknown citizen endorsers to result in more positive consumer attitudes than celebrities, resulting from the excessive exposure of celebrities. When ordinary people endorse the brand, the similarity between the endorser and the recipient is a crucial factor of a successful endorsement. On SNSs, people post information regarding the brand and recommend it. They can persuade followers due to shared characteristics with the recipients of the messages. Homophily complements a lack of understanding based on imagined usage with ease. Particularly in electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM), which lacks contextual information compared with offline communication, similarity determines trustworthiness (Naylor, Lamberton, and West, 2012). In terms of source reliability, the more consumers perceive similarity to themselves, the more likely they are to believe the posts (Brown, Broderick, and Lee, 2007; Prendergast, Ko, and Yuen, 2010; Chu and Kim, 2011). The similarity in profile causes recipients to infer commonality with posters, which leads to a favorable attitude toward posters (Naylor, Lamberton, and West, 2012).

Posts on SNSs are conducive to searching behavior prior to making a purchase. Particularly, a hashtag allows users to efficiently and effectively search the brand. When they enter the brand name as well as words regarding product categories, benefits, and use with hashtags, it can reach both posted and similar brands.

Consumers then obtain information regarding the endorsed posted brand and similar brands, which leads to examining various brands as a consideration step prior to purchase. In other words, the effect of endorsement on SNSs seems to spill over similar to that of advertising (Nedungadi, 1990). In this context, when consumers search for a brand based on interest in a post, they also search for similar and competitive brands on SNSs.

Regarding expertise and similarity, these propensities encourage searching behavior. Strong endorsement via perceived expertise causes followers to examine the posted brand; however, the post leads them to search for various brands, including endorsed brands. Perceived similarity promotes searching behavior to obtain knowledge regarding endorsed and similar brands.

H1 The expertise of a poster is positively related to searching behavior.

H2 Similarity with a poster is positively related to searching behavior.

Several studies have demonstrated the influence of perceived expertise and similarity on purchase intention (Ohanian, 1990; Chu and Kim, 2011). Nonetheless, the internet leads consumers to consider similar brands on SNSs than offline media. Given this characteristic, a different outcome is expected. Experts are expected to be considered more trustworthy. Thus, perceived expertise is likely to elicit purchase intention for the endorsed brand. However, it is unlikely for the effect to spill over to an alternative brand.

In contrast, perceived similarity is not necessary to result in making a purchase for the posted brand. With perceived similarity to posters, it is easy to infer commonality for product use and the poster's needs. Moreover, it is unlikely that followers perceive the strong trustworthiness of posters that enhances brand attachment. Therefore, it is expected that they fulfill their needs with similar brands when they evaluate the brand comparable. Particularly when posted brands have a price premium, similar brands are likely to be chosen.

H3 Perceived expertise of a poster is positively related to purchase intention for posted brands.

H4 Perceived similarity of a poster is positively related to purchase intention for similar brands.

As predicted by the spill-over effect, the internet allows consumers to easily search and compare posted brands and similar brands during the consideration

step; therefore, searching behavior is likely to cause purchase intention on both posted and similar brands. In other words, searching behavior can prevent purchases resulting from endorsement.

H5 Searching behavior is positively related to purchase intention for a posted brand (H5a) and other similar brands (H5b).

Therefore, drawing on these hypotheses, a mediating relationship is expected.

H6 The positive impact of perceived similarity with a poster on purchase intention for posted (H6a) and similar brands (H6b) is mediated by searching behavior.

H7 The positive impact of perceived expertise with a poster on purchase intention for posted (H7a) and similar brands (H7b) is mediated by searching behavior.

METHOD

This study conducts an online survey in Japan. At first, potential participants who use Instagram were asked to participate in this survey. Respondents were selected by stratification of age (20s, 30s, 40s, 50s) and gender from those who agreed to participate in answering the survey investigation. The total sample is 824 respondents. Participants were asked about the posters they followed, the posts viewed, searching behavior, and purchase intention. In addition, demographic data were gathered from all participants.

This study adopted adjusted measurements of perceived similarity (Chu and Kim, 2011), perceived expertise (Ohanian, 1990), and purchase intention (Hausman and Siekpe, 2009). Measurements of searching behavior were original items developed from group interviews. All measurements were assessed using a five-point Likert scale.

Table 1 Concepts and Measurement Items

Construct	Measurement	SE	N
Expertise The poster is-	experienced with this product	0.81	3
	an expert with this product	0.77	
	knowledgeable about this product	0.86	
Similarity The poster is-	thinks like me	0.80	3
	like me	0.78	
	behaves like me	0.71	
Searching behavior	searching for the usage of similar products	0.81	8
	searching the brand image of similar products	0.80	
	referring to the price and shop of posted products	0.73	
	searching for the brand image of posted products	0.76	
	searching for similar products in terms of styling	0.80	
	searching for the usage of posted products	0.80	
	searching for similar products in terms of function	0.79	
	searching for the function of posted products	0.72	
Purchase intention (posted brand)	I will definitely buy in the near future	0.86	3
	I intend to purchase in the near future	0.93	
	It is likely that I will purchase in the near future	0.83	
Purchase intention (lookalike brand)	I will definitely buy in the near future	0.89	3
	I intend to purchase in the near future	0.94	
	It is likely that I will purchase in the near future	0.86	

RESULT

A confirmatory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method was conducted. The results of a confirmatory factor analysis yielded a satisfactory result (Chi-square = 884.968, $df = 160$, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07). Each of the loading items was found to be more than 0.60. Convergent validity was assessed using composite scale reliabilities and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The composite scale reliabilities ranged from 0.81 to 0.92, exceeding the cutoff value of 0.70. The AVE of each construct was required to be greater than 0.50. The AVEs satisfied this criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). To examine discriminant validity, we compared the square root of the AVE with the correlation between the two latent constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The square root of the AVE should exceed this correlation; this criterion was satisfied.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix and Validity Tests

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	AVE	CR	M	SD
Expertise (a)	0.81					0.66	0.85	3.36	0.91
Similarity (b)	0.55	0.77				0.59	0.81	3.09	0.78
Searching behavior (c)	0.43	0.54	0.78			0.61	0.92	3.15	0.84
Purchase intention (posted brand) (d)	0.40	0.40	0.57	0.87		0.77	0.91	3.36	0.89
Purchase intention (similar brand) (e)	0.26	0.36	0.50	0.65	0.89	0.80	0.92	3.03	0.85

Note: Diagonal elements are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct. All estimates are significant; $p < 0.01$

The proposed model in SEM yields a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2(162) = 1249.790$, $p < 0.01$, IFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, CFI = 0.90, RMSEA=0.09).

Perceived expertise and similarity are positively and significantly related with searching behavior, supporting H1 and H2. Perceived expertise is positively and significantly related with purchase intention for the posted brand, whereas perceived similarity is positively and significantly related with purchase intention for similar brands, supporting H3 and H4. With no regard to the hypotheses, this study did not find significant relationships between similarity and purchase intention for the posted brand, and expertise and purchase intention for similar brands. Searching behavior is positively and significantly related to purchase intention for posted brands and similar brands, supporting H5. As for H6 and H7, this study conducted mediation analysis (Bootstrap resampling = 1,000). The indirect effects of similarity on purchase intention for the posted brand and similar brands through searching behavior are significant because the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval excludes 0 (Posted brand; Upper = 0.27 Lower = 0.15 Similar brands; Upper = 0.25 Lower = 0.14). Given that the effect of similarity on purchase intention for the posted brand (no hypothesis) is insignificant, and the direct effect of similarity to purchase intention for similar brands is positively significant, the mediated relationship of the former is full and the latter is complementary (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen, 2010). The indirect effects of expertise on purchase intention for posted brand and similar brands through searching behavior are significant (Posted brand; Upper = 0.19 Lower = 0.08; Similar brands; Upper = 0.18 Lower = 0.07). Given that the direct effect of expertise on purchase intention for the posted brand is positively significant, and the effect of expertise on purchase intention for similar brands (no hypothesis) is insignificant, the mediating relationship of the former is complementary, and the latter is full; therefore, H6 and H7 are supported.

Table 3 Hypotheses Test

Proposed Hypotheses	β
Expertise \rightarrow Searching behavior	0.27**
Similarity \rightarrow Searching behavior	0.43**
Expertise \rightarrow Purchase intention for posted brand	0.17**
Similarity \rightarrow Purchase intention for other similar brand	0.10**
Expertise \rightarrow Purchase intention for other similar brand (No hypothesis)	N.S.
Similarity \rightarrow Purchase intention for posted brand (No hypothesis)	N.S.
Searching behavior \rightarrow Purchase intention for posted brand	0.47**
Searching behavior \rightarrow Purchase intention for other similar brand	0.44**

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

DISCUSSION

The results contribute to the study of SNSs in several ways. This study aims to incorporate searching behavior in terms of consumers' perception of posters and purchase intention for posted and similar brands. The results directly demonstrate the positive influence of perceived expertise of posters on posted brands. Expertise can enhance brand endorsement. When experts recommend posted brands, consumers are likely to buy posted brands without searching behavior. Trust in an expert is crucial for successful brand endorsement.

Second, this study directly demonstrates the positive influence of the similarity with a poster on similar brands. More importantly, rather than the posted brand, perceived similarity enhances purchase intention for similar brands. The perceived similarity of posters can evoke interest; however, it does not appear to enhance posted brand purchase intention. This seems to be because perceived similarity has a resonance for the posts in terms of product use and benefits, and they are likely to switch to buying a similar product suitable to other requirements, such as price and brand likeness.

Finally, both antecedent constructs influence searching behavior followed by purchase intention for both posted and similar brands. The two different kinds of brand endorsement are successful for evoking interest and involvement; however, similar to the spill-over effect, searching behavior opens up the possibility of examining similar and alternative brands, resulting in a purchase. This is consistent with Edelman's (2010) suggestion that consumers examine and compare other brands after interests have been evoked and stimulated as the perspective of the customer decision journey suggests.

This study has some limitations. The research conducted a questionnaire survey and collected data based on self-reported answers. Self-reported data can cause some biases, such as overestimating scores. Actual behavioral data regarding searching and purchase behavior would be fruitful for this kind of research. Moreover, although the questionnaire survey was conducted in this study to take advantage of external validity, internal validity remains in question. A better way to enhance internal validity could be through manipulating expertise and similarity as independent variables and searching and purchase intention for posted and similar brands as dependent variables.

Future research could add parasocial relationship constructs to expertise and similarity. Such parasocial relationships have been researched in celebrity endorsement. Hung, Chan, and Tse (2011) demonstrate that a bonding relationship is driven by personal attachment and the derivation of entertainment and fun from the celebrity, which facilitates the endorsement. Chung and Cho (2017) assert that social media boosts the effects of parasocial relationships because of the personal aspects of interactive communication. Parasocial relationships in addition to expertise and similarity seem to be a crucial factor of endorsements on SNSs, and the influence on consumer purchase should be compared.

Moreover, future research could extend this framework to other SNS platforms. This study focused on Instagram as a visual platform. Unlike Instagram, Facebook and Twitter have different features. Twitter is a text-based platform for users to follow as they like without mutual agreement, whereas Facebook is a closed social circle-developing platform that requires mutual agreement to connect. Presumably, different outcomes are to be expected. Future studies should examine the influences of the platforms on the relationship between the antecedents of expertise and similarity and their effectiveness as moderators.

Finally, future research should develop a theoretical framework of online purchase decision-making. Yadav et al. (2013) extended the framework of purchase decisions to social commerce; however, this result demonstrated a unique effect of social media on searching behavior and purchasing similar brands as a spill-over effect. To clarify the spill-over effect, the relationship between product category and brand should be investigated. Putting related information into categories using hashtags is also likely to facilitate more brand consideration.

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