



Social Media Era Consumers' Identity Formation:
A Symbolic Interactionist Approach to Consumer-Brand Identity Co-Creation

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Social media has been widely explored as a space for users to construct and develop their identities online through tools such as photo sharing and micro-blogging (Greenhow & Robilia, 2009; Te'Neil Lloyd, 2002). Similarly, brands have also adopted social media platforms not only as a critical avenue to reach consumers (Yan, 2011), but also as a way to develop and express their brand identities (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Carr & Hayes, 2017). Indeed, the incursion of branded social media has reshaped the trajectory of consumers' online self-presentation, reportedly transforming their behaviors (Carr & Hayes, 2017), and assisting in the development of their identities online (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). Despite preliminary development in academic discussion, limited research revolves around the intersection of consumers' and brands' identity co-creation in social media environments. In this conceptual research, we focus on the virtual space of social media to propose a theoretical understanding of the consumer-brand identity co-creation process. In doing such, we contribute and clarify these preliminary discussions involving the consumer-brand identity co-creation construct by adopting and applying a symbolic interactionist perspective to social media branding and identity.

Symbolic Interactionism is a theoretical approach which generally contends that individuals interact with one another to create symbolic worlds of meaning used to reinforce their self-identity within society. Social processes conducted through digital means of social media have been previously studied, utilizing the symbolic interactionist perspective (Jones, 2015; Murthy, 2012; Zhao, 2015); however, theoretical applications of Symbolic Interactionism are currently lacking in branding contexts despite the continued proliferation brands' utilization of social media, an environment largely created for interpersonal communication among users.

Marketers are no longer the main producer of a brand's identity, and the realm of social media has potentially opened the construction of brand identity to the voice of any potential consumer (Gunelius, 2010). In this regard, dissecting the complexities of identity co-creation in social media environments is imperative for brands in order to gain clarification on the bits of uncontrolled information which contribute to their brand meaning (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Carr & Hayes, 2017). In implicating such, our framework entails two main parts: (a) mere social media users converting to consumers through the integration of branded symbols to construct their identities and (b) the inadvertent impacts of this process on constructing brands' identities. Through these two processes, consumers and brands alike co-construct identity.

Postmodern scholars have theorized that consumption plays a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of consumers' self-identities (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). In fact, cultural meanings

transferred to brands have been theorized to formulate the basis of symbolic resources utilized by consumers in ‘self’ formation (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). The ‘self’ can be thought of as the unique symbolic associations that individuals construct to ascertain their identities (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). By using social media tools like photo sharing in order to publish content to convey the ‘self,’ consumers can construct their identities online by using branded symbols. We conjecture that branded symbols can be thought of as any brand related content that can be interpreted by consumers to convey brand associations, and thus, a brand’s identity (Aaker, 1996). Examples of such include visual brand representations (e.g., logos), physical brand elements (e.g., products), purely cognitive brand content (e.g., brand personality) (Aaker, 1996), or online brand configurations (e.g., branded social media profiles and advertisements).

In a seminal symbolic interactionist work on identity formation, Cooley (1902) details the ‘looking glass self.’ This concept proposes that an individual’s identity is developed in part by (a) how the individual perceives themselves and (b) how the individual thinks they are being perceived by others (Cooley, 1902). The era of social media has ushered in an amplified ‘looking glass self’ for the everyday social media user (Jones, 2015). That is, without actually being physically present, users can rectify both aspects of Cooley’s (1902) concept through a telecopresent process (Zhao, 2003) of interaction with others virtually to showcase their identities and receive feedback on their self-presentations (Jones, 2015; Zhao, 2015). We conjecture that through a mediated social media ‘looking glass’ (Jones, 2015), consumers utilize branded symbolic material to construct and exercise the ‘self’ in order to purposefully entice reactions from others regarding their identities.

Mere social media users convert to consumers via the integration of branded material in their presentation of the ‘self’ online. Examples of consumers employing a ‘looking glass self’ while using branded symbols are vast and vary in complexity. One example may be users sharing social media posts of themselves showcasing a brand’s product and ‘tagging’ and/or discussing the brand in the image caption. Another example may be users interacting with branded social media content (e.g., ‘liking’ a brand’s post) with the assumption and even anticipation that the interactions will appear in their followers’ social media feeds. Both examples explicate users integrating branded symbols into their social media presence to construct and portray their identities to others online. The integration of branded symbols, mediated by social media, enables the user to employ a ‘looking glass’ lens by (a) directly showing how the user perceives themselves through the utilization of branded symbols and (b) displaying these ‘self’ acquired brand symbols to other users for an accessible interpretation of who they are (e.g., garnering quantifiable ‘likes’ or ‘views’ on a post).

Research suggests that the composition of a brand’s identity is moving away from static conceptions created and managed by brands themselves, and more towards fluid, dynamic social processes driven by a synergy of brand managers, consumers, and other stakeholders (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). By integrating branded symbols into personal social media content, consumers not only manage their own identity, they also participate in constructing the brand’s identity—the symbolic associations used to explicate brands to consumers (Aaker, 1996). Branded symbols pushed by consumers in their social media presence are internalized by other users, subjecting

brand identity as a fluctuating symbolic concept mediated by these processes (Merz et al., 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

To our knowledge, this is the first theorizing of its kind to apply a symbolic interactionist approach in understanding how social media user generated content, utilized to express self-identity, mediates brand identity in a co-creation process. This contribution bridges the gap between social-psychological theory and the expansion of social media branding, contributing to the growing breadth of research regarding the brand identity co-creation construct. A novel conceptualization of this phenomenon is offered for future investigation, as the conjectured framework can be tested by further means to arrive at empirical conclusions among the constructs (i.e., branded symbols, consumer identity, brand identity, consumer-brand identity co-creation) for practical branding insights (e.g., examining which types of branded symbols adapted by consumers leads to optimal identity co-creation).

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