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I BUY YOUR PRODUCT WHEN I FEEL I KNOW YOU: USING BLOG DISCLOSURE TO INFLUENCE CONSUMERS

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Abstract:

Whilst confidence in certain companies has fallen as a result of the feeling amongst consumers that their private life has been violated, it would seem that at the same time, consumers are very eager to know more about the private life of the bloggers they follow. In return, bloggers are revealing more and more about themselves and displaying their private lives on their blogs. We show that the role of disclosure is a key determinant in consumer persuasion and that the exposure by bloggers of their private lives has a positive influence on their visitors. A quantitative study made of fashion and beauty blog enabled us to assess the impact of such disclosure on confidence in the blog, attitude towards the blog and the brand, and on the various routes to persuasion observed. The managerial implications of this research are presented in conclusion to help managers choose relevant blogs.

Keywords: blog, private life, perceived disclosure of private life, confidence, routes to persuasion

Introduction

The phenomenon of blogs, and in particular, those concerned with fashion and beauty, has developed dramatically and the power of these blogs has been taken on board by companies: recruitment of certain bloggers by publishing and press companies, the development of advertising, the recourse to sponsored articles and the sending of free products to influential bloggers, etc. As a result, blogs are now entering into serious competition for audiences, competition that is reinforced by the appearance of measurement and classification tools such as *Ebuzzing*.¹ In this ceaseless

race for visibility, bloggers have turned the disclosure of their private lives into a deliberate strategy for attracting and winning the loyalty of readers. This research contributes to understanding how the capacity of blogs for commercial persuasion is fuelled, with the private life of the blogger serving as an element of personalization and confidence. In 2009, Shankar and Batra emphasized the growing influence of online communications and this is particularly true of blogs, which are increasingly influencing sales (Dhar and Chang, 2009). The private life variable is very influential where online media is concerned (Peltier, Milne and Phelps, 2009), hence the development by bloggers of strategies that attract and persuade their visitors by intentionally revealing elements of their private life.

Although the literature has dealt

¹ Ebuzzing is a monitoring and audience measurement platform for blogs but also an advertising agency specializing in social media.

with the reasons why bloggers are led to reveal their private lives, very little research has been done to measure the impact of such disclosure on consumers. In the first section, we present the literature relating to private life and Internet. We have centered this presentation on the particular case of the voluntary disclosure of private life with the aim of persuasion. In the second section, we establish a model of the influence of disclosure of the blogger's private life on confidence and persuasion. This model, presented in the third section, was tested on a sample made up of 300 consumers. It culminates in an analysis of the routes to persuasion taken by the bloggers and of the influence of the disclosure of the writer's private life on attitudes towards the blog and intentions to buy the featured product. In conclusion, the managerial implications are commented on and analyzed.

Contextual and Theoretical Background

The disclosure of private life on Internet: from search for gratification to inclination to disclosure

Two strands of research deal with the implications of self-disclosure online. The first endeavors to define the potential threats to the personal safety of the Internet user as a result of revealing private information online (Andrade and al. (2002); Phelps and al. 2001) and the influence of such threats on the behavior of the Internet user (Dinev and Hart 2005, Lee and al., 2008).

The second strand is centered on the use that brands can make of this type of information, that is to say, the personalization of messages (Blattberg and Deighton, 1991), the influence on survey methodologies (Tourangeau and Ting, 2007) and consumers' resistance to intrusive communications (White, 2004). These research strands draw on Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz,

Blumer and Gurevitch, 1974) to explain the motivations that lead individuals to self-disclosure on Internet. The disclosure of private life represents a form of exchange between that which is received and that which is given. Nonetheless, this theory only explains a small part of the motivations for self-disclosure on the Net. A paradox exists based on the following observations: individuals agree to self-disclosure with no firm assurance of real gratification. Therefore, disclosures of private life are a situational variable that cannot be explained wholly by the desire to receive gratifications. Acquisti, John and Loewenstein (2012) show that receiving private information from one's Internet contacts increases one's personal inclination for disclosure. This reciprocal disclosure is related to social imitation (Moon, 2000), since individuals are influenced by the behaviors of the Internet user with whom they are in contact. These observations do not call into question Uses and Gratifications Theory, but they extend the sphere of application of gratifications, which may be monetary but also social. Lastly, the idea of inclination to disclosure must be understood in the light of the various presences on Internet. Balague and de Valck (2013) studied the effect of questioning. Although the idea of reciprocal disclosure is very important on social networking sites such as Facebook, it is much less so on blogs, which are a social media within which the transmitter (blogger) is the main actor.

Motivations for revealing one's private life: the specific case of bloggers

Blogs are characterized by a considerable degree of disclosure of private life (Viegas, 2005). Suler (2004) explains this by the relative anonymity and asynchronicity of the information given. A certain number of research papers have shown that the

phenomenon of blogs and personal sites is developing all the more rapidly since such sites "represent a recreational space for post-modern personalities and allow individuals to create and develop their identities" (Marcus and al. 2006). These characteristics are in line with research on private life and Internet. Bloggers are seeking to generate authenticity as well as placing themselves in a setting that will be attractive to their visitors (Kretz, 2010). Amongst the individual variables, gender seems to be an essential element in explaining this. Women are more inclined to online revelations. A study carried out on female British bloggers (Pederson and Macaffee, 2007) shows that they are more interested in the social aspect of blogging. Moreover, the content of blogs plays a vital aspect in disclosure. Blogs centered on the presentation of general, rather than personal content are far less likely to reveal the private life of their authors. However, the latter only represent half of all bloggers, with the other half made up of bloggers who write for themselves as though in a private diary and without really taking their readers into account (Lenhart and Fox, 2006).

Motivations for blogging and influence on the disclosure of private life:

The motivations for blogging have a relatively weak influence on the voluntary revelation of a blogger's private life. Hollenbaugh (2010) constructed a scale for measuring the motivations for blogging. This comprised seven factors (sharing feelings, desire to inform, desire for entertainment, desire to become well-known, desire to archive and organize information, desire to improve one's image, desire to obtain feedback on posts). The author studied the links between these constructs and disclosure of private life. It would seem

that only the motivation relating to the wish to archive and organize information exercises a significant influence on self-disclosure. On the other hand, gender and propensity to reveal one's private life (which is a permanent psychological variable) have a strong influence on disclosure of private life. These results lead to a certain number of observations. Bloggers do not reveal their private life for commercial ends. "Professionalism" (importance for career or image) or "Feedback" (obtaining feedback and comments on the posts) does not seem to be antecedents of disclosure. It is individual characteristics (being a woman and the degree of propensity to reveal details of private life) that would seem to explain disclosure. Nonetheless, these results need qualification. The bloggers questioned kept blogs that we would qualify as personal online diaries rather than content-driven blogs. Self-disclosure in a more commercial context remains to be studied.

Type of blog and measurement of perceived disclosure; two research fields yet to be explored

Taking account of the type of blog would seem to be essential to an understanding of the links that exist between self-disclosure and the motivations for blogging. Lenhart and Fox (2006) showed that the type of audience and the target are antecedents of disclosure. Lastly, the degree of private life disclosure merits clarification. The degree of private life disclosure should be differentiated from the propensity to make private life disclosures. The latter may be defined as a tendency to reveal elements of private life whatever the context. Wheelless (1978) drew up a measuring scale comprising seven items ("I tend to talk about myself relatively often", "I like talking about myself" etc.) that was taken and adapted to the online context

(Stefanove and Jang, 2007). As for the degree of disclosure of private life, this is based on a two-dimensional scale (quantity of information disclosed and depth of intimacy of the information disclosed) that has been tested in numerous research projects including Hollenbaugh's (2010). To our knowledge, however, no scale exists for measuring readers' perceptions of the blogger's disclosure of her private life.

With respect to the literature, a certain number of questions therefore continue to arise. How is the disclosure of private life by bloggers perceived by their readers? How can this perception be measured? Does the perceived disclosure of the blogger's private life have an influence on the process of consumer persuasion in relation to blogs concerned with consumer topics such as fashion and beauty?

Presentation and objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to examine the possible link between a blogger's disclosure of her private life and persuasion, and to assess the effectiveness of such disclosure on attitudes to the blog, the brand featured in the blog, and purchasing intentions.

Perceived disclosure of private life

The disclosure of private life was studied from the point of view of perception and from the point of view of the measurement and detection of self-disclosure signals (Brodin and Magnier, 2011). With regard to the detection of self-disclosure signals, what the authors

term "extimity" was assessed in relation to social media networks. It was therefore possible to clarify the various indicators of the disclosure on Internet of private life: the formalization of status, public presence (open networks), free expression of the social role, quantitative production of signs linked to the self, etc. Another thread in the literature is concerned with measuring self-disclosure by approaching it as a perceptual construct. For these authors, it is more important to assess the force of the impression that others receive of an individual's self-disclosure. Leung (2002) defines the concept of self-disclosure as the way individuals reveal themselves to others, which includes their experiences and feelings. Self-disclosure is therefore measured in relation to others. It corresponds to all messages about oneself that a person communicates to others and to the perception of the degree of intimacy that the latter have of this. It is a multi-dimensional concept based on the following aspects: depth of revelation, honesty, and intentionality.

The various routes to persuasion that the readership of a blog can follow

In order to anchor our study in the literature dealing with advertising persuasion, we formulated our research proposals and hypotheses on the basis of MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch's persuasion model (1986). They identified four routes to persuasion, which are described in the following Table.

Table 1

Description of MacKenzie Lutz and Belch's four potential persuasion mechanisms (1986)

Hypothesis of affective transfer
The consumer transfers the feelings he experienced during his exposure to the message onto the brand. This route may be assimilated into the peripheral persuasion route of Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (1981, 1986).
Hypothesis of dual mediation
The consumer is influenced both by the beliefs he holds with regard to the advertisement and his beliefs with regard to the brand. Moreover, an interaction exists between attitudes and beliefs. The central and peripheral routes are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive.
Hypothesis of reciprocal mediation
The consumer seeks to maintain a balance between his attitude towards the advertisement and his attitude towards the brand by liking both the advertisement and the brand or by rejecting both of them.
Hypothesis of independent influence
No relationship is observed between the attitude to the advertisement and the attitude towards the brand.

Source: adapted from MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986)

Presentation of the model

Our quantitative study is based on two levels of analysis. The first is centered on the link that may exist between the perceived disclosure of private life and the confidence generated by the blog. The second lies in the description of the routes to persuasion followed by the reader depending on the type of blog (impersonal blog with no disclosure of the blogger's private life or blog in which the blogger reveals details of her private life).

Analysis 1: This level of analysis (Figure 1) requires the construction of a scale to measure the perceived disclosure of the blogger's private life,

the use of the measure of confidence scale (Gurviez and Korchia, 2002), the cleaning of items, and a study of the links between constructs using SPSS and Amos 16 software.

Analysis 2: The second level of analysis is presented in Figure 2. This consisted in checking whether the type of blog (impersonal or disclosing the private life of the blogger) moderates the routes to persuasion followed by the reader. The analyses were based on pre-tests of all the scales of variables that constituted the model and a multi-group analysis using Amos 16 in order to check the moderating nature of the type of blog.

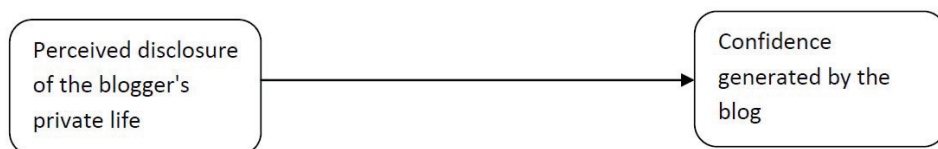


Figure 1. First level of analysis, the perceived disclosure of private life as an antecedent of the confidence generated by the blog

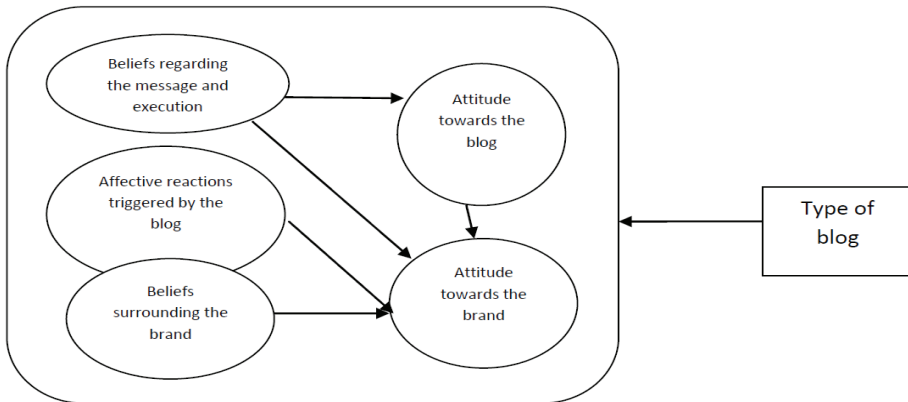


Figure 2. Second level of analysis, modeling of the different routes to persuasion followed by the reader of an impersonal blog versus a blog that reveals details of the blogger's private life.

The methodology of the quantitative survey is detailed in the following box (Box 1).

Box 1

Methodology of the quantitative survey

Stage 1: the scales of variables in our model were pre-tested to ensure their reliability and the validity of our measuring instruments. **Stage 2:** a questionnaire that took all the items adopted was presented to two paired samples. The first sample read a blog in which the blogger revealed her private life. The second sample was shown a completely impersonal blog (with no information about the blogger). **Structure of the sample:** the sample of interviewees was made up of 305 people. The average age was 22.9 years and the median age was 23. Women represent 61% of the sample. 53% of the samples, that is to say 162 people, were shown the blog disclosing details of the private life of the blogger.

Test material: the two blogs selected were fashion and beauty blogs. An identical brand of make-up featured in both blogs. The selection of these two blogs was made from a pre-selection of blogs listed in E-Buzzing in the Beauty category. A private life disclosure grid was drawn up using items identified in the qualitative study. Each item on each pre-selected blog was given a mark from 1 to 5 ("highly visible" item versus "not very" visible item) by a convenience sample made up of twenty people. The blog with the highest average mark for the items overall (blog disclosing private life) and the blog with the lowest average mark (impersonal blog) were retained.

The blog containing disclosures of private life had the following characteristics: scene-setting (blogger shown with products), confidences on her private life. **The impersonal blog** presents the following characteristics: minimalist introduction of blogger, very few confidences on her life apart from those corresponding to purchasing occasions.

Structure of the questionnaire: the structure of the questionnaire lists all the variables for the model: opinion on the brand and the blog, affective reactions triggered by the blog, questions linked to the measure of confidence generated by the blog, beliefs regarding the message delivered by the blog and its execution, items linked to perceived disclosure of the blogger's private life, purchasing intention, beliefs regarding the brand.