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Article information:

To cite this document:

Hemant Sashittal, Avan Jassawalla, (2019) "Preliminary evidence of brand acquaintancing on Snapchat", Marketing Intelligence & Planning, Vol. 37 Issue: 2, pp.197-210, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-05-2018-0144>

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Preliminary evidence of brand acquaintancing on Snapchat

Brand
acquaintancing
on Snapchat

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Received 7 May 2018
Revised 26 July 2018
16 September 2018
Accepted 18 September 2018

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to empirically derive and test a framework of brand acquaintancing – a new emotional attribution resulting from user-brand interactions on Snapchat, a popular social medium with ephemeral properties.

Design/methodology/approach – Focus group data were used to derive a framework, hypotheses and measurement scales for explicating the brand acquaintancing construct. Structural coherence of the framework and reliability and validity of scales were tested using a survey sample of Snapchat using students. The purified theoretical model was tested using a nationwide sample of Snapchat users.

Findings – The studies find that Snapchat users are receptive to unknown and stranger brands. Users' fear of self-disclosure triggers a search for acquaintances on the medium, i.e., acquaintances are sought over friends and intimates. Moreover, unknown and stranger brands encountered on the medium are acquaintances, i.e., awarded the status of an acquaintance.

Research limitations/implications – The studies found Snapchat users receptive to unknown and stranger brands. Users' fear of self-disclosure triggers a search for acquaintances on the medium, i.e., acquaintances are sought over friends and intimates. Moreover, unknown and stranger brands encountered on the medium are acquaintances, i.e., they were awarded the status of an acquaintance.

Originality/value – The paper presents empirical evidence of brand acquaintancing on Snapchat, and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of social media platforms to aid scholars and practitioners.

Keywords Branding, Brand, Snapchat, Acquaintance brands, Emotional attributions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The literature on emotional attributions toward brands is highly developed (see Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). Multiple streams of writing have produced insights into attributions of personality (Aaker, 1997) and human likeness to brands (Epley *et al.*, 2008), and found that positive emotionality toward brands renders them more accessible and produces positive outcomes for marketers (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007). Brand-related emotional attributions occurring on specific social media platforms such as Facebook (Sashittal *et al.*, 2012), Twitter (Sashittal *et al.*, 2015) and Pinterest (Sashittal and Jassawalla, 2014) have invited recent inquiry. Despite these developments, two interrelated gaps exist in the literature. First, little empirical evidence of emotional attributions toward brands fostered by Snapchat, a medium with ephemeral properties, currently exists (see Bayer *et al.*, 2016 for more on distinctiveness of the medium). New attention is deserved because Snapchat has ushered in a time centric, “see it now or it is gone” dimension to brand communication (e.g. Sheth and Sisodia, 1999). Its ephemeral properties have triggered new user behaviors. If previous generations preserved memories of people and events in time, Snapchat users are defining what they aim not to preserve (Frasier, 2015), and adapting to the internet of forgetting (Johnston, 2016). Currently, Snapchat is used by 173m people, including 77 percent of US college students and 83 percent of all 12–17 year olds who open their app approximately 25 times a day (Dogtiev, 2018). New attention is also deserved because emotional attributions produced by user-brand interactions on social media are



producing more decisive an impact on market outcomes than those produced by brand messages alone (e.g. Lopez *et al.*, 2017).

Second, the recently introduced construct of brand acquaintancing, a somewhat unique emotional attribution characteristic of user-brand interactions on Snapchat, has invited no empirical investigation to date. Based on an exploratory study, Sashittal *et al.* (2016) contend that: Snapchat users order brands they encounter in Snapchatverse in the same way they order people they encounter in and outside the medium, along a continuum of familiarity as strangers, acquaintances, friends or intimates, and interactions with unknown, unfamiliar or stranger brands on Snapchat triggers brand acquaintancing; Snapchatters come to regard such brands as more relatable, and award them the status of more familiar, more interesting acquaintances. The latter contention is broadly acknowledged by current reports, 45 percent of college students reportedly open messages from stranger, unknown and unfamiliar brands on Snapchat (Dogtiev, 2018). Theoretical explication of this process by which brands are acquaintanced and rendered more relatable on Snapchat, however, has yet to occur.

This paper reports findings from three studies that address the current gap in understanding of brand acquaintancing as an emotional attribution toward brands resulting from user engagement on Snapchat. First, based on the voices of Snapchat using college students of the Millennial generation, the brand acquaintancing construct is explicated, i.e., a grounded framework with hypotheses about its antecedent and consequence, and scales for measurement are derived. Then, based on two separate surveys of Snapchat using Millennials, the paper presents preliminary evidence of brand acquaintancing. The overriding purpose is to stimulate new thinking and research into emotional attributions toward brands made possible by social media with ephemeral properties. Replication of results over multiple random samples is necessary before widely generalizable results are drawn and formalized theory is developed.

2. Theoretical foundations

The notions of acquaintance brands and brand acquaintancing occurring on Snapchat are new to branding and social media literature, they are known solely from descriptions derived from exploratory data reported by Sashittal *et al.* (2016). Current thinking about branding, social media usage, consumer–brand relationships and brand humanization yield no testable hypotheses of “changes in relatability of an unknown, stranger brand to a more relatable acquaintance brand in ephemeral environment of Snapchat.” The review of these streams of literature, therefore, remain outside the scope of this paper and are not reproduced here (see Fournier, 1998 and Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015 for consumer–brand relationships; see Culotta and Cutler, 2016 for branding on social media). Instead, the discussion is focused on the key notions in which the brand acquaintancing construct is embedded, i.e., the properties of an acquaintance brand and the theoretical underpinnings of relatability and acquaintances (e.g. Sashittal *et al.*, 2016). This delineation is essential, it specifies what was studied based on what is known (e.g. Miles *et al.*, 2014).

2.1 Brand acquaintancing

Channeling the words of Snapchat users, Sashittal *et al.* (2016) define an acquaintance brand as follows:

(An acquaintance brand) is included in my sweet spot; I relate better to it now that I see it in this space. (The once stranger or unknown brand) [...] is validated by its association with my acquaintances; I am spared the effort of evaluation. This brand makes no claims or propositions, provides no reason for purchasing, and asks for no relationship or commitment. It hovers in space, just as do my acquaintances. I don't feel forced to make a choice; I can keep all options open indefinitely. I associate this brand with inclusiveness and effortlessness; it makes me feel

momentarily empowered. This brand will do just fine if my preferred brand is unavailable or stops being my preferred brand. (p. 200)

This definition aligns partly with the Fetscherin and Heinrich (2015) view of acquaintance brands as those toward whom buyers form low levels of emotional connection and harbor low levels of interest in terms of its performance (e.g., Wilcox and Stephen, 2013). The Sashittal *et al.* (2016) definition is, however, less about the brand's trust and performance and focused on the psychological and emotional benefits users derive from engaging human and non-human entities on Snapchat. Users enter a hyper-real, compelling space inhabited mostly by human acquaintances, and feel unencumbered from notions of reciprocity and commitment (see Baudrillard, 1994, 1996 for more on preference for hyper-realities). Unknown, stranger brands are let in and are awarded the status of relatable acquaintances. The notions of relatability and acquaintances have afforded discussion in current theory as briefly discussed below.

2.2 Notions of relatability

The Sashittal *et al.* (2016) study indicates that assessment of the changes in a stranger brand's relatability is central to understanding the brand acquaintancing construct. In so doing, the authors identify a key challenge for future research, i.e., deriving constitutive and operational definition of brand acquaintancing as an improvement in the relatability of a stranger brand. Present theory affirms that improved relatability of strangers signals an improved relationship between two entities (e.g. Maulana and Eckhardt, 2007; Zourrig and Chebat, 2009). Strangers are less relatable than acquaintances relationships with the latter are enduring and cordial (Swan *et al.*, 2001), with weak affect-related characteristics (Price and Arnould, 1999). Similarly, there is little dispute that relatability is a defining feature of social interactions (Downie *et al.*, 2008) of connections among humans (Townsend and McWhirter, 2005), and of relationships between human and non-human agents, such as websites (Maulana and Eckhardt, 2007). Acquaintances are more familiar and have greater extent of contact than do strangers (see Starzyk *et al.*, 2006 for the personal acquaintance measure), and more relatable than strangers and less relatable than friends with whom one enjoys a relationship of reciprocity (e.g. Lamb, 1998). The inseparability of relatedness and relationships is widely acknowledged in the counseling (Townsend and McWhirter, 2005), nursing (Lamb, 1998) and developmental psychology literature (Ricci, 1991).

2.3 The theory of acquaintances

Sashittal *et al.*'s (2016) view of acquaintances is aligned with Russell's (1913/1984) deconstruction, i.e., acquaintances are presentational rather than judgmental constructs. Acquaintances are cognitively available, recognized as present, can be identified and named but without the burden of judgment, i.e., a bond has not emerged (Russell, 1913/1984). Russell (1913/1984) regards acquaintance as a primitive cognitive relation, i.e., acquaintances exist, they are there sans relational connotations of empathy, caring or reciprocity. An acquaintance's presence is not inferential but spatial not inferential because the Snapchat user is disinterested in expending cognitive effort necessary for evaluating or judging the relationship, spatial because the brand is recognized as present amidst the space of acquaintances – the denizens of Snapchatverse. Similar to Russell's definition, acquaintance brands occupy the space between “not present” and “present” as an inference that means and symbolizes something akin to reciprocity, obligations and trust.

The theory of acquaintance brands is also rooted in the moral philosophy. Moral strangers are communities with whom one shares little understanding, moral friends are communities with whom one shares “robust and full view of the moral world” (Hanson, 2007; p. 207). Acquaintances are somewhere in between, i.e., communities with whom one

feels some connection without the existence of a moral understanding. As a concept defined by moral philosophers or theologians, moral acquaintances are not tested for their fullness or robustness, they are not friends held dear nor readily defended. Aligned with these views, acquaintance brands are not judged for their fullness, robustness, utility, or symbolic value. They are acknowledged as legitimately present in the Snapchatverse crowded with strangers and acquaintances, in a psychosocial environment that feels once-removed.

3. Methodology

While notions of acquaintances and relatability have basis in current theory, the literature does not yield constitutive or operational definitions of the constructs in the context of brand acquaintancing as a result of user-brand interactions on Snapchat. The state of the art precludes a one-shot, theory-derived hypotheses testing study. Instead, it implicates: an initial exploratory study for deriving a testable conceptual framework and hypotheses, and measurement scales grounded in voices of Snapchat users, an initial survey for testing and purifying grounded measurement scales and the conceptual model, followed by a second survey to validate the theoretical model yielded by the initial survey.

3.1 Study 1: exploratory study and findings

Four focus groups of college students ($n = 8$ per group), self-identified as heavy users of Snapchat (used at least twice a day) who followed at least one brand, were conducted by a co-author. Participants were enrolled in two sections of a marketing research class taught by a co-author at an AACSB accredited business school. As part of learning by doing, participants had completed a secondary research assignment, i.e., they had reviewed literature devoted to Snapchat, ephemerality, branding, consumer–brand relationships and brand acquaintancing.

All participants received instructions on: qualitative research methods and the process of deriving grounded insights, hypotheses and measurement scales, drawing internally consistent findings and fidelity between data and inferences and the likelihood of bias introduced by familiarity with the subject matter, and attempts to guess what the instructor wanted to hear in the focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to further investigate the construct of brand acquaintancing on Snapchat, derive hypotheses and scales – vs a general exploration of Snapchat usage. In other words, brand acquaintancing was not discovered as a result of the focus groups conducted for this study, it was explicated, i.e., its antecedents and consequences were identified and constitutive and operational definitions were derived.

A total of 32 students (18 males, 14 females) participated in the four focus groups ($n = 8$ per group) that lasted between 45 and 60 min of class time. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. To reduce the risk of bias arising from familiarity with the literature on Snapchat and with other ephemeral mediums such as Facebook's Slingshot, participants were required to provide concrete examples to illustrate their statements. Students present in class, but not participating in the focus group, were required to observe and make notes. Students were instructed to draw inferences using a two-column table designed to ensure fidelity to data and internal consistency. The boxes in the left hand column were devoted to inferences, the corresponding boxes in the right hand column contained references to actual statements made during the focus groups. Students were required to frame their inferences in the following format: "when [...] was said during the focus group, I inferred [...]."

In the subsequent class, 4–5 member student teams were asked to compare and contrast their focus group derived notions and complete a new two-column table – one per team. Students were further instructed to evaluate the fidelity of inferences to the statements during focus groups. The focus group transcripts, the two-column exercises completed by individuals and teams, and notes made by the instructor at the end of class discussions were

independently analyzed by the two coauthors. Content analysis was conducted following the guidelines of Miles *et al.* (2014).

Participant voices noted that Snapchat is the realm of acquaintances, that much interaction occurs with acquaintances, brands are ordered on a scale of relatability, and unfamiliar, unknown and stranger brands are rendered more relatable and regarded as acquaintances in the medium. They also proceeded to describe specific instances and examples, provide concrete examples of brands they had acquainted, and derive hypotheses and scales.

The hypotheses and scales were further developed via a two-step process outlined by Cavusgil *et al.* (2005). It began by structural theorizing about the concepts identified from the data. The observed indicators of each concept were identified to scale construction (based on Cavusgil *et al.*, 2005; Hinkin, 1995). The hypotheses make explicit the data-derived notions of convergence and direction of relationships posited as significant, i.e., fear of self-disclosure antecedes acquaintance-seeking on Snapchat, brand acquaintancing is a consequence of acquaintance-seeking (based on Cavusgil *et al.*, 2008). The measurement scales included in Table I emerged as the result of following the guidelines of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), Churchill (1979) and Hinkin (1995). Table I shows the items on the five-point Likert scales derived from verbal protocols (strongly disagree = 1; strongly agree = 5). The focus groups added value because the framework and measurement scales are not directly derivable from Sashittal *et al.* (2016).

Fear of self-disclosure. The fear of self-disclosure emerges as the key driver of Snapchat usage and of interactions with others in the Snapchatverse. Posting content on other social media, users report, is anxiety provoking (FG# = focus group number):

FG1 female participant: I don't want to be feeling bad about myself just because (someone) said something negative. I stopped Tweeting because of that. Like, I got no responses, even my best friend would be like yeah, I saw that or whatever.

FG2 male participant: Why should I give people that [...] (the opportunity to) say something negative? Like approve or disapprove?

	Standardized loadings
<i>Fear of Self-disclosure</i> ($\alpha = 0.88$, $CR = 0.88$, $AVE = 0.65$) ^a	
FSD1: I often feel anxious about how others might respond to what I am saying	0.76
FSD2: I feel highly vulnerable to the negative responses I might possibly attract from others. (Dropped after CFA1)	
FSD3: I am afraid that others can misunderstand what I am saying	0.7
FSD4: I worry that people will take a dig at me if they don't like what I am saying	0.87
FSD5: I worry that people will say hurtful things if they don't appreciate what I am saying	0.88
<i>Acquaintance-seeking</i> ($\alpha = 0.82$, $CR = 0.82$, $AVE = 0.6$)	
AS1: I am mostly connecting with new people that are not really my friends outside the app	0.75
AS2: I don't want to hang out with them, I just want to connect with them on the app	0.76
AS3: In many cases, I have no connection with them outside the app	0.82
<i>Brand Acquaintancing When I see an unfamiliar, unknown or a stranger BRAND on SNAPCHAT</i> ($\alpha = 0.92$, $CR = 0.91$, $AVE = 0.72$)	
BA1: I relate better with the brand after that	0.78
BA2: I tend to pay more attention to the brand after that	0.81
BA3: I end up liking the brand more after that	0.84
BA4: My interest in the brand often grows as a result	0.84
BA5: The brand becomes more relevant to me as a result	0.81

Notes: ^a α , Cronbach's α coefficient; CR, construct reliability; AVE, average variance explained

Table I.
Measurement

FG3 female participant: Sometimes it is insulting [...] either my friends ignore me, or say something rude without intending to maybe. They may not be understanding me necessarily.

Snapchat usage is free from making oneself vulnerable to responses of others:

FG2 male participant: Snapchat? Okay I am there, but I don't have to connect or whatever [...] I am just seeing something happening out there without being there, and feeling like I am participating without putting in any effort. Like I pay no price [...] (for) admission.

Snapchat usage is recounted as liberating, a soothing salve for the fear and anxiety of posting original content. If participants spoke in one voice, they would say: "I use Snapchat because I want the benefits of peeking into what others are doing, but not risk saying something that will produce a response from others I do not want," (see fear of self-disclosure Likert scale in Table I):

FG3 female participant: (On Snapchat) [...] I am not feeling pressure. If they are there, they are there. If not, they are not. I see if someone has seen what I posted. Nice if they did. But otherwise no.

Acquaintance-seeking. Snapchat users seek connections with acquaintances – as distinct from strangers and friends:

FG1 male participant: The people I went to grade school with, that guy who was with me junior high, until I moved away. That became more relatable when I saw them on Snapchat.

Q: What does relatable mean? Relatable how?

A: Like we didn't talk then, maybe like said hi, but like no conversations. We were not in any team [...] but now we connect on Snapchat [...] not awkward, we are not talking [...] there is no chance for him to say anything about what I am saying or doing. We are just hanging and looking at something else that is going on that we are both connected to [...].

Q: Would you call and hang out during the break when you go back home?

A: No, that is not going to happen. I don't want that. Like what would we even talk about? That would get awkward.

There is an explicit desire to not connect with Snapchat acquaintances outside of the Snapchatverse. In this once-removed ephemeral environment, users seek acquaintances (see acquaintance-seeking Likert scale in Table I):

FG4 male participant: There are friends I want to hang out with. I hang out with them. Acquaintances are like an outer ring [...] I don't [...] we don't let each other enter our space. Like, don't call or look me up or whatever. There is some time we hang (on Snapchat) and see something we want because we are not there (physically present where the event is occurring) [...] not [...] because we decided that we want that, but like it just happened. It is interesting, I like that. Not everyone has to be your friend, my friend [...] it is like "no pressure zone."

Brand acquaintancing. An acquaintance brand is not a stranger who merits indifference, and not a friend who merits cognitive or emotional energy. Snapchatverse is the once-removed universe where users connect in real time; strangers are easily included as acquaintances. Strangers and acquaintances are differentiated as follows:

FG3 male participant: A stranger is someone I don't care exists or not. There, not there, same difference. I am like defensive, my guard is up [...] if a stranger (guy) is approaching me. I will look away, like pretend I am talking to someone, or looking at something else – or at least try not to pay attention. You know? A stranger brand is like [...] what? Okay, but not interested. But if the guy is an acquaintance, I might give him a (head nod).

FG1 female participant: If I can't find what I am looking for, and my preferred brand is out of reach, this will do. Like if I don't see my friends anywhere, I'll see if you want to talk. The acquaintance brand is acceptable.

The following examples of brand acquaintancing are offered by participants. General electric was once a stranger. Encountering the brand on Snapchat has made it more relatable:

FG4 female participant: They are doing something cool, I want to work for them.

Similarly, *New York Times* was a stranger brand, it transformed into an acquaintance brand because of repeated connection on Snapchat:

FG2 male participant: I might get the New York Times app now [...]. I (would otherwise) stay away from it. But now they are on Snapchat, and I now get it [...]. Times was a stranger who is now more like an acquaintance. Still not friends though, I don't have the time to read it all every day. It used to be "my mom reads it [...] the print is too small, and it's kind of boring." Now I like, hmmm. Hey there, New York Times (laughs).

Unfamiliar and stranger brands are engaged on Snapchat, seem more relatable, and awarded the status of acquaintances (see brand acquaintancing Likert scale derived in Table I):

FG4 male participant: So [...] Sperry (shoe brand) was like a stranger brand. I didn't care for it [...] maybe because some (kids in my high school) wore it a lot [...]. Then there it is on Snapchat. I am not looking for him, but we can hang together and watch the game. Like there is no one else there I know, right, so [...] now, I want to hang with him [...]. Like I'm at a bar and not seeing Converse and Adidas [...] and I was looking for them? But Sperry was there. So I am okay to hang with him. I am not putting my life on hold or anything. Don't care if Sperry thinks I am cool. If the brand is there, I will say okay, and then look at what I am there to look at.

Guiding hypotheses. The following hypotheses were derived from the qualitative study, all in the context of Snapchat using college students:

- H1. Greater the reported fear of self-disclosure, greater the reported acquaintance-seeking on Snapchat.
- H2. Greater the reported acquaintance-seeking on Snapchat, the greater the likelihood of brand acquaintancing.

3.2 Study 2: survey and scale purification

The coauthors derived a questionnaire that included the above mentioned scales and administered it via a Qualtrics survey during the subsequent semester. Fresh batches of students received a link to the survey; they were asked to participate if they: had not participated in the classes in which focus groups were held, used Snapchat and interacted with at least one brand on the medium. The sample ($n = 473$) included 215 (45.5 percent) males and 258 (54.5 percent) females, 84 percent of whom interacted with Snapchat at least once a day. Testing of means for the three constructs of interest to the study (fear of self-disclosure, acquaintance-seeking, and brand acquaintancing) identified no significant differences among genders.

EQS 6.1 was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) as part of a two-step structural equation modeling procedure (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The base model included latent factors and measured variable for the three constructs (fear of self-disclosure, acquaintance-seeking, brand acquaintancing). To overcome the likely estimation bias as a result of non-normality, the robust estimation procedure was used (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Bentler and Wu, 2002). The Lagrange Multiplier (LM) test was used to identify items that cross-loaded on more than one latent variable during the iterative CFA procedure. The CFAs proceeded over two iterations, the second item from the five-item scale for assessing fear of self-disclosure was dropped after CFA1 because it cross-loaded on another latent variable (see Table II). The CFA procedures ended after the second iteration because the underlying structure of the data suggested excellent fit

parameters (NFI = 0.966, NNFI = 0.977, CFI = 0.982, IFI = 0.982 and RMSEA = 0.049). The specified paths, testing the relationships between fear of self-disclosure, acquaintance-seeking and brand acquaintancing as hypothesized (*H1* and *H2*) are also significant (*H1* supported, $\beta = 0.18$, $t = 3.05$; *H2* supported, $\beta = 0.22$, $t = 3.87$).

Reliability and validity. Table I includes statistics that point to reliability and validity of our scales. The reliability of measurement scales are indicated by Cronbach's α s (ranging from 0.817 to 0.919, based on Churchill, 1979) and the composite reliability drawn from standardized regression weights and measurement correlations for each item that composed the latent construct (ranging from 0.82 to 0.91, based on Hair *et al.*, 1998). Convergent validity was tested in two ways. First, the support for our hypotheses provides preliminary evidence, i.e., the relationships we propose are supported by data. Second, AVEs calculated from the factor loadings produced by CFA2 for each latent construct exceed 0.5 (see Table I, based on Hair *et al.*, 1998). In a similar vein, discriminant validity of scales is indicated in two ways. As a preliminary tests, all correlations between latent constructs are lower than 0.8 (see Yanamandram and White, 2010). Moreover, the AVEs, reflecting the variance captured by the latent variables from its indicator variables, are greater than the squared correlations between any two latent variables, and attest to discriminant validity of scales (based on Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

3.3 Model validation

The Qualtrics survey used for the student sample was sent to a nationwide sample of Snapchat using Millennials via Amazon Mechanical Turk service. The reliability of M-Turk data is discussed in the literature (e.g. Stewart *et al.*, 2015). Scholars note that M-Turk samples produce findings with reliability comparable to the one obtained from student samples (Kees *et al.*, 2017), and that participants in M-Turk surveys are more likely to read instructions from researchers (Ramsey *et al.*, 2016). Participation was requested from frequent users of Snapchat (at least five interactions per week) who followed at least one brand. The resulting sample included 281 males (54.7 percent) and 223 females (43.4 percent), 10 participants (1.9 percent) did not respond to the question. We tested the hypothesized paths using the syntax used for assessing the study 1 model, but with the new data set. The model and the hypotheses are supported by the nationwide survey (see Figure 1 for path and model fit parameters).

Results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Model	NFI	NNFI	CFI	IFI	RMSEA	Action based on LM test
CFA1	0.96	0.97	0.98	0.98	0.05	Drop FSD2
CFA2	0.97	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.05	CFA concluded

Fit indices with specified paths (hypothesized paths)

Model	NFI	NNFI	CFI	IFI	RMSEA	Action based on Wald's test
OUT1	0.97	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.05	Model converged, the two hypothesized paths were significant

Note: LM, Lagrange multiplier

Table II.
Two-step purification process of the measurement model

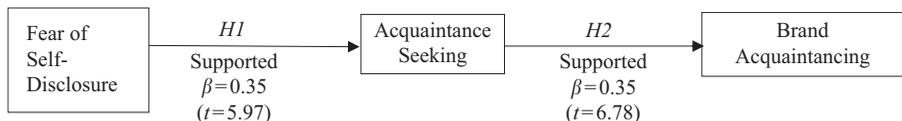


Figure 1.
Standardized structural model

Notes: Nationwide sample of Snapchat users, $n = 514$. NFI = 0.97; NNFI = 0.99; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.03

4. Findings

The measurement scales for fear of self-disclosure, acquaintance-seeking and brand acquaintancing emerge as reliable and valid, and related in the ways hypothesized. The structural coherence of the proposed framework received support from the first survey. The notion of brand acquaintancing was supported based on two survey samples of Snapchat users. In particular, brand acquaintancing results from acquaintance-seeking behaviors on Snapchat (supporting *H2*), and the fear of self-disclosure drives acquaintance-seeking on Snapchat (supporting *H1*).

5. Implications

Social media platforms with ephemeral properties such as Snapchat, Confide (confidential messenger), Mirage (photo messaging) and Facebook’s Slingshot hold new implications for engaging social media users. Newly identified constructs associated with social media usage such as “acquaintance-seeking” and “brand acquaintancing,” new and tested scales, and evidence of linkages hold implications for scholars interested in user-brand interactions on emerging social media platforms. The findings contribute to the development of a nuanced understanding of rapidly fragmenting social media platforms with new properties, each of which stimulate distinct user-motivations and foster unique user-brand interactions and emotional attributions (see Table III). The following discussion delineates the value added by the findings and briefly discusses implications for theory and practice.

Social media	Key user-motivations that serve as antecedents to usage and user-brand interactions	Noted brand-related attributions resulting from user-brand interactions	Consequences likely to interest scholars and practitioners
Snapchat (present study)	Fear of self-disclosure. Seeking acquaintances on the medium (over friends and intimates)	Stranger and unfamiliar brands are awarded the status of an acquaintance	A key social media for enhancing the relatability of a brand (from stranger to acquaintance), aligned with the interest in seeking interactions with human acquaintances
Twitter (Sashittal <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	Fear of being ignored. Seeking connections with celebrities	Brand is regarded as a human celebrity with an elevated social status (i.e. brand is entified)	The attribution toward brands as human celebrities as a post-anthropomorphic construct, i.e., brands are not human-like, they are human
Pinterest (Sashittal <i>et al.</i> , 2014)	Groundedness. Seeking authentic connection with others based on verification of one’s ability to curate content (virtual scrapbook with museum like qualities), and/or produce concrete evidence (such as kitchen and other projects)	Brands are part of an authentic expression of self, and part of an authentic experience	Enrichment; users feel more self-confident about publicly expressing self, and derive satisfaction from discovery of one’s authentic, culturally-rich, complex self
Facebook (Sashittal <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	Narcissism. Facebook is me-TV, a personal medium for seeking attention, and broadcasting one’s positive image to others. Voyeurism. Seeking information about others for salacious pleasure	Brands are relevant only if they feed users’ narcissism and voyeurism, i.e., connection with brands is not sought with vigor	Medium not recommended for building brands; independent brands face the obstacle of users attempting to brand themselves

Table III.
Distinguishing user-brand relationships on social media

5.1 *Calibrating engagement*

Social media users' unrestrained expression (Wang, 2012), unfettered discourse (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013), unflinching self-disclosure (Medina and Srivastava 2016) and desire for gratuitous self-promotion via selfies are widely reported (Lim, 2016). These notions contrast sharply with the data-derived learning about drivers of Snapchat usage, i.e., fear of self-disclosure. Snapchat users' vocabularies of anxiety and vulnerability are distinct from currently reported drivers of social media which lead to over-sharing and strong emotionality. For instance, the fear of missing out is driving social media usage (Henig and Marantz-Henig, 2013), the clamor for attention is driving Facebook usage (e.g. Taylor and Strutton, 2016), the desire to engage in brand communities is driving Instagram usage (Roncha and Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016) and the desire for authentic connection is reportedly driving Pinterest usage (Sashittal and Jassawalla, 2014). This paper is the first to present empirical evidence of the calibrated engagement and acquaintance-seeking occurring on social media, and the concern for relationships at safe psychosocial distances. Snapchat users' motivations are more aligned with the emerging reality of flaming, cyber-stalking, trolling, cyber-bullying and online hostility that spills over to physical harm in real life (Jane, 2015).

New research into social media users' interest in a commitment free, low anxiety, once-removed hyper-reality is poorly understood outside of the Snapchat context, and is clearly implicated by this study. Practitioners are likely better served if the brand's presence on social media can allay concerns about self-disclosure and can insulate their target audiences from negative responses – which seem to shape their calibrated engagement with brands.

5.2 *Calibrating emotional commitment*

Current thinking about consumer–brand relationships and humanization of brands holds that stronger, deeper emotional connections between buyers and brands are more desirable for firms (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). Consequently, scholars have directed considerable attention toward the intensely emotional relationships that develop between consumers and brands. This includes positive emotionality such as brand anthropomorphism (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007), love (Batra *et al.*, 2012), forgiveness (Donovan *et al.*, 2012), passion (Bauer *et al.*, 2007) and romance (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011), and negative emotionality such as avoidance (Lee *et al.*, 2009), divorce (Sussan and Meamber, 2012), and hate (Hegner *et al.*, 2017).

The findings reported here offer a sobering perspective, and stand in sharp contrast to reports of selfie-posting behaviors that aim to produce an emotional response from others (see Lim, 2016). Emotional connection with other people on Snapchat is calibrated by users and strong emotional commitment is consciously avoided. Instead, users are satisfying their cognitive and socio-emotional needs for connecting without committing or reciprocating with something “out there” with “once-or-twice removed” properties. Brands encountered in this space, if strangers, are rendered acquaintances, i.e., “this far and not more.” The survey results suggest that Snapchat users are not clamoring for strong emotionality, friendship or intimacy. Instead, Snapchat users are willing to accept muted benefits of low-affect connections driven by their concerns about self-disclosure.

New research that can explain muted affect milestones – such as brand acquaintancing of stranger brands – in the process of developing affect-rich relationships with potential buyers – is sorely needed. In a similar vein, practitioners are better served if the process of gaining emotional commitment from social media users is conceptualized not as a one-shot event precipitated by catchy slogans that likely worked on traditional media, but as a process characterized by developmental milestones defined by social needs, anxieties and fears of social media users.

5.3 Calibrating attributions

The consumer–brand relationship and brand humanization literature is rich with insights into brands with human-like personalities (Aaker, 1997), physical resemblance to humans (Wan and Aggarwal, 2015) or possession of human-like mind (Puzakova *et al.*, 2013). Brand anthropomorphism is known to render brands more likeable (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007), make buyers more loyal (Chandler and Schwartz, 2010) and feel warmer and connected to brands (e.g. Epley *et al.*, 2008). Snapchat users' attributions toward brands are post-anthropomorphic. Users are unconcerned with a brand's resemblance to humans, or with the degree to which they are human-like. Instead, brands are accepted as humans who differ in terms of their familiarity and command varying levels of emotional commitment. New research is needed to explain the emergence of post-anthropomorphic attributions toward brands, wherein they are no longer regarded as human-like but as specific types of humans, such as human strangers and acquaintances. Practitioners too are likely to benefit from abandoning concerns for human likeness, or physical properties of their products designed to seem human and foster communication with social media users where brands are unquestioningly human because they behave and respond as humans.

6. Limitations

Some of the key limitations of our studies that caution against broad generalization are as follows. First, we used SEM procedure to test two hypotheses simultaneously, no claim of causal relationships is made (e.g. Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The directionality of hypothesized relationships is derived from exploratory research, it precluded testing of hypotheses reverse in their direction. Second, common methods variance has likely inflated self-reports of the dependent variable (e.g. Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Independent measures of brand acquaintancing, random samples of all Snapchat users, and longitudinal designs are left to future efforts. To reduce the problems in estimation caused by common methods variance, we followed Conway and Lance's (2010) directions, i.e., we calculated composite reliability and ensured discriminant validity of constructs.

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