

**Being a Likable Braggart:**

**How Consumers Use Brand Mentions for Self-presentation on Social Media**

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## **Abstract**

Consumer self-presentation is considered a major driver of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. In particular, the manner in which consumers self-present using brand mentions is likely to impact impressions of the WOM senders as well as the mentioned brands. In some cases, however, mentioning reputable brands in a WOM message can be considered bragging, which can lead to negative impressions of the communicator. In this chapter, we use Twitter data to develop a typology of different strategies consumers use to mention brands while crafting positive self-presentations on social media. Our findings suggest that consumers try to avoid negative evaluations while bragging via brand mentions by (1) mentioning brands in the context of sharing on social media what one is doing, feeling or thinking at the moment, (2) shifting the focus of communication away from the self, and/or (3) downplaying one's own or the brand's positive characteristics. These brand mentioning strategies map onto some common tactics used by marketers to encourage consumers to talk about brands on social media. Our typology of brand mentioning strategies is a first step towards examining the downstream consequences of these strategies for the communicator and the mentioned brand. Moreover, our typology can help in developing a theory to guide practitioners in selecting tactics to encourage brand mentions that will benefit the brand.

## Introduction

“But Blippy also failed to gain traction outside its early adopter user base because, for some folks, there’s something awkward and braggy about sharing lists of things you’re buying. Price or no price, it’s one thing to Instagram your fabulous new shoes, but posting the purchase on a site dedicated to posting purchases can cross that invisible line between sharing and showing off. Mine will need to tread carefully there.” – a quote by Perez (2012) in a TechCrunch article on why purchase sharing social network ‘Blippy’ (launched in 2009) failed and why its new avatar ‘Mine’ (launched in 2012, which has also been closed to the public subsequently) needs to tread carefully. This quote illustrates how people are quick to judge others based on their social media posts about brands, which in this case led to the failure of a social media platform. The use of social media to talk about consumption experiences is pervasive (Briggs 2012). People are often confronted by others’ mentions of the brands they own or like on social media (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012). As the above quote by Perez (2012) suggests, mentioning brands on social media can lead to less than favorable impressions, both for the consumer who posted the information and potentially, for the brand itself (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2012).

In this chapter, we propose that the impressions formed based on brand mentions may not just be a matter of *whether* a brand is mentioned but *how* it is mentioned. Specifically, we develop a typology of strategies that consumers use to mention brands for self-presentation on social media. Research on word-of-mouth (WOM) has focused primarily on self-presentation as a *driver of WOM* but has not examined *how* consumers self-present using products and brands (Berger 2012), which is likely to impact the impressions of the communicator and the brand.

Therefore, this research aims to develop a more nuanced characterization of the WOM phenomenon by looking at consumer self-presentation strategies in the online medium.

### **Consumer Self-Presentation Using Brands**

It is a common human tendency to try to portray a positive image to others about one's characteristics, achievements or status (Leary 1995). Any behavior intended to influence the impression of oneself in the minds of others is called self-presentation (Schlenker 2003). A common way to craft a favorable self-presentation is to verbally convey positive self-related information, which has alternatively been labeled as bragging (Berman et al. 2014), self-promotion (Jones and Pittman 1982; Rudman 1998), boasting (Brown and Levinson 1987), self-praise (Dayter 2014), positive self-disclosure (Miller et al. 1992), and positive self-description (Holtgraves and Srull 1989). Mentioning a reputable brand in one's social media communications can be considered a special case of crafting a positive self-presentation in this way (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Schau and Gilly 2003).

In line with Veblen's (1899) original conceptualization of conspicuous consumption, the consumption literature has mainly focused on self-presentation via conspicuous 'display' of one's possessions to an immediate audience (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010). Thus, this literature has neglected an increasingly common way of self-presenting with a brand- that of mentioning the brand in linguistic communications. In particular, with the advent of social media, people have an opportunity to craft their self-presentations for a much wider audience via explicit mentions of brands they might or might not own (Schau and Gilly 2003).

On the downside, including positive self-related information in one's own communications is considered bragging (Berman et al. 2014) and can lead to negative evaluations of the communicator (Godfrey, Jones, and Lord 1986). Similarly, we posit that name-dropping reputable brands in one's communications is likely to be considered a form of bragging. Past work has shown that because of inferences of self-presentational motives, conspicuous display of possessions can lead to negative evaluations of consumers and brands (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2012). This earlier work has focused primarily on the distinction between conspicuous versus inconspicuous display of a brand. In the social media context, however, linguistic communication gives consumers more latitude than mere display in terms of how to frame brand mentions to signal desirable qualities such as wealth or taste. Moreover, written communication allows for more time to craft brand mentions in subtle ways due to its asynchronous nature (Buffardi and Campbell 2008). Computer-mediated environments also make digital association with brands easier by relaxing the material constraints of ownership (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Schau and Gilly 2003). All of these affordances of online media can help consumers craft their self-presentations via brand mentions in ways that might minimize negative evaluations by others. As a starting point in understanding the different ways in which consumers mention brands, we develop a typology of brand mentioning strategies in this chapter.

## **Methodology**

Given the exploratory nature of the research objectives, we used content analysis to provide insight into different strategies consumers use while crafting their self-presentations using brands. To examine this phenomenon in naturally occurring statements, we sampled posts

from the popular microblogging site Twitter.com, which allows users to post short 140-character updates on a public profile, or ‘timeline’. Microblogging updates can be considered parts of an autobiographical narrative and therefore, can achieve the goal of positive self-presentation (Dayter 2014; Leary and Kowalsky 1990; Puschmann 2009). We chose Twitter for sampling the posts as it allowed us to sample public posts from any user that mentioned particular brands.

We sampled posts mentioning luxury brands as they are more likely to be mentioned for self-presentational reasons (Berger 2012). Using NVivo software, we captured tweets with hashtags related to two luxury brands- Mercedes and Louis Vuitton. We captured 1893 tweets with mentions of Louis Vuitton and 2398 tweets with mentions of Mercedes posted over a 3-day period (4/27/2013 - 4/30/2013). Then, we used a random number generator to generate a sample of 100 tweets- 50 from each brand. We focused on tweets written in English by individuals only (excluding those by organizations). The descriptive information about the tweeters in the final sample of 100 tweets is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Information about Tweeters in Sample

	<b>No. of Followers</b>	<b>No. of Tweets</b>
<b>Mean</b>	2310	9196
<b>Median</b>	204	2515
<b>Minimum</b>	5	10
<b>Maximum</b>	175445	126312

As the purpose of the investigation was exploratory, we allowed categories to emerge from the data. The first author classified these tweets into categories and then followed an iterative process of going back to the literature and identifying patterns to minimize the number of classifications that could account for a broad range of strategies used. This classification

scheme was further cross-checked with the co-authors. Our taxonomy represents an extensive—although not exhaustive—list of strategies used to mention brands for self-presentational purposes. Moreover, the categories are not mutually exclusive; that is, one or more strategies may be used within the same communication. Although the small sample size precludes statistical analysis, we will discuss the qualitative findings in detail.

## **Findings**

We found instances of posts claiming ownership of the mentioned brand as well as posts that made no attempt to claim ownership of the mentioned brand. This supports Schau and Gilly's (2003) finding that ownership is not a prerequisite to using the symbolic meanings of brands for self-presentation in the online medium. The brand mentioning strategies conveying ownership can be considered a form of conspicuous consumption behavior signaling wealth. However, signaling wealth by mentioning brands one owns may not encompass all status-seeking practices engaged in by consumers (Chaudhuri, Majumdar, and Ghoshal 2011). Economic capital (wealth) and cultural capital (taste, knowledge or expertise) are considered two distinct ways to signal status through symbolic consumption (Bourdieu 1984; Chaudhuri and Majumdar 2010; Holt 1998). Therefore, even the strategies that do not convey ownership of the mentioned brands can signal traits such as knowledge or expertise of that particular brand or product category.

We identified four main strategies consumers use to mention brands in their social media communications. These four strategies comprised 90% of the posts in our sample. Table 2 summarizes the main strategies. Whereas the four brand mentioning strategies we identified are

specific to the consumption domain, we also found evidence of two common tactics that could be used to avoid negative evaluation while bragging in any domain. In the next section, we will describe these strategies and tactics in greater detail.

Table 2: Typology of Brand Mentioning Strategies

<b>Brand Mentioning Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Conveying Ownership</b>
Having	When the primary information shared in the post is that one owns a particular brand.	Yes
Doing	When the post mentions or describes an activity one is engaged in and a brand is mentioned as an enabler or a prop in that activity.	Yes
Loving	When the post conveys positive feelings for an owned brand or describes the brand as a loved relationship partner.	Yes
Opinion Sharing	When consumers publicly share their opinion about a brand or a brand action. Posts in this category may also convey desire for a product/brand.	No

### ***Brand Mentioning Strategies***

#### *1) Having*

Posts were categorized as using the *having* strategy when the primary information conveyed in the post was that the writer owns the brand. Such posts mention a brand in the context of explicitly announcing to the world that the writer possesses a particular branded product. Use of possessive pronouns (such as my, mine) to convey ownership and linking to a picture of the owned product is common in such posts. Posting a picture with the branded product also authenticates one's claim of ownership of the brand (Dayter 2014). For example, in

the following tweet the writer explicitly mentions “MyCar” while linking to a picture of his Mercedes:

“#mercedes #classeC #voituredesports #lourd #MyCar #car #iphonephotographie  
<http://t.co/zFw2oFclw6>”

Due to the social, environmental, and religious discourses against materialistic and conspicuous consumption behaviors (Belk 1983; Ger and Belk 1999; Mason 1981), posts focused on ‘having’ material possessions are likely to be considered counter-normative. Seeking happiness through ‘having’ material things is believed to inhibit self-actualization (Fromm 1976) and is associated with extrinsic goals such as social recognition (Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010). Therefore, mentioning owned brands using the ‘having’ strategy is likely to be categorized as bragging, leading to negative evaluations.

However, we also found examples of tweets in this category where the consumers seemed to be trying to brag ‘under the radar’. For example, one can convey *having* in the context of sharing one’s recent purchases. Such posts give the writer a chance to show-off branded purchases in the context of sharing excitement about shopping or about a specific purchase. For example:

“Vintage shopping! Look what I picked up! #Chanel #LouisVuitton @ LRX Beverly Hills <http://t.co/BpOUcDfLsQ>”

In this post, the writer has conveyed her ownership of Louis Vuitton while framing it as sharing details about an activity (i.e. shopping) she is engaged in.

Tal-Or (2010) showed that observers do not judge the braggarts who create a context for talking about their accomplishments during an interaction. But, how do people create a context for bragging about their consumption experiences in an online scenario? Creating a context for

brand mentions on social media is easy because moment-to-moment sharing of what happens in our daily lives is not only acceptable but also encouraged on these media. The central question that Facebook asks its users to answer and share with the world is “what’s on your mind?” More than 80% of posts on Twitter consist of announcements about one’s immediate experiences (Naaman, Boase, and Lai 2010). Sharing of mundane personal activities, thoughts and feelings can fulfill a relational maintenance function on social networks (Tong and Walther 2011). Therefore, posts having brand mentions as part of constant, up-to-the-minute updates on what one is doing, feeling or thinking (as is the case in the next three strategies) can be considered normative in the online medium.

## 2) *Doing*

A post is categorized as using the *doing* strategy when it mentions or describes an activity that the consumer is engaged in and a brand is mentioned as an enabler of the activity or as a prop incidental to the activity. In posts using this strategy, brand mentions pop up as incidental details in the process of cataloging of daily lives on a social network. For example:

“#convoi #having #fun #friends #cousin #love #mercedes #flags #ballons

<http://t.co/I8NzCMbbOJ>”

Here, the user is tweeting a photograph and sharing information about his fun-filled day with friends and the Mercedes brand just happens to be a part it.

The focus in such updates is on what the brand helps you do or achieve rather than on having the brand as its own reward. For example, in the following tweet, the writer is talking about her walk with ‘Sophie’, most likely a dog with a Louis Vuitton collar.

“Taking Sophie to the park for an early morning walk... I've got my @RachelK\_CCcream and she has her #louisvuitton... Time to roll!”

As the tweet is focused on an activity (walking the dog), the brand mention seems incidental and is less of a central focus in the tweet—the collar or leash simply helps this person attain their goal of walking with the dog.

Using possessions to engage in ‘doing’ or gaining experiences is often considered more moral and acceptable than just ‘having’ material possessions (Belk 1985; Van Boven 2005; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2008). Ger and Belk’s (1999) informants explicitly mention the use of material goods for “doing more” as a source of true happiness (190). Similarly, Marwick (2010) found that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs use costly sporting equipment as a status symbol but frame it as a means for engaging in self-improvement, making it more acceptable compared to traditional status symbols such as cars. Based on these earlier findings, we suggest that when consumers mention brands using the *doing* strategy, they are framing their communication not as bragging about possessions but as sharing details about activities they are pursuing for self-improvement or intrinsic pleasure.

### 3) *Loving*

A post is categorized as using the *loving* strategy when it mentions a brand in the context of sharing positive feelings (such as love) for the brand or describes the brand as a loved relationship partner. Here is an example:

“Is it too weird to say that I missed my baby Louis..? #louisvuitton #attached #mylove #missedyou <http://t.co/EH5sdms7eH>”

Here, the user has anthropomorphized the brand and brought it into the domain of social relationships thus making it more acceptable to mention as part of an update on a social network. Chandler and Schwarz (2010) showed that when people think about objects in anthropomorphic terms, the features relevant to relational partners become applicable to those objects. Therefore, publicly enacting consumer-brand relationships using brand mentions (Fournier 1998; Schau and Gilly 2003) may lead to more positive evaluations of the communicator compared to just talking about ‘having’ a brand.

Posts in this category also included other features of the brand love prototype such as having a history with the brand and experiencing separation distress (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012). For example, in the following tweet, the writer is conveying his distress over parting from his Mercedes that he has had for last 2.4 years.

“goodbye #Mercedes you served me well over the last 2.5 years, you will be missed”

According to (Ger and Belk 1999), consumers can portray themselves as “passionate connoisseurs” instead of “vulgar materialists” by talking about their passion for a particular possession or consumption experience as passionate consumer relationships are considered praiseworthy (188). Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012) also found that a loved brand for their respondents was more likely to be “connected to something the respondent believed was deeper,

such as self-actualization...” (4). Therefore, posts using the ‘loving’ strategy are likely to be categorized not as bragging but as sharing with others the love and enthusiasm for a brand.

#### 4) *Opinion Sharing*

The final category focuses on posts that convey opinions about a brand. Though the posts in this category do not signal brand ownership, they can be used as a vehicle to signal the writer’s cultural capital (or taste) in a particular consumption domain. Building an audience by displaying one’s cultural capital can be an important goal behind using these strategies (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). These strategies also shift the focus of communication from the self to the brand and thus, can be considered as ways of distancing the self from the positive self-presentation.

A common way to implement this strategy is to curate and share with others the images of products that one considers beautiful or extraordinary. In such posts, consumers publicly curate a product that they do not own but find desirable. These posts can also help others discover new products. For example, in the following tweet, the writer shares an image of a new Mercedes model seen on the road.

“First I’ve seen in the wild #Mercedes #sls #amg <http://t.co/1FGVJluCSt>”

Here is another tweet where the consumer is sharing information about discovering a unique Louis Vuitton bag:

“One of the most unique #LouisVuitton bags I’ve seen @Prima Moda <http://t.co/YpS3nHl4Po>”

Though the writers in both the examples above do not own the products they are tweeting about, they clearly have an opinion on and a desire for these products. Moreover, they are also helping

their followers discover and appreciate these products. In doing so, they are building their own reputation for being ‘in the know’.

Sharing of aesthetic appreciation with others as seen in the above examples can be an important reason people curate on visual social networks such as Pinterest. In her interpretive work contrasting art collectors and museum visitors, Chen (2009) suggested that ‘possession’ and ‘access’ are two different expressions of consumer desire. According to the author, possession is about having power and control over an object whereas access is about the desire for sharing the appreciation of the object with others. The responses of the museum visitors in her research highlight “the willingness of sharing the place, moments, feelings and memories and enjoying the magic instance with other people” (Chen 2009, 934). Ger and Belk’s (1999) informants also differentiated between buying a painting because “it is the thing to have” versus “enjoying looking at it, being excited by it, moved by looking at it”(189).

In contrast to the previous examples, we also found posts where the writers explicitly conveyed desire to own the mentioned branded product and where the focus is on possession and not access. Here is an example:

“I need this car in my life! #Mercedes #sls #amg <http://t.co/91rBTFVJcU>”

Here, the writer seems to be focused on having a Mercedes. Though this post is more likely to signal the writer’s taste and not wealth, its explicit focus on *having* can also be seen as a reflection of the materialistic nature of the writer. Therefore, in contrast to the posts focused on curating, such posts could lead to negative evaluations that people reserve for materialistic people (Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010).

In our data there were also instances of mentioning a brand in the context of sharing one’s opinion about a brand action or passing along some information about the brand; usually

from a company related source (such as a commercial or a website link). For example, in the following tweet, the writer expresses enthusiasm about a new campaign video launched by Louis Vuitton:

“Such a great campaign video! #LouisVuitton "Check In, Check Out!" <http://t.co/oWI8ejglau>  
<http://t.co/48UGTb3eaW>”

Here the writer is signaling knowledge and expertise by commenting on and passing along a brand initiated communication. By being an unofficial ambassador for the brand, the writer is conveying an association with the brand.

Although most of the posts in our sample can be seen as vehicles to associate with brands and their symbolic meanings, we also found a few instances of consumers trying to disassociate from brands and brand users through their tweets. For example:

“Just because you have #LouisVuitton luggage doesn't mean you have class!  
#trashyfirstclasspassengers #crewlife”

In this post, the writer is commenting upon people who might want to appropriate Louis Vuitton’s association with being classy but whose actions suggest otherwise. Here, the writer is trying to dissociate from such poseurs while at the same time is weakening the association that others might have with being a Louis Vuitton consumer and being classy. However, this post can also be interpreted as the writer trying to dissociate from the brand itself by disapproving the brand users’ actions. This is in line with past research showing that digital media has made it easier to enact identities oppositional to brands by using brands as cues for describing to others who one is not (Schau and Gilly 2003).

### ***Likable Bragging Tactics***

In addition to the four brand mentioning strategies discussed above, we also found two common tactics that consumers appear to use to manage the tension between bragging and likeability. These tactics could be used with any of the strategies described previously. Specifically, we found evidence that consumers can attempt to impact observers' evaluation of their self-presentation by (a) shifting the focus away from self and/or by (b) tempering the positivity of the presentation by sharing negatives. Table 3 below summarizes these tactics.

Table 3: Likable Bragging Tactics

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Sub-strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>
Shifting the Focus	Credit Sharing	When consumers attribute the ownership of a brand to some factor external to themselves such as a close other, luck or God.
	Basking in Reflected Glory	When the post conveys that a close other (friend or family member) owns a particular branded product.
Sharing Negatives	Self-deprecating	When the consumers mentions an owned brand along with a self-deprecating comment.
	Complaining	When the post mentions an owned brand in the context of sharing some hassle caused by the brand in one's life.

### *1) Shifting the Focus*

Shifting the focus of a positive self-presentation away from self can be a way to make the self-presentation more acceptable to the audience (Dayter 2014). Past research has shown that distancing self from one's accomplishments can lead to positive evaluations. For example, Hareli and Weiner (2000) found that accounts ascribing success to external factors such as luck or help

from others are seen as modest. Similarly, having another person present the desirable information on one's behalf (Pfeffer et al. 2006) or even restating someone else's positive statements about self can lead to more positive evaluations as compared to self-praising (Speer 2012). We found evidence for two sub-strategies under this category:

*Credit Sharing.* Consumers use this tactic to communicate possession of a reputable brand but try to come across as modest by attributing it to a person/circumstance external to their selves. Here, one can brag about one's possessions and show gratitude simultaneously by attributing whatever one has to others- a relative, friend, or even God- shifting the focus of communication away from the self. For example:

“I love it when Mum hands down her vintage luxury wallets to me. I'm starting to feel pretty lucky. #ChristianDior #LouisVuitton.”

In this tweet the consumer is attributing ownership of luxury brands to her mother as well as luck. Posts thanking God for one's possessions as well as those commenting on how blessed one feels also fall under this category.

*Basking in Reflected Glory.* Posts in this category convey that a close other (a friend or a family member) owns a particular branded product. For example:

“My moms getting a new car #mercedes”

Research on indirect self-presentation has shown that people manage their presentations by associating themselves with successful others, a process called “basking in reflected glory” (Cialdini et al. 1976). Similarly, as in this example, we found evidence of people posting about the luxury brands owned by their family or friends. According to the balance theory (Heider

1958), associated things are generally perceived as similar. Therefore, conveying associations of one's close others with reputable brands can be a way of crafting a positive self-presentation while avoiding direct talk about one's own possessions.

## 2) *Sharing Negatives*

Past research has found that people try to tone down their positive self-presentations on social media by tempering their positive self-related claims (Dayter 2014). For example, people append contextual cues such as emoticons, internet slangs such as “lol” (abbreviation for “laughing out loud”) to positive statements about the self in order to convey that they are not taking themselves too seriously (West and Trester 2013). We found evidence for two sub-strategies in this category that tried to downplay the consumer's or the brand's attributes respectively.

*Self-deprecating.* People using this strategy deprecate themselves on a relatively unimportant dimension while trying to gain the reputational benefits attached with the brand. Including a self-deprecating comment along with a brand mention may also help to reduce the perceived distance between the communicator and the audience and can make the communicator more likable (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). Though we did not find many examples of this strategy in our sample, it appears to be common in the microblogging world (Dayter 2014; Zappavigna 2013) and has been labeled ‘humblebragging’ in the popular press (Wittels 2012). Here is one example from our sample: “My whip for the day. Oh the places we will go! #Mercedes #benz #notmine #zoom <http://t.co/bhbUXB1dy0>.”

In this tweet, the writer conveyed that she is driving a Mercedes. However, she self-deprecates at the same time by implying that the Mercedes is not hers using the hashtag “notmine.”

*Complaining.* Consumers use this tactic to convey association with a reputable brand in the context of sharing some minor hassle caused by the brand in one’s life. Any communication showing a downside of one’s possessions has a higher chance of being categorized as sharing (one’s problems) rather than bragging. For example:

“129.00 for the part & 629.00 for labor to fix a window~ #FML guess I can do the 50 cent piece of plastic #mercedes.”

In this tweet, the user is complaining about the high cost of getting his Mercedes repaired using the Internet slang “FML” (acronym for Fuck My Life). Past research (Cohen and Olshtain 1993; Vásquez 2011) has shown that complaints often occur as a ‘speech act set’ (i.e., they co-occur with other speech acts such as warnings, suggestions etc.). Vásquez (2011) showed that a significant proportion of complaints on the review website Tripadvisor.com combined overall negative evaluation with some positive appraisal as the reviewers avoid giving off the impression that they are complaining. Similarly, here we see that self-presentations mentioning one’s luxury brands can contain some minor negative information, essentially creating a “speech act set” that combines complaining with bragging.

## **Conclusion**

Consumers use brand mentions to build desirable associations about their wealth, taste, or knowledge. At the same time, mentioning brands can lead to negative evaluations if construed as

bragging by others. Our main contribution is to demonstrate how consumers calibrate what they say about brands to avoid negative evaluations. Our findings are in line with past research showing that social media users are aware that overtly positive self-presentations can lead to negative impressions (Barash et al. 2010; Dayter 2014).

We found that though there were a few consumers who were very explicit in conveying their possession of luxury brands, most mentioned luxury brands in the context of what they were doing, feeling or thinking about the brand. Research has shown that two common motives for engaging in WOM are product/brand involvement and self-presentation (Dichter 1966; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998). It is likely that by mentioning a brand in the context of doing, loving or opinion sharing, consumers provide cues to their involvement with the brand making self-expression as a more likely explanation for their behavior as compared to self-presentation.

Moreover, bragging that is relevant to the communication context is less likely to be viewed as a violation of conversational norms, and therefore, is viewed more favorably (Grice 1975; Holtgraves 2002). However, the criteria of relevance are more relaxed in non-directed social media communications such as microblogging updates (whether on a microblogging website such as Twitter or as a 'status update' feature on social networks). As such posts are generally not directed to a particular receiver; they are assumed to be "author-centric" (Kramer and Chung 2011; Puschmann 2009) and the only criteria for relevance seems to be that they contain some information pertaining to what the author is doing, feeling or thinking at the moment (Bazarova et al. 2012). The brand mentioning strategies of *doing*, *loving* and *opinion sharing* seem to be in line with these criteria of relevance for microblogging updates.

In addition to the four brand mentioning strategies, we also found that consumers use the tactics of (a) shifting the focus of the communication away from the self and/or (b) tempering its positivity to impact the evaluations observers make of them. Though there were posts focused only on ‘having’ the brand, we also found instances of posts focused on others or on the brand itself. Also, though we found that most of the posts were uniformly positive there was some variance in terms of how positive or balanced the posts were. The strategic balancing of valence in posts suggests that consumers recognize (either consciously or unconsciously) the tension between positive self-presentations using brand mentions and likeability.

In sum, in line with the previous research in psychology, communication and linguistics, our findings suggest that it is possible to avoid negative evaluations while bragging via brand mentions if (1) the brand is mentioned in the context of sharing one’s activities, thoughts or feelings, (2) the focus is shifted away from self and on to others, and/or (3) the positivity of the self-presentation is tempered. Moreover, by mentioning a brand in the context of *doing*, *loving* or *opinion sharing*, consumers can provide brand attachment cues to observers which make inferences of self-expression more likely than inferences of self-presentation.

### **Managerial Implications**

The brand mentioning strategies we identified also reflect common tactics used by firms to encourage brand mentions on social media. First, some brands encourage consumers to share their purchases with their social networks stimulating posts in the ‘having’ category. For example, online retailers such as Amazon.com encourage customers to share their purchases (of books, clothes, vacations etc.) with a standard default message such as “I just bought X.”

Second, firms encourage brand mentioning using the ‘doing’ strategy by encouraging consumers to share experiences that involve the brand and updates about what they are doing with the brand. For example, with the Nike Fuel band, consumers can easily track and share their daily workout with their friends. Third, firms encourage consumers to publicly enact relationships with brands using the ‘loving’ strategy. For example, brands ask satisfied consumers to ‘like’ them on social media or to write supportive testimonials for them or share brand-related stories. Fourth, firms are giving more and more opportunities to consumers to ‘share their opinion’ publicly. Consumers can curate beautiful images of products they desire on visual social networks such as Pinterest, Instagram and Tumblr for “serendipitous discovery” by others (Hall and Zarro 2012). Moreover, firms are encouraging consumers to create a wish list of things they want and share with their social networks. For example, Amazon lets consumers share their wish lists with their social networks. Finally, encouraging consumers to share company generated communication or other brand related information has been a primary goal of many social media marketing strategies.

Even though marketers use these tactics, there is no empirical work demonstrating the incidence or effectiveness of these strategies and their downstream consequences for the consumer conveying the information or for the mentioned brands. In fact, when researchers study brands mentions in social media they maintain a gross definition of the construct, noting simply whether a given brand is mentioned or not (Berger 2012). Our research advances this dialogue by qualifying the *types* of brand mentions in social media and exploring their differential effects. This typology can be a first step towards developing a theory that can guide practitioners in the choice of encouraging a particular brand mentioning strategy.

## **Future Research Directions**

The descriptive nature of this research precludes us from making any claims about the success of the strategies and tactics we identified in terms of conveying one's associations with brands while avoiding negative evaluations. Moreover, our small sample size is not conducive to statistical analysis of the frequency of occurrence of particular strategies. However, this typology can help us develop a more nuanced characterization of the word-of-mouth phenomenon and come up with interesting research questions that can be tested empirically.

We propose that the inferences that consumers make based on others' brand mentions and the narrative surrounding those mentions can have important implications for how the brand is perceived. A fruitful step for future research is to examine how the use of these strategies can impact consumer and brand perceptions. Observers' impressions of the communicator and mentioned brands are likely to be influenced by how they interpret the brand mentions in self-presentations (Reis and Shaver 1988). People try to make sense of others' self-presentations by considering their reasons for sharing that information (Miller et al. 1992). Past research has shown that when observers infer a self-presentational motive based on conspicuous brand usage, the attitude towards the consumer is adversely affected (Ferraro et al. 2012; Pancer 2013). Therefore, inferences of self-presentational motives based on the brand mentioning strategy used can lead to negative evaluation of the target consumer.

Moreover, if consumers infer that a brand is mentioned in a positive WOM communication for self-presentational reasons, they are likely to discount that information (Chen and Lurie 2012; Friestad and Wright 1994). Inference of self-presentational motives for brand mentioning can also lead to an inference that the consumer prefers the brand because of its

signaling potential and not due to any inherent preference for the brand. Therefore, observers may infer that the brand does not offer any intrinsic value which might negatively impact the attitude towards the brand.

Moreover, research has shown that consumers' behaviors are dictated by concerns regarding how others might see them (Berger and Heath 2008; Pancer 2013; White and Dahl 2006). As consumers don't like others who are seen as engaging in self-presentation (Ferraro et al. 2012), it is likely that they will try to avoid buying or talking about brands associated with self-presentational motives. Therefore, examining the downstream consequences of the different brand mentioning strategies can be a fruitful topic for future research.

Understanding consumer self-presentation via brand mentions on social media is important for marketers due to its easily observable and highly public nature (Berger 2013). It is almost impossible to visit an online social network without being exposed to others' posts about their consumption experiences (Bernstein 2012). In a world where marketers are creating more and more opportunities for consumers to mention brands (Berger 2013), it is important to understand the impact of exposure to such consumption related bragging on impressions of the brands as well as brand users. By encouraging marketers to pay attention to not only the frequency but also to the context of brand mentions, this research can be helpful in initiating social interactions that will enhance brand value.

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