

# This ad's for you: how personalized SNS advertisements affect the consumer–brand relationship

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Firms can now access users' digital histories due to advances in technology and deliver personalized recommendations through social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook that offers advanced targeting options and reliable conversion tracking. This paper aims to examine the effects of personalized advertisements on SNS on the relationship between consumers and brands, tests the impact of brand attachment and experience on brand equity through personalized SNS ads and investigates the influence of such ads on branded products and services.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Two studies were conducted. Study 1 ( $n = 275$ ) was a survey-based design that leveraged structural equation modeling to test the hypotheses, while Study 2 ( $n = 350$ ) used experimental design to compare two groups who saw service brand ads versus those who saw product brand ads.

**Findings** – Results showed that SNS ads supporting the brand had a significant positive impact on respondents' brand attachment and brand experience. In both studies, brand experience positively impacted all the elements of brand equity, while brand attachment was found to impact brand loyalty.

**Originality/value** – The findings illustrate how personalized ads for brands appearing on SNS can change consumer perceptions, thus affecting the consumer–brand relationship. The results bode well for brands considering leveraging SNS in their marketing mix, particularly when the strategy behind the advertising is brand building.

**Keywords** SNS advertising, Consumer–brand relationship, Brand equity, Brand loyalty, Facebook

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Research examining the effects of perceived personalization of marketing communications on consumer behavior in traditional media is increasing, but accompanying research in social media remains underexplored (Aguirre *et al.*, 2015; Tucker, 2014). Fortunately for marketers, advances in technology have allowed firms to capture users' digital histories, enabling practitioners to produce personalized recommendations that match each user's individual needs (Zanker *et al.*, 2010). The objective of personalization is to deliver the right content to the right person at the right time, maximizing immediate and future business opportunities (Tam and Ho, 2006). Social network sites (SNS) are an option for marketers and feature advanced targeting options, reliable conversion tracking and prevalence on mobile devices (Ganguly, 2015). However, questions persist as to how

personalized advertising strategies on SNS can impact customer perceptions of an advertiser's brand because of the complexities of the consumer–brand relationship.

Research has shown that users tend to have a more favorable attitude toward ads on SNS that are liked by their peers or friends (Jung *et al.*, 2016) and that user-generated messages are more recommended than marketer-generated advertising (Chatterjee, 2011). Hence, it is essential for brands to understand how they can leverage personalized SNS ads to create a lasting impact, eventually leading to favorable advertiser brand-related perceptions and, ultimately, consumer behaviors based on those perceptions (Logan *et al.*, 2012). While quite limited, there has been recent research pertaining to the impact of personalization in SNS advertising on consumer attitudes toward the advertiser. Tran (2017) examined the impact of personalized Facebook ads and concluded that personalized SNS ads helped reduce skepticism towards advertising while increasing ad attitude and ad credibility, further reducing ad avoidance, and ultimately leading to purchase intention. In another study (Shanahan *et al.*, 2019),

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results showed that personalized SNS ads increased consumer brand engagement and brand attachment, which further positively impacted consumer loyalty and brand quality perceptions. Personalized ads in Facebook were further shown to positively impact brand relationship quality through consumer brand identification and engagement (Tran *et al.*, 2020b). Finally, Tran *et al.* (2020a) found that personalized SNS ads positively impacted consumers brand identification and self-brand connection, which in turn impacted brand equity. Further, results showed that consumers brand identification and self-brand connection mediated the relationship between perceived personalization and brand equity, and that SNS ads had a significant effect on respondents' brand usage intent.

Despite these findings, it is not known what the effects are of personalized SNS ads in terms of the customer brand experience and the effects on brand attachment. Nor is it understood whether SNS ads for product brands versus service brands have differing effects on consumers. To address these gaps, and to respond to the calls for more research on consumer engagement in SNS marketing (Brodie *et al.*, 2014; Dessart, 2017; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016), the primary objectives of this research are threefold:

- examine the effects of perceived personalization on brand experience, brand attachment, and brand equity in a social media channel;
- test the impact of brand attachment and experience on brand equity through personalized SNS ads; and
- investigate the impact of perceived personalization on branded products and services to determine if brand type has an effect on brand loyalty.

To accomplish these objectives, strengthen the findings from one study to the next, and extend the nascent research field of personalized SNS advertising, two studies were conducted that leveraged multiple empirical methods.

Combined, these studies provide theoretical and practical implications that are of significant value to academics and practitioners. For researchers, relationships empirically validated in this research provide a framework as to how personalization creates a cognitive and affective mechanism that translates into brand-related behavior, thus ultimately contributing to enhanced brand equity. The study was conducted in the context of SNS, and thus, the findings help digital marketers design a personalized and holistic brand experience interconnecting different branding elements which could contribute to favorable outcomes such as heightened brand awareness, quality perceptions and loyalty.

## Literature review

Historically, personalized advertising has not only created a favorable impression but also increased the personal relevance of the ads (Anand and Shachar, 2009; Kalyanaraman and Sundar, 2006). In a digital setting, personalized advertisements increase customer click-through intentions when consumers feel less vulnerable about the advertiser's data collecting techniques (overt vs covert) or when the ads seem more trustworthy (Aguirre *et al.*, 2015). Further, personalization of mobile phone advertising tends to create a favorable attitude among customers, which ultimately leads to consumption intentions of the advertised brand (Xu, 2006). The more

personalized a digital ad, the more relevant it is to customers, which leads to positive evaluation of the ad and greater clicking intention (Kim, 2013), as well as creates a positive attitude toward the ad and intention to forward the ad (Walrave *et al.*, 2018). The effectiveness of personalized advertising further improves when SNS allow enhanced privacy control to users (Tucker, 2014).

Additional research found that consumers paid more attention to personalized advertising, but increased level of personalization made them feel discomfort about the availability of their personal data to the advertisers (Malheiros *et al.*, 2012). However, when consumers have more desire for information transparency, they are less willing to be profiled online by a familiar site for personalized service or advertising (Awad and Krishnan, 2006). These results thus warrant an investigation of the consumer–brand relationship in terms of attachment and experience, and their effects on brand equity. Brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998) provides the foundation for such an examination.

## Consumer–brand relationship

Brands are, to consumers, “an active, contributing partner in the dyadic relationship that exists between the person and the brand” (Aaker and Fournier, 1995, p. 393) founded on the consumer's investment in a long-term relationship built on love, trust and exclusivity (Fournier, 1998). The consumer–brand relationship is the voluntary or independently enforced link between an individual and a brand (Chang and Chieng, 2006) that leads to such aspects as brand commitment and self-brand connection. Because consumers are willing to engage with brands in such a relational sense, marketers have been able to advance their efforts beyond the traditional single transaction and instead work to develop a relationship between the consumer and the brand over time.

Relationship inferences are formed through communications with consumers (Fournier, 2009) allowing marketers to create functional and utilitarian meaning, and/or psychological and emotional meaning for their brands in developing that consumer–brand relationship. Satisfaction is the consumer's perception of brand quality based on transactions over time, and leads to trust, which is the consumer's belief that the brand will act with integrity. Once trust is established, a personal connection is formed (Hess and Story, 2005) that can lead to development of affective response to the brand through brand attachment and brand experience.

The concept of brand attachment has its foundation on the principles of attachment theory, which defined attachment as “a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby, 1980, p. 194).

The brand attachment construct is a second order factor comprised of three first-order factors – connection, affection and passion – which impact outcome variables such as brand loyalty and willingness to pay a premium to obtain a desired brand (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). The more attached the consumer is with the brand, the more they will exhibit brand purchase behaviors (Park *et al.*, 2010). Even moderate levels of brand attachment are associated with a customer's purchase intention, willingness to pay, likelihood to indulge in word of mouth and brand forgiveness (Fedorikhin *et al.*, 2008). Further, brand attachment can be enhanced through a positive

brand experience (Dolbec and Chebat, 2013) creating positive cognitive and affective impressions.

Brand experience is developed not only when customers search and shop for a brand, but also when they are exposed to brand-related marketing communications elements such as personalized advertisements. The effect that a marcom stimulus has on the consumer-brand experience is not a one-to-one correspondence, but rather affects more than one experience (Brakus *et al.*, 2009) because customers develop brand experiences when they have an impression of the brand as a result of the holistic offering of the brand (Klaus and Maklan, 2007). By managing both functional and emotional elements of an offering, a brand can deliver distinctive and unique experiences (Berry *et al.*, 2002; Haeckel *et al.*, 2003) with the goal of creating brand experiences to enhance brand equity (Payne *et al.*, 2009; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Simmons, 2009).

## Hypothesis development

While matching customers' preferences to advertised products, personalized advertising lessens consumers' search time (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2002). However, individuals may develop unfavorable attitudes to poorly targeted or irrelevant messages (Pavlou and Stewart, 2000) or have concerns with browsing data being shared (Boerman *et al.*, 2017). With its personalized features, SNS have become a strategic marketing channel for online firms to reach out to customers more effectively (Tran, 2017). While personalization is believed to create a positive customer experience (Hussain, 2019), personalized marketing efforts leveraging social media can affect consumers' brand and product perceptions, while buying intention ultimately remain unclear (Edelman, 2010; Barwise and Meehan, 2010).

Based on the previous research that examines the effects of personalized advertisements in a digital environment, the literature on consumer-brand relationships, and the gaps in our understanding they expose, personalized advertising is hypothesized to positively influence brand experience and brand attachment. Brand experience is a combination of internal consumer response (affect and cognition) and behavioral response to brand-related stimuli (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). On the other hand, brand attachment is an affective based construct that refers to feelings between an individual and an object or brand. Thus, it is proposed that personalized advertising will create a dual cognitive and an affective reaction, which leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1. Exposure to personalized SNS advertising is positively related to *brand experience*.
- H2. Exposure to personalized SNS advertising is positively related to *brand attachment*.

A relationship is also expected between brand experience and brand attachment wherein brand experience acts as the cognitive response leading to the affective reaction of brand attachment. Building on this further, it has been proven in attachment theory research that consumers tend to form emotional bonds from multiple brand experiences and brand interactions (Bowlby, 1980; Thomson *et al.*, 2005;

Ramaseshan and Stein, 2014). From this, the following hypothesis is suggested:

- H3. *Brand experience* is positively related to *brand attachment* when consumers are exposed to brands advertised on SNS.

Brand equity comprises “a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers” (Aaker, 1991 p. 15). Consumer behavior brand equity (CBBE) is “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993, p. 2). Drawing on this conceptualization, we argue that brand equity could be positioned in the customer's mind as soon as they feel, see or hear the brand through different channels, such as social media.

Brand equity consists of four fundamental components: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness and brand association (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). *Perceived quality* is the customer's assessment of the overall superiority of goods or services as compared to competitors (Zeithaml, 1988). Positive evaluation of quality can contribute to customer retention and loyalty among existing customers, justify increased prices, and attract customers from competitors that are not high in quality (Babakus *et al.*, 2004; Severi *et al.*, 2014). *Brand loyalty* refers to the extent to which customers keep purchasing the same brand over a period of time (Aaker, 1991). Loyal customers are immune to gimmicks from rival brands such as price decreases, new products or promotional incentives.

*Brand awareness* is the ability of a customer to remember and recognize a brand amidst different situations. It can only be achieved through careful designing of customer's brand experiences, purchase experiences and enhancing overall familiarity with the brand (Atilgan *et al.*, 2005). *Brand association*, on the other hand, is the emotional and positive feelings that a consumer has toward a brand, which makes them willing to spend a premium price to purchase the brand (Hamann *et al.*, 2007). There is strong evidence of inter-relationships between brand awareness and brand association wherein successful associations between a consumer and a brand are possible when brand awareness is deeply embedded in consumers' minds (Pitta and Katsanis, 1995) meaning that brand association and brand awareness can be combined into one component due to their inseparability (Yoo and Donthu, 2001).

It has been shown that advertisements enhance dimensions of brand equity, increasing brand awareness and fostering favorable brand quality perceptions, which eventually lead to favorable behavioral intentions (Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995; Tran *et al.*, 2020b), as well as increased brand awareness, brand associations and brand quality perceptions (Yoo *et al.*, 2000). In consideration of this research, it is hypothesized that personalized advertising creates a multisensory and cognitive experience among customers, which results in a positive impact on the dimensions of brand equity. Hence:

- H4. *Brand experience* is positively related to perceived quality of brands when consumers are exposed to brands advertised on SNS.

- H5. Brand experience is positively related to the brand loyalty of brands when consumers are exposed to brands advertised on SNS.
- H6. Brand experience is positively related to association with/awareness of brands when consumers are exposed to brands advertised on SNS.

As noted earlier, brand attachment is an affective construct that captures the emotional bond a consumer creates with a specific brand based on experiences and interactions with the brand. Existing research has shown that consumers having a pleasurable feeling about an entity will positively influence their overall judgment about the quality standards of that entity. This will happen particularly in the hedonic context of consumption where consumers use the amount of pleasure received in the previous experience as a heuristic to make subsequent quality evaluations (Compeau et al., 1998; Jiang and Wang, 2006). Emotion-laden brand attachment is proposed to have a positive impact on perceived quality of a brand. It is thought that consumers with high brand attachment will tend to forge long-term relationships with a brand and exhibit positive brand equity related behaviors (Zhou et al., 2012; Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Shanahan et al., 2019). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H7. Brand attachment is positively related to perceived brand quality of brands when consumers are exposed to brands advertised on SNS.
- H8. Brand attachment is positively related to brand loyalty of brands when consumers are exposed to brands advertised on SNS.
- H9. Brand attachment is positively related to brand association with/awareness of brands when consumers are exposed to brands advertised on SNS.

All hypotheses from the study are represented in Figure 1.

### Methodology

Facebook, the world’s largest social network, was selected as the platform of interest in this study for numerous reasons. First, Facebook has 2.45 billion active users per month, and as such 92% of companies on SNS have selected Facebook as a marketing tool. Second, advertising is a main source of revenue for Facebook. Third, Facebook provides a platform in which

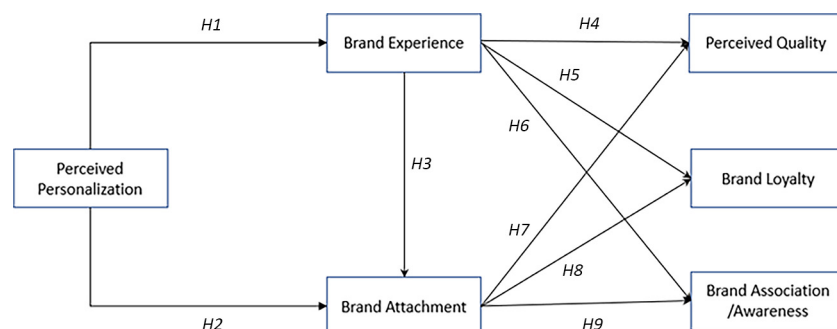
advertisers can engage with their target customers through marketing communications strategies such as personalized advertising and interactive digital advertising. Finally, perceived personalization of Facebook ads positively impacts consumer brand engagement and brand attachment (Shanahan et al., 2019), which in turn should have a favorable effect on perceived quality and brand loyalty.

### Study 1

To test the hypotheses, an online survey was distributed via Amazon Mechanical Turk. A screening question was used to ensure that participants had a Facebook account. Qualified participants were then given the definition of personalized advertising to ensure participants had a basic understanding of this concept. Adopting similar priming methodology for SNS advertising research (Li, 2016; Tran et al., 2020a), participants then reported whether they had seen a personalized advertisement on their Facebook account. Participants who answered “No” were excluded from the analysis. Those who answered “Yes” were asked to recall a situation in which they were involved in an activity online that was followed later by an advertisement for that brand appearing on Facebook. They were then asked to provide the name of a brand they had seen advertised. Those who could not recall the brand were excluded from the final sample. Of the 359 participants who initiated the survey, 84 were removed for not meeting qualifications, incomplete responses or failing to follow directions, leaving a final sample of 275 (76.6%) for analysis. The sample was 56.4% female (n = 155), skewed slightly younger with 46.3% less than 30 years old, and skewed toward more educated individuals with 52% (n = 143) having bachelor’s degrees. Most importantly to this research, almost half the respondents (46.2%, n = 127) indicated they spend 1–3 h per day on Facebook.

The study adopted existing measurement scales from related research. The first-order construct *perceived personalization* (Srinivasan et al., 2002) was measured on a five-item, seven-point Likert-style scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), while *brand equity* (Yoo and Donthu, 2001), another first-order construct, was a 13-item scale with three dimensions: perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand associations. For the two second-order constructs (*brand experience* and *brand attachment*), all items of the first-order variable were averaged and the average scores were used as observed variables (indicators) in the structural equation

Figure 1 Conceptual model



modeling analysis (Zeugner-Roth *et al.*, 2015). Using this method, *brand experience* (Brakus *et al.*, 2009) was measured by four indicators – average score of items belonging to affective, behavioral, intellectual and sensory factors – on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). *Brand attachment* (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) was measured by three indicators – average score of the items for affection, connection and passion – also on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very well). Those scores were calculated after removing low or cross-loading items. Partial least squares (PLS) path modeling analysis was used in this research for two reasons: the conceptual model is relatively complex and captures not only direct effects but also indirect effects; and this method is not strictly bound by the normal distribution assumption. Although PLS-SEM does not produce the model fit as the covariance-based counterpart does, what this approach can do is to maximize the explained variance of latent variables and use this as a sufficient alternative fit index (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2014). All scales were reflectively measured, and the model was tested using SmartPLS 3 software (Ringle *et al.*, 2014).

## Results

The measurement model was analyzed for reliability and validity (Chin and Newsted, 1999). Reliability was evaluated using three criteria: factor loadings, composite reliability and internal consistency reliability. The results showed that all items loaded well on their corresponding constructs except for six items due to low loadings, and therefore these items were removed – four from brand experience and two from brand equity. The results from the remaining items revealed high factor loadings (0.861–0.99), high composite reliability (0.915–0.985) and high internal consistency reliability (0.861–0.977) in all latent constructs (Table 1).

Average variance explained (AVE) was used to measure convergent validity. The AVE values of all latent variables were greater than 0.7 (0.721–0.956); therefore, convergent validity was established (Hair *et al.*, 2009). Discriminant validity was tested by using a comparison between the AVE value of one construct and squared Pearson's correlation coefficients between the other construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was confirmed since the AVEs were greater than the squared correlation coefficients (Table 1). As construct reliability and validity were established, it was appropriate to test the structural model.

### Structural model

After the measurement model was tested, structural model analysis was conducted (Hulland, 1999). An assessment of the structural model revealed that the  $R^2$  for brand experience (0.555), perceived quality (0.390), brand loyalty (0.57) and brand association/awareness (0.414) showed that brand experience and brand attachment were moderate to strong predictors of brand equity components in the context of personalized advertising on Facebook. Additionally, as all  $Q^2$  values were greater than zero for all related constructs, the path model's predictive relevance  $Q^2$  for corresponding dependent constructs were confirmed (Hair *et al.*, 2016) (Table 2).

Next, direction and significance levels of path coefficients estimated in the PLS analysis were tested using a bootstrapping

resampling procedure. Means of asymptotic  $t$ -statistics generated through this procedure were used to evaluate the goodness of path coefficients. The number of bootstrapping samples was set to 5,000 and standard error estimates were assessed through  $t$ -tests (Hulland, 1999; Sellin and Keeves, 1997). That way, the inner model (structural model) evaluation of PLS explained the path estimates of the independent variables on dependent variables. Path coefficients and their significant values were used to test the hypotheses.

The results showed that perceived personalization of the SNS ads had a significant impact on brand experience ( $\beta = 0.745$ ,  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ) and on brand attachment ( $\beta = 0.317$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), thus supporting  $H1$  and  $H2$ . Further, brand experience had a significant effect on brand attachment ( $\beta = 0.448$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting  $H3$ . Brand experience was significantly related to the three brand equity components: perceived quality ( $\beta = 0.380$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.508$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and brand association/awareness ( $\beta = 0.269$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore  $H4$ ,  $H5$  and  $H6$  are supported. However, brand attachment only had a significant effect on brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.246$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), providing support for  $H8$ , but it did not have significant effects on perceived quality ( $\beta = 0.109$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) nor on brand association and awareness ( $\beta = 0.014$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore,  $H7$  and  $H9$  were not supported (Table 2).

## Discussion

The results show that personalization of the recalled SNS ad had a significant positive impact on respondents' brand attachment and brand experience. In this study, brand attachment, which signifies bonding between the consumer and a brand, was shown to be significantly impacted by brand experience, thus exhibiting the role of internal (a combination of intellectual, affective, sensory) and behavioral responses generated through brand experience (Brakus *et al.*, 2009) in response to brand stimuli, further contributing to emotional attachment between the respondent and the brand, which is significant new finding in the context of personalized advertising in SNS. Brand experience was found to positively impact all the elements of brand equity (quality, loyalty, awareness and association) as hypothesized, and provides reaffirmation to the view that marketing communications stimuli such as advertising is capable of creating a cognitive brand experience that can contribute to heightened brand equity perceptions (Dolbec and Chebat, 2013; Yoo *et al.*, 2000).

However, brand attachment was found to impact only the brand loyalty dimension of brand equity, and not awareness/association, nor quality perceptions. This research also predicted that consumers will use their attachment with the brand as a heuristic to evaluate brand quality and also develop brand awareness and association. However, this was not supported. A possible explanation could be that consumers might have a strong emotional bond with a brand and might even feel some degree of loyalty to the brand, but an attachment does not automatically translate into higher quality perceptions, associations or awareness without an active experience with the brand.

In this study, respondents were asked to recall an ad that showed up on their Facebook account after they had been

Table 1 Measurement model evaluation

Items	Study 1 (n = 275)					Study 2 (n = 350)						
	α	CR	AVE	AVE > Corr2	Loadings	t-value	α	CR	AVE	AVE > Corr2	Loadings	t-value
Perceived personalization (Srinivasan et al., 2002)	0.906	0.930	0.727	0.727 > 0.555	0.872	48.605	0.884	0.915	0.682	0.682 > 0.441	0.836	42.504
1. This ad makes purchase recommendations that match my needs												
2. I think that this ad enables me to order products that are tailor-made for me												
3. Overall, this ad is tailored to my situation					0.884	59.778					0.818	39.801
4. This ad makes me feel that I am a unique customer					0.844	36.649					0.811	33.729
5. I believe that this ad is customized to my needs					0.816	32.860					0.838	59.471
Brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009)					0.846	35.762					0.825	34.287
1. Average score of items of "affective" factor	0.932	0.952	0.831	0.831 > 0.555	0.925	78.104	0.917	0.941	0.801	0.801 > 0.542	0.918	90.993
2. Average score of items of "behavioral" factor					0.853	30.581					0.869	53.680
3. Average score of items of "intellectual" factor					0.931	93.027					0.881	61.604
4. Average score of items of "sensory" factor					0.935	107.820					0.910	89.372
Brand attachment (Thomson et al., 2005)												
1. Average score of items of "affection" factor	0.977	0.985	0.956	0.956 > 0.468	0.977	238.508	0.965	0.977	0.935	0.935 > 0.518	0.962	172.924
2. Average score of items of "connection" factor					0.976	243.459					0.966	209.613
3. Average score of items of "passion" factor					0.980	306.077					0.972	295.001
Brand equity (Yoo et al., 2001)												
Perceived quality	0.937	0.952	0.798	0.798 > 0.591	0.886	36.936	0.930	0.947	0.781	0.781 > 0.382	0.868	41.009
1. This brand is of high quality					0.900	51.514					0.906	66.493
2. The likely quality of this brand is extremely high												
3. The likelihood that this brand would be functional is very high					0.859	32.768					0.873	53.605
4. The likelihood this brand is reliable is very high					0.914	70.560					0.875	45.007
5. This brand must be of very good quality					0.906	53.677					0.894	69.698
Brand loyalty												
1. I consider myself to be loyal to this brand	0.861	0.915	0.782	0.782 > 0.526	0.905	73.491	0.835	0.901	0.753	0.753 > 0.542	0.918	117.109
2. This brand would be my first choice					0.881	54.341					0.896	71.692
3. I will not buy other brands if this brand is available at the store					0.867	41.384					0.783	22.122
Brand associations with brand awareness												
1. I know what this brand looks like	0.904	0.928	0.721	0.721 > 0.591	0.866	46.504	0.869	0.906	0.658	0.658 > 0.382	0.851	37.336
2. I can recognize this brand among other competing brands												
3. I am aware of this brand					0.854	37.740					0.862	45.986
4. Some characteristics of this brand come to my mind quickly					0.836	31.905					0.754	21.086
5. I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of this brand					0.837	31.775					0.779	27.341
					0.855	38.153					0.804	27.414

Table 2 The results of hypotheses testing

Path	Study 1		Study 2		Hypothesis
	Coefficient	p-value	Coefficient	p-value	
Personalization → Brand Experience	0.745	0.000	0.661	0.000	H1: supported
Personalization → Brand Attachment	0.317	0.000	0.281	0.000	H2: supported
Brand Experience → Brand Attachment	0.448	0.000	0.534	0.000	H3: supported
Brand Experience → Perceived Quality	0.380	0.000	0.245	0.000	H4: supported
Brand Experience → Brand Loyalty	0.508	0.000	0.505	0.000	H5: supported
Brand Experience → Brand Association/Awareness	0.269	0.000	0.200	0.003	H6: supported
Brand Attachment → Perceived Quality	0.109	0.184	0.272	0.000	H7: mixed*
Brand Attachment → Brand Loyalty	0.246	0.000	0.299	0.000	H8: supported
Brand Attachment → Brand Association/Awareness	0.014	0.856	−0.013	0.811	H9: not supported
R <sup>2</sup> (Q <sup>2</sup> ) Brand Experience	0.555 (0.431)		0.436 (0.346)		
R <sup>2</sup> (Q <sup>2</sup> ) Brand Attachment	0.512 (0.461)		0.562 (0.523)		
R <sup>2</sup> (Q <sup>2</sup> ) Perceived Quality	0.390 (0.287)		0.341 (0.262)		
R <sup>2</sup> (Q <sup>2</sup> ) Brand Loyalty	0.570 (0.414)		0.596 (0.441)		
R <sup>2</sup> (Q <sup>2</sup> ) Brand Association/Awareness	0.414 (0.275)		0.398 (0.257)		

Notes: Controlling variables include age, sex, income and brand familiarity; (\*) H7 is not supported in Study 1, but supported in Study 2

involved in a search activity for a product or brand. Because customers may have different perceptions between brand types (Love *et al.*, 2010), to further examine the effects of personalized advertising in SNS on consumer–brand relationships and to strengthen the findings from Study 1 by using more specific examples of such advertising, a second study was initiated that identified advertising by a specific brand. The other purpose for Study 2 is to observe if personalized advertising implemented in SNS have differing effects when the advertiser was a service brand versus a product brand.

### Study 2

In this study, adopting the methodology used in prior social media research (Shanahan, Tran, and Taylor, 2019), four brands were selected that included two product brands (Nike and Dell) and two service brands (American Airlines and Texas Roadhouse). All four brands were chosen based on familiarity and marketing reach. For example, according to Interbrand, Nike is the 11<sup>th</sup> most valuable brand and has 35 million followers on Facebook, while Dell ranked number 63 on the Interbrand list in 2019, has more than 200 employees managing its social media efforts (Gingiss, 2017) and has almost 1 million Facebook followers. American Airlines ranks third for passengers carried in the USA and total passengers carried worldwide, ranks higher than any other US-based airline for passengers carried internationally (International Air Transport Association, 2019) and has 2.6 million followers on Facebook, while *Full Service Restaurant News* named Texas Roadhouse its brand of the year in 2019 and the restaurant chain leverages numerous social media platforms for its marketing efforts (Kats, 2012) and has more than 2.7 million Facebook followers.

As was done in Study 1, this study adopted existing measurement scales for perceived personalization, brand experience, brand attachment and brand equity. Like the first study, all items of the first-order variable were averaged and the average scores were used as observed variables (indicators) in the structural equation modeling analysis. All scales were

reflectively measured and the model was tested using SmartPLS 3 software. However, in this study participants were provided with a scenario (one ad for each brand) that indicated they had seen a personalized ad based on their prior online search. To illustrate, the scenario for the Dell laptop (product brand) read:

Imagine you were searching online to find a new Dell laptop that meets your expectations in terms of brand, screen size, color, price and configuration. One day later when you opened your Facebook account, you recognized there was an advertisement for a Dell laptop.

The scenario for Nike was similar, except respondents were told they were searching for shoes. Other scenarios for service brands were created in a similar fashion with some modifications to contextualize the scenarios. To illustrate, the scenario for American Airlines service brand read:

Imagine you were planning a vacation with your family and attempted to buy flight tickets. You searched online to find more information about the airline company like price, departure time, arrival time, layover time, airplane, flight availability and so on. One day later when you opened your Facebook account, you recognized there was an advertisement for American Airlines.

The scenario was similar for Texas Roadhouse except respondents were told they were trying to find a good restaurant for a party with friends and were searching for information such as menu, prices, location and reviews. The survey was again distributed online via MTurk. In total, 350 completed observations were included in the analysis. The sample was 50% female ( $n = 175$ ) and relatively young with 78.3% younger than 40 years old. A majority had bachelor's degree or less (86.3%,  $n = 302$ ). Again, importantly for this research, those who spent 1–3 h a day on Facebook was 41.7% ( $n = 146$ ).

### Results

Using the same measurements as in Study 1, the model of reflective constructs was analyzed for reliability and validity. Analysis revealed high factor loadings (0.754 – 0.972), high composite reliability (0.901 – 0.977) and high internal consistency reliability (0.835–0.965) in all latent constructs. The AVE of all latent variables were greater than 0.5 (0.658 – 0.935);

therefore, convergent validity was established (Hair *et al.*, 2009). Discriminant validity was confirmed, as the AVEs were greater than the squared correlation coefficients (Table 2). An assessment of the structural model for the  $R^2$  of brand experience (0.436), brand attachment (0.562), perceived quality (0.341), brand loyalty (0.596) and brand association/awareness (0.398) showed the effect of perceived personalization was in the medium range.

To test the hypotheses, path coefficients and their significant values were used. The results showed that all hypotheses were supported except *H9*. In particular, the results showed that perceived personalization had a significant impact on brand experience ( $\beta = 0.661, p < 0.01$ ) and brand attachment ( $\beta = 0.281, p < 0.01$ ), supporting *H1* and *H2*, respectively, and that brand experience had a significant effect on brand attachment ( $\beta = 0.534, p < 0.05$ ), supporting *H3*. All three relationships between brand experience and brand equity's components (perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand awareness/association) were significant ( $\beta = 0.245, p < 0.01$ ;  $\beta = 0.505, p < 0.01$ ;  $\beta = 0.200, p < 0.01$ , respectively). And of the three relationships between brand attachment and brand equity's components, two relationships (*H7* and *H8*) were significant – between brand attachment and perceived quality, and between brand attachment and brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.272, p < 0.01$  and  $\beta = 0.299, p < 0.01$ ). But the relationship between brand attachment and brand association/awareness (*H9*) was not significant ( $\beta = -0.013, p > 0.01$ ). These results are shown in Table 2.

### Product vs service brands

To strengthen these results and those of Study 1, as well as provide further direction for brand managers, analysis was conducted that investigated any differences between SNS ads in the product category ( $n = 176$ ) belonging to Dell and Nike, and the service category ( $n = 174$ ) belonging to American Airlines and Texas Roadhouse. This was also done because a service provides intangible values, therefore it could be expected that the effect of a service brand's advertisement may differ from that of a product brand's ad (Nijssen *et al.*, 2006; Jacob and Ulaga, 2008).

Interestingly, the only significant difference between SNS ads for service brands and product brands was brand attachment on perceived quality (Table 3). More specifically,

the difference in the effect of brand attachment on perceived quality in product brand ads is significantly less than that in service brand ads ( $\beta = -0.322, p < 0.01$ ). The stronger effect of brand attachment on perceived quality in service brand ads could be explained by the fact that a customer's emotional connection with a service brand is more likely to improve his or her perception about the quality of the service while the effect is not the same for products.

### Discussion

As the results demonstrate, personalized SNS ads were significant predictors of both brand experience and brand attachment. This bodes well for brands who consider leveraging SNS in their marketing communications, particularly when the strategy behind the advertising is brand building. Furthermore, the brand experience proved to be a robust determinant for all three brand experience outcomes. Thus, it appears that well-established brands can leverage such marketing communications to maintain or strengthen this aspect of the consumer–brand relationship. This was solidified when brand attachment was also a significant predictor of perceived quality and brand loyalty. However, different from what was expected, brand attachment was not a predictor of brand association/awareness. Taken together, then, personalized ads on an SNS platform for a brand could be the right approach to developing and solidifying perceived quality and brand loyalty.

Of importance is the finding that enhanced brand experience created by personalized ads was significantly related to all three of brand equity's components, demonstrating that whether a product or service brand, the brand experience as personified in a personalized ad on Facebook can lend assistance in building brand equity. Similarly, brand attachment was significant in relation to perceived quality and brand loyalty, thus signaling that personalized SNS ads are a tool that brand managers should leverage. However, brand attachment did not lead to brand associations. Therefore, such a marketing strategy may not be something to count on if a manager is considering a brand extension.

Further, enhanced brand experience may play a role in increasing brand equity of brands advertised on SNS. The significant impact of brand experience on brand attachment and all three brand equity variables in the present research

Table 3 Comparison between product and service (Study 2)

Path	Product ( $n = 176$ )		Service ( $n = 174$ )		Product – Service	
	Coef	<i>p</i> -values	Coef	<i>p</i> -values	Coef	<i>p</i> -value
<i>H1</i> : PER → EXP	0.667	0.000	0.680	0.000	–0.013	0.845
<i>H2</i> : PER → ATC	0.302	0.000	0.286	0.000	0.016	0.868
<i>H3</i> : EXP → ATC	0.453	0.000	0.580	0.000	–0.127	0.216
<i>H4</i> : EXP → QUA	0.173	0.065	0.228	0.031	–0.055	0.703
<i>H5</i> : EXP → LOY	0.527	0.000	0.452	0.000	0.075	0.491
<i>H6</i> : EXP → ASW	0.070	0.372	0.295	0.005	–0.225	0.084
<i>H7</i> : ATC → QUA	0.131	0.176	0.453	0.000	–0.322	0.022
<i>H8</i> : ATC → LOY	0.240	0.001	0.386	0.000	–0.147	0.175
<i>H9</i> : ATC → ASW	–0.063	0.372	0.041	0.606	–0.104	0.326

Notes: PER = perceived personalization; EXP = brand experience; ATC = brand attachment; QUA = perceived quality; LOY = brand loyalty; ASW = brand association and awareness



demonstrates that effective online advertising could trigger cognitive reactions among SNS users that ultimately lead to favorable attitudes toward the brand and conative actions such as purchase intention and brand loyalty.

### Theoretical implications

The findings of the research offer some significant theoretical implications for branding researchers. First, the studies here lend evidence that personalization of SNS ads plays a role in enhancing customer response to an ad (brand experience and brand attachment). This finding is in accordance with the tenets of brand attachment theory, where personalized communications creates a “closeness” between the brand and the SNS user, thus strengthening an emotional bond through brand attachment which in turn positively influences other brand-related behavior such as brand experience and brand equity (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Perceived personalization also significantly impacted customers brand experience, which is a combined affective–cognitive reaction to brand stimuli, thus offering another route to generating positive brand related behavior other than simply an affective route of brand attachment (Brakus *et al.*, 2009).

Second, the findings of this research provide further explanation to seemingly contradictory results found in previous research arguing that personalization does not have a positive significant impact on customer response (Maslowska *et al.*, 2011). Inconsistencies may exist due to the fact that perceived and actual personalization are not always the same (Kramer *et al.*, 2007). Drawing on the concept of perceived personalization, the results of this research provide insights into the relationship between perceived personalization of SNS ads and brand equity through brand experience and brand attachment.

Finally, the findings add to what we know about the consumer–brand relationship, particularly with its ability to influence the brand associative network (Chang and Chieng, 2006). The results further provide evidence to the fact that personalized marketing communications creates a combination of affective and cognitive personal meaning for their brands in the minds of the customers leading to formation of a relationship that has the ability to endure and lead to positive brand related behavior. The significant impact of brand experience on brand attachment and on other brand equity variables is in line with models where the multisensory emotional and cognitive consumer response (brand experience) successfully creates an emotional bond (brand attachment) and has direct influence on consumers forging long-lasting relationship with the brand through enhanced awareness and associations coupled with favorable brand quality perceptions and loyalty intentions.

### Managerial implications

The centerpiece of the research deals with the importance of personalized advertising and the impact it can have on behavioral and financial outcomes related to a branding initiative. Results in the context of SNS reaffirm the established view of the importance of personalized communications in building a deep connection with the target audience. The research provides empirical evidence of the utility of such

targeted marketing communications contributing to strengthening of several brand-level outcomes such as brand attachment, brand experience and brand loyalty. Therefore, marketers should be able to leverage personalized and engaging content to nurture preexisting brand-related customer dispositions in a favorable direction and even create new cognitive and affective connections with the brand in the mind of a customer, a finding indicated in this research. The outcome for practitioners is enhanced brand loyalty. If marketing managers can oversee digital advertising campaigns on SNS that create a brand experience as personified in a personalized ad, loyalty should follow. Similarly, if marketers leverage such a campaign, brand attachment will increase, which this research showed was related to brand loyalty in both studies. However, because personalized ads did not lead to brand associations, they should probably not be used for brand extensions nor line extensions.

Most brands incorporate multiple SNS and mobile platforms in their marketing communications and can harness intricate large amounts of data generated from mining customer behavior information and use it to personalize communications based on the platform they are using. Marketers could leverage categories of customized communications that can involve reminding customers of a positive experience with the brand that was previously shared in SNS by the user as a subtle way of encouraging them to relive the memory. Marketers may also consider delivering targeted Facebook ads or in-app notifications with a personalized “wish list” of items to purchase based on previous shopping or browsing behavior. Personalized marketing communications can be one-to-one based on SNS user data combined with shopping behavior, or targeted to a specific brand community. In both cases, as shown in this research, such a customized branding initiative has the potential to generate positive brand-related feelings.

### Limitations and future research

Although this research offers notable implications, it also has limitations. First, this research focuses only on personalized ads based on customers’ prior experience with SNS advertising. Future research should consider how online marketers incorporate customers’ activities pertaining to a brand such as “likes” or “shares” to create personalized advertising on SNS and see how these ads change perceptions about the ads. The study model could also be tested across different SNS platforms and using different advertising formats to evaluate effectiveness.

The majority of the respondents in these studies were young, which research has shown are more accepting of targeted ads compared to older users (Turow *et al.*, 2009). While this is a limitation, it also offers a research opportunity as different levels of personalization such as location, gender, interests, online shopping behavior and search history could be examined to understand their impact on consumers’ decision-making process.

Finally, this research collected data from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Although this service is being actively used globally for academic research, arguments still exist about representativeness and the quality of the data collected using

MTurk. Thus, future research could consider using other sampling methods.

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### Further reading

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