

*Social Impact Theory: an examination of how immediacy operates as an influence upon social media interaction in Facebook fan pages*

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**TITLE: Social Impact Theory: an examination of how immediacy operates as an influence upon social media interaction in Facebook Fan pages**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

This paper proposes that Social Influence Theory is an appropriate approach for understanding social media interaction. Increasingly organisations are looking for ways to develop an effective presence in social media to increase awareness, customer satisfaction, sales and consumer engagement with the brand. The influence of interpersonal interaction upon attitude, beliefs and behaviour, has been studied within social psychology. Different forms of immediacy: physical, temporal and social are theorised as exerting distinct influences upon individual behaviours. This paper reviews the concept of social influence and introduces social impact theory (SIT) a conceptual framework to guide research enquiry and inform practice within the social media marketing. It examines in detail the concept of immediacy and indicates how an understanding of immediacy might explain Facebook behaviours

**Key Words: Social Media, Facebook, Social Influence, Social Impact Theory, Online Branding, Literature Review**

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Kevin O’Gorman is Professor of Management and Business History and Head of Business Management in the School of Languages and Management in Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. He trained in Glasgow, Salamanca and Rome as a philosopher, theologian and historian. His research interests have a dual focus: Origins, history and cultural practices of hospitality, and philosophical, ethical and cultural underpinnings of contemporary management practices. Using a broad range of methodological approaches he has published over 80 journal articles, books, chapters, and conference papers in business and management.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media is a new channel of communication between brands and consumers, which is characterised by brand to consumer and consumer to consumer interaction (Daugherty, Eastin and Bright, 2008). Brand fan pages have become a forum for online brand community expression, where brand fans can share their enthusiasm about the brand with other members with a common interest in the brand, and be aware of news regarding that brand, as well as the promotional activities being undertaken (Kozinets, 1999). Hence, fan pages are a major factor for brand communication, and they are used by brands to integrate and interact with their customer base (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004).

The adoption of technologies associated with web 2.0 raises questions regarding how interaction and communication in computer-mediated environments are influencing consumer decision making (Blank, 2013). Increasingly organisations are looking for ways to develop an effective presence in social media to increase awareness, customer satisfaction, sales and consumer engagement with the brand (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). There is considerable academic interest in how social media interactions influence behaviour (Li, Lee and Lien, 2012; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), and there is growing practitioner interest in how to apply the techniques of “co-creational marketing” and “social influence marketing” within social media (Gamble and Gilmore, 2013; Li et al., 2012).

Social influence marketing is a technique that employs social media and social influencers to achieve marketing and business goals (Singh, 2009). It draws on the fact that as potential customers make a purchasing decision, they are being influenced by various forces (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Within the field of social psychology, the concept of ‘social influence’ and its influence upon individual behaviour, attitudes and beliefs is widely studied (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Social influence has also of interest to marketers as consumer-to-consumer interactions are believed to affect consumer behaviour,

attitudes and feelings towards a product or brand (Libai et al., 2010). Trends towards brands being present in online environments (Fournier and Avery, 2011) plus the innate human need to anthropomorphize objects to facilitate interactions with non-material objects (Brown, 1991) make brand-consumer interactions within social media subject to similar effects. However, social influence forces are complex and can include individuals who have a strong social influence upon a consumer and also the format of the technology employed, for example, influence can come from mere virtual presence (Naylor et al., 2012). Hence there is a need to identify a theoretical framework to guide decision making.

The purpose of this paper is to propose Social Impact Theory (SIT) as an appropriate framework for social media enquiry. We use Facebook fan pages as context to develop our argument for several reasons: according to the Content Marketing Institute (2014) Facebook is the leading social media platform used by content marketers. Facebook is a popular platform for companies to use due to the number of consumers that can be found there (1.09 billion daily active users on average in March 2016 according to Facebook). A challenge associated with the use of fan pages by a brand is to elicit engagement behaviours towards it in the form of clicks, comments and shared content (de Vries et al., 2012). In addition, customer engagement with the brand in its social media presence has become a top metric for marketing practitioners (eMarketer, 2013). Therefore, this paper first introduces Facebook behaviours as forms of customer engagement., it then reviews the concept of social influence and introduces social impact theory (SIT) is an appropriate conceptual framework. Finally, it examines in detail the concept of immediacy and indicates how an understanding of immediacy might explain Facebook behaviours. The paper concludes with a call for empirical work to test these assertions.

## **FACEBOOK BEHAVIOURS AS FORMS OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT**

Facebook offers companies several options to contact and communicate with their customers. Four engagement behaviours are identified as prominent in terms of consumer-brand interaction in this environment: Page Liking, Content Liking, Content Sharing and Content Commenting. These behaviours are of interest because they represent the type of interactions that consumers and brands can have in Facebook fan pages. Interaction rates are one of the top engagement metrics that marketing practitioners use to measure their success of marketing activities in social media (eMarketer, 2014) and this type of behavioural outcomes have also been used to measure fan page engagement (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). This section will now detail how each of these behaviours is enacted.

### ***Page Liking***

‘Liking’ a page on Facebook essentially serves as an opt-in mechanism for ongoing communications with the owner of that page (Poynter, 2008). The internet makes it possible to overcome geographical restrictions and to build fan communities world-wide. Borle, Dholakia, Singh and Durham (2012) and Dholakia and Durham, (2010) examined the degree to which participating on a Facebook fan page affects customer behaviours. In a longitudinal study, conducted in cooperation with two restaurants, they showed an effect of membership on the fan page to behavioural loyalty, spending in the restaurants, and the restaurant category overall. Their findings support the idea that Facebook fan pages are useful for deepening the relationship with customers, creating online communities and increasing consumer engagement (Jahn and Kunz, 2012).

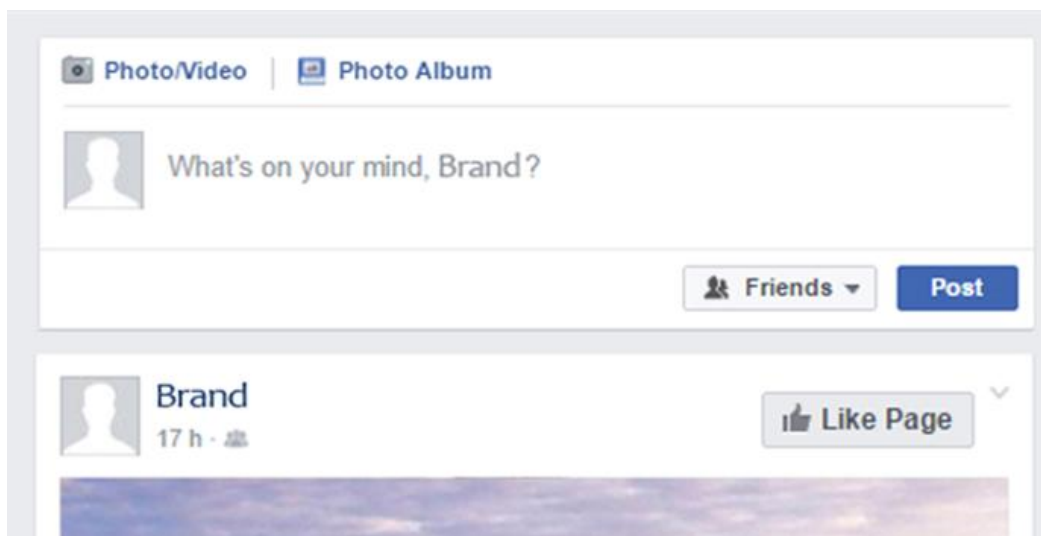
A fan can be anything from a devotee to an enthusiast of a particular brand. Typical characteristics of fans are self-identification as fan, emotional engagement, cultural competence, auxiliary consumption, and co-production (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner, 2010). In practice, users become fans of a Facebook fan page by pressing the “like-



button” which indicates to their social network that they like this brand; this preference is then added to their profiles The new content of this fan page is automatically posted to their personal Facebook news feed, and they can like this content, share it with their friends, post comments on the fan page, get in contact with the company, forward offers from this page as well as interact with other fans. Therefore Liking the page is the first step towards other forms of interaction with the brand in this environment. Figure 1 provides an example of liking behaviour.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

*Figure 1 Example of Page Liking Behaviour*



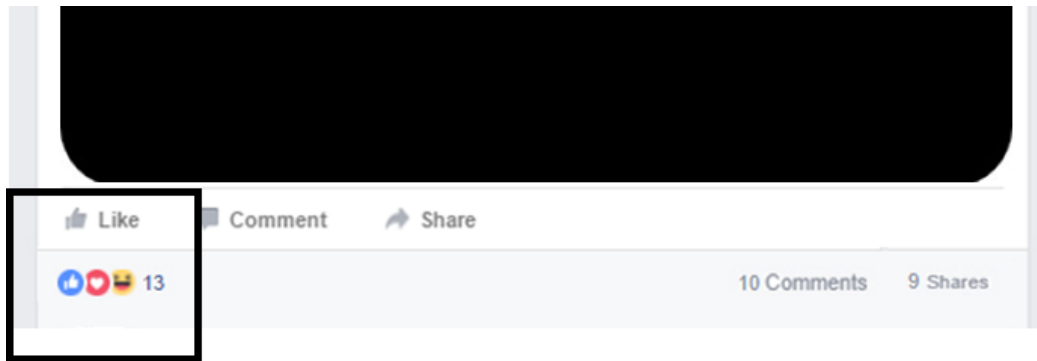
### ***Content Liking***

Facebook defines “Liking” content on its platforms as making a connection (Facebook, 2014). The consequence of “Liking” content in this platform according to Facebook is to generate a story, and content may appear in that individual’s timeline, it may be displayed on the Page that individual is connected to, and next to content in third party sites. Liking content also may result in the person endorsing the content or other brands, as well as delivering branded messages to others around the user’s social network (Li et al., 2012).

A study by Chadwick Martin Bailey (cited in Owyang, 2010) reports that 33 per cent of Facebook users are fans of brands, and 60 per cent of these consumers are more likely to purchase or recommend to a friend after ‘liking’ brand content. Some authors suggest that liking content in social media is a manifestation of affective evaluation of people, situations or objects (Alhabash, McAlister, Hagerstrom, Quilliam, Rifon and Richards, 2013). Yet other authors argue that motivations behind liking contents were aimed at financial or social rewards, with users looking to receive discounts or to show brand support to their friends (Harris and Dennis, 2011). This evidence suggests that liking content is not only a meaningless action by users of social media, but there are other cognitive, affective and behavioural drivers underpinning their liking behaviour. Figure 2 provides an example of content liking behaviour.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

*Figure 2 Example of Content Liking Behaviour*

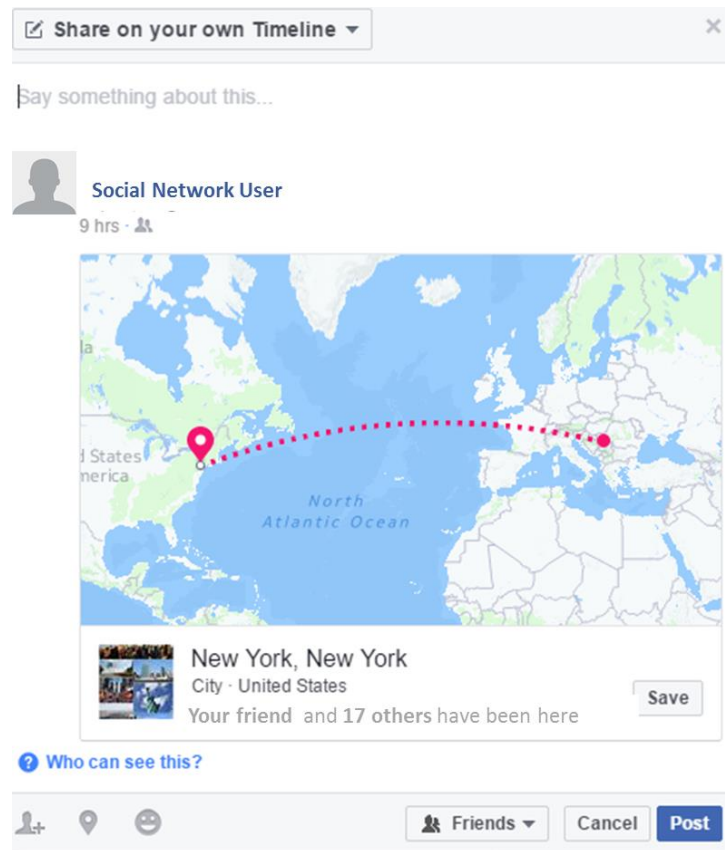


### ***Content Sharing***

Content sharing happens when users decide to share content with others within their social network. Content sharing help users to build an online identity based on the type of content that they share and socialise with other users in online environments (Brandtzæg et al., 2010). The barriers for sharing content online and in particular in social media websites are considerably lower compared with earlier times (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). Recent developments on the web and in the realm of other digital media have made it increasingly possible for people to share their creations with others. Sharing is a simple way for users to co-create together with the message source content that is relevant to them and to build their identity based on the content that is being shared (Karahasanović et al., 2009). In some social networking sites (i.e. Twitter) sharing content is perceived as a way to show support to the content being shared. Sharing content is one of the most important criteria for the success of social networking sites together with sociability (Brandtzæg et al., 2010). Figure 4 shows an example of content sharing behaviour.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

*Figure 3 Example of Content Sharing Behaviour*



### ***Content Commenting***

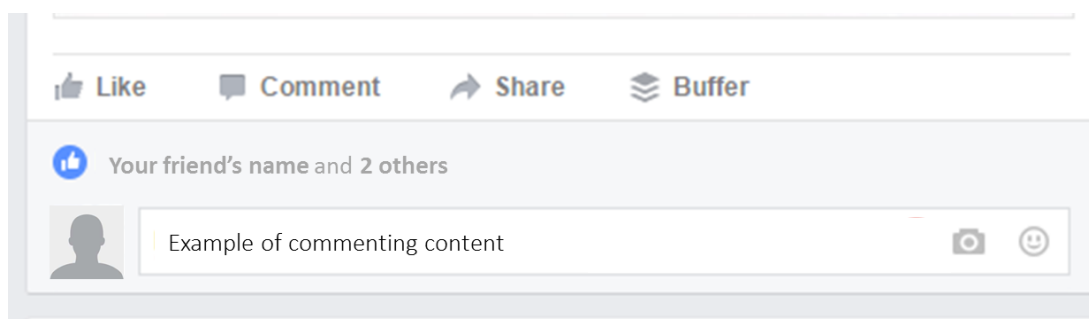
Giving the possibility to comment on someone's post is a feature that has been added to social media sites to encourage sociability (Keenan and Shiri, 2009). Sociability according to Preece (2000) is the ability to interact with others or to socialise, and it is another of the important features to the success of social media websites (Brandtzæg et al., 2010). By allowing users to comment on content, social connections are being strengthened, and the formation of online virtual communities is possible.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

This section has detailed four types of Facebook engagement behaviours: liking, content liking, content sharing and content commenting. One challenge associated with the use of fan pages by a brand is to elicit interaction by attracting people's attention and inducing them to click on

the page to become a fan, or clicking on the content (de Vries et al., 2012). There is emerging research that looks at the factors determining the types of behaviours in an online context. For instance, Li et al. (2012) proposed and tested via simulations a model that used social influence factors as determinants of behavioural outcomes, including click-through rates. Moreover, Naylor et al. (2012) also found, in their empirical study, that social influence factors such as mere virtual presence can affect intentions when engaging with a brand in social media settings when the sources of influence have certain demographic characteristics. Thus there have been several calls for research to examine what other factors determine behaviour in social media settings (Marketing Science Institute, 2014; Schultz and Peltier, 2013). This paper will now discuss how Social Impact Theory and in particular a study of immediacy provides the basis for empirical enquiry.

*Figure 4 Example of Content Commenting Behaviour*



## SOCIAL IMPACT THEORY

Social Impact Theory (SIT) seeks to explain how social influence causes changes in behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of individuals as a result of their interaction with others (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Social influence is defined as the direct and indirect influence processes that can operate at the interpersonal, group or socio-cultural level, and that involve effects that may be subconscious or conscious, and can impact on thoughts, judgements and observable behaviours (Turner, 1991). Social influence can be divided into three sub-types: “norms”, “compliance” and “conformity” (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Table 1 presents an overview of how theory within social psychology addresses each sub-type, this shows that Social Impact Theory addresses the influence of conformity.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1 Overview of Social Influence Theories

Sub-Type of Influence	Description	Theory
Social Norms	Habitual custom or “the way we do things.”	Theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)
Compliance	The action to consent to a certain request, and all the motivations surrounding this behaviour	Affect-infusion model (Forgas, 1995)
Conformity	The act of changing one’s behaviour to match the responses of others	The objective consensus approach (Mackie, 1987) Conversion theory (Moscovici, 1980) Social influence model (Penrod and Hastie, 1979) Self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) Social impact theory (Latané, 1981)

Adapted from: Cialdini and Goldstein (2004)

Conformity behaviour involves forming an opinion as a result of external pressure by others. The pressure can be either real or perceived and can be either direct or indirect. Conformity can mean moving from one opinion to a contradictory view but it does not necessarily mean changing to an opposite perspective, it can also involve remaining in the same position as a result of peer pressure, a term known as conformity by omission (Sorrels and Kelley, 1984). Conformity can be considered a response to the strength of social norms (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Goldberg, 1954). Conformity exerts social influence as a way of satisfying basic psychological needs (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). These needs can be summarised as the need to assess correctly the way our external environment works (informational social influence) and the need to be liked by the people that are around us (normative social influence). These needs influence individuals to conform to the views, thoughts and behaviours of others. SIT proposes that conformity is gained if the source of external pressure has three key: source strength, source immediacy and source numbers (Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2 Three Social Forces Comprising Social Impact Theory

Social Force	Explanation	Illustration
Strength	<p>Salience, importance or intensity of the influencing source.</p> <p>Can be related to the source itself (Transituational strength) or related to the context-specific roles that the influence and the influenced occupy (Situational strength)</p>	<p>Transituational Strength: age, gender, physical characteristics, and perceived intelligence, physical appearance.</p> <p>Situation-Specific Strength: Actor and audience, teacher and class, peer pressure and alcohol consumption.</p>
Immediacy	<p>The proximity of influencing source and the individual who is the target of the influence.</p> <p>Can be physical, temporal or social</p>	<p>Physical Immediacy: Geographic location, seat spacing, crowding.</p> <p>Temporal Immediacy: time between announcements, duration of announcement</p> <p>Social Immediacy: perceptions that others are “like us.”</p>
Number	<p>The number of influencing sources directed towards the individual</p>	<p>Numbers in a crowd, numbers in class, numbers in an online community.</p>



*Source strength* is the salience, importance or intensity of the influencing source. SIT proposes that strength is either trans-situational or situation specific (Latané 1981) and that as strength increases so does the degree of social impact. Trans-situational strength is relatively stable across different contexts and time. Empirically, the concept of strength as a trans-situational has been tested a wide range of forms. For instance, the influence of personality traits on nomination behaviour (Miller and Bruiner 2008), the influence of source status on paranormal belief (Markovsky and Thye, 2001) , the influence of witness status on juror verdicts (Wolf and Bugaj, 1990) and the influence clothing worn by source on donation behaviour (Williams and Williams, 1989) . Situation-Specific strength changes according to the context within which social influence is exerted. Situation-specific strength is related to the roles that the influencer and the individual being influenced occupy. Empirical studies have included the influence of the presence of an audience in inducing stage fright (Seta, Crisson, Seta and Wang, 1989), the influence of peers upon alcohol consumption (Pedersen, LaBrie and Lac, 2008) and the presence of a caregiver upon time to call for assistance (Williams and Williams 1989).

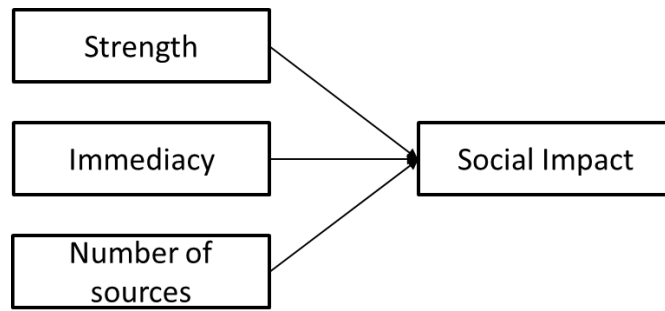
*Source immediacy* is closeness in space or time, communication clarity and richness as well as the absence of intervening communication barriers or filters (Latané 1981). As immediacy increases so does the degree of social impact. There are three main types of immediacy: physical, temporal and social. Immediacy is also studied in the form of psychological distance; that is defined as the subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self (Trope and Liberman, 2010) and acknowledges the subjectivity of immediacy of objects, people and events. Empirical work has focussed on the effect of physical immediacy on behaviours and cognitions. For instance, Pedersen et al. (2008) found that physical proximity of college students affected the levels of alcohol consumption at university, Bourgeois and Bowen (2001) found that groups of friends that were physically close shared similar beliefs to those that were physically more distant in other courses. Research into temporal immediacy

has found that as the time between interactions increases so social impact decreases (Sedikides and Jackson, 1990).

*Source number* is the numerical value of sources of influences and that as this numerical value increases so does the degree of social impact (Latané, 1981). There is some debate about whether continuing to increase numbers results in similar increases in social impact through a need for conformity. For example, Asch (1951) found that three sources increased conformity but after that number was reached no further gains in social impact were made. Elsewhere researchers have suggested that, dependent upon context, there is an “ideal” number of sources after which adding more influencers will diminish the amount of social impact gained or in other words in some situations “less is more” (Latané and Wolf, 1981; Tanford and Penrod, 1984). Finally, SIT proposes that the multiplication (interaction) of source strength, source immediacy and number of sources produces social impact. The relationships suggested by SIT (Latané, 1981) are graphically represented in Figure 5.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

Figure 5 Social Impact Theory



Adapted from Latané, 1981

## **THE INFLUENCE OF IMMEDIACY IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

This paper next considers the concept of source immediacy in more detail and applies it as a way of explaining behaviour within social media. Immediacy is a multi-dimensional construct, and different types of immediacies exist between source and target which are labelled: physical immediacy, temporal immediacy and social immediacy. Various types of immediacies have been tested empirically in a range of offline and online settings (Blaskovich, 2008; Miller and Brunner, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2008; Bourgeois and Bowen, 2001; Hart, Stasson and Karau, 1999; Jackson and Latané, 1982; Bassett and Latané, 1976) and through computer simulations (Fink, 1996; Latané and L'Herrou, 1996; Latané and Liu, 1996; Latané, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento and Zheng, 1995). Evidence suggests that source immediacy relates to social impact at the behavioural (Chidambaram and Tung, 2005; Miller and Brunner, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2008) and cognitive level (Blaskovich, 2008; Argo, Dahl and Manchanda, 2005; Bourgeois and Bowen, 2001; Knowles, 1983).

A focus upon immediacy is appropriate for three reasons. First, there is very limited empirical evidence that looks at the relationship of immediacy and consumer-brand interactions (Kwahk and Ge, 2012), however there is evidence to suggest that immediacy influences persuasion (Miller and Brunner, 2008) and collaboration in groups (Conaway et al., 2005; Woods and Baker, 2004). Furthermore, empirical testing has shown contradictory results for the influence of immediacy upon behaviour (Jackson, 1986; Mullen, 1985; Jackson and Latané, 1982). One possible explanation is that there a tendency to use only one form of immediacy as the independent variable. This means that more complex interactions between different forms of immediacy have been overlooked.

Second, developing insight into the relationship between changes in immediacy and social impact outcomes is of interest to Internet marketers. Indeed, Miller and Brunner (2008) found that there was a positive relationship between perceptions of sources being present and sources

being influential amongst online users. A detailed understanding how physical immediacy is interpreted online by consumers would help inform decisions about whether websites and social media pages need to be adapted to appear to become from a local source to have a maximum influence upon customer behaviour.

Third, other forms of immediacy such as temporal and social immediacy of a brand can be modified via sponsored posts and social advertising. For example, it is possible to have both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (time-delayed) interactions (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) and to communicate in real time over great physical distance (Moon, 1999). Hence physical, temporal and social immediacy are very variable in the online environment. This paper now explains how different forms of immediacy are present within the online environment, and it is organised around the forms of immediacies identified: Physical, Temporal and Social.

### ***Physical immediacy***

Empirical evidence in computer-mediated environments has shown that physical immediacy affects behaviour in similar ways as in offline environments. Olson and Olson (2000) reviewed 10 years of empirical research in the context of group collaboration in computer-mediated communication and offline environments. They argue that despite the fact that computers and online environments allow users to interact regardless of their physical location, physical immediacy among other elements remains an important factor that determines the outcome of an interaction. This is because differences in the local physical context, time zones, culture, and language persist even when technology allow for physical immediacy to be less relevant to interact with other people. Evidence supporting this view has been provided in different contexts. For instance, Bradner and Mark (2002) found in a series of experiments that interactions performed via computer-mediated communication technology were affected by the geographical immediacy of the subjects. In their study, subjects in physically close locations

had higher levels of cooperation, were perceived as more persuasive and elicited fewer levels of deception compared to subjects that were believed to be in distant locations.

Evidence also suggests that the frequency of interactions moderates the influence of physical immediacy upon behaviour. Research by Bradner and Mark (2002) on cooperation, persuasion and deception found that despite the fact there were significant differences in these variables between online and offline interaction, these differences were not significant after a certain number of interactions. Similar results obtained by Moon (1999) who found a negative relationship between perceived physical immediacy and persuasion in computer-mediated interactions.

Previous research has largely focused on computer-mediated interaction in a work-related setting. Research that focuses on social interaction shows that physical immediacy affects social interactions at different degrees in offline and online contexts (Rosette, Brett, Barsness and Lytle, 2012; Mok, Wellman and Carrasco, 2010; Ganesan, Malter and Rindfleisch, 2005). For example, in face-to-face and telephone contexts, high physical immediacy results in higher levels of interaction. Evidence in online environments suggests that in computer-mediated environments this relationship also exists, with the number of interactions being determined by the social structures (e.g. tie strength, degree of intimacy) than by the physical immediacy that exists between the users (Mok et al, 2010). Other studies have found similar results (e.g., Wellman, Hogan, Berg, Boase, Carrasco, Cote, Kayahara, Kennedy and Tran, 2006). Studies of “friendship” ties on LiveJournal (e.g., Liben-Nowell, Novak, Kumar, Raghavan and Tomkins, 2005) also found an effect of distance.

Drawing on this body of evidence it is proposed social interactions in the context of social media will also increase as physical immediacy increases. It is expected that users will like Facebook pages from organisations that are physically close to them. The act of liking begins

a process of communication. Thus fan page liking results in messages from that brand being present in the news feed of the user. It can be argued that the presence of this content might contribute to online self-identity formation, for example, a study by ExactTarget (2010) found that almost 40% of consumers “like” companies on Facebook to publicly display their brand affiliation to “friends.” In addition, “liking” a page might result in monetary reward as companies often incentivise liking behaviour with special offers and rewards. The First Incentive Theory of Motivation suggests that we are motivated to engage if there is a meaningful reward. This means that if there are vouchers and offers as a result of liking a fan page or content then geographically close fans will respond as a reduction in distance increases the meaning of the reward. Finally, there is empirical research that shows that in a personal context Facebook users’ intention to befriend is inversely proportional to their physical distance for medium to long range distances, however for a short range, there is no influence (Backstrom, Sun and Marlow, 2010).

Since Facebook Page liking behaviour shows affective commitment to engage in a relationship with that brand in social media settings, it is proposed that this will affect the intentions to perform other forms of Fan Page behaviours such as content liking, content sharing and content commenting.

### ***Temporal immediacy***

Temporal immediacy refers to the time of the receiver of the communication regardless of actual past or future (Bar-Anan, Liberman and Tope, 2007; Shen and Chiou, 2010; Trope and Liberman, 2003). The more distant in time an event is perceived to be, the less social impact these events will convey to the target. Research into the effects of temporal immediacy on social impact in online environments shows that the more distant in time an event is perceived the less social impact these events will convey on the target. For instance, temporal proximity of events reflect on aspects of attachment to, membership in, and departure from a certain event

in the context of immediacy learning (Haythornthwaite et al., 2006). Even when interactions are occurring in online environments, the temporal proximity generated by “live” events as opposed to recorded ones result in a better experience and more engagement from the participants of immediacy learning courses (Conaway et al., 2005). Temporal proximity in synchronous interactions also have a positive effect in the outcome of teamwork (DeRosa and Hantula, 2004).

Construal level theory (CLT) posits that people use a higher level of construals to represent an object/person or event as the temporal distance increases. Thus as temporal immediacy decreases, people will tend to focus on more abstract elements, while at high temporal immediacy people will tend to concentrate more on operational details. Empirical evidence from Castaño, Sujana and Kacker (2008) found that when adoption of a new product is in the distant future, people are more concerned about performance and symbolic-benefit uncertainties. In contrast, in the near future, the concerns are more about switching- and affective-cost uncertainties. The view of CLT on temporal immediacy is also shared by Kahneman and Miller's (1986) norm theory. They posit that people elicit more intense affect to temporally immediate scenarios. For instance, Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1992) suggest that the effect of temporal distance on emotional response will be higher on events occurring to close friend one week ago vs. 9 months ago. Thus it is proposed that temporal immediacy will have similar positive effects on Facebook Page behaviours.

### ***Social Immediacy***

Social immediacy refers to the perceived similarity with those around us, with similar others being perceived as socially closer to oneself than dissimilar ones (e.g. Heider, 1958, Miller et al., 1998 and Tesser, 1988). High social immediacy is found to increase trust and reciprocity (Charness Haruvy and Sonsino, 2007; Cox and Deck, 2005; Eckel and Wilson, 2002). Low social immediacy results in social norms not being clear for social network participants and has



an effect on the negotiation style and targeted outcome expected from both parties (Rosette et al., 2012). These findings can be explained via social awareness theory and its accompanying research suggests that psychological distance between members of different groups reduce social awareness and increase a self-interested behaviour (Rosette et al., 2012).

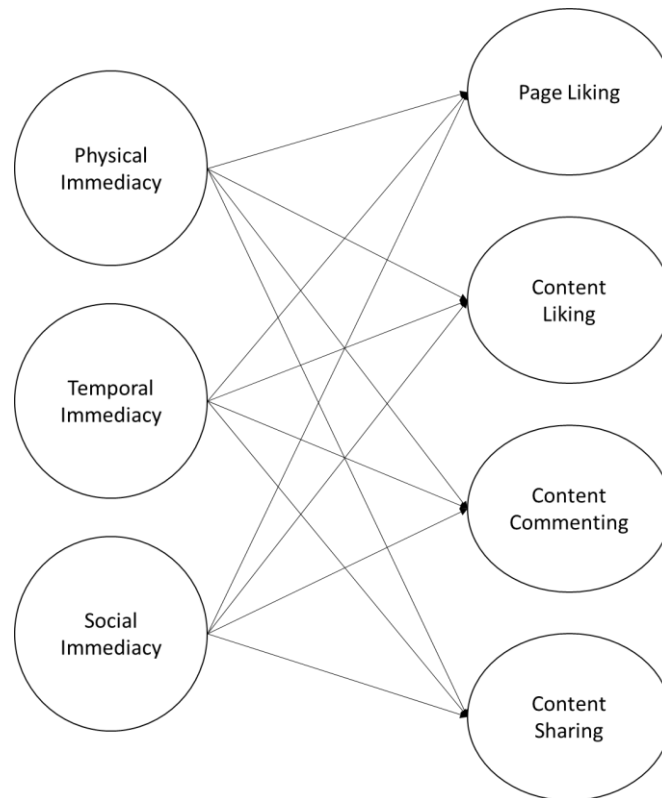
The strength of weak ties (SWT) theory also supports the significance of social immediacy (which within the theory is called *tie strength*) as a determinant of behavioural and cognitive outcomes (Granovetter, 1973). Tie strength is the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocity that exist between two individuals, and it determines the diffusion of influence and information. This means that strong tie relationships are more likely to have a greater amount of information flow between the dyads, and also have a higher level of influence over each other (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973; Leonard-Barton, 1985; Reingen and Kernan, 1986). Tie strength has also shown to influence consumer engagement behaviours such as word-of-mouth (Wirtz and Chew, 2002). Empirical evidence indicates that the amount of word-of-mouth generated is higher within groups with many strong tie relations (e.g. close friends) as opposed to within groups with many weak ties relations (Fitzgerald Bone, 1992).

Social immediacy has also been found to drive sharing activity in online environments such as sharing music content within an individual social network (Tran et al., 2011). Thus it is proposed that social immediacy also has a relationship with Facebook Page behaviour.

Figure 6 represents the type of relationships that are proposed in this paper between Facebook behaviours and different forms of immediacy.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

Figure 6 Relationship between Immediacy and Facebook Engagement Behaviour



## DISCUSSION

Social influence is recognised as a critical shaper of consumer behaviour in situations characterised by ambiguous information or in situations where there are unclear standards of conduct (Mangleburg, Doney and Bristol, 2004). In other words, people rely heavily on others behaviour when they do not possess much information regarding a certain outcome or behaviour. An example of this would be thinking that because a restaurant is full this is an indication of good food or conforming to certain behaviour because other individuals who are thought to be like you behave in the same manner (Banerjee, 1992; Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno, 1991). In this respect, the presence of others or looking at what others are doing is deemed to be a driving force to future behaviour, as well as the creation and change of beliefs and feelings (Banerjee, 1992).

Empirical evidence on the impact of different forms of immediacy in the context of social media is still very limited. Results from studies in other settings suggest that an understanding of immediacy as a determinant of social impact would provide insight into online behaviours such as consumer engagement. For example, Chu and Kim (2011) found that people that are susceptible to normative and information influence positively affect their engagement behaviours in social networking sites. Their study provides supportive evidence that social impact factors have a positive effect on the generation of electronic word-of-mouth communications. This paper has considered how immediacy might influence consumer behaviour within social networking sites.

Online environments allow for the modification or concealment of those elements that can help targets determine closeness. Thus social immediacy can be manipulated to allow individuals to choose what kind of information is disclosed to others (Guadagno and Cialdini, 2005). This ability to manipulate social immediacy can also be used by brands and other stakeholders to leverage the decision of other users that are close to a given target. For example, content in web articles, or playlists in social media sites that rely on video content display the popularity that a given content had with other users that are socially close to the client. For this reason, it appears to be crucial to understand further the implications of these constant changes in the form immediacy manifest in this medium to understand its full effect as a social impact factor.

SIT has been tested in both social psychology (DiFonzo et al., 2013; Doohwang et al., 2011; DeWall et al., 2010; Miller and Brunner, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2008; Latané and L'Herrou, 1996; Jackson and Latane, 1982) and marketing literature (Kwahk and Ge, 2012; Naylor et al., 2012) resulting in supportive evidence that at least one of the social forces proposed by the theory (strength, immediacy and number of sources) affect consumers' behaviour.

Consumers are assuming increasingly active roles in the marketing process resulting in a blurring of traditional boundaries between producers and consumers (Kim and Hardin, 2010; Cova and Dallı, 2009; Konczal, 2008). Amongst the drivers of this change are: continued innovation of information communication technology (Akar and Topçu, 2011; Hardey, 2011) an increasing consumer desire for interaction with brands (Dauhgerty et al., 2008) and consumer resistance to marketing control (Cova and Dallı, 2009). Within this environment, social media development has acted as a marketing catalyst (Qualman, 2012; Smith, Deitz, Royne, Hansen, Grunhagen and Witte, 2012; O'Connor, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

Social media enables individuals to not only read content provided by others but also to create their content that can also be shared among their peers. In social media users can also connect with brands by becoming "fans" of that brand on their dedicated brand fan page.

Social media websites are characterised for allowing both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Increasing interest has been devoted to the role that time plays in affecting consumers' judgments and behaviours (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Hornik and Schlinger, 1981; Jacoby, Szybillo, and Berning, 1976). However, the body of knowledge applied to the online context is still very limited.

In this paper, we have examined the concept of social influence and applied different forms of immediacy to social network behaviour in accordance with Social Impact Theory. Social impact theory is proposed as an appropriate approach to explaining changes in behaviour, attitudes and cognitions as a result of the presence of others. Facebook behaviour of liking, sharing and commenting were examined as forms of customer engagement. Customer engagement is of increasing importance within the marketing literature. This is because consumer engagement positively affects elements that are valuable for companies such as

consumer trust (Hollebeek, 2011), satisfaction and loyalty (Bowden, 2009) and commitment (Chan and Li, 2010). These elements are considered to be strong indicators of long-term sales, word-of-mouth and brand advocacy (Brodie et al., 2011).

### ***Implications for Practice***

There are several questions that practitioners face that are addressed from a detailed consideration of different forms of immediacy. For example, the introduction in 2012 of a new structure for global brands to manage their local presence via Facebook (Darwell, 2012). This new structure allows brands to display unified elements of social influence such as the number of people already liking or talking to the page, but also enabling users to be redirected to localised versions of the page based on their physical location. The question is whether geographical localisation of Facebook fan pages has a positive impact on the levels of engagement with those brands. There appears to be no study in the literature that can provide empirical evidence of this, and that could certainly inform marketing practitioners on the effectiveness of this practice. In our discussion we have examined in depth the concept of immediacy and formulated three research propositions that seek to explain differences in consumer behaviours within Facebook. These research propositions argue that an increase in physical, temporal and social immediacy will positively affect these behaviours.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

It is appropriate at this point to make a connection between the concept of immediacy and the concept of telepresence and interactivity found within online research (Klein 2003, Griffith and Chen 2004, Cho, Wang and Fesenmaier, 2002). Telepresence is defined as the feeling of “being there” (Steuer, 1992) and originated in virtual reality research as a consequence of computer-mediated interactions (Hyun and O’Keefe, 2012). The focus of telepresence research is on how closely computer-mediated experiences simulate real-world interaction with a

product or person rather than on how the interaction within the online medium generates social influence (Shih, 1998). The concept of interactivity is defined as “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of the mediated environment in real time” (Steuer, 1992). Studies in interactivity focus on responses to the structural properties of the online medium such as “the hardwired opportunity of interactivity provided during an interaction” (Liu and Shrum, 2002, p.55). Interactivity research therefore focuses on the information system itself rather than the social practices and influences within the online space.

There is a need for empirical work to test our assertions. Empirical evidence of social influence within social network is limited. For example, Lim, Cha, Park, Lee and Kim (2012) found that reducing temporal immediacy in social media can enhance users’ co-experience in video streaming platforms, and to the knowledge of these researchers no empirical testing has been done in online environments using temporal immediacy as a determinant of social impact. Experimentation with different configurations of Fan pages can provide evidence of which configurations elicit higher levels of engagements with a brand. This kind of methods are already being used to increase conversion rates of landing pages, and the practice should extend to the management of Facebook fan pages. We argue for the continuation of experimental designs in social media environments as this will allow testing the impact of different configurations on behaviours that are of interest for marketing academics and practitioners.

We argue that immediacy of the sources in the form of time distance, social distance and physical distance are constantly being manipulated and changing for the user of social media websites. However, its effect as a determinant of social impact in social media environments remains an understudied subject. Within the broader stream of Social Impact Theory testing empirical work has tended to focus on physical presence as an operationalization of immediacy.

We argue that the dynamic nature of immediacy within social networks recommend this context as a site for further study and we aim to test in a future study the effects of these types of immediacies on consumers' behaviours with brand fan pages on Facebook.

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