Just keep scrolling: Insights for consumers and producers of social media with strained attention spans.

If an important event is not posted on social media and then liked by a critical mass of your friends, can you be sure it really happened? About a year ago Qimei Chen and I—(Pohlmann, A., & Chen, Q. (2017). Easy Loving: Understanding Affect in Social Media. In Digital Advertising: Theory and Research. Routledge)—reviewed the marketing literature to offer additional advice to advertisers and marketing practitioners on how to successfully navigate the fast-changing social media landscape. The full text includes references to research mentioned during this interview and proposes an interactive response model for social media.

Why is it important to marketers to study emotions on social media?

The act of “liking” online content is a routine task in our day-to-day interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and companies who advertise online. Facebook’s thumbs-up button and a variety of similar heart-shaped mechanisms across social media platforms woo us to signal positive affect towards online content. Reactions are formed and communicated easily on social media, but advertisers and marketers are cautioned against interpreting a “like” as a reliable sign of deep emotional, cognitive, or critical engagement with online advertisements. In fact, most internet users try to avoid and ignore online advertisements and it is unlikely that users of social media will pause to carefully consider the persuasive appeals of an advertisement when they encounter it in their social media stream. It is much more likely that they remain swept up in the emotional flurry delivered by the next post in the eternal vertical scroll of their social media feed. Given the increasing amount of stimuli that are competing for our attention on social media we can discuss some of the implications of these developments for advertising and marketing.
How has engagement with social media changed over time?

During the first decade of social media’s evolution, the like-button was repurposed by many users: Liking bad news—public or private—was to be understood as a signal of empathy or concern; liking an article about movie spoilers was to signal a safe real world conversation topic to others. Often the “like” click thus serves as an indicator of personal relevance, to validate others, or to simply acknowledge a message rather than being an expression of true fondness. Recognizing this development, Facebook introduced an augmented like-button in 2016 that offers universal cultural emotional expressions, namely “love”, “haha”, “wow”, “sad”, and “angry” in addition to “like.” This addition allows users a more nuanced expression of emotions towards online advertisements and can provide marketers with valuable quantitative insight regarding consumer attitudes when they interact with an advertisement. By and large, marketers have access to an abundance of digital metrics, such as the number of likes, followers, shares, co-creation attempts, and video views, just to mention a few. Market research companies aggregate these data and build consumer profiles that transcend the boundaries of their activity on a single platform and device. Such structured data allow tracking the spread of information through networks and gauge user engagement, but more involved qualitative approaches such as web scraping and sentiment analysis are still required to extract the emotional context and valence of these activities.

Are decreasing attention spans on social media a good thing?

Given the limited attention and low motivation to process online advertisements, viewers are most likely to form attitudes based on surface features. The attractiveness and credibility of the source of the message (e.g. a well-liked celebrity spokesperson), or its perceived production quality would be examples of such surface features. So, social media users are more inclined to
make snap judgments unless they feel motivated to deeply think about the logical consistency or argument quality of the message. While the competition for consumers’ attention has intensified, in some instances marketers can still benefit despite the dwindling amount of mental bandwidth granted to them. For example, when consumers browsed a website, lower levels of attention were positively correlated with brand attitude toward the advertised product, supporting the idea that low levels of attention can positively affect attitude under certain conditions. The reason for this outcome is that liking judgments are spontaneously made when attention is low, whereas the formation of disliking judgments requires a more involved cognitive process. However, some caution is advised. Managed without the proper diligence in an online context, consumers easily tend to unfavorably interpret self-serving sales pitches of a business as single-sided, since such messages neglect the conversational and relational nature of social media.

**What are the implications for consumers, businesses, advertising, and marketing practitioners?**

The evolution of technology profoundly altered the parameters of online customer attitudinal formation and now allows for complex real-time interactions between customers and firms, facilitating the delivery of elaborately targeted communications. According to social media analysts, many Ecuadorean and international brands have successfully attracted vast numbers of Ecuadorean social media users as followers. The success of their campaigns indicates that Ecuadorean marketers are well aware of pitfalls such as contagion effects in social media and know how to avoid them. Such effects occur when negative affect from user generated content is transferred onto the object of an advertisement, or even from one ad to another. For example, reading about a friends’ fear of flying or negative holiday experience can taint the attitude toward the subsequently encountered advertisement for an airline or hotel chain. In traditional
advertising media, such unfortunate occurrences used to be largely outside of the scope of marketers influence, but context-aware, dynamic advertisement delivery systems need to be carefully configured to distribute impressions accordingly.

Especially in light of recent global data privacy scandals, ethical concerns with regards to consumer privacy require careful attention since empowered consumers’ sentiment can rapidly upturn as the #DeleteFacebook campaign has demonstrated. Considering that a substantial number of sensitive personality attributes (e.g. political views, personality traits, sexual orientation, use of addictive substances, general happiness, etc.) can be predicted with substantial accuracy from a digital record of about 50 “likes”, an ad that is overly tailored can be perceived as outright uncanny. Especially in social media contexts where consumers expect an equitable relationship that they wish to form with a brand or company, the behavior of the business is evaluated according to social norms and human interaction etiquette. Consequently, norm violations or transgressions of a brand will ultimately be penalized by social-media empowered consumers.

This interview with one of the authors is based on a previously published article, which includes a full list of references: “Easy Loving: Understanding Affect in Social Media” by Attila Pohlmann and Qimei Chen, in “Digital Advertising: Theory and Research” Rodgers, S., & Thorson, E. (Eds.). (2017). Taylor & Francis.