This article investigates—and compares—the effects of brand publicity in social and “traditional” digital media. In an analysis of consumer responses to identical brand publicity in seven popular blogs and seven popular online magazines, the authors found that blogs generated higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This effect can be explained, in part, by blogs’ higher para-social interaction (PSI) with its users. They also found that—owing to that para-social interaction—publicity is more sensitive to user perceptions of the writers’ credibility and relationship with the brand. Based on their findings, the authors provide implications and a new architecture for the media and marketing industries.

INTRODUCTION
Social-media marketing is growing rapidly (Kozinets et al., 2010). Over the last few years, it has been the subject of a number of popular books (e.g., Li and Bernoff, 2008; Rosen, 2009) and gained considerable attention in global general-interest media. In one such story, the New York Times reported that a popular blog endorsement had helped one company grow its sales from $100,000 to $4 million (Jaret, 2006).

How much of such success can be attributed to the blog as a medium? Would a “thumbs up” from a popular online magazine have had as much effect? In this study, the authors explored the publicity effectiveness of social media as opposed to traditional media by placing an identical piece of text on blogs and in online magazines. They then measured the media follow-up of the brand covered in that text. The authors demonstrate the greater publicity effectiveness of social media and underlying factors behind it.

Blogs have become highly fashionable among writers, readers, and marketers. They are now leading destinations among Web users. For instance, as of this writing, 4 of the top 10 global entertainment sites (OMG, TMZ, Asylum, and PerezHilton) are blogs (Technorati.com, 2008). Influential bloggers who reach millions of readers are becoming online stars themselves. PQ Media reported spending on consumer-generated and social-networking sites at $1.01 billion in 2008—an increase of 25 percent over the previous year (The New York Times, 2009).

In addition to regular coverage in the daily and business press, blogging and other forms of social-media engagement have been embraced by a number of major companies. Yet, to date, marketing in social media has received surprisingly little academic attention. Among the scarce research on blogs that exist to date, focus has been on bloggers’ motivations (Huang, Shen, Lin, and Chang, 2007; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz, 2004); on blog content (Chu and Kamal, 2008; Thorson and Rodgers, 2006); and on social-media marketing narratives (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Previous researchers, however, have not focused on the fundamental issue of how blogs—as opposed to more traditional online platforms—perform as publicity vehicles. Blogs remain an “uncontrollable platform whose value is largely unproven” (Huang et al., 2007). The authors intend to fill part of that void by investigating the publicity effectiveness of this cornerstone of social media
Blogs have become highly fashionable among writers, readers, and marketers. They are now leading destinations among Web users.

and, from that, we draw conclusions about the blog as a medium, but we also make observations that can be applied to other forms of social media.

The authors’ study is a straightforward comparison of publicity effectiveness of blogs as opposed to online magazines. The two differ in several important aspects—considerations that, in fact, are the rationale for the study. Yet, in form, they are similar enough to appeal to the same audiences and the same advertisers. Indeed, the scope of the blogging phenomenon—and the erosion of print audiences that it has helped accelerate (Huang et al., 2007)—indicate that blogs and magazines are in competition. These findings highlight the need for comparing the effects of the two.

Placing identical texts in the two media, the authors measured the resulting effects on attitudes and intentions toward the brand covered in the texts. And they found that blogs could be described as “fashionable friends.” Exhibiting superior publicity effectiveness, the authors found that blogs’ effects are mediated by para-social interaction (PSI). Blog readers’ relationship with the blogger is thus similar to—and as powerful as—a word-of-mouth relationship. On one hand, that makes the readers more susceptible to bloggers’ opinions. On the other hand, that relationship is frail; it is important that the blogger is seen as unbiased and as a credible source of information. Therefore, the authors also emphasize the moderating effects of the writer–brand relationship and source credibility.

PARA-SOCIAL INTERACTION

In a 2009 article, The Economist reported that contemporary consumers use social media to help make purchases because they rely on “recommendations from friends” (The Economist, 2009). The word “friends” seems to indicate some sort of PSI. Are bloggers really friends, however?

PSI has been described as the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a media performer (Horton and Wohl, 1956). It has been studied most frequently in a television context (e.g., Auer, 1992; Horton and Wohl; Rubin, 2002; Rubin and Perse, 1987; Russell and Stern, 2006), and from those studies marketing researchers have drawn much of the knowledge about PSI. Consideration of PSI in the context of blogging, however, has received scant attention.

Based on the characteristics of blogs, one would expect to find a high level of PSI among their readers. Typically on blogs (and less typically in online magazines), readers are exposed to details from the blogger’s personal life and watch him or her interact with other online visitors through comment functions. Such interaction has been demonstrated to generate PSI on online forums (Ballentine and Martin, 2005) and one would expect that it should have the same effect on blogs.

PSI is reinforced by each interaction with the performer, and strong para-social feelings about him or her will occur after numerous encounters (Auer, 1992). This should be especially applicable to blogs, as many of them are updated several times a day. By contrast, online magazine writers typically write articles at a much slower pace. After repeated exposure on a blog, a relationship develops. Because of that perceived intimacy, readers may start to consider the blogger a friend. As such, the blogger becomes an important part of their daily lives (Ballentine and Martin, 2005). The difference in style and frequency of blogging, therefore, should generate greater PSI with bloggers than with writers of online magazines.

The authors therefore hypothesize:

H1: Blogs will generate greater para-social interaction than online magazines.

PUBLICITY EFFECTIVENESS

If the authors’ hypothesis (H1)—that blogs generate greater PSI than magazines—holds, the expectation would be that publicity on blogs would be more effective than comparable efforts in online magazines. That is, brand attitude and purchase intention should be higher for a brand after exposure on a blog compared to a magazine.

Existing studies have highlighted the potential connection between PSI and the shaping of consumers’ views. For example, in 2002, Rubin suggested that as PSI indicates active, involved media use, it also can enhance both attitudes and intentions. The authors argue that communication from sources with whom PSI is high will have much the same positive impact as word-of-mouth (WOM) communications.

WOM—more properly, consumer-to-consumer brand communication—has been emphasized in marketing literature for more than a half-century (Kozinets et al., 2010). It has been said to influence the vast majority of purchase decisions (Dichter, 1966) and has been called “one of the most influential channels of communication in the marketplace” (Allsop, Basset, and Hoskins, 2007).
If, in fact, messages in social media are interpreted like WOM communications, they may be a more effective tool for reaching consumers than online magazines, whose dynamic is less interactive. Indeed, the press abounds with anecdotal evidence of the value of social media as a marketing tool.

The authors placed identical pieces of editorial copy on blogs and in online magazines to measure resulting brand-attitude and purchase-intention changes. In line with WOM theory, the authors expect the blogs to generate a higher brand attitude and higher purchase intentions than the online magazines. Hence, they hypothesize:

H2a: Brand attitude is higher after exposure to a positive story about a brand on a blog compared to the same article in an online magazine.

H2b: Purchase intention is higher after exposure to a positive story about a brand on a blog compared to the same article in an online magazine.

Given the greater PSI on blogs, however, the authors would expect greater sensitivity among blog readers to distortions in the relationship. They believe that two crucial factors will moderate the publicity effectiveness of blogs compared to magazines:

• The relationship between the blogger and the publicized brand
• The writer’s credibility.

Given that readers perceive the blogger as a “friend,” it would seem likely that a blog would be evaluated differently than a magazine.

One possible variant is driven by the sensitivity of the relationship between the blog writer and the brand that is being endorsed. Through daily encounters with media and marketing agents, consumers learn to view information about brands in the context of the influencing agent’s motives, strategies, and tactics (e.g., Campbell and Kirmani, 2000; Fristad and Wright, 1994). Particularly central to WOM communications is the agent’s relationship with the promoted brand. For instance, Dichter argued in the Harvard Business Review (1966) that the listener in a WOM relationship asks himself or herself a few tacit questions in evaluating a speaker: “What is the speaker’s relation to the product? How authentic is it? Is the speaker’s intention to sell me the product for any material reason, or to help me with his true experience?”

Unlike online-magazines readers, who have a one-way relationship with content, blog readers socialize with bloggers besides reading their posts. Consumers understand that magazine writers are writing in response to an assignment and that the content creator’s primary relationship is with the assigning employer. Such dynamics, by and large, do not exist for bloggers—a freedom that encourages blog readers to be more attentive and sensitive to the writer’s motivation. Because of their PSI rapport, blog readers expect bloggers to be honest about their relationships with brands and that their concern for their readers would be so strong that they would write only about those that they truly prefer. Publicity notices that appear on a blog would suffer more than those that appear in an online magazine should the writer/brand relationship be perceived as unauthentic—an understanding leading to the next hypothesis:

H3: The perceived writer/brand relationship has a greater effect on publicity effectiveness on readers of blogs than readers of magazines.

Blogger Credibility
Given the high levels of PSI on blogs—and the consequent WOM-type relationship between bloggers and readers—the authors suggest that there will be differences in how blogger credibility affects the audience. More specifically, the success of brand publicity appearing on a blog would seem to be dependent on readers’ perceptions of the writer. In WOM recommendations, the listener puts more weight on the sender of the message than other aspects of the communication (Dichter, 1966).

A host of studies have found source credibility to be one of the most prominent factors in persuasion (e.g., Pornpitakpan, 2004). Source credibility becomes particularly important when the consumer has no choice but to take a person’s word as a guarantee—a piece of persuasion particularly powerful in online shopping settings, where the consumer cannot experience and test the product (Everard and Galetta, 2006). In forming an opinion about a brand publicized online, consumers likely would consider the writer’s credibility as an important part of their receptiveness to a published item. The more prominent and credible the writer, the more
persuasive the items that appear under his name.

The authors expect that writer credibility would have a greater impact on publicity effectiveness on blogs because of the personal nature of such content and the clear writer focus on such sites. That advantage becomes even more pronounced when compared to such “traditional” media as online magazines, wherein readers are less personally involved with the writer. Tarnished credibility would be a problem for an online magazine, but it would be devastating for a blogger. As the sender is an integral part of the message in social media, blog readers would react more strongly to a perceived drop in credibility than readers of an online magazine—a theory that leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: In terms of effectively placed publicity, writer credibility is more important on blogs than it is in online magazines.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Context**

To test the hypotheses, the authors compared responses from consumers exposed to a story published on a blog against the reaction of consumers exposed to the same article appearing in an online magazine. The copy had to be identical; the only difference between the two items could be the nature of its delivery.

The authors chose fashion as the product category for their product placement. Fashion is a common topic in the blogosphere, which facilitated the recruitment of a representative and sufficient number of bloggers and blog readers to study.

To ensure validity, the authors used actual blogs and actual online magazines for the study. The blogs and magazines all catered toward a young, fashion-savvy audience. To avoid potentially confounding effects from idiosyncratic features of specific blogs and magazines, the research team used the top-10 traffic ranking of online fashion media as the sampling frame. To facilitate their data collection, they used seven of the highest-ranking blogs and seven of the highest-ranking online magazines in a western European country. This wide range of media provided a representative sampling of blog and online magazine readers in a popular, high-volume product category.

**Research-instrument Development**

To avoid confounding effects, the authors employed an anonymous fashion label (called Brand X) as the stimulus in the study. A story was written in such a manner that it would be a compatible fit on blogs and in online magazines. It described how the blogger/reporter had been to one of Brand X’s fashion shows and disclosed the theme of the new collection. It also described some of the other offerings at the show and ended by praising Brand X for its ability to create timeless, stylish clothes that were likely to survive over several seasons.

The fit of the copy in both media was ensured through a pre-test in which participants rated the article on how likely it was that it would appear as a blog post/article in the chosen venues of distribution. Analysis showed that there were no significant differences between the two groups of testers.

**Procedure**

The authors agreed with the blog and online-magazine proprietors to post messages explaining the study and requesting reader assistance. A link was led to a stimulus text—a presentation of the message displayed in the design format of a blog or an online magazine. A questionnaire followed.

In total, 374 complete forms were returned. The sample consisted of 69 percent women and 31 percent men. The average age of the respondents was 27. The blogs had a somewhat greater female ratio (72:28) and younger audience (average, 23 years) than the magazines (female–male breakdown: 67:33; age, 29 years). To control for these differences, the research team included respondents’ gender and age as covariates in the analysis.

**Measures**

All measures were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree and 7 = completely agree).

*Brand attitude* was measured with three items: “Brand X is good”; “Brand X is pleasant”; “Brand X is favorable” (Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989). Responses to the three items were averaged to form an index, Cronbach’s alpha = 0.93.

*Purchase intention* was measured with two items: “I would like to buy something from Brand X”; “I would like to own something from Brand X.” Responses to the items were averaged to form an index, with an inter-item correlation of $r = 0.89$.

*PSI* was measured with five items taken from Russel and Stern (2006): “I think the writer is like an old friend.” “The writer seems to understand things I want to know.” “I would like to meet the writer in person.” “I like to compare my ideas with what the writer says.” “When I am on the Web site, I feel as if I am part of the group.” Responses were indexed with a Cronbach’s alpha = 0.84.
Writer–brand relationship was measured with three items (Cronley, Kardes, Goddard, and Houghton, 1999): “The writer likes Brand X.” “The writer frequently uses Brand X.” “The writer thinks Brand X is a good brand.” Responses were indexed with a Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87.

Writer credibility was measured with three items taken from Mackenzie and Lutz (1989): “The writer is convincing”; “The writer is believable”; “The writer is unbiased.” Responses were indexed with a Cronbach’s alpha = 0.84.

In addition, the study measured the attitude toward (and credibility of) the actual story used as a stimulus. Throughout our hypotheses, the authors have argued that the sender will have a greater impact than the actual message on publicity effectiveness. By measuring perceptions of the specific blog post/article text, they were able to contrast the impact of what was written about the brand with the impact of the writer.

Attitude toward the text was measured with three items based (Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989): “My impression of the post/article is positive.” “My impression of the post/article is favorable.” “I like the post/article.” Responses were averaged to form an index, Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87.

Credibility of the text was measured with three items taken (Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989): “The post/article is convincing.” “The post/article is believable.” “The post/article is unbiased.” Responses were indexed with a Cronbach’s alpha = 0.84.

RESULTS
To gain an initial picture, the research team ran a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) simultaneously on a variety of the dependent variables, PSI, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions, with respondents’ gender and age as covariates. The results showed that the medium (blogs compared to online magazines) had significant effects on all the dependents (F(3,374) = 19.04, p < 0.01, Wilks’s lambda 0.88).

The results from the MANCOVA showed no significant main or interaction effects of either the attitude toward the post/article or the credibility of the post/article on any variable. These variables, therefore, can be excluded from further analysis in favor of variables related to the medium and the writer—distinctions that highlight the importance of those latter variables in a social-media context. The authors then used planned contrast to test their hypothesized effects individually (See Table 1).

H1 hypothesized that blogs will generate more PSI than online magazines. To test that claim, the research team compared the mean of the PSI between the two media.

The results support H1, as the PSI was significantly higher for blog readers than magazine readers: MPSIblog = 3.78 versus MPSImagazine = 3.31 (p < 0.01; See Table 1).

Testing H2a and H2—that blogs have a higher publicity effectiveness than online magazines—the authors compared the mean brand attitudes and purchase intentions between the two media.

The results support H2a and H2b, suggesting a systematically higher publicity effectiveness of blogs as compared to online magazines. Brand attitude rated M = 5.06 on the blogs as compared to M = 4.71 in the online magazines (p < 0.01). Purchase intentions rated M = 5.64 on the blogs, compared to M = 5.15 in the online magazines (p < 0.01; See Table 1).

Finding support for their hypotheses, the authors tested their underlying notion that blogs have greater publicity effectiveness because of their greater PSI, employing a frequently used procedure for testing mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986). If the medium enhanced publicity effectiveness through perceived para-social interaction,

• the medium should have direct effects on the two publicity effectiveness variables (brand attitude and purchase intentions) as the single independent variable in regressions;
• PSI should have direct effects on the publicity effectiveness variables when it is added as an independent variable in the regressions; and
• the effect of the medium as an independent variable should decrease significantly as a result of this.

The tests produced significant results at all three stages for both publicity effectiveness variables. In addition, the authors performed Sobel’s test of mediation. The mediating effect of PSI on brand attitude was supported (z = 2.49, p < 0.01), as was its mediating effect on purchase intention (z = 3.97, p < 0.01).

To test H3—that the perceived writer–brand relationship would have a greater impact on publicity effectiveness on blogs than in online magazines—a median split created a new variable (high- versus low-perceived writer–brand relationship) that was included as a factor in the initial MANCOVA together with medium (blogs compared to online magazines). The interaction term produced significant effects on

**TABLE 1**
Mean Comparisons of Publicity Effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Online Blogs</th>
<th>Online Magazines</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Attitude</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Intentions</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para-social Interaction</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(F(3,374) = 19.04, p < 0.01, Wilks’s lambda 0.88)
the dependent variables ($F(3,374) = 3.28$, $p < 0.01$, Wilks’s lambda 0.95), suggesting that the impact of perceived writer–brand relationship differed between the two media.

In a comparison between the high- versus low-perceived writer–brand relationship groups for each medium, although perceived writer–brand relationship had a directionally positive impact on publicity effectiveness in both blogs and online magazines, the differences between the high versus low groups were greater for blogs (See Table 2).

Brand attitude differed at $M_{\text{ATT Blog}}\text{LowRelation} = 4.50$ versus $M_{\text{ATT Blog}}\text{HighRelation} = 5.47$ ($p < 0.01$) on the blogs, compared to $M_{\text{ATT Magazine}}\text{LowRelation} = 4.71$ versus $M_{\text{ATT Magazine}}\text{HighRelation} = 4.73$ (not statistically significant) in the online magazines. Similarly, purchase intention differed at $M_{\text{PIM Blog}}\text{LowRelation} = 4.89$ versus $M_{\text{PIM Blog}}\text{HighRelation} = 5.94$ ($p < 0.01$) on the blogs, compared to $M_{\text{PIM Magazine}}\text{LowRelation} = 5.09$ versus $M_{\text{PIM Magazine}}\text{HighRelation} = 5.29$ (not statistically significant) in the online magazines.

In conclusion, the results uniformly support H3.

For the test of H4—the writer-credibility hypothesis—a median split created a new variable (high- vs. low-perceived writer credibility) that was included as a factor in the initial MANCOVA together with medium (blogs versus online magazines). Supporting H4, the interaction term produced significant effects on the dependent variables ($F(3,374) = 2.70, p < 0.01$, Wilks’s lambda 0.95), suggesting that the impact of perceived writer credibility differs between the two media (See Table 3).

In comparing the high- versus low-perceived writer credibility groups for each medium separately, brand attitude differed at $M_{\text{ATT Blog}}\text{LowCredibility} = 4.65$ versus $M_{\text{ATT Blog}}\text{HighCredibility} = 5.51$ on the blogs ($p < 0.01$), compared to $M_{\text{ATT Magazine}}\text{LowCredibility} = 4.57$ versus $M_{\text{ATT Magazine}}\text{HighCredibility} = 4.72$ (not statistically significant) in the online magazines. Similarly, purchase intention differed at $M_{\text{PIM Blog}}\text{LowCredibility} = 5.13$, $M_{\text{PIM Blog}}\text{HighCredibility} = 6.10$ ($p < 0.01$) on the blogs, compared to $M_{\text{PIM Magazine}}\text{LowCredibility} = 4.86$ versus $M_{\text{PIM Magazine}}\text{HighCredibility} = 5.34$ ($p < 0.01$) in the online magazines. In conclusion, the results uniformly support H4.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the current study clearly show that the publicity effectiveness of blogs is higher than that of online magazines—a symptom of a new logic wherein media, marketing, and consumers are joined in friendships. Consumers follow their “fashionable” blogger friends and, as long as the bloggers genuinely follow brands, their readers form friendships with the brands as well. Blogs, in effect, provide a testimony to this logic that neither media nor marketers can ignore.

**TABLE 3**

Effects of Writer Credibility: Mean Comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Credibility</th>
<th>High Credibility</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blogs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>6.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online Magazines</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>4.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>5.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
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</table>

**The Position of New and Traditional Media**

The identification of PSI as a factor contributing to the popularity of social media suggests methods for traditional media to achieve “blog effects.” Promoting journalistic staff as the faces of a media would allow audiences to form a more personal relationship with them through PSI. Magazines are taking notice, trying to update their image and promoting blogs as part of their online presence (La Ferla, 2009). These adjustments, in part, are brought on by the new online competition and lead to significant changes as magazines try to adapt to the present as they struggle to maintain their original identity.

**Finding “Fashionable Friends”**

The study conclusively shows that the publicity effectiveness is superior in social media as compared to “traditional” online media. There is a similarity between social-media marketing and WOM advertising. In each case, the unbiased nature of the sender—and other perceptions of his or her credibility—play a greater role in social media than in traditional media.
This study displayed clearly how the writer–brand relationship and writers’ credibility affected readers’ perceptions of brand publicity on blogs. These findings highlight the need for transparency of blogs and other social media. For consumers, it is essential that the information is unbiased—originating from “people like me”—rather than a corporate-sponsored online presence (cf. Allsop et al., 2007).

For consumer watchdogs and government regulators, the unbiased nature of the endorsements has become equally important. Coincidental with the growth of the social media, many companies began sponsoring social media in exchange for endorsements of their products (Arango, 2009). Various advocacy groups have called for stricter oversight of such marketing practices (Joshi, 2009). Noting the growth and importance of social media, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission moved to regulate marketing within that environment: Social media endorsers now are compelled to disclaim any “material connection” with the brands they endorse (Arango).

The use of social media requires marketers to take a step back from traditional campaign thinking and focus more on relationship building. Public-relations practitioners end up in traditional media by reason of news-generating spectacular advertising campaigns, press releases, sponsored competitions, and the like. By contrast, for publicity to find a credible spot on blogs, placement efforts need to begin with genuine relationships with the bloggers.

Finding “fashionable friends” online takes time and effort. The return of those investments, however, could provide marketers with a new kind of far-reaching effective publicity generated by blog producers who similarly devote both time and effort to promoting the brands they believe in.

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THE FUTURE: EARNED DIGITAL MEDIA


