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Media brand loyalty through online audience integration?

Juliane A. Lischka¹

Abstract This chapter discusses the question of whether audience members become loyal toward a media brand when sharing, liking or commenting on online media content – or are loyal readers more inclined to write comments on online articles or to like and share them? The aim is to answer this chicken-egg causality dilemma of the audience integration-loyalty relationship on a theoretical basis. Therefore, the concept of attitude-behavior consistency, the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior, involvement theory, uses and gratifications theory, and current research are reviewed. In conclusion, audience integration can be defined as behavioral dimension of loyalty and affects gratifications obtained that determine satisfaction, which in turn determines loyalty and future gratifications sought.

Keywords: Audience, audience participation, online distribution, loyalty, satisfaction, branding, uses and gratification, involvement, media, Facebook

1 Introduction

When regarding media products as brands, the concept of media brand loyalty is closely connected. Loyalty towards products or services is an important marketing goal for companies, since loyal buyers or users increase the profitability and brand value of the company according to Aaker (1996). Loyal customers re- and cross-purchase, accept price increases, and are more likely to recommend a service or product to others. Therefore, loyalty is relevant for relationship management – and ultimately for developing a sustainable competitive advantage (Dick & Basu, 1994; see the overview on loyalty as indirect marketing outcome in Tropp, 2011).

With web 2.0 and social media, companies (are forced to) open up, interactively engage with customers, and even integrate customers into what were once internal processes. That is, customers become co-creators of the product design, advertising or the corporate identity (See-To & Ho, 2014; Theunissen, 2014; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). One benefit of integrating customers is a potential increase in brand loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995; Flint, Blocker, & Boutin, 2011).

For media brands, a loyal audience (that can be sold to advertisers) is crucial and gains greater importance in an online environment where switching costs are low.

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Online, the audience can be integrated into the supply chain of content production. Audience comments and user-generated content (UGC) can be used within the value chain of a news outlet, e.g., when prioritizing topics (Kang, 2010; Ots & Karlsson, 2012).

Audience integration is defined by two behavioral dimensions according to Hille and Bakker (2013); (1) sharing or liking articles on social media or via email, i.e., *audience distribution* and (2) creating UGC or comments on journalistic articles, i.e., *audience participation* (see left side of *Figure 1*). Audience integration features offered by online compared to offline media brands “have expanded the range and scope of our interactions with media content” (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 505). When integrating users online, they spend more time with the media brand, have more touch points, deal more intensively with the media brand, and personally connect stronger to the brand (Czolkoss & Schmid-Petri, 2012). Audience integration can increase the user satisfaction with a brand (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012) and therefore should be able to increase loyalty as well. However, the chicken or the egg causality dilemma remains: are more loyal customers the ones who participate in content creation and distribute content online or does participating/distributing lead to an increase² in loyalty towards the media brand?

To approach the relation between audience integration and loyalty, satisfaction serves as a link. A satisfying experience with the brand is considered as a necessary antecedent for loyalty (e.g., Oliver, 1999b). Therefore, firstly the relation between customer loyalty and satisfaction and also involvement theory are reviewed. Secondly, uses and gratifications theory is applied to relate media brand loyalty and satisfaction with audience integration. Further, the motivators of audience integration are discussed in relation to involvement theory and uses and gratifications theory, and empirical results of the relation between loyalty and audience integration are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary of theoretical and empirical connections between loyalty and audience integration.

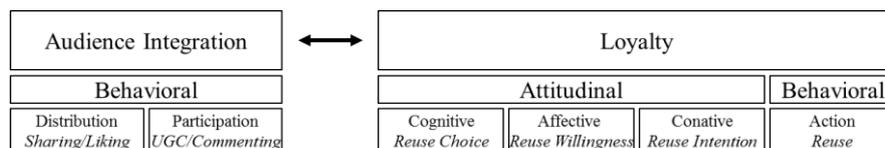
2 Loyalty and satisfaction

Loyalty can be defined as a *behavioral* or *intentional* response to *attitudes*, e.g., as “the strength of the relationship between an individual's relative attitude and repeat

² It should be noted that audience participation may not be exclusively positively related to loyalty: dissatisfied and less loyal readers may *vent their anger* when commenting on journalistic articles. This behavior might rather be a result of psychological arousal through perceived news content and could be similar to letters to the editor. On this matter, Smith, McLeod, and Wakefield (2005) indicate that letters to the editor are likely to reveal extreme positions. However, a negative relation will remain mostly disregarded in this chapter since the aim is to reveal the *direction* of causality between loyalty and audience integration.

patronage” (Dick & Basu, 1994, p. 99). The concept of loyalty is often broadened to attitudinal, i.e., cognitive, affective, and conative, dimensions when referring to “the degree to which customers intend to repeat their purchases in the future (intention of future behavior), express a positive attitudinal willingness toward the provider (affective loyalty), and consider this provider the sole option for future transactions (cognitive loyalty)” (Picón, Castro, & Roldán, 2014, p. 747). The dimensions of loyalty are visualized on the right side of *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Audience integration and loyalty dimensions



Source: Compiled by the author.

Behavioral *media* brand loyalty can take other attendance forms than repeat purchase, such as spending more time watching a channel or programs and visiting a media brand website more often. The term *reuse* combines cost-involving and free forms of reutilization a media brand. On the cognitive dimension, users regard a media brand as the best alternative to fulfill their needs. On the affective dimension, users prefer a certain media brand and are willing to reuse it. On the conative dimension, users express a reuse intention, which is expected to transfer to the actual reuse behavior. One could argue that audience distribution and participation are elements of the behavioral media brand loyalty dimension since both are ways of *reusing* online features of a media brand.

Satisfaction is regarded as *necessary antecedent* of loyalty (e.g. Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, & Hansen, 2012, see overview in Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Suh & Youjjae, 2006). Oliver (1999b, p. 42) distinguishes between loyalty as “an attained state of enduring preference to the point of determined defense” and satisfaction as “a fairly temporal post-usage state for one time consumption or a repeatedly experienced state for ongoing consumption that reflects how the product or service has fulfilled its purpose” (Oliver, 1999b, p. 41). In this view, Oliver (1999b) regards satisfaction as an essential ingredient of or as transforming into loyalty. Oliver (1980a) defines satisfaction as a function of expectation and expectancy (dis)confirmation, which in turn leads to a revision of attitudes and purchase intention. If an outcome is poorer than expected, satisfaction decreases. This then leads to degrading attitudes and a decline of repurchase intention (Oliver, 1980a). Because satisfaction is an “overall evaluation of personal consumption experience” (Suh & Youjjae, 2006, p. 146), it represents the influence of the total past experience of customers. Online media brand satisfaction thus includes all past visits of the media website and all experiences with its media content though social media websites or other online channels. The nature of media content being an experience or

confidence good exacerbates the ability of recipients to evaluate their consumption experience to a full extent. Therefore, evaluating the satisfaction with a media brand may be harder and, in turn, building up stable loyalty towards a media brand may take longer than with non-confidence goods. In an online environment where switching costs are low, establishing satisfied and loyal users is not easier. Therefore, Adams (2006) underlines that the perceived value of the content and services as well as the pace and degree of fulfilling the needs of users are relevant for online media brands.

The rationale for the *satisfaction* → *loyalty* causality (→ = *to positively affect*) is based on the concept of attitude-behavior consistency and the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980, 2005; Lutz, 1977). That is, *attitudes guide behavior*, and past behavior may forecast future behavior by affecting intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). When post purchase evaluations are satisfying, this may lead to a repurchase behavior.

According to Oliver (1980a; 1999b), a simplified *satisfaction* → *loyalty* causality sequence consists of (1) *expectation* → (2) *purchase* → (3) *post purchase (dis)confirmation; post purchase satisfaction/attitude/intention* → (4) *repurchase*. Since loyalty comprises attitudinal as well as behavioral dimensions, loyalty dimensions are contained in steps (3) and (4), respectively.

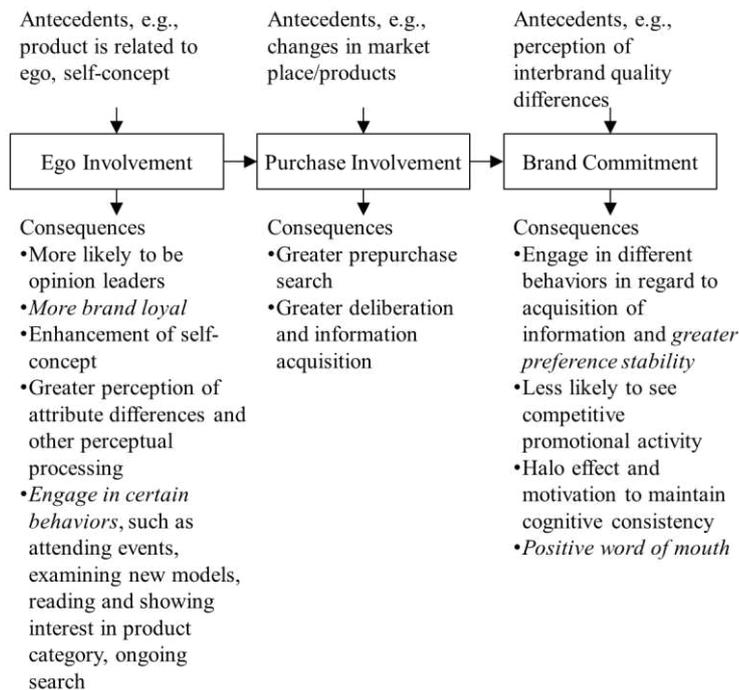
The relation between satisfaction and brand loyalty is however “not simple and straightforward” (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995, p. 311), and customer satisfaction is not sufficient to predict loyalty. The satisfaction-loyalty relation is influenced by *internal*, i.e., product characteristics, service quality, promotion mix, and costs, and *external* factors, i.e., switching costs, marketplace situation, perceived value, commitment, and trust (Yoo & Bai, 2013; see Morgan & Hunt, 1994 for the commitment-trust model of relationship marketing).

Yet various studies confirm the satisfaction-loyalty causality sequence using longitudinal designs. Lariviere, Keiningham, Cooil, Aksoy, and Malthouse (2014) show in a panel study that a change in the affective (pleasure of being customer of the brand), calculative (perceived payoff to be a customer of the brand), and normative commitment (perceived similarity of values) is positively related to a change in the customers’ share of wallet, which can be regarded as a dimension of behavioral loyalty. Results of Johnson, Herrmann, and Huber (2006) indicate that *early* repurchase and recommendation intentions are driven by *cognitive* perceptions of overall value, i.e., performance beliefs. They conclude that “loyalty intentions are a function of perceived value early in the life cycle” (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 122). Later, with more consumer experience, affective attitudes toward maintaining the relationship become more important for repurchase and recommendation intentions. That is, *later-stage affective* attitudes mediate the effects of performance beliefs on purchase intentions. Overall, their findings support that *attitudes* → (*intentional*) *behavior*, which is in line with the concept of attitude-behavior consistency.

However, the longitudinal studies reported did not allow for a reverse impact of loyalty towards assumed causes and are thus not truly dynamic. Therefore, a causal relation suggested by the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior are found, but is not sufficiently dynamically proven over time. Interestingly, Shankar, Smith, and Rangaswamy (2003) argue that the relation between satisfaction and loyalty is *reciprocal*, i.e., satisfaction reinforces loyalty *and vice versa*. Yet their study did not differentiate between attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of loyalty. There is no discrepancy with the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior, when assuming that satisfaction and the attitudinal dimension of loyalty may reinforce each other. Shankar et al. (2003) did not use longitudinal data to reveal dynamic relations between satisfaction and loyalty.

A more dynamic theoretical approach explaining the relation between a customer and a brand is offered by involvement theory. The involvement-commitment model (Figure 2) proposes that ego involvement, i.e., whether the product is related to the self-concept of the consumer, positively affects purchase involvement, i.e., whether a consumer cares about what brands to consume, which in turn positively affects brand commitment, i.e., preference and loyalty towards the brand, resulting in preference stability and positive word of mouth (Beatty, Homer, & Kahle, 1988).

Figure 2: Involvement-commitment model with antecedents and consequences



Source: Beatty et al., 1988, p. 153. Examples of antecedents are reduced. Attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of loyalty are printed in italics. Italics by the author.

Previous research shows that commitment, trust, and product involvement also serve as predictors of word of mouth (Kumar, Pozza, & Ganesh, 2013). Consequences of ego involvement are an increase in brand loyalty and *engaging in certain behaviors*, such as attending events, reading and showing interest in product category, or ongoing search (Beatty et al., 1988). This relates to the concept of brand experience, which is described as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses” and is found to increase loyalty (Sahin, Zehir, & Kitapçı, 2011, p. 289).

Hence, the involvement-commitment model does not differentiate between attitudinal antecedents and behavioral outcomes but allows attitudinal and behavioral consequences to occur after each of the three steps. The outcomes of involvement and commitment are loyalty-related attitudes *and* behaviors. The first stage of ego involvement, as well as the last stage of brand commitment may *lead to* loyal attitudes and behavior, but also to participating and distributing behaviors. That is, audience integration may rather be accompanied by an increase in loyalty than being an antecedent. Instead, ego involvement can be treated as antecedent of loyalty. Brand commitment itself may well represent an attitudinal dimension of loyalty. Therefore, ego involvement may play a relevant role for disentangling the audience integration-satisfaction loyalty relation, which is discussed in the following section.

3 Audience integration, loyalty and satisfaction

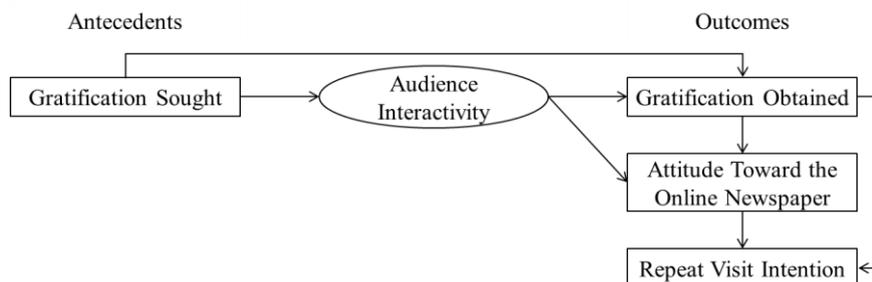
Research on online communities has revealed that audience integration positively affects brand commitment (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2008), consumer-based brand equity (Christodoulides et al., 2012), recommendation behavior, brand image of the community sponsor, intention to continue community membership (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008), and brand trust, which in turn has a positive effect on brand loyalty (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013) and on participation in the community activities (Casaló et al., 2008). Casaló et al. (2008) remark that the level of satisfaction with interactions positively affects trust – and trust has a positive effect on participation. Likewise Chung (2008) shows that the perceived credibility of online news also positively affects the use of interactive features. On the other hand, audience participation can increase the credibility of an online media brand (Kim, 2012). Horppu, Kuivalainen, Tarkiainen, and Ellonen (2008) confirm that users’ satisfaction and trust determine their loyalty for a Finnish consumer magazine web site. Oyedeji (2007) finds that perceived media outlet quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty can explain about three quarters of the variance in media channel credibility. These studies reveal that audience integration, credibility, satisfaction, and loyalty are strongly interdependent. Hence,

not only satisfaction and loyalty (Shankar et al., 2003) but also the concepts of audience integration, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty may be reciprocal.

Uses and gratification theory can explain antecedents and outcomes of online audience integration and relate audience integration to loyalty and satisfaction. Interactive features can lead to an increase in the *gratifications obtained* by the use of online media brands. Uses and gratifications theory proposes that media use and media choice depend on gratifications sought by the audience and lead to a certain level of gratifications obtained after the media use (Katz & Blumler, 1974). The degree of accordance of sought and obtained gratifications affects future media use – that is, the behavioral dimension of loyalty. This attitude-behavior relation can also be based on the concept of attitude-behavior consistency and the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior.

When relating gratifications to the satisfaction-loyalty relation, obtained gratifications correspond to post purchase (dis)confirmation and post purchase satisfaction, attitude or intention. Ko, Cho, and Roberts (2005) argue using the example of interactive advertising that gratifications obtained, which result from perceived fulfillment of usage motivation or gratifications sought, create satisfaction with the usage experience. Chung and Nah (2009) uncover that the use of interactive features is positively associated with perceived satisfaction toward a community news site. Similar to the concept of satisfaction with purchase experience including all experiences with a product, satisfaction towards a media brand includes all experiences with its content. How satisfying experiences with the content are, is determined by the concordance of gratifications sought with gratifications obtained. In the case that this concordance is high, a high level of satisfaction and revisiting can be expected. When the gratification sought was not obtained, users may rather avoid reusing the online news outlet. Hence, “the extent to which an individual perceives GO [gratification obtained, JL] should contribute to his/her attitudes and future intention to seek similar experiences in the same medium” (Yoo, 2011, p. 74). These relations are displayed in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3: Audience interactivity, gratifications, and repeat visit intention



Source: Compiled by the author based on Yoo, 2011, p. 81.

Sundar (2004) argues that interactivity can also cause negative effects through over-stimulation of the user leading to negative evaluations. In an experiment conducted in 2000, interactive features were found to be rated as significantly more participatory, involving, and immediate than non-interactive conditions, but also generated significantly more confusion and frustration (Bucy, 2004). Still, interactive features are appreciated by visitors, even though they remain unused quite often (Larsson, 2011). In addition, Larsson (2011) reveals that newspaper websites offering interactive features are visited significantly more often. Today, interactive features may be regarded as less confusing as they have become more common among news websites. In this manner, Hunt, Atkin, and Kowal (2013) argue that familiarity with interactive features on a website influences its use. Although a low number of audience members use interactive features, Chung and Yoo (2008) suggest that more people should exercise interactivity on an online site, because they are more likely to acquire favorable attitudes toward the site and to have a greater intention to visit the site at a later occasion.

According to uses and gratifications theory, online media brand reuse, i.e., the behavioral dimension of loyalty, depends on the level of satisfied gratifications. If audience integration increases the satisfaction in gratifications sought then media brand loyalty will increase as a result. Hence, audience integration is a *mediating* variable of the relation between gratifications sought and obtained and, initially, *precedes* satisfaction and loyalty towards the media brand. Subsequently, since obtained gratifications affect future gratifications sought, an increase in audience integration can also *follow* an increase in loyalty. The resulting reuse experience in turn affects loyal behavior in the next step. Therefore, a *reciprocal relation* between the level of audience integration, satisfaction, and loyalty may occur.

However, previously reviewed literature regards audience integration as a by-product of media used as a means of seeking gratifications. Yet there may be distinct motivations that trigger audience integration. In order to understand such motivations, the two dimensions of audience integration according to Hille and Bakker (2013), distributing and participation, are discussed in the following.

In general, Berger and Iyengar (2013, p. 573) argue that “Written communication provides the opportunity to refine communication, and self-enhancement concerns drive people to use that opportunity to talk about more interesting products and brands.” Berger and Milkman (2012) investigate why readers share, i.e., distribute, news articles via email with others. Their content analysis of the most often shared articles from the *New York Times* in combination with an experiment reveal that positive and negative emotions potentially arouse readers (awe, amusement, anxiety, and anger) and lead to sharing. Also practical utility, interest and surprise are positively connected to sharing. They argue based on Homans (1958), who considers social behavior as an exchange of goods, that certain content characteristics of articles offer social exchange value, which can be related to the socialization motivation to use online news investigated by Yoo (2011). That is, the sender expects

that certain content may help others, it supports the sender's self-enhancement as the sender appears knowledgeable to others, or the sender aims to generate reciprocity and to deepen social connections (Berger & Milkman, 2012). In addition, sharing with one or many people affects what senders share. When sharing with many, senders are self-focused and avoid content that may make them look bad. Whereas, when sharing with only one person, senders chose content that is useful to the other (Barasch & Berger, 2014). Hence, senders share content for self-presentation and self-enhancement or target the content to the receiver.

Audience participation, i.e., commenting, involves the disclosing of one's own ideas to an unfamiliar public and an unfamiliar online community of commenting voices, whereas the sender as well as the community members can remain anonymous. Readers may comment on articles because they want to discuss matters of personal interest or want to make abusive comments (Canter, 2013; Singer, 2009). Canter (2013) finds that for online comments in two UK regional newspapers, the dominant reason why readers comment online is to express a personal opinion on a story. A secondary motivation is to interact with other readers. Compared to the social activity of sharing articles with familiar people, social self-enhancement within the writer's familiar social environment through generating reciprocity and deepening social connections cannot be achieved by commenting. Still, the writer of a comment may appear knowledgeable to anonymous others, which may enhance the sender's self-concept. Thus, for commenting, there is no benefit for social relations but a rather egocentric self-enhancement benefit (e.g., "Others read my thoughts and may find me clever").

Connecting Berger and Milkman's (2012) and Canter's (2013) findings to the involvement-commitment model (*Figure 2*), sharing of articles, a social transaction activity between a dyad or a small group of familiar people, and commenting, a social transaction activity between unfamiliar users, enhances the self-concept and social relations of the sender/commenter. The fulfillment of the enhancement in turn determines satisfaction and loyalty towards the media brand as suggested by uses and gratifications theory. In the first step of *Figure 2*, the arousing characteristic of an article may be related to the reader's self-concept. The social activity of sharing, liking or commenting on an article, which can be regarded as *engaging in certain behaviors* within the model, may be perceived beneficial for the sender as it enhances the sender's self-concept and social relations. According to the involvement-commitment model and uses and gratifications theory, a possible causal sequence according to the involvement-commitment model may be *arousal* → *ego involvement/social value* → *sharing/liking of articles* → *gratifications obtained* → *satisfaction/loyalty*.

These results suggest that in the context of the involvement-commitment model and uses and gratifications theory audience integration increases website satisfaction, trust and other attitudes toward the media brand, which in turn increases loy-

alty, i.e., *audience integration* → *gratifications obtained* → *satisfaction/trust/commitment* → *loyalty*. Hence, audience integration may increase loyalty through a greater level of gratifications obtained because participation offers a more intense and credible media experience.

4 Conclusions for the audience integration-loyalty relation of media brands

According to the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior, an attitudinal change *precedes* a behavioral change. Therefore, *attitudinal* antecedents and the *attitudinal* dimension of loyalty precede the *behavioral* dimension of loyalty. According to uses and gratifications theory, the level of gratifications obtained through media use determines the satisfaction with a media brand, which *precedes* the re-visiting of a media site, i.e., the behavioral dimension of loyalty, and future gratifications sought. Audience integration affects the level of gratification obtained. Therefore, it is initially an antecedent of loyalty and can later result from loyalty. First, since satisfaction is “the overall evaluation of personal consumption experience” (Suh & Youjae, 2006, p. 146), the experience with integration activities determines audience satisfaction through obtained gratifications of social value, self-concept or ego enhancement according to the involvement-commitment model. In turn, satisfaction transfers into loyalty.

The following conclusions and suggestions for future research derive.

- The theories of reasoned action and planned behavior proposes that attitudinal dimensions of loyalty can precede audience integration behavior. Hence, audience integration can also be defined as an element of the behavioral dimension of loyalty. Sharing articles online is a recommending behavior and re-commenting is a reuse behavior.

Future research should clearly differentiate between attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of loyalty, systematically subclassify the behavioral dimension of online media brand loyalty (e.g., re-visiting, re-commenting, recommending/sharing, re-purchasing etc.), and analyze the relations between these loyalty dimensions.

- Involvement theory, especially the involvement-commitment model, proposes that loyalty is accompanied by audience integration behavior. Arousal, social (exchange) value, and ego involvement lead to audience participation.

Uses and gratifications theory proposes that audience integration is a means to gratifications obtained, which affects satisfaction and in turn loyalty. Hence, audience integration determines the degree of satisfaction in gratifications sought. Yet obtained gratifications and loyalty determine future use and gratifications sought. With this, a change in loyalty can precede a

change in audience integration because gratifications sought have changed. To conclude, audience integration can precede *and* follow loyalty, but there is no direct causality since a direct connection between audience integration and loyalty does theoretically not exist. Instead, audience integration determines gratifications obtained. When returning to the chicken-egg image, the chicken is not audience integration but it is satisfaction that lays the egg, i.e., loyalty. Audience integration is rather the forage the chicken consumes to “produce” an egg.

Future studies employing longitudinal designs and allowing dynamic relations between online audience integration, media brand satisfaction/trust/commitment, and media brand loyalty will be very insightful.

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