If you reply to me, I will buy from you: A social influence examination of reciprocity on Twitter

Rosanna E. Guadagno^{1,†}, Amanda Sardos^{2,*,†} and Amanda M. Kimbrough^{3,†}

Abstract

This research examines corporate communication practices on social media, focusing on potential customers' intentions to patronize a corporate brand after contacting the brand's Twitter account. Specifically, across two studies, participants reported their intentions to patronize one of two restaurant chains after the corporate Twitter account responded in one of three ways to their hypothetical message: direct reply, retweet, or did not respond. Based on Guadagno's [11] model of social influence online, we predicted that people would be more likely to patronize a restaurant that responded to the tweet -- either via retweet or reply -- owing to the norm of reciprocity. Across both studies, results indicated that participants reported stronger intentions to patronize the restaurant after a Twitter interaction. Furthermore, women generally reported higher purchase intentions and sensitivity to the different restaurant response conditions than did men. Thus, as predicted, reciprocity in social media interactions between people and businesses is effective in influencing people to patronize the business. Implications for user behavior change will be discussed.

Keywords

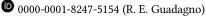
Reciprocity, social influence, social media, Twitter, gender, user engagement

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram) has become the primary way for people to communicate online. Social media sites, or social networking sites (SNS), as they are often referred to, have been operationally defined by scholars as: "Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system"[1]. Social media use has been steadily growing globally over the past ten years. In 2005, only seven percent of American adults used social media; ten years later, this number rose to sixty-five percent, an almost a tenfold increase. Among American adults under thirty years old, social media use is now almost ubiquitous with ninety percent reporting active use on at least one platform. Furthermore,

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[☑] rosanna.guadagno@oulu.fi (R. E. Guadagno); asardos@gmail.com (A. Sardos); amkalbright@gmail.com (A. E. Kimbrough)



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¹ University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

² University of Texas at Dallas, 800 W. Campbell Road, Richardson, TX 75080-3021, USA

³ Instagram, Dallas, TX, USA

^{*}Corresponding author.

[†] These authors contributed equally.

social media use comprises about twenty percent of the total time Americans adults spend on the Internet [20]. Thus, it is safe to state that social media use is extremely popular in contemporary society.

Given the popularity of social media, scholars have begun to examine the ways in which communication via social media affects social relationships e.g., [24]. While much of the extant literature examines the implications of social media use for interpersonal relationships, there is a paucity of research examining the relationships between consumers and businesses. Many brands have a presence on social media that ties into their actual products. Indeed, during a trip to the grocery store, most people encounter popular social media icons on product labels as well as ads for tie ins between the physical product and the corporate social media presence. The present investigation seeks to fill this gap by examining whether interacting with corporate social media accounts via Twitter will increase people's intentions to patronize the business.

1.1. Social influence online

The present investigation focuses on reciprocity as an influence tactic. Reciprocity has proven successful in various offline contexts because returning favors, invitations, or gifts is ingrained as a universal social norm [9]. Thus, the norm of reciprocity, which is also referred to as the Golden Rule, indicates that people who give others favors have the reasonable expectation that those favors will be returned. This is because when someone does another person a favor, the person receiving the favor feels indebted to the favor-doer until they can return the favor. Although the literature on compliance gaining in an online context is still somewhat limited, results suggest that influence tactics that play on internal processes within the individual, rather than those that rely on interpersonal processes will be more successful (see [13, 15, 16] for reviews). Guadagno and colleagues argue that this is due to the primarily to the decreased salience of the other person in many forms of online interaction.

Within the context of a brand-consumer exchange, reciprocity remains a relational or a giveand-take process; the brand can give the consumer information or a special deal, and the consumer can reciprocate that interaction by purchasing their product or spreading their information to other consumers. Additionally, this can be seen in the ways consumers share advice, information, and ideas from each other online and then reciprocating these shared resources [3].

Ewell, Minney, and Guadagno [7] reviewed the literature on reciprocity online and found that few studies have examined social influence with reciprocity in online contexts. For instance, Eastwick and Gardner [6] examined whether people would comply with a requester who used the reciprocity-based door-in-the-face (DITF) technique in a virtual world. With the DITF, a requester initially asks their target for an exceedingly large request, expecting it to be rejected, creating a situation in which retreating to a smaller request is perceived by the target as a concession on the part of the requester. This invokes reciprocity and, compared to no large request controls, generally increases compliance to the smaller, target request. Consistent with the general research in this area, the author found a significant DITF effect, but only when the avatar appeared to be White. When the avatar appeared to be Black, the DITF was unsuccessful in the virtual world. Other scholarship suggests that reciprocity affects people's social media news consumption such that people with stronger beliefs in reciprocity consume more news shared on social media [17] . Thus, while the evidence is limited, it appears that reciprocity in communication can be effective in certain online contexts.

1.2. Gender differences in technology use

Human social behavior is often impacted by the expectations people have for others. This is evident in the way reciprocity functions. However, societal expectations for behavior can also differ between men and women in both on and offline contexts. Social role theory postulates that men and women occupy different roles in society [5]. According to social role theory, the different roles men and women fulfil in society produce gendered beliefs about the skills and characteristics of men and women. Specifically, according to social role theory, perceivers expect men to engage in more agentic behaviors such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and independence. Conversely, perceivers expect women to be more communal in their conduct as evidenced by a greater focus on relational goals and interpersonal processes. Not only are these gender differences expected, research suggests that men and women conduct themselves in accordance with these gender role expectations. These gendered differences in behavior have been shown to translate to online environments as well, with women spending more time maintaining interpersonal relationships online and men engaging in more independent and competitive behaviors. For instance, Muscanell and Guadagno [22] found that women were more likely to use social networking sites for maintaining existing relationships than were men. Instead, men reported engaging in more agentic behavior in their social media use as evidenced by more time spent establishing new romantic and platonic relationships and seeking job opportunities. Other research has shown that women use mediated communication more broadly defined (e.g., across social networking, texting, e-mail) more than do men [19].

Indeed, this tendency for women to adopt and use mediated channels of communication to maintain social ties can be seen in the early days of communication on the Internet. For instance, while both women and men report valuing email for its convenience and efficiency at equal rates, women report greater satisfaction with email in their daily life and that have indicated that communication via email is an important and meaningful aspect of their lives [8]. These differences in communication satisfaction and importance can be traced to women's greater use of email for maintaining close social bonds with friends and family, whereas men were more likely to use email as a source for seeking information [8, 19].

Across three studies, Guadagno and Cialdini [12, 14] investigated whether persuasion via email differed significantly from face-to-face interactions. This line of research examined people's change in attitude towards undergraduate comprehensive exams – a popular topic of persuasion, largely because it is so unpopular to students -- after hearing a series of persuasive messages from a same-sex communicator via either an email or face-to-face interaction. This research was framed by social role theory [5] and predicted that women, focused on establishing connection would be more persuaded when the communicator was more salient (i.e., FtF) and similar to them, while men would be focused on establishing agency and would not vary in persuasion by communication mode. As expected, the results of their first study revealed that women were significantly less persuaded when a same-sex confederate conveyed the persuasive messages via email than via face-to-face. Men, on the other hand, did not differ in persuasion as a function of the communication channel. Their second study replicated and expanded upon this work by demonstrating that interacting with the confederate prior to the persuasive exchange varied the outcome differentially for men versus women. Specifically, for women, any prior interaction regardless of the nature (i.e., competitive vs. cooperative) attenuated the effect of email on persuasion such that women reported the most negative attitudes toward the comprehensive exams. This was not the case for male participants who instead reported the most negative attitudes toward the exams when they had a competitive prior interaction with the confederate before he attempted to persuade then in person. Study 3 replicated and expanded on these findings by examining the impact of perceived similarity on persuasion. Results indicated that participants who perceived themselves to be highly similar to the confederate were the most likely to be persuaded relative to those participants who did not receive any similar feedback or were informed that they were highly dissimilar to the communicator. Again, the results varied by participant gender such that male participants evaluated the persuasive message on its merits when interacting via email, while women participants were prone to reject entreaties from dissimilar others.

Given that this previous research demonstrated women's greater focus on communal goals in the context of online persuasion, we suggest that they may be more susceptible to reciprocity-based social influence appeals are more likely to use, prefer, be more satisfied with, and report greater importance of mediated communication channels in their lives, this could lead to them being more persuaded by or compliant with requests presented via these channels, such as those posed by brands online.

1.3. The present investigation

In two studies, we examined whether reciprocity affects purchase intentions after a hypothetical interaction between corporate twitter accounts and consumers on Twitter. Specifically, we examined how type of interaction with a business (reply, retweet, or no response) affected people's intentions to patronize a restaurant. We chose Twitter over other social media platforms because it is a microblogging site and features more informational posts and business to consumer messaging than social media sites focused on social networking such as Facebook [10].

Based upon the relevant social influence on social media theoretical frameworks reviewed above e.g.,[11], we predicted that the greater the response from a corporate twitter account to a potential customer would increase intentions to patronize the brand. In addition, owing to social role theory [5], we expected gender differences such that women would be more sensitive to the different response types and therefore show greater intentions to patronize the brand when the brand reciprocated the participant's tweet with a personalized tweet in response. We examined this first with an undergraduate sample (Study 1) and then again with an online sample from Amazon's Mturk (Study 2) in part to increase generalization of our results and in part to increase the sample of men in our study. Other than this, there were no other differences between the studies.

Specifically, our hypotheses are as follows:

H1: When brands interact with consumers through a reply or retweet, consumers will be more likely to patronize the company.

H2: Women will be more likely than men to visit the company after seeing brands engage with consumers on Twitter.

RQ1: Since the literature on the influence of reciprocity in interactions between businesses and consumers is limited, we wanted to examine whether consumers perceived retweets and replies similarly as they are both reciprocal forms of communication. Thus, this research question is aimed at understanding whether retweets and responses are equally persuasive when used in the same context.

2. Study 1

In this initial study, undergraduate students were recruited to test our hypothesis.

2.1. Participants

Participants were 139 undergraduate students (113 women, 26 men) from midsized southwestern university who received partial course credit for their participation. Participants ranged in age from 18-42 (M= 21.3, SD = 3.29). Self-reported ethnicity was as follows: Caucasian 54 (38.8%), African American 6 (4.3%), Asian 46 (33.1%), Pacific Islander 2 (1.4%), Hispanic 21 (15.1%), and Other 10 (7.2%). Additionally, almost half (47.5%) of our sample reported using social media over 4 hours a week.

Table 1Participants Social Media Use per Week in Study 1

Time Per Week	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-1 hrs	11	7.9	7.9
1-2 hrs	24	17.3	25.2
3-4 hrs	38	27.3	52.5
4 or more hrs	66	47.5	100
Total	139	100	

2.2. Design and measures

Design. The experimental design was a 3 (restaurant's social media response: retweet vs. reply vs. none) X 2 (participant gender: men vs. women) between subjects factorial design. The restaurant's social media response options were as follows: replying to the consumer's tweet, retweeting the consumer's tweet, or not responding to the consumer at all. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these three conditions by Qualtrics, the survey software used to collect the data. To increase generalizability of our findings, stimulus materials were created for two different restaurants with participants randomly assigned to view one: Chili's or Gloria's. See Figure 1 for example images of the stimulus materials for each restaurant.

Measures: To assess users' behavioral intentions with a company after interacting with them on Twitter, a scale was created using three author-generated items, the reliability of which was quite high, Chronbach's α = .89: (1) "How likely are you to visit this company in person?" (2) "How likely are you to buy this company's product?" and (3) "How likely are you to recommend this company?" Responses were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1= not important at all; 7=very important).

Additionally, before seeing the stimulus materials or rating their behavioral intentions, participants were asked questions about their overall social media use in order to get a sense of how important brand interaction over social media would be. Participants were asked how much they used social media in a given week and were asked to choose the answer that best reflected their general habits from 0-1 hours, 1-2 hours, 3-4 hours, or 4 or more hours. Finally, after seeing the stimulus materials and rating their behavioral intentions, participants were

specifically asked to rate how important it is that a brand engages with them on twitter on a 1-7 Likert scale from (1) not at all important to (7) extremely important.

2.3. Procedure

Participants in this study first answered survey questions pertaining to their overall social media use to get a sense of the importance social media plays in their everyday lives. Then participants were asked to imagine that they sent a tweet to a restaurant while planning an evening out with friends. They were then presented with one of the three tweet conditions (response, retweet, or no response) from either of the two restaurants (Chili's or Gloria's). After reading the stimulus material, the participant was asked to rate, given their imagined interaction with the company, their likelihood to visit the company, buy the company's products, and recommend this company to others. Finally, participants were asked to rate the importance of brand engagement on Twitter as well as complete a series of demographic measures.

2.4. Results and discussion

Data were analyzed using IBM's SPSS. To ensure that there were no discernable differences between the two restaurants, we first conducted an ANOVA to compare behavioral intentions across the type of restaurant. As anticipated, this analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between Chili's (n = 70; M = 4.94, SD = 1.5) and Gloria's (n = 69; M = 4.65, SD = 1.5); F(1,137)=1.23, p=.269, $\eta p2=.009$, so for the remaining analyses, participants' responses were collapsed across the type of restaurant.

When asked how much they engaged with social media in a given week almost half (47.5%) of our participants indicated that they use social media more four hours per week (3-4 hours - 27.3%, 1-2 hours - 17.3%, 0-1 hours - 7.9%) indicating that social media played a prominent role in their weekly activities. However, on a 1-7 scale of how important was it that a brand engaged with them on Twitter, participants rated it as low importance (M = 2.95; SD = 1.79).

Next, to test H1 and H2, we conducted a 3 (restaurant's social media response: retweet vs. reply vs. none) X 2 (participant gender: men vs. women) ANOVA on individual's behavioral intentions to patronize the restaurant. Failing to support H1, there was no significant difference for restaurant response [F(2, 139) = .433, p = .649, $\eta p2 = .017$]. Nor was there a significant main effect for participant gender [F(1, 139) = 2.34, p = .128, $\eta p2 = .006$]. However, in support of H2, the predicted interaction between the restaurant's response type and participant gender was marginally significant, F(2, 139) = 2.61, p = .077, $\eta p2 = .038$. Planned pairwise comparisons revealed that women had stronger behavioral intentions to patronize the restaurant after a reply (M = 5.57, SD = 1.31) than after a retweet (M = 4.79, SD = 1.54, p = .024) or no response (M = 4.36, SD = 1.57, p < .001). There were no significant differences for behavioral intentions for men across response type (retweet M = 4.33, SD = .49, reply M = 4.12, SD = .46, no response M = 4.76, SD = .55). This analysis also addressed research question 1 by demonstrating that men and women differed in how they responded to a reply versus a retweet.

Table 2 Study 1 Results by Condition

	Overall		No Response		Response		Retweet	
	N	M(SD)	N	M(SD)	N	M(SD)	N	M(SD)
Women	113	4.89(1.55)	40	4.37(1.57)	36	5.57(1.31)	37	4.79(1.54)
Men	26	4.38(1.33)	7	4.76 (.92)	10	4.17(1.49)	9	4.33(1.48)
Total	139	4.79(1.51)	47	4.43(1.48)	46	5.27(1.46)	46	4.70(1.52)

Consistent with predictions, we found that women differentiated more between the different restaurant response options than did men. Specifically, women participants reported that they would be more likely to patronize a restaurant after the restaurant directly engaged with them by replying to their hypothetical tweet personally. Men did not differentiate between the different response options. However, given the low sample size for men (n = 26 across the design), it remains unclear whether our predications for men were supported. Study 2 was deigned to address this issue by increasing the size of the male sample.

3. Study 2

Due to the small sample of men in Study 1, we were unable to thoroughly investigate whether men and women evaluated the corporate Twitter response (or lack thereof) differentially. Thus, Study 2 was conducted to recruit a larger sample of men from among a sample of US adults using the Amazon.com data collection website Mechanical Turk (www.MTurk.com). Contemporary research indicates that data collected using this online service yields results comparable to Psychology subject pools [2]. Thus, our predictions and procedure for Study 2 were identical to Study 1. The sample changed and the data were collected a semester later than Study 1.

3.1. Participants

Participants were 306 (115 female, 191 male) adults from the USA recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants ranged in age from 18-68 (one participant did not provide data; (M=30.2, SD=8.95)). The ethnicity breakdown was as follows: Caucasian 215 (70.3%), African American 24 (7.8%), Asian 5 (1.6%), Pacific Islander 1 (0.3%), Hispanic 21 (6.9%), and Other 5 (1.6%). Participants in this study also reported being heavy social media users with 42.8 percent reporting using social media over four hours per week.

Table 3 Participants Social Media Use per Week in Study 2

Time Per Week	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-1 hrs	31	10.1	10.1
1-2 hrs	77	25.2	35.3
3-4 hrs	67	21.9	57.2
4 or more hrs	131	42.8	100
Total	306	100	

3.2. Measures

To assess users' behavioral intentions to patronize the restaurant after interacting with them on Twitter, we used the same three items to make the scale as in Study 1. Again, the reliability was quite high, Cronbach's α = .94. The same measures of social media use and importance of brand engagement on Twitter were taken before and after the stimulus material and behavioral intentions questions.

3.3. Procedure

The procedure was identical to Study 1.

3.4. Results and discussion

As with Study 1, an ANOVA was conducted to compare behavioral intentions across the type of restaurant. Again, as anticipated, there was no difference between Chili's (n = 154; M = 4.65, SD = 1.65) and Gloria's (n = 152; M = 4.83, SD = 1.29); F(1,306)=1.18, p=.278, $\eta p2 = .004$. For the remaining analyses, responses were collapsed across the type of restaurant.

Much like our first sample, participants in Study 2 also indicated that social media was a prominent part of their weekly activities with over half indicating they spent more than 3 hours per week on social media (4 hours or more -42.8%, 3-4 hours -21.9%, 1-2 hours -25.2%, 0-1 hour -10.1%). However, in this second sample, participants rated brand engagement on Twitter as slightly higher in importance than in the first sample (M = 3.05, SD = 1.67).

To examine H1, we examined how the different responses (no response, reply, or retweet) affected participants' intentions to patronize the restaurant. In support of H1, this analysis revealed a significant main effect for response F(2, 306) = 3.28, p = .039, $\eta p2 = .021$. Specifically, replies (M = 4.99, SD = 1.58) and retweets (M = 4.87, SD = 1.34) were more likely to lead to higher behavioral intentions with a company than no response (M = 4.36, SD = 1.46).

H2 was also supported. Our analyses revealed a significant main effect for gender, F(1, 306) = 6.29, p = 0.013, $\eta p2 = .021$. Specifically, women (M = 5.05, SD = 1.49) were more likely to visit/recommend/purchase from a company engaged with them on Twitter than were men (M = 4.55, SD = 1.45). While there was no significant interaction between gender and response type F(2, 306) = .195, p = .82, $\eta p2 = .001$. However, because we had predictions based on gender, we examined pairwise comparisons, which revealed that female respondents had significantly greater intentions to patronize the restaurant after a personal reply (M = 4.86, SD = 1.57, p = .01) or a retweet (M = 4.71, SD = 1.26, p = .04) than after no response (M = 4.19, SD = 1.43), but there was no difference for men across response type. This analysis also answered RQ1 and indicated that, as with Study 1, the was a difference between responses and retweets on this measure for women, but not men.

Overall, Study 2 replicated the results of Study 1 in that women responded with stronger behavioral intentions when the brand directly engaged the consumer by responding to a tweet. With a larger sample of men, we found that they responded similarly but the magnitude of the difference was smaller than with women. Furthermore, with a sample that was better balanced with respect to gender, we also found support for H1 revealing that participants' intentions to patronize were higher when the corporate Twitter account responded to their hypothetical tweet.

Table 4 Study 2 Results by Condition

	Overall		No Response		Response		Retweet	
	N	M(SD)	N	M(SD)	N	M(SD)	N	M(SD)
Women	115	5.04(1.49)	29	4.78(1.49)	43	5.18(1.58)	43	5.09(1.49)
Men	191	4.55(1.45)	73	4.19(1.43)	58	4.86(1.57)	60	4.70(1.26)
Total	306	4.74(1.48)	102	4.36(1.46)	101	4.99(1.58)	103	4.86(1.34)

4. General discussion

We began this paper by questioning whether reciprocal communication – operationalized as reciprocity in responses between a consumer and a corporate Twitter account could affect intentions to patronize said company. Our predictions were that responses would be more effective than no response and that women would be more sensitive to the nuances of different response options than would men. Across two studies, one an undergraduate sample and a second an online sample of American adults, the results supported our hypotheses. Thus, these results provide evidence that directly engaging with consumers via Twitter increases the likelihood these consumers will give their business to the company. Our results have direct implications for the ways corporations can utilize Twitter for their benefit to connect with their current and potential customers. Communication via Twitter can also involve a one-on-one interaction, so when brands respond directly, the consumer feels connected, and this produces positive feelings toward the brand. This paper also fills a gap in the literature as there are few studies that examine business to consumer social influences process on social media applications such as Twitter.

We expected that women would be more influenced than men to visit the company after receiving a reciprocal communication from the brand. As social role theory [5] predicts, these results indicate that compared to men, women are more likely to visit a company when the company has interacted with them on Twitter. Illustrative of this, research indicates that women are more likely to engage in Internet use to fulfil relational goals and men are more likely to use the Internet to seek information [22]. Our results support this previous research and suggest that the reason reciprocity was more effective for women than men could be that women may be using Twitter to form and maintain relationships with brands as well as people. Indeed, some evidence suggests that women may be more apt to be persuaded or influenced by relationship building online than men [12, 14]. Men, who are generally less relationally focused, may not show the same pattern of results is that given Twitter's limited capacity for text, men may not see it as an efficient way to gain knowledge and information. Social networking's focus on building and maintaining relationships is one reason Kimbrough et al. [19] assert that women use and prefer mediated technology more than men.

4.1. Limitations and future research

The present study reveals implications for both brands and consumers. For corporations, these results demonstrate an easy and effective means of obtaining new customers. For consumers, these results suggest that it may be beneficial to engage with a corporate Twitter account as an

initial means of gauging likely levels of customer attentiveness. Furthermore, it is an open question as to whether these results generalize beyond people already likely to patronize a specific restaurant. Future research should examine whether these results are equally applicable to new versus existing patrons. Also, given that this is the first study that we are aware of that has revealed that in mediated interactions, men and women respond differently to reciprocity-based social influence techniques, we suggest that future research continue to examine this finding through replication and expansion so that scholars and practitioners alike can gain an understanding of the boundary conditions of this finding.

This study focused on one type of consumer product: a restaurant. It may be that women and men may respond more similarly (or even more differently) as a function of the type of product or company interacting with them via Twitter. Future research should focus on more than one category of product as a means of exploring the generalizability of the results. Finally, these results may not generalize beyond Twitter, a microblogging platform. Future research should examine whether similar dynamics between customer and business exists on other social media platforms, especially those with different functions.

4.2. Implications for user behavior change

Overall, the results of these two studies highlight the importance of communication between a corporation and a user. Specifically, these results suggest that responding directly to a prospective customer will likely increase the likelihood of that customer patronizing the business.

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A. Conditions by brand

