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To cite this article: Holly A. Syrdal & Elten Briggs (2018) ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 26:1-2, 4-22, DOI: 10.1080/10696679.2017.1389243

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2017.1389243

Published online: 02 Mar 2018.

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ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

Holly A. Syrdal and Elten Briggs

A lack of a consensus regarding what constitutes engagement in the context of social media has made it difficult for scholars to generate theory in this area and has created challenges for managers attempting to demonstrate positive outcomes stemming from social media marketing. To address this issue, qualitative studies are undertaken with marketing practitioners and consumers to provide clarification and to formulate a formal definition of engagement in this context. The studies reveal it to be a psychological state of mind operating independently from interactive behaviors such as “liking” and sharing content. The findings offer new insight into consumer consumption of social media content and sow the seeds for future exploration.

As marketers race to leverage social media to advance their brands and organizations, the concept of “social media engagement” has surfaced as a hot topic among practitioners and academicians alike. In a survey of over 800 C-level executives, digital customer engagement ranked as the highest priority among a list of several possible digital initiatives, with 69 percent of executives ranking it among the top three organizational digital priorities and 62 percent indicating it is a budgetary priority (McKinsey & Company 2014). This prioritization of social media engagement is logical given that it is thought to be associated with a number of positive outcomes, including increased sales (Lake 2011; eMarketer 2015), increased brand loyalty (Powers et al. 2012), development of positive organizational image (Kietzmann et al. 2011), and brand equity (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, and Schafer 2012).

Although marketing researchers and practitioners agree that “social media engagement” is an important marketing objective and performance metric (Marketing Science Institute 2013; McKinsey & Company 2014; Mersey, Malthouse, and Calder 2010), it is interesting to note there is currently no consensus on what exactly constitutes this form of engagement. While some have equated the size of a brand’s or organization’s fan base (e.g., the number of people who “like” an organization’s or brand’s presence on Facebook or follow it on Twitter) with social media engagement and successful utilization of the medium (Franz 2016; Tuten and Solomon 2015), others have described social media engagement in terms of behaviors specific to a particular social media platform, such as “likes,” comments, and/or shares on Facebook (e.g., Blowers 2012; Oracle 2012). Additionally, some researchers argue engagement, in the broad sense, is a psychological state of mind that precedes behaviors (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011; Calder and Malthouse 2008; Mollen and Wilson 2010). This last conceptualization leads to questions as to whether behaviors should be included in a definition of social media engagement. The marketing literature offers little insight on the topic, as it suffers from a lack of agreement in the overarching conceptual domain of engagement (Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas 2015; Marketing Science Institute 2010). In fact, clarifying the meaning of social media engagement has emerged as a top marketing research priority in academia (Marketing Science Institute 2013).

The rationale underlying the call for clarification of this form of engagement is twofold. First, from an academic standpoint, the lack of a formal definition of engagement in a social media context makes it difficult to put forth theory concerning relationships between the construct and potential drivers and outcomes. Second, from a practitioner standpoint, engagement is one of the most heavily discussed metrics for establishing returns on investment for social media spending (Drell 2012). The lack of a consensus regarding what constitutes engagement in this context makes it challenging to demonstrate that it results in positive outcomes for a brand or organization.

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To address this gap, we examine various conceptualizations of engagement and conduct qualitative research with the objectives of delineating the nature and scope of engagement in the context of social media and establishing a formal definition of this form of engagement. Much of the extant marketing research on engagement focuses on customer engagement with a brand. Examinations of engagement within the realm of social media have typically been limited to studies incorporating the medium as part of the context in which customer engagement operates. However, we argue that the focal object of social media engagement is actually the content (e.g., status updates, pictures, videos, blog posts, etc.) individuals consume while utilizing social media. This is an important distinction given that social media users may be motivated to consume branded content for a host of reasons other than feeling “connected” to the brand. For example, a consumer may choose to read a brand’s social media post because the information contained therein fulfills a utilitarian need. In this case, it is not the brand attracting the user to the content; rather it is the information contained in the content itself. However, this type of utilitarian-motivated consumption of branded content still serves as a point of contact between the brand and the consumer and, as such, it represents an opportunity to influence consumers. Therefore, we focus our research efforts on engagement with social media content (ESMC).

This article is organized as follows. First, we provide a literature review inclusive of various conceptualizations of engagement. Next, we propose research questions and delineate the exploratory method employed in two studies of engagement with social media content. After presenting the results and findings, we conclude with a discussion of the limitations of the studies and identify avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is currently no formally accepted definition of “social media engagement,” the concept of “engagement” itself has been studied in various disciplines, including education, organizational behavior, information systems, and marketing, for many years. An overview of these conceptualizations and potentially related constructs follows.

Conceptualizations of Engagement in Domains Outside of Marketing

Academic Engagement

Within the realm of higher education, academic engagement has been defined as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin 1999, p. 518). More recently, academic engagement has been conceptualized as the time and effort students expend in educational activities that are empirically linked to desired college outcomes (Kuh 2009). It is generally comprised of various behavioral factors, including investment in the academic experience of college, interactions with faculty, involvement in cocurricular activities, and interaction with peers (Kuh 2009; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Job Engagement

In the area of organizational behavior, job engagement is described as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind...” and a “persistent and pervasive affective–cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior” (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004, p. 295). The construct consists of three dimensions: vigor (e.g., “When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work”), dedication (e.g., “I am enthusiastic about my job”), and absorption (e.g., “When I am working, I forget everything else around me”) (Schaufeli et al. 2002a). The absorption dimension is similar to the concept of “online flow,” which describes human-computer interactions (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Ghani, Supnick, and Rooney 1991; Trevino and Webster 1992).

User Engagement

In the information systems literature, Laurel (1991) describes engagement in computer-mediated activities as “the state of mind that we must attain in order to enjoy a representation of an action (p. 113).” Entering this state requires a willingness on the part of the user to temporarily suspend the knowledge that the on-screen representation, whether in the context of a game or a functional activity, is not an actual physical artifact. Building on this concept, O’Brien and Toms (2008) develop a broader process model of user
engagement that involves four stages: 1) the point of engagement, 2) the period of engagement, 3) disengagement, and 4) reengagement. Thus, user engagement in this field has been viewed as either a specific state of mind, or the process of moving into and out of a particular state. However, the object of engagement is typically viewed as a particular technology or platform, rather than the contents distributed through the technology or platform.

**Conceptualizations of Engagement and Potentially Related Constructs in Marketing**

**Online Flow**

The notion of online flow has been studied by researchers addressing the role of marketing in computer-mediated environments and may be related to social media engagement. In their work on user engagement, O’Brien and Toms (2008) examined the construct of online flow and determined that it operates separately from user engagement. Expanding upon the concept of flow put forth by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Hoffman and Novak (1996) define a flow experience in a computer-mediated environment as a “state occurring during network navigation, which is (1) characterized by a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by machine interactivity, (2) intrinsically enjoyable, (3) accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness, and (4) self-reinforcing” (p. 57). They posit consumers in a flow experience are so involved in the act of network navigation that irrelevant thoughts and perceptions are filtered out and focus is completely on the interaction. Hoffman and Novak (1996) contend online flow is a cognitive state experienced during navigation of a website (e.g., in online shopping environment), in which self-consciousness disappears, the individual’s sense of time becomes distorted, and the individual enters into an extremely gratifying state of mind and focuses completely on the interaction.

**Media Engagement**

In a long stream of research, Calder and Malthouse extensively examined consumer engagement with various types of advertising media, including newspapers, TV shows, magazines, and online media (e.g., Calder and Malthouse 2004; Malthouse, Calder, and Tamhane 2007; Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel 2009; Malthouse and Calder 2011; Mersey, Malthouse, and Calder 2010; Mersey, Malthouse, and Calder 2012). They examined engagement with whole categories of advertising media (e.g., magazines), as well as with vehicles within those categories (e.g., specific magazines, such as Better Homes and Gardens). Calder and Malthouse suggest that media engagement embodies a “sense of involvement, of being connected with something” and postulate that it stems from experiencing something like a magazine or TV program in a certain way (Calder and Malthouse 2008, p. 2–3). The researchers contend that engagement should not be defined in terms of behavioral usage, such as the amount of time an individual spends viewing a TV show, because many other things can result in this behavior. For example, a person may watch a TV show because their spouse is watching it, rather than because he/she is actively engaged with it. Therefore, they argue engagement cannot be accurately measured simply by measuring behaviors.

Calder and Malthouse suggest that the theoretical model proposed by Higgins (2006) offers a useful framework for understanding the relationship between experience and engagement. Higgins (2006) theorizes there are two distinct components of an experience: liking and engagement. A person may like a particular radio talk show, but not be engaged with it. Or, he/she may be engaged with it, but not particularly like it. In order to understand and measure engagement, Calder and Malthouse (2008) identify relevant experiences (defined as “the thoughts and feelings consumers have about what is happening when they are doing something,” p. 3), which they describe as inherently qualitative. They view responses to ads embedded in the media and usage of the media as consequences or side effects of engagement.

**Brand Engagement in Self-concept (BESC)**

Engagement has also been conceptualized in the marketing literature as brand engagement in self-concept (BESC), which is described as an “individual difference representing consumers’ propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves” (Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg 2009, p. 92). The BESC scale measures a consumer’s general engagement with brands and how ingrained the brand is in an individual’s identity. BESC is a predictor of consumers’ differential attention to, memory of, and preference for their favorite brands. It is related to differential brand
loyalty, with high-BESC consumers being less price and time sensitive regarding their favorite brands than low-BESC consumers.

**Customer Engagement**

In the services marketing literature, various conceptualizations of customer engagement exist. Bowden (2008) defined customer engagement as “a psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand.” Van Doorn et al. (2010) addressed “customer engagement behaviors,” resulting from motivational drivers including word-of-mouth activity, customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions and/or blogging activity. They suggest “customer engagement behaviors go beyond transactions” and may be defined as “customers’ behavioral manifestations that have a brand- or firm-focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (p. 254). Based on this rationale, they develop a theoretical model linking customer engagement behaviors to specific customer-, firm-, and contextual antecedents and consequences. Participating in word-of-mouth activities, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, writing reviews, and even taking legal action constituent customer engagement behaviors under the umbrella of this definition.

Brodie et al. (2011) offer a theoretical analysis of customer engagement. Drawing on relationship marketing theory and service-dominant logic, they distinguish “engagement” from “participation” and “involvement” based on existence of a customer’s interactive, cocreative experiences with a specific engagement object. They conceptualize engagement as a form of social, interactive behavior characterized as a transient state occurring within broader relevant engagement processes developing over time, with participation and involvement being antecedents of customer engagement (Brodie et al. 2011). However, in a commentary on the article, Malthouse and Calder (2011) express concern with the conceptualization of engagement as an “expression of relevant cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions,” and argue that behaviors should be viewed as consequences rather than a dimension of engagement.

Based on a literature review and exploratory qualitative research, Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) define customer engagement as “the intensity of an individual’s participation and connection with the organization’s offerings or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiates” (p. 133). The researchers suggest the individuals may be either current or potential customers and that customer engagement may be manifested cognitively, affectively, behaviorally, or socially. The experiences and feelings of customers are incorporated by the cognitive and affective components of customer engagement, while the participation by current and potential customers is captured by the behavioral and social components. Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) postulate that involvement and customer participation are antecedents of customer engagement, and that value, trust, affective commitment, word-of-mouth, loyalty, and brand community involvement are consequences of the construct.

More recently, customer engagement has been investigated within the context of online brand communities by Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015). These researchers did not attempt to redefine consumer engagement; rather, they sought to describe the meaning, conceptual boundaries, and dimensions of the construct as it applies to an online brand community, which is a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 412). Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015) note that although there are various interpretations of consumer engagement, it is often conceptualized as a motivational construct, with varying intensity. Based on interviews conducted with online brand community members, they posit that consumer engagement is comprised of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. The researchers further propose that the affective dimension is comprised of two subdimensions (enjoyment and enthusiasm), the cognitive dimension is made up of two subdimensions (attention and absorption), and the behavioral dimension consists of three subdimensions (learning, endorsing, and sharing). Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015) theorize that drivers of online engagement in brand communities include brand-related variables, such as brand identification, brand satisfaction, and brand trust; online brand community identification; and
community value-related variables, including the level of information, entertainment, networking, and monetary incentives offered by the community.

**Online Brand Engagement**

Mollen and Wilson (2010) build upon e-learning and online marketing research to develop a conceptual framework for online brand engagement. They define the construct as a “cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value. It is characterized by the dimensions of dynamic and sustained cognitive processing and the satisfying of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotional congruence with the narrative schema encountered in computer-mediated entities)” (p. 923). The authors suggest that telepresence is an antecedent of online engagement and that this form of engagement leads to “optimal” consumer attitudinal and behavioral consequences. As there was some disagreement among prior researchers regarding exactly what constitutes telepresence, the authors synthesize the literature to develop the following definition of it: “the psychological state of ‘being there’ in a computer-mediated environment, augmented by focused attention. It is characterized by cognitive and sensory arousal, control, and immersion (defined as perceiving oneself to be steeped in and interacting with an environment that sustains a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences)” (Mollen and Wilson 2010, p. 921). While the authors discuss how telepresence, flow, and interactivity relate to online engagement, they firmly assert that engagement is a discrete construct, comprised of cognitive and affective dimensions.

**Other Forms of Engagement in Marketing**

The aforementioned conceptualizations have spurred additional work in the area of engagement. Building upon the framework of Mollen and Wilson (2010), Goldring and Nicholson (2013) examine digital marketer-generated content (MGC) engagement in context of B2B sales. Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014) extend the work of Brodie et al. (2011) and Hollebeek (2011a, b), conceptualizing consumer brand engagement (CBE) in a social media setting as “a consumer's positively-valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions” (p. 149). Table 1 provides an overview of various conceptualizations of engagement. Notably, in the majority of these conceptualizations, behaviors are not an integral part of the definition; rather, the construct is defined as a state of mind or psychological state.

Interestingly, academic conceptualizations of engagement as a state of mind conflict with current managerial perspectives of engagement in social media contexts. “Engagement” has become a buzzword among digital marketers and is commonly used in describing one of two phenomena. First, practitioners sometimes discuss the amount of “engagement” generated by a brand or organization in terms of the number of individuals who “friend,” follow, or “like” a brand’s official presence on various social media sites (Tuten and Solomon 2015). Second, in the digital marketing industry, the term is commonly used to refer to participatory behaviors undertaken by social media users (e.g., Drell 2012). For example, a recent white paper on optimizing social media strategies defines engagement in terms of specific behaviors, including “a like, comment, or share” on Facebook (Oracle 2012, p. 2). Thus, in addition to the vast discrepancies in academic conceptualizations of engagement, there is also variation in characterizations of engagement in social media contexts from the practitioner perspective.

Given the lack of a clear definition of ESMC, the central aim of this article is to provide answers to the following research questions in order to define the term and to explore the nature and scope of the construct.

- **RQ1**: What characteristics describe the experience of engagement with social media content?
- **RQ2**: What characteristics describe engaging social media content?
- **RQ3**: How should engagement with social media content be defined?

**METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative methodology was employed to examine engagement with social media content. Qualitative research, which allows for a more discovery-focused approach compared with quantitative methods, can be particularly useful in exploring phenomena where
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Construct</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Behavioral Component?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Engagement</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Astin (1999)</td>
<td>“the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience”</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Engagement</td>
<td>Organizational Behavior</td>
<td>Schaufeli and Bakker (2004)</td>
<td>“a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Engagement</td>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>Laurel (1991)</td>
<td>“the state of mind that we attain to enjoy a representation of an action”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Flow</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Hoffman and Novak (1996)</td>
<td>“a state occurring during network navigation, which is (1) characterized by a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by machine interactivity, (2) intrinsically enjoyable, (3) accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness, and (4) self-reinforcing”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Engagement</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Calder and Malthouse (2008)</td>
<td>“embodies a sense of involvement and of being connected with something... stems from experiencing something like a magazine or TV program in a certain way”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Engagement in Self-Concept (BESC)</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Sprott et al. (2009)</td>
<td>“an individual difference representing consumers’ propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Engagement</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Patterson et al. (2006)</td>
<td>“the level of a customer’s physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organization”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bowden (2008)</td>
<td>“a psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VanDoorn et al. (2010)</td>
<td>“customers’ behavioral manifestations that have a brand- or firm-focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brodie et al. (2011a)</td>
<td>“a psychological state the occurs by virtue of interactive, cocreative customer experience with a focal agent (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2010)</td>
<td>“the intensity of an individual’s participation and connection with the organization’s offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organization”</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Brand Engagement</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Mollen and Wilson (2010)</td>
<td>“a customer’s “cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketer-generated Content (MGC)</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Goldring and Nicholson (2013)</td>
<td>“the extent to which customers process and identify with the content of marketing material... characterized by active, sustained cognitive processing, satisfaction with utility and relevance, emotional impact and experiential value, and attractive and appealing aesthetics”</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Brand Engagement</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014)</td>
<td>“a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions”</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Engagement in Online Brand Communities</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015)</td>
<td>“a cognitive, affective, and behavioral commitment to an active relationship with the brand”</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>
little understanding exists (Stake 2010) as is the case in the social media marketing domain. In undertaking this exploration of ESMC, we specifically drew from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2007), which is among the most commonly utilized methods in qualitative marketing research (e.g., Pryor, Malshe, and Paradise 2013; Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012). Grounded theory is described as a “qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a larger number of participants” (Creswell 2007, p. 63). Grounded theory aids in the theoretical understanding of nascent and underdeveloped areas of research; as such, it is likely to be a better approach than the common practice of “theory borrowing” from other domains of inquiry to propose theoretical relationships (Johnson 2014).

To obtain multiple perspectives on ESMC, two studies were conducted over an eight-month period. In Study 1, in-depth interviews were conducted with marketing practitioners who incorporate social media in their marketing strategy. In Study 2, in-depth interviews and focus groups were utilized to gain insight into the thoughts and opinions of consumers who are connected with brands and organizations through social media. Data collection was terminated once theoretical saturation was reached.

### Study 1—Marketing Practitioner Perspective

#### Sample and Data Collection

A series of fourteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with marketers who utilize at least one of the following social media platforms to promote a brand and/or organization: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and/or LinkedIn. These platforms were chosen because they are used by large percentages of American adults who use the internet (Facebook, 71%; LinkedIn, 28%; Pinterest, 28%; Instagram, 26%; Twitter, 23%) (Duggan et al. 2014). Potential informants were selected from a list of personal business contacts of the researchers (i.e., a convenience sample) and were contacted by phone, email, or LinkedIn private message. Twenty marketers were contacted and fourteen agreed to be interviewed (eight men and six women). The informants, who work for U.S.-based brands and organizations of various sizes and industries, represent a variety of hierarchical levels within their organizations. They range in age from 27 to 64 years old (additional descriptive characteristics presented in Table 2).

Informants were assured their identity, as well as that of their organization, would be not be revealed in any published research and that their confidentiality

#### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Social Media Audience</th>
<th>Geographic Scope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Marketing and Social Media Coordinator; Owner</td>
<td>Financial services; marketing consulting</td>
<td>Individuals and Businesses</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Shelley</td>
<td>Social Media Administrator and Volunteer</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Realtor</td>
<td>Real estate</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Assistant Commissioner for Television and Electronic Media</td>
<td>Sports media</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>VP of Marketing</td>
<td>Luxury gifts</td>
<td>Individuals and Businesses</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Designer and Owner</td>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>Individuals and Businesses</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Whitney</td>
<td>Regional VP of Communications</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Director of Communications</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>Political Activist</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Regional</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Owner and Photographer</td>
<td>Small business owner</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Local</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Leon</td>
<td>Marketing Professor</td>
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<td>Individuals</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Marketing Director</td>
<td>Apparel</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>National</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>VP of Marketing and Digital Strategies</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Businesses</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>Director of Marketing and Communications</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>National</td>
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</table>
would be protected. The interviews averaged ninety minutes in length and were conducted either in the informant’s place of work, or via Skype or phone call. The following questions were used to prompt discussion focused specifically on ESMC:

1. In your opinion, what constitutes engagement in the realm of social media?
2. Describe the types of content that you feel are most engaging for your social media followers.

Data Analysis

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was utilized to organize the data collected from the interviews. As prescribed by qualitative inquiry guidelines, the analysis of the data was an iterative process, which allowed for emerging themes to be identified and to be used to shape subsequent interviews. Additionally, the technique of peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was used over the course of the study to solicit helpful feedback and to refine the study as it progressed. The first step performed in the analysis process was open coding, in which all meaningful quotations were assigned to a higher-level major category of information. Next, relationships among the first-order codes were identified and aggregated into higher-order themes in the axial coding step. The findings stemming from the analysis of the interviews with marketers are discussed next.

Results

Engagement in the Realm of Social Media

In response to the question concerning what constitutes engagement in the realm of social media, much discussion centered on the participatory behaviors resulting from the dissemination of branded content. This suggests that the focal object of engagement in this context is the content on social media platforms. Many informants indicated that ESMC involves specific behaviors performed by social media users on various platforms. Examples of specific behaviors that were mentioned include “liking” a brand’s posts on Facebook, retweeting a brand’s tweet on Twitter, and commenting on a brand’s posts on various platforms. This perspective was not surprising given the frequent use of the term “engagement” by the popular press when categorizing the aforementioned activities (e.g., Drell 2012; Oracle 2012).

Although this perspective was somewhat pervasive among the practitioner informants, some individuals offered alternative views that suggest ESMC is a psychological state of mind. For example, one informant described engagement in terms of “being highly consumed, committed, or involved with something” [Heidi]. Another informant, who relies heavily on Twitter for his social media marketing efforts, stated that merely viewing and/or reading social media content are forms of engagement. Indeed, the same informant noted that, for his marketing communication purposes, “viewing and reading are the most important … more so than retweeting, etc.” [Shawn]. The notion that viewing and reading content may constitute engagement was explored in subsequent interviews and informants agreed the two activities fall under the umbrella of engagement. Many informants suggested that various levels of engagement exist. Some characterized ESMC as being “passive” or “active,” with viewing and reading falling into the passive category and behaviors such as “liking,” commenting, and sharing belonging to a more active category of engagement. Additionally, several informants felt that engagement can be thought of as a continuum, with viewing and reading representing less engagement and behaviors such as sharing and commenting indicative of greater engagement. Informants tended to think of “liking” content as being in the middle and, while they generally agreed upon the concept of an “engagement continuum,” they were not consistent in their opinions of where certain behaviors would fall along the continuum. For example, some informants felt that sharing represents a higher level of engagement compared with commenting, while others held the opposite viewpoint. The idea that ESMC may exist along a continuum seems logical as it bears some resemblance to the Engagement Food Chain, an existing model of consumer engagement with a brand. This pyramid model illustrates the hierarchy of effects marketers seek from target audiences as they reach increasing levels of engagement with a brand (Tuten and Solomon 2015). Effects such as “saw” and “saved” reside at the base of the pyramid, with more desirable effects, such as “purchased” and “recommended,” at the top.

Additionally, the data suggests marketers recognize the behaviors they often refer to as “engagement” (i.e.,
“liking,” commenting, sharing, etc.) are not always dependent upon an individual’s level of actual engagement with the content. Several informants noted that it is possible for consumers to be engaged with content, but not perform any measurable behavior. For example, an individual may be very engaged with an article about strategies for buying a home shared by a realtor on Facebook, reading the article from beginning to end, and thinking deeply about it. However, the individual may not share, comment on, or even “like” the post containing the link to the article. In this case, while the marketer (i.e., the realtor) may have access to metrics indicative of the number impressions (i.e., views) for the Facebook post and number of clicks on the link to the article, he or she would have no way of knowing that the post is resulting in this form of deep engagement.

The data also reveals that the source of the content (i.e., the person or organization who shares the content) plays a role in driving ESMC. An informant who owns a freelance photography business revealed that she believes the source of the content greatly impacts behaviors that are currently characterized as “engagement” by many marketing practitioners. Specializing in custom photography sessions with families and children, she posts photographs she takes to Facebook and Instagram (with permission of the subjects) as a method of allowing her customers to preview their photos before she provides them with digital files. A benefit of allowing her customers to preview their photographs on social media is that her customers often “like,” comment, and share the pictures with their social networks, thus providing positive publicity for her photography business. Interestingly, she notes that her photography posts sometimes have no apparent association with what she considers to be actual “engagement” with the content:

Many times, people will like and share and so forth because they’re my friend or someone else’s friend, but they may not really care or actually like or have an interest in what they’re “liking” or sharing. [Samantha]

Samantha believes her personal friends are often sharing her photography posts in order to be supportive of her business initiatives and/or because they think their social media connections might be in the market for a photographer for family portraits. She also acknowledges that some of her photography posts may be “liked” or shared as a means of simply being nice to and/or supporting the subjects in the photos. She stated that she would not characterize these individuals as necessarily being “engaged” with the photographs.

The finding that the source of content influences ESMC is in line with previous research that demonstrates how source credibility in the context of social media can influence a number of outcomes. For example, Bruhn, Schoenmueller, and Schafer (2012) examined the influences of firm-created content and user-generated content on brand image. They found the source of content impacts specific types of brand image in different ways, with firm-created social media communications positively affecting functional brand image, and user-generated content positively influencing hedonic brand image. Other research has noted the importance of source credibility to consumers when deciding whether to interact with content, especially when thinking about sharing the content with social media connections (Syrdal and Bok 2016).

Engaging Content

The data analysis reveals a great deal of variation in the types of content that marketers feel are most engaging for their social media followers depending upon industry and the social media platform(s) utilized. However, one commonality emerging from the data is that content providing a personal connection for social media users seems to be more engaging, at least in terms of generating a measurable response. Heidi, a Realtor, stated that she has noticed pictures she posts of buyers and sellers at closings, which typically show people passively sitting around a table or standing against a wall in an office setting, generate a tremendous response compared with content that is more utilitarian in nature, such as news articles related to buying or selling houses. She attributes this response to the personal connection between the buyers and/or sellers in the pictures and their friends and family wanting to offer support and share in the excitement. In the quotation below, Allison also notes the importance of the personal connection aspect when asked to describe the characteristics of the content that is most engaging for the audience to which her organization tries to appeal:

Content that revolves around pride and vanity. People like to see their name, their pictures, people they know. I think there’s a personal
connection and pride that comes from engaging. For example, alumni updates garner more engagement than posts about upcoming events. [Allison]

Additionally, several informants suggested that user-generated content (UGC) produces more of a response compared with content created by the brand or organization. The marketers reported experiencing success with a variety of tactics for increasing UGC associated with their brand or organization. These tactics include contests and sweepstakes involving sharing pictures or video taken by consumers or offering entry into drawings for prizes when consumers perform certain actions such as “liking” the brand’s page on a social media platform. The quotation below speaks to the notion that UGC is likely more powerful than marketer-generated content:

Overall, I’d say user-generated content is going to be more engaging compared to marketer-generated. Marketers need to achieve a “trusted advisor” status on social media. But this is tough because the audience knows they’re trying to sell stuff. But if you can get people screaming about how good you are, it’s better than you screaming about how good you are. [Leon]

Some informants, however, noted that they are not able to employ UGC contest campaigns due to regulations imposed upon the industries in which they operate (e.g., financial services). Also, several informants stated that the level of success they have experienced with UGC contest campaigns seems to be dependent upon the social media platform utilized.

I have gotten our followers to submit user-generated content . . . tried with Facebook and got no response. But then I tried with Twitter and got lots of retweets and photos. So it seems to me that it’s platform-specific . . . what works, what doesn’t work. [Allison]

Finally, some informants reported that the valence of the content plays a role in the response it generates. Victor, a communications director for a large animal welfare organization, stated that while his organization attempts to mix in positively-valenced social media posts, the majority of what they post is more negatively-valenced due to the nature of the organization’s mission. Reflecting on his years of experience in the nonprofit world, he noted that, from his perspective, generating a response to social media content is similar to soliciting donations using mailers: “Messages that are more detailed and gruesome produce at least twice the response as happy messages.” [Victor]. A political activist, shared a similar view: “content that is negative in nature seems to draw more attention.” [Shawn]. However, the data suggests what works for one brand or organization in terms of valence of the content, may not work for another. Shelley, who also works for a nonprofit organization focused on animal advocacy, stated that her organization experiences higher levels of success by sharing high-quality pictures and videos that showcase animals looking happy in a more positive environment.

**Study 2 - Consumer Perspective**

**Data Collection**

To gain the consumer perspective, focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with consumers who use Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and/or LinkedIn at least three hours per week and are connected to brands and/or organizations through at least one of those platforms. “Connected” means they “like” the brand’s or organization’s Facebook page and/or follow it on one of the other platforms. The platforms were selected because of their high level of popularity (Duggan et al. 2014) and to maintain consistency with the eligibility criteria used in Study 1. All participants and informants were assured their confidentiality would be protected. The focus groups and interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded to allow for the creation of accurate transcriptions. The following questions were included in the discussion guide and used to prompt discussion with both focus group participants and interview informants:

1. What comes to mind when you think about social media engagement?
2. What does it feel like when you’re engaged with social media content?
3. Describe the types of content that you find most engaging.

**Focus Groups Sample**

Six focus groups were conducted with upper-level undergraduate business students at a Southwestern university. The participants were recruited from marketing courses by offering an extra credit opportunity for
participation. The focus groups were conducted in conference rooms in the business building on the university’s campus. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 years of age and represent a variety of ethnicities. Descriptive characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 3.

**In-depth Interviews Sample**

Nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with informants who were selected from a list of personal contacts of the researchers (i.e., a convenience sample) and were contacted by phone, email, or LinkedIn private message. Thirteen individuals were contacted and nine agreed to be interviewed (eight women and one male). The consumer informants ranged in age from 22 to 68 years old and comprised a diverse sample, with a number of ethnicities, educational levels, and occupations represented. The interviews were conducted in a location convenient for the informant or via phone call. Table 4 provides descriptive characteristics of the consumer informants.

**Data Analysis**

The same process utilized for the analysis of the data collected from the interviews with marketers was employed to analyze the data collected from the focus groups and interviews with consumers. The findings follow below.

**Results**

**Engagement in the Realm of Social Media**

The first and second questions posed to the consumer participants and informants were designed to prompt the subjects to describe their characterization of engagement when using social media. When asked what comes to mind when thinking about “social media engagement,” focus group participants and interview informants were noticeably less confident in their answers compared with the practitioner informants in Study 1; the consumers spent considerably more time formulating their answers. Most consumers struggled with answering this question and some admitted they had never heard of the terminology. The major first-order categories identified from responses to this question include the following: interest, involvement, interaction, keeping in touch, communication, and participating. Interestingly, social media behaviors often categorized as “engagement” by practitioners (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing), were only mentioned by one individual.

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th># of Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Average Age</th>
<th>Ethnicities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4 female</td>
<td>21–31</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5 White, 2 Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4 female</td>
<td>21–35</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>5 White, 1 Asian, 1 Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2 female</td>
<td>21–32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4 White, 1 Asian, 1 Black, 1 Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 female</td>
<td>21–27</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2 White, 1 Black, 1 Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0 female</td>
<td>21–36</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>3 Asian, 2 White, 1 Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6 male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5 female</td>
<td>18–23</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>4 Black, 4 White, 1 American Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responses to the second question, regarding what it feels like when engaged with social media content, were more free-flowing and illuminated a number of differences in perspective compared with that of the marketer informants. A common theme emerging from analysis of the data was enjoyment, as the subjects characterized the experience of being engaged with social media content using the following words: relaxing, positive, good, happy, exciting, and fun. Another emerging theme was that of a sense of involvement, described by subjects using the following words and phrases: absorbed, interested, involved, “zoned in,” all-consuming, holds attention, “light bulbs in my head,” intrigued, captivated, entranced, focused, and “plugged in.”

Social media interactive behaviors such as “liking,” commenting, and sharing, were notably absent from nearly all of the subjects’ responses to the first two questions. After discovering this apparent departure from the marketing practitioners’ characterization of engagement in a preliminary data analysis conducted early in the data collection process, a follow-up question was added to the discussion guides for both the focus groups and interviews. The question concerned whether/how the consumers typically interact with social media content they find engaging. While some subjects indicated they are more likely to undertake social media interactive behaviors if they find content highly engaging, others disclosed additional factors that they weigh more heavily in their decision of whether or not to perform the behaviors. Many consumers described their consumption of social media content, and subsequent decision regarding whether or not to interact with it, as a two-step process in which they first perform an initial evaluation of the content to determine whether they want to spend time consuming it. After spending time viewing/reading/watching content, a second assessment is conducted to determine whether they will perform a social media behavior such as “liking” or sharing the content. In the second assessment, consumers indicated they take a host of variables, other than their level of engagement with the content, into consideration. The most notable variables identified through the analysis of the data were privacy concerns and source considerations.

Both focus group participants and interview informants expressed concerns about the lack of privacy on social media. Privacy salience, defined by Tuten and Solomon (2015) as the extent to which worries about sharing too much information impact an individual’s online behavior, was especially prevalent among the focus group participants. Concerns about social media activities being monitored or observed emerged as a chief consideration when deciding whether to undertake various social media interactive behaviors, especially sharing content. Some participants reported that their concerns about their personal privacy have led them to decrease their usage of Facebook, while simultaneously increasing their usage of other social media sites, such as Instagram. The motivation underlying this migration is to avoid disclosing details of their personal lives to certain individuals (e.g., some family members, coworkers) who are increasingly using Facebook. This finding is in line with recent research that finds 55 percent of internet users have taken steps to hide from specific people or organizations, such as employers and family members (Rainie et al. 2013). Focus group participants indicated they believe they have greater levels of privacy on newer social media

Table 4
Consumer Informant Descriptive Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID #</th>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Executive Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Black, Asian</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Terri</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Executive Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Vickie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Elementary special education teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Platforms because older generations have yet to begin using them en masse. Subjects also noted the decision of whether or not to interact with content is often impacted by the social media platform on which the content is posted. In other words, if consumers are exposed to the same content on multiple platforms, it would be expected that the outcome of their decision of whether to interact with that content would be the same across platforms. However, the data suggest consumers’ concerns about who may observe their interaction with the content on a given platform impacts the interaction outcome. Below, an informant explains how her behavior differs when utilizing Tumblr compared with Facebook:

On Tumblr, I am very free with my likes and follows. But, then again, it is more private than Facebook. My parents and friends don’t see my Tumblr profile.” [Susan, 25 years old]

The source of the content was also cited as a variable that impacts consumers’ initial interest in social media content and the decision of whether to interact with the content. Source considerations were inclusive of both the creators of the content (i.e., the person or organization that originally produced the content), as well as the source redistributing (by sharing) the content when applicable. Subjects discussed how they evaluate the credibility of both types of sources to initially determine whether they will spend time viewing or reading the content and, subsequently, to decide whether they will interact with it. Before choosing to interact with content, they think about how associating themselves with the source(s) of the content will reflect upon their image. Subjects also indicated they consider whether the content itself, as well as the source of the content, might be considered controversial by their social media connections. Below, an informant who often finds herself “engaged with content,” even though she mostly “just looks and reads,” elaborates on her thought process when deciding whether to interact with content:

I rarely do any of those things [“like,” comment, share], especially with controversial stuff. I especially avoid interacting with political and religious stuff. I really think about it before making a comment. I think about who shared it and where it came from and how it’s going to reflect on me. I consider what other people will think if they see I’ve liked or commented on something, especially people outside of my close circle. There are so many people on social media. I need to try to maintain my professionalism because I’m connected to a lot of people from work. Plus, I hate the drama . . . I just want to avoid that and keep my opinions to myself. [Terri, 39 years old]

The results of the data analysis suggest that when consumers decide to interact with content, the underlying motivations for doing so vary with the type of interactive behavior performed (i.e., “liking,” commenting, sharing, etc.) and also the social media platform being utilized. Consumers indicated they are much more liberal with “liking” compared with behaviors such as commenting and sharing. A common motivational theme for “liking” content was to support a social media connection, such as a friend, brand, or organization. Two motivations for sharing emerged: to help connections and/or to maintain or enhance one’s own image. Said one focus group participant in reference to Facebook, “I’ll like and favorite stuff that I won’t share. Because sharing means it goes on your wall, and then it represents you” (Cassie, 21 years old). Many other subjects echoed this rationale.

**Engaging Content**

Responses to the question concerning the types of content consumers find engaging varied greatly; however, the specific examples provided by consumers can be classified into a number of common themes. **Humorous** content seems to hold wide appeal, as consumers discussed how they often feel engaged with funny memes and comical videos circulating on social media. **Newsworthy** is another theme that emerged. Consumers described this type of content using the terms “breaking news,” “fresh,” relevant, up-to-date, and “breaking stories.” The topics of newsworthy content that consumers said they find engaging mirrored their individual, specific interests such as sports, politics, local news, and so on (i.e., specific news topics did not emerge as common themes). Further, while some subjects indicated they prefer positively-valenced content, it was acknowledged that engagement could occur with negatively-valenced content as well. Consumers also noted they often find themselves engaged with content that is **utilitarian** in nature and provided examples such as decorating ideas, lists of tips (e.g., ten ways vinegar can be used as a cleaning product), and articles such as “How to Successfully Network.” **Authenticity** was another theme that emerged. Consumers discussed their preference for content they
perceive to be authentic, or original, as opposed to “canned” or “recycled” content that is sometimes circulated by brands and organizations. One interview informant shared the following regarding her perceptions of authenticity: “Content that's not real, not authentic, is not engaging. It’s almost the opposite of engaging.” [Alexis]. The same informant discussed her negative feelings about what she described as the large amount of “click bait” and the increasingly commercial aspects of social media. Additionally, many consumers noted the impact of their personal social media connections on their initial decision to view/read/watch content and also their level of engagement:

If content comes from my friends, especially if they tag me in a comment on a post, pic, or video . . . or if I get a push notification about it on my phone, I’m definitely going to check it out. I’m going to go look at whatever it is because there’s a good chance I’m going to be interested in it because my friends know me pretty well. [Stephen]

Below, another consumer discusses how she sometimes experiences a heightened level of engagement with content when reading comments from other social media users regarding that content:

Social media gives more opportunity to play with people’s emotions. With a TV ad, you’re left to interpret by yourself. With social media, you’re reading through other people’s interpretations and that’s going to influence you too. [Alexis]

Finally, consumers suggested that content that is visually appealing is more engaging compared with content that is not attractive or is not as visual in nature (e.g., text compared with pictures). Some subjects noted that the specific social media platform impacts their judgment of what is engaging. For example, one consumer noted that when using Pinterest, she has higher expectations for content to be visually appealing than on other platforms, such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Consumers were further probed as to whether they feel the format (e.g., content that includes pictures vs. only words, videos vs. pictures, etc.) impacts their level of engagement. While the data suggest consumers perceive content that includes a visual component is more engaging than content without such a component, there was no indication that the type of visual (e.g., pictures compared with videos) impacts the level of engagement experienced by the consumer.

DISCUSSION

ESMC vs. Social Media Interactive Behaviors

Taken together, the findings from the marketing practitioner and consumer studies contribute to the marketing literature by expanding our understanding of engagement in the context of social media and offer a number of novel findings. First, the results of both studies indicate marketers and consumers are in agreement in their view that the focal object of engagement in the context of social media is the content consumed on social media sites. This is important as it suggests ESMC is conceptually distinct from consumer engagement with a brand, in which the focal object is a brand.

Second, consumer characterizations of engagement with social media content differ greatly from marketer characterizations. While marketing practitioners tend to use the term “engagement” in the context of social media to describe active behaviors such as “liking,” commenting, and sharing, the consumer characterization of engagement does not include a behavioral component. Instead, consumers tend to characterize engagement with social media content as a state of mind in which they often feel a sense of enjoyment coupled with a high degree of involvement. When consumers experience this state of mind, they sometimes choose to interact with the content, by “liking” or sharing it, for example. However, the decision to undertake interactive behaviors involves a conscious thought process based on several factors other than the level of engagement with the content. Thus, although marketers currently operate under the assumption that higher levels of consumer interaction with content are indicative of higher levels of interest or involvement with the content, the results do not support this notion. Additionally, the findings also show that consumers sometimes interact with content with which they are not engaged and, in some cases, they have not even consumed (e.g., sharing a video they have not watched). This suggests ESMC is separate and distinct from social media interactive behaviors and that engagement is not always a prerequisite for interaction.

Third, when consumers choose to interact with content, underlying motivations such as a desire to support others and/or maintain or enhance one’s own image may play a larger role than the level of engagement with the content. The findings also suggest that the
motivations underlying social media interactive behaviors vary by the type of behavior being performed. While consumers often “like” content to support brands (and other consumers) for which they have positive feelings, sharing is a more complex behavior that is likely motivated by an expectation of the gain of some personal and/or social benefit, similar to the motivations underlying word-of-mouth (Alexandrov, Lilly, and Babakus 2013). Because the motivations underlying social media interactive behaviors are distinct from one another, any examination of potential drivers and outcomes of these behaviors should be conducted separately, as it is likely that there are vast differences in the processes surrounding each behavior.

Fourth, interaction with social media content is platform-specific, as consumers consider the individuals with whom they are connected on a given social media platform when deciding if interaction with the content is appropriate. Concerns about privacy and the credibility of the source(s) of content may attenuate consumer interactions with content even when a high level of engagement exists. For example, a consumer may “like” a meme on Instagram that he/she will not “like” on Facebook. In this case, the difference in behavior may be attributed to the consumer’s perception of higher levels of privacy when using Instagram, which likely stems from having fewer connections on that particular platform.

Characteristics of Engaging Social Media Content

While the characteristics of engaging content varied widely among the informants and participants in the study, content that can be categorized as humorous, entertaining, newsworthy, and/or utilitarian holds wide appeal for many consumers. Additionally, positively-valenced content is preferred by consumers, although content that is negatively-valenced can also engage social media users. Regardless of the categorization, consumers find content more engaging when they perceive it to be more authentic (i.e., fresh and relevant, rather than syndicated content created to be sold to, and distributed by, multiple brands and organizations). Finally, aesthetic qualities of social media content affect the level of engagement consumers say they experience while consuming content, with more engagement occurring when the content is visually appealing. The expectations for the level of visual appeal vary by platform, often with higher expectations for content on platforms that are considered more visual in nature (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest).

Definition of ESMC

The findings of the current research share some similarities with the stream of research on media engagement generated by Calder and Malthouse, which focuses on engagement with media such as TV, newspapers, and magazines. In this stream of research, engagement is viewed as “the sum of the motivational experiences consumers have with the media product” (Calder and Malthouse 2008, p. 5). As with some of the conceptualizations of engagement from the information systems domain (e.g., Laurel 1991), these authors argue that media engagement is a state of mind, and consider it an antecedent to outcomes such as usage, affect, and responses to advertising (Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel 2009). Similar to this conceptualization of media engagement, the overall findings of the current research suggest ESMC may be an antecedent of consumer interaction with content and other outcomes and, therefore, should be defined separately.

The findings of the consumer study indicate that when consumers are engaged with social media content, the experience is described as a deep feeling of involvement, often combined with a sense of excitement or enjoyment. Therefore, we propose ESMC be defined as follows:

“A psychological state of mind experienced when consuming social media content in which an individual is highly absorbed in the content and experiences a sense of excitement.”

Though some initial behaviors, such as reading or viewing content, are necessary in order for ESMC to occur, our research indicates a clear distinction between these behaviors, ESMC, and interactive behaviors commonly performed in response to social media content (e.g., likes, shares, comments). Based on the findings of our studies, we suggest this state of mind likely has a greater impact on important brand and organizational outcomes than social media interactive behaviors.

Managerial Implications

The results of the studies provide a host of implications for marketing practitioners, an estimated 92 percent of
whom believe social media is important to their business (Stelzner 2014). One of the most important implications of the present work is that the metrics currently being used to assess the success of a brand’s or organization’s social media efforts (the number of brand fans who “like” or follow a brand’s social media page or the number of social media interactions with content, such as “likes,” comments, shares, etc.) are not adequate proxies for measuring the level of engagement experienced by consumers when consuming the brand’s content. The notion that garnering a large social media fan base translates into meaningful outcomes has already been called into question by previous research (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, and Rapp 2012; Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014; Lake 2011).

Although commonly utilized social media metrics, such as the number of shares generated by a branded post reflect the conscious choice of the consumer to interact with the content, they offer no insight into the level of actual engagement experienced by individuals when consuming the content. While social media interactive behaviors are certainly valuable in that they allow for increased distribution of the content to more news feeds, we suggest that engagement with content is also important, possibly more so. A recent white paper examining how brands can optimize social media strategy supports this idea, indicating that 79 percent of brand fans get content directly from the brand, as opposed to a viral source. Brands are advised not to rely on viral strategies to distribute their messages; rather, it is suggested “the production of consistent, quality, and relevant content will pay higher dividends than swinging for the fences in a misguided attempt to ‘go viral’” (Oracle 2012, p. 8). Brands seeking to develop deeper relationships with their customers should place a greater focus on ensuring their social media content is meeting the needs and expectations of their audiences. The number of social media interactive behaviors garnered by content should not be used as the sole yardstick for assessing this.

Additionally, because social media metrics are simply measures of observable behaviors and ESMC is not an observable behavior, marketers may be overlooking some members of their target audience on social media. It is estimated that the vast majority (up to 90 percent) of social media users are lurkers, people who consume content (e.g., reading posts, watching videos, etc.), but who do not contribute to the flow of content on social media by carrying out any measurable behavior (Little 2015). Although this group of social media users often goes undetected by brands and organizations whose content is part of what lurkers consume on social media, they should not be disregarded because they are likely influenced by the content to which they are exposed. Additionally, while lurkers may not perform measurable behaviors on social media, it is quite possible they carry out important offline behaviors, such as spreading positive word-of-mouth about brands. It is important for marketers to understand how well branded social media content psychologically engages targeted audiences so that modifications can be made (if needed) to ensure the content is adding value to the brand experience desired by consumers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any research, the current work is not without limitations. The data collected in the studies are self-reported and retrospective in nature, which may result in some inaccuracies. Future research might address this concern by employing additional qualitative techniques, such as auto-driving or diary accounting to enhance the findings of the current research. Auto-driving is a technique in which informants are asked to comment on a stimulus to which they are exposed (e.g., a picture, video) and how the stimulus relates to them (Woodside and Wilson 1995). This technique could be utilized by asking informants for permission to observe their browsing and interaction habits with social media content. It would be interesting to assess whether observed consumer behaviors on social media are consistent with the findings of the current research.

The findings of this work offer a number of directions for future research that are ripe for exploration as well. The current research suggests that ESMC is a separate and distinct phenomenon from interactive behaviors with social media content. This indicates that the observable social media interactions currently being used to measure “engagement” do not serve as adequate proxies of actual engagement in social media contexts. Thus, one direction for future research would be the development of a scale to measure the construct so that hypothesized relationships between engagement in a social media context and various outcomes can be empirically tested. Another alternative would be to develop a broader, more process-oriented model based on this core conceptualization. For example, O’Brien and Toms (2008) develop one such model.
of user engagement with technology that incorporates the points at which users become engaged and/or disengaged. Though such an exploration was outside the scope of the current investigation, future qualitative research may be applied to incorporate this perspective.

Further, a natural extension of this research would be to examine the relative impacts of ESMC and social media interactive behaviors on business outcomes that have been posited to result from “social media engagement.” To the authors’ knowledge, there has been no research conducted to date to explore the drivers or outcomes of engagement in a social media context as it is conceptualized in this article. While there has been some research examining the impact of social media interactive behaviors (sometimes referred to by practitioners as “engagement” or “participation”) on marketing outcomes, the manner in which the variable has been operationalized and the specific contexts utilized to test hypotheses severely limit the generalizability of the findings. For example, Kumar et al. (2016) examined the impact of “social media engagement” on customer purchase behavior. However, “engagement” is examined in terms of the impact of firm-generated content, which is operationalized as the number of messages posted by the firm on a particular social media site per week. While the findings are bolster support for the inclusion of social media as a component of marketing strategy for retailers, it is a stretch to consider the frequency of posts made by a retailer to be any form of “engagement.” Certainly, more research is needed to study both ESMC and the social media interactive behaviors currently coveted by marketing practitioners.

Additionally, while specific features of social media content have been examined as drivers of interactions with social media content, the results of the present research suggest that the source of the content may play a larger role than physical attributes of the content itself, such as the format. Previous research examining the source of online reviews for businesses such as restaurants and resorts found that consumers are more persuaded by reviews written by similar reviewers and ambiguous reviewers compared with reviews written by dissimilar reviewers (Naylor, Lamberton, and Norton 2011). Given those findings, it would be interesting to investigate whether consumers also become more psychologically engaged with social media content distributed by consumers more similar to themselves.

Finally, recent research examining a phenomenon called “attachment to social media” (ASM) specifically calls for an investigation of possible relationships between the new construct and engagement in the context of social media. ASM is defined as “the strength of a bond between a person and social media” (VanMeter, Grisaffe, and Chonko 2015, p. 71) and has been found to predict C2C advocacy and C2B supportive communication behaviors on social media. Specifically, individuals who are more strongly attached to social media have a greater propensity to express positive C2C word-of-mouth via social media and higher levels of C2B supportive communication behaviors via social media. It seems logical that a consumer’s level of ASM would impact the level of engagement experienced during the consumption of social media content and it would interesting to examine this empirically.

REFERENCES


