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Terms of engagement: Analyzing public engagement with organizations through social media

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growth of research on social media engagement over the last five years, studies have failed to define exactly what engagement is. While many studies equate engagement with the broad array of social media activities, this study argues that engagement is conceptually distinct, and involves cognitive and emotional immersion that may not characterize all social media usage. This study addresses the need to clarify the concept of social media engagement in both communication research by exploring drivers of this immersive state of social media engagement from the perspective of those who are among the most active in social media: Millennials. The study also explores Millennial consideration of engagement with organizations online. In-depth interviews and focus groups suggest that engagement is driven by information consumption, interest immersion, sense of presence, and social interaction. Furthermore, findings point toward the need to consider the spontaneous nature of online sociability, the relationship between online engagement and the organization–public relationship, and the concept of engagement itself.

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1. Introduction

In the race to understand social media behavior, researchers have often mistakenly equated social media usage with the more cognitive and emotional involvement of social media *engagement*. Whereas the former represents the broad daily activities that occur online, the latter refers to the absorption and immersive state of social media usage that may not always accompany social media usage. The difference is particularly important, as recent research has shown that social media engagement mediates social media usage and communication behavior (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013). Oh, Bellur, and Sundar (2010) have defined engagement as “the progression from interacting with the interface physically to becoming cognitively immersed in the content offered by it and then onto proactively spreading the outcomes of this involvement” (p. 25).

By this definition, social media activities like viewing, commenting, and even sharing social media content, may not be the same thing as being engaged. Rather, engagement is a state of mind and emotion, a level of involvement that comprises social media activities, but is, simultaneously, distinct from them. In other words, to be engaged may require social media interactivity, but

social media interactivity may not be sufficient to render one “engaged.” While much of the communication research, particularly in public relations and marketing, examines social media engagement “as a form of one-way communication” (Taylor & Kent, 2014) whereby organizations seek to send out messages that will secure engagement as views, likes, comments, and shares; perhaps the more pressing need is to “peel back the layers” of social media user engagement, as Solis (2011, p. 6) recommends, to understand the underlying factors that drive the progression of social media interactivity to the cognitive and emotional immersion of social media engagement.

A focus on social media user meanings in the progression of engagement has particular value for public relations and strategic communication research. Paek et al. (2013) point out that strategic social media management requires consideration of “the extent to which users will feel engaged” (p. 527). Perhaps for this reason, social media engagement has been “heralded as the new paradigm for public relations in the 21st century” and requires a “mindfulness and awareness of the power distribution in public relations and its role in shaping...communicative relationships” (Johnston, 2014, p. 382). To this point, recent studies have sought to connect engagement with efforts to secure positive organization–public relationships (Kang, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014). In fact, Kang (2014) points out that engagement and relationships share two important antecedents: trust and satisfaction. As such, evaluating the link between social media engagement and

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the organization–public relationship is of theoretical and practical importance to public relations and strategic communication.

The purpose of this paper is to fill the need to understand the progress of engagement and its connection to the organization–public relationship by qualitatively examining engagement among a group who may be one of the most active in social media: Millennials. Findings suggest that social media engagement comprises four characteristics: information consumption, sense of presence, interest immersion, and social connectivity. Findings also shed light on assumptions about the connection between engagement and the organization–public relationship. We conclude this article with a call to explicate the types of engagement.

2. Theory

2.1. Social media engagement

The term social media refers to the online tools that are “designed to facilitate the dissemination of content through social interaction between individuals, groups, and organizations using Internet and Web-based technologies to enable the transformation of broadcast monologues (one to many) into social dialogues (many to many)” (Botha & Mills, 2012, p. 85). Social networking sites (SNS) serve as a context for social media activities, wherein individuals debate ideas, contextualize news, and connect with like-minded individuals (Hung, Li, & Tse, 2011; Lefebvre, Tada, Hilfiker, & Bauer, 2010; Phillips, 2008; Shao, 2009; Voorveld, Nijens, & Smit, 2011). The use of social media tools is often used synonymously with the term “social media engagement,” but the two are conceptually distinct. Social media usage refers to the multiplicity of activities individuals may participate in online while social media engagement refers to the state of cognitive and emotional absorption in the use of social media tools.

Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009) argued that few studies define what engagement actually is, but rather consider it as either frequency of media use or as an outcome of social media use. Instead, Calder et al., recommended defining engagement from an experiential perspective, as “a collection of experiences” that comprise social media user beliefs about “how a site fits into his or her life” (p. 322). Similarly, Paek et al. (2013) argued for an experiential perspective when they found that engagement is utilitarian, and based on social facilitation, civic mindedness, and inspiration. Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014) provide a consumer perspective, arguing that online brand engagement involves positive brand experiences that carry over online. Overall, Oh et al. (2010) provide a good foundation for understanding engagement as experiential, defining engagement as “progression from interacting with the interface physically to becoming cognitively immersed in the content offered by it and then onto proactively spreading the outcomes of this involvement” (p. 25).

Engagement is a “psychologically motivated affective state that brings extra-role behaviors” (Kang, 2014, p. 402). In other words, engagement is what publics feel about social media content and then what they do about it (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011), including searching for, commenting on and sharing content online (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010; Nichols, Friedland, Rojas, Chos, & Shah, 2006). Scholars agree that engagement represents a transition from the one-way reception of messages to active user involvement in responding to, creating, and distributing information (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011; Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012; Shao, 2009; Voorveld et al., 2011), as well as using such information to express oneself online (Kang, 2014). Through social media activities, individuals construct a public profile (Ahn & Bailenson, 2011; Rains & Keating, 2011), which renders engagement a concept of image and reputation development consistent with Phillips’ (2008) argument that “people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others” (p. 80).

Engagement is underscored by emotional attachment, dedication, and passion (Bennett, 2000; Davis, 2010; Kang, 2014). Engaged individuals demonstrate “feelings of persistence, vigor, energy, dedication, absorption, [and] enthusiasm” (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 12), and the concept of engagement comprises “cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral attachment” (Yang & Kang, 2009, p. 323). Kang (2014) argued the emotional attachment of engagement is driven by positive affectivity, affective commitment, and empowerment.

Engagement is also considered inherently social, as the engaged usage of social media tools is often “marked by mutual trust and interaction” in which individuals “seek fulfillment of their relational needs through socializing with others in the community” (Hung et al., 2011, p. 99, 102). Individuals commonly use social media to increase relational connections (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010), and social media engagement is commonly associated with interaction and online support (Bennett et al., 2011; Davis, 2010; Rains & Keating, 2011; Steuber & Solomon, 2011; Waters & Williams, 2011).

2.2. Engaging organizations

Several studies in public relations have considered the strategic use of social media for organizational benefit (Paek et al., 2013). Social media engagement is often connected to a positive organization–public relationship, particularly in public relations research. In the latest edition of his public relations textbook, Smith (2013) defined engagement as “how publics interact with the organization and with each other vis-à-vis the message” (p. 353). Public relations scholars recognize engagement as “an important and influential factor in cultivating and reinforcing relationships” (Men & Tsai, 2014, p. 419), and as such, pursue engagement as a tool for relationship cultivation. Taylor and Kent (2014) argued, “Virtually all studies... show how engagement may help build relationships,” and they equated engagement with relational dialogue (p. 390). Common topics in public relations on social media engagement include organization–public relationship strategies and evaluation (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013).

In a recent special issue of the *Journal of Public Relations Research* (2014) devoted to social media engagement, some scholars positioned engagement as an outcome of positive relationships. Johnston (2014) argued that engagement requires an “understanding of, appreciation for, and commitment to dialogue with and among stakeholders and organizations” (p. 382). Kang (2014) argued that public relations scholars view engagement as “the ultimate marker or maker of a good organization–public relationship” (p. 400) and, consequently, defined engagement as the “affective commitment, positive affectivity and empowerment that an individual public experiences in interactions with an organization over time” (p. 402, italics added).

Despite the value of considering the connection between engagement and the organization–public relationship in research, doing so also overlooks the unique meanings and motivations involved in a platform that grants publics accessibility to media channels and empowers them to distribute messaging in a publicly visible platform. The difficulty of equating engagement with the organization–public relationship is that it prioritizes organizational meanings and actions in a medium that is intended to “enable voices to be heard without any voice dominating the dialogue” (Bruce & Shelley, 2010, p. 4). If social media are public-centered tools in which organizations “lose their ability to precisely control messages about their brands” (Campbell et al., 2011, p. 88), the need is to analyze individuals’ own perspectives of the progression of engagement from social media activity to

cognitive and emotional immersion, and then to examine individuals' online relational connection to organizations on their own terms. To this end, the current study analyzes the individual-based meanings in social media engagement and their relationship with organizations online. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

- RQ 1: How do Millennials consider their online engagement?
- RQ 2: How do Millennials consider their engagement with organizations online?

3. Material and methods

To explore depth of meaning in the engagement experience, qualitative research is appropriate because it emphasizes depth over breadth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study employed in-depth interviews and focus groups to acquire a rich description of participants' meanings and motivations, which is a primary goal in qualitative research (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007).

3.1. Sampling and data collection

The study involved purposive and convenience sampling techniques by recruiting Millennials at college campuses from the researchers' own communication classes in exchange for extra credit. We chose to study Millennials because young adults under the age of 30 are among the most active social media users (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) and would be the most likely to discuss social media activities in detail. The extent of their social media usage also suggests that they may demonstrate higher levels of social media engagement, per the definition of engagement by Oh et al. (2010). Another reason Millennials are appropriate for this study is their "affiliation for technology, and "susceptibility to digital marketing" (Inside the Heads of Today's Millennials, 2012), meaning that our college student sample may be more susceptible to the social media efforts of organizations.

Of course, using the researchers' own students presents a potential limitation, as students might have sought to give researchers the answers students thought they were "looking for." However, the personal rapport with students also enabled deeper discussion about social media usage, and to control the potential for students to give the "right" answers, researchers used probing question techniques, minimizing the effect of professor–student rapport.

Inasmuch as the sampling was based on convenience, all participants were college students between the ages of 18–25. The group of interviewees yielded a split of nine females (participants A, B, D, E, F, H, and I) and two males (participants C and G). All focus group participants were female.

Researchers collected data in two phases. Phase one comprised nine in-depth interviews with male and female students from a university in the Southern United States. Interviews lasted between 45 min and an hour, and were open-ended and loosely structured around an interview guide discussing social media engagement and organizational relationships. Assurances of participant confidentiality and informed consent created an open environment for sharing opinions. Sample questions included: "What does it mean to you to be engaged online?" and "Why do you interact with organizations online?" Data collection in this first phase of research was considered complete when new ideas appeared exhausted and answers began to be redundant, consistent with qualitative research standards that consider data saturation more important than sample size and repetition (McCracken, 1993, p. 71).

In the second phase, three focus groups of four to seven participants each (17 total students) were conducted to further explore

knowledge claims about engagement through debate and discussion. Due to the convenience sample, all participants were female. Each focus group lasted one hour and the focus group moderator used a guide based on the interview guide used in phase one of the research. As with the interviews, focus groups reached saturation, as themes appeared to be exhausted.

Data collected in both interviews and focus groups included verbal responses and visual cues. To maintain anonymity, all participants were assigned labels—interviewees were assigned letters (A–I); focus group participants, numbers (1–17).

3.2. Data analysis

Following data collection, verbatim transcripts were reviewed using a grounded theory approach in which codes were developed directly from the data. Researchers used the constant comparative method in which each subsequent transcript was analyzed for added depth from the previous (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Summaries, annotations, and memo writing were also used to help researchers "keep a box score along the way" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 86). Following this preliminary coding, core categories developed from the literature were applied to the data and grounded codes were analyzed for fit. Following categorization of the grounded codes into primary categories, codes were reanalyzed and outliers were reassigned to new categories. Codes and categories are listed below:

The findings and conclusion sections discuss the final categories and compare them to the literature. To ensure inter-coder reliability, both authors reviewed the core categories and codes, and then discussed the analysis to come to an agreement.

This study sought to insure Kvale's concepts of validity (1995) by developing flexible interview and focus group guides that would allow respondents to discuss concepts in their own way and by establishing claims through communicative discourse.

The rapport between participant and researcher (student–professor) may have influenced findings. Students might have sought to give the answer they thought the professors wanted to hear. To minimize this effect, researchers used depth and probing regarding student experiences to understand their perceptions of engagement. Furthermore, students seemed to enjoy discussing their personal views on social media, and researchers sought to put themselves in the student role, and students in the teacher role.

4. Results

Results depict engagement as a personally-initiated and often spontaneous activity driven by four primary factors. These factors include information consumption, sense of presence, interest immersion, and social connectivity. Engagement with organizations online seems to reflect similar themes, with primary focus placed on the ability of organizational content to fulfill the four motives of social media engagement.

4.1. How do social media users consider their online engagement?

For many participants, engagement activities were impulsive, and few had discussed or even thought about the motivations for their online experiences. The question, "What does it mean to be engaged?" often elicited long pauses in discussion. However, when encouraged to discuss experiences in which they felt most engaged, common terms included "being involved" and "active" in interacting with content and individuals online, including searching for and participating in information distribution. While discussing these activities, participants underscored four main concepts as central to their engagement activities: (a) information

consumption, (b) sense of presence, (c) interest immersion, and (d) social interaction.

4.1.1. Information consumption

Engagement was considered an information-based activity that includes staying up to date with personally relevant information. Participant E summed up engagement as “being educated,” and Participant D explained her online engagement as the need to “be the one who knows the most.” In focus groups, participants used the terms, “actively looking” (Participant 1), “constantly researching” (Participant 2), “constantly online” (Participant 3), and “always going online to look for new information” (Participant 4) to define engagement. Participant three summarized, “People are using [the Internet] to be cutting edge and find out new stuff that people don’t know.”

Though consideration of engagement as an information-based experience was common, participants debated whether reading, alone, constituted engagement. Millennials in the first focus group said engagement is more than just reading something that “sparks your interest” (Participant 13); it involves higher levels of attention than just reading. Participant 10 commented, “You’re very engaged when . . . you can’t really sway away to think about something else. She added that being engaged involves “wanting to tell people” about what she has read. Others echoed the attention factor as a determinant of being engaged, including Participant K, who said engagement is when something “takes all [her] focus” and Participant 16 who said, “It has to be content that you’re really ready to take in.”

4.1.2. Sense of presence

Participants described engagement as cognitive attachment to their online experience, using terms like “being really into something” (Participant B), “being aware” (Participant E), and “having a presence and making your presence known” (Participant 15). Sense of presence also included cognizance of time spent online and awareness of one’s own connectedness. Millennials used terms like “never ending hole” (Participant 16), “time sacrifice” (Participant F), and “connected at all times” (Participant E) to characterize online engagement.

Though most reported cognizance of the energy and time spent online, few described engagement as a premeditated activity. Participant 16 admitted, “You don’t even think about it.” Participant 2 called it “a routine that I don’t even know, but I just do it everyday.” Though some admitted they were trying to “kick the habit” of social media, the use of social media as “an entertainment luxury,” and something they did when they needed a “break,” coupled with the fear of missing out on something made quitting social media problematic.

4.1.3. Interest immersion

Participants said engagement involved immersion into content relevant to personal interests, including commenting on, forwarding, and advocating personal interests online. Becoming engaged involved making assessments about personal relativity of content for the purpose of consuming, liking and sharing the content. For example, Participant F said:

“The first thing I do is ask, “How does the picture relate to me?” If I feel I have identified with the picture, then I like it. And then I want to share it. I want to put it on my wall. That’s part of who I am. If you see my wall, it’s like a way of telling people who I am.

Many enjoyed the opportunity to advocate their personal interests and have an influence on others, especially when they had a complaint. Participant 11 said:

I think social media has a lot of power for the individual because if you are upset at a company, let’s say you have a thousand friends on Facebook, those people might see that and if they decide to get on the bandwagon, it could really impact an organization. . . . If I was upset, the first thing I would do is to turn to social media and say how I felt.

Involvement in interests online was often considered a form of self-actualization. Participant F said, “I post a lot of positive things every day. It keeps me going. . . I’m doing it for myself. It makes me feel more secure. It makes me feel like I’m complete.” Participant E said she uses Pinterest to develop her creative side because she’s been told she’s not creative. Participant D said social media allow her to be more fun and joke around more than she would normally do offline.

4.1.4. Social interaction

Social media engagement was often tied to respondents’ desires to interact with friends. Participant E explained that she uses Pinterest because: “You can see what others are interested in and use it to your advantage when you speak with them, and you can be chummy and they think you’re interested.” Participant A commented, “Social media allows me to communicate with people in ways I wouldn’t communicate.” In one focus group discussion, participants defined engagement as “being connected with what people are talking about.” Participant 17 said “including other people in what you’re trying to post about” is a big part of engagement and Participant 16 said she felt “more engaged on blogs because you feel like you’re having a conversation with somebody.”

Sense of connection and social approbation were strong underlying themes of Millennial engagement. Participant B echoed others when she defined engagement as “the true life part of media, knowing about other people.” Participants commonly attributed their engagement to an interest in knowing other people and sharing information others might value. In the third focus group, Participant 16 summarized

“If something got a rise out of me, then I want to share that feeling with somebody; otherwise, it just dwindles away. So if somebody jumps in on the conversation and says, ‘I was really interested in that, too,’ then I’m like, ‘Oh, let’s continue this conversation.’”

4.2. How do social media users consider their engagement with organizations online?

Millennials often initiated discussions by talking about product satisfaction and preference of organizational mission and values. As discussions progressed, however, it was apparent that organizational content online facilitated participants’ sense of engagement. As such, Millennials defined their experiences based on the way organizations facilitated their information consumption, sense of presence, interest immersion, and social interaction online.

4.2.1. Information consumption

Engagement with organizations online may best be described as Millennials’ desires to stay up-to-date with organizational online activities, based on the perceived quality of the organization’s online offering. Millennials who subscribe to content updates expected that doing so would provide an enhanced information experience with the organization, including original content, exclusive information, and promotions.

For participants, the information experience is self-initiated and based on the recency and extent of information posted. For

example, Participant B explained that she preferred to “see a little less” of an organization because “that’s why you research. You research about a company when you don’t know about them. . . . When you already know what you need to know, you don’t look them up on Facebook.”

Discussions also revealed that promotions were not enough to engender engagement, but rather, engagement required companies to make content personal. Millennials said they bemoaned companies that “just post things about themselves and what they have to offer all the time” (Participant B) and wanted companies to post content that was “not so promotional” (Participant C). The most engaging experiences discussed involved content that was newsworthy, personally relevant, and entertaining. Participant H summarized, “Companies are more attractive online when they’re interactive or funny vs. being straight information-based.”

4.2.2. *Sense of presence*

Millennials considered themselves engaged with organizations based on their investment of time and attention, and they expected organizations to invest consistent interest in them. Participant E, for example, said she knows she’s engaged when “[companies] have my time. They have my attention.” Participant 17 said, “Our age group wants to know what they’re doing, and I don’t know if that’s really clicked with the people in charge. . . . They need to keep a constant interest.” Participant E said if an organization has been sending updates consistently but abruptly stops, then she would reach out and say, “What’s going on? Why aren’t you treating me the same way?”

4.2.3. *Interest immersion*

For many Millennials, engaging with an organization online began as a self-initiated process in which they sought out the company and assessed the value of engaging with it online based on personal interests. Participant F said she initiates the contact. “I give the company a chance,” she said. “I go in with a positive attitude that this is going to work out. And if it doesn’t, fine, I’ll move on.” During this initiation exercise, she said she tests companies based on what she gets in return: “I want things. If I’m getting more things, then I’m going to keep testing you until one day we’re engaged.”

To a certain extent, engagement entailed “using the company,” as Participant H said. Many participants echoed Participant F who said, “I’m not going to get engaged with a company if I haven’t gotten anything in return.” Participants “used” companies they followed for several reasons including promotional and pro-social objectives. Some mentioned coupons and special offers, but others, like Participant 13, said they follow a company to support a company’s social mission. Participant 13 said, “I like engaging with companies where I support their mission.” Still others used engagement with organizations strategically for improving career prospects. Some admitted they follow and promote organizations online as a strategic advantage, including one focus group participant who said following an agency on Twitter gave her “an edge because not a lot of people knew about [the agency’s Twitter account].”

The pre-eminence of career endeavors seemed to make engagement with organizations a balancing act between personal and professional use of social media. During discussions, Millennials often switched between personal and professional social media activities (sometimes answering as a student, sometimes as a company employee). Some were proud to show off activities at work, such as Participant F, who often shares media content she helped produce at her agency to her followers online. Others bemoaned the mix of the personal and professional, especially Participant G, who did not like being asked to post Facebook and Twitter updates for work on his personal pages.

Participants were aware of the way their organizational engagement reflected on their online profile. Participant F said, “If I like something, that tells people what kind of person I am. If I like Wal-Mart, then they’ll be like, ‘She must live in a bad area.’” Many said they were careful in tarnishing an organization’s reputation online in case doing so would reflect poorly on them, or as Participant E said, it would “show what kind of person” she is. “Bashing a company online” was a common subject of discussion, with some participants expressing concern about “crossing the line” (Participant 15) and “really thinking about what you’re going to say” (Participant 17).

The general consensus was that commenting online about a company would influence the company. Some said their online comments might reach company decision-makers; others said their chance to join a chorus of voices would lead to change. Participant H sent tweets to news sources who frustrated her with “contradictory” reporting because, as she said, “that’s how you communicate with these people.”

4.2.4. *Social interaction*

Engagement with an organization online often started offline through consumer activities, extending to additional relational interaction online. Participant I said, “I would consider engaging anything extracurricular the consumer might do beyond just the purchase.” Extracurricular activities cited by participants included recognizing good service with an online post. Participant C said, “If they help me, I’m going to throw them some good publicity and help them out.” Others described engagement as loyalty. Participant H said, “I think a big part of being engaged to a company is being brand loyal.”

Product purchases were not always a prerequisite for engagement. Participant H said she follows All-State’s “Mayhem” Facebook account, even though she’s not a customer, simply because the posts are funny. When asked if it was ok to engage with a competitor’s online content, she responded, “It’s free game.” Participant F described her organizational engagement as more of a test than an indication of brand loyalty. She explained, “I’m testing them [to see] if they give me a nice response or help me somehow. I’m not going to engage somebody that’s not going to help me.” She further explained that after this trial period, she then considers herself engaged:

We are committed. It’s not like we signed a contract, but we’re in this, it’s both of us, and we’re going to make this happen. It’s an agreement to me. I’m here for you, and I want something back. That, to me, is engagement. It’s 50–50.

Despite indications that Millennials considered organizational engagement in relationship terms, many did not expect organizations to interact with them directly. The sentiment was that large companies were too big to care about their posts, and small companies were too small to have personnel to respond. Still, Participant G wished companies would “show appreciation for people’s time” with a response, and a participant one admitted, “I don’t think [influence] matters for me to be engaged, but it would make me more engaged.” Participant 13 summarized, “People like to be heard. . . . Some people like that they’re a part of the organization.”

Furthermore, many participants admitted not seeking a relationship with an organization through their engagement activities. For example, Participant 13 said, “I don’t think I would look at an organization’s Twitter for any other reason [than to complain about a customer service issue].” Though many echoed Participant 11, saying that getting a response “feels like engagement” (Participant 11), most did not expect a response from organizations, and some wished organizations would engage them

more. Participant H said not getting a response from a company “can be a let down,” but it was still satisfying that others who search for the company on Twitter would see her tweet.”

Rather than engage organizations for a company-based relationship, participants reported engaging organizations for their own interpersonal relationships. For example, Participant D echoed others’ comments when she said, “I post about [the company] because I get excited about them, and I want someone to be excited with me.” Participant 9 said, “I connected because [the company] had my personal interests, and it had [my friend’s] personal interests.” Sharing organizational content for friends, relatives, and associates was commonly discussed throughout interviews and focus groups.

Participants also shared organizational content to bring people together—for crowd sourcing. Participants said they felt influential because of the size of their online social network. Participant I called social media a “tool for the consumer” because “everyone can help each other out to steer clear of a company that might be horrible.” Focus groups called it “safety in numbers”—Participant 6 said, “It’s hard to stand alone, especially if it’s in the negative,” and “If 50 people stood up and said something, [the company] would be forced to listen.”

4.3. Comparing social media engagement and organizational engagement

This study examined both general social media engagement and engagement with organizations via social media. Some interesting themes emerge when comparing the themes between the two main research questions. Under the heading of interest immersion, respondents’ considerations of the benefits of public visibility through online engagement became concerns about the visibility of public association with an organization when discussing engagement with organizations online. Additionally, instead of focusing on the personal diversion of online engagement, discussions shifted to work-life balance of engaging with one’s own company, and the pressure they felt to promote their place of business. Finally, discussions that centered on the empowerment of using social media transitioned to doubts about their own ability to influence organizations.

When comparing themes regarding respondents’ online experience, and their online experience with an organization, one major difference emerged. Rather than discuss the mental and emotional involvement of social media generally, they discussed their organizational experience online as an extension of their offline experience. In other words, they viewed their online interactions with an organization as a recreational appendage to their offline consumer experiences. Additionally, diversion and time spent online shifted to how much diversion an organization’s online content offered, and how much time it took to find that information.

Other nuances of the organizational engagement include the ways respondents considered the information value of organizational content online and the social nature of interacting with an organization online. Respondents focused more on the ways companies initiated engagement online through their own content efforts, rather than the information seeking and spontaneity of general online engagement. Additionally, respondents saw general online engagement as a social approbation and connection phenomenon, while discussing organizational engagement online as ways relationship facilitation, or the ways organizational content linked them to other friends.

5. Discussion

This study suggests that individuals may consider social media engagement as a personally initiated, informational, and attentive

social experience, rather than one that is mediated by organizational interactions. Findings also suggest that engagement may be as spontaneous as it is premeditated. Overall, data from this study shed light on the connection between engagement and the organization–public relationship. Below, we discuss the relevance of the findings to social media communication research, and suggest the need to delineate organization–public social media engagement from other, non-organizational, forms of engagement.

5.1. Engagement factors

Commentary from interviews and focus groups shows that social media usage progresses into the higher levels of absorption and immersion described in the literature (Kang, 2014; Oh et al., 2010) through a personal reflexive process of assessing the degree to which social media activities fulfill users’ needs in information consumption, sense of presence, interest immersion, and social interaction. These findings are consistent with previous research that has shown that college student social media use is driven by emotional, informational, social, and habitual needs (Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012). Below is a description of each factor.

5.1.1. Information consumption

Search and retrieval of information may be the entry point of an engagement experience because information activities facilitate other engagement activities. However, information consumption is more than a question of ability to find information online—it represents the ease of constant connectivity to information and the cognitive fulfillment social media activities provide, including needs for understanding. Findings in this study show that individuals seek and use information to achieve understanding, improve their personal life and, build an online profile. Information consumption also enables individuals to be experts in their own interest domains, which facilitates content contribution. Social media information enables individuals to be content participants and contributors, a point other researchers have also suggested (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012).

5.1.2. Sense of presence

Engagement comprises one’s own cognitive involvement in their social media experience, including the investment of time and attention. This cognition is similar to what Taylor and Kent (2014) refer to as “presentness,” “synchronous interaction,” and “state of being” in online dialogue (p. 389). This does not mean that engagement is necessarily premeditated—rather presence appears to develop in the context of the engagement experience itself. Responses indicate that extent of engagement may be based on one’s assessments of the engagement experience as it is happening. This includes evaluations of entertainment value, time spent, and cognitive investment.

Wang et al. (2012) use the term “reciprocal causality” to describe this reinforcing effect of social media usage on need recognition and fulfillment. They explain that online media needs are reinforcing spirals—“needs drive media use, which may fulfill all, part, or none of the needs; the changed needs lead users to adjust their subsequent media choice and use behavior” (p. 1830). In other words, as individuals use social media, they simultaneously fulfill needs and create new ones, leading to further social media use.

5.1.3. Interest immersion

Findings suggest that the transition from social media usage to engagement is contingent upon the degree to which social media activities enable active participation in areas of interest through online content creation and distribution. The opportunity to have one’s voice heard in an area of interest is personally fulfilling,

making self-expression a considerable part of the engagement experience. The concept of interest immersion is consistent with Oh et al.'s (2010) definition of engagement as an active process of immersion into social media content that leads to self expression and other "outcomes of involvement" (p. 25).

Interest immersion may represent the emotional need fulfillment that other research considers critical for driving social media usage (Wang et al., 2012). Namely, immersing oneself in an issue or topic provides emotional satisfaction. Paek et al. (2013) found that inspiration and civic mindedness are primary motives for social media usage, and that social media represents a utility for social media users.

5.1.4. Social interactivity

This study's findings suggest that social media facilitate online and offline connections through the resources available online. Whereas interactivity may initiate social media activity, the pursuit of social approval through social media represents engagement. Individuals use social media to fulfill social needs such as gaining social approbation and recognition from like-minded individuals. This research finding is consistent with previous research that has shown that perceived interpersonal support has a large effect on social media use (Wang et al., 2012). In this way, engagement is social facilitation (Paek et al., 2013), as individuals use social media for approval.

The notion that social media engagement is for social approval helps explain contradictions between other studies. Wang et al. (2012) point out that some studies show that individuals find extensive value in relationship satisfaction and social capital through social media, but others (including their own) show that social media use may not gratify social needs. In short, their research showed that "participants perceived social needs as the largest reason for them to use SM, but they did not report being socially gratified" (p. 1837). They reasoned that the difference lies in short- vs. long-term orientation to relationships via social media—in the short term, social media is not enough to fulfill relational needs, but in the long-term, it is. While that may indeed be the case, our study adds a further perspective: relational needs in social media may be more commonly for social approval, rather than for building relationships. Social approval may be considered a continuous need that is rarely fulfilled, because social approval is rarely unanimous.

Furthermore, the plight for social approval is ongoing—as satisfactory social approval is earned for one issue, another arises. The more social approval one gets, the more social approval one seeks. Therefore, social media users may rate relational fulfillment high in the long-term (looking back on previous plights for social approval provides satisfaction), while unfulfilling in the short-term, in which individuals may focus on current unfulfilled needs for social approval.

5.2. Spontaneous sociability

This research raises questions about the assumptions of social media engagement. Whereas social media usage may begin as a premeditated activity, social media engagement may not be so purposeful. It would be shortsighted to assume that social media users log onto the Internet and think, "How can I get engaged online today?" Participants were often at a loss for words when describing their engagement meanings and expectations, and responses often began with statements such as "I'm not sure this counts" and "I don't know if this is what you're looking for," showing that the research setting may have been the first time they had thought about their social media behavior. More than one Millennial admitted engagement was hard to discuss because they did not think about it beforehand, it just happened.

Engagement, then, may be spontaneous or impulsive. Fukuyama (1995) coined the term "spontaneous sociability," which features "the ability of strangers to trust one another and work together in new, flexible forms of organization" (p. 91). Social media engagement involves the flexible interaction and interpersonal trust that are the basis of Fukuyama's concept. As a spontaneous phenomenon, then, engagement may be based on the perceived connectedness between individuals in the social media sphere. Considering engagement as spontaneous also suggests it is a dynamic phenomenon based on Millennials' ongoing assessments of their experiences as they happen. In this way, engagement may vary by degrees and develops based on the subjectivity and reflexivity (concepts Groom (2008) suggests) involved in assessing personal fulfillment of the experience. Up until this point, engagement has been considered as a fixed point or state of being, but it may more aptly be considered as phases or levels of social media activity.

The concept of spontaneous sociability is consistent with research that has pointed out the habitual and self-reinforcing nature of social media use. Wang et al. (2012) point out, "ungratified social and habitual needs of social media use can accumulate through their own endogenous effects over time and motivate future SM use. These needs drive SM use, but are not gratified by SM use, and grow larger to stimulate heavier use in the future" (p. 1837). Therefore, through self-reinforcement and reciprocity, social media use both fulfills needs and creates new need.

5.3. Engagement and organizations

The findings from this study provide insight into the experiential engagement process for consumers and other publics who engage with organizations online. First, the four primary motives that emerge from this study, confirm and relate to previous research on online brand engagement. Hollebeek et al. (2014) argued that engagement comprises cognitive processing and affectation, which relates to information consumption and interest immersion. This study's findings add the need to focus on users' sense of presence and the habitual, spontaneous nature of engagement.

Second, this study's findings shed light on the growing discussion of social media engagement and the organization–public relationship, which has been a focus in public relations research (Ye & Ki, 2012). Among studies about engagement and organizational interaction, two themes seem to emerge. On the one hand, some studies seem to suggest that engagement follows an organization–public relationship, with studies examining engagement as part of dialogic strategy in extant relationships (Taylor & Kent, 2014) and engagement as a mediator between organization–public relationships and supportive behavioral outcomes (Kang, 2014). Research from the current study shows additional evidence of engagement from an extant relationship. On the other hand, other studies also suggest the opposite, that engagement precedes an organization–public relationship, including research by Men and Tsai (2014) showing evidence that relationships may also form from user engagement with organizational content on social networking sites. As a result, the connection between engagement and organizational relationships becomes a chicken-and-the-egg debate of which comes first: engagement or the organization–public relationship?

Results from the current study provide evidence that social media engagement may precede an organization–public relationship, in addition to engagement that proceeds from it. Consistent with research by Taylor and Kent (2014), many Millennials expressed hope that engagement on social media would elicit feedback from organizations, particularly from those organizations with which they are interested in pursuing a relationship. Furthermore, participating in a collective of individuals seeking feedback from an organization coincided with higher expectations

that an organization would respond. Findings also suggest that many Millennials hope for some dialogic interaction with organizations because of they are “engaged” on social media (and represent a more vocal and involved public). Underlying these findings is that social media engagement imbues a sense of empowerment over social media activities, which is consistent with Kang’s (2014) definition of engagement.

Implicit in the assertion that engagement may precede a relationship, and also apparent in this study’s findings, is that the organization–public relationship is self-initiated, as many Millennials sought to build relationships on their own terms. Evidence for this principle in interview and focus group discussions includes comments about the trial and response process whereby research participants tested the possibility and benefits of a relational connection. Organizational response to such “tests” influences the development of the relationship. Overall, examining relationships as an outcome of social media engagement coincides with the stance others have taken on social media engagement in professional communication research, including Bruce and Shelley (2010), who called for a focus on engagement as “an umbrella term that covers the full range of an organization’s efforts to understand and involve stakeholders in its activities and decisions” (p. 3).

Future research may benefit from delineating the role engagement plays in a relationship. Our findings demonstrated that engagement may precede a relationship as much as it proceeds from a relationship. Nuances of social media usage and engagement factors may be identified by analyzing the different points at which engagement comes into play in the organization–public relationship.

5.4. Engagement: the bigger picture

The discussion of organization–public interaction under the broader heading of social media engagement also suggests a need to look more broadly at engagement as a concept. Most scholars use the term with the assumption of shared meaning across disciplines. And while there may be overlaps in understanding of engagement (i.e. as cognitive and emotional immersion), operating off of unstated assumptions leads to issues in examining and investigating the concept. Taylor and Kent (2014) argued that scholars have created an ideograph around engagement by “refer[ing] to the importance of engagement without ever explaining engagement” (p. 385). Ideographs are dangerous in research because “they close off discussion rather than encourage it by introducing concepts that on their face seem uncontested and generally understood” (p. 385).

Reviews of the research show several types of engagement addressed by scholars. These include civic engagement (i.e. participation in social, political, and community issues), employee engagement (i.e. employee commitment to and involvement with their place of employment), brand engagement (i.e. consumer participation with a company’s product or service), and broader social media engagement (i.e. cognitive immersion in the social media

channel) (Kang, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Findings from the current study elucidate yet another form of engagement—organizational engagement, or public involvement with a chosen organization that may fall outside of consumer interests. An examination of engagement based on the target of one’s cognitive immersion may reveal nuances worthy of further investigation. In fact, it is entirely possible that one type of engagement may lead to another. For example, social media engagement may precede organizational engagement, as was demonstrated in some of the responses in this study, or it may also lead to engagement with civic and political issues, as Conroy et al. (2012) demonstrated.

5.5. Implications for practice

Considering social media engagement as an antecedent to the development of a mutually beneficial organization–public relationship puts the onus on communicators to commit to “mutual understanding, collaboration, and shared meaning” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 389) in social media interactions. Findings reaffirm the need for communicators to look beyond engagement as a one-way, organization-to-public activity, and “acknowledge the interconnectedness of organizations and social environments” and the need for dialogue with stakeholders toward “community-building discourse and power resource management” (Johnston, 2014, p. 382). In turn, considering social media engagement as a result of organization–public relationships is also valuable because it provides organizations with insights to interact with their most motivated online publics.

This study also offers broad implications for practitioners who seek to engender and measure engagement for strategic purposes. Consistent with research by Calder et al. (2009), this study shows that experiential factors for engagement include self-esteem (sense of presence in this study), social facilitation, and intrinsic enjoyment (interest immersion in this study). Therefore, practitioners who want to engage their publics through social media will find value in building personal, social, and participatory elements into their social media pages and online sites.

6. Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest engagement is a phenomenon that comprises personal, informational, attentive, and social components. Furthermore, findings question assumptions that engagement necessarily proceeds from an organization–public relationship. Researchers should pursue a user-construction perspective of social media engagement, including parameters that include self-expression, empowerment, social life improvement, and rewards for attention.

Appendix A

See Table 1.

Table 1
Coding categories.

Core categories	Personal	Online experience	Information	Social	Spontaneous
<i>RQ 1: Online engagement</i>					
Code 1	Public visibility	Mental, emotional attention	Information seeking	Approbation	Habitual
Code 2	Personal interests	Diversion	Information distribution	Online interaction	Self-awareness
Code 3	Personal influence	Time	Value of information	Crowdsourcing influence	
Code 4				Relationships	
<i>RQ 2: Online engagement with organizations</i>					
Code 1	Public association with org	Extension of offline experience	Organizational actions	Peer linking	
Code 2	Work life balance	Diversion	Interest overlap	Online interaction	
Code 3	Personal control	Time	Value of information	Crowdsourcing influence	
Code 4				Relationship-building	

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