Exploring the empowering and paradoxical relationship between social media and CSR activism☆

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the extent to which social media empowers consumers' CSR activism. Analysis of in-depth interviews with consumers reveals that they experience both high and low empowerment from a behavioral, affective, and cognitive perspective. The study also revealed the presence of two paradoxes that influence the level of empowerment. The first is a social judgment paradox whereby a consumer experiences being both social judge and socially judged. The second paradox is an efficiency/inefficiency paradox reflecting the impact of social media on the time and effort required for performing CSR activism. The research findings extend and counter current theoretical thinking and managerial practice related to CSR activism in social media and they provide the basis for a typology of CSR activists in social media that provides directions for future research.

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Social media is linked with increased individual empowerment in many areas. One of these areas is individuals' experiences as consumers. Consumers are described as having "more information, choices, and purchase points—and thus a greater impact" as a result of social media (Savitz,, 2012, p. 26).

An area of consumer behavior where social media is increasingly being adopted is consumer activism related to corporate social responsibility (e.g., Albinsson & Perera, 2013). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) reflects the voluntary integration of social concerns and practices into the everyday operations of a company (Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Murphy, 2013). It is argued that, by "democratizing" consumer activism, social media empowers consumers to pursue the role of a CSR activist (Handelman, 2013).

However, there is little empirical research documenting the empowering impact of social media on the CSR activism of individual consumers. Instead, the small but growing body of research examining social media and CSR focuses on the use of social media by firms in communicating their CSR efforts (Du & Vieira, 2012; Fieseler & Fleck, 2013; Lee, Oh, and Kim, 2013; Lee, Van Dolen, and Kolk, 2013). At a consumer level, research primarily focuses on how social media empowers consumers to act together as a group (e.g. Hoffman & Hutter, 2012; Leudicke, Thompson, & Gisler, 2010). The research reported in this paper focuses on consumers at the individual level. Thus, hereafter

when referring to a "consumer" in this research, it is within the context of consumers acting individually and independently of other consumers, not within a group such as a protesting situation.

Three questions guide the research. First, the research examines whether social media empowers all aspects of CSR activist behavior. Handelman (2013) identifies pontification, moralizing, and obfuscating as three behaviors undertaken by CSR activists. Research to-date has not identified the specific types of behavior that are empowered by social media, leaving researchers' and managers' with little knowledge regarding the types of behavior empowered by social media.

The second research question considers whether social media's empowering effect extends into non-behavioral areas. The psychology literature describes empowerment not only with respect to behavior. It also discusses empowerment with respect to emotional experiences (affect) and information processing (cognition) strategies (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). The absence of research considering social media's empowering impact from these perspectives suggests that our knowledge is incomplete.

The paper also considers whether paradoxes for CSR activists emerge in social media contexts. Mick and Fournier (1998) describe a technology paradox as a situation whereby consumers use of technology results in unexpected and opposing effects. Research to-date portrays social media as a positive force enabling consumer activism (Handelman, 2013; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) but also suggests the potential for a negative impact of social media when it discusses the use of social media to "vanquish" (Handelman, 2013, p. 392) and "convert others" (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, p. 702). This research explores whether paradoxes occur for consumer CSR activists in a social media context.

We explore these questions through in-depth interviews of consumers using social media to perform various CSR-related activities. The research findings reveal mixed support for the empowering impact of social media. Furthermore, the research reveals the presence of a social judgment and an efficiency/inefficiency paradox associated with consumers' use of social media for CSR activism purposes.

1. Conceptual background

Consumer empowerment occurs when an individual experiences control over their marketplace experiences. One view of consumer empowerment focuses on marketers granting consumers control over particular marketing activities like new product development (Fuchs & Schreier, 2011). A second view emphasizes how the acquisition of information empowers consumer decision-making (Wathieu et al., 2002).

We draw on the elevated power literature in defining consumer empowerment as a perceptual state experienced by consumers when they possess the "relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments" (Keltner et al., 2003, p. 265). This definition is consistent with both the strategy and information perspective of consumer empowerment and recent discussions of consumer empowerment in the social media context explored in this research (e.g., Labrecque et al., 2013). Access granted by marketers as well as information acquired by consumers can each serve as a resource enabling the consumer to influence the behavior of firms.

2. Social media and empowerment of consumer CSR activism

Consumers undertake CSR activism when they seek to influence the CSR-related activity of firms. The activities associated with using social media for CSR activism are many (e.g., Corning & Myers, 2002). They can include more passive CSR activism such as showing support for firms through a "like" publicly endorsing a CSR action. A more aggressive use of social media could involve making posts criticizing the CSR-related actions of firms.

Social media can potentially empower individual consumer CSR activists by enhancing their ability to perform various behaviors (Handelman, 2013). *Pontification* involves consumers creating a self-identity as a knowledgeable activist (e.g., creating posts and sharing the posts of other CSR activists). Social media can potentially empower consumer CSR activism by providing consumers with a forum for pontificating in creating their activist identity. *Moralization* refers to targeting another for social praise (e.g., "liking" a firm's CSR action) or social criticism (e.g., posting critical comments). Social media can empower moralization by enabling them to easily share social praise or social criticism of a firm's CSR-related activity with many other consumers. *Obfuscation* recognizes that consumers often have multiple identities (e.g., activist, student, parent, etc.) that must be managed in a way that addresses conflict occurring between these identities. Their identity and social praise/criticism represent resources that the CSR activist can use to influence others and, in the process, either reward or punish a firm in its attempt to gain social legitimacy through CSR activity (e.g., Campbell et al., 2012). The previous discussion provides the basis for our a priori theme 1: *Social media will empower consumers' CSR activism from a behavioral perspective* (i.e., *pontification, moralization, and obfuscation*).

The psychology literature suggests individuals can also experience empowerment in their affective experiences and cognitive processing. For example, empowered consumers focus on positive emotions (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002) and employ a more heuristic-based versus elaborate decision-making process (Thompson & Ince, 2013). These effects are argued to result from the greater sense of control associated with elevated power and how it reduces the need to actively process information in an attempt to manage one's environment (Keltner et al., 2003). These findings provide the basis for a priori theme 2: *Social media will empower consumers' CSR activism from a non-behavioral perspective* (i.e., *affectively and cognitively*).

3. Social media and consumer CSR activism paradoxes

There is also reason to consider a dark-side to social media in the form of paradoxes. A technology paradox occurs when a consumer's use of technology results in unexpected and opposing experiences (Mick & Fournier, 1998). In the context of consumer activism, prior research is suggestive of a social judgment paradox that can occur in a technological context like social media, whereby a consumer is both social judge and socially judged (e.g., Leudicke et al., 2010). The recent Chick-fil-A gay marriage controversy is suggestive of how this may occur. Comments by Dan Cathy, Chick-fil-A President, expressing his position against gay marriage sparked a heated debate within almost every social media website. Social media allowed those with opposing views to organize and boycott Chick-fil-A, while also enabling his sympathizers to organize a day in support of his opinions. In this case, consumers continually faced strong opinions both for and against Chick-fil-A's actions, causing a complex and polarized reaction among CSR activist and the overall consumer base. This case, in combination with the previous discussion of technological paradoxes, provides the basis for a priori theme 3: *Consumers will experience paradoxes when using social media for CSR activism purposes.*

If consumers do experience paradoxes when using social media for CSR activism, we should see them following certain coping mechanisms (Mick & Fournier, 1998). *Avoidance* involves attempts by a consumer to prevent themselves from experiencing a paradox. *Confrontation* is a coping strategy focused on attempts at changing the situation in order to prevent the paradox from occurring. Consumers may also simply accept a paradox through *accommodation*, incorporating it into their experience as consumers. The basis for a priori theme 4 is built upon these coping mechanisms: *Consumers will undertake coping strategies in response to paradoxes they experience when using social media for CSR activism purposes.*

4. Method

We examined the impact of consumers acting independently in using social media to perform various CSR-related activities through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We used this methodology because our research questions focus on identifying new manifestations of empowerment (i.e., affective and cognitive) and paradoxes associated with the use of social media by consumer activists. A discovery-oriented process has been shown to perform well in identifying both new manifestations of empowerment (Henry, 2005) and the presence of new paradoxes associated with the use of technology (e.g., Mick & Fournier, 1998). Second, there is a scarcity of prior empirical research relating CSR activism and social media with consumer empowerment and paradoxical experiences. A qualitative approach, like semi-structured interviews, is recommended in this situation (e.g., Zaltman, LeMasters, & Heffring, 1982). Third, an interview approach responds to calls in the CSR literature related to social media recommending qualitative research because of its ability to address theoretical limitations currently characterizing the literature (e.g., Lee, Oh, and Kim, 2013).

The in-depth interviews were conducted by one of the authors of this paper. A semi-structured approach provided a basic framework of similar questions to all participants while also encouraging participants to elaborate on ideas and introduce new themes. All interviews began by asking participants to describe their experiences using social media. This approach allowed a discovery-oriented discussion highlighting social media usage in a CSR context. The average length of each interview was 45 minutes and each interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

4.1. Sample

Initial participants were recruited from the student population at a large mid-Atlantic university through convenience sampling based on friends and colleagues of the researchers. Theoretical sampling was subsequently used to identify new participants (O'Reilly, Paper, & Marx, 2012).

Table 1 provides information on the sample of participants interviewed, their social media usage, and their CSR activism. Respondents ranged in age between nineteen and twenty-nine, aligning closely with the median age for social media users; twenty-one years of age (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2010). Sixty percent of subjects were female and forty percent were male.

Using the tenet of theoretical saturation (O'Reilly et al., 2012, p. 253), we made efforts during data collection to ensure no critical theme was ignored that might help to explain the behavior being studied. Interviews continued being collected and reviewed until no new themes arose from the data. By the end of the data collection phase, fifteen interviews were conducted, surpassing the criteria of eight long qualitative interviews set by McCracken (1988).

4.2. Analysis

Following prior research (e.g., Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), we used a comparative method in coding and analyzing the data. Throughout the analysis process, information from participants was collected, coded to identify recurring ideas, and rearranged to uncover additional themes until no additional themes were identified. We also employed theoretical coding (O'Reilly et al., 2012, p. 251). This process allowed us to uncover core themes describing consumers' experiences in social media that could then be used in understanding social media's impact on consumer empowerment and technology paradoxes. Field notes were combined with analysis of interview transcripts in order to follow the theoretical coding framework of identifying themes.

5. A priori and emergent themes

Analysis of the interviews explored the empowering nature of social media's impact on consumer CSR activism. It also considered the potential for paradoxes to characterize consumer CSR activism involving social media and the coping strategies consumers followed when experiencing these paradoxes. We next discuss the extent to which the research supports the a priori themes and identifies emergent themes.

5.1. Behavioral aspects of consumer CSR activism

Many of the study participants expressed that social media empowers their activism-related behavior associated with CSR. When asked if social media has had an impact on the way companies behave, "Owen" responded:

Social media has given us a way to access information and access people's minds about what they think about a company…companies have to be really mindful of that because we're the consumers so it makes a difference what we think. So I think eventually they'll have to change their image for the better…companies have to be aware of someone like me.

Important in this statement is the view that social media empowers pontification. The phrase "aware of someone like me" at the end of his statement is an example of how social media can allow individuals to create their identity as a CSR activist.

The empowering nature of social media is seen as the result of the reach and speed by which a consumer can share social criticism or social praise. When discussing some of the social responsibility actions of firms, like Chick-fil-A's stance on homosexuality and Apple's labor practices, "Lucy" remarked:

If one person finds out one bad thing about [a company], it can get out to millions within minutes, so it makes [the company] more aware of what they're doing and act more responsible.

Consumers' use of social media in socially praising and criticizing is a form of moralizing and it represents a form of socially uninhibited behavior which is characteristic of high empowerment (e.g., Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). The emphasis on "one person" in the statement is another example of empowered pontification, revealing the opportunity social media provides for creating a unique identity related to CSR activism.

To this point, the analysis supports a priori theme 1 in revealing how social media empowers CSR pontification and moralization behaviors. However, we found less support for empowered obfuscation. The interviews suggest that social media makes obfuscation more difficult by increasing the transparency of consumers' CSR activism to important audiences and making the information available for a longer period of time. "Sophia" communicated this in describing that anything shared online is always there for everyone to see.

Everything that's on social media makes its way back to your real life. You can't share something on Facebook and have it not come back to you at some point in your life. That's why I don't [post] a lot.

The focus on the impact of CSR activism on social media in other settings reflects a concern about the multiple identities consumers must manage when undertaking CSR activism. "Sophia" was particularly concerned with how her moralizing on social media would impact her role as a recent college graduate seeking employment. She commented that the concern for managing her identity as a future employee outweighed her role as a CSR activist and led to minimizing her CSR-related moralizing behavior on social media.

Of additional theoretical interest is our finding that there is little moralizing activity whereby consumers used social media to praise a firm's CSR-related activity. A possible explanation is that consumers primarily only learn about companies from a CSR perspective when something bad has happened. "Caroline" expressed this view when asked how she reacts after hearing positive CSR activity undertaken by a firm.

… Because usually the reason why they (companies) did it is because they got caught for doing something stupid in the first place. For example, the supersized food that was induced with chemicals (McDonald's).

The lack of information about firms doing good from a CSR perspective is at odds with research exploring the different CSR communication practices of firms (K. Lee et al., 2013; H. H. M. Lee et al., 2013; Du & Vieira, 2012; Fieseler and Fleck, 2012). One possibility is the existence of a form of CSR "blindness". "Hayden", for instance, described negative information as more "noteworthy":

Yea, I've actually been thinking about this for a while, because I've always noticed that on most of the news it's all negative. It always is. I mean that's because that's what people are interested in. That's what catches their attention.

The failure to give attention to positive CSR information presents a challenge for firms that we return to later in the paper.

Another possible explanation is that consumers see CSR information from firms as a marketing ploy. "Lucy" described positive CSR as a "nice marketing strategy" while "Caroline" described BP Oil's communication regarding the help they are giving to the Gulf Coast as "part of their (BP Oil) marketing strategy".

Table 1
Characteristics of the participant sample.

"Name"	Age & gender	Social media technologies used	CSR activities (Corning & Myers, 2002)	Excerpts from Quotes illustrating the variety of CSR activities mentioned by participants	CSR domains (Öberseder et al., 2013)	Excerpts from Quotes illustrating the variety of CSR domains mentioned by participants
"Clyde"	21 M	Facebook, LinkedIn, StumbleUpon, Wikipedia, YouTube	Publicly endorsing a view, tracking individual activists, being involved in an argument	…there's a guy who has very different views and he'll post stuff and then we talk about it later. I'll see his point and we'll learn from it and we'll find some common, middle ground." (Being involved in an argument)	Customers, environment, shareholder	I think companies' first responsibility is to their shareholders (Shareholders).
"Caroline"	21 Female	Facebook, YouTube	Publicly endorsing a view, collecting information, sharing information, attempting to alter another's view	"I'll put, like, an article that I think is really stimulating that goes against the common belief." (Attempting to alter another's view)	Environment, NGOs, society, local community	… investing in their community would be good (Local Community).
"Lucy"	19 Female	Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, YouTube	Arguing with others about issues, collecting information, sharing information, buying a product	"If they have philanthropy, I lean more towards that company if I'm looking for certain products." (Buying a product)	Employees, NGOs, society	I find it enlightening that a company would actually go out of their way to do something to change a social problem (Society).
"Lauren"	21 Female	Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Wikipedia, YouTube	Attending an online community event, collecting information, sharing information	"You know, there's a "Share" button for a reason and I'm big on using it." (Sharing information)	Employees, shareholder, NGOs, society, media	I like to see good public relations. I think that it's important to maintain a positive image with your company, but also, with the people, with your consumers (Media).
"Sophia"	21 Female	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	Boycotting a product, collecting information, sharing information, tracking individual activists	"Like a lot of people I boycotted BP." (Boycotting a product)	Employees, environment, society, local community, NGOs	It's really cool because it's like for every pair of shoes you buy, they [Tom's Shoes] give some, one to kids (NGOs).
"Jackie"	19 Female	Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube	Collecting information, sharing information	"If there's something on the news, it's usually over all like Facebook, like everyone's commenting about it." (Collecting information)	Environment	I guess the environment is a big now nowadays (Environment).
"Irvine"	21 Female	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	Collecting information, sharing information	"And if I find an article that I really like, then I'll post that." (Sharing information)	Customers, shareholders, environment, local community, NGOs, government	However, when it comes to politics, I'm very like—I abstain from it as much as I can (Government).
"Maggie"	20 Female	Blogs, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia	Publicly endorsing a view, giving a talk about an issue	"You can put a video on your Facebook wall and you can send it to other people and you can email it here and tweet about it this way and post it on your blog." (Publicly endorsing a view)	Environment, society, media	So, like they [companies] advertise and they promote towards that are going to grab our attention because our age group is the most widespread I feel like on social media (Media).
"Bud"	21 Male	Blogs, Facebook, Reddit, Wikipedia, YouTube	Publicly endorsing a view, sharing information, participating in an online community site	"If I feel like, you know, kind of inputting my opinion on something, just give my opinion about it." (Participating in an online community site)	Employees, suppliers, environment, society, local community, NGOs, government	Well, I'll try to support like local businesses (Local Community).
"Alyssa"	21 Female	Blogs, Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, Wikipedia, YouTube	Publicly endorsing a view, confronting views of others, tracking individual activists	"If it really does go against my opinion so far that it really bothers me. I usually do say something back." (Confronting views of others)	Customers, employees, shareholder, environment, society, NGOs	Yeah I would say for me like I mean definitely fair trade things are always like, always good for that (Customers).
"Hayden"	21 Male	Blogs, Facebook, LinkedIn, Wikipedia, YouTube	Publicly endorsing a view, arguing with others about an issue, organizing an event, sharing information	"They posted on their website, that you know they were giving back to the community by doing community service days and I actually organized an intern day where we went and just did community service for a whole day at a place that was helping out, you know with schools in the community." (Organizing an event)	Employees, shareholder, environment, society, local community	I also look into employees, so what kind of employees they're hiring, if the employees actually care about social responsibility, or if those employees have had difficulty in the past as well (Employees).
"Owen"	21 Male	Facebook, Foursquare, Twitter, YouTube	Publicly endorsing a view, collecting information, sharing information, tracking individual activists	"Facebook was probably the biggest one to keep me informed." (Collecting information)	Customers, employees, environment, society, NGOs	That's kind of the big thing that I would look for in a company. Making sure that their employees are happy. Making sure that the employee's expectations of the company and the company's expectations of the employees are very clear (Employees).
"Helen"	21 Female	Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Wikipedia, YouTube	Sharing information, tracking individual activists	"…sharing their [CSR activist] posts so that other people are aware as well and helping spread the news." (Tracking individual activists)	Employees, shareholder, environment, society, local community, NGOs, media	I don't think a company should exist just for the sole purpose of profitability. I think that companies need to give back. (Shareholders).
"Cadence"	22 Female	Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube	Collecting information, encouraging a friend to participate in an activity, buying a product	"My aunt forwarded me this YouTube video that was a commercial for Chipotle, talked about how they're—basically just like the cycle from farm to restaurant. How it helps the local community when you buy local. And so it's like, now I'll only ever eat at Chipotle instead of Qdoba." (Buying a product)	Customers, employees, suppliers, environment, society, NGOs, media	A specific campaign I remember was Chipotle. They always try to make as much as they can, get their meat products and ingredients they use from local farms (Supplier).
"Anna"	29 Female	Blogs, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube	Publicly endorsing a view, sharing information	"I would [Facebook] like it." (Publicly endorsing a view)	Employees, environment, local community	I look for them to make ethical decisions with respect to how they're impacting the environment. (Environment)

In addition to targeting firms, CSR activists also target each other. For instance, when "Sophia" was asked if she felt a sense of judgment from other people when sharing her CSR views on social media, she responded:

Yeah, I'd say so, on Facebook and in all that stuff. They're always looking into what you're saying and they're going to interpret it how they want, kind of.

Study participants experienced both positive and negative moralizing from other CSR activists. Praise primarily occurred through behaviors such as a "Like" posted on Facebook but rarely went beyond that action according to "Maggie":

The most I would do is hit the "like" button if it's (comment by another CSR activist) something I really feel strongly about, but I usually don't go farther than that.

The finding that consumers can be the target of social praise by other consumer activists is counter to current accounts of the consumer activist as a person that "rhetorically vanquishes a socially constructed moral opponent…" (Handelman, 2013, p. 392).

More prevalent than positive moralizing was negative moralizing that challenged the identity of a consumer as a knowledgeable CSR activist. "Jackie", for instance, shared a comment indicating her reluctance towards posting CSR information on social media because it would be misinterpreted by other consumers:

People read it how they want to read it. They get angry at what you say, and then they totally twist it around and exaggerate it to make it worse.

This statement reflects how other consumers can make pontificating difficult through purposeful manipulation of information that serves to discredit a CSR activist's identity. The finding is counter to the earlier discussion when social media was described as empowering pontification.

The challenge to self-identity also has implications for moralization. "Maggie" described the "backlash" that comes from disagreement on social media:

I'm not the kind of person who would post something like that [personal CSR beliefs] or move something like that along because I'd rather keep how I feel about certain things to myself…it always comes with this over the internet backlash.

This statement reveals how consumers may limit pontification activity in order to avoid being socially judged. Thus social media lowers empowerment from a pontification perspective for those who are the target of moralization by other consumers.

5.2. Affective aspects of consumer CSR activism

Consumers should emphasize the positive emotional aspect of their CSR activism if social media is empowering them (Keltner et al., 2003). Our interviews reveal evidence of positive emotional experiences associated with using social media for CSR activism. "Lauren" shared her emotions when posting CSR-related information on social media:

If you can relate to it, you know someone else will be able to relate to it…it makes me happy to see that other people are interested in the same kind of thing.

Her point suggests that social media empowers affectively when it allows consumers to identify with the CSR views of other consumers when undertaking moralization activity.

There is also evidence that consumers use social media for promoting the feeling of happiness in other consumer activists as expressed by "Anna":

By liking something on Facebook, I'm not saying it's something I'll go picket in front of the company for, but I'm saying that if that's something you're passionate about I'll support you.

While there were discussions of positive affect, the primary emphasis of consumers was on the negative emotional experiences associated with using social media for CSR activism purposes. These negative emotions included hatred as described by "Clyde":

I really hate this organizing around social media, because you get people who don't understand [an issue] and aren't qualified to speak [about that issue].

"Clyde" then proceeded to describe how this impacted his moralization behavior.

I don't like to (moralize). I don't want to have to argue. Because if I put something there, someone's going to disagree with it. Someone's gonna comment.

This comment reflects several instances where we heard the consumer pontificate about the superiority of their CSR knowledge relative to other consumers. It also suggests that consumers can experience negative affect, even when they perceive themselves to possess a superior moral opinion.

Another negative emotion was frustration. "Caroline", for instance, stated:

It needs to be a constructive conversation, and we don't have that [in social media]….they think a meme is the beginning and the end. It's frustrating.

This is another example of a consumer pontificating about the superiority of their CSR knowledge by suggesting other consumers do not understand how to engage in a constructive dialogue around moralization.

An important contributor to the negative emotions associated with social media usage by CSR activists is the social judgment paradox revealed in the interviews, reflecting an experience of being both social judge and socially judged simultaneously. In this vein, "Irvine" discussed how debate would be helpful in advancing CSR issues, but the negative experience of being socially judged often outweighs these benefits and results in less moralization.

Conversations can be had that would make progress, in the sense that you're actually listening to the person and trying to understand their viewpoint, but I feel like most of those posts, like really long status posts about what you believe in just leads to arguments, and defensive comments coming back from people who disagree, or just a lot of bias. So in that case it's just argumentative and no one feels good about it afterwards.

It is interesting that consumers specifically recognize the judgment that they encounter when using social media for CSR activism. "Sophia" asserted that "You shouldn't really judge someone for sharing something, even though a lot of people do", in recognizing the tendency of a consumer to be judged when using social media for engaging with other consumers around CSR issues. The social judgment paradox experienced during CSR activism provides support for a priori theme 3.

Consumers cope with the social judgment paradox by purging their contacts or limiting others' access to their CSR views. "Clyde", for instance, reduced his communication network in order to avoid negative emotional experiences.

A lot of people have wrong opinions, and a lot of people say the stupidest stuff imaginable. It just bothers me. I purged my Facebook…I just went

through one time, and I just reduced [*my number of Facebook friends*] *by two thirds.*

Other consumers use the technological capabilities of social media to maintain a connection but limit other consumers' access as communicated by "Anna".

I just don't want the negativity in my life, so I will hide people or delete them very quickly.

Both hiding people and deleting others from one's social media network reflect different forms of avoidance strategies and reflect the paradoxical impact of social media. A consumer's network of connections is an important part of their self-identity (Schau & Gilly, 2003). The removal of social connections reflects a redefinition of one's self-identity that is motivated by the social judgment paradox. Additionally, these coping strategies represent restrictions consumers self-impose on their moralizing behavior and provide evidence of the social judgment paradox and how it reduces empowerment for CSR activists.

At an extreme, consumers' avoidance strategies in response to the social judgment paradox can even include a reluctance to participate on any level. According to "Irvine":

Most of my audience is probably Christian, so I wouldn't feel hesitant to post about Christian views even though I know some people wouldn't agree with that. But politically, no I wouldn't [*post opinions*]*.*

It is noteworthy that the interviews revealed little evidence of consumers employing a confrontational coping strategy in response to the social judgment paradox. "Irvine", describes one reason being that there is little value in doing so.

Even if I agreed or strongly disagreed, I'm not going to get involved because I don't feel like it makes any progress. To argue on that level, just between people, it's just counterproductive and makes people mad.

These findings support a priori theme 4 in that CSR activists follow specific coping strategies when experiencing paradoxes as a result of using social media for CSR activism. However, the emphasis on avoidance rather than confrontational coping strategies differs dramatically from prior research by Kozinets and Handelman (2004, p. 702) describing consumer activists as confrontational individuals who view themselves as being "spiritually obligated to enlighten and convert others." One possible explanation for the different findings is the focus. Our research focused on social media's impact on CSR activism whereas Kozinets and Handelman (2004) focused on the nature of CSR activism. This difference illustrates the strong impact of social media resulting from the social judgment paradox it creates for CSR activists.

5.3. Cognitive aspects of consumer CSR activism

The research finds partial support for a priori theme 2 from a cognitive perspective. In support of empowerment, consumers view moralization by other consumers to be more heuristically-based. "Sophia" described a concern about the low level of effort other consumers put into their CSR comments.

Interviewer—*So you said you heard about it* [BP Oil Spill] *first on Facebook. And then you went and looked it up on other sites. Why did you look to verify it on other sites?*

"Sophia"—*I guess just because obviously people on Facebook will kind of post the extremes. So either people are really upset about it or people are totally fine with it. So people use social media kind of as a complaint. And I feel I was just double checking to make sure that the facts that they were* (*quote-unquote*) "*complaining about*" *were at least relevant or at least kind of truthful….It's* (*social media*) *like a first trusted source.*

People will first be like 'Oh yeah that's true,' and then it takes them a minute to rethink it and say 'wait, I shouldn't jump to conclusions because somebody posted something'.

The heuristic approach to moralization used by other consumers is credited to the ease by which social media allows consumers to share information. As "Caroline" stated:

Facebook allows you to say whatever is on your mind without having it be brought up in a natural conversation.

"Alyssa" further emphasized the need for verifying the moralizing information shared by other consumers.

I wouldn't believe it on Facebook, I would go look it up…it's not really a credible source…it's not a news site, it's just people posting their own opinions.

The resulting verification of information shared by other consumers is characteristic of more systematic processing. Further supporting systematic processing is the experience described by "Owen" in regards to the Chick-fil-A case regarding sexual preferences:

…when I would read something from Chick-fil-A, I would have to read something that opposes them too and then take both sides into account before I could really make a decision off of how I feel about it.

The need to verify the moralization of other consumers' reflects a higher level of processing that is more characteristic of low empowerment. The emphasis put on more elaborate processing activity is counter to discussions suggesting online consumer activists more often focus on espousing their own moral identity than investigating an issue to learn more about its moral merits (e.g., Handelman, 2013).

The findings related to heuristic and systematic information processing suggest a second paradox where social media supports both efficiency and inefficiency. According to Mick and Fournier (1998), technology creates efficiency (vs. inefficiency) when it facilitates less (vs. more) effort or time spent in certain activities. Study participants were clearly aware of their ability to easily and efficiently share CSR-related information in social media. "Owen" reinforced the efficient aspects of social media when acknowledging his power to spread information:

I mean I feel I've got a lot of power because I've got a lot of Twitter followers. I've got a lot of Facebook friends, so whenever I post something a lot of people are going to see it.

Thus, there are experiences of using social media to efficiently undertake moralizing behavior.

However, there were also situations when social media was considered inefficient because it requires verification. "Clyde" experienced this inefficiency:

But it's also because the stuff that he posts is intelligent so I think intelligent posts have a positive effect. I think unintelligent posts waste a lot of time. And I think that social media tends to lean to unintelligent posts because people realize that they can tell 700 people what they're thinking.

The irony "Clyde's" statement communicates about social media is that the behavioral empowerment associated with the greater reach is also an important contributor to "unintelligent posts" that create inefficiencies in future moralization.

The additional time required to conduct CSR activism also includes constantly defending one's own CSR position. "Alyssa", expressed it this way:

I don't know I guess I feel like it's not worth it with people that I don't know. A lot of the time I feel like people are way more insistent on

certain things than I am and gets to be exhausting to try to face those people all the time and try to, I guess, change their opinion.

"Maggie" shared a similar experience:

If I were to post something that might be controversial to other people and that starts a conversation, like why do you believe this, then I have to type all this whole long thing because of this, this and this. It's easier for me to explain exactly why and how and when I got to believing in this personally and why I think it's important, et cetera as opposed to trying to do that over social media I feel is, just to me, it's not worth it.

Thus, while social media is an efficient means of sharing CSR-related information to a large audience, there are inefficiencies associated with its use as well.

6. Implications

Our inquiry drew on various literatures to explore issues related to social media's impact on empowerment and paradoxes associated with consumer CSR activism. The findings provide varying levels of support for empowerment. Social media is found to empower moralizing behavior to a greater extent than obfuscation. The data also indicate that CSR activists have affective and cognitive experiences suggestive of both high and low empowerment. Two paradoxes also emerge from the analysis. The social judgment paradox reflects how social media supports CSR activists being both social judge and socially judged. The efficiency paradox reflects how social media can both reduce and increase the amount of time and effort required for CSR activism.

7. Theoretical implications

Fig. 1 provides a typology of CSR activism in social media based on the research. The most empowered CSR activist does not experience being socially judged by other consumers and finds social media to be an efficient means for carrying out CSR activism. We label this consumer as the "Empowered Online CSR Activist".

The "Disempowered Online CSR Activist" represents the lowest level of empowerment because the consumer experiences being socially

Fig. 1. A typology of CSR activism in social media.

judged by other consumers in a negative manner and finds social media as an inefficient method for CSR activism. These experiences motivate the consumer to follow coping strategies like avoidance that severely limit their CSR activism to more passive behaviors. This view of the consumer CSR activist aligns with those who view social media as capable of being both functional and dysfunctional in its impact on CSR activism (Whelan, Moon, & Grant, 2013).

CSR activists also experience mixed experiences of empowerment. The "Frustrated Online CSR Activist" doesn't experience being negatively socially judged by other consumers but finds social media inefficient. Alternatively, the "Guarded Online CSR Activist" experiences social media as efficient but guards against being socially judged.

We hope future researchers will utilize the proposed typology in Fig. 1 to further investigate how high-, low-, and mixed empowerment experiences may accompany consumer CSR activism using social media. Of particular interest, what is the prevalence of the four categories of online CSR empowerment and how do they impact both consumer and firm CSR-related activities?

The study's findings also extend and counter several views in the CSR literature related to social media. The social judgment paradox identified in the research adds a new form of paradox to the literature describing paradoxes associated with consumers' use of technology (e.g., Mick & Fournier, 1998). One possible explanation for this paradox not appearing in earlier research is the recent emergence of social network technologies and the novel communication opportunities they provide. Researchers are urged to use these findings as motivation to explore how other emerging technologies may be creating new paradoxes for consumers in CSR and other realms.

The findings also counter perceptions communicated in prior research examining the relationship between CSR and social media. In contrast to the suggestion that "social media only attracts consumers who actively look for conversation and engage in online discussions" (Fieseler & Fleck, 2013, p. 772), the research findings suggest that social media attracts consumers who seek to pontificate in building their CSR identity. Thus, the research provides evidence that consumers' CSR motives are not solely based on the desire for positive conversation and discussion as suggested by prior research. Our hope is that future researchers will use this finding to explore questions related to why and when consumer use of social media involves more negative behavior.

Second, the research counters the view that "social media clearly rewards the socially responsible firms and allows them to harvest 'greater output' (positive moralizing) over the 'same amount of input'" (Lee et al., 2013, p. 804). The interviews revealed very few instances of positive moralizing of firms by consumers that is sought by firms. Consumers attributed the lack of positive moralizing to their views that firms use social media primarily for "marketing purposes", causing consumers to discredit or even ignore positive CSR information shared by firms. We hope future research will investigate when consumers view firms as being more or less authentic in their use of social media for CSR purposes.

Lastly, the research findings did not provide full support for the varying coping strategies identified in prior research related to consumers' reactions to technology paradoxes. We only discovered support for an avoidance coping strategy. This conclusion differs from previous research that found consumers also follow confrontational coping strategies involving activities like partnering and accommodation (Mick & Fournier, 1998). Future research is needed that explores the extent to which the limited coping behavior found in this research extends to other emerging technologies that facilitate social exchange.

7.1. Managerial implications

The research findings offer important insight for managers. Firms' CSR communication activities have been described as resembling advertising and public relations approaches to communication (e.g., Du & Vieira,
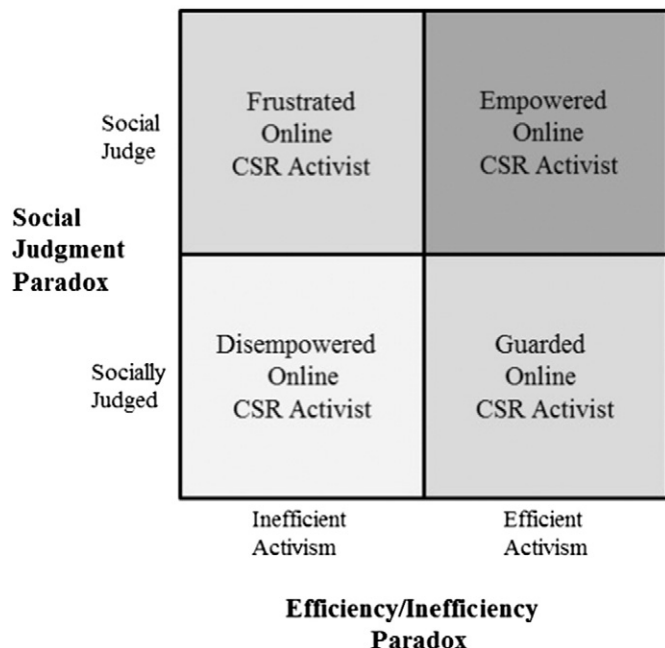
2012). This research suggests that these approaches to CSR communication are actually working against firms because they are motivating consumers to focus on negative moralization of firms. Furthermore, these more "marketing" types of tactics possibly explain why positive CSR communication may be ignored by consumers. We strongly suggest managers reconsider their approach to CSR communication and move away from approaches that use social media only for the purpose of advancing a firm's market interests (e.g., customer acquisition and/or retention).

Another common managerial practice is to view CSR communication as a means to communicate with consumers rather than as a means for consumers to communicate with each other (e.g., Lee et al., 2013). A firm-centered focus can lead managers to overlook the role of paradoxes and misunderstand the reason for low customer engagement on CSR issues. This research indicates that managers should create an environment where all views are to be respected in order to limit the social judgment paradox. Additionally, behaviors such as unfollowing a Twitter account or unliking a Facebook page can be important indicators of the social judgment paradox and/or the efficiency/inefficiency paradox being present and preventing CSR-related dialogs from occurring.

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