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A mixed-method approach to examining brand-consumer interactions driven by social media

A mixed-method approach

295

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Abstract

Purpose – Online social media are dramatically changing the ways in which firms and their consumers interact. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter among younger consumers (“digital natives”) in their interactions with brands. To investigate this, the authors conduct a mixed-method study including latent class analysis (LCA) to examine the role of social media among younger consumers (referred to as “digital natives”) in their interactions with brands.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed-method approach including both qualitative analysis and LCA was used to analyze daily interactions between consumers and specific brands across two primary social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). Data were collected by means of a social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). Data were collected by means of a social media diary collected over a one-week period.

Findings – The findings from this study suggest that brand-consumer interactions driven by social media can be characterized by five primary motivations or themes: entertainment, brand engagement (specifically identification with or connection to the brand), timeliness of information and service responses, product information, and incentives and promotions. The authors also identify relationships among these themes related to respondents’ age, gender, and social media use.

Research limitations/implications – Although social media have become a widespread form of communication and interaction between brands and consumers, research regarding the nature of social media-driven brand-consumer interactions is only now developing. Drawing on the perspectives of consumer online engagement and uses and gratifications theory, the results from this study are important to guiding future brand-customer interaction research. These findings help extend previous research by identifying consumer motivations that underlie social media usage in brand engagement.

Practical implications – These results highlight the role of social media in helping brands to be proactive in their consumer communications and interactions, in areas such as communicating product information, addressing customer service issues, engaging consumers with content relevant to the brand, providing timely information regarding promotions and new product launches, and fostering consumer-generated comments. Managers should also recognize that younger digital natives interact with brands via social media differently (e.g. for pure entertainment) than older individuals.

Originality/value – This study provides new insights to the nature of brand-consumer interactions, engagement, and outcomes driven by social media.

Keywords Social media marketing, Customer experience, Facebook, Twitter, Advertising, Email marketing

Paper type Research paper



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Marketing researchers have noted the importance of generating more effective brand-consumer interactions and engagement with respect to increased sales (Neff, 2007), profits (Voyles, 2007), customer satisfaction (Challagalla *et al.*, 2009), and overall firm competitiveness (Kumar *et al.*, 2010; Sedley, 2008). Although firms have long recognized the importance of retaining, sustaining, and nurturing their customers (Doorn *et al.*, 2010), consumer-brand interactions are now more complex in that they represent a multi-party conversation rather than a brand-dictated monologue (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010). Within these interactions, online social media including Facebook and Twitter have become integral elements for companies and brands seeking to develop and foster more intimate online consumer relationships. Additionally, these platforms provide consumers an online “soapbox” with which to publish and disseminate personal evaluations of products and services (Chen *et al.*, 2011). This type of behavior is particularly relevant among today’s younger teen and 20-something consumer who is active on social media platforms and whose brand preference is heavily influenced by friends and peers (Haven, 2007).

The recent growth in social media activity related to peer and friend recommendations, user-generated content, and product reviews and feedback are increasingly playing a central role in consumer-brand interactions and engagement, where customer engagement behavior has been broadly defined as “a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (Doorn *et al.*, 2010, p. 254). Moreover, practitioners as well as scholars are now seeking to better understand the extent to which social media can and should play a role in customer engagement (Parent *et al.*, 2011; Schultz and Peltier, 2013). Prior research related to brands’ and consumers’ use of social media includes studies examining the relationship between word-of-mouth, online reviews, and pricing (Chen *et al.*, 2011), the effects of consumers’ participation in brands’ social media efforts on firm-consumer relationship intensity (Ramkumar *et al.*, 2013), and consumer socialization along with the use of avatars in generating more intimate online connections between companies and their customers (Holzwarth *et al.*, 2006; Kohler *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2007). Prior research also includes conceptual articles examining the impact of open-sourced branding fueled by social media (Fournier and Avery, 2010), consumers’ willingness to engage with companies and brands through social media (Parent *et al.*, 2011), and return on investment issues related to social media (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). Indeed, scholars have noted the need for research to more fully account for the depth of consumers’ interactions with brands (Bowden, 2009) and to examine the nature of brand-consumer engagement within interactive, online, and social settings (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Schultz and Peltier, 2013).

In response, our study follows a mixed-method approach to investigate in-depth the role of social media among the younger generation of consumers as they interact with brands spanning the product, service, and media sectors. We administered a written diary to 58 individuals over a one-week period in late Fall 2011. The diary captured background information (age, gender, and social media usage) and recorded 311 discrete company-respondent interactions across two primary social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter – as well as email. The unit of analysis for this study was at the interaction, rather than the individual, level. Overall, the diary data helped to capture the depth and extent to which companies and consumers engage and interact on social media in ways unheard of as recently as ten years ago.

Our research contributes to the literature on online brand-consumer interactions by focusing on “digital natives,” defined as the younger generation raised throughout the internet era (Prensky, 2005). We focus on this consumer group because of the growing role of online social media within this segment. It is particularly revealing that many of these younger individuals actually prefer to interact with firms online via social media than in physical settings (Graeber and Dolan, 2007).

Our study makes two substantive contributions to the extant body of social media marketing research. First, we uncover central themes that help to characterize online brand-consumer interactions on social media platforms among youth consumers and develop a typology of brand-consumer interactions for these digital natives. The themes uncovered in this study represent individuals’ motives for interacting and engaging with brands on social media platforms. In this respect, our research contributes to the literature by identifying consumer motivations uniquely important to online social media interactions. Prior research has identified consumer motives for experiencing commercial media such as advertising (Bronner and Neijens, 2006) as well as motivations for engaging in online social networks (Dunne *et al.*, 2010). Although we find some common motivations, our study highlights the additional motives of timeliness (e.g. current content and timely service responses) and the provision of incentives and promotions that appear central to consumer-brand interactions driven by social media. Second, we identify the relationship among these themes and respondents’ age, gender, and level of social media usage. In the following sections, we highlight the theoretical perspectives on online engagement as well as the uses and gratifications model that guided the development of our social media diary. Then, we discuss the data collection, analysis and results, the theoretical and managerial implications from our findings, and the limitations of our research.

Conceptual background

Online consumer engagement

Considering the numerous definitions of consumer engagement proposed by scholars and practitioners, the concept of consumer engagement is closely tied with the trend toward “interactive experience and value co-creation within marketing relationships” (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, p. 253), with greater levels of consumer engagement (e.g. through greater referral activity, encouragement of others to make initial or additional purchases, product feedback and customer co-creation) leading to overall firm competitiveness (Kumar *et al.*, 2010). Specifically, Calder *et al.* (2009) define online consumer engagement as the collection of experiences with web sites and other online media based on usage, affect, and resulting actions taken. Greater online consumer engagement has also been shown to result in enhanced service offerings and delivery and greater customer collaboration in areas such as new product ideas and development (Berman, 2012).

Schultz and Peltier (2013) point to the need to consider consumer engagement beyond traditional consumer touch points and actions such as direct transactions, whereby a central characteristic of online social media is the extent to which it enables brands and consumers to connect, communicate, and interact.

Relatedly, recent trends show that consumers are increasingly seeking more involved roles in the consumption process and in contributing to brand identity and equity (Calder and Malhotra, 2005; Doorn *et al.*, 2010). Brand-consumer engagement

specific to social media has, more directly, been conceptualized as consisting of several elements, including:

- creating and posting online content that is relevant and meaningful to consumers;
- relinquishing some degree of control over this content so that it becomes sharable, and even modifiable, among friends;
- engendering a sense of online community among existing customers; and
- facilitating conversation and dialogue rather than delivering one-way marketing communications monologues (Parent *et al.*, 2011).

Overall, the online engagement perspective described here helped us to develop our research instrument (a one-week social media diary involving both qualitative and quantitative assessments of individuals' engagement with brands using social media).

Uses and gratifications

An additional perspective that helped us to develop the research instrument employed in this study involves the uses and gratifications model focusing on individuals' use of media and technology for both rational and utilitarian reasons as well as hedonic purposes of fun seeking and enjoyment. For instance, Childers *et al.* (2001) examine utilitarian and hedonic experiences to explain online shopping behavior, and Bronner and Neijens (2006) propose several types of advertising experience motivations, including information, transformation, negative emotion and irritation, stimulation, and practical use. Further, the uses and gratifications model has been applied to factors related to consumers' choice of new media and level of engagement with web sites (Calder *et al.*, 2009; Stafford *et al.*, 2004). For instance, Calder *et al.* (2009) argue that web site content can be engaging because of the utilitarian nature of the content, or it can be engaging because of the intrinsic enjoyment gained from the user's experience. Recent studies in the online context have also applied it to investigating digital natives' motives for using social networking sites (Dunn *et al.*, 2010) as well as consumer acceptance of e-commerce web sites (Huang, 2008).

A basic premise behind the uses and gratifications model is that individuals are highly involved with offline and online media (Huang, 2008). Although research applying the uses and gratifications model to brand-consumer interactions in the social media context is limited, Dunn *et al.* (2010) found that (regarding individuals' social networking involvement) the impersonal nature of online communications fostered feelings of confidence in managing relationships. Dunne *et al.* (2010) identified seven gratifications sought from social networking, including communication, friending, identity creation and management, entertainment, escapism and alleviation of boredom, information search, and social interaction. Further, Huang (2008) highlights the importance of hedonic motives and experiences, in addition to function, in driving greater acceptance of e-commerce web sites. By drawing from studies based on the uses and gratifications perspective, we help to extend its theoretical base to interactions between brands and consumers driven by social media. We identify specific themes that are representative of social media-driven brand-consumer interactions, where personal motives for brand and service interactions can range from utilitarian (functional) to hedonic (for enjoyment, entertainment, and social status).

Empirical research

Method

The research instrument for this study involved a written social media diary administered to 58 respondents aged 20-35 (median age 21.5; 59 percent female) over a week-long period during late 2011. The diary was developed to guide study participants in documenting their social media activity with respect to a focal brand of their choice and resulted in capturing over three hundred discrete brand-consumer social media interactions. We employed a mixed-method approach – combining both qualitative and quantitative data – in order to generate deeper insights into social media usage among digital natives and to help capture a greater diversity of respondent views and actions.

The brands that formed our brand-consumer interaction study were self-selected by respondents and ranged in type from retailers (e.g. J. Crew), online services (e.g. living social), media brands (e.g. MTV), luxury (e.g. LMV), fast-moving consumer goods brands (e.g. Mountain Dew), sports and lifestyle brands (e.g. Nike), and restaurants (e.g. Pinkberry). Diary participants were directed to document their daily social media activity and brand interactions taking place on Facebook, Twitter, and email over the week-long period.

For each day of the diary period, respondents indicated their primary form of interaction with the brand for that day (Facebook, Twitter, or email) and described their experience in an open-ended response. These comments were content analyzed for themes (motives) related to their daily brand interactions using social media. Respondents also indicated their age (in completed years), gender, and daily social media use (0-2, 3-4, or 5 + hours). We derived a typology of social media brand interactions based on the interaction themes identified by the content analysis. We then explored relationships between the different interaction types comprising the typology and background variables (age, gender, and social media use).

Analyses and results

Typology of social media brand interactions

The 58 study participants described 311 interactions with brands. These open-ended comments were analyzed for overall themes related to participants' motivations for engaging in the brand interactions. The content analysis followed the process outlined by Kassirjian (1977) and Kolbe and Burnett (1991), and it involved one of the co-authors and a research assistant reviewing the comments and agreeing on the distinct themes emerging from the data. In other words, the representative themes were determined, not a priori, but from the data. The initial coding process resulted in ten unique themes that described respondents' motivations for their daily online interactions with their respective brands on Facebook, Twitter, and email. Each of the 311 interactions was assigned a binary score (1 – presence, 0 – absence) for each of the ten themes. The coders agreed on 83 percent of the judgments and the authors subsequently resolved discrepancies. Table I shows the frequency with which each theme occurs in the data. One theme – “privacy and trust” – was excluded from further analyses because it had less than ten mentions.

Because the interaction scores on the remaining nine themes are binary variables, we utilized latent class analysis (LCA) to identify types or classes of interactions based on the nine remaining themes. LCA models allow researchers to examine the

A mixed-method
approach

JRIM
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300

Table I.
Social media brand
interaction themes

Theme	Frequency (%)
Fresh/timely content	107 (21)
Entertainment/fun	89 (17)
Product information	73 (14)
Promotions/incentives	69 (14)
Engagement	68 (13)
Customer service	39 (8)
Branded content	33 (6)
Purchase	17 (3)
Exclusivity	11 (2)
Privacy and trust	3 (1)
Total	509 (100)

Note: There are 509 theme mentions and 311 interactions because some interactions are described by two or more themes

homogeneity of a population and define categorical latent variables representing subpopulations of individuals or observations (Collins and Lanza, 2010; Muthén, 2002). Because observed scores are decomposed into an underlying latent component and a residual representing error, LCA involves more rigorous testing of latent structures and group assignment than traditional cluster analysis (Collins and Lanza, 2010; Muthén, 2002).

We sequentially fit one- through six-class models in order to identify the optimum number of latent classes. Table II shows the fit statistics for the six models: the likelihood ratio χ^2 , Akaike information criterion (AIC), Bayesian information criterion (BIC), and entropy. Whereas the values of the likelihood ratio χ^2 and the AIC monotonically decrease as the number of classes increase, the BIC, which evaluates the relative balance between model fit and parsimony (Collins and Lanza, 2010), suggests a five-class solution. The entropy statistic, which assesses the overall level of uncertainty in the latent class assignment of observations (Collins and Lanza, 2010), also suggests that a five-class model classifies the social-media brand interactions with the least amount of error (Table III for the probability of misclassification).

Class 1 is the largest, comprising 27 percent of the total interactions (Table IV). The other four classes are approximately equal in size, comprising 17-19 percent of the interactions. We labeled the classes based on the item-response probabilities. For example, we labeled Class 1 "Timeliness" because 75 percent of the interactions classified into that class involve acquiring timely customer service and other current content. Class 2 was labeled "product information" because all interactions in that class

Table II.
Model fit statistics

Class	Estimated parameters	χ^2	df	Sig.	AIC	BIC	Entropy
1	9	267.66	501	>0.10	2457.83	2462.95	1.00
2	19	241.13	492	>0.10	2437.17	2447.96	0.84
3	29	195.99	481	>0.10	2416.16	2432.63	0.88
4	39	161.00	471	>0.10	2393.92	2416.08	0.90
5	49	140.34	462	>0.10	2378.91	2406.75	0.95
6	59	120.47	452	>0.10	2375.49	2409.01	0.92

involve acquiring product information. The other three classes were accordingly labeled “fun” (consumers interact with a brand for fun and entertainment); “brand engagement” (consumers initiate an interaction as a way to identify with or psychologically connect to a brand) and “incentives/promotions” (interactions related to incentives and/or promotions offered by the brand).

Each latent class is characterized and defined largely by a single interaction theme, suggesting that when consumers engage with brands using social media, each interaction typically serves a single objective or motivation. Representative respondent comments related to each of the five classes are shown in Table V. Next, we use correspondence analysis to examine relationships among the five classes of social media brand interactions, on the one hand, and age, gender, and social media use, on the other hand.

Background differences in social media interactions

Correspondence analysis creates maps such that objects and/or variables are simultaneously plotted on the same map directly based on their association (Hair *et al.*, 2010; Myers and Mullet, 2003). In this study, we employed correspondence analysis to identify the relationship among the five classes of social media brand interactions, on the one hand, and age $\times$ gender and age $\times$ social media use, on the other hand. The median value of the age variable (21.5) was used to divide the sample into two age groups: 20-21 year olds, and 22 and older.

The correspondence analysis map representing the relationship among age, gender, and the five classes of social media brand interactions is displayed in Figure 1.

A mixed-method
approach

301

Class	Count	Mean posterior probabilities				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	85	0.990	0.009	0.000	0.002	0.000
2	58	0.069	0.931	0.000	0.000	0.000
3	60	0.000	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
4	54	0.055	0.000	0.000	0.945	0.000
5	54	0.000	0.032	0.000	0.000	0.968

Table III.
Mean posterior
probabilities

Observed variables	Latent classes				
	1 Timeliness	2 Product information	3 Fun	4 Brand engagement	5 Incentives/promotions
Prevalence	0.27	0.19	0.19	0.17	0.17
Product information	0.07	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.20
Entertainment/fun	0.00	0.30	1.00	0.24	0.00
Promotions/incentives	0.00	0.07	0.15	0.08	1.00
Customer service	0.27	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.15
Engagement	0.05	0.23	0.00	1.00	0.00
Fresh/timely content	0.75	0.18	0.22	0.08	0.22
Exclusivity	0.07	0.06	0.00	0.02	0.02
Branded content	0.12	0.07	0.15	0.13	0.06
Purchase	0.04	0.09	0.03	0.00	0.11

Table IV.
Latent class model of
social media brand
interactions

Table V.
Representative quotes
by latent class

Timeliness-oriented interactions	“Free People [the apparel brand and retailer] post things on Twitter constantly, which makes me realize they are very aware of their customers and what people are saying about their brand. Their hourly updates keep me informed of what’s new, in the moment” (female, aged 22)
Product information-based interactions	“Luxury goods brand (YSL) recommended on Facebook to follow their ‘PR girl’ on Twitter: she is tweeting beauty advice and describing YSL’s current events during Fashion Week. I think it’s great because she is giving timely and useful tips on YSL products and is creating buzz around its events” (female, age 29)
Fun-based interactions	“I checked out Hotels.com on Facebook [...] there was a section that featured the company’s animated spokesperson named SMART which was composed of six videos. The videos were short ads featuring SMART that were REALLY funny and entertaining. It helped give Hotels.com a personality that sets them apart from other web sites” (male, aged 27)
Brand engagement-based interactions	“J Crew posted a video on Facebook of designers posing like everyday people at their presentation of the Spring 2012 apparel collection. It was really engaging to be able to see the action behind the scenes with their designers” (female, age 21)
Incentive-based interactions	“(Red) (a cause-related group of product brands) posted a very interesting video on Facebook titled ‘Social Good Day’, where \$1 will be donated for every retweet, share, and blog post related to the Day. I felt this post inspires people to think of ways in which social media can be used for social good” (female, age 32)

The first two dimensions account for 94.3 percent of the variance. Dimension 1 explains the majority of the variance (84.4 percent), whereas Dimension 2 accounts for 9.9 percent of the variance. The 20-21 year olds in our sample are more likely to interact with brands via social media for the sake of entertainment and brand engagement, whereas participants older than 21 are more likely to focus on staying current with timely information. Furthermore, women (both age groups) are more likely than men to engage in interactions related to promotions and other incentives. Product information as a motivation for social media brand interactions is equally relevant to all age $\times$ gender categories.

The relationships among gender, social media use, and the five classes of social media interactions are described by two dimensions explaining 92.7 percent of the variance (Figure 2). Dimension 1 accounts for the majority of the variance (80.5 percent), whereas Dimension 2 accounts for 12.2 percent. Consistent with the prior analysis and irrespective of their social media use, the 20-21 age group is more likely to initiate social media brand interactions for entertainment and brand engagement. For the 21-plus age group, the type of interaction varies by social media use. Those older than 21 who are moderate social media users (three to four hours daily) are more likely to engage with brands for the purpose of acquiring product information, whereas both lighter and heavier users in the 21-plus age group (zero to two hours and five or more hours daily) are more focused on staying current.

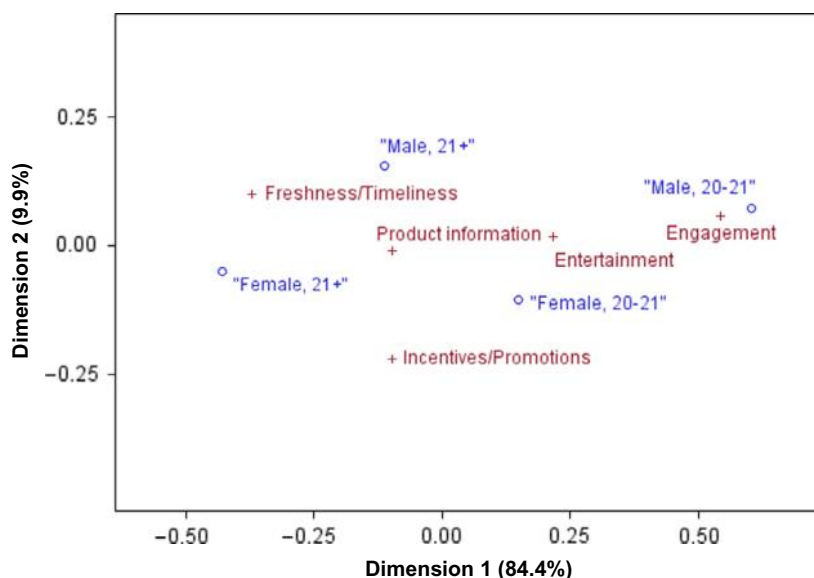


Figure 1.
Social media brand interactions: age $\times$ gender

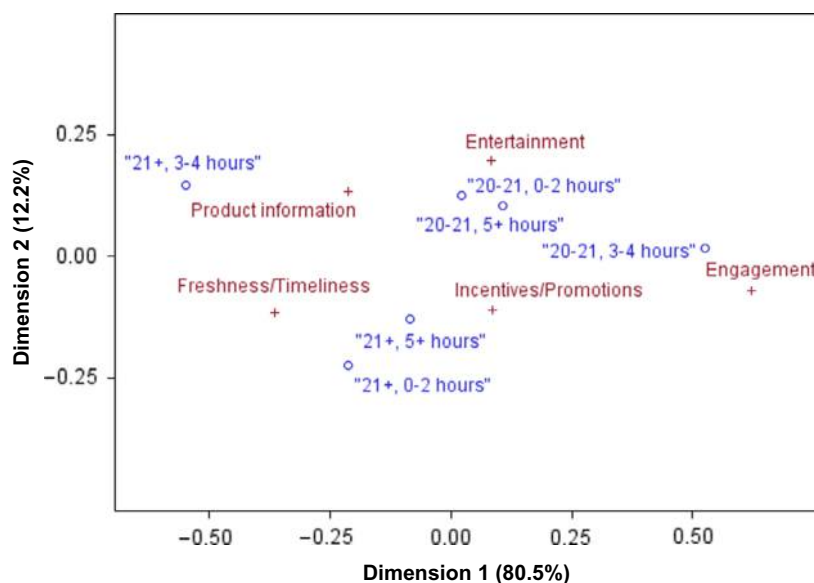


Figure 2.
Social media brand interactions: age $\times$ social media use

Conclusion

This study examined brand-consumer interactions through two prominent social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) as well as email. We developed and administered a week-long diary to document participants' overall social media usage and daily social media brand interactions. The diary methodology enabled us to gain

a deeper understanding of the role of social media in brand-consumer engagement. We uncovered five classes that help characterize online brand-consumer interactions driven by social media among youth consumers (i.e. digital natives). These five classes represent individuals' motives for interacting and engaging with brands via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Through our mixed-method approach, we offer empirical support for a typology of brand-consumer interaction classes that can help companies understand the underlying motivations and desired outcomes resulting from consumers' social media engagement.

Research implications

Our findings contribute to research investigating the growing application of social media in marketing and customer service strategy by highlighting five classes of consumers' motives and desired outcomes regarding brand-consumer engagement via social media:

- (1) for timely customer service and for accessing current content;
- (2) for product information;
- (3) for entertainment;
- (4) for greater engagement (connection and identification) with the respective brand; and
- (5) for incentives and promotions.

Our findings related to the interaction themes derived from the open-ended responses extend previous research examining online brand engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Fournier and Avery, 2010; Parent *et al.*, 2011) by identifying the motivations that underlie social media usage in brand engagement. These findings also help begin to address a central question posed by scholars (Schultz and Peltier, 2013) of not necessarily what consumer engagement is, yet how it works and how it can lead to more effective brand-consumer communications and relationships.

Through the open-ended diary responses, we developed a typology of brand-consumer interactions consisting of the five primary interaction classes identified. Because it illustrates the extent to which consumer experiences comprising these five interaction classes have multiple dimensions and purposes, this interactions typology can help guide further studies involving the extent and nature of online consumer engagement. For instance, research applying uses and gratifications theory to brand-consumer interactions in the social media context is limited, and our findings help to extend this perspective within the social media space by highlighting the functional as well as hedonic nature of social media brand-consumer interactions. We found that brand-consumer interactions within social media range from utilitarian and purposive (e.g. seeking product information; up-to-date service information) to hedonic (e.g. sharing entertaining brand-related content). This supports the view (Patterson *et al.*, 2006) that consumer online engagement is a multidimensional and complex construct that deserves greater attention within the context of brand and consumer interactions taking place within social media. Our findings also add to recent findings pointing to the positive effects of individuals' increased participation in firms' social media efforts on firm-consumer relationship intensity (Ramkumar *et al.*, 2013).

Managerial implications

Our findings highlight the central yet multi-faceted role that social media plays in brand-consumer interactions and provide important insights to managers seeking to better understand these interactions. A Forrester Research report on consumer engagement noted that traditional marketing metrics such as purchase intent remain important measures, yet “in this socially-charged era in which peers influence each other as much as companies do, good customers can’t be identified solely by their purchases” (Haven, 2007, p. 2). Kumar *et al.* (2010) argue that customers contribute to company success (beyond direct sales) through approaches such as fostering word of mouth (WOM) and by helping uncover new product ideas generated from customer co-creation efforts. In short, as noted by Haven (2007), the process by which consumers now arrive at the purchase stage is indeed more complex and non-linear than in years past.

Building on this observation, our findings point to the positive outcomes (related anecdotally in Table V specific to the five interaction classes found in our study regarding brand-consumer engagement) resulting from the convergence of social media activity across different platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. For instance, one diary respondent noted that he watched a video of his focal brand (the surf apparel brand RVCA) on Facebook, posted it to his wall, and tweeted it to several other friends; this led to he and his friends meeting to surf and to a subsequent purchase of RVCA apparel. What began as an online interaction across two platforms ended as an offline experience culminating in purchase activity. For managers, this convergence of online social media and offline activity should be thought of in terms of an ecosystem framework (Hanna *et al.*, 2011), whereby the various brand interaction platforms, or touch points, all work together to engage the consumer.

Related to the five interaction classes, brands should consider employing social media platforms for a number of different outcomes that occur prior to the actual purchase, including:

- communicating product information;
- staying on top of and addressing customer service issues;
- engaging consumers with fun and entertaining content relevant to the brand;
- providing timely and relevant information regarding discounts, promotions and other events;
- communicating new product launches; and
- fostering consumer-generated comments and the sharing of experiences that perhaps are more credible to consumers as information sources than are brand-generated communications.

It is perhaps this finding – that social media platforms provide brands a multiplicity of beneficial outcomes apart from immediate sales – that is most relevant to companies seeking to leverage social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, among others, in their customer contacts and communications. Scholars have accurately noted that consumer engagement driven primarily by promotions and discounts (in both the offline and online contexts) may benefit brands with short-term sales, yet it can also diminish longer-term profitability and customer value (Schultz and Peltier, 2013). Based on our findings, we argue that companies’ strategic use of social media does not

necessarily need to fall within a single objective, yet rather can and should apply to a wider array of consumer-facing communications. Companies and brands need to view social media not as merely a platform for simply gaining “likes” and “fans,” yet also for conveying content that is functional and informative, timely and relevant, and entertainment-worthy and sharable, with the objective of leading to positive consumer impressions, involvement, as well as downstream actions and attitudes such as purchase consideration and intent.

The five classes of brand-consumer interactions identified in this study can provide a roadmap to managers seeking to frame and align their social media strategy and content with consumers’ specific motives for engaging with brands within online social media. Three of the interaction classes identified in our research – product information, brand engagement (i.e. connection to and identification with the brand), and fun/entertaining content – have been identified in past research investigating social networking interactions (Dunn *et al.*, 2010) and consumers’ advertising experiences (Bronner and Neijens, 2006). Moreover, these interaction types need not occur independently. For instance, in low-involvement (defined as low financial or social risk) and frequently-purchased product categories such as snack foods or soft drinks, brands such as M&Ms and Coca-Cola actively employ Facebook as a platform for communicating humorous and entertaining content that, although peripheral to the actual product, can ultimately influence consumers’ purchase decisions within these highly competitive product categories (Facebook, 2013a, b). However, in higher-involvement product categories, such as the luxury car market, defined by greater social and financial risk and longer purchase cycles, brands such as Cadillac with its recent ATS campaign have sought to engage consumers with entertaining and compelling online content – characterized by product information, a strong identification with the brand, and entertainment – delivered through both traditional, online, and social media. Designed to drive in-market car buyers to its web site and dealerships, Cadillac’s ATS campaign and its post-campaign effectiveness studies showed significant increases in shopping consideration for the ATS, in part driven by social media activity (Forbes.com, 2012).

The remaining two interaction classes:

- (1) timely customer service and the provision of current information (timeliness); and
- (2) incentives and promotions – emerge as new strategic interaction types in the context of social media brand-consumer interaction.

For managers, these two interaction classes are important in that they pinpoint ways that firms can leverage social media strategy in order to improve service quality and generate equity-building “touch-points” with consumers. The identification of timeliness is especially important because acquiring timely information and content was found to be the most common motivation for interacting with brands via social media (accounting for more than 25 percent of all social media brand interactions). The high prevalence and importance of interactions classified by timeliness is further supported by the immediacy with which consumers can access social media in a variety of settings on different platforms and at numerous times throughout the day. Brands implementing a social media strategy should develop customer interfaces that furnish real-time information such as timely answers to product questions,

return processing, and complaint resolution related to the pre- and post-purchase process. For example, the representative quotes shown in Table V highlight how the brand Free People promotes timely information on its Twitter presence (2013a). In addition, the online retailer Zappos actively employs Twitter to communicate with customers in real time regarding pre- and post-purchase issues (Twitter, 2013b). By increasing the role of timely and fresh content in social media interactions with customers, marketers would foster customers' social media engagement with the brand and better meet customers' needs.

Numerous brands have leveraged online social media as a channel with which to foster customer co-creation and to crowdsource new product ideas as part of an incentive or promotional campaign. For example, the Mars company, along with its brands such as Snickers and Skittles, developed an open innovation platform that was closely tied to promoting consumers' involvement in its new product development efforts (Crowdsourcing.org, 2012). This helps to illustrate that social media-driven incentives and promotions that generate useful content for the organization or brand need not be viewed merely as product discounts delivered via a new medium.

Overall, the primary lesson for managers from our research is that firms and their brands should actively seek to influence consumer engagement behavior through social media. Our results highlight the role of social media in helping brands to be proactive in their consumer communications and interactions. Companies that merely play a reactive role within interactions with prospective or current customers, for instance within post-sales and service contexts, risk missing the opportunity to proactively uncover and address product or service issues that may arise. Moreover, these companies risk diminishing customer perceptions of value as well as the product or service utility derived from the purchase (Challagalla *et al.*, 2009; De Jong and de Ruyter, 2004). Applied to our findings, this suggests that brands should view social media as not just a platform with which to promote and sell, yet also as a platform that enables customer co-creation in the product development process and that allows the brand to quickly react to customer service issues and customer feedback in a proactive manner.

Finally, we identified relationships among the five classes of social media brand-consumer interactions and age, gender, and social media use. Even though the age differences across our sample were narrow, managers should recognize that younger digital natives (20-21) may indeed interact with brands via social media differently (e.g. for pure entertainment) than somewhat older individuals (21-plus). Additionally, we found gender interaction differences across the classes as well as interaction differences based on the level of social media use. Managers that can identify these relationships between consumers' interaction motivations and background variables such as age, gender and social media use can ensure even more finely targeted communications.

Limitations and future research

We stress that this study is a first step toward understanding a growing, and complex, new world of brand and consumer interactions. Given the relative complexity associated with the ways brands can now communicate interactively with consumers across myriad platforms, the integration of different research approaches such as those employed in this study (consisting of quantitative and qualitative data) can help

scholars generate deeper insights and a more detailed understanding of the differentiated role of social media in establishing and maintaining brand-consumer relationships. Since this study was based on a one-week period of brand-consumer interactions, an important direction for further research would be to conduct a more detailed analysis over a longer time period employing a growth model of online brand-consumer engagement using longitudinal measures associated with social media activity. Continued research in this area should also examine specific constructs such as online engagement, customer satisfaction resulting from social media engagement, purchase intent or actual purchase activity, and perceived loyalty over time.

Another limitation of our research is that we measure only gender, age, and the level of social media usage as background variables. By capturing a wider range of demographic and psychographic variables, future research would be able to offer richer insights into social media brand-consumer interactions as well as ensure more representative samples. Furthermore, our research is limited to younger digital natives. Although, social media use is especially prevalent among this age group, investigating how older and younger consumers interact with brands via social media would stimulate further theoretical development and hypothesis generation as well as furnish potentially valuable strategic opportunities to brand managers.

Finally, our study focuses exclusively on consumers' interactions with various brands. However, consumers often use social media to interact with other consumers regarding a brand. The global consulting firm Vivaldi Partners calls this behavior "social currency" and defines it as the degree to which consumers share a brand or information about a brand with others (Badenhausen, 2013). Because of the strategic implications of consumer-to-consumer communications related to brands, future research needs to specifically examine the antecedents and consequences of C2C (consumer-to-consumer) interactions related to brands.

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311

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