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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

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