

# “Actually Having Conversations and Talking to People”: Defining Social Media Engagement

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*Abstract*

While previous attempts to conceptualize social media engagement have yielded limited building blocks to clarify the phenomenon, those attempts primarily resulted in frameworks generated by advertising, organizational literature, and media histories. Instead of asking users how they understand engagement within social media contexts and spaces, previous attempts myopically defined the concept by pointing at the way users use the social tools given them. This study asked heavy social media users to pro-

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vide a definition of social media engagement without referencing previous advertising, marketing, organizational, or media research terms, and without referencing specific social media spaces or technologies. The results show that users conceptualize social media engagement as a connective and interactive phenomenon where users attend to others in ways that speak to collective understanding of the world and time. Generated from these thematics, social media users appear to comprehend engagement as communication that requires attentiveness to others without being constrained by technology.

**S**ocial media usage is a ubiquitous activity occurring across more than two billion global social media accounts where users interact frequently with friends, family, governments, publics, private corporations, and nonprofit organizations (We Are Social, 2014). Strategically speaking, engagement with and within social media is recognized as important among those who work in the communications industries. However, there has been little research around what defines engagement with and within social media. The number of whitepapers professing how to be “engaging” or how to leverage “engagement” is vast, written by marketing teams from organizations such as Adobe, Business Intelligence, Salesforce, Hubspot, and many more. A 2012 Mobility Report by Ericsson, for instance, claims to extol social media engagement practices but caveats the work with the claim that analyses “are based on a number of theoretical dependencies and assumptions,” presumably including its understanding of social media engagement (Gilstrap,

2012). While social media has been intimated as connection between stakeholders and organizations where “intense and meaningful public interactions can take place” (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 338), the lack of empirical research surrounding engagement is problematic, especially as it relates to an increasing number of resources created and distributed online claiming that social media engagement influences consumers, enhances commerce, and strengthens brands and organizational identity (Byfield-Green, 2013). Unfortunately, few researchers have worked to define or develop social media engagement conceptually. The present study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how social media users understand engagement within and across social spaces.

### **A Review of Engagement and Social Media**

The word “engagement” as it is related to digital interaction emerged as early as 2005, with engagement interpreted as levels of interactivity related to control, responsiveness, and turn taking. In one of the first studies of engagement in online environments, researchers considered the attention span and interaction levels of children in a computer learning setting and showed that children who had more control over their experience are more engaged in learning and less likely to lose interest than those who had no control over their experience (Calvert, Strong, & Gallagher, 2005). Other research from this time period identified how people engage in computer games and video games. Assessing engagement strategies used by game designers, such as role-play, narrative, and interactive choices, studies intended to help define new ways of integrating these engagement strategies into the creation of

online learning materials (Dickey, 2005).

A few, similar studies considered engagement by attempting to define what engagement is. Much of the past research referenced social media engagement in a way that assumes the reader/user already understands it. For instance, a study examining corporate blogging and how blogs relate engagement to relationships assessed levels of engagement to analyze what drives different levels of stakeholder interaction. The resulting impact on consumer relationships and loyalty to an organization yielded insights into the message content organizations must generate to keep consumers connected and returning (Ahuja & Medury, 2010). Engagement, from this perspective, was understood to be consumer communication as it revolves around brand messaging. Additional research identified that marketing strategies are changing due to the introduction of digital communication, and that customers adjust communication to fit message needs relative to digital channels. “Engaged consumers” who utilize digital channels to interact with organizations or brands could be understood through their retention, efforts, advocacy, and passion (Singh, Kumar, & Singh, 2010). Engaged stakeholders were retained through rich, longitudinal conversations, spent a great deal of time promoting organizational advocacies they support, personally shared brand or organizational messages about which they care, and demonstrated emotional support for an organization to the point that they would defend against organizational detractors. Engagement, in such an instance, spoke to the brand evangelism of stakeholders who trumpet an organization’s accolades to ward off organizational interlocutors.

The richest media engagement definition to date

emerged from a series of American Research Federation papers from 2006 and 2007 where researchers utilized this definition: “Engagement is turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context” (ARF, 2006, p. 9). Napoli (2011) explained that although this definition is constructed based upon the views of many media experts found across multiple industries, the definition remains “contested territory” (p. 96) given its marketing posture. When media measurements are operationalized to account for engagement, Napoli argued, it becomes difficult to determine where the concept of engagement terminates and where the outcomes of engagement begin. Additionally, since engagement has been widely discussed as a strategy, measured in even more ways, and parsed across a plurality of analytics campaigns, engagement has taken on a life of its own depending on advertiser or organizational need. At times, engagement language was used to articulate the social media behavior designed into social media channels (e.g., likes on Facebook, retweets on Twitter, number of snap shares on Snapchat). In other instances, engagement was considered either the emotional response to shared material (e.g., sentiment), or the amount of time social media users expose themselves to socially shared content (Napoli, 2011). In yet additional instances, engagement was thought to be determined by a change in user behavior. Evolving concepts of media engagement have grown to include social media engagement as yet another episode in the life-cycle of media consumption and usage. However, the evolutionary usage of social media as an engagement concept has not remained contested. It has, rather, withered to become theoretically and functionally benign given additional lack of conceptual

analysis.

When attempts at “social media engagement” research first emerged, researchers investigated how customers engage with organizations through various social spaces. Data from those studies showed that consumers have strong opinions about what they are willing to do regarding social media interactions with businesses, identified that there are a large number of people who utilize social media, though most are occasional users of social media, clarified that “more than half” of users don’t think about engaging with business and consider social media to be “about friends and family,” reported that “significant gaps” exist between what consumers want and what businesses think consumers want, and, finally, explained that more than half of users think “passion for a business or a brand is a prerequisite for social media engagement” though most companies think social media will be a driver for consumer advocacy of their business or brand (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 31). Another study attempted to provide an understanding of engagement at different levels in public health communication transmitted through social media and conditioned by various risks, challenges, and benefits, and defined social media engagement proper as “the interactive, synchronous communication and collaboration among numerous participants via technology” (Heldman, Schindelar, & Weaver, 2013, p.2). A Facebook field study explored the impact social media content has on people who read and share it by defining engagement as the number of likes and comments on Facebook (Lee, Hosanager, & Nair, 2013). Operationalized, social media engagement was thought to be the use of persuasive content, such as emotional testimonials or philanthropic narratives, that

results in a higher frequency of comments, conversations, and shares. Use of informative content, sharing prices, or details about products or services accrued the least engaged messages. The resulting study recognized the importance of understanding engagement in order to provide strong practical applications for strategic communication via social media platforms, even if users themselves did not determine the engagement apparatus. In a study of how the American Red Cross uses social media, analysis revealed the importance of “two-way dialogues as essential components to building relationships (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011, p. 3). Resonating the relational components of social media, a nonprofit Facebook-use study clarified that “relationships are the foundation for social networking sites” and that social networks afford nonprofit stakeholders the space and capacity to develop and grow personal and organizational networks (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009, p. 1).

Several studies (Britten, 2013; Hendrickson, 2013; McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Sisco, 2013) specifically considered the Millennial generation and their use of social technologies. Those studies identified the “high level of social media engagement” by 18-24 year-olds and identified engagement as the number of likes, hits and comments received by a social media post. Elsewhere, social media engagement was articulated as tweets that link back to an organization’s website, inspiring the insightfully reflective questions, “should engagement be conceptualized as any kind of interactivity (e.g., providing links to click), or should it emphasize two-way conversation (e.g., replying to readers)?” (Britten, 2013, p. 2). While these studies considered how Millennials engage with organizations online,

their purpose was to understand the best ways to market to the Generation Y demographic based upon generally understood notions of engagement, rather than a highly defined social media engagement concept.

Mirroring Napoli's (2011) assertions, the majority of past research regarding social media engagement appears to have been geared toward news and marketing to aid those industries planning strategic advertising. On the whole, past research has been focused on the assumption that engagement is widely understood instead of examining the empirical data that defines what social media engagement actually means to users. Studies identified engagement by the actions that accrue in the carefully designed environment of social media channels rather than building upon user perception data. Additionally, none of the research has examined social media engagement by asking those users who are actually engaged with and through the technology. Daily users may understand engagement to some extent, as they natively communicate within and across social media channels. Successfully surveying users' understanding of engagement should improve the richness of the concept as it is applied to social media communication. Additionally, surveying users who use many forms of social media should enrich our theoretical understanding of social media as more than a single channel, more than a single social medium's functionality, and more than a single social media behavior. Given the deficiencies in developing the concept of social media engagement, this study seeks to answer the singular question: According to users, what is social media engagement?



## **Method**

### **Participants**

IRB-approved qualitative surveys were administered to young adult social media users in the United States using electronic links. Researchers used convenience sampling to share these links across three Midwestern universities, a college on the West Coast, and a university on the East Coast. Of the 726 surveys originally distributed, 374 complete qualitative responses were received with survey takers self-identifying as social media users. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 25 years ( $M = 20.98$  years) and were located across 20 different U.S. states, demonstrating that respondents were both traditional and online students. In the sample, 273 participants self-identified as women, and 101 participants self-identified as men. Participating young adults also identified their heritage as Caucasian (91.98%), African (2.41%), Asian (2.67%), Hispanic (2.67%), Middle Eastern (0.27%), and Indigenous American (1.6%).

### **Data Collection**

Survey participants self-reported that they frequently utilize social media. Participants then completed an informed consent form describing the purpose of the study and assuring the anonymity of their responses. Following these confirmations and demographic information collection, the survey instrument asked participants to list the social media spaces they use. Participants indicated a) that they spend between 1 and 4 hours using social media each day, and b) that they are cross-platform social media users regularly active across these social spaces: Facebook, YouTube, Google Maps, Google Plus, Twitter, Snapchat,

Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, Vine, Tumblr, Wordpress, Reddit, Soundcloud, Vimeo, Yelp, Imgur, Flickr, Four-square, and BlogSpot. Participants were then asked to define social media engagement in short-answer form. Answers were captured for transcription and analysis using electronic survey open-cell forms.

## **Data Analysis**

Following the lead of computer-supported qualitative methodology leveraged by Gephart (1997), this study used interpretive analysis to analyze qualitative responses regarding how social media users define social media engagement. Response data were first coded using computer filtration, then hand-coded using the constant comparative analysis, and then both analyses were cross-compared to generate final themes. To process and interpret this data set, this study used Leximancer software—a system utilized by various research groups and fields (Gautami, Suganthi, Suganthi, & Sivakumaran, 2014; Smith & Humphreys, 2006) to make sense of larger scale qualitative data. This process generates word frequency counts within larger data sets, creates co-occurrence tables of word concepts to demonstrate connections between frequently used words and phrases, weighs the strength of those connections, and then calculates stable themes based upon interconnectedness (Crofts & Bisman, 2010). In terms of hand-coding, data transcripts were reviewed multiple times to increase researcher knowledge of the responses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), then assessed by researchers to create categories via analytic memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). Emergent categories were created and differences were discovered. Researchers then created an x-y axis of catego-

ries, counted the categories within category units (responses), and examined the co-occurrences of the categories. This allowed researchers to link all categories that co-occurred, develop a frequency count of co-occurring categories, achieve full consensus regarding the final, emergent themes, and select final data excerpts representing each emergent theme. Finally, the newly hand-coded themes were compared to computer-coded themes further to filter thematic findings shared across both types of analysis.

## Findings

Thematic clusters generated from the two-step process of Leximancer moved from word and phrase mode counts, to comparing the most frequent words and phrases against one another, and then generating themes based upon how the most frequent words and phrases co-occurred. Computer-supported themes (Figure 1) included Social, Paying Attention, Others, Interacting, Connected, World, and Time. The analysis process was repeated in the two-step technique of hand-counting and hand-coding categories into co-occurring themes. The top five hand-coded themes include Attention/Focus, Family/Friends, People/Interaction, Attention/Interest, and Attention/Active. The following section articulates these findings.

**Social.** As the most frequent and strongest co-occurring theme that emerged from participant responses, the Social theme embodied the hallmark of this particular form of media by leveraging the media-type title. Additionally, participants clustered terms such as active, interest, and thinking as conceptual pairs within the Social theme. Here

is a cross section of examples:

- Maintaining interest - purposeful and mindful choice to use social media sites.
- To be addicted and to feel the need to use it everyday.
- Usage per app.
- Actively paying attention and getting involved.
- Actively using my brain/mind and responding.
- Requires active use of logic, thinking.
- Actively observing or thinking about the media I am using.

Across these definitions, social media users understood engagement to mean a kind of focused, attentive interaction between user and media within social media channels. Rather than highlight the social features of sharing content and conversations with others, participants more often emphasized the use-functions of these media. Interestingly, participants did not frequently deploy social examples in their definitions when they also used the word “social” in defining social media engagement across the Social theme.

**Paying Attention.** Participants did, however, emphasize individual focus and involvement in the process of describing engagement as a form of attentiveness. Examples included:

- Totally paying attention to.
- Something that has your full attention.
- Intensity of my attention.
- Being involved with what you are doing.

- Actively being involved with current news or apps.

While focusing on the intensely intrapersonal nature of their social media engagement efforts, participants articulated granular definitions in terms of types and levels of attention. Further emphasizing the self-focus as it was exposed in the first theme of Social, 'Paying Attention' builds a deeper expression of intrapersonal focus for users of Social Media in terms of how they perceived engagement as individual users of social technologies and spaces.

**Others.** (people) Less frequently, participants explained that social media engagement includes interpersonal, group, and organizational activities. Beyond the self-focus of 'Social' and 'Paying Attention' themes, participants expressed the importance of 'Others' as integral to engagement given their need to connect with human friends and family members they "know and love." Respondents went as far as to distinguish the 'Others' concept as a "meaningful experience" required within social spaces, a standard that seemed to suggest non-others experiences as non-engaging. 'Others' examples included:

- Connecting with others on a personal level.
- Interacting with people.
- Being able to see people and them you.
- When people are connecting.
- Actually having conversations and talking to people.

'Others' engagement included or referenced the specified behaviors of talking, sharing, and interacting forms of communication.

**Interacting.** While the ‘Social’ theme demonstrated individual behaviors using social technology, and the ‘Others’ theme pertained to individuals with whom participants communicate and exchange information, the ‘Paying Attention’ theme articulated participant focus regarding how respondents personally attend to information in social spaces. Similarly, participants expressed a theme of ‘Interacting’ to define social media engagement—exchanges with others in social spaces, using social technology. Examples included:

- Interacting with others, controlling content, meaningful experience.
- Interacting positively online while being connected in real life.
- Interacting with peers and social trends.
- Interacting to see how peoples lives are going.

While participants used other terms to explain basic information sharing, entertainment activities, and education, they frequently used ‘Interaction’ to explain sharing, conversations, and relationships with other individuals.

**Connected.** Extending the interpersonal trend from the previous themes, the ‘Connected’ theme encapsulates the mode of engagement activity as expressed through numerous participant definitions. Examples included:

- Being constantly connected with everyone you know and love.
- How personally connected one feels while using it.
- I feel connected to the world around me.
- Quality of content. How connected my friends are.

Rather than a metaphor articulating activity, the manner in which respondents used the ‘Connected’ theme appears to be more of an expression of a state-of-being with other people. While the Interacting theme clearly portends action, ‘Connected’ theme appears to be an ontological statement where participants describe a state rather than an activity.

**World and Time.** Extending the ontological thematics, participants frequently referenced how their social engagement included action, people, being “connected to the world,” and spending time focusing on various topics in social spaces. In other instances, participants noted that focusing too much on other people or on information shared through social technologies would lead to the “world around you” becoming “a blur.” Meanwhile, consecutive and non-consecutive focusing tended to lead some participants to note they could forget “what time it is” if they didn’t “focus on one thing at a time.” Less frequently shared themes, ‘World and Time’ clarify the extent to which respondents were willing to go to express social media engagement. In both instances, precepts that guide human behavior as well as how humans understand reality were leveraged to provide boundaries for what respondents construe as engagement in social spaces. These precepts are normally used by humans to express the larger world beyond social media. Using themes of ‘World and Time’ in their answers, respondents envisioned social media engagement boundaries in terms usually reserved for larger questions of reality.

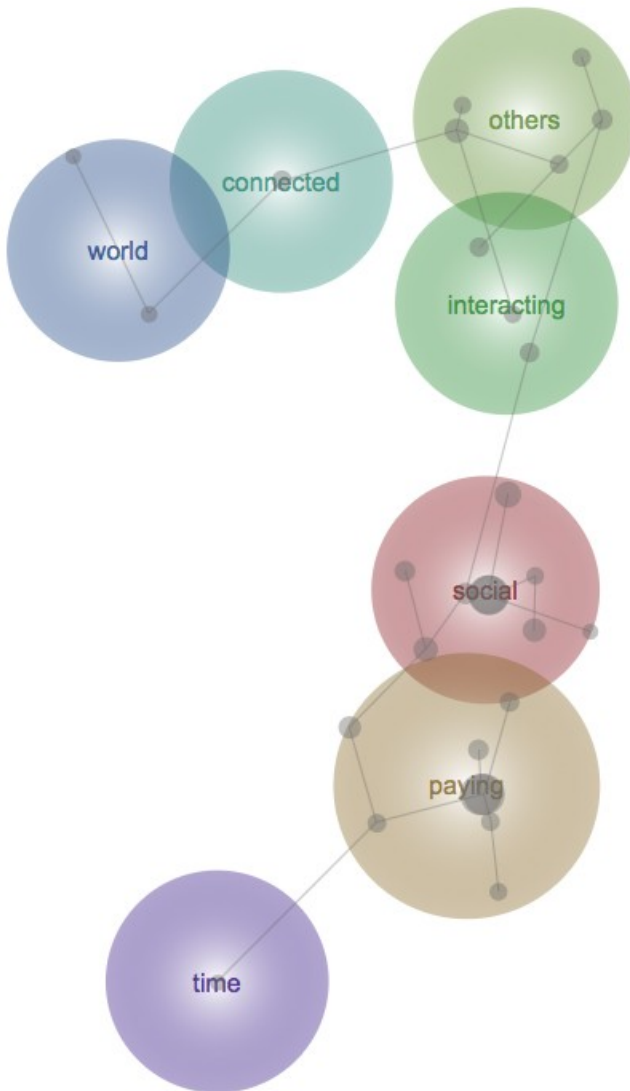
Computer-supported analysis shows that these themes of ‘Social’, ‘Paying Attention’, ‘Interacting’,

'Others', 'Connected', and 'World and Time' comprised the most frequent and most connected themes as derived from among all of participant responses. Figure 1 provides a visual demonstration of these concepts with the colored bubbles representing the words and phrases that clustered around each concept, and the connected grey nodes represent the manner in which various theme clusters connected to additional theme clusters. The closer the clusters, the more highly connected the clusters were. To further express this comparison of the various themes, the following indicates that the most prominent data themes were connected to one another, and that they link to additional themes with levels of connectivity indicating their co-occurrence:

- Social (100% Connectivity),
- Paying Attention (86% Connectivity),
- Others (29% Connectivity),
- Interacting (15% Connectivity),
- Connected (6% Connectivity),
- World (5% Connectivity), and
- Time (2% Connectivity).

While 'Social' and 'Paying Attention' demonstrated frequency dominance among all social media engagement themes in terms of connectivity, they did not show a closeness of connection to other themes in the same way as 'Interacting', 'Others', 'World and Time', and 'Connected' themes did. Proximally, these latter themes appeared to operate as an integrated apparatus of human-based communication where participants perceived connecting and interacting with friends, family, peers, and additional others. Whereas paying attention socially indicated how par-





*Figure 1.* Theme Clusters. Illustration shows computer-supported analysis of thematic responses when study participants were to define social media engagement.

participants perceived their focusing efforts within the spaces of social media, the collection of less frequently used thematic clusters detailed a richness of interaction for partici-

pants who were able to explain social media engagement as user-actions built upon relationship establishing and maintenance, as well as intrapersonal experiences.

In terms of hand-coded co-occurrence analysis, researchers' themes supported the computer-coded themes in several ways. First, hand-coded themes demonstrated significant co-occurrences between the 'Attention' theme and several other categories that emerged from the data. The co-occurrence theme of 'Attention/Focus' demonstrated that participants spoke often of the importance in focusing their attention within the spaces of social media as a mode of engagement. Respondents also matched their curiosity and frequency of behavior to attention in the themes of 'Attention/Interest' and 'Attention/Active'. Relative to the computer-supported coding, participants also claimed the importance of familiar 'Others' utilizing co-occurrence themes of 'Family/Friends' and 'People/Interaction' as they defined social media engagement. The correspondence between hand-coded co-occurrence themes and the computer-coded themes of 'Social', 'Paying Attention', 'Interacting', and 'Others' was clear. The additional computer-coded themes of 'Connected' and 'World and Time' appeared to provide contextual qualities to the other themes. For instance, the mode of interaction in social media channels clearly indicated a kind of connective behavior. The environment created within these social spaces as well as the extension of networked conversations created a vision of the world constructed through social exchange.

Finally, the frequency of occurrence matched with the speed of conversation appeared to elicit awareness of time. 'Connected' and 'World and Time' were both implicated by the hand-coded and first four computer-coded

themes. As well, these final three computer-coded themes demonstrated that social media users understood the rich dimensions of engagement as it occurred and was enhanced by social media technologies.

### **Analysis and Limitations**

These definitional findings result in a number of revelations regarding how social media users define engagement. Notably, users defined social media engagement beyond isomorphic behavior as attentiveness, and as a kind of qualified other-centric behavior. In addition to using the technologically designed tools within social channels, consistent social media users defined engagement as communicative actions attentive to familiar others. While previous conferences and whitepapers defined social media engagement as a laundry list of “likes” or “retweets” metrics calculated in ratios relative to “shares,” “repins,” or sentiment analysis (in various configurations), survey participants explained engagement as more fundamental and more transcendent than using the available links and tools within social media ecosystems. By actively focusing their attention on others, participants defined engagement as something more than triggering available sharing or endorsement buttons within social spaces. In this way, the richness of these responses demonstrates that users were not merely “locked into” repeating the use of the social media channels they previously used, nor were their actions across social media determined merely by the socially designed mechanisms through which they were conversing. Moreover, the actions taken by these users appear as though they mean to develop relationships of varying degrees, depths, and lengths, similar to the earliest thinking

in social media customer engagement research (Sashi, 2012).

Unlike customer engagement research however, social media respondents did not define social media engagement in terms of exchange relationships of varying values and longitudes (Bowden, 2009). Rather, respondents understood that engagement within these channels is more akin to the personal relationships that may be achieved and maintained in face-to-face contexts. In terms of the themes that emerged from the aggregate definitions, both attentiveness and other-centrism demonstrates this face-to-face relational communication characteristic. In terms of attentiveness, users defined engagement as a kind of active and sustained attention they experience when communicating with other individuals within social spaces. And in terms of others, familiar friends, colleagues, and family topped the list for the individuals users most often mentioned as targets of engagement. While computer-generated themes also expanded dialectical counterparts within social channels to include a wider world, the immediacy of known others appeared to hold more weight with regard to the locus of engagement, and with the expansion of users' social worlds facilitated through network connections within the framework of relationally-based exchanges. Based upon these findings, a user-based definition of social media engagement appears to take shape: *The quality and extent to which users connect and attend to others through interactions across social channels.*

But while previous definitions of social media engagement focused on users as passive audiences—consumers interested in exchanging information for the

sake of brands and products (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010)—participants in this study elicited a more dynamic conceptual apparatus for comprehending social media engagement. Within this apparatus engaged social media users are construed as more than instrument users, more than individuals who converse face-to-face, and more than mere consumers of information. Social media engagement as defined by respondents explodes the idea of individuals who merely “use” social technologies. Communicators—a more appropriate moniker than users—demonstrated that social media are more social than media, more communicative than information sharing, and more relational than electronic.

Perhaps one drawback to this more communicative definition of social media engagement is the frequency of non-social examples when the word “social” was used to define social media engagement. Across a number of survey answers, respondents were more inclined to articulate how they are engaged across particular forms of media. In a majority of the frequent themes however, respondents were likely to include specific individuals or comment on a broader audience with whom they saw themselves interacting through social media exchanges. The authors believe that this unique definitional insight offers a bounded concept of social media engagement whereby communication is key, as is individual user-attentiveness toward specific social media form and function for quality engagement to take place. Future research could drill down into engagement data to a greater degree and examine whether or not competency levels among users are necessarily related to attentiveness, interaction levels, and other-focus for higher or lower quality levels of social media engage-

ment. Future research may also explore the level of communicative responses across social media user populations with higher levels of demographic heterogeneity. At minimum, future investigations should examine if there are reasons why intrapersonal attributes work in tandem with interpersonal attributes when social media users define social media engagement.

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