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# Employee brand engagement on social media: Managing optimism and commonality

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**Abstract** This article considers how employees engage with B2B firms on social media, a topic that is largely overlooked in the extant brand engagement literature. Using the results from a large-scale study of employee brand engagement on social media, two key drivers of employee brand engagement are identified using the content analysis tool DICTION—namely, optimism and commonality. Employees of top-ranked and -rated firms express higher levels of optimism and commonality in their reviews of their employers on social media than do their counterparts in bottom-ranked and -rated firms. This permits the construction of a $2 \times 2$ matrix that allows managers to diagnose strategies for increasing or improving employee brand engagement. This creates four different kinds of employee brand engagement situations, and offers human resources and marketing managers different strategies in each case. We demonstrate how practitioners and scholars can shed new light on the way stakeholders engage with brands.


## 1. Increasing a brand's value

In the recent marketing literature, there has been a significant amount of attention dedicated to the concept of *brand engagement*, the process of how emotional or rational attachments are formed between

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customers or other stakeholders and brands (e.g., Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015; Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Brodie, Ilić, Jurić, & Hollebeek, 2013; de Villiers, 2015; Graffigna & Gambetti, 2015; Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Brand engagement is an important concept in the marketing literature as it is strongly connected to brand equity or, put simply, the value of the brand. As articulated by Keller (2012), brand equity is often driven by a consumer's association with a brand's features and attributes and the ultimate engagement with the brand.

Brand engagement itself has also changed significantly in the recent past largely due to the advent of social media. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011, p. 241) described social media as mobile and web-based technologies that "create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content." Some of the best-known social media include the social networking platform Facebook, the micro-blogging website Twitter, and the video-sharing website YouTube, but also comprise more specialized social media platforms. These include the travel and hospitality platform TripAdvisor, the picture-sharing platform Instagram, and the ephemeral content-sharing platform Snapchat. Social media platforms with a more professional slant include the peer-to-peer platform LinkedIn, and the job description and evaluation site Glassdoor.com. Users can interact and share personal information with not only other users on these social media in a variety of ways, but also with the brands with which they choose to engage (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

After reviewing the extant research and managerial literature with regard to brand engagement on social media, two trends emerge. First, customers—rather than other stakeholders such as employees, suppliers, and investors—are overwhelmingly the focus. Second, the brand engagement literature has concentrated consumers—or the customers of business-to-consumer (B2C) firms—rather than the industrial and organizational customers of business-to-business (B2B) firms or their stakeholders. Scholars have just started to explore both customer (CE) and employee engagement (EE) and how they affect firm performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016) in both B2C and B2B firms. In this article, we recognize the importance of employees as stakeholders who engage with their employer brands on social media. When employees are positively engaged with their employee brands on social media and this engagement is well managed, there are many benefits to an organization's customers, its employees, and to the organization itself. When employees are negatively engaged with their employee brands on social media, or when this engagement is poorly managed, the consequences can be severe for the organization's customers, its employees, and indeed for all other stakeholders.

The objective of this article is to help managers understand employee brand engagement on social media in order to maximize the returns of positive brand engagement and to minimize its potential risks and negative outcomes. We start by providing a framework for those who manage employee brand engagement on social media to use in diagnosing its nature, taking steps to enhance and maintain engagement when it is positive and to mitigate and take corrective action when it is negative. Based on the results of a large study of employee brand engagement on social media, we identify two key dimensions of engagement—optimism and commonality—that we use to construct a simple but powerful $2 \times 2$ matrix that facilitates the diagnosis and identification of actions. We explain the tool's purpose, as well as identify its limitations. We conclude the article by speculating on how brand engagement by employees on social media might evolve in the future.

## 2. Brand engagement by employees

Firms have long sought to engage target customers with their brands; these efforts have ranged from simple promotions to more complex strategies such as the exploitation of brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). The advent of social media has furthered customer engagement with brands in many ways. Some of this has been intentional, driven by the strategies of organizations in the form of online communities on social media platforms such as fan pages on Facebook and YouTube channels (see Paschen, Pitt, Kietzmann, Dabirian, & Farshid, 2017 for a number of examples). In other cases, customers rather than firms have driven much of the customer engagement with brands. They post videos, share content and offer both positive and negative commentary on the brands they both love and hate (see, for example, Muñiz & Schau, 2005). Conversations about brands happen all the time, online and offline, without the explicit permission—or even awareness—of those in charge of managing the brands (Dabirian, Kietzmann, & Diba, 2017). For brand managers, this poses significant challenges.

Passikoff (2013) expressed this problem of defining and managing brand engagement: awareness of a brand does not equate to engagement with that brand. Engagement is emotional. Passikoff also argued that striving for real brand engagement should be the brand manager's sole objective as it will not only influence the customer's behavior toward the firm but also ultimately impact the firm, the brand's sales, and profitability.

However, it is important for those who manage brands to realize that not only customers engage with brands. In many cases, employees are arguably the most important stakeholders of brands. For example, Guy Laliberteé—at the time, CEO of Cirque de Soleil—argued that the company had built an environment for creative people to come together from all over the world and be as great as their exceptional talents would allow them to be. He did not believe in listening to customers at all, and so the company would never allow surveys or audience feedback to be used to create the offering (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2002).

Kumar and Pansari (2016, p. 498) defined engagement as the "attitude, behavior, the level of connectedness among customers, between customers and employees, and of customers and employees within a firm." Evidence suggests that successful engagement strategies result in improved firm performance. Research by Crim and Sejits (2006), for example, showed that 84% of highly engaged employees believe they can positively affect the quality of their organization's offerings, as opposed to only 31% of the disengaged employees who believe this. Furthermore, 72% of highly engaged employees believe they can positively affect customer service, versus 27% of disengaged employees. More than 68% of highly engaged employees believe they can positively influence costs in their job or unit, versus just 19% of the disengaged employees.

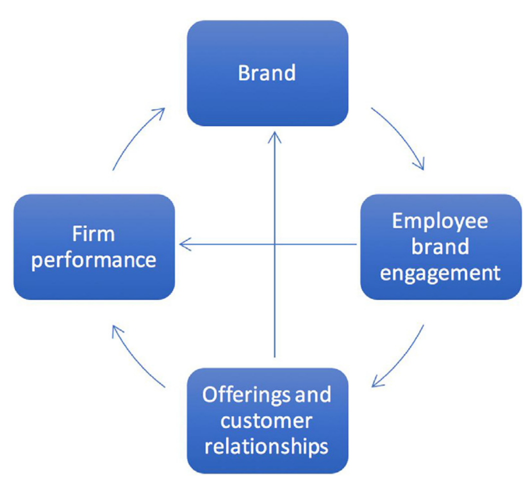
## 3. The reflexivity of brand and human capital

It has long been asserted in the management literature that "brands and human capital constitute some of the firm's most important assets" (Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010, p. 57). More recently, Vomberg, Homburg, and Bornemann (2014) argued that despite the attention on these two capitals as valuable assets in separate marketing and human resources management literature (e.g., Farjoun, 1994; Mizik & Jacobson, 2008), their analytical separation impedes our understanding of the possible interactions. Therefore, it is necessary to study and understand both assets jointly—brand and human capital—as they both impact each other. Their reflexive relationship is bidirectional, suggesting that they affect each other in a circular relationship in which neither can be seen as only the cause or effect.

Figure 1 illustrates this relationship in more detail. Strong brands influence employees; this influence emanates from employees as they experience the brand. This engagement influences employee offerings and relationships with other stakeholders, the most important of which are customers but can also include prospective employees. Employee brand engagement directly influences the firm's performance and ultimately affects the brand. Naturally, the same cycle in Figure 1 can be vicious just as easily as it can be virtuous. In a virtuous cycle, a strong brand positively influences employees for which heightened brand engagement leads to increased firm performance through their involvement in improving the firm's offerings or relationships with key stakeholders. The increased firm performance then closes the positive feedback loop by further strengthening the brand, thereby reinforcing the next round of the cycle. A vicious cycle describes how a brand in trouble could negatively impact employee brand engagement, which in turn could deleteriously affect the firm's offerings and other stakeholder relationships. This would impact firm performance and the brand negatively, and so the vicious cycle would go on. In order for organizations to compete successfully, not only must customers be engaged, but also other stakeholders—employees in particular.

In order to examine employee brand engagement, a core element of the reflexive brand and human capital relationship illustrated above, we turned to social media to collect employee-generated content regarding their employment at B2B brands. Social media monitoring and social intelligence company Brandwatch was used to determine the brands to study, and employer branding site Glassdoor was used to collect employee reviews of the respective brands.

**Figure 1. The cycle of employee brand engagement**



## 4. A study of employee brand engagement on social media

We used the social media website Glassdoor as the source of data for a large-scale study of employee brand engagement on social media. Tim Besse, Robert Hohman, and Rich Barton cofounded Glassdoor in 2007.[1] The idea came from a brainstorming session between the founders, when Hohman relayed the story of accidentally leaving the results of an employee survey on the printer while working at Expedia. They began to think about what would have happened if the results had gotten out into the public and had the idea that if the material had indeed been revealed publicly, it could have been a service to those looking to make a career decision (Winfield, 2014). Glassdoor holds a database of millions of company reviews that describe what it is like to work for a particular company. These reviews are written by employees past and present, and offer more specific information such as CEO approval ratings by employees and peers; details on salaries, benefits, and interview questions by both successful and unsuccessful applicants; and much more. It also posts job opportunities like the job advertisement website Monster, but the additional information it provides about companies is what differentiates it. Glassdoor's main purpose is for employees to share information about jobs and employers in order to help others making career decisions. It permits employees who describe their experience with a particular employer to rate firms on a five-star scale (1 star = very low; 5 stars = very high).

We gathered data from Glassdoor reviews in two ways. First, an independent ranking of the top B2B brands on social media by Brandwatch was used to identify the top 30 ranked B2B brands and the bottom 30 in terms of their use of social media (Agnew, 2015). Now, not every employee rates a top-ranked brand highly, and vice versa. We attempted to secure equal numbers of five star- and one-star ratings, with in-between ratings not included. The reviews of the 30 top-ranked brands were then split into two groups, those with five-star ratings and those with one-star ratings, and the same was done with the 30 bottom-ranked brands. This resulted in 2,315 five-star and 1,983 one-star reviews for the highest-ranked firms, and 1,013 five star and 1,025 one star reviews for the lowest-ranked firms. The study ended up with very large samples of reviews in all four instances.

Each review was subjected to content analysis using the DICTION tool.[2] DICTION uses the five central dimensions of a text identified by the political scientist and communications scholar Roderick Hart (1984, 1985, 2000, 2001; see also Short & Palmer, 2008). He posited that five fundamental questions can be posed of any document if it is to be understood. To what extent does the text express:

- Certainty (language and words that indicate resoluteness, inflexibility, completeness, and a tendency to speak with authority);
- Optimism (language that endorses an individual, a group, a concept, or an event);
- Activity (language that is about movement, change, and the implementation of ideas and the avoidance of inertia);
- Realism (language that describes tangible, immediate, and recognizable issues); and
- Commonality (language that communicates communitarian concepts, and specifically highlights the agreed-upon values of a group of individuals, rejects language that is idiosyncratic in terms of engagement)?

The DICTION scores across these dimensions were combined, grouped according to ranking and rating, and compared for statistically significant differences. Lower-ranked and -rated brands scored higher on the dimensions of activity, certainty, and realism. However, employees of both higher-ranked and higher-rated brands scored them significantly higher on the dimensions of optimism and commonality. Stated differently, employees of higher-ranked and higher-rated brands are significantly more optimistic about their employing firms. They are more likely to endorse individuals, groups, concepts, and/or events. They are also significantly more likely to express commonality—communitarian concepts and the agreed-upon values of a group. The two dimensions on which higher-ranked and -rated brands score significantly higher than their lower counterparts—namely, optimism and commonality—can be used to construct a simple but powerful matrix that provides potentially valuable managerial insights.

[1] Rich Barton is also founder of the travel site Expedia.

[2] http://www.dictionsoftware.com

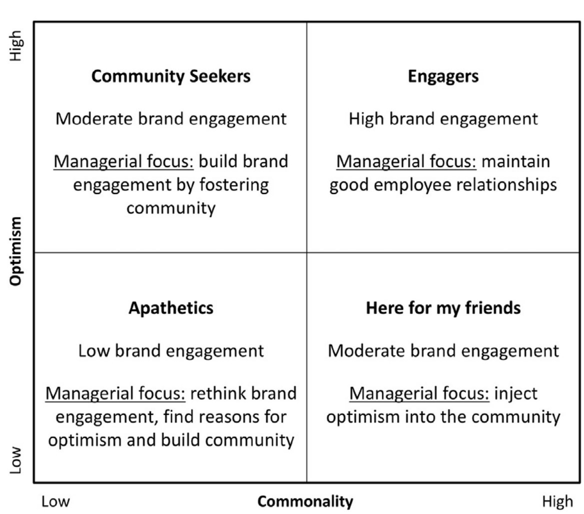
## 5. The optimism-commonality matrix

Kumar and Pansari (2016) noted that the more positive the attitude and behavior and the higher the level of connectedness a stakeholder has with both a brand and a firm, the higher the level of stakeholder engagement. This is important for managers because in the case of both highly ranked and highly rated firms, the dimensions of optimism and commonality are significantly higher than they are in low-ranked and low-rated firms. Employees of highly ranked and highly rated firms are more optimistic about their firms, the brand they engage with, and their future careers in these environments. Similarly, they see themselves as part of a community/team, and these communities/teams are built around a brand as a common identifier. The benefits to the firm created by these phenomena are profound: There is considerable evidence of the positive effects of these behaviors on a range of business outcomes such as increased revenues, lowered costs, better service, and enhanced customer satisfaction.

If optimism and commonality are regarded as the key drivers of employee brand engagement, as well as important distinguishers of the ratings and rankings of firms, it is useful to consider a 2 $\times$ 2 matrix that juxtaposes these two dimensions. This is illustrated in Figure 2 below. The matrix can be used as a diagnostic tool by both human resource and marketing managers to best identify where to focus their efforts regarding corporate social media employee brand engagement.

Figure 2 posits that there will be four different kinds of employee brand engagement in social media situations, and that human resources and marketing managers should focus on different strategies in each case. The ideal situation is that of the *engagers*, typically found in both highly ranked and highly rated B2B firms. Here, employees are highly attached to their communities and optimistic about the firm. The manager's task here is to uphold both the optimism and the commonality in order to maintain the highest levels of brand engagement; this will be achieved with continual attention to good employee relationships with the brand, the firm, and each other, and making sure that this is communicated in all social media activity.

**Figure 2. Key drivers of employee brand engagement on social media**




In the case of the *community seekers* quadrant, while there is high optimism among employees about the firm and its brand, commonality is lacking. The manager's task here is to focus on building a sense of community, or commonality, among employees. Social media can be a powerful way of doing this, and astute managers will find creative ways of fostering commonality through this vehicle.

In the *here for my friends* quadrant, it is very possible that the engagement that employees have is not so much with the brand, but with each other. There is high commonality, but this might actually cause employees to coalesce in negative ways rather than in ways that are beneficial to the brand. Indeed, their negative feelings toward the firm might be their reason to band together, and this could have deleterious consequences for the firm and its brand. The manager's challenge in this instance is to find ways to inject optimism into the situation and to use the commonality that exists for good to foster positive brand engagement.

Finally, the most pessimistic scenario in terms of brand engagement is found in the *apathetics* quadrant, where both optimism and commonality are low. There are two negative consequences here. One is that employees who are pessimistic and find no community in their firms will leave, which is undesirable if they are good and competent. The other is that they will stay and continue to engage with the brand in a negative way, and this in turn will have an adverse impact on other stakeholders such as fellow employees and customers, and firm performance. This reinforces the thinking discussed in the virtuous/vicious brand engagement cycle in Figure 1.

### 5.1. Data-led strategic decision making

Most firms are, by definition, not at the extremes of brand rankings. They fall somewhere in between the highest- and lowest-ranked brands on the spectrum not only in terms of brand-rankings surveys, but also in terms of brand engagement. The use of Glassdoor, for example, provides managers with interesting data points that can shape their strategic decisions. We suggest managers adhere to the following guidelines when gathering data.

1. Managers can collect data specific to their industries and sectors in order to get a sense of the degree to which employees are engaged with brands. This would allow them to understand range of optimism among employees and how they express commonality across agreed-upon values.

2. This spectrum of engagement allows managers to position their own firm relative to their competitors, and to understand the level of engagement of other firms' employees. In other words, data on employee brand engagement from social media such as Glassdoor can be used for benchmarking. By using tools such as DICTION and large samples of job reviews, managers can compare the text used in reviews by their own employees against those of competitors in order to identify the dimensions in which the firm is underperforming, and those in which it is superior.

3. Managers could benchmark against best-in-class brands identified by their rankings on sources such as Brandwatch or media sources such as *Fortune*'s 25 Best Global Companies to Work For,[3] or indeed the rankings according to stars received on websites such as Glassdoor.

4. Managers can use such insights to build important competitive advantages—especially for attracting and retaining employees, but also for poaching good employees from the competition. As they improve their virtuous cycle, their position will improve along all dimensions: employee brand engagement, the quality of their offerings and of their customer relationships, firm performance and, ultimately, the brand itself.

5. Apart from using and exploiting the $2 \times 2$ optimism-commonality matrix discussed above, managers can gain many other insights into employee brand engagement using data from social media such as Glassdoor. One opportunity would involve accessing a large number of both five-star- and one-star ratings from the websites and comparing them using tools such as DICTION. The factors that seem to account for low ratings (one star) could be identified and addressed, while those explaining five-star ratings could be maintained and reinforced.

6. DICTION also permits users to create their own dictionaries. If managers believed there were important concepts not fully captured by Hart's five dimensions, comparisons could be made on these bases as well. A regular accessing of new reviews and ratings over time, perhaps at 3-month intervals, would also provide insight into whether particular initiatives undertaken to improve brand engagement were having the desired effect. Corrective action could then be taken in cases in which brand engagement was slipping or changing direction unfavorably.

7. Once the value of employer branding and online data has been established, managers might want to consider how they can automate the generation of such data gathering processes so that they always have the most recent data available. Collecting data manually is cost and time prohibitive, and will likely not happen often enough to inform strategic decisions appropriately.

8. While we are confident that the data collected on Glassdoor is representative in general, it has its shortcomings. For instance, measuring aggregate online data does not always allow the researcher to filter for time-sensitive entries. In other words, one might include data from before and after major decisions were made at work (e.g., restructuring of a department), and treat the employee brand engagement the same. Also, Glassdoor entries are voluntary, including from former, possibly disgruntled employees, and might not adequately resemble the current workforce's opinions. Managers might want to consider the patterns they detect online, and verify their validity with their existing employees.

9. Making the analysis of employee brand engagement part of overall corporate marketing and HR strategy will allow managers to listen and react to their employees' opinions, to become better employers, and better brands in the eyes of the employees. As we showed, this will pay dividends for their offerings, their customer relationships, and for their overall performance. By paying attention to their own employee brand engagement over time, by monitoring changes that can be gleaned about the brand engagement of their own employees and those of their competitor's, firms can transform into desirable

[3] http://fortune.com/2016/10/26/best-global-companies/

places to work and gain a competitive advantage over others.

## 6. Final summary

This article considers brand engagement from a generally overlooked perspective: that of employees rather than customers. This is important because employee brand engagement impacts that of other organizational stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, and investors, often leading to virtuous or vicious cycles. Using the results from a large-scale study of employee brand engagement on social media, two key dimensions (optimism and commonality) are identified that differentiate between top-ranked and -rated brands and bottom-ranked and -rated brands. Employees of top-ranked and -rated firms express higher levels of optimism and commonality in their reviews of their employers on social media, and this enabled us to construct a $2 \times 2$ matrix that allows managers to diagnose strategies for employee brand engagement.

As Lamberton and Stephen (2016) pointed out, social media facilitates individual expression by allowing an organization's stakeholders to generate their own content and broadcast this to audiences that might range from just a few friends or family members to the thousands of employees and potential employees of a large organization. Much of this content will be about the branded offerings they either love or hate, or those for which they are indifferent. Social media has become a major source of market intelligence for marketing practitioners as well as marketing scholars. The user-generated content on social media about brands and how stakeholders engage with them provides a data source that can sometimes be better than, sometimes easier to obtain than, and sometimes merely different from the standard sources of data and research methods managers have used and academics exploited in the past. Armed with powerful software to process this data, practitioners and scholars can shed new light on how stakeholders engage with brands.

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