

Don't You Dare Push Me: How Persuasive Social Media Tactics Shape Customer Engagement

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ABSTRACT Social media marketers increasingly employ persuasive tactics, with advertising tone (i.e., highlighting favorable product aspects) and calls to action (i.e., encouraging specific actions) being most prevalent. Prior research proposes that both tactics could be perceived as overly pushy and therefore might harm customer engagement. Drawing on a field study employing a unique panel data set at the customer level as well as an experiment, this article suggests that employing advertising tone may reduce customer engagement, which is accelerated when it is used together with calls to action. However, high communal-brand connection (i.e., customer's connectedness with the brand community) mitigates this negative effect. While weakly connected customers punish the marketer by engaging less, for strongly connected customers the negative interplay of the two tactics vanishes, alleviating undesirable consequences for engagement.

Social media represent a critical touchpoint between brands and their customers (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Seventy-four percent of consumers turn to social media to gather brand and product information by interacting with brands and other customers in brand communities such as Facebook brand pages (Barker 2017). Behaviors such as creating, liking, or sharing of online content in such social media brand communities are referred to as customer engagement (van Doorn et al. 2010). Because engagement has been linked to improved customer relationships (Ma, Sun, and Krekre 2015) and sales (Manchanda, Packard, and Pattabhiramaiah 2015), it is the key performance indicator in social media practice (Ratcliff 2014), spurring marketers' interest in its drivers.

Inspired by traditional advertising "laws," marketers use persuasive tactics to enrich social media brand posts and encourage customers to engage in social media, with advertising tone and calls to action emerging as the "twin tactics" of persuasion (Lee, Hosanagar, and Nair 2018). Advertising tone refers to highlighting favorable aspects of the brand (e.g., "Our new winter jackets will keep you warm, cozy and in style"; Stephen, Sciandra, and Inman 2015). Calls to ac-

tion are defined as the encouragement of specific actions (e.g., "Go here to shop for your new winter outfit now"; de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012). While the former seeks to persuade by enhancing customers' brand evaluations, the latter suggests customers perform a particular behavior. Practical guides for social media campaigns advocate using both persuasive tactics simultaneously for a "don't make customers think" approach, implying synergistic effects (Cohen 2013).

However, prior research suggests that confidence in persuasive tactics is questionable. While some traditional advertising research has indicated that persuasion is effective in positively shaping brand attitudes (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), several studies have found that overt persuasion attempts can trigger persuasion knowledge (e.g., Friestad and Wright 1994) and psychological reactance (e.g., Brehm 1966), which entail negative consequences for consumer behavior (Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004). Social media research has also left ambiguous how customers respond to persuasive tactics. While initial evidence shows that persuasive tactics can drive purchase behavior (Goh, Heng, and Lin 2013; Kumar et al. 2016), such tactics may also have undesir-

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able consequences for customer engagement behavior. For instance, social media brand posts containing high advertising tone receive fewer customer engagement responses (e.g., fewer likes; Stephen et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2018). Research has also found that social media brand posts containing calls to action may have negative effects (Stephen et al. 2015), positive effects (Lee et al. 2018), or countervailing effects (de Vries et al. 2012) on customer engagement. Overall, these initial findings suggest that the use of persuasive tactics may come at the expense of customer engagement. However, it is unclear for which tactics, tactic combinations, and customers this undesirable situation occurs, raising concerns among social media marketers (Bowden 2016).

As our objective is to better understand how customers respond to persuasive tactics in social media brand communities, we address three research questions: (1) Do advertising tone and calls to action have undesirable effects on customer engagement in social media brand communities? (2) Should these tactics be combined? (3) If so, for which customers?

We draw on theoretical reasoning and prior findings to extend initial research on persuasive tactics in social media. We adopt a customer-level perspective to derive a model that relates advertising tone and calls to action to customer engagement. Given that marketers expect synergistic effects for customer behavior from campaigns that contain both tactics, we are particularly interested in customers' responses when these persuasive tactics are combined. While initial findings imply that each tactic by itself may threaten customer engagement, we explore whether using the two together may additionally deter engagement by unambiguously disclosing marketer's persuasive attempts to the customer. Thus, we also examine the interaction between advertising tone and calls to action. Further, to account for psychological differences between customers, we consider communal-brand connection—feeling a sense of connectedness with the brand and fellow brand users—as a moderator. Communal-brand connection plays a central role in how customers perceive brand actions in social media and may thus elicit more affective responses to persuasive tactics (Hoffman, Novak, and Kang 2016).

We test the hypotheses in two studies. In study 1, we draw on a unique panel data set to conduct a field study that matches advertising tone and calls to action with customer-level data from a large-scale survey and observations of engagement behavior on a retailer's social media brand page. In study 2, an experiment, we further examine the interaction of the tactics and the moderating role of communal-

brand connection. Overall, the results indicate that persuasive tactics do not per se impair engagement. However, the results reveal notable differences between the two tactics as well as the dependence of undesirable consequences on communal-brand connection.

The evidence in the present research partially contrasts with current social media practices and has the potential to improve marketers' attempts to intervene in brand communities. Specifically, it makes four contributions to the literature. First, the results indicate that advertising tone may damage engagement (counter to marketers' expectations) while calls to action may enhance engagement (in line with marketers' expectations) in the long run. Second, although the two tactics are often used in tandem, this study is the first to examine their interplay. The findings show that combining the tactics can, but not always does, have detrimental consequences. Third, we theorize and show when this is the case. By examining the role of individuals' communal-brand connection, we consider that the link between persuasive tactics and engagement may differ across individuals, which represented a challenging task for prior research focusing on the sum of all customer responses to brand posts. Fourth, we are the first to account for long-term consequences of persuasive tactics. Given that engagement is an expression of the customer's relationship with the brand, its implications may play out in the long run (Ma et al. 2015).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework, which connects the two persuasive tactics of advertising tone and calls to action to customer engagement. As the two tactics are frequently combined, we also consider their interaction. In addition, we account for the moderating role of communal-brand connection, because consumer responses in social media may depend on relatedness to others (Sheldon, Abad, and Hinsch 2011). This section develops the study's conceptual foundation of the variables contained in the framework and the theoretical reasoning for the links between them.

The Impact of Persuasive Tactics on Customer Engagement

Advertising Tone. Social media marketers follow traditional advertising rules when crafting brand posts. For instance, in conformance with classic advertising, brand posts often feature positive product attributes (Stephen et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2018). Accordingly, we define *advertising tone* as the highlighting of favorable brand or product aspects in social

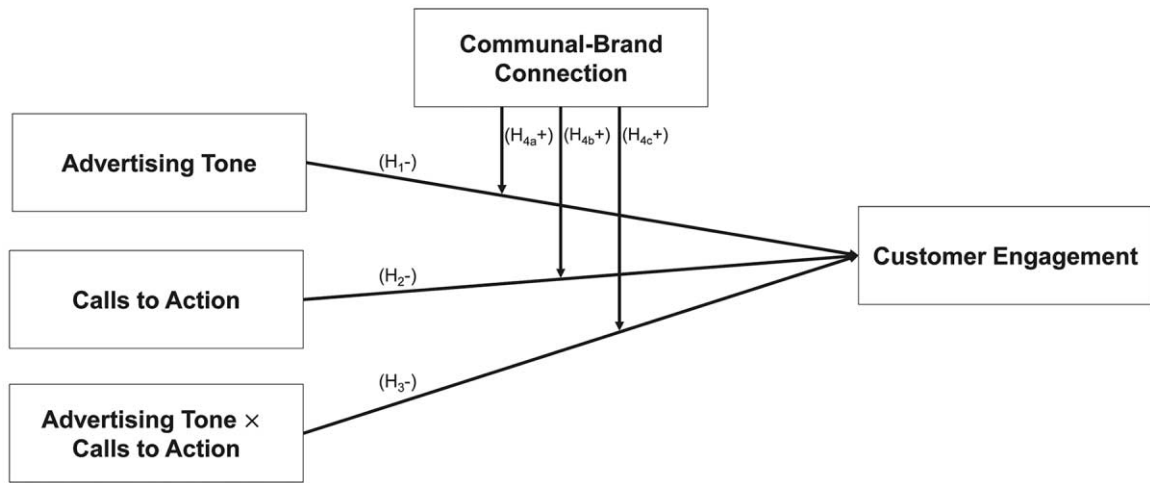


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the impact of advertising tone, calls to action, and their interaction on customer engagement, which is moderated by communal-brand connection.

media brand posts. In general, marketers use such advertising language to support customers in search of brand-related information, to decrease uncertainties in the prepurchase stage, and to positively affect purchase intentions and behaviors (Goldfarb and Tucker 2011). Advertising tone is used to make a brand stand out against competing brands' marketing messages and to persuade customers of the relative desirability and benefits of the firm's offering (Goh et al. 2013). Thus, the persuasive nature of advertising tone manifests in marketers' overt attempts to influence customers' brand attitudes.

Calls to Action. In social media marketing messages, *calls to action* refer to encouragement of users to take specific actions (de Vries et al. 2012). Irrespective of whether calls to action seek to encourage purchase behavior (e.g., "buy this product"), engagement behavior (e.g., "share this post"), or other types of online behavior (e.g., "download this pdf"), their persuasive nature is generally rooted in the solicitation of brand-related activities. Calls to action can range from implicit calls via asking questions (Lee et al. 2018) to explicit calls that directly prompt a specified behavior (Stephen et al. 2015). We therefore view calls to action as a continuum, to account for this varying degree of explicitness.

Customer Engagement. Engagement is a psychological state that arises through interactive customer experiences within the customer-brand relationship (Brodie et al. 2011) and incorporates cognitions, emotions, and behaviors occurring in the context of customer-brand interactions (Holbeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014). Social media researchers

often focus on the behavioral manifestation of customer engagement (Weiger, Wetzel, and Hammerschmidt 2017; Beckers, Van Doorn, and Verhoef 2018), because interactive customer experiences ultimately materialize in behavior (Brodie et al. 2011) and because they are easily trackable in a social media context. Accordingly, and in line with van Doorn et al. (2010), we define *customer engagement* as an individual's behavior toward a brand in social media beyond purchases and resulting from psychological drivers.

Hypotheses. Marketers aim at increasing engagement when using persuasive tactics. However, various theoretical arguments, for instance, from self-determination theory, suggest that these tactics may undermine customer behavior. In general, the motivation for an individual's behavior depends on how contextual impulses in the social environment—such as brand posts in social media—foster perceptions of autonomy (Deci and Ryan 2002). Importantly, this basic psychological need is forestalled when contextual impulses are perceived as controlling. Persuasive tactics can be expected to restrict attitudinal (advertising tone) and behavioral freedom (calls to action) of community members and undermine autonomy. Thus, we expect that persuasive tactics trigger reactance, which manifests in a reduced motivation to engage.

Findings from research on brand post reactions at an aggregated level underscore this rationale. Brand posts reflecting high advertising tone receive fewer total numbers of likes and comments (Stephen et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2018). Promotional language causes reactance because it seems highly artificial to social media users, who prefer social interactions (also with brand representatives). Regarding calls

to action, however, empirical results are somewhat mixed. Prior brand-post level research finds positive effects on likes and comments (Lee et al. 2018), negative effects on comments and shares (Stephen et al. 2015), and mixed effects on likes and comments, depending on the type of call to action (e.g., implicit vs. explicit; de Vries et al. 2012). We suggest that this ambiguity results from treating implicit and explicit calls to action as separate constructs rather than as a continuum (as we do). We suggest that the more explicit calls to action are, the more they will undermine customers' autonomy. That is, the more precisely the brand tells a community member what to do, the more he or she feels controlled, which is likely to hamper engagement behavior. Thus:

H1: Advertising tone has a negative effect on customer engagement.

H2: Calls to action have a negative effect on customer engagement.

In social media practice, advertising tone and calls to action are often combined to achieve a higher impact on customer behavior. However, attempts to concurrently enhance brand evaluations through advertising tone and prompt behavior through calls to action may reinforce each tactic's detrimental effect on customer engagement. Particularly, the simultaneous occurrence of the tactics makes the persuasive attempts obvious to customers. The increased pressure accelerates each persuasive tactic's autonomy-undermining effect (Deci and Ryan 2002) and may trigger noncompliant customer behavior (Friestad and Wright 1994; Stephen et al. 2015). Thus:

H3: The interaction of advertising tone and calls to action has a negative effect on customer engagement.

The Moderating Role of Communal-Brand Connection

Communal-Brand Connection. Prior research on customer responses in the social media context has highlighted the importance of feeling connected (Algesheimer et al. 2010; Hoffman et al. 2016). Thus, we consider *communal-brand connection* to be our key moderator and define it as the extent to which a consumer feels a sense of meaningful connectedness with the brand and fellow brand users (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009). Being connected to a social media brand community does not necessarily denote active and regular interactions with others but rather emerges from a sense of communal identification with the brand and other

users of the brand (Rindfleisch et al. 2009; Algesheimer et al. 2010). Communal-brand connection stems from the value attributed to these perceived bonds with others in the brand community (Porter and Donthu 2008). Importantly, customers with high communal-brand connection have integrated the brand in their social circle and may have even formed emotional bonds with marketers (Brodie et al. 2013).

Hypotheses. An individual's responses to contextual impulses (i.e., persuasive tactics) depend on how strongly someone feels connected to the social environment as it determines affective responses (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Fan and Jiang 2018). Thus, customers who are socially connected to a brand community are more likely to overlook minor lapses of a firm such as persuading customers instead of socializing with them (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009; Stephen et al. 2015). While nonconnected customers interpret advertising tone and calls to action as inexcusable violations of social media's conversational norms, connected customers do not perceive them as inappropriate and thus are not resentful or reactant. We conclude:

H4a: Communal-brand connection mitigates the negative effect of advertising tone on customer engagement.

H4b: Communal-brand connection mitigates the negative effect of calls to action on customer engagement.

Customers who are strongly connected to the brand community might not only respond more favorably to marketer intervention (Hoffman et al. 2016) but even endorse it (Schau et al. 2009), because being responsive allows active communication of their brand relationship to the brand community (Berger and Heath 2007). Using both advertising tone and calls to action in brand posts facilitates fulfillment of connected customers' need for relatedness. While advertising tone promotes the brand they adore, calls to action provide justification for their behavior and solicit activities they already enjoy (e.g., demonstrating their relationship to the brand; Weiger et al. 2017). Hence, for connected customers, the tactics should reinforce each other in counterbalancing the undesirable consequences of obvious persuasion attempts. Hence:

H4c: Communal-brand connection mitigates the negative effect of the interaction of advertising tone and calls to action on customer engagement.

STUDY 1

Study Goal

Study 1 offers an initial test of all hypotheses. It uses a field setting to establish external validity by matching real-life marketer activities to customer activities in a social media brand community. Given that social media engagement reflects customer relationships, which often play out in the long run, study 1 accounts for long-term effects of persuasive tactics.

Research Setting

We collaborated with a well-established European online fashion retailer (a sole online player) to conduct a survey among users of its Facebook brand page and to collect data on marketer activities and engagement behavior on this page. The main purpose of the brand page is to interact with users of the target group (middle-aged fashion- and lifestyle-oriented males and females).

Facebook is the major channel used to facilitate firm-consumer touchpoints and to run content marketing campaigns. The retailer posts content, and page users can engage with the brand by interacting with marketers or other customers. On average, the marketers create between one and two posts a day in a uniform rhythm. Customers can engage by creating their own posts and by commenting on, liking, or sharing existing posts generated by the retailer or by other customers.

Data Collection

The data set matches survey data with data on observed customer engagement behavior and observed marketer activities that we collected on the retailer's social media site. In the first step, we conducted an online survey on the social media site in early 2014, in which participants answered questions about their communal-brand connection and other characteristics. In preparation for tracking user behavior on the brand page, we also asked participants to provide their user name and opt-ins necessary to prevent privacy and data-matching concerns. In the second step, we collected the brand posts by the retailer and the resulting reactions (i.e., total likes, shares, and number of comments) for 54 weeks from the end of October 2013 through October 2014. We linked marketer activities to individual participants by adopting an approach by Kumar et al. (2016), as we discuss later. In the third step, for participants who opted in to behavioral tracking, we collected individual engagement activities on the retailer's social media site (i.e., creating, liking, or sharing content) during the observation period.

For each participant, we aggregated these activities by week and then matched the engagement activities to the survey data. This procedure resulted in a matched data set consisting of survey responses, observed brand posts, and observed customer engagement for 1,133 participants during an observation period of 54 weeks.

Measures

Persuasive Tactics. To measure the retailer's intensity of using persuasive tactics, we used a three-step procedure. First, we relied on human coders to rate each brand post according to its degree of advertising tone and calls to action. Two independent judges coded the collected posts according to single items on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), which we adapted from prior literature. Advertising tone was coded using the item "This post feels like an advertisement for the brand" and calls to action using the item "This post encourages taking action" (Stephen et al. 2015). Before coding, all judges received training and detailed coding instructions (Kolbe and Burnett 1991). We provided a link to the corresponding original brand post in the digital coding document, so the judges could evaluate the brand post in a realistic setting (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). Intercoder reliability was high for advertising tone ($\alpha = .97$) and calls to action ($\alpha = .94$). For further variable operationalization, we use the mean of the judges' ratings for each post.

In a second step, to allow the impact of past persuasive tactics to carry over to future periods, we formulate a stock variable for the accumulated weekly average ratings of the brand posts in terms of advertising tone (AT_t) and calls to action (CTA_t). As the effects of persuasive tactics are likely to wear out over time, we allow the effect of each stock variable to decay at the rate λ . The variables are formulated as $ATStock_t = AT_t + \lambda ATStock_{t-1}$ and $CTAStock_t = CTA_t + \lambda CTAStock_{t-1}$, respectively (Jedidi, Mela, and Gupta 1999). We do not estimate λ but instead rely on the weekly decay rate ($\lambda = .626$) for online display advertising effects identified by Braun and Moe (2013).

In the third step, we build on the approach established by Kumar et al. (2016) and assign weights to advertising tone and calls to action stock variables. We weight $ATStock_t$ and $CTAStock_t$ with the weekly average of post-specific receptivity and customer-specific susceptibility to account for the likelihood of brand posts appearing in the customer's newsfeed and to add customer-specific variance (Kumar et al. 2016). Post receptivity refers to the total number of likes, shares, and comments for a specific brand post. Customer

susceptibility, which refers to a user’s predisposition toward social media, is captured by a single item (“How often do you interact with posts on the brand page [e.g., by reading a post]?”; 1 = less than once a week and 8 = daily).

Thus, for calculation of advertising tone and calls to action, we weight the stock variables ATStock_t and CTASock_t obtained in the second step with the average post receptivity at *t* and susceptibility of customer *i*:

$$\text{AdvertisingTone}_{it} = \left(\text{ATStock}_t \left(\frac{\sum_{k=1}^{\text{Brandposts}_t} \text{Receptivity}_{kt}}{\text{Brandposts}_t} \right) \text{Susceptibility}_i \right), \tag{1}$$

$$\text{CallsToAction}_{it} = \left(\text{CTASock}_t \left(\frac{\sum_{k=1}^{\text{Brandposts}_t} \text{Receptivity}_{kt}}{\text{Brandposts}_t} \right) \text{Susceptibility}_i \right). \tag{2}$$

We measure these variables with a lag of 1 week across the number of brand posts (Brandposts_t), each denoted by *k* for each participant *i* and for week *t*.

Customer Engagement. We measure customer engagement as the count of a participant’s weekly activities in terms of posts, comments, likes, and shares on the retailer’s social media site. In line with prior research, behavioral manifestations are considered to be directed toward the brand (and thus represent customer engagement; e.g., Beckers et al. 2018) if they contain brand-related information or if they occur within a brand-related environment such as a social media brand community (e.g., a Facebook brand page).

Communal-Brand Connection. We measure the moderator variable communal-brand connection using a multi-item measure (see table 1) adapted from Ryan and Connell (1989) and calculate the factor score for each participant. This construct captures the customer’s communal identification with the brand and other users of the brand.

Control Variables. We control for two content-specific variables to account for general effects of content marketing. First, we consider *entertainment*, which we define as the extent to which content evokes arousal, as prior research has shown that arousing content triggers social media activity (Berger and Milkman 2012). Second, we consider *information* (the extent to which content features specific details) as it encourages discussions among users (de Vries et al.

2012).¹ We relied on Kumar et al.’s approach (2016) to capture weekly entertainment (ENT_t; coding based on “This post evokes positive emotions,” α = .79) and information (INF_t; coding based on “This post is informative,” α = .94).

We capture customer-specific control variables using survey items to account for differences across customers beyond communal-brand connection. Specifically, we consider the variable *network size* (i.e., the number of ties with other actors in social media) because engagement might be fostered by a broader audience (Toubia and Stephen 2013). The variable *image utility* accounts for whether a customer leverages social media to boost self-image (Toubia and Stephen 2013). Finally, we consider several sociodemographics (i.e., gender, age, education, and income) because they can explain customer-specific inclinations to engage (e.g., Kumar et al. 2016). Table 1 provides an overview of all measures, and table 2 provides summary statistics.

Model

In the model, we examine the impact of advertising tone and calls to action and their interaction on customer engagement, which is moderated by communal-brand connection. The dependent variable is the number of a customer’s weekly engagement activities on the retailer’s social media site. As is typical for online behavior data, the distribution of customer engagement is highly skewed and we are likely to observe overdispersion (the variance exceeds the mean). We therefore estimate a negative binominal regression model, which accounts for overdispersed data (Long and Freese 2014):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{CustomerEngagement}_{it} &= \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{AdvertisingTone}_{it-1} + \beta_2 \text{CallsToAction}_{it-1} \\ &+ \beta_3 \text{BrandConnection}_i + \beta_4 \text{AdvertisingTone}_{it-1} \\ &\times \text{CallsToAction}_{it-1} + \beta_5 \text{AdvertisingTone}_{it-1} \\ &\times \text{BrandConnection}_i + \beta_6 \text{CallsToAction}_{it-1} \\ &\times \text{BrandConnection}_i + \beta_7 \text{AdvertisingTone}_{it-1} \\ &\times \text{CallsToAction}_{it-1} \times \text{BrandConnection}_i \\ &+ \beta_8 \text{Entertainment}_{it-1} + \beta_9 \text{Information}_{it-1} \\ &+ \beta_{10} \text{Academics}_i + \beta_{11} \text{Female}_i + \beta_{12} \text{HighIncome}_i \\ &+ \beta_{13} \text{Age}_i + \beta_{14} \text{NetworkSize}_i + \beta_{15} \text{ImageUtility}_i \\ &+ \beta_{16} \text{MembershipDuration}_i + \sum_t \delta_t \text{Week}_t + \varepsilon_{it}), \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

1. We consider entertainment and information to be two separate variables rather than mutually exclusive poles of one continuum since social media content can be simultaneously informative and entertaining (de Vries et al. 2012).

Table 1. Overview of Measures (Study 1)

Variable	Description
Customer engagement	Number of engagement activities of participant i (i.e., number of likes, shares, posts, and comments) in week t
Advertising tone	Stock variable of weekly averaged advertising tone in all brand posts created by the retailer until week t based on coder rating (AT_{kt}) weighted with post-specific receptivity $_{kt}$ and customer-specific susceptibility, across brandposts, for participant i
Calls to action	Stock variable of weekly averaged calls to action in all brand posts created by the retailer until week t based on coder rating (CTA_{kt}) weighted with post-specific receptivity $_{kt}$ and customer-specific susceptibility, across brandposts, for participant i
Communal-brand connection	Factor score for participant i of multi-item measure ([1] "I take part in the [brand] Facebook community because I see myself in it." [2] "I spend time in the [brand] Facebook community because I really value it." [3] "I'm a member of the [brand] Facebook community because I identify myself with it." [4] "I'm a part of the [brand] Facebook community because it is important to me."; 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .92$)
Entertainment	Variable based on the averaged degree of entertainment in all brand posts created by the retailer in week t based on coder rating (ENT_{kt}) weighted with post-specific receptivity $_{kt}$ and customer-specific susceptibility, across brandposts, for participant i in week t
Information	Variable based on the averaged degree of information in all brand posts created by the retailer in week t based on coder rating (INF_{kt}) weighted with post-specific receptivity $_{kt}$ and customer-specific susceptibility, across brandposts, for participant i in week t
Academics	Indicator variable for participant i 's education level (0 = no academic degree, 1 = academic degree)
Female	Indicator variable for gender of participant i (0 = male, 1 = female)
High income	Indicator variable for above average monthly net income of the household of participant i (0 = income \leq €2,000, 1 = income $>$ €2,000)
Age	Age of participant i (1 = below 18; 2 = 18–20; 3 = 21–30; 4 = 31–40; 5 = 41–50; 6 = 51–60; 7 = above 60)
Network size	Number of Facebook friends of participant i
Image utility	Factor score of four-item measure (e.g., "I'm a member of the [brand] Facebook community because it makes me feel special"; 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .80$)
Membership duration	Time since joining the retailer's social media brand community (1 = less than 1 month and 7 = 3 years or more)

where ε_{it} relates to the error term of participant i at time t . Week represents a vector of week dummies to control for time-related unobservable factors. Persuasive tactics and content-specific controls are lagged at $t - 1$. Table 1 provides further variable descriptions.

We additionally estimate a Poisson regression model and a Tobit regression model as robustness checks. Poisson models are an alternative to model skewed count data. However, in the presence of overdispersion their parameter estimates are likely to be overconfident (Long and Freese 2014). Tobit models are appropriate for dependent variables with left censoring (Prins, Verhoef, and Franses 2009), such as a high proportion of zeros, as is typical for social media behavior. To address multicollinearity concerns arising from the panel data structure, we performed orthogonal transformation

for all time-varying and interacting covariates (i.e., content-specific controls, persuasive tactics, communal-brand connection, and their interactions) using the modified Gram-Schmidt procedure (Sine, Shane, and Di Gregorio 2003; Golub and Van Loan 2013).

Self-Selection

The sample comprises participants who opted in for observation of their engagement behavior after participating in a survey promoted on the retailer's social media site (Rishika et al. 2013). Customers who grant such permission to firms might be more likely to demonstrate compliant responses to persuasive tactics (Kumar, Zhang, and Luo 2014). To control for the resulting self-selection bias, we apply the Heckman (1976) two-step procedure. First, we estimated a probit

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for all Untransformed Model Variables (Study 1)

Variable	Mean/ proportion	SD	Min	Max
Customer engagement	.06	.43	.00	23.00
Advertising tone	3.63	.68	1.63	4.64
Calls to action	2.15	.67	1.06	3.63
Communal-brand connection	3.29	1.53	1.00	7.00
Entertainment	3.01	.63	1.43	4.27
Information	3.61	.60	1.53	4.55
Academics	47%	NA	NA	NA
Female	81%	NA	NA	NA
High income	29%	NA	NA	NA
Age	3.65	1.19	1.00	7.00
Network size	265.17	280.85	.00	2,000.00
Image utility	3.07	1.48	1.00	7.00
Membership duration	3.81	1.59	1.00	7.00
Receptivity	446.24	276.98	80.93	1,197.86
Susceptibility	1.89	1.66	1.00	8.00

model for the participation decision based on a sample containing both those who opted in to behavioral observation and those who did not. We considered several determinants of self-selection. We account for self-reported referral likelihood, because a customer’s decision to opt in for behavioral observation in a survey conducted by the brand depends on the customer’s inclination to support the brand (Schau et al. 2009). We consider e-mail disclosure for the retailer’s newsletter subscription to address data privacy concerns, which might explain whether customers opt in to behavioral observation (Goh et al. 2013). We also include self-reported Facebook and brand page use as predictors in the probit model, as these variables indicate a general affinity for social media (Kumar et al. 2016). These predictors appear to be valid drivers of the participation decision ($p < .10$). Second, using the estimates from the probit model, we calculate the Heckman correction factor (or inverse Mills ratio) and include it in our model as an additional control.

Endogeneity

Endogeneity might result from preferably, but not exclusively, seeding persuasive tactics to specific groups according to targeting criteria known to the marketer but not to the researcher (Stephen et al. 2015). If customer groups with certain characteristics have a higher probability of being confronted with brand posts in their newsfeed, correlations be-

tween the regressors and the error term would result. The retailer’s social media marketing team and editorial plan indicate that posts were largely targeted on the basis of two sociodemographic characteristics (age and gender) with no changes in targeting criteria during the observation period. By controlling for age and gender in our model, we account for this potential source of endogeneity and thus we have no unobserved group-specific factors.

Empirical Results

Table 3 shows the results of the negative binomial regression, Poisson regression, and Tobit regression. The negative binomial regression model provides the best fit according to the Akaike information criterion and the Bayesian information criterion and thus represents our focal model, which we use for hypotheses testing. Further, the significant dispersion parameter α indicates overdispersion, which underscores the confidence in this choice.

The results show that advertising tone has a negative and significant effect on customer engagement ($\beta_1 = -.081, p = .022$), providing support for hypothesis 1. Surprisingly, calls to action have a positive and significant effect on engagement ($\beta_2 = .240, p < .001$), and we therefore reject hypothesis 2. Further, in support of hypothesis 3, the interaction effect of advertising tone and calls to action yields a negative and significant effect on engagement ($\beta_4 = -.222, p < .001$). Additionally, we find that communal-brand connection mitigates the negative effect of advertising tone on engagement, as the interaction effect is positive and significant ($\beta_5 = .049, p = .019$). We therefore accept hypothesis 4a. The interaction effect of calls to action and communal-brand connection is positive and significant ($\beta_6 = .246, p < .001$). However, we reject hypothesis 4b, because we postulated a negative main effect of calls to action. In support of hypothesis 4c, we find a significant positive effect of the three-way interaction between advertising tone, calls to action, and communal-brand connection ($\beta_7 = .115, p < .001$).

Discussion

The findings of study 1 provide support for our theorizing that persuasive tactics in social media brand communities can be detrimental for customer engagement. Results show that advertising tone decreases customer engagement (hypothesis 1) and that this effect is accelerated when it is used in combination with calls to action (hypothesis 3). The findings further indicate that both the negative effect of advertising tone (hypothesis 4a) and the negative effect of the interaction between advertising tone and calls to action

Table 3. Model Estimation Results

	Negative binomial regression (Focal model)		Poisson regression		Tobit regression ^a		Hypothesis support
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	
Intercept	−4.603***	.399	−4.909***	.287	−10.206***	.627	
Persuasive tactic:							
Advertising tone	−.081*	.035	−.050*	.021	−.120*	.053	Hypothesis 1: Yes
Calls to action	.240***	.032	.183***	.019	.376***	.051	Hypothesis 2: No
Moderator:							
Communal-brand connection	.284***	.029	.228***	.020	.447***	.047	
Interaction:							
Advertising tone × calls to action	−.222***	.028	−.258***	.018	−.425***	.043	Hypothesis 3: Yes
Advertising tone × communal- brand connection	.049*	.021	.017	.012	.063 ⁺	.034	Hypothesis 4a: Yes
Calls to action × communal-brand connection	.246***	.029	.161***	.019	.329***	.047	Hypothesis 4b: No
Advertising tone × calls to action × communal-brand connection	.115***	.022	.078***	.014	.184***	.037	Hypothesis 4c: Yes
Content-specific control:							
Entertainment	.535***	.032	.525***	.021	.859***	.053	
Information	.050	.035	.054*	.021	.116*	.052	
Customer-specific control:							
Academics	.027	.051	.077*	.034	.047	.079	
Female	1.050***	.090	1.140***	.061	1.680***	.126	
High income	−.061	.062	−.222***	.039	−.280**	.089	
Age	.260***	.020	.312***	.012	.401***	.032	
Log(network size)	−.144***	.019	−.156***	.012	−.221***	.031	
Image utility	−.244***	.040	−.097***	.025	−.210***	.059	
Membership duration	−.060***	.016	−.050***	.010	−.080**	.025	
Additional control:							
Heckman correction factor ^b	−.225	.247	−.025	.162	.523	.375	
Time dummies	Yes		Yes		Yes		
α^c	12.959***	.627					
Akaike information criterion (lower is better)	22,691.90		27,894.40		24,133.08		
Bayesian information criterion (lower is better)	23,341.45		28,534.94		24,782.63		

Note.—Dependant variable = customer engagement. $N = 61,182$.

^a Left-censored at value 0. All variance inflation factors are below the recommended cutoff of 5 (O'Brien 2007). The persuasive tactics, moderator, interactions, and content-specific controls are orthogonalized.

^b A robustness check without the correction factor yielded qualitatively identical results.

^c Dispersion parameter α . Significance indicates that a negative binomial model is preferred to a Poisson model.

⁺ $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

(hypothesis 4c) are mitigated when consumers' communal-brand connection is high. The findings suggest that, counter to what we have hypothesized in hypothesis 2, calls to action have a positive effect on engagement. Following a post hoc reasoning, we suggest that calls to action may allow customers to feel effective in their behavior in the brand community and thus may motivate engagement behavior due to enhanced competence perceptions. Finally, as suggested by our theorizing, calls to action have a more positive effect on engagement when communal-brand connection is high. Overall, from study 1 the interactions between advertising tone, calls to action, and brand-communal connection appear to play a major role in explaining customer engagement responses. However, whether communal-brand connection effectively counterbalances the negative interaction effect between advertising tone and calls to action or merely mitigates it is a question that still needs to be answered in this research. We address this question in study 2.

STUDY 2

Study Goal

Study 2 examines the complex nature of the three-way interaction between advertising tone, calls to action, and communal-brand connection. To focus on this effect while controlling for extraneous effects, we conduct an experiment. The experimental approach complements the field study by examining immediate effects of persuasive tactics on customer engagement (study 1 also accounted for long-term effects). Moreover, it adds internal validity to prevent potential sample selection and endogeneity concerns and helps to validate study 1 findings by adopting a broader engagement measure.

Design and Sample

Participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and completed the study in return for a nominal payment. To achieve a setting comparable to study 1, participants were required to be Facebook fans of the focal brand, a major telecommunications company's smartphone brand. An effective total of 238 participants (30% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.85$) were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions as part of a 2 (communal-brand connection [CBC]: low vs. high) \times 2 (advertising tone [AT]: low vs. high) \times 2 (calls to action [CTA]: low vs. high) between-subjects design.²

2. We excluded 37 questionnaires owing to respondents' incorrect answers to attention checks. When these responses are retained, the results remain qualitatively the same.

Procedure

After being reminded that as brand fans (which we verified at the beginning of the survey) they are part of the brand community, participants were instructed to imagine they are fans because they appreciate the information they get through their community membership. The two communal-brand connection scenarios (low vs. high) were manipulated via participants' perceptions of the connection to other community members (the materials appear in app. A; apps. A and B are available online). In the high communal-brand connection condition, participants were told that it was most important to them to be a part of the community and to be connected to others. In the low communal-brand connection condition, participants learned that they do not really value being a part of the community and being connected to others. We pre-tested all materials in a separate study with 106 participants (47% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.08$). For a manipulation check of communal-brand connection, we used the measure from study 1 ($\alpha = .96$; all manipulation check items anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). As expected, measured communal-brand connection was significantly higher in the high communal-brand connection group ($M_{\text{CBClow}} = 2.85$ vs. $M_{\text{CBChigh}} = 5.07$; $F(1, 104) = 48.63$, $p < .001$).

Next, to manipulate advertising tone and calls to action, participants were exposed to realistic screenshots of brand posts mimicking actual brand posts on the smartphone brand's Facebook page. Manipulation checks for advertising tone treatments used two items (e.g., "This post highlights favorable aspects about the brand and their products"; $\alpha = .75$). The mean of measured advertising tone across the high advertising tone scenarios was significantly higher than the mean across the low advertising tone scenarios ($M_{\text{ATlow}} = 3.46$ vs. $M_{\text{AThigh}} = 6.22$; $F(1, 104) = 112.63$, $p < .001$). Likewise, the two-item manipulation check for calls to action treatments (e.g., "This post encourages taking a specific action"; $\alpha = .88$) indicated that the mean across the ratings for the high calls to action scenarios was higher than the mean across the low calls to action scenarios ($M_{\text{CTAlow}} = 3.11$ vs. $M_{\text{CTAhigh}} = 5.53$; $F(1, 104) = 57.30$, $p < .001$). Confound checks revealed that participants perceived all scenarios as sufficiently realistic ($M_{\text{AT}} = 6.13$, $M_{\text{CTA}} = 5.30$, $M_{\text{CBC}} = 5.09$). The suspicion probe ("What do you think is the exact purpose of this survey?") indicated that participants were unaware of the study's purpose.

Measures

To provide generalizability of our findings across different engagement measures, in study 2 we rely on a broader mea-

Table 4. Mean Customer Engagement across Treatment Conditions (Study 2)

	Low AT, low CTA		High AT, low CTA		Low AT, high CTA		High AT, high CTA	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Low CBC	5.22	.15	5.02	.14	5.51	.16	4.74	.13
High CBC	5.48	.15	5.39	.14	5.16	.14	5.51	.14

Note.—CBC = communal-brand connection; AT = advertising tone; CTA = calls to action.

sure of customer engagement developed by Hollebeek et al. (2014) and validated by Harrigan et al. (2017). Like our study 1 measure, the construct considers a behavioral dimension (e.g., “I spend a lot of time using the [brand] Facebook community, compared to other online brand communities”) but also captures cognitive (e.g., “Using the [brand] Facebook community gets me to think about [brand]”) and emotional responses (e.g., “I feel very positive when I use the [brand] Facebook community”). The 10-item scale was reliable ($\alpha = .95$), and we used its mean score for subsequent analysis. As for control variables, we used one-item measures of brand knowledge, gender, age, and information.³ We measured Facebook involvement using a 10-item 7-point semantic differential scale ($\alpha = .93$; Zaichkowsky 1994). All items appear in appendix B.

Results

ANCOVA results indicate a significant main effect of communal-brand connection ($F(1, 225) = 7.02, p = .009$). We observe a marginally significant main effect for advertising tone ($F(1, 225) = 2.83, p = .094$) but not for calls to action ($F(1, 225) = .23, p = .631$). We find a significant two-way interaction effect of communal-brand connection \times advertising tone ($F(1, 225) = 9.34, p = .003$) but no significant effects for the interaction between communal-brand connection and calls to action ($F(1, 225) = .28, p = .596$) or between advertising tone and calls to action ($F(1, 225) = .10, p = .757$). Most importantly, the ANCOVA revealed a significant three-way interaction effect of communal-brand connection \times advertising tone \times calls to action on customer engagement ($F(1, 225) = 6.34, p = .013$). The significant interaction indicates that the negative interaction effect of advertising tone and calls to action on engagement may differ across communal-brand connection levels.

3. To achieve a realistic setting comparable to study 1, we designed the treatments to mimic realistic brand posts, leading to different message lengths. As longer posts are likely to contain more information, we control for the level of information to alleviate potential confounds.

To better understand these effects, we provide the predicted cell means across the scenario conditions in table 4. Planned contrasts revealed no significant differences when advertising tone was high compared to the control condition for both low ($M_{ATlow,CTAlow} = 5.22$ vs. $M_{AThigh,CTAlow} = 5.02$; $F(1, 225) = .94, p = .333$) and high communal-brand connection conditions ($M_{ATlow,CTAlow} = 5.48$ vs. $M_{AThigh,CTAlow} = 5.39$; $F(1, 225) = .19, p = .662$). Likewise, planned contrast did not reveal significant differences between high calls to action and control conditions for low ($M_{ATlow,CTAlow} = 5.22$ vs. $M_{ATlow,CTAhigh} = 5.51$; $F(1, 225) = 1.86, p = .175$) and high communal-brand connection ($M_{ATlow,CTAlow} = 5.48$ vs. $M_{ATlow,CTAhigh} = 5.16$; $F(1, 225) = 2.57, p = .110$). Although it is not significant, we find a trend comparable to the study 1 findings, with lower engagement in the high advertising tone condition and higher engagement in the high calls to action condition when communal-brand connection is low. For high communal-brand connection, these differences tend to be smaller or nearly disappear.

Most importantly, and consistent with hypotheses 3 and 4c, planned contrasts revealed that for low communal-brand connection, customer engagement is lower when both advertising tone and calls to action are high ($M_{ATlow,CTAlow} = 5.22$ vs. $M_{AThigh,CTAhigh} = 4.74$; $F(1, 225) = 5.74, p = .017$; see fig. 2). That is, the predicted negative interaction effect between advertising tone and calls to action (hypothesis 3) was supported under the low communal-brand connection condition. However, the negative effect disappeared in the high communal-brand connection condition ($M_{ATlow,CTAlow} = 5.48$ vs. $M_{AThigh,CTAhigh} = 5.51$; $F(1, 225) = .02, p = .881$; see fig. 2), demonstrating that being connected to the brand community can entirely counterbalance the negative interaction effect of advertising tone and calls to action on engagement. Hence, hypothesis 4c received empirical support.

Discussion

Study 2 underscores the evidence found in study 1 concerning the undesired outcomes of combining the two persua-

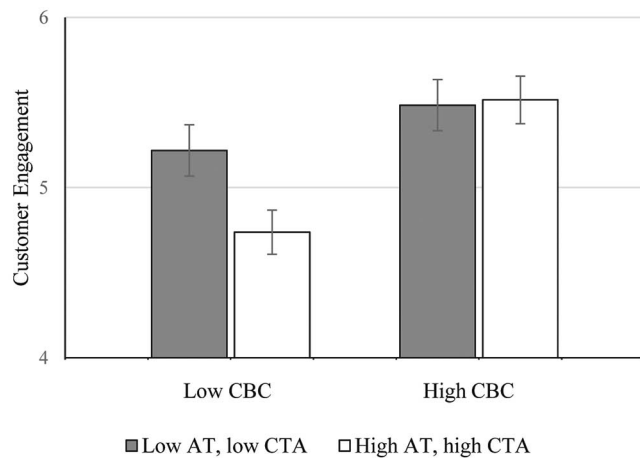


Figure 2. Mean customer engagement as a function of communal-brand connection and the interaction of advertising tone and calls to action (study 2).

sive tactics. The findings suggest that the detrimental effect of the tactics' interaction is strongly accentuated for customers who are weakly connected to the brand community. Moreover, the detrimental effect of intertwining the tactics is offset for highly connected customers, as the negative effect of combining the tactics fully disappears for customers who are strongly connected to the brand community, bolstering the generalizability of these findings.

Although study 2 also finds support for hypotheses 3 and 4c, some discrepancies are worth noting: on its own, neither advertising tone nor calls to action affected customer engagement (a result that differs from the predictions formulated in hypotheses 1 and 2). Further, in line with our reasoning for hypotheses 4a and 4b, we find no engagement-diminishing effects of persuasive tactics for high communal-brand connection. We believe these discrepancies result from the different empirical settings. Study 1 focuses on the long-term effects of persuasive tactics on actual engagement behavior, whereas study 2 focuses on an immediate perceptual response in an experimental setting. In other words, the experimental variation of the two tactics may not have been strong enough to have an immediate impact on engagement unless both tactics were manipulated at the same time.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Social media marketers aim at synergistic effects when they design their campaigns to simultaneously contain advertising tone and calls to action. However, neither the repercussions of each persuasive tactic nor the interplay of the two is

well understood. This research is motivated by marketers' concerns about how to employ these tactics without risking negative side effects. The results help us to understand whether and when customers respond in a desirable way to those tactics. Across a field study and an experiment, we provide empirical evidence on the engagement-diminishing effects of persuasive tactics and reveal how customer's communal-brand connection counterbalances these negative consequences. We compare the two studies in table 5.

Study 1 builds on real and observed marketer activities to enhance external validity, while study 2 uses a controlled experimental setting to support internal validity of the findings. Further, study 1 focuses on a fashion retailer, where product quality and features can easily be evaluated before purchase. Study 2 focuses on a smartphone brand, where product quality is more difficult to evaluate before actual use. Such differences in the availability of information might alter customer responses to persuasive tactics, adding to the validity and robustness of the results. Next, study 2 uses a perceptual engagement measure, which considers cognitive and emotional components in addition to the behavioral component (which was focal to study 1). Both studies examine the moderating role of communal-brand connection, offering evidence based on a surveyed measure (study 1) and manipulated treatments (study 2). Finally, study 1 shows that the effects of persuasive tactics play out in the long run, while study 2 shows that immediate customer responses to persuasive tactics are triggered only when the two tactics are combined. Together, the studies demonstrate the central role of communal-brand connection in alleviating detrimental effects of persuasive tactics.

Overall, we enhance initial empirical evidence that advertising tone exerts its negative effect on customer engagement particularly in the long run (Stephen et al. 2015). However, prior research has been equivocal as to whether calls to action are effective in triggering customer engagement. We find empirical evidence that prompting behavior actually motivates users to engage in social media brand communities. In contrast to prior studies, ours accounts for the degree of explicitness when capturing calls to action, which allows the differentiation between different forms of calls to actions used in practice, such as implicit (e.g., questions) or fully explicit (prompting a specific activity). Our results thus suggest that the previously mixed findings (de Vries et al. 2012; Stephen et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2018) might be due to the nonconsideration of the degree of explicitness in previous conceptualizations and operationalizations of calls to action.

Table 5. Comparison of the Studies

Comparison standard	Study 1	Study 2
Primary goal	Examine the overall framework	Deepened insight into the nature of the three-way interaction between advertising tone, calls to action, and communal-brand connection
Study type	Field study	Experiment
Setting	Fashion retailer	Smartphone brand
Persuasive tactics measures	Real marketer interventions (observed)	Manipulated treatments (scenario based)
Engagement measure	Behavioral (observed)	Perceptual with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (surveyed)
Communal-brand connection measure	Customer perceptions (surveyed)	Manipulated treatments (scenario based)
Temporal focus	Long-term effects	Short-term effects
Key findings	<p>Persuasive tactics can have negative (advertising tone) or positive (calls to action) long-term effects on engagement.</p> <p>The combination of the two persuasive tactics has a detrimental long-term effect on customer engagement.</p> <p>The effects of persuasive tactics depend largely on communal-brand connection.</p>	<p>The combination of the two persuasive tactics has a detrimental short-term effect on customer engagement when communal-brand connection is low.</p> <p>The negative effect of combined tactics disappears when communal-brand connection is high.</p>

The results further show that employing advertising tone and calls to action simultaneously reinforces their persuasive nature and reveals their manipulative intent. We find strong evidence of a dissynergistic interaction effect across our two studies, which suggests that combining the two tactics increases pressure on customers and demotivates engagement behavior. These findings add to recent research that found both tactics may impair engagement when examined in isolation (Stephen et al. 2015). However, our results suggest that calls to action are detrimental only in tandem with advertising tone.

Although advertising tone poses a risk for engagement, it is vital for driving purchases (Goh et al. 2013). Consequently, completely discarding advertising tone in the social media marketing context would be unwise. To enhance marketing messages with advertising tone without impairing engagement requires a target group that is immune to the pushy nature of persuasive tactics. Our results show that customers with a strong communal-brand connection represent such a target group.

Implications for Social Media Marketers

Social media marketers must be cautious when deploying persuasive tactics in social media, as the tactics may function dissynergistic. Although they are promising for driving purchases, when carelessly disseminated without consider-

ing how recipients relate to the brand community, (some) persuasive tactics may provide a hostile environment to the facilitation of customer engagement. Firms should avoid creating posts that feature only advertising tone (e.g., "Our comfortable new winter jackets, sweaters and pants will keep you warm, cozy and definitely in style"). In contrast, marketers can feel confident when integrating calls to action in social media campaigns instead of advertising tone, as this tactic offers promising engagement results in social media marketing. Thus, according to our findings, if the retailer makes a brand post containing only a call to action (e.g., "We offer new winter jackets, sweaters, and pants. Go *here* to shop for your new winter outfit now"), engagement responses by customers should be favorable. However, if the same call to action is accompanied by advertising tone (e.g., "Our comfortable new winter jackets, sweaters, and pants will keep you warm, cozy, and definitely in style. Go *here* to shop for your new winter outfit now"), the post is more likely to trigger customers' persuasion knowledge, creating reactance and undermining engagement.

Further, the results provide marketers a guideline to steer clear of these potential backlashes by considering the role of customers' communal-brand connection. The findings suggest that brand posts enhanced with any of the messages discussed above and targeted to connected customers would be received more favorably, and engagement rates should

be left undiminished. However, determining the connectedness of a brand's social media fans is challenging. Thus, before deploying persuasive tactics, marketers are advised to target connected customers by emphasizing shared values and common interests in their social media communication, which could be identified by semantic content analysis (Ludwig et al. 2013). Thus, if managers are forced to employ persuasive tactics (e.g., for pushing sales as in the example above) they can do so only when attracting a socially connected audience to effectively prevent potential backfiring effects. Otherwise they are running a risk of negative side effects in terms of impaired engagement. If firms want to maximize customer engagement, we recommend that they employ only calls to action and target socially connected customers. However, if firms want to deploy persuasive social media campaigns using advertising tone, they can minimize negative side effects only by combining advertising tone with calls to action and targeting socially connected customers.

Limitations and Further Research

The present research aimed at providing the "big picture" on consequences of persuasive social media tactics. However, advertising tone and calls to action can be divided into more specific design categories (e.g., calls to "shop" vs. calls to "enter a competition"; Stephen et al. 2015). Thus, future behavioral research could consider these subcategories to offer more specific insights for designing persuasive posts. Further, we focus on the moderating role of communal-brand connection because it explains different response patterns across customers. For future research endeavors, such an individual-user perspective offers manifold opportunities to account for other psychological factors (e.g., customer commitment).

We focus on customer engagement as an outcome of social media marketing but acknowledge that engagement may also drive economic behaviors with the firm (Manchanda et al. 2015). However, linking engagement to sales is beyond the scope of our research. In the same vein, as we focus on engagement responses among fans of the focal brand, it may be worthwhile to examine determinants of becoming a brand fan in the first place.

By cooperating with one online retailer in our field study, we were able to collect a unique data set to provide deep insights into the long-term consequences of persuasive tactics. Given that the retailer sells a variety of different brands, this setting can be considered rather conservative for capturing customer engagement toward the retailer (Manchanda et al.

2015), pointing to generalizability of our findings. Nevertheless, we encourage other researchers to extend our findings across other settings.

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