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Petra Audy Martínek

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# Petra Audy Martínek<sup>1</sup>

## Sensitive to Sources: Generation Z Consumers' Engagement Practices on Social Media

*Branded communication on social media faces new challenges as consumers from Generation Z intentionally keep their engagement practices from the social media metrics. This study seeks to uncover their hidden behaviours in relation to branded content on social media and explore the role of the source of the message in consumer engagement practices.*

*Drawing on the analysis of 134 hours of screen recordings from smartphones and PCs of 15 participants, 15 in-depth interviews and 185 questionnaires, the article proposes two contributions. First, it presents a taxonomy of non-measured consumer engagement practices on social media and outlines different motives behind each of those practices. Second, using this classification of practices, it explores the role of the source and concludes that specific combinations of promotion factors affect consumer's engagement practices towards social media branded content posts.*

**Keywords:** Consumer engagement, Social media, Branded content, Promotion factors, Digital methods

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### INTRODUCTION

On social media, brands compete for consumers' attention and look for signs of consumers' interactions with branded content that could portray consumers' engagement. In the extant research, empirical assessment of consumers' engagement on social media mainly relied on metrics provided by the social media platforms (Audy Martínek, 2021), such as button reactions, comments and shares, that monitor consumers' public reactions. However, consumers' engagement practices on social media change as rapidly as the developments in the digital environments. The changes in consumer practices are especially relevant for Generation Z consumers who are more familiar with technologies and attentive to the consequences of their digital practices for their privacy (Duffy et al., 2018). Therefore, they only publicly share information and activities they want to and keep their conversations locked within private groups while still being in shared environments (Duffy et al., 2018). This trend is mirrored in Abidin's (2021) concept of 'refracted publics', in which "users manipulate conditions of digital spaces to enhance, deflect, or deter detection" (p. 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czechia. Email: petra.audyova@fsv.cuni.cz

Information that accesses their personal online spaces, including those provided by brands, is considered pragmatically and analytically. Driven by their desire to search for truth (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), their attitude towards advertising is rather sceptical (Gutfreund, 2016). In the context of brand communications on social media, they scrutinise the sources of the branded content posts and question who produced the message and how that message was promoted within the particular social media environment. Those actions reflect that they particularly value knowing what is going on around them and being in control (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Despite their distrust in advertising, social media still play an important role in their consumer-brand relationship (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). However, due to their private online conduct and critical questioning of information sources, their social media engagement practices may occur "below the radar" of current online metrics (Boccia Artieri, 2021).

This article aims to explore how young adults interact with branded content on social media and analyse their consumer engagement practices in relation to the source of the branded content. To achieve this aim, the author performed an exploratory study of individual social media practices in their natural environment. Methodologically, the author combined digital methods (Rogers, 2017) with ethnographic principles of observation (Caliandro, 2018) and followed the participants' social media usage through recordings of their devices' screens. Specifically, to explore the full extent of individual behaviours, the author collected screen recordings of their usage of two social media platforms – Instagram and Facebook, and an Internet browser over one week. Within the 134 hours of the collected screen recordings dataset, the author investigated participants' online interactions with branded content and analysed the participants' behavioural patterns and the role of the communication source. In addition to the screen recordings, the author conducted face-to-face interviews with all 15 participants to understand their attitudes and motivations behind their specific social media practices. As an additional source of information, this study employed 185 questionnaires filled in by university students screening the social media practices of young adults, from which the core sample of participants emerged.

The study draws on the conceptual framework for studying consumer engagement on social media developed by Barger, Peltier and Schultz (2016). The authors operationalised consumer engagement as "a set of measurable actions that consumers take on social media in response to brand-related content" (p. 271). Those practices include button reactions (e.g., likes or hearts), comments, shares of the content and creation of user-generated content. In their framework, the authors identified five groups of antecedents and five groups of consequences of consumer engagement. This study complements this framework with two additions. First, it identified an additional group of antecedents that comprise 'promotion factors', namely producer of the message, in-platform location and advertising type. Second, in addition to measured consumer engagement behaviours, this study incorporates other observable consumer engagement behaviours that are not tracked by the social media metrics. The results show that the social media metrics track only a small part of consumers' engagement behaviours. This study proposes a typology of consumer engagement behavioural practices on social media that are not measured yet observable - namely 'see', 'search' and 'save' practices. Each of those practices is then associated with different levels of consumer engagement and their connection with promotion factors is assessed. The paper concludes that different types of consumer engagement practices on social media are related to specific sets of promotion factors. Based on the findings, the author makes key recommendations for marketing practitioners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although consumer engagement is in the literature understood as a multidimensional construct (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Viveek et al., 2014), its behavioural dimension has offered the capacity to tangibly capture how and why consumers behave in a number of ways that are relevant to the brand and its stakeholders (van Doorn et al., 2010). While emphasising the motivational state and its detachment from the actual consumption, Van Doorn et al. (2010, p. 253) define engagement practices as “behaviours toward a brand or a firm that result from motivational drivers and go beyond the mere purchase of products or services”. While focusing on the social media environment, Hollebeek et al. (2014, p. 151) define consumer-brand engagement as “a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions”. In their definition, the authors articulate the positive valence of engagement, dynamics of the construct and interactivity as the key attributes.

Departing from interactivity as being the natural component of social media, Barger, Peltier and Schultz's (2016, p. 271) operationalise consumer engagement as "a set of measurable actions that consumers take on social media in response to brand-related content", such as reactions to content through the platform buttons (e.g., likes and hearts), comments to content, shares of the content and creation of user-generated content. In this framework, consumer actions are limited to the measurable practices as recorded by the social media platform metrics and do not consider other behavioural expressions toward a brand. Eigenraam et al. (2018) expand the scope of engagement actions while conceptualising 'digital customer engagement practices' as "consumer's observable digital manifestations of brand engagement that go beyond purchase" (p.108). Similarly, to previous conceptualisations of consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Viveek et al., 2014, van Doorn et al., 2010), digital engagement practices are manifestations of consumer's motivational states (Eigenraam et al., 2018), a digital embodiment of what consumers think and feel about a particular brand and how much energy, effort and time consumers spend with a brand.

By conceptualising digital engagement practices as a set of consumer's observable practices, the scope of the interactions with branded content is broadened to those behaviours not necessarily tracked by the social media metrics, such as viewing a video about a particular brand or watching brand pictures (Eigenraam et al., 2018). Following Eigenraam et al. (2018), this study analyses participants' observable practices in relation to branded content on social media rather than only the measurable ones. To explore those practices that are not measured by the social media metrics, a taxonomy that consists of three groups of practices was developed. First, 'see practices' include those consumer actions when a consumer reads or watches certain content. Second, 'search practices' comprise those behaviours when a consumer actively searches for a branded content either on or outside the social media platform. And third, 'save practices' include any action from which a consumer can later recall the message. For a complete list of the practices, see Table 3.

Table 1: Taxonomy of Observable Consumer Engagement Practices on Social Media

<b>Non-measured practices</b>	<b>See</b>	Stop on the post Browse multiple images Expand text Pause the story Watch the whole video Zoom the picture
	<b>Search</b>	Social search Browse profile page Click and redirect Related online search
	<b>Save</b>	Take a screenshot Save post Share privately
<b>Measured practices</b>		Like Comment Share Follow

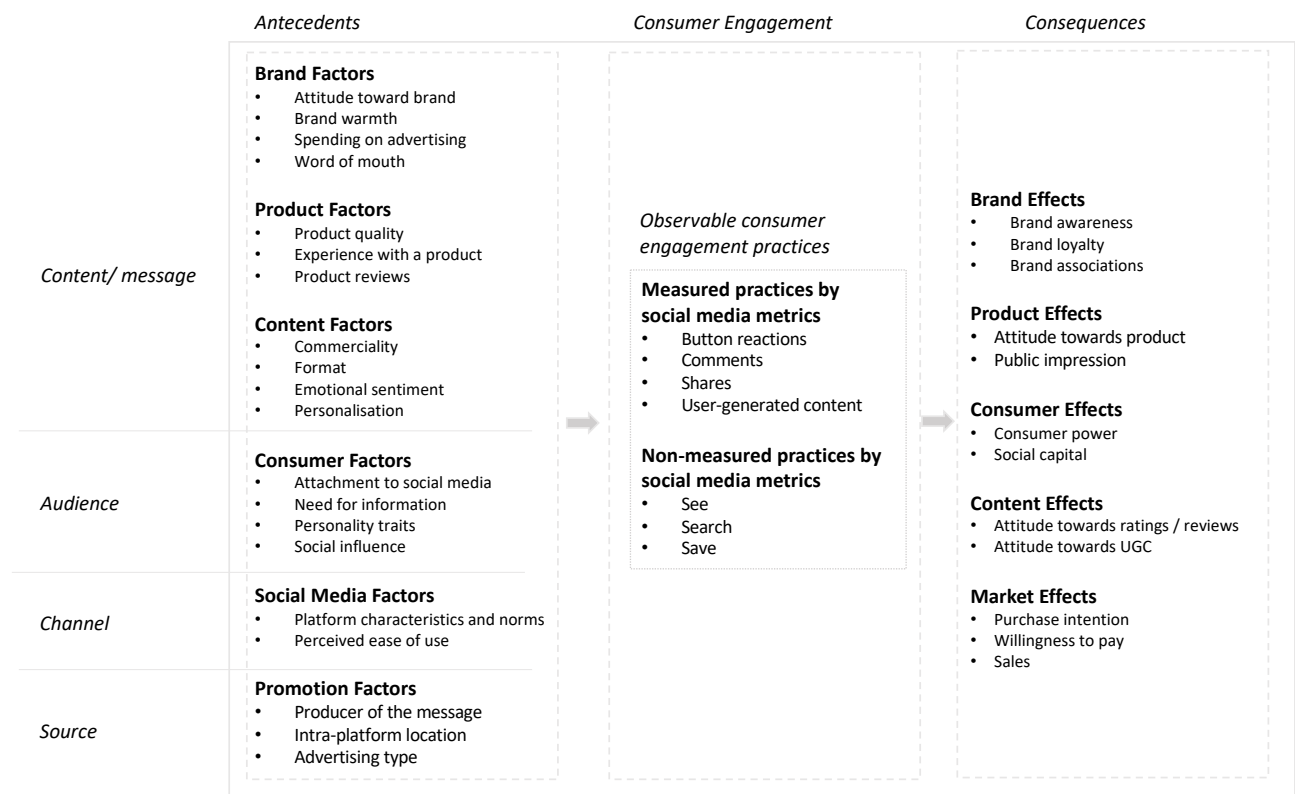
To explore the consumer engagement practices on social media, the author further follows the conceptual framework developed by Barger, Peltier and Schultz's (2016) that draws on recognition of the existence of precursors and outcomes of brand engagement as defined in theoretical studies (Brodie et al. 2011, Calder et al., 2016) and as employed in empirical marketing research. In their framework, Barger, Peltier and Schultz (2016) identified five categories of antecedents and five categories of consequences of consumer engagement on social media. The antecedents are understood as reasons why consumers engage with branded content and include a) brand factors, such as attitude toward a brand or spending on advertising, b) product factors, such as experience with a product or product quality, c) consumer factors, such as attachment to social media, need for information or personality traits, d) content factors, such as format, personalisation or emotional sentiment of the message and e) social media factors that mainly comprise platform characteristics.

The scheme of antecedents covers some of the major attributes of communication and persuasion models that Lasswell (1948) and McGuire (1989) defined as content, source, channel and audience. First, 'content' refers to the message and its credibility, attractiveness, and power. In Barger, Peltier and Schultz's (2016) framework, it overlaps with content factors, product factors, and brand factors. Second, 'channel' indicates the medium used for brand communication. In the framework, it is described as social media factors. And third, 'audience' is reflected in the framework as consumer factors.

This study argues that the 'source' of the message is not represented in the framework. In communications theory, the subject who is communicating a message, referred to as a 'source' (Lasswell 1948), is known to have a significant impact on communication effects (Voorveld, 2019), in this case, engagement. However, the extant literature on antecedents of consumer engagement does not include such attribute (Barger, Peltier and Schultz, 2016). In the context of social media, the variability of the

source reflects the blurred lines between communication shared by brands and other producers of branded content (Voorveld, 2019), such as influencers, and different modes of targeting of the content based on consumers' (non)followers of a particular brand profile. In this study, this category of antecedents is defined as 'promotion factors'. Those factors include attributes that reflect the producer of the message and the way the message is promoted within the channel. Specifically, the promotion factors include: producer of the message, the intra-platform location of the message and the advertising type of the message. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework employed in this study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Consumer Engagement on Social media



## METHODOLOGY

This study employs an ethnography-inspired natively digital approach that is built on observation of consumer practices in their natural environment. To explore consumer practices in their complexity, this study employs an approach of following the user (Caliandro, 2018) and their media usage as it takes place in the digital environment. In contrast to the following the medium (Rogers, 2013), which follows the logic of the Internet and extract and analyse digital data as they appear, such as links, comments or hashtags, following the user allows to pay attention to how users use digital devices (Calindro and Gandini, 2017).

Drawing on the digital methods paradigm (Rogers, 2013), which understands the Internet as a source of methods rather than an object of study, this study leveraged methods already incorporated in the mobile and computer devices and repurposed them for social research. Specifically, participants' behaviour on social media and the Internet was tracked using screen recordings captured from

the participant's devices. In doing so, the central focus of the research is the individual's moving across the digital environment rather than a close examination of individual's responses to a single post. In that sense, videography allows to capture detailed records of dynamic behaviours, through which individual experiences may be understood (Kawaf, 2019).

To collect the individual behaviours on social media an in Internet browser, a set of tracking devices was used to record, share and delete the recorded videos installed on smartphones and PCs' of 15 participants. To record the participants' online activity on PCs and Android smartphones, an application ApowerRec was used, which captured all onscreen activity, including mouse movements for the PCs and screen touches for mobile devices. For iOS devices, the author had an application developed by a professional programmer that provided similar functionalities as ApowerRec, while incorporating the in-built iOS function of screen recording. Once the data were recorded, the video sequences were automatically uploaded to a shared folder on Google Drive and deleted from the participant's device. The participants were asked to manually start recording every time they began using social media or an Internet browser and turn it off when the session was ended. They were asked to repeat this procedure over one week. The participants recorded their one-week activity in the period from November 2018 to March 2019. After the complete screen recordings were shared and reviewed by the researcher, each participant was interviewed to understand the motivations and intentions behind the observed practices. The interviews were semi-structured, organised in three parts: general social media usage, participants' relation to branded content on social media and reflection on specific individual consumer engagement practices as observed in the screen recordings. The interviews were transcribed and content coded, while the findings were analysed in relation to the observations from the screen recordings.

The participants were recruited from the local and visiting master degree students of media and journalism programs during guest talks at Charles University Prague and the Metropolitan University Prague and through a call shared through the Charles university newsletter. During the recruitment process the researcher presented the research purpose, objectives, and methods used in the research. The students were first asked to fill in an online questionnaire that was structured in three parts comprising questions on their general online community behaviour, their behaviour on social media and their practices in relation to branded content on social media. At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents could leave their contact details if they were interested in participating in the main study. Since the focus of this study is on consumer engagement practices of Generation Z, the target participants were between the ages 18 and 25, both women and men, regularly using Facebook and/ or Instagram at least four times a week. As a result of the three-phase data collection process, 185 questionnaires were collected while the demographic profile of the respondents consisted of 65% women and 45% men, aged between 18 and 25 years. From this dataset, 15 participants expressed their willingness to participate in the research and therefore were included in the study. The final participant sample comprised of 70% of women and 30% of men. Besides the function of the questionnaire as a mean to collect contact details of those students that were willing to participate in the study, it also served as an additional source of data that allowed to compare the findings based on the data from 15 participants with a larger sample. As a result of the data collection process, this study acquired a dataset of 134 hours of screen recordings and 15 hours of interviews. The participants' descriptive information and information on the screen recordings dataset is presented in Table 1.

Table 2: Participants and Data Set

Participant	Gender	Age	Total length of recordings (H:M:S)	Number of recordings	Period of data collection
Barbora	F	23	0:55:17	15	12/2018
Charlotte	F	22	6:43:27	70	12/2018
Chiara	F	24	1:18:32	12	03/2019
Katerina	F	23	2:12:42	30	01/2019
Katy	F	19	30:25:22	36	11/2018
Koen	M	20	1:54:16	17	11/2018
Maiju	F	25	8:23:38	45	11/2018
Marine	F	22	0:53:52	15	12/2018
Marion	F	23	7:46:52	39	11/2018
Marketa	F	20	4:31:49	81	11/2018
Samy	M	20	16:50:21	38	11/2018
Stefanie	F	25	6:02:07	51	11/2018
Simon	M	18	6:29:23	27	11/2018
Stepan	M	22	20:36:47	40	02/2019
Valerie	F	22	18:57:14	192	12/2018
TOTAL			134:01:39	708	

### Data analysis

The point of departure to investigate consumer engagement practices in relation to branded content was to define what is branded content. For that purpose, this study adopted a broad definition that defines branded content as "any manifestation associated with a particular brand in the eye of the beholder" (Asmussen et al., 2016). In that sense, the analysis was not limited to official branded communication but could also investigate content from stakeholders, i.e. influencers. This approach is supported by the conclusions of the study by Syrdal and Briggs (2018), who demonstrate that branded content is the focal object of engagement in the context of social media. Given the broad definition of branded content, any news media outlet, event, store, political party or even a location can be considered a brand. Therefore, in this study, the scope of the branded content was narrowed down to consumer product and service brands.

The analysis of screen recording then followed three phases: observation, coding and categorisation. First, the author viewed the video recordings, and by taking 'field notes,' identified trends and patterns of behaviours in relation to branded content. Based on the observation phase, two general categories were distinguished for further coding: transactions and actions. The transaction was defined as an occasion when a participant came across a branded content piece on social media, either through the newsfeed, stories or in-platform search. Action, on the other hand, was defined as a single activity related to the specific branded content (e.g. expanding text, browsing multiple images or assigning a 'like'). Second, the video content was coded by transactions, while each transaction was documented by three categories of attributes: description of the transaction, branded content identification and engagement actions. The complete list of coding categories is indicated in Table 2.



The attributes related to the group of antecedents defined as 'promotion factors' include producer of the message, in-platform location and advertising type. The 'producer of the message' attribute describes who created or shared the branded content - whether a brand itself (i.e., a trademark owner - TMO) or an external stakeholder, such as an influencer. The attribute 'in-platform type' identifies the placement of the branded content piece within the network, such as a newsfeed, a story, or content investigated through social media search functions (i.e., posts found via search bar, direct brand profile page visits or clicks on one of the suggested posts on Instagram). The coding category 'advertising type' was coded in two subcategories, 'promoted/organic' and 'sponsored', indicating whether the participant followed the brand or not. The actions were coded in three types: no action, measured actions and non-measured actions. As a result of the coding process, 1,805 brand-related transactions were identified within the data set.

Table 3: Coding Scheme of a Transaction

Description of transaction	Branded content identification	Actions
Participant's code	Platform	No action
Date and time of the recording	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facebook</li> <li>Instagram</li> <li>Internet browser</li> </ul>	Measured actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Like</li> <li>Comment</li> <li>Share</li> <li>Follow</li> </ul>
Action start time	In-platform location	Non-measured actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stop on the post</li> <li>Expand text</li> <li>Browse multiple images</li> <li>Zoom the picture</li> <li>Watched the whole video</li> <li>Paused the story</li> <li>Read comments</li> <li>Browse profile page</li> <li>Social search</li> <li>Click and redirect</li> <li>Related internet search</li> <li>Screenshot</li> <li>Save post</li> <li>Send a screenshot / share privately with a friend</li> </ul>
Time spent on a transaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Newsfeed</li> <li>Stories</li> <li>Social search</li> </ul>	
	Producer of the message	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trade mark owner</li> <li>Influencer</li> </ul>	
	Brand communicated	
	Advertising type	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organic / Promoted</li> <li>Sponsored</li> </ul>	
	Post format	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Photo</li> <li>Video</li> </ul>	

The third phase of analysis focused on categorisation of non-measured actions into behavioural practices. The author developed a taxonomy of three practices: see, search and save. Each practice groups related actions as observed in the screen recordings. The list of actions per category is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Taxonomy of Observable Consumer Engagement Practices on Social Media

Non-measured practices	See	Stop on the post Browse multiple images Expand text Pause the story Watch the whole video Zoom the picture
	Search	Social search Browse profile page Click and redirect Related online search

	Save	Take a screenshot Save post Share privately
Measured practices		Like Comment Share Follow

Then, within the entire dataset, transactions with engagement were filtered based on the number of related actions. First, transactions where no action was performed were sorted out. Next, the dataset was divided into transactions, where at least one action was performed. This dataset also included transactions where the participant only stopped on the post. Therefore, to get a data set that includes only transactions with engagement, the transactions were further filtered only to those where the participant performed at least two actions, i.e. stopped on the post and performed at least one additional action. As a result of the filtering process, the author obtained a dataset of 297 transactions that can be considered as ‘transactions with engagement’. The transactions’ dataset is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Transactions Dataset

Dataset specification	Number of transactions
Total dataset	1805
Transactions with at least one action (incl. stop on the post)	632
Transactions with at least two actions	297

## FINDINGS

This study seeks to answer two research questions. Firstly, how young adults interact with branded content on social media? And secondly, what is the role of ‘promotion factors’ in their consumer engagement practices?

### How Young Adults Interact with Brand Content on Social Media?

Before investigating consumer engagement practices on social media, the author first explored the role of social media in the participants' relationship with brands. The findings based on the results of the questionnaire and the content analysis of interviews and the screen recordings dataset revealed that social media, and Instagram specifically, is for young adults the primary point of contact with brands. In the questionnaire, direct connection with brands via social media was claimed by almost half of the respondents (47,6%), while major platforms that respondents declared to serve as the touchpoints with brands online were Facebook (47,6%) and Instagram (41,1%). This fact contrasted with the observations from the screen recordings. The data show that 85% of the total transactions with at least one action took place on Instagram, while only the remaining 15% of those transactions on Facebook.

The participants mainly accentuated social media’s inspirational qualities, as Maiju declares: “I have discovered a lot of new products through social media – not that I bought all of them, but at least I encountered them in social media for the first time. So yeah, it’s pretty major thing.” The inspiration may come from both followed profiles as well as sponsored communication, as evidenced in Marketa’s citation: “Social media are usually

my primary contact with a brand. Speaking of shoes, the influencer either wears it or I notice a sponsored advertising. But then I need to see them in real. Very rarely I go to e-shop websites, I usually look at social media." Besides the inspirational qualities of the social media, the participants frequently articulated relevance of branded content encountered on social media, as Katy appreciates: "Online browser, compared to social media, will not show me relevant content. It will not display something that might interest me. It only shows what I have already seen somewhere, so I am not interested in it anymore, because I have either already bought the product or I do not want to buy it anymore."

Although the respondents claim their connection with branded content via social media, their interactions with branded content are relatively rare. In the questionnaire, 54% claimed that they do not interact with commercial messages or branded content via social media, and 46% do interact with brands via social media, mainly for content (n=80), special offer (n=25) and information about new products (n=22). The screen recordings dataset support this finding as it indicates that the participants interacted with branded content posts in approximately 16% of the total transactions, i.e., performed at least two actions related to one branded content post.

The observations from the screen recordings revealed that 'liking' behaviours were the only 'measured practices', observed in 17% of transactions with engagement within the screen recordings dataset. Table 5 summarizes the frequencies of consumer engagement practices. As mentioned during the interviews, the main drivers of 'liking' on social media were admiration, connection, and support. However, those feelings were mainly related to their friends or potentially influencers but rarely associated with branded content. Therefore, alternative behaviours, such as 'clicking', occur. This is well demonstrated in Koen's citation: "I like a lot of things from my friends but not from commercial things. [Instead] I click a lot, when I think it's interesting."

Similarly, Chiara emphasises: "I never tap the heart icon. I always lurk. If it is an interesting reading, I try to reflect on it, but it depends on the content. If it is an interesting topic, I follow the link." Participants clearly expressed that their reactions to branded content follow different scenarios than their reactions to friends' content, scenarios that are not tracked by the publicly visible metrics. The interpretation of a 'like' as an expression of connection and support also emerged from the screen recordings dataset. The analysis revealed that 39% of transactions with liking behaviours were associated exclusively with see practices, without any additional search or save action. Furthermore, 43% of transactions with liking behaviours were not associated with any of the see, search and save practices. Such finding may refer to impulsive conduct, where a participant wanted to express their support without any further need for information and therefore interaction. See practices were naturally the most dominant behaviours, represented in 68% of total transactions. The most frequently observed see actions in the newsfeed were expanding texts and browsing multiple images. For posts in stories, the most frequent actions were browsing multiple images and pausing a story. Such behaviours alone may be interpreted as expressions of consumer's interest in the branded content, however they do not necessarily lead to further interactions.

Search practices were observed in 40% of total transactions. Those practices included both intra-platform search as well as related searches outside the social media environment. As the participants revealed during the interviews, social media appears to serve as a major trigger for a further search action, mainly outside the social media platform, which is highly linked with their purchase intentions. The participants claim that they either visit a brand website through directly clicking on a link or through an independent visit of a desired website or e-shop. To illustrate, Katerina describes: "I

follow brands that I have learned about from the social network. When thinking about some brands that I follow, I have found them on Instagram. So I think that social media is the major communication channel. However, if I consider buying something from that brand, I go to the website.” Similarly, Stefanie, claimed: “When I just want to inform myself, Instagram or Facebook is okay for directing me to the webpage but if it really comes to buying the product, then I enter it almost every time through the web.”

Save practices were detected only in 9% of the total transactions, while the most frequent way of saving was taking screenshots. Although the save practices were not massively observed in the screen recordings, the interviews revealed their important role in the decision-making process. In that process, the participants get back to their saved lists, links or posts to reconsider the choices and reflect on their actual needs. This process of reconsideration might take from a couple of days to a couple of months. To illustrate, Maiju explains: If I know that I need something, then I'm actually taking my time to find the product and I kind of decide if I want to buy it – then I can be impulsive if I see it somewhere. But I'm pretty considerate with my buying. I mean it can take even months when I decide.

Similarly, Charlotte describes: “I know there are some times when I don't buy for weeks or months and I would reach upon the browser and say “okay, now I'm gonna buy stuff”. And I know that I'm gonna have folders with links in my browser for such situations. Usually I might buy it six months after discovering the product because I still like it.”

Table 5: Frequency of consumer engagement practices

	Categories of consumer engagement practices	Number of transactions	% of total transactions
Total number of transactions		297	
Measured practices	Likes	51	17%
	Follows	2	0,6%
	See practices	203	68%
Non-measured practices	Search practices	117	40%
	Save practices	9	3%

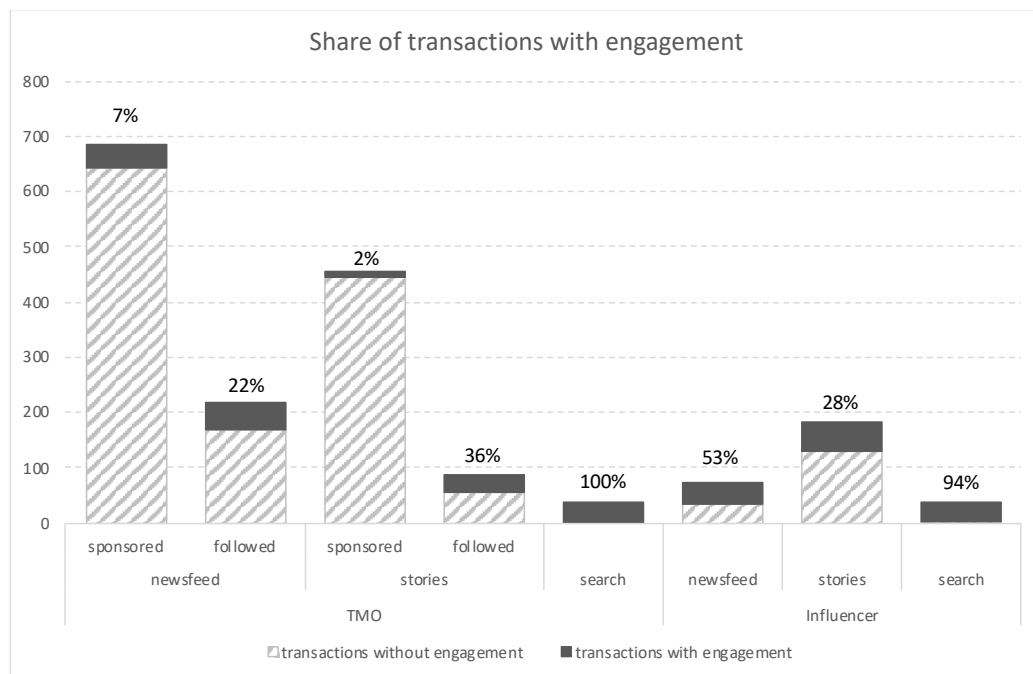
### What is the Role of ‘Promotion Factors’ in Consumer Engagement Practices of Young Adults?

This part focuses on exploring the role of three attributes: producer of the message, in-platform location and advertising type in the consumer engagement practices of young adults on social media. The screening questionnaire results revealed rather expected facts that most of the respondents intentionally skip sponsored posts on social media and are more likely to consume brand-related content from influencers than brands. Specifically, 35% of respondents replied that they never interact with sponsored posts, and 57% of respondents claim that they interact rarely or occasionally. When asked about product placements in the influencer's communication, more than half of respondents (55,5%) expressed a favourable stance towards product placements. The majority of them claimed that they do not mind product placements in the influencers' posts (46,5%), and 9% of respondents even appreciate such posts.

To investigate the role of promotion factors on social media from the screen recordings, the first step was to explore what is the share of the transactions with engagement on the total dataset based on a matrix of the three attributes – producer, in-platform location and advertising type. Figure 2 illustrates the results. Similarly to the

questionnaire results, influencers' branded content posts gained the highest share of engagement – the participants interacted with 53% of the influencers' branded content posts shared through the newsfeed and with 28% shared in stories. The posts coming from the trademark owners (TMO), i.e., from brands, received the highest engagement rates for the followed profiles both in stories (36%) and in the newsfeed (22%). The results also confirmed the findings from the questionnaire that sponsored TMO posts receive very low engagement rates – 7% in the newsfeed and 2% in stories. Besides the very high skip rate of sponsored posts in stories, the author also noticed in the screen recordings that those posts frequently made the participant end their browsing sessions through stories. Seventy-seven of such cases were identified within the dataset. Posts that were viewed as a result of participants' search efforts were naturally reaching a 100% engagement rate.

Figure 2: Share of Transactions with Engagement by Producer, Location and Advertising Form. Based on a Data Set of 1,774 Transactions



Next, the analysis looked into detail on the type of actions related to each combination of promotion factors. Table 6 demonstrates the results.

First, practices towards influencers' branded content posts were explored. As mentioned earlier, influencers' branded content posts received the highest proportion of branded content posts with engagement, especially in the newsfeed. However, the participants' actions were dominated by expanding texts (in 56% of transactions) and assigning likes (in 23% of transactions). Likes, in this case, should be treated cautiously as they might be understood as a statement of connection and proximity with the influencer rather than an expression of a positive attitude to the specific brand or product. Samy explained in the interview as follows: “[Liking] depends on my proximity to the people. For example, if it is a very good friend, I comment, if it is someone I appreciate, I put like, if it is a content of someone I don't know, I never have any reaction”. Similarly to the influencers' posts in the newsfeed, actions toward the branded content posts in stories were dominated by see practices, in this case pausing a story (in 39% of transactions) and browsing multiple images (in 35% of transactions). Unlike the newsfeed posts, posts in stories triggered more click-throughs (in 16% of transactions),

which can be understood as a higher level of engagement than the see practices. See practices were also predominant when participants searched for certain branded content in the influencer's communication. Such search queries resulted mainly in the browsing of the influencer's profile page and watching multiple images.

Second, the focus was on social media posts shared by the trademark owners, the brands themselves. Similarly to previous findings, the sponsored posts received minimum attention both in stories as well as in the newsfeed. However, unlike the influencers' posts, the TMO posts triggered more related searches online, outside of the social media platform. This finding can be interpreted in two ways – as an advanced level of engagement (although in a very small percentage of total transactions) and as a way of intentional non-interacting with the sponsored content within the social media platform (although interested in the content itself).

TMO posts coming from followed profiles received relatively high engagement rates, both in the newsfeed and in stories. However, despite slightly lower engagement rates compared to influencers' posts, the following observations were made that illustrate more qualitative engagement. In stories, in addition to see practices (browsing multiple images and pausing a story), click-throughs and related searches were observed in 19% of transactions. Even increased employment of search practices was detected among the TMO posts in the newsfeed (in 28% of transactions), which were furthermore associated with an increased liking behaviour. In this case, the meaning of 'like' can be interpreted as a form of support, which participants tend to express to individuals but also to indie brands (rather than to corporations), as Stepan describes his view: "I do not follow global companies, but if I, for example, buy watches from a small producer I may give them a like on Facebook. If I bought watches from Rolex, for instance, I would not feel the need to like their page. By liking, I want to declare my support to the brand, to the small producer. Big corporations do not need that support so I give a sh\*t"

The last category – participants' searches for brands and products, were observed to be connected with a high share of related searches online. This finding documents the trend mentioned in the interviews that social media serves as an entry point in consumers' interactions with a brand.

Table 6: Top actions by producer, location and advertising format, based on a data set of 297 transactions with engagement

Post producer (number of transactions with engagement)	Location	Advertising type	Number of transactions with engagement	Related actions (number of transactions)	Frequency of related actions
TMO (173)	Newsfeed	Sponsored	45	Browse multiple images (20)	45%
				Click and redirect (12), Related online searches (5)	38%
				Expand text (7)	16%
		Followed	47	Expand text (24)	51%
				Like (23)	49%
				Click and redirect (7), Related search (6)	28%
	Stories	Sponsored	11	Click and redirect (5), Related search (5)	90%
				Pause the story (3)	27%
		Followed	32	Browse multiple images (17)	53%
				Pause the story (10)	31%
Search	38	Click and redirect (3), Related search (3)	19%		
		Browse profile page (24)	63%		
		Browse multiple images (17)	45%		
Influencer (121)	Newsfeed	Followed	39	Click and redirect (7), Related search (10)	45%
				Expand text (22)	56%
	Stories	Followed	51	Like (9)	23%
				Pause a story (20)	39%
				Browse multiple images (18)	35%
	Search	34	Click and redirect (8)	16%	
			Browse profile page (12)	35%	
				Browse multiple images (8)	24%

DISCUSSION

To explore how young adults interact with branded content on social media and what is the role of ‘promotion factors’ in their consumer engagement practices, this study adopted an approach of following the users (Caliandro, 2018) in their natural environment through a set of tracking devices. Specifically, screen recordings capturing participants’ one-week online navigation were collected which allowed to explore their consumer behaviour in fine detail and therefore understand their practices in complexity. Such approach of following the user rather than the medium, which measures users’ engagements with branded content on social media by relying on the platforms’ metrics, was especially relevant for the research on digital practices of consumers from the

Generation Z who understand digital environments and the consequences of their public reactions. That is why a significant proportion of their reactions remain below the radar of online metrics. Following Eigenraam et al.'s (2018) conceptualisation of digital consumer engagement practices, this study focused on observable practices, i.e. behavioural manifestations of consumers engagement on social media in response to brand-related content that are not limited to those tracked by the social media metrics. As a result of the observations, a taxonomy of non-measured engagement practices was developed, namely see, search and save practices. 'See' consists in a practice in which participants spend time to scrutinize attentively all the characteristics of a branded content - instead to immediately react to it through social media buttons. This practice is used by the participants in order to understand if the branded content interest them or not. Usually, to perform the see practices, participants take advantage of the 'natively digital methods' inbuilt in their own devices (Bainotti et al., 2020), such as the zoom-in function or expanding texts. In case the participants decide that they like the branded content, they turn to the 'Search' practice, meaning they start browsing social media and the Internet to look for more information about the brand. If the participants are attracted by a particular branded product and they feel that, maybe, they are willing to buy it in future they 'Save' the related branded content, that is, they achieve it by means of ad hoc functions like taking screenshots or saving Internet links.

The proposed taxonomy defines practices independent of platforms, making it flexible for use in the diversified digital landscape. In that regard, the taxonomy differs from classifications that rely on a specific platform (Azar et al., 2016, Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit, 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2017). Similarly to Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit's (2011) COBRA framework, the proposed taxonomy is classified by type of actions rather than motivations for engagement (e.g. Azar et al., 2016; Eigenraam et al., 2018). However, unlike the COBRA framework that groups consumer actions based on their level of public exposure (i.e. the more effort and energy one invests in public interaction, the more s/he is engaged) into consuming, contributing and creating activities, this typology follows a logic of functions.

Based on a detailed understanding of those practices, different motives behind each consumer engagement practice on social media can be inferred. In the author's interpretations, liking behaviours were understood as an expression of connection and support. Therefore, the author proposes that liking behaviours are manifestations of consumer's public attitudes. The see practices illustrate consumers' interest in the content but do not necessarily express consumers' motivation to learn more. This group of practices corresponds the most appropriately with Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit's (2011) 'consumption' practices. Search and save practices, on the other hand, are manifestations of higher engagement than the see practices. In the participants' customer journeys, the search practices are manifestations of participants' intention to actively seek more information about a brand or a product and, therefore, consumer involvement. This group of practices resonates with 'learning' practices, which are self-initiated, self-directed, and self-controlled, which were identified by Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen (2018) as an essential process of consumer engagement. The save practices appeared to play an important role in the participants' decision-making process and were closely related to purchase intentions.

Using this typology of consumer engagement practices on social media, this study further investigated the effects of promotion factors, namely producer of the message, in-platform location and advertising type, on the type of practices consumers partake on social media in relation to branded content. Based on the presented findings, this paper concludes that specific combinations of promotion factors seem to affect consumers'



reactions to social media branded content posts. Specifically, the following three observations were made.

First, the participants were more likely to engage with branded content on social media through influencers. However, such posts drive consumers' interest rather than involvement or purchase intentions. In the literature, opposing opinions on the effects of opinion leaders, i.e., influencers, on consumer engagement and purchase behaviours can be found. Previous research has largely identified the positive effects of influencers on consumer purchasing (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). However, in contrast to those studies, more recent studies came to similar conclusions to this study - that influencers did not affect consumers' purchase decisions (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; Chen, 2018). This finding can be attributable to sponsorship disclosure, as identified by Djafarova and Bowes (2021), but also to informational value rather than a persuasive effect of such communication.

Second, the participants very rarely interacted with social media sponsored posts coming directly from the trademark owners, i.e., brands. This trend was especially prominent among the TMO's sponsored posts shared in stories, which were skipped by the participants in the vast majority of observed cases. This can be attributed to content characteristics of those posts, such as relevance and commerciality of those messages; however, these attributes were not assessed in this study. From the interviews, it can be inferred that an important role in intentional skipping of the sponsored posts also play consumer factors, such as consumers' information overload, general distrust towards advertising, resistance to self-association with brands or the participants' aim to affect social media algorithms. A relatively high frequency of related searches outside the social media environment can be interpreted as a quest for anonymity of participants' actions in relation to social media sponsored posts.

Third, TMO's posts targeted at brand followers were considered to foster the most qualitative engagement among consumers, affecting consumers' involvement that stimulated further self-initiated and self-controlled practices in a wider digital environment. Furthermore, given that liking reactions were found to be expressions of positive attitudes, such as connection or support, the relatively high frequency of liking reactions to TMO content from the followed profiles can be interpreted as a way of consumer's building a positive relationship with the particular brand.

## CONCLUSION: MARKETING IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The author believes that the current study provides original insights into the consumer engagement practices of young adults on social media, which can be translated into actionable directions for marketing managers when designing their social media campaigns. Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations can be drawn. First, marketing practitioners should consider their marketing communication goals and reflect them in their choice of promotion format. Specifically, to build awareness, positive impression or attitudes of target consumers, it is advisable to consider cooperation with influencers, to whose communication consumers tend to be more receptive and open. Their communication in the newsfeed should focus on informative messages, while in stories on calls for action. Campaigns focused on awareness may be complemented by sponsored posts coming directly from brands; however, the author recommends being very selective on the content of such messages and avoiding highly promotional content in stories.

To build a relationship with consumers, enhance customer loyalty or stimulate purchase, the author advises exploiting the potential of relatively high consumer engagement of brand followers, especially in the newsfeed. A critical point of departure for this strategy is to build a qualitative follower base that consists of genuinely interested consumers. Second, the author suggests focusing on communication that encourages search practices by stimulating consumers' interest and curiosity. Specifically, marketing practitioners should stimulate brand profile searches and visits and click-throughs to a brand's website; however, the consumers cannot feel the pressure of the calls to action; they need to feel control over their online navigations. To further trigger purchase decisions, the author suggest developing ways to make consumers save the brand content and help them revisit their saved lists.

Despite the contribution of this paper, the author is aware of several limitations that predefine future research areas. First, the current study is limited by its number of participants and the acquired dataset. Therefore, future research should focus on the validation of the findings on a larger set of participants. Second, the findings of a larger quantitative exploration should further be confronted with a qualitative study that further investigates the meanings of those practices. Third, this study considers a broad range of products and services freely depending on particular participants' choices and interests. The author thinks that further research may explore specific categories of products and services and gain more precise insights relevant to those particular categories. And finally, an important note to conclude this paper is that this study provided an insight into the consumer practices of young adults, specifically, university students from a set of European countries between ages 18 and 25. Although the participants happen to be members of Generation Z based on their age, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole generation as they do not capture the full variety of characteristics and behaviours of individuals and do not address the cross-cultural diversity (Rudolph et al., 2020).

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