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On Online Engagement: Does the Leadership Style Matter?

(Full Paper)

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ABSTRACT

The news industry is facing tremendous changes. Integrating digital technologies into news practices has become the key to survival. Social media engagement editors are one of such innovations to respond to the challenge. Engagement editors are required to facilitate the functions of marketing, editing, content production, and data analysis. They thus play the role of boundary-spanner within and beyond the organizational boundaries. However, there are few studies to explore issues associated with the management of social media engagement editors. This research examines whether and how the leadership style (i.e., transformational and passive leadership style) influences engagement editors' job performance. We collected 122 valid responses, and used the SmartPLS 3 and SPSS 19.0 to analyze the data. Our findings indicate that performance of engagement editors is influenced by the leadership style; moreover, job autonomy mediates the positive effect of transformational leadership on engagement editors' job performance. Implications for the management of social media engagement editors are discussed.

Keywords: Social media, engagement editor, transformational leadership, passive leadership, job autonomy, job performance.

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INTRODUCTION

With the prevalence of the Internet and mobile devices, news organizations must adapt themselves to the trend of digital convergence. Social media is among the biggest game changers for news organizations. In the US, 70% of online users have Facebook accounts (Duggan & Smith, 2013); and half of those who frequent Facebook consume news through Facebook (Mitchell *et al.*, 2013). In fact, social media create much needed referral website traffic for such traditional news outlets as BBC, Financial Times, Guardian, and The Economist. With the application of multiple social media platforms, traditional news organizations can stay competitive. These news organizations bring their established credibility and brand recognition to the online news realm, putting small and young online news organizations at a disadvantage (Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012).

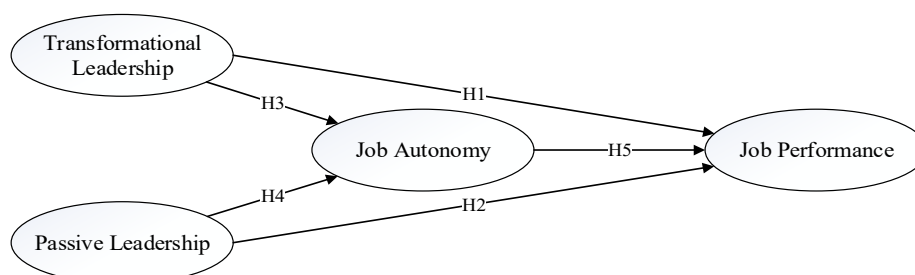
Both the established and young news organizations rely on social media engagement editors to engage their audience. The primary task of engagement editors is to establish and maintain relationships with audience on behalf of individual news organizations. Unlike traditional reporters, engagement editors mostly conduct their tasks online or through digital technologies. For example, engagement editors search news materials on the internet, interact with audience on social media platforms, and conduct interviews via such digital technologies as Skype or Facebook instant messaging. Given their proximity to the audience, engagement editors are able to form understanding about their audience and establish relationships with them (Chang, 2015).

According to Powers (2015), engagement editors should possess three key abilities. First, they must understand how social media work and exploit their technological affordance to detect potential public issues, and even to actively set the news agenda. Second, engagement editors should help coordinate the overall news production/dissemination process. For example, engagement editors can help customize news contents for different media carriers, or design and execute promotion activities to engage audience online and offline. Finally, engagement editors are also data analysts. Engagement editors must help analyze and interpret website traffic data, and make decisions about the engagement strategy and best temporal intervals for news posting on various social media platforms. In other words, engagement editors play the role of the boundary-spanner within and beyond the organization. How to manage and motivate engagement editors thus warrant scrutiny.

This paper aims to examine whether and how the leadership style influences job performance of engagement editors. We employ the conservation of resource theory to explore the research question. The conservation of resource theory argues that individuals have a limited stock of energy (Hobfoll, 2002). Supervisors can tap into employees' energy stock, draining it and causing poor job performance. Likewise, supervisors can also help refill or conserve the energy by motivating employees or providing support and correct guidance (Liu, Chua & Pavlov, 2016; Liu and Chua, 2016). There is a full range of leadership style, ranging from the most active to the least one, with transformational leadership and passive leadership representing the opposite ends of a continuum (Bass and Avolio, 1997; Bass 1998). On the other hand, job autonomy allows employees to work with a flexible schedule or self-governing working process (Morgeson *et al.*, 2005). Empirical studies indicate that job autonomy can boost employees' job satisfaction and thereby their performance level (Parker *et al.*, 2001). This research argues that both the leadership style and job autonomy influence the resource level of individual engagement editors. This paper should provide insight into the management of engagement editors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the boundary-spanning nature, engagement editors' job includes both the execution of substantive and technical tasks (e.g., news posting at regular intervals), and those focusing on interpersonal and motivational aspects (Witt, Gerald & Ferris, 2003). Morgeson *et al.* (2005) distinguish job performance between task performance and contextual performance. Task performance refers to the activity based on a worker's prescribed role in an organization. Contextual performance, or citizenship performance, refers to the sort of activities not directly related to employees' prescribed duties. Most of these contextual works are voluntary in nature and contribute to the social and psychological core of an organization. In this study, we consider engagement editors' job performance include both elements. Figure 1 is our research model.



Source: This study.

Figure 1: Research model.

Conservation of Resources Theory

With interaction with the audience as their primary task, engagement editors play the role of the boundary spanner beyond the organizational boundaries. They thus are subject to more stressors that could drain their personal resources. For example, online bullying by haters can be stressful, depleting engagement editors' resources and leading to their reduced performance. According to the conservation of resource theory (COR), resources refer to any objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that can help an individual alleviate threats or losses caused by stress (Hobfoll, 1988; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001; Hobfoll, 2002). Individuals have to utilize available resources to maintain their performance levels. In organizations, management can provide support or guidance to increase and/or conserve employees' personal resources to mitigate the stress related losses (Hobfoll, 2011).

There are many forms of leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1997; Bass 1998). Active and effective leadership can boost employee morale and confidence, resulting in more personal resources and better performance (Bass and Avolio, 1994). This is because those leaders take into considerations individual needs and abilities of their subordinates, and motivate or instruct them accordingly (Zohar and Luria, 2004). Employees thus can perform better than they normally would.

The transformational leadership style is the most active and effective leadership style (Holtz and Hu, 2017). A transformational leader affects employees via four means, namely via providing idealized influence (i.e., charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass and Avolio, 1994). That is, transformational leaders would adapt means to influence, inspire, and stimulate their subordinates to realize their potentials and achieve goals in accordance with their individual differences. For example, transformational leaders would allow employees to participate in the decision-making process as a way to realize their potentials (Barling & Kelloway, 2010). Transformational leaders also create lower power distance, intimate superior-subordinate relationships (Zohar and Luria, 2004), trusting relationships, identification (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008), and perceived happiness (McKee *et al.*, 2011). That is, transformational leaders would rely on trust and compassion to maintain good relationships with subordinates.

In contrast, the passive leadership style, the polar opposite of the transformational leadership style, can lead to less relationship-oriented effectiveness due to the leader's inaction. Passive leaders tend to leave their subordinates by themselves after assigning the task; they only intervene, to punish workers or to remedy the bad outcomes, when employees make mistakes or fail to attain the expected goals. Passive leaders withdraw from managerial activities and avoid decision-making; consequently, workers feel dissatisfied and lack a sense of achievement (Bass, 1985).

Passive leadership is found to be prevalent; at least 20% of workers have experienced passive leadership (Aasland *et al.*, 2010). Passive leadership leads to decreasing job satisfaction and performance, and workers have no guidance to construct and enhance appropriate behaviors (DeRue *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, Skogstad *et al.* (2007) discover that through role vagueness, conflict and workplace bullying, passive leadership cause employee psychological distress. Kelloway *et al.* (2006) suggest that passive leadership would lead to the impairment of the job security and safety climate. Harold and Holtz (2015) demonstrate that passive leadership style also relates to employee uncivilized behaviors.

We thus argue that transformational leadership will save and/or replenish engagement editors' personal resources, leading to better job performance. In contrast, passive leadership will deplete engagement editors' personal resources and reduce their job performance:

H1: Transformational leadership style will be positively related to engagement editors' job performance.

H2: Passive leadership style will be negatively related to engagement editors' job performance.

Job autonomy

Job autonomy refers to the degree of freedom workers perceive to have for making their own decisions (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Job autonomy is important as it could affect an employee's sense of responsibility and task outcome (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011). Empirical studies indicate that job autonomy provides workers with opportunities to demonstrate their abilities, has positively impact on workers' personal creativity, and inspires workers to familiarize with and attempt at new tasks (Morgeson, & Campion, 2003; Dierdorff, & Morgeson, 2007). When employees have a high degree of autonomy, they can decide by themselves when and how to carry out the task, making work more flexible (Dierdorff, & Morgeson, 2007). As Hon and Chan (2013) point out, transformational leadership provides high degrees of job autonomy and improves workers' self-efficacy. Transformational leaders support and encourage job autonomy, and consequently workers improve their self-governing ability and gain confidence. Dvir *et al.* (2002) demonstrate that empowerment is one of the key characteristics of transformational leadership. Casimir and Bartram (2006), studying customer service workers, discover that transformational leadership has positive impact on employee empowerment.

Passive leaders, however, tend to avoid responsibility, withdraw from helping workers, and absent themselves from times of need (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Bass, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1997). Passive leadership at once ignore managerial responsibilities and refuse employee autonomy. Hinkin and Schriesheim (2008) argue that passive management has a negative impact on subordinate-perceived role clarity, subordinate-rated leader effectiveness, and job satisfaction. Holtz and Hu (2017) demonstrate that passive leadership reduces employee trust and contributes to a sense of unfairness in workplace. Under passive leadership, engagement editors would suffer from vague roles and lack trust in management, leading to their unwillingness to take responsibilities for their jobs. Thus we hypothesize:

H3: Transformational leadership style will be positively related to engagement editors' job autonomy.

H4: Passive leadership style will be negatively related to engagement editors' job autonomy.

The most important aspect of job autonomy is that the workers are authorized to make their decisions; employee sovereignty most often leads to high job satisfaction and work engagement, reducing the turnover rate. A high degree of job autonomy greatly reduces job insecurity (Idaszak & Drasgow, 1987). Job autonomy allows workers to develop their ability to adapt and understand the importance of enhancing their knowledge and improving their skills. Loher *et al.*, (1985) suggest that job autonomy has a significant impact on job performance; autonomous working environment nourishes and facilitates employee responsibility, and after attaining task objectives, such sense of responsibility would increase job satisfaction.

Job autonomy has positive impact on job performance, creativity and knowledge sharing (Morgeson, DelaneyKlinger, & Hemingway, 2005; Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006; Pee & Lee, 2015; Llopis & Foss, 2016). Job autonomy is crucial for highly complex and diversified works that involve various knowledge and skills, and easily spark knowledge sharing behaviors (Whittington, Goodwin, & Murray, 2004; Coelho & Augusto, 2010). Creativity tasks often demand participation and mutual learning among co-workers, and such activities rely on highly flexible working schedule and operating methods. Thusly, the hypothesis goes as such:

H5: Engagement editors' job autonomy is positively related to their job performance.

METHODOLOGY

We used a survey questionnaire to collect data. We derived our measures from existing scales and adapted them to suit our research context. To better understand the work context and process of social media engagement editors, we interviewed 2 engagement editors and 3 managers in a social media news organization in Taiwan. After compiling an English version of the questionnaire, the survey items were first translated into Chinese by a research assistant. The survey items were next verified and refined for translation accuracy by two bilingual scholars. The Chinese version of the draft was then pretested with 2 senior news editors for examining face and content validity, resulting in modification of the wording of some items. We operationalized all constructs using multi-item reflective measures with a five-point Likert scale anchored from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The measures are discussed below.

Based on Judge & Bono (2000), transformational leadership was measured with five items assessing the extent to which individual engagement editors perceive supervisors' leadership style that promotes the supervisor-subordinate relationship and individualized concern. Example items include "my supervisor talks to us about his/her most important values and beliefs" and "my supervisor spends time teaching and coaching." Passive leadership was measured by four items assessing the extent to which individual engagement editors perceive that supervisors withdraw from making decisions and managerial activities. Example items include "my supervisor spends his/her time trying to 'put out fires'" and "my supervisor fails to intervene until problems become serious." Job autonomy was measured by five items assessing the extent to which individual engagement editors have discretion to make decisions about their work (Breaugh, 1985). Example items include "I am free to decide how to go about getting my work done" and "I am able to decide for myself what my objectives are." We assessed job performance with

four items adapted from Witt and Ferris (2003). Example items include “I create effective working arrangements with team members and partners” and “I develop and maintain positive relationships without our audience.”

Sample and Data Collection

A cross-sectional survey was administrated to collect data from 150 social media engagement editors in 19 news organizations in Taiwan. One hundred and twenty-two responses were returned and valid for subsequent analysis, yielding an effective response rate of 81.3%. Tables 1 exhibits the characteristics of the sample. Of the respondents, 71% were less than 30 years old, and 70% had experiences in managing online communities for less than 3 years. Our data reflects the reality that social media engagement editing is still in its adolescence in the news industry of Taiwan. Thus, most respondents are relatively young and junior.

Table 1. Profile of the respondents (N=122)

	No.	%
Gender		
Male	43	35
Female	79	65
Ages		
20-25	43	35
26-30	44	36
31-35	22	18
36-40	6	5
40 above	7	6
Year(s) of experience in managing online communities		
Less than one year	24	20
1-3 years	61	50
3-5 years	26	21
5-7 years	8	7
More than 7 years	3	2

Non-response bias was assessed using the procedure recommended by Armstrong and Overton (1977). By considering the last group of respondents as most likely to be similar to non-respondents, a comparison of the first and last quartiles of respondents based on return dates provides a test of response bias. No significant differences between the first and last quartiles of the respondents were found on firm size based on the independent sample t test ($p=0.681$). Accordingly, non-response bias should not be a serious concern in this study.

Data analysis

A PLS structural equation model (PLS-SEM) was constructed using SmartPLS Version 3.2.7 for measurement validation and hypothesis testing.

Assessment of common method variance

To assess common method variance (CMV), Harmon's single-factor test was conducted (Podsakoff *et al.* 2003). As expected, four factors with eigenvalues of >1 were extracted and collectively accounted for 68.82% of the variance in the data, with the first factor accounting for 37.07% of said variance, which indicates that CMV does not influence our model seriously.

Measurement model evaluation

We assessed the validity and reliability of the items and constructs according to the guidelines from Henseler *et al.* (2016) and Hair *et al.* (2017). Outer loadings for all items were higher than 0.7 and significant at 1% level except for three items (one of transformational leadership, one of passive leadership, and one of job autonomy), resulting in the items deletion (Hair *et al.* 2017). The ρ_A , composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha estimates, reported in Table2, were above 0.7 for all constructs, indicating good internal consistency and the reliability of the scales (Hair *et al.* 2017; Henseler *et al.* 2016). We further assessed the convergent validity of our constructs based on average variance extracted (AVE). The AVE of each construct exceeded the minimum threshold value of 0.5 (Hair *et al.* 2017; Henseler *et al.* 2016). The combined results demonstrated sufficient convergent validity of the constructs.

Discriminant validity is established when (1) items load more highly on the construct that they are intended to measure than on other constructs, (2) the square root of the AVE by each construct is larger than the inter-construct correlations (Hair *et al.* 2017), and (3) heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation (HTMT) is significantly smaller than 1. Cross-loadings were computed by calculating the correlations between a latent variable's component scores and the manifest indicators of other latent constructs (Hair *et al.* 2017). Without exception, all items loaded more highly on their own construct than on other constructs. As shown in Table 2, the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the correlations between the construct and other constructs, indicating that all the constructs shared more variances with their indicators than with other constructs. All HTMT values, also

shown in Table 2, were significantly smaller than 1 with 95% CI, indicating clear discriminant between two constructs. Thus, our measures exhibited sufficient discriminant validity.

Table 2. Inter-construct correlations, reliability measures, and HTMT (N=122)

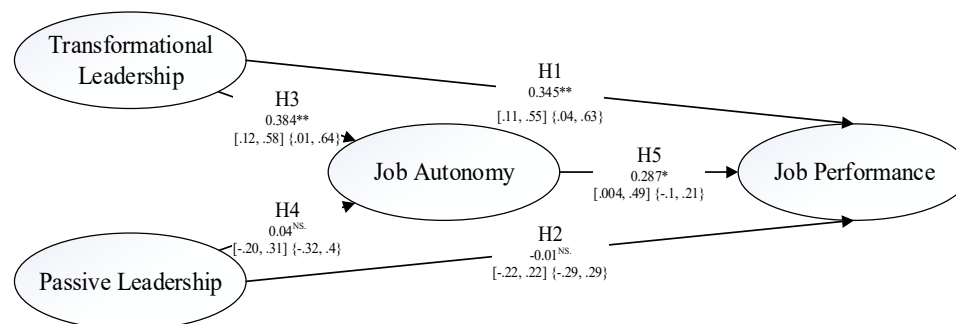
Construct	Items	ρ_A	Cron. α	CR.	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Transformational leadership	4	.85	.84	.89	.68	.82			
2. Passive leadership	3	.94	.90	.94	.83	-.67 (.59; .86)	.91		
3. Job autonomy	4	.84	.80	.87	.63	0.36 (.22; .62)	-.22 (.12; .44)	.79	
4. Job performance	4	.82	.77	.85	.59	0.45 (.33; .69)	-.32 (.17; .52)	.41 (.18; .72)	.77

Note: (1) Square roots of average variance extracted are shown on the diagonal; (2) HTMT and their 95% CI are shown in parentheses (HTMT; 95% CI, two-tailed test); (3) the 95% CI of HTMT are estimated by 5,000 bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping with confidence intervals bias corrected (Henseler *et al.*, 2016).

Structural Model

We first assessed multi-collinearity by examining each set of predictor constructs separately for each subpart of the research model (Hair *et al.* 2017). In our model, all the variance inflation factors (VIF) of endogenous constructs are less than 2.2 which is well below the cutoff value of 5 (Hair *et al.* 2017), indicating no multi-collinearity problem in our model.

To assess the significance of the path coefficients in the inner model, SmartPLS was applied to generate 5,000 samples using a bootstrapping technique with the PLS algorithm, no sign changes, a path weighting scheme, a bias-corrected and accelerated CI, use Lohmoeller settings for initial weights, and two-tailed test (Hair *et al.* 2017). The full model has an adjusted R² of 25% for job performance and 11.4% for job autonomy. Figure 2 shows the result of structural model estimation.



Note: ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; NS. Not significant; CI bias corrected [2.5%, 97.5%]; {0.5%, 99.5%}

Source: This study.

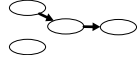
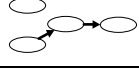
Figure 2: Result of structural model.

We first examine the direct effects of our research model. The results show that while transformational leadership (support H1: p<0.05) has significant effect on job performance, passive leadership fails to do the same thing (reject H2: p>0.05). Transformational leadership affects job autonomy positively (support H3: p<0.01), whereas passive leadership does not influence job autonomy (reject H4: p>0.05). Our analysis also reveals that job autonomy positively influences job performance (support H5: p<0.05). Finally, the effects of the control variables on job performance are insignificant (i.e., years of experience in managing online communities, and gender).

To test mediating effect of job autonomy, we followed the guidelines suggested by Zhao *et al.* (2010) for justifying full or partial mediation and conducted the mediation regression method with bias corrected bootstrap approach for examining the significance of indirect paths. We then adopted the simple mediation model (Hayes 2013; Preacher and Hayes 2004) in order to test the indirect paths with single mediators in the model. Because these approaches are regression based, we used PLS algorithm to obtain latent variables of the research constructs as inputs for performing the mediation regression method and 5,000 resampling on SPSS macros provided by Hayes (2013). Based on these procedures, all indirect paths can be tested reliably and validly.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the mediation model. As suggested by Zhao *et al.* (2010), we first examined the significance of indirect effects. The results indicate that the indirect effect of transformational leadership on task performance through job autonomy is significant at p<0.05 level since zero is excluded in the 95% confidence interval. The indirect effect of passive leadership on task performance through job autonomy is insignificant at p<0.05. We then examined the significance of direct effect from independent variable to dependent variable with the mediator controlled in order to justify full or partial mediation (see column c' in Table 3). Consequently, job autonomy partially mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance.

Table 3. Significance of single-mediator paths

Row	Graphical representation	c	α	β	c'	$\alpha\beta$	Sobel Z	Bootstrap 95% CI	Type
1		.43 (.00)	.38 (.00)	.29 (.00)	.32 (.00)	.11	2.34	.02, .25	Partial mediation
2		-.32 (.77)	.04 (.73)	-.04 (.00)	-.03 (.00)	-.04	0.33	-.05, .12	Nonsignificance

Note: c = the total effect of independent variable on dependent variable;
 α = the effect of independent variable on mediating variable;
 β = the effect of mediating variable on dependent variable when controlled independent variable;
c' = the effect of independent variable on dependent variable when controlled mediating variable
t values shown in parenthesis

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper examines the research question as to whether and how the leadership style influences social media engagement editors from the perspective of COR. We discover that transformational leadership contributes to the improved job performance and autonomy; such finding is consistent with past literature. Transformational leaders care about employee needs and development, form trusting relationship with their subordinates, and utilize rewards and encouragement to increase employee motivation; transformational leaders are also willing to empower their workers by offering sufficient job autonomy. Consequently, the workers gain confidence and feel a sense of achievement. This finding is consistent with the research on job autonomy of news reporters (Wang & Huang, 2010). That is, the work of engagement editors is similar to that of news reporters; they have to manage various news issues and handle the chaotic and dynamic nature of news events; high degree of job autonomy helps engagement editors conserve resources and deal with challenges from ever-changing environment. Furthermore, this finding is in line with the literature on transformational leadership and self-determination: transformational leadership helps employees fulfill their internal needs and thusly increase the level of self-determination (Gilbert, Horsman & Kelloway, 2016).

While past literature mostly focused on the negativity of the passive leadership style, this research detects no significant negative effect of passive leadership. That is, although passive leadership does not contribute to performance, it inflicts no significant damage to performance either. Passive leaders basically leave their workers alone, avoiding decision-making and ignoring problems; they cannot enhance workers' appropriate behaviors (Harold & Holtz, 2015). Under passive leadership, supervisors and engagement editors share no trusting relationship, but they are not at odds either. Therefore, if engagement editors follow organizational rules, they should be able to maintain an acceptable level of performance (Liu, Chua & Pavlov, 2016). Furthermore, as passive leaders withdraw from involvement, engagement editors attain job autonomy from the structural design of organizations; thus, passive leadership has no significant impact of any kind on job autonomy.

To conclude, this paper finds that the transformational leadership style has a significant impact on job performance, with job autonomy partially mediating the positive relationship. Even though passive leadership has no negative impact on job performance, it is an ineffective style. As time goes on, without any supervisor involvement, employee performance and motivation would eventually deteriorate. Some researchers argue that passive leaders apply the non-involvement policy because they respect their subordinates, and such style contributes to employee creativity in certain situations (Ryan & Tipu, 2013). This study, however, suggests that while creativity is important to engagement editors, they are also greatly in need of supervisor support. Being the boundary spanners, engagement editors have to frequently engage in internal and external communications, and constantly consume personal resources to engage fans and defend the organizations from haters or any attack. The non-involving and withdrawing attitude of passive leaders most likely would make engagement editors feel desperate and exhausted, and eventually withdraw from their duty. Thus, organizations should not promote passive leaders.

This study has some limitations. First, this study conducted a cross-sectional survey. Our conclusion thus is only tentative. Second, this paper adopts perceptual measures that may not accurately reflect the true relationships between the constructs. We thus conducted a Harmon's single-factor test which indicates this limitation is not serious. Third, we only study social media engagement editors in the news industry. Future studies may consider other industries with a similar focus on online customer engagement (e.g., online retailing). This may enhance generalizability of our results.

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