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# Conceptualizing the brand in social media community: The five sources model



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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media is challenging the ways that marketing academics and practitioners conceptualize and manage brands. This research explores the consumers' specific motivations for the purpose and structure of the consumption of brands in social media community. Keeping the evolving economic relevance of social consumption in mind, the resulting conceptual model has been designed to give a better understanding of the unique branding opportunities and relationships that social media present to brand managers. The research employs a triangulated method that includes a social media-based Facebook focus group and face-to-face interviews. The findings suggest that consumers expect some very specific two-way interactions with brands and that social media may be the only way to effectively deliver these demands. This study identifies five core drivers of brand consumption in a social media community articulated in the *Five Sources Model*: functional, emotional, self-oriented, social and relational. These core drivers represent unique opportunities for brands to enhance their relationships with their customers and to increase the likelihood of an active and beneficial online community built around their brands. Future research implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2013 one in four people globally use social networks (1.73 billion people) and this will rise to 2.55 billion in 2017 (eMarketer, 2014). In sum, social media is changing the game and it will have a major impact on business (Sands et al., 2011; Corstjens and Umblies, 2012); transforming consumer behavior, relationships and traditional brand practice (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Consumers now possess almost unlimited opportunities to engage with brands (Christodoulides et al., 2012; Helm and Jones, 2010). The results of this increased brand access mandate changes in branding strategies towards engagement platforms (Naylor et al., 2012; Verhoef et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Therefore, understanding brand consumption in a social media community demands a shift from marketer led brand to customer ownership and co-creation of meaning (Ostrom et al., 2010). Brand consumption is increasingly carried out in a social community collective context in which consumption value is an uninterrupted social process of stakeholder interactions (Vock et al., 2013; Merz

et al., 2009). Consumption then becomes the social co-production of shared meanings (Tuominen, 2007; De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001). As Laroche et al. (2012) found, brand communities in social media had positive effects on the brand as well as shared community foundations, value creation processes as well as service quality (Ellahi and Bokhari, 2013). This continuous process of consumption and re-production intensifies the intangibility of the process, magnifies extensions (Van Riel et al., 2001): making it difficult for brand and consumer to have defined points of meaning (McDonald et al., 2001, p. 345). Even for product brands, which are not actually consumed within social media, the shift to social media as an additional channel for sales or advertising is relevant (Hoffman and Novak, 2012; Toral et al., 2009). Consumers are transformed from quiet, unnoticed individuals into a loud ram-bunctious noisy collective who want to 'change' the world (Libai et al., 2010; Patterson, 2011). Consumption now orients around a community of stakeholders that create and exchange content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) democratically (Reyneke et al., 2011), in cluttered, excessive spaces (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011; Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013) where real-time accessibility and exchange are a social norm (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Service brands are also increasingly being consumed within the social media community, increasing the need for a better understanding of this consumption behavior.

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### 1.1. Research question

Despite the unique challenges faced by brands, few models exist that explain the role of the brand in the relationships with consumers' and their social media consumption. As a result, marketers have had to impose traditional rules in brand communities. Like a large echoing room full of shouting people, this has created a torrent of continuous organized chaos that makes up brand consumption in the social media community. Therefore, to address this deficiency, we pose the following research question:

*How are brands conceptualized in the consumption of social media community?*

In this study the practice of consumption plays an important role in a consumer's everyday existence and reality. Therefore, our definition of consumption is based on Holt (1995): consuming is comprised of structure and purpose. In this way consumption encapsulates the unique characteristics of the two mediums; brand and social media technology: (1) structure of consumption is both brand and community and (2) purpose of consumption for the individual oneself as well interpersonal interactions with community.

To start building a theory of the social media brand we apply the grounded theory approach to the development of the conceptual model (Campbell et al., 2011; Goulding, 2005). A review of theoretical and practitioner literature on brands and social media lays the groundwork for a series of non-directive face-to-face interviews (Hirschman, 1986) with brand consumers who actively participate in brand social media communities. A concurrent social media Facebook focus group (Kozinets, 2010) allows triangulation of the data and informs the development of a framework that suggests that brand consumption in the social media community is characterized by five core consumption values called the *Five Sources Model*: functional, emotional, self-oriented, social, and relational. Understanding these values is an important way to understand the structure and purpose of consumption in the consumers' everyday lives and experiences (Campbell et al., 2011).

### 1.2. Paper organization

In the following section we review prior literature on the social media community and on brands. Specifically with aim of understanding social media brand consumption. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, this section provides a theory-based context for the subsequent data analysis and the development of the conceptual model. The next section describes the method employed to develop the conceptual model and uncover the consumer's consumption habits and motivations in the social media community. The remainder of the manuscript lays out the resulting propositions and *Five Sources Model* that will inform the discussion and the practitioner implications that follow.

### 1.3. Contribution

The main contribution of this paper is three-fold. First, while, some studies have focused on brand related constructs (e.g., Georgi and Mink, 2013), most do not purposefully build a brand-specific model in social media community. Therefore, this research constructs a new model based on empirical evidence called the *Five Sources Model*. This model is important to branding theory as it positions social media community-based brand consumption around five core consumption values. Second, this model begins the process of conceptual model development. We are confident that this model and empirical evidence will motivate debate and discussion. Therefore, our paper places a strong emphasis on future research. Finally, the grounding of this process in consumer evidence also helps practitioners understand the relevance to everyday

branding practice. The comprehensive evidence collected online and offline helps us understand the role of these consumption values in the consumers' daily lived experiences.

## 2. Understanding social media branding

The conceptualization of community has a long history in sociological, cultural and communication research (Peck, 1987). Often the term is applied to almost any group of people, regardless of online or offline context, where the type of bond between the stakeholders defines the community. The idea of a consumption community arose because consumers have shared feelings and activities in the consumption of common objects (Friedman et al., 1992), for example, of brand cited such as Macintosh, Harley Davidson and Star Trek. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define these communities as a human consumption context where members are non-geographically bonded and their structured social relationships are defined by shared morality, consciousness, rituals and traditions: communities as linking places or communal affiliation (Cova, 1997). Further, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) argue that these relationships help to form consumption subcultures to meet specialized needs (Fournier and Lee, 2009).

Often consumption revolves around the brand: a human affiliation in which a shared passion or interest toward a particular product, service or consumption activity unites the members. The brand becomes a fulcrum or bond of specific interrelationships (Davis et al., 2000). Therefore, consumers in brand communities are 'psychically' connected: a union that helps members gratify functional or emotional needs (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Murray, 1991).

However, in recent years social media has intensified instant personal interaction between the brand and its community (Nambisan and Watt, 2011). The ease of participating in online social communities removes both the physical and temporal barriers, increasing the likelihood of participation from consumers who may not have been able or inclined to do so previously. Access has moved beyond the fixed physical space of the computer screen to the ubiquitous mobile channel of the smart phone: instant consumption and interactivity is now further fueled by brand and conversation related content from other connected channels of communication (e.g., radio and TV) (Davis and Sajtos, 2008). For brands, this enhanced interaction capability is an efficient way for users to share their experiences and opinions of the brand. Their inherent intangibility adds to the potential for community members to actually shape the brand offering and impact other users' interpretation of the brand.

We argue that the discussion of brand consumption in a social media context enhances previous work that defines brands. For example, as a promise (Berry, 2000), a process (Merz et al., 2009; De Chernatony and Dall'Olmio Riley, 1999), a relationship partner (Fournier, 1998), a fulcrum of experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Davis et al., 2000) and a performance (Rahman et al., 2009). The common theme of these descriptions is the concept that the brand is the outcome or fulcrum of the interactions between the brand and the consumers (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmio Riley, 1999; Berry, 2000), where interactions are based on value co-creation (Merz et al., 2009).

In addition we are that given the importance of community in defining the meaning of the brand to individual and collective self-identity, emphasis is placed on brand personality in social media community brand consumption (Avis, 2012; Seimiene, 2012; Aaker, 1997). Aaker (1997) suggests that consumption is motivated by the brands human characteristics. The power of intense collective social interactions pivoting on the brand will create a valued experience for consumers. Not only will it help the consumer and marketers make the brand interaction more tangible in the mind of the consumer, it will also enhance the subjective

experience, that is, brand consumption also revolves around the co-creation of their constantly changing actual, ideal, social and virtual selves.

We may find with brand personality-based consumption, the ease of participating in an online community may increase the diversity of its community members. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) posit that virtual communities lower the importance of members' social characteristics, physical appearance and nonverbal expressions, but elevate the importance of content and freedom to express. Cova and Pace (2006) agreed and concluded that consumption is the personal self-exhibition of brand rituals in front of other consumers.

Also, some consumers may be avid users who would take part in the community even if the barriers to participation were higher, but others may be less interested in the brand and want other benefits from their participation. It could also be so that the moral responsibility and social ties that often characterize face-to-face communities may decrease in an online community (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Social media brand consumption may only be devoted to specific commercial or informational objectives rather than social responsibility and mutual support.

Finally, social media brand consumption places emphasis on the interactive experience (Yoo et al., 2010; Downes and McMillan, 2000; Rafaeli, 1988). Consumption is two-way. In social media consumption the roles between consumer, brand and community coalescence (Davis and Sajtos, 2008). As they co-create the experience, they seek personalization (Yoon et al., 2008; Vlastic and Kesic, 2007; McMillan and Hwang, 2002) and the immediate experience of interactivity (Haeckel, 1998; Hoffman and Novak, 1996). It is a contingent process of co-creation of the mediated conversation, fueled by both the consumer and the advertiser's need for the benefits that arise from the interactivity (Yoo et al., 2010; Park and Park, 2009; Trappey and Arch, 2005). Further, this type of interactivity moves beyond the creation of monologued content. Cui et al. (2010) argue that this responsiveness mediates other factors such as social presence cues, which will have an important impact on word-of-mouth and social media communities (Chan and Li, 2010). It evolves and is a form of responsive dialogue that does not merely react to a message stimulus. Rather, a type of dialogue that is a commitment to the brand or part of an active relationship (Mollen and Wilson, 2010).

Despite the importance of this early work on brand consumption in social media community, we have found no studies that focus solely on social media community and brand consumption. Therefore, building from this preliminary understanding, this research will explore the nature of the consumer's consumption of the brand in a social media community, paying close attention to the benefits that consumers derive from their participation as well as the way that brand meaning is created and morphed by the community members.

### 3. Method

The research takes a grounded theory approach, triangulating an online Facebook focus group with offline interviews (Wunderlich et al., 2013; Harrison and Reilly, 2011). This dual approach places the researcher at the focal point of a complex and elusive phenomenon (Gummesson, 2003) and allows for a process of questioning of the emerging conceptual model (Pettigrew, 2000). The online focus group allowed for participation, anonymity and accessibility (Kozinets, 2010; Hemetsberger and Reinhardt, 2009). Consumers can be in control of what they say, how they say it, and the meaning of their contribution (Cooke and Buckley, 2008; Gaiser, 2008; Dholakia and Zhang, 2004) over a longer period of time (Stewart and Williams, 2005; Oringderff, 2004).

Further, the non-directive interviews further allow for the researcher to focus on the consumers' narratives of their experience (Tanggaard, 2009; Thompson et al., 1989) of everyday brand interactions (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2011; Cova and Pace, 2006). Non-directive interviewing allows the data collection process to explore each consumer's unique story (Jarratt, 1996; Grove and Fisk, 1992). The flexible approach also allows for emerging themes to be explored at trigger points of the conversation (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Using a triangulated online Facebook focus group with offline interviews blended well with the grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) as it allowed for the testing of the emerging thematic structure (Kozinets, 2010). To be able to organize the systematic process of data analysis, this study used theoretical memos which help to create categories at a conceptual level. To achieve consistency in data collection, it was necessary to focus on the concepts that emerged in each data segment to build an understanding of the phenomena (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Emerging concepts were labeled and constantly compared with preliminary propositions and other findings that had emerged at the prior levels of data analysis. Therefore, similarity and variation was identified (Ng and Hase, 2008).

#### 3.1. Online facebook focus group

Eight consumers made up a closed group with the researcher serving as facilitator (Table 1). The group discussion began on March 15, 2012 and remained active over a two-month period. The majority of the participants were recruited through other brand-related communities in Facebook. These communities gave their permission to use their Facebook and Twitter channels to post a call for research participants. The main selection criteria for participants were that the participants had to be over 18 years of age and have daily general interactions with brands in a social media community.

During data collection, participants were asked to respond to questions that were regularly posted by the group facilitator. These

**Table 1**  
Focus group and interview participant profiles

Code	Age	Gender	Occupation	Location
Face to face interviews				
1 AO-IT	41	Male	IT Manager	NZ
2 AC-CM	32	Female	Community Manager	NZ
3 AT-MC	41	Male	Media Consultant	NZ
4 DT-BD	37	Female	Brand Developer	NZ
5 AZ-PA	40	Male	Political Analyst	NZ
6 BM-SM	37	Female	Sales Manager	NZ
7 DT-PM	41	Female	Promotion Manager	NZ
8 KB-MM	27	Female	Marketing Manager	NZ
9 DD-LD	53	Female	Landscape Designer	NZ
10 EO-CC	25	Female	Communication Consultant	NZ
11 RI-CM	43	Male	Community Manager	NZ
12 RJ-SE	55	Male	Self-Employed (IT)	NZ
13 AN-PJM	26	Male	Project Manager	NZ
14 JM-GM	42	Male	Business Owner (Construction)	NZ
15 SA-AM	61	Male	Business Owner (Automotive Service)	NZ
Facebook focus group				
16 TC-ED	64	Female	Teacher	USA
17 KQ-IT	36	Male	IT Specialist	NZ
18 KF-FM	45	Female	Full-Time Mother	Germany
19 VN-AP	38	Female	Accounts Payable	NZ
20 SM-EM	37	Male	eMarketing Manager	NZ
21 CR-TA	36	Male	Travel Agent	NZ
22 MN-ST	41	Male	School Teacher	NZ
23 LR-NS	50	Female	Nurse	USA

questions were based upon responses from other participants and findings gathered from the face-to-face offline interviews. The group was evenly divided in terms of gender, with ages ranging from 36 to 64. Most participants reside in Auckland, NZ, but some international residents were recruited. All participants were tertiary educated, and seven participants have part-time or full-time positions as specialists in different industries. It is noted that the level of tertiary education may limit the generalizability of these results. However, while there are country variations, we find that our sample in both the online focus group and consumer interviews is consistent with recent data on the education level of social media consumers in that most have a college degree or greater (Skelton, 2012). The data collected represented text and image posts of their responses to questions, other consumers and randomly unprompted responses.

### 3.2. Consumer interviews

Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted in a non-directive manner between March and May, 2012. The interviews took place at a neutral location for the participants and lasted from 1 to 1.5 h. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for the analysis. The participants were recruited using similar approaches to those deployed in the netnography. The participants ranged from 25 to 55 years of age and reside in Auckland, NZ. The eight males and seven females are all tertiary educated; 12 participants have part-time or full-time positions as specialists in different industries; and three participants are self-employed (Table 1). The interviews were designed to gather insights regarding: (1) the participants' memorable brand experiences within a social media community; (2) the participants' brand-related activities and forms of consumption; and (3) their consumption-related meanings and value.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Consistent with the grounded theory approach, data analysis began immediately with the first set of transcripts, and this was on-going (Thompson, 1997). Following Miles and Huberman's (1994) tactics for assessing research validity, the research constantly compared the research findings derived from the online and offline data. Data were initially divided into two categories – the Facebook focus group and the offline in-depth interviews. Each participant was given a code, which included the participant's initials and an abbreviation of his/her occupation. Focus group and interview transcripts were read seven times, and were guided by a set of preliminary propositions that evolved from the literature review in order to replicate and extend the research findings (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). A secondary reader and verifying was also used in this process.

Following the grounded theory comparative mode, every time new themes occurred, they were compared against those identified previously to uncover possible links. The first set of codes was created using data from the Facebook focus group, and their themes were then tested against data derived from the face-to-face interviews.

Analysis focused on generalization of the findings by comparing the degree to which the evolving evidence supported or contradicted the preliminary propositions. The first and broadest set of codes focused on the object of consumption and produced three categories – service, tangible goods, and media brands. Then seven characteristics of consumption context evolved – convenience, usability, comfort, relevance of location, number of followers, quality of content, and applicability of mobile apps. Finally 45 elements of brand consumption merged into five core categories that represent consumers' motivations that are related to brand consumption in a social media community – functional, emotional, self-oriented, social and relational.

## 4. Findings

The five core elements of brand consumption in a social media community that evolved from the data analysis are presented here as propositions that inform a conceptual model. Some of the participant descriptions below address more than one perceived benefit, demonstrating the overlap of the five core elements.

### 4.1. Functional brand consumption

Evidence from the focus group and face-to-face interviews demonstrates that some consumers consider social media to be a platform for addressing problems when other communication channels, such as email or phones, are unavailable, inconvenient or time/money consuming. The data suggests that consumers contact brands with the following five primary functional motivations in mind (Aksoy et al., 2011): (1) to solve problems, (2) to send specific inquiries, (3) to search for information, (4) to evaluate the service before purchasing, and (5) to gain access to a brand's special deals and giveaways.

The participants' stories about their memorable experiences with brands often refer to service functionality, and particularly to problem solving:

“One day I tweeted to my vet and I said “Look, I'm little worried about my dog, he has fleas once again, what would you recommend?” And they just tweeted me back “Try one course of Primasone”. I would have usually had to call to the vet or gone down the road and be charged for this information. As it was – I just was sitting at my desk tweeting to my vet.” (DT-PM)

In this case, as in many others, social media allow consumers to reduce the effort or money they would normally expend for a service. When participants were asked in what case they would contact a service using social media, many of them agreed that scheduling an appointment or sending inquires would be one such case:

“I don't have time to go to the [bank] branch. If I have a question I can chat with them via online consultant. And sometimes it's not a business hour. You know before social media, the bank sent you a letter or insurance companies, for example. Now if I have a question regarding policy I can send them a tweet. And they respond back to me. Before social media there were not such things. You had to wait. Now you just go online and it's instant.” (DT-BD)

Some of these consumers would never have contacted a service via social media unless certain problems had occurred. There is evidence that some consumers often begin engaging with a brand when they experience service failure. Consumers also report an expectation that brands will provide them with regularly updated information such as useful tips, new knowledge and information about the service offering:

“I get notifications from NZ Herald daily, because I want to be updated about national and world news.” (VN-AP); “I don't check business pages on a regular basis until I have a reason to. I'd rather spend my time checking news items, new tech coming up, something which adds to my informational level on any particular area. So I don't go and source a business page without reasons.” (AT-SM)

Consumers often connect the need for information with the possibility of learning something new about the service (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007). Accordingly, a lack of expected

information can negatively influence the consumer's impression of the brand itself:

"Often there is a campaign with a 'Like Us on Facebook' button, and then people get to the Facebook page and they are like 'What the hell?' There is nothing here to recognize that. I have come to the Facebook page, and I want to learn more about it." (RI-CM)

Some consumers utilize social media to provide brands with feedback regarding their experiences, publically expressing what they think about service quality (e.g., [Ellahi and Bokhari, 2013](#)), brand initiatives or even advertising campaigns:

"When they [Air New Zealand] launched the Rico campaign I was very vocal and particularly scathing in my critique of the campaign... I felt strongly that it undermined the brand significantly and could alienate the American market." (TC-ED)

The data also suggests that some consumers expect prompt actions from a service provider in response to their changing requirements. Consumers point toward social media as a shortcut for addressing their emerging needs:

"I remember we were after tickets, I think that were the New Zealand Open, and my friend was after those tickets for us. And he communicated with a person from the New Zealand Open on Twitter. And he got replies like straight away, which for me was quite spectacular." (KB-MM)

Some consumers prefer social media interactions with service businesses to phone calls or offline meetings:

"I follow Air New Zealand on my Twitter. And they tweet something like, 'OK, Hurry up. Let's grab a deal'. They just probably put two lines, but that is what makes me open their pages. I don't wanna spend a lot of time going through the page, I want instant information so this information has to be there for me, and otherwise I will not be interested." (DT-BD)

Evidence shows that some consumers use brands' social media channels not only to evaluate service offers via other consumer's opinions and interactions but also to gain tacit knowledge through personal experiences before making a purchase decision. Many participants consider social media a tool for researching a brand. Asked how she would feel if business pages disappeared from social media, one of the interviewees was emphatic:

"Lost... because before I do anything I always look at people on Facebook or Twitter, to see what they are about, I always check their web page. If they didn't have Facebook, I wouldn't be able to see how they interact with people. As an example with a car mechanic, I want to know what is going on with this car mechanic before I go there. It's a way for us, as customers, to research the product, to research a coffee place before we go there." (DT-PM)

For some consumers their interest in a brand's specials, giveaways and gifts is a primary motivator for social media interaction ([Parsons et al., 2014](#)). In exchange for giveaways or discounts, these consumers are willing to participate in brand activities such as contests and opinion polls:

"If the company announces a contest via the app, I would definitely read it and depending on what it is, I may participate, especially if there is a reward." (CR-TA)

Other participants report that possible rewards are the *only* reason they engage with a brand via social media. Engagement with brands in social media enables some consumers to stay informed about a company's deals and giveaways and participate in brand activities as soon as they become available. The findings

demonstrate that such reward-focused communications with brands can actually lead to the beginning of a new relationship:

"One of the pages I follow offered \$99 headshots for a specific period. I took advantage of the offer and am delighted with the results. This means that I will take more notice of that page's updates in the future." (TC-ED)

Consumers seem to feel that social media make communication with brands more convenient and accessible. These interactions allow the consumer to gather information about the brand and its product offering, gain useful information, and see how the brand treats its customers. From the consumers' point of view, contacting brands via social media is more convenient than making phone calls or sending inquiries using websites ([Collier and Kimes, 2013](#)). In this respect, the consumer's impression of the brand may often depend on how easily they can access the information they require or reach the company's experts. This finding may indicate that some consumers engage with brands in social media only for rewards. This places emphasis on a transactional marketing paradigm rather than relationship marketing ([Coviello et al., 2002](#)).

#### 4.2. Emotional brand consumption

Another common theme that emerges from the consumer interviews and focus group transcripts is the emotional connection to the brand, which is reinforced by enjoyable interactions. The three most common emotional motivations for brand interaction via social media include (1) alleviating personal problems or situations, (2) feeling privileged, recognized, and valued by a brand, and (3) escapism and satisfaction of curiosity. The participants in the Facebook focus group were asked to choose a few images from some randomly selected images that reflect their experiences with specific brands via social media. The findings illustrate that participants give great weight to pleasant service experiences. For example, one participant chose a picture of a rock musician performing on stage in front of a large audience, accompanied by the following comment:

"This is what you feel when you open their (Air New Zealand) mobile application. It is sooo good." (CR-TA)

Involvement in the co-creation of service offerings produces feelings of enjoyment for some of the participants.

"Like yesterday I commented on a pull when somebody asked if LinkedIn should have an instant messenger. That's a new feature, I had a quite few things to say, I got engaged, I started going back to this page to check – there is so much for learning...And that is the value, value of information. I have my viewpoint, but that's one viewpoint. When 47 other viewpoints are coming at me – it got me." (AT-SM)

Interaction with other community members is another source of enjoyment for some consumers. Their support provides a form of community value ([Rosenbaum, 2008](#)):

"The biggest pleasure is when somebody likes your comments, somebody you don't know. And especially, if like 5 or 6 people liked that comment, you sort of feel like a superstar." (KB-MM)

Consumers also consume brands in a social media community as a form of entertainment:

"Like the Old Spice ads on YouTube...They're really funny, so it has to be something that I kind of engage with or find funny or compelling first and then the brand will literally get brand association by creating something that is like that. I'm not likely

to wade through something that is instructional or self-serving.” (RJ-CM)

Conversely, the data indicate that *lack* of enjoyment and entertainment in brand interactions may actually result in on-off consumption encounters with a brand:

“If I follow New World and they don’t have a post at least once a week, I’m going to get really bored really quickly with them. And then if they do end up putting up a post and it’s something that I find completely boring, or irrelevant to me, chances are I’ll go off and get rid of them. I’ve done that a few times with companies.” (AO-IT)

Because some consumers are situated in concrete every day contexts, the way they consume a brand does not just reflect these contexts because it is also formed by those contexts and situations. One of the focus group participants who immigrated to the USA several years ago stated that her connections with NZ Herald or Air New Zealand through Facebook help her to feel emotionally close to her birth country. In this respect, the brand acts as a proxy to support the consumers’ own gaps and insecurities in her personal life:

“This pic epitomizes my former life in many ways and is vastly different to the life I live now.” (TC-ED)

For others, connections with brands and other people via social media can help to overcome personal obstacles. For instance, one participant emphasizes that going social made him feel more confident and conversational:

“I was afraid of becoming a part of a community; I was not interactive, but not anymore. I decided to start interacting to become a part of it and I’m stepping out of my comfort zone, because I’m confident about our business, I’m happy I can be a part of the community.” (JM-GM)

A consumer’s consumption of a brand can evolve out of a variety of emotional experiences within a social media community, and some of these experiences are deeply rooted in personality traits or motivated by personal circumstances. The evidence shows that some consumers tend to believe that brand consumption can create some sort of personal advantage and feeling of privilege or recognition by a brand. These emotional benefits enhance the brand experience for the consumer (Padgett and Allen, 1997). This finding highlights the importance of two-way communication:

“NZ brands like, for example, Less Meals, they don’t do well. Their Twitter feed is one – for Less Meals worldwide. So if you tweet them, they don’t respond. They don’t retweet even if you have got something really interesting to say.” (EO-CC)

Some consumers report that a sense of escapism accompanies their social media interaction with brands. These consumers often want to find experiences that on the one hand serve as the opposite of reality and on the other hand reflect a desired reality:

“Virtual fashion space can be very captivating, and sometimes takes me away from reality.” (VN-AP)

Some forms of escapism can create emotional experiences for some consumers by reflecting their aspirations. The data also show that a consumers’ involvement with a brand often begins with curiosity and is fueled by the experiences and knowledge that they develop through subsequent interactivity with the brand. The proximity of brands and consumers within social media has turned online communities into interactive showrooms freely available without time and location constraints. As a result, some

consumers are motivated to research and explore brands, often out of mere curiosity:

“I’ve got a nut allergy, and a beautiful Anzac recipe was posted by one of the chefs I follow. And I asked a question; ‘Do I need to substitute more flour to make it more balanced?’ and she got back straight away and said, ‘No, no it’s fine; you don’t have to.’ I was genuinely interested.” (BM-SM)

On the other hand, if a brand arouses curiosity, there is an opportunity for creating repeat consumption, as the consumer wants to maintain a connection and learn from personal experiences about the brand evolution:

“Like Pinterest. 11 million people on it, it’s the fastest growing network ever. But if someone asks me ‘Hey, do you really need to use Pinterest? – No. I don’t think so’. I don’t have business there, I don’t make money off it, its curiosity and knowledge, and I wanna know what this is. That’s what keeps me going back and keeping engaged with Pinterest. It’s the whole thing about – there might be something about it, and the only way is to go and find out.” (AT-SM)

In the context of social media, curiosity is a challenge for brands and a driver of consumption, as there is always something consumers want to find out. The findings suggest that emotions created by engaging and entertaining social media events may enhance some consumers’ hedonic experience and bring about a positive reaction to the brand. At the same time, a lack of enjoyable or entertaining experiences may result in weak or even negative consumer-brand consumption.

#### 4.3. Self-oriented brand consumption

The theme of self-oriented brand consumption that emerges from the data replicates some of the functional and emotional elements, but it varies because of the emphasis on the consumer’s lifestyle and the goals that facilitate that lifestyle. Three primary motivators contained in this core value include (1) self-actualization, (2) self-perception enhancement, and (3) self-branding. The data reveal that consumers often seek self-actualization in their experiences with brands and other consumers in a social media community:

“I cover a lot of [social media] territory in a day. I have to do this. It’s about self-actualization. It’s tacit knowledge. You recognize the gaps, keep your mind open of course, because you are always learning some little new things and filling out these gaps. It’s just the way to get the knowledge out there. The way to say, ‘Look, have you ever thought it might be like that?’ It’s important for me to be there on a maturity continuum. The goal is to affect some kind of changes. It’s a huge part of my life, but it’s never about me. It opens up the world. As a social entrepreneur I like to make a difference for people.” (DD-LD)

For some participants social media present new opportunities to consumers to realize their personal potential through brand-related activities. In this regard, some consumers take a very active role, encouraged by a network-oriented medium:

“I’m nosy. I would definitely say that this engagement with businesses and with people in social media adds value to my life, definitely. And it adds to my perception of value I can give other people. Years and years ago on a back of a bus was an ad saying, ‘Listen to news on your way to work and you will be a far more interesting person by the time you get there.’ I’m always knowledge taking.” (EO-CC)

Consumers value the ability to express themselves and share their endeavors or ideas through brand interactions. This enhances feelings of self-worth and makes the experiences valuable. Stressing the importance of authenticity, consumers tend to engage with a brand if the brand's symbolic meanings are congruent with their sense of self (Schouten, 1991). If consumers perceive a brand's symbolic meanings, as enacted in a social media community, to be relevant to their personal values, interests and beliefs, then they are more likely to consume the brand's social media. A sense of self-relevance creates a strong affiliation with a brand:

“Companies have to sit well with the customer so I'm very, very conscious of that. So I'll only like companies that I admire or who have the same ethical background that we [my family] have.” (BM-SM)

Professional responsibility represents a motivation for some consumers, who feel their career goals are enhanced through their interaction. This may place emphasis on the consumer's desire to project their ideal, social or virtual self (rather than actual self) in the social media world:

“I do follow a lot of businesses because I like to keep an eye on what they do. I also follow general industry people and journalists. I would follow a business more out of a sense of professional duty than through compelling interests of my own to follow them.” (RI-CM)

The data also indicate that some consumers may negotiate the brand's relevance to themselves. One informant reports the personal relevance of the service portion of a product-related business:

“One example would be Giapo; it's an ice cream shop in town. It's a tiny, tiny little ice cream shop. I have never even been to his ice cream shop, but I know him, I know about his specials, I know when he is making new flavors, never met him, but he creates a feeling of like a little club, like Giapo club. And I don't even like ice cream.” (DT-PM)

The above example illustrates that consumer's brand preferences in social media are convertible, dynamic and unstable. The brand may fail in the self-relevancy dimension, but it still creates a connection with some consumers through interactivity and co-creation (Hoyer et al., 2010). However in general, the evidence reinforces the notion that consumers search for brand experiences that resonate with their interests and values (Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006). Brands in a social media context seem to provide consumers with opportunities to create their identities depending on their personal goals. Self-branding in this context is characterized by the some consumers' actions that are undertaken to build their social self-identities through different brand activities, including brand endorsement and brand affiliation. By publicly showing their affiliation with certain brands, consumers differentiate themselves while indirectly giving their followers an idea about the knowledge, expertise, skills and interests they want to be known for:

“I only like to post maybe three to four times a week. If I found that other people found it interesting, I'll repost it but I will take away the link to show where it came from. So it almost looks as if it's something that I magically found. And I try, also on my personal page, to like a lot of European pages, so that what I'm bringing through is something a little different. A different perspective, different culture, different ideas, different chefs...I think it's a unique selling point as well. I have to. I work for a company but also I mightn't work for them in two or three years' time. I think it's very important to brand myself.” (BM-SM)

Such consumer interactions contribute to the construction of a consumer's social self. Additionally when brands assign the role of product tester or a reviewer to a consumer, other community members may perceive this person as an expert in the field. Participants also demonstrate a need for brand experiences that help to facilitate, optimize and manage different daily tasks. The evidence suggests that some consumers use the proximity of brand in social media to get, for example, news updates or information when it is needed, or to address their personal inquires as soon as they occur. In this regard there is an overlap with the functional and emotional aspects of brand consumption, as consumers use a brand's social media applications as tools that facilitate their daily activities:

“What happens when I wake up in the morning is I check my tweet, because I want to see what happens now on *NZ Herald*. I don't wait for the newspaper to arrive in my mailbox, I check my tweets first. It's how I get my information.” (DT-BD)

Obviously, the integration of social media in consumers' lives signifies a general shift in their consumption activities. The evidence illustrates that some consumers need experiences that help to manage the daily tasks that are related to their personal or professional life. In this respect, the need to simplify or facilitate day-to-day activities serves as a driver of consumption in social media and adds overall value to the consumption process.

#### 4.4. Social brand consumption

Social brand consumption focuses on the interactions between consumers within a brand community. The literature review highlighted the social aspect of consumers' participation in a social media community, but the data suggest specific functions that compose social value for some consumers. These include (1) experience exchange, (2) community attachment, (3) building links, and (4) social interaction. Consumers use social media to share their personal brand experiences with others, and they are willing to broadcast their consumption activities and experiences not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of others. We anticipated that consumers would pay attention to which businesses their friends like or follow in social media. Social media is a public representation self-identity: engaging for professional responsibility reflects some consumer's efforts to project their ideal self (rather than actual self). Some participants follow their friends' recommendations even if the brand is outside their personal or professional interests but others are skeptical about the influence of social media word-of-mouth:

“What Facebook is trying to sell is personal recommendations. They're always saying that a personal recommendation is the most powerful that you can get, which is absolutely true, for a plumber or an electrician or anything like that. I just don't think it's quite as neat as Facebook thinks it is...To be honest I don't actually see a lot of my Facebook friends recommending companies. I don't think it happens. Out of my friends it doesn't happen a lot. It might be different for other people.” (RI-CM)

However, evidence suggests that some consumers tend to rely on certain people's opinions, indicating the sense of community attachment that can evolve:

“You get to a point that if certain people send it to you, then you'll follow it, so it's the people that you align with or you think are credible.” (RJ-SE)

And some informants specifically report that consumption maintenance is a determinant of how they choose to interact:

“I wouldn’t promote something for a friend if I didn’t believe in the product, because that doesn’t help them nor does it help me in my relationships.” (RJ-SE)

Despite the varying opinions regarding the value of friends’ recommendations, almost all participants agree that public opinion plays an important role in the evaluation of a service:

“We were leaving for Queenstown for a holiday. So I looked through holiday homes because I didn’t want to live in a hotel. I checked some business pages...I think nowadays it’s not even about experiencing; you might not even have experiences with a company, but what other people say about it. If somebody has a really bad experience, and they post about it on a page, and in the back of your mind you can think that what happened to this person might happen to me. Nowadays it’s about what other people think. It becomes really important.” (DT-BD)

Some participants articulate the social importance of being able to engage with a brand community. They are often motivated by the notion that social media give them a chance to be heard:

“It’s important to belong to something. I don’t know why it’s necessarily social media, it’s not like I have a lack of friends. People are social creatures, right? We want to have a voice. That’s why you want to be a part of community. Internet gives you courage; it allows you to say anything you wouldn’t normally say. And it also allows you to feel like you belong. People don’t know each other, but they feel a sense of community.” (DT-PM)

Link building and networking for professional or personal purposes have also evolved as an important part of brand consumption in social media. Consumers appreciate the opportunities for developing new consumption experiences through brand affiliations in social media, while others are likely to limit their communal ties to the social media context:

“I would meet people [offline] who shared a political affiliation, but not someone who liked the same company.” (MH-ST)

Consumers generally recognize the networking benefits of being engaged in a brand community:

“It’s not as fast as face to face, it is not in real time, but there is definitely interaction on air, which you can call communication. And in terms of networking, yes, because you never know when your network is gonna be important to what you are doing right now. You have to be creating relationships that you can call on or be called on in the future. And by continuing communication again you are putting yourself in front of somebody.” (PM-GM)

The consumption of brands through the connection with others may also foster and support other activities. The data indicate that consumers sometimes use brand communities in social media to experience social interaction with other consumers. The findings suggest that consumers’ communal experiences do not necessarily imply an attachment to the brand community:

“I wouldn’t like to join a “dead” page just because someone sent me an invitation. It should be in my areas of interest, but it also should work, make daily updates, create discussions, upload pictures, offer to take part in competitions with some rewards, keep me informed about new things.” (VN-AP)

Nevertheless, being involved with a brand in social media means that some consumers read and post comments, repost and retweet the brand’s links and photos, ask questions, address

personal problems, provide feedback, share experiences and build networks. Often these consumption practices are motivated by the consumers’ need for socializing with other members of the social media community, which makes them feel as if they are a part of something tangible. Can a brand bring consumers a sense of community and add value to consumption via social media interaction? The evidence suggests that the way consumers bond with brands in social media is in many ways shaped by their communal experiences.

Through participation in brand communities and networking, social connections between consumers and brands add value not only to brand experiences, but to the consumers’ lives as well:

“I would definitely say that this engagement with businesses and with people in social media adds value to my life, definitely. And it adds value to my perception of the value I can give other people.” (EO-CC)

#### 4.5. Relational brand consumption

Relational consumption focuses on the interactions between the consumer and the brand. The relational core value describes the consumers’ desire for interaction with the brand on a human level and about brand personality (Aaker, 1997). The value is characterized by the following three motivations: (1) co-creation of the service offering, (2) the desire for personalized brand interaction, and (3) the desire to know the real people behind the brand. The “human” touch is an especially important dimension of the relational aspect of brand consumption. Personalized interactions may lead to greater expectations of the brand experience:

“That’s the thing with online; it’s such an intimate space. It’s sort of public, but at the same time it’s one-on-one. You don’t really talk to the corporation any more. You talk to the person who started it. If you have a person behind that brand page, and if you know that you’re talking to somebody who is passionate about this business, I guess just having a human face for that page would be like a good start.” (KB-MM)

Social media enable a shorter distance between consumers and brands, creating the notion that there is always someone who listens and can fix a problem:

“I don’t have time to go to the [bank] branch. If I have a question I can chat with an online consultant. And sometimes it’s not a business hour.” (DT-BD)

“It is about a personal relationship with that service, with that company. And that’s one of the reasons why I follow pages.” (AN-PJM)

Brand experiences in social media hold the promise of a personalized conversation with the brand. From a consumer’s perspective, brands become close and real in social media:

“I like the fact that I can express my side as well. Like recently Vodafone did a poll on “if you were given extra broadband, what would you use it for?” It makes you feel like you’re engaging in a business decision.” (DT-PM)

Consumers expect brands to be present in a social media community so that they can continue offline conversations with them online:

“The thing is that with companies that I like – they’re not on Facebook. There is my hairdresser. They’re amazing, these punk ladies in their 60s and they’re so funky and so cool and I love talking to them, and I think they would be great on Facebook,



but they're not. So I can't even like this company, to show people that I like them." (KB-MM)

Personalized communications from a brand and the possibility of being engaged in the brand's daily activities are two important elements of the relational aspect of consumption. Co-creation gives consumers relevant brand experiences and potentially adds value to consumption (Christodoulides et al., 2012).

#### 4.5.1. Relational archetypes

The relational motivation for brand consumption is unique in that this particular motivation seems to define the overall consumption relationships that the consumer has with the brand. Several types emerged from the data. While some reflect those proposed by Fournier (1998), others are unique to this research as they relate specifically to social media interaction.

**4.5.1.1. Fickle.** 'Fickle Relations' describes rather unstable, demanding and volatile consumption relationships that vary, based on the consumer's most recent interaction with the brand. It is not surprising that consumption is often influenced by the quality of their current brand experiences and also by the degree of brand relevance.

**4.5.1.2. Obligated.** Relational bonds between consumers and brands could also be derived from statutory obligations, not because they are planned or wanted. 'Obligated Relational Bonds' describes the consumption type of some participants who feel that they are forced to keep in touch with brands, such as banks and telecommunication services. While these respondents do choose to interact with services in social media, they tend to resent being forced to utilize the social media channels in order to receive the service they require. Statutory obligations seem to have a particular effect on some consumers' attitudes toward brands in a social media community. Even though consumers might have long-term relationships with the brand, they prefer to have brand communications offline. However, despite the lack of emotional or self-brand ties, obligated consumption can still bring about value associated with service functionality by providing consumers with convenient and accessible experiences.

**4.5.1.3. Pre-existing.** 'Pre-Existing Relations' describes consumption by some consumers who choose to engage in social media community with brands because they are already quite happy with the brand and its offerings. This often evolves into online advocacy while the social media interaction enhances the existing relationship and brand experience. Social media community participation can enhance pre-existing relationships through visualization and reinforcement of the consumer's previous brand experiences. But social media may also allow consumers to form new brand relationships, often in response to their friends' recommendations or a direct invitation from a brand to join its brand community.

**4.5.1.4. Emerged.** Relational bonds that arise in social media without the support of previous offline experiences are identified as 'Emerged Relational Bonds'. Consumption relationships that have emerged for the first time in social media may be characterized by a low degree of self-relevance, so the mode of brand interactions is fleeting and somewhat insignificant compared to pre-existing relational bonds. However, data also illustrate that if a new brand is congruent with the consumer's interests, the newly emerging relationships may be developed further and lead to liking, interactivity and co-creation.

**4.5.1.5. Casual.** Data also indicate that consumption practices in social media depend to a certain degree on the nature of a service. In this respect, consumer relationships with a brand are shaped by the frequency of service usage, regardless of offline or online context. 'Casual Relational Bonds' are defined by irregular interaction with the brand. The intensity of brand-related communications in social media to a large degree is dictated by the nature of the business and is often oriented toward the consumer's utilitarian needs. Even though the nature of some services implies casual relationships, social media may shift the focus from the functional aspect of consumption and direct it toward the satisfaction of the consumers' utilitarian, social and emotional needs, thus creating stronger relational bonds. Regardless of the consumption type, consumers do not want to interact with a faceless organization, preferring instead to know the real people behind the brand. The consumers' discourse with the brand and the co-creation activities form a bridge that builds relational bonds. The evidence shows that consumers expect brands to provide them with personalized communications. Moreover, consumers want to establish a close contact with brand representatives or experts in social media even if that contact is utilitarian and brief.

## 5. Conceptual model

The intangible nature of services gives consumers the ability to co-create the brand and help define the experience for other consumers as well. When the easy interactivity of social media is added to the mix, a situation is created that gives the consumer a great deal of control. Despite the relevance of this phenomenon to both academics and practitioners, though, little prior research has explored the coalescence of brands and social media. Insights provided by the respondents in this study allow the development of a set of propositions that explain consumers' motivations for interaction with brands in a social media community. The propositions delineated below allow for a very simple but relevant conceptual model of brand consumption in a social media community. This is called the *Five Sources Model* and is based on the consumers' motivations to have a specific set of needs met.

The findings indicate that brand consumption in a social media community is motivated by the consumers' functional needs for problem solving, information search, providing feedback, access to deals and rewards, and evaluation of the service offering. Apparently, consumers use a brand's social media channels as a shortcut to address their needs when traditional communication channels are unavailable, inconvenient or expensive (time or money) (Brodie et al., 2011). Services are considered valuable if they can provide functionality for the consumer (Gronroos, 2001). A brand's communities on Facebook and Twitter may serve as functional resources that not only create value but also determine the consumer's relationship to the brand (Gronroos, 2004). Accordingly:

**Proposition 1.** *Brand consumption in social media community is characterized by fulfilment of the consumers' functional needs.*

Additionally, the data suggest some specific functional needs that are met by interaction with brands in a social media community:

**Proposition 2.** *The consumers' functional brand-related needs in a social media community are motivated by (a) problem solving, (b) access to answers, (c) information, (d) evaluation of the service offering, and (e) access to special deals and giveaways.*

One of the contributions of this study is the finding that social media change not only the consumer's status in the brand relationship, but that of the brand as well. Brands assume a variety

of roles and tasks in social media, serving as information desks, emergency services, and a reception area, each anchored in consumer needs.

The findings also suggest that brand consumption in a social media community is motivated by consumer's emotional needs. Interaction with the brand and with other consumers meets several emotional needs for the respondents in this study. Consistent with this finding, Wikstrom (2008) posits that service experience production has shifted in social media community towards the primary experience of emotion as value in interactions. Therefore:

**Proposition 3.** *Brand consumption in a social media community is characterized by the fulfilment of consumers' emotional needs.*

Several specific needs were uncovered in the analysis:

**Proposition 4.** *The consumers' emotional brand-related needs in a social media community are motivated by (a) alleviating personal problems, (b) feeling privileged, recognized, or valued by the brand, and (c) escapism and curiosity satisfaction.*

Consumers use brand affiliations as both recreational and treatment facilities, for example to deal with homesickness or even to overcome insecurities about themselves. In this regard, interaction with a brand and other consumers helps to develop confidence in personal skills and abilities. Further, a relationship that derives from personal situations may result in an emotional connection with a brand (Morrison and Crane, 2007).

Service consumption, regardless of context, is a dynamic and complex process that is shaped by consumers' social and personal needs and is closely tied to the notion of self. Even though there is a generally accepted view that the self-concept is inherent in all consumption practices, this study produced some novel insights regarding the way that consumers develop and realize their social roles and self-identities through experiences with brands in a social media community. While some of the other listed motivations could be considered self-serving, a specific subset of motivations uncovered in this study relate very closely to the maintenance of a strong self-concept. "Social benefits, economic incentives, concern for others, and extraversion/self-enhancement [are] the primary reasons consumers publish their experiences on opinion platforms" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010, p. 50). With that in mind:

**Proposition 5.** *Brand consumption in a social media community is characterized by the fulfilment of consumers' self-oriented needs.*

The most important self-oriented needs that drive brand interaction in a social media community are the following:

**Proposition 6.** *Consumers' functional brand-related needs in a social media community are motivated by (a) self-actualization, (b) self-perception enhancement, and (c) self-branding.*

Consumers use self-brand connections to construct and communicate their self-concepts (Heinonen, 2011). The symbolic meanings of brands allow consumers to enhance their social identities through brand endorsement and brand-related activities. In this regard, the attention from other consumers in the form of comments and "likes" increases their self-confidence. The personal benefits provided through such interactions create a sense of brand tangibility and result in repeat consumption.

The data suggest that brand relationships in social media are also inspired by consumers' need for social experience, particularly for sharing knowledge, community attachment, link-building and interactions with others. This finding is supported by the recent work of Georgi and Mink (2013) on their eCCI Model (electronic customer-to-customer interaction). Through participating in the

creation of new knowledge around the brand, consumers strive to educate each other while learning from others. "There are two ways that brands can contribute to the relationships that consumers experience in their daily life...the first type is the brand and consumer relationships, while the second is the links that consumers develop with other consumers around the brands which have been viewed as brand communities" (Veloutsou, 2009, p. 127). Therefore:

**Proposition 7.** *Brand consumption in a social media community is characterized by the fulfilment of consumers' social needs.*

The data illuminate four specific factors that are relevant to consumers' social needs:

**Proposition 8.** *Consumers' social brand-related needs in a social media community are motivated by (a) experience exchange, (b) community attachment, (c) link-building, and (d) social interaction.*

Participants expressed their interest in building new relationships with "like-minded people." Some even reported offline connections from brand communities that evolved beyond the online context. Most agree, though, that these deeper relationships require common personal or professional interests as a basis, not just an interest in the same brand. The study also shows that consumers pay attention not only to the quality of content, brand responsiveness and the regularity of updates, but also to the number of brand followers and the volume of their communications with the brand. These findings are contrary to the widely accepted belief that consumers are more interested in a brand's content than in the numbers of brand "likes" and followers. Indeed, in a social media context, *numbers* give consumers a notion of the brand's credibility (Pentina et al., 2013).

Social media allow for interactivity with brands, regardless of temporal and geographical constrictions. This communication channel enables the consumer's brand knowledge to be enhanced, and it provides opportunities to transform brand experiences into a relationship through customized communication and co-creation. The study revealed that personalized communications and relationship with the brand and engaging in brand-related activities constitute important forms of relating with the brand (Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993). The consumption experience is enhanced when consumers feel that the brand has individualized their interactions (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Accordingly:

**Proposition 9.** *Brand consumption in a social media community is characterized by the fulfilment of consumers' relational needs.*

The study also uncovered the following specific drivers of relational bonds with brands in a social media community:

**Proposition 10.** *The consumers' relational brand-related needs in a social media community are motivated by (a) co-creation of the service offering, (b) desire for personalized brand interaction and (c) desire to know the real people behind the brand.*

The research indicates that social media have shifted the focus from abstract forms of brand communication to close and personal interaction. From the consumers' perspective, this means knowing the person behind the brand, which gives them a sense of brand tangibility and a feeling that the brand knows them on a personal level. This proposition emphasizes the human characteristics and personality of the brand and attached consumers in the social media collection (Aaker, 1997). However, we are yet to uncover the role of brand personality and the co-creation and consumption of self (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012). The illusive question with social media is: does this type of consumption actually increase purchase and usage.

In summary the *Five Sources Model* makes an important theoretical contribution in 2 ways. First, it extends the work of Fournier (1998) on brand relationships, that is, the relational interaction between consumers and brands in a social media context (Fournier et al., 2012; Heath et al., 2006). The *Five Sources Model* focuses on brand consumption as relationship: the consumers lived experiences, similarly to human relationships (e.g. Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Like the work of Davis et al. (2000) our model takes specific account of the effect of the computer mediated environment on consumption practices. Rather than attempting to reconfirm the existing brand paradigm, we seek through a grounded theory approach to uncover a new consumer-based model. Second, the *Five Sources Model* further enhances the work on communities and consumption. For example, the seminal work of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Schouten and McAlexander (1995) and Cova (1997). The *Five Sources Model* provide further evidence of the bond between the brand stakeholders: shared feelings and activities of consumption that are 'psychically' connected.

## 6. Practitioner implications

This study identifies five core drivers of brand consumption in a social media community. This model is called the *Five Sources Model*. Each of these core drivers represents unique opportunities for brands to enhance the relationships they have with their customers and to increase the likelihood of an active and beneficial online community built around their brands. By recognizing the vital role that interactivity plays in social media, brand managers are in a position to harness the still growing power of the online consumer (Breazeale, 2009). Based on the importance that consumers place on the meeting of their functional needs, brand managers should constantly monitor their social media communities for inaccurate information placed by both well-meaning and ill-intentioned posters. If consumers are seeking information and answers to their service-related questions, bad information could easily taint the relationship between consumer and brand. Few respondents indicated that they distinguish between marketer-provided information and that provided by other consumers. In fact, a large number of participants indicated that they place a great deal of value on the opinions of virtual strangers.

Considering the relevance of emotional needs for many of the brand consumers, managers also need to focus on the way their social media communities make the consumers *feel* when they are participating. While few marketers would leave the appearance of their brand's website to outsiders, it is exactly these outsiders who often determine the feel of a brand's social media sites. If consumers come to these sites not just for information but also for escapism, then a sense of play should be built into the sites when it is appropriate to the brand's intended image. Even easier to control by the brand is the consumer's need for validation by the brand. Well-monitored social media provide marketers with amazing opportunities to quickly respond to individual consumers' posts and comments with highly personalized content. To write off this capability as too time-intensive is to ignore a core reason that consumers choose to relate with a brand. It also risks losing that consumer to a more responsive brand.

It is not surprising that the participants in this study provided self-oriented reasons for interacting with brands online, but the depth of their sentiments in this regard was a novel finding. Brand managers should be aware that consumers often display their brand affiliations as a signal of their identities. The proactive marketer will make this easier for the consumer by providing ample opportunities for the consumer to identify with other

respected brand users. Having carefully selected celebrity brand ambassadors make occasional posts and interact with the social media community would be an excellent way to enhance consumers' impressions of the "typical user". Enabling effective self-branding via the online community would also be as easy as inviting especially prolific posters to contribute to the brand's actual website or e-newsletter, or inviting them to participate in new product launches.

Socially motivated interaction should also not be a surprise, given the nature of social media. Effective targeting of this core value could include creating online brandfests that occur in synchronous real time, bringing all social media community members together with the promise of prizes and opportunities to meet and interact with like-minded others. Forums that encourage usage stories and service feedback could serve the dual purpose of providing the brand with valuable insights into the parts of the service experience that resonate with their customers as well as giving consumers the opportunity to bond with each other. As with any social media forum, it would also be beneficial to have a strong brand presence in the forum as a moderator to ensure that the interaction is positive and the participants feel safe and know they have been heard.

The relational motivation for brand consumption in a social media community presents marketers with some unique challenges. As this need tends to define the relationship that the consumer has with the brand, it is important for the brand to allow the consumer to feel like a vital part of creating the brand while still maintaining control over the integrity of the brand. Effective management of this core value should involve more than just the brand's communications team, who should bring in the voices of employees from all levels of the organization. Too often, brands only include the voice of the CEO or other highly visible employees in their social media interactions. The participants in this study make it clear that they want to know the *real* people who make the brand what it is. From the mailroom clerk to the person who sends out the monthly statements, the faces of the brand are the ones that consumers want to interact with them.

Overall, these five core values suggest that consumers of brands are more than willing to participate in the social media communities of the brands they use as long as they receive value from their interaction (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). This is not a novel idea. What is novel is the idea that brands should understand the specific brand attributes that matter to the consumer in social media community. Brands that pay attention to these findings will be well positioned to profit from the interactivity of their consumers.

## 7. Research limitations

As is the case with any study, this one has certain limitations. First, the majority of the participants were New Zealanders. While we may not state that the findings are completely generalizable, we believe that the needs described by these participants are not unique to New Zealand and are indeed fairly consistent with most individualistic cultures (e.g., Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011). Second, data collection was limited to a participative Facebook focus group and a fairly compact set of interviewees. The small sample size was a trade-off that allowed us to collect richer and more complete data, and we feel that the insights obtained are more valid than those that could have been collected from a much larger sample. Third, this research does not directly contrast online brand experience with product brand experience. Finally, we note that all participants in the Facebook and face to face interviews are tertiary qualified. This may limit the generalizability of the findings.

## 8. Future research

Like Aaker (1997), we advocated that future research may start with exploring and confirming the role of brand personality and its human characteristics in social media brand consumption. For example, in the consumers expression of their actual, ideal, social and virtual selves. If brand personality is important, how can it increase, in individual as well as cross-cultural settings, the consumer's brand preference, loyalty and usage (Malar et al., 2011)? Does brand personality impact utilitarian consumption values and/or the hedonic self-expressive or symbolic function? In both pathways attention could be placed on self-congruity and brand personality (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Sirgy, 1982).

Future work could also focus on defining the difference between components of consumption. For example, is the social brand consumption more about interaction between consumers, and the relational consumption is more about interaction between the consumer and the brand?

Further research could also focus on drawing distinctions between product and brand consumption in social media as this type of knowledge would be very useful for both service researchers and service providers (Danaher et al., 2003). Comparing a product brand model to the proposed brand model would be very interesting. Additional research might also focus on a particular brand or type of service to explore how online brand consumption varies depending on the nature of the service.

Because theory on brand relationships in social media is in its infancy, further exploratory research would be appropriate. A case study methodology could yield further insights into consumers' brand-related behaviors and also some interesting nuances in consumer-brand interactions in social media communities. In addition, the growth of social media is related to rapid growth of smart mobile devices: shortening the distance between brands and consumers (Davis et al., 2014; Hoffman and Novak, 2012). Further work should proceed to conceptualize the social media brand in ubiquitous mobile contexts and its role in retailing and consumer to consumer interactions (Sands et al., 2011).

The research also raises the question of whether this conceptual model of brand consumption can be measured. In this respect, quantitative methodology could be adopted to further refine the conceptual model and start the process of building a measurement instrument that is applicable to the social media context. Considering the complexity of the phenomenon being studied, structural equation modeling seems to be the most suitable quantitative approach to use. The conceptual model developed in this study gives a better understanding of brand consumption in an under-researched domain, social media. As social consumption continues to evolve as an important economic consideration, these findings should prove valuable to both researchers and practitioners. Future work may also focus on the internal link between brands and social media engagements. For example, focusing on the fit between brand and social skills on and offline (Hurrell and Scholarios, 2013).

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