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To cite this article: Hilde A.M. Voorveld (2019): Brand Communication in Social Media: A Research Agenda, Journal of Advertising, DOI: [10.1080/00913367.2019.1588808](https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1588808)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1588808>



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Published online: 09 Apr 2019.



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Brand Communication in Social Media: A Research Agenda

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This article provides an agenda for future research on brand communication in social media. Based on an overview of the current state of research, a discussion of the theoretical and conceptual challenges of brand communication in social media, and a survey about the expectations of the media and advertising industry, I present six key directions for future research. These six key directions include research on (1) social media influencers, (2) personalized brand content in social media, (3) ethical concerns about the nature of social media content and consumer empowerment, (4) platform characteristics rather than on Facebook, (5) the integration of social media in the media mix and the consumer journey, and (6) using real social media data. Together these six key directions help to shape the social media research agenda.

Social media have become an important part of consumers' daily lives. It has been estimated that in 2018, 2.62 billion people worldwide used a social media platform at least once a month, and the average time spent amounted to 135 minutes per day (Statista 2018a). In an attempt to capitalize on this intense usage, almost every consumer brand is present on social media and advertisers and marketers are eagerly integrating social media in their digital strategies. Brand presence on social media can take many forms, including paid display advertising (paid media), brands participating in social networks as a brand persona, publishing branded content (owned media), and branded engagement opportunities for

consumer participation (earned media) (Ashley and Tuten 2015). According to the 2018 CMO Survey, the longest-running noncommercial survey among top marketers in the field of marketing, social media spending now accounts for 13.8% of brands' total marketing budgets (Moorman 2018).

Given the ongoing evolution and proliferation of social media consumption, budgets, and research, this is the right moment to give an overview of the previously published research and to develop an agenda for future research based on the theoretical, conceptual, and practical challenges of brand communication in social media. In this article, a theoretically and a practically grounded approach are combined to formulate an agenda for future research. The starting point is a broad keyword search within top-tier advertising and marketing journals to identify previous scholarship in the field. The second step is a discussion of the theoretical and conceptual social media research challenges related to the key factors that shape consumers' responses toward brand communication in social media: source, message, and channel characteristics (McGuire 1989). The third phase is a discussion of expectations and needs of the media (planning) industry with respect to brand communication in social media. This is based on a brief survey that was conducted among key players at media agencies to find out what they consider to be the major developments and challenges for the future. Finally, six concrete directions for future research that tie into the theoretical challenges and industry expectations are discussed.

DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Many different conceptualizations of social media exist in the literature. In this article, social media are broadly defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). Although social networking sites are probably the most prominent type of social media (Boyd and Ellison 2007),

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TABLE 1
Overview of Popular Social Media

Social Media Platforms	Year of Launch	Description	Number of Active Users (in Millions) ^a
Facebook	2004	A social networking site that allows people to build public profiles and establish explicit connections with others in their social network (Boyd and Ellison 2007)	2,271
YouTube	2005	Video-sharing platform/content community (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010)	1,900
WhatsApp	2009	Application allowing the sending of text messages and voice calls, as well as video calls, images, and other media, documents, and user location	1,500
Facebook Messenger	2011	Instant messaging app and platform	1,300
WeChat	2011	A Chinese multipurpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment app	1,083
Instagram	2010	A social networking site that provides users with video- and photo-sharing possibilities	1,000
Sina Weibo	2009	A Chinese microblogging website	446
Snapchat	2011	A multimedia messaging app; a defining feature is that “snaps” dissolve after a few seconds	287
Pinterest	2010	Social networking site where any web image or personal digital image can be posted (“pinned”) to a digital scrapbook, where it can then be viewed by the public (Phillips, Miller, and McQuarrie 2014)	250

^aStatista as of January 2019.

many variations and types of social media exist. Mangold and Faulds (2009) distinguished blogs, forums, business networks, photo-sharing platforms, social gaming, microblogs, chat apps, and social networks. The social media landscape is extremely dynamic, with new applications springing up almost daily (Phillips, Miller, and McQuarrie 2014). By the beginning of 2019, the most popular social media worldwide are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, and Instagram (Statista 2019). Table 1 lists some popular social media, along with a description and the number of active users.

Brand communication in social media is defined as any piece of brand-related communication “distributed via social media that enables internet users to access, share, engage with, add to, and co-create” (Alhabash, Mundel, and Hussain 2017, p. 286, also see the broader definition by Dahlen and Rosengren 2016). This definition diverges from the chosen angle in recent articles that provide a review and research agenda on social media. On the one hand, some articles have adopted a rather narrow definition of advertising as “persuasive and planned communication by advertising professionals deliberately placed on

third-party websites” (Knoll 2016, p. 267), thus neglecting many forms of brand communication in social media, such as owned brand pages, and stimulating or reacting to user-generated content (UGC). On the other hand, some other articles have been too all-encompassing, investigating digital media, social media, and mobile marketing together (e.g., Lamberton and Stephen 2016); the latter articles lack concrete guidance for future research on brand communication in social media in particular.

PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Identification of Previous Scholarship

To identify previous scholarship in the field, I conducted a search in journals that have the longest history in the field and have a high impact factor: *Journal of Advertising*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, and *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (e.g., Nelson, Ham, and Ahn 2017). The *Journal of Interactive Advertising* and *Journal of Interactive Marketing* were also searched, because these journals specifically focus on

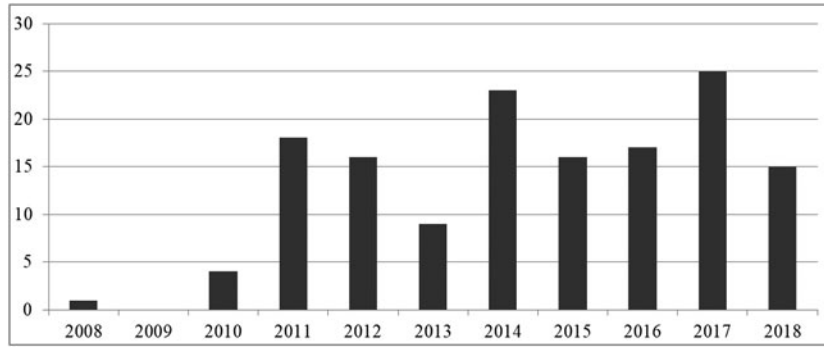


FIG. 1. Brand communication in social media: Number of papers published through May 2018.

TABLE 2

Journals Ranked by Number of Articles Published on Brand Communication in Social Media through May 2018

Journal Title	Number of Articles	Percentage of Total Number of Articles Published 2008–May 2018 ^a
<i>Journal of Advertising Research</i>	33	9.07
<i>Journal of Interactive Marketing</i>	32	13.68
<i>Journal of Interactive Advertising</i> ^b	28	22.76
<i>International Journal of Advertising</i>	25	6.53
<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	11	3.21
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	10	1.97
<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i>	5	1.09

Note. Based on keyword search in Business Source Premier and Communication and Mass Media Complete for *JAR*, the WARC database was used. Keywords: “social media” and for “Facebook,” “Twitter,” “YouTube,” “Instagram,” “Snapchat,” and “Pinterest.”

^aAccording to Journal of Citation Reports 2008–2017; the number of articles published between January 2018 and May 2018 was retrieved manually from the journal publisher’s website.

^bNot included in *JCR*; numbers were retrieved manually.

interactive advertising and marketing. Business Source Premier and Communication and Mass Media Complete were used to search these journals, using the abstracts and keywords as search fields. For the *Journal of Advertising Research*, the WARC database was used with the title and summary as a search field. I searched for the term “social media” and for “Facebook,” “Twitter,” “YouTube,” “Instagram,” “Snapchat,” and “Pinterest” (similar to Knoll 2016). The literature search was conducted in May 2018 and was not restricted to certain years. Articles that did not explicitly deal with social media—for example, studies that used only Facebook for data collection—and articles that only studied people’s social media use without referring to brands, advertising, or marketing were deleted from the selection because the focus of the current article is on brand communication in social media. Nonempirical articles were also excluded. The search process resulted in a total of 144 papers that were subsequently coded by the author.

Distribution of Papers across Journals and Years

All identified articles were published between 2008 and 2018. Figure 1 shows that research on social media started to flourish in the top advertising and marketing journals in 2011, with 18 articles published that year. The highest number of articles was published in 2017 (25), followed by 2014 (23). In the first five months of 2018, 15 articles had already been published.

Table 2 shows that three journals are dominant in terms of number of articles published: *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, and *Journal of Interactive Advertising*. The mission of the *Journal of Advertising Research* is to act as the research and development vehicle for professionals in all areas of marketing; therefore, the high number of articles in that journal could be seen as an indication of the keen interest of practitioners in the field of study. Given the focus on interactive advertising/marketing, it is not surprising that the *Journal of Interactive Advertising* and the *Journal of*

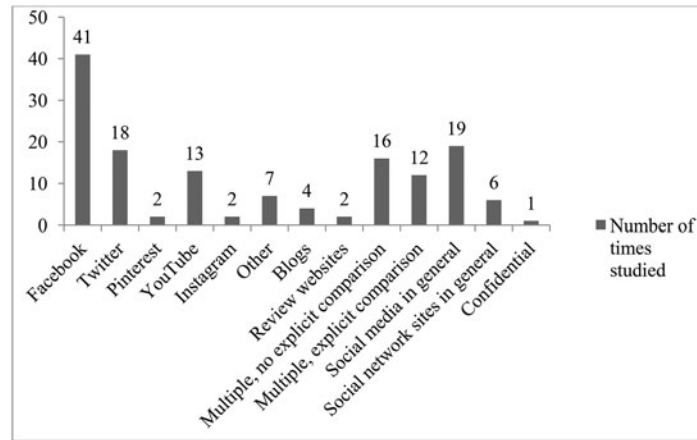


FIG. 2. Number of papers published on different social media platforms.

Interactive Marketing publish a considerable share of the work on the topic.

Platforms Studied

Almost 30% of the 144 papers (41 papers) focused on social network sites and on Facebook in particular (see Figure 2). This finding is not surprising given Facebook's popularity among consumers, the fact that it was one of the first major global social media platforms founded, and the fact that it was chosen by marketers as the most important social platform for their business (Statista 2018b). Next, 25 papers (17%) studied social media or social network sites in general, without referring to any specific platform. Social media that are popular among consumers and marketers but are rarely studied include Instagram (2 papers) and Snapchat (0 papers). In addition, although 16 papers investigated multiple social media platforms (11%), only 12 made explicit comparisons between different platforms (8%; exceptions include Seo et al. 2018; Minton et al. 2012; Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012; Strutton, Taylor, and Thompson 2011; Voorveld, van Noort, et al. 2018). Future research directions with respect to type of platform are discussed later in this article.

Areas Covered

To identify the key areas from the 144 papers, each paper was read and assigned descriptive keywords. The keywords were then analyzed and further combined across the entire set to identify key areas. This is in line with procedures described in the grounded theory approach (Braun and Clarke 2013). Six key areas were identified: attitudes toward social media and social media advertising; motivations for and antecedents of using social media; content characteristics; electronic word of

mouth (eWOM)/virality of brand messages; user-generated brand content; and engagement with brand communication. Table 3 provides a set of example articles for each area. Some observations about previous scholarship serve as direct input for the future research directions that are discussed later in this article, but it is first necessary to discuss theoretical and conceptual challenges of brand communication in social media.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES

In this section, I discuss the theoretical and conceptual challenges of brand communication in social media based on the major factors mentioned in different models of communication and persuasion, such as the model from Lasswell (1948) and the persuasion matrix from McGuire (1989): source, message, and channel characteristics. I discuss the theoretical and conceptual challenges related to these key factors by taking into account the defining characteristics that differentiate social media from other media.

Source Characteristics

The source refers to who is communicating (Lasswell 1948). Characteristics of the source are known to have an important influence on communication effects (e.g., Wilson and Sherrell 1993). Sources are often defined in terms of credibility (perceived expertise and trustworthiness; Van der Heide and Lim 2016), attractiveness (Amos, Holmes, and Strutton 2018), and likeability (Yilmaz et al. 2011).

An important unique characteristic of social media as compared to other media is networking capability, and this is also one of the most capitalized benefits of social media. Consumers are partly in control of how information is generated and shared (Okazaki and Taylor 2013).

TABLE 3
Key Areas and Sample Article on Brand Communication in Social Media

Key Area	Key References (Chronological Order)
Attitudes toward social media and social media advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelly, Kerr, and Drennan (2010) • Taylor, Lewin, and Strutton (2011) • Jung et al. (2016)
Motivations for and antecedents of using social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chi (2011) • Minton et al. (2012) • Chu, Windels, and Kamal (2016) • Sung, Kim, and Choi (2018)
Content characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012) • De Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang (2012) • Phillips, Miller, and McQuarrie (2014) • Wen and Song (2017)
eWOM/virality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chu (2011) • Chatterjee (2011) • Liu-Thompkins and Rogerson (2012) • Fang et al. (2018) • Kim et al. (2018) • Seo et al. (2018)
User-generated content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) • Vanden Bergh et al. (2011) • Steyn et al. (2011) • Liu, Burns, and Hou (2017) • Kim and Song (2018)
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tsai and Men (2013) • Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014) • Pagani and Malacarne (2017) • Pentina, Guilloux, and Micu (2018) • Voorveld, van Noort, et al. (2018)

Note. The majority of papers, but not all, could be categorized under these main areas.

This networking capability has important implications for defining the source in social media brand communication. Social media provides an environment where anyone can say anything about anything to everyone (Van der Heide and Lim 2016). There is great uncertainty regarding the source of communication. All users either can be a source as producers of brand content (UGC) or can be a source if they endorse brand messages. Moreover, multiple sources can usually be distinguished in brand communication: the brand that produces brand content; people who endorse the brand or brand content; social media users that produce UGC; and other social media users who engage with this UGC, for example, by liking or sharing it. Another reason why source characteristics are so important for influencing consumer responses to social media is because brand communication is often endorsed by other people in the consumers' network. Earlier research has shown that the strength of social ties plays an important role in consumer responses to brand communication via social media (e.g., van Noort, Antheunis,

and van Reijmersdal 2012; Shan and King 2015; Hayes, Shan, and King 2018).

Message Characteristics

Variations in the features of a message have an important impact on persuasion. Message characteristics refer to what is being said (Lasswell 1948) and include microlevel (e.g., argument related and emotion-related aspects) and macrolevel message features (e.g., narratives as persuasive vehicles; O'Keefe 2018). On social media, the message does not necessarily refer to what is being said by a brand; it also refers to UGC. Social media research most often refers to the term *content* rather than *message*. Theoretically, two macrolevel content characteristics of brand communication on social media stand out.

First, the content of brand communication in social media can be characterized by blurred lines between brand communication and other content. Brands often use native advertising formats on social media or engage

in content marketing (Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017). The second defining characteristic is that data can be used to make brand content more relevant for or targeted at specific groups, a phenomenon known as personalized advertising, defined as “advertising that is tailored to an individual’s characteristics and/or interests or tastes” (De Keyzer, Dens, and De Pelsmacker 2015, p. 125; Maslowska, Smit, and van den Putte 2016).

Channel Characteristics

Channel characteristics refer to what brings the advertising message to its audience (Thorson and Rodgers 2012), in other words, the medium that is used for brand communication. A first relevant distinction in this respect is between different types of social media platforms. Theoretically, social media are often treated as one type of channel or medium, just like television, radio, magazines, and so on; however, social media platforms differ in many respects, including modality, private versus public access to content, types of connections, and longevity of content accessibility (Kietzmann et al. 2011). They also differ in the way in which they are experienced, such as satisfying the need to find useful information, filling empty moments, or creating or sharing content with others (Voorveld, van Noort, et al. 2018). Conceptual articles have categorized social media platforms along these characteristics. For example, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure are the defining characteristics of social media. Based on this idea, they distinguish collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Based on the nature of connection (profile-based versus content-based) and level of customization of messages, Zhu and Chen (2015) distinguish relationship media (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp), self-media (e.g., Twitter, Weibo), creative outlets (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Flickr), and collaboration platforms (e.g., Quora, Reddit). It is likely that the possibilities for and consumer responses to brand communication differ among these various types of platforms. Another relevant challenge with regard to channel characteristics of social media is that in a brand communication program, social media are usually not used as a stand-alone activity but are combined with other media. In addition, consumers more often than not use social media in combination with other digital and traditional media in their consumer journey (Kannan and Li 2017; Voorveld, Araujo, et al. 2018).

The theoretical and conceptual challenges of brand communication in social media provide important input for an agenda for future research. The next section

describes the expectations that practitioners have about the future of brand communication in social media.

MEDIA INDUSTRY EXPECTATIONS

Survey among Media Agency Representatives

A brief survey was conducted among key players at media agencies to determine what they consider to be the major developments and challenges for the future. Eleven of the largest media agencies in the Netherlands participated in this survey. These Dutch media agencies have a high reputation, and some are part of international chains. It can be reasonably assumed that their responses are representative for the international media-planning industry. There were different types of informants, such as digital specialists, strategy directors, and account directors (see Table 4). The participants were asked to answer questions on behalf of their company. The key factors distinguished by McGuire (1989) that were discussed previously with regard to their theoretical and conceptual challenges were also referred to in the survey. More specifically, the practitioners were asked about target groups they try to reach with social media, their expectations about the platforms that are more or less frequently employed in the media strategies they develop, their expectations about the type of content that would be used, and their thoughts on the most important developments they anticipate in the coming years.

Source Characteristics

When asked about their vision for the future of social media, media agencies often refer to the use of social media influencers or influencer marketing. The deployment of social media influencers is a strategy that taps into the unique nature of the source in social media. Social media influencers are people who have built a sizable social network of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017, p. 798). The practitioners believe that social media influencers offer a unique opportunity to reach a diverse set of audiences, not only the young. They expect that the amount of influencer marketing will increase in the next few years.

Message Characteristics

Media agencies foresee two main developments in the types of social media content for the coming years. These two developments are well aligned with two defining characteristics of social media content. First, all media agencies mention that high-quality content will become increasingly important for brand communication in the future. They expect that content will be less “commercial”

TABLE 4
Overview of the Informants

Informant	Role	Type of Agency
1	Business development director	Media agency (part of international chain)
2	Strategy director	Media agency (national)
3	Head of strategy and consultancy	Digital agency (part of international chain)
4	Head of business	Communication agency (national)
5	Strategy consultant	Communication agency (part of international chain)
6	Account director	Media agency (part of international chain)
7	Director	Association of media agencies in country of study
8	Social lead	Media agency (part of international chain)
9	Communications executive	Media agency (part of international chain)
10	Account director	Media agency (national)
11	Strategy consultant	Media agency (part of international chain)

but more organic and relevant. In addition, it will more often be “social first,” meaning that social elements and how social media users might react is taken into account from the brainstorm phase of a campaign.

Second, almost all media professionals refer to the fact that the availability of huge amounts of data, algorithms, machine learning, and artificial intelligence (AI) will probably make it easier to better target consumers with personalized advertising on social media (see also Rosenkrans and Myers 2018). The representatives mention that they mainly use demographics, sociographics, and earlier website visits to personalize or target their brand communication content. While personalization can be rather easily implemented in any online context, social media especially provide brands with rich data for personalized advertising. Personalization of persuasive messages is currently done “manually,” and some media agencies argue that rapid developments in AI are expected to create unprecedented possibilities for automatic personalization in the future. Interestingly, the media agencies refer more often to acceptance of and concerns related to the use of social media data, such as privacy and trust, than to the impact on the effectiveness of personalized or targeted ads. It seems like practitioners already are convinced that personalized content is more effective than generic content.

Channel Characteristics

Media agencies were asked about their expectations regarding the platforms that get more often or less often used for brand communication in the coming years. They clearly indicate that Instagram will be the dominant platform in the next few years. With regard to Facebook, the opinions are a bit more mixed. About half of the participants indicate that the use of Facebook for brand

communication will remain stable, but the other half thinks that it will become less dominant in the near future. Also, Snapchat, YouTube, and Pinterest (if advertising will be allowed), are mentioned as strong platforms for the years to come. Agencies have high expectations regarding more private networks and messenger platforms, such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Three participants also mention that niche platforms, where people can connect with other people who have similar interests (e.g., Untappd for beer lovers, Dogster for dog lovers) will probably get more interesting for brands.

Approximately half of the participating media agencies mention that they expect the budgets for social media to decline somewhat. After years in which social media had a rather dominant position in media strategies, they expect that social media will be positioned on a similar level in a media strategy as other digital and offline media, rather than on a higher level. They mention that this might be due to the limited impact of social media on relevant key performance indicators (KPIs), as well as due to a decline in trust toward social media and an increase in trust toward strong, traditional media. This implies that the integration of social media in the media mix and the consumer journey will become more important in the future. Relevant developments that further emphasize the need to investigate the interaction between social media and offline media or channels include the facilitation of payment on social media (so-called social selling) and the possibility to optimize campaigns to stimulate offline store visits by using this as a KPI to evaluate campaign success.

Finally, media agencies expect a sharp increase in communication via images (rather than text), which is in line with the expected dominance of the visual-driven platform Instagram. In addition, video content is expected to

become increasingly popular, especially vertical video (i.e., video optimized for viewing on a smartphone in a vertical position, rather than for the more commonly used horizontal position). Also, some mention that they expect other innovations, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, chat bots, and voice-controlled interfaces, will originate from social media. These innovations are definitely interesting, but they are not thoroughly discussed in this article because social media only provide a means to bring them to an audience; such innovations are not characteristics of social media themselves.

FUTURE RESEARCH: KEY DIRECTIONS

To determine directions for future research, conceptual and theoretical challenges and media industry expectations were mapped on the previous scholarship. While some areas identified in the discussion of conceptual challenges and in the survey among practitioners have already received quite a bit of scholarly attention in the top-tier advertising and marketing journals, six key future research directions could be formulated. Because the proposed research directions are also based on a review of the previous scholarship, in the online appendix an overview can be found of previous research which is linked to the different future research directions.

Research on Social Media Influencers

Future research on social media influencers is needed because they are becoming increasingly more common. This strategy taps into the unique nature of the source in social media, yet academic research is scant (Domingues Aguiar and van Reijmersdal 2018). Although the use of social media influencers by brands is widespread, many important questions remain unanswered. First, social media influencers should be systematically compared with other forms of endorsers on which a solid base of academic knowledge already exists, such as celebrities or experts. Potentially important differences include the fact that social media influencers are more similar to the social media users they target than celebrities or experts and that they are more credible or authentic because social media users believe that they produce genuine content (Domingues Aguiar and van Reijmersdal 2018). The relative impact of these different types of endorsers should be tested to investigate whether social media influencers affect consumer responses in a different way to ultimately answer the question whether the existing base of knowledge on other types of endorsers can be applied to social media influencers.

To develop theories on the effectiveness of social media influencers, the mechanisms, such as similarity or

credibility, explaining consumer responses to influencer marketing need to be investigated. Also, the conditions under which social media influencers have an impact on users are important. For example, knowledge about the fit between types of brands, types of influencers, and types of social media users will not only help theory development but also offer important insights for practitioners in deciding on whether and how to use which social media influencers for which brand communication and for which target groups.

Future research should also investigate what determines whether people perceive social media influencers as too commercial or unacceptable and how this affects consumer responses toward the promoted brand. Research should further examine if these effects will subside or if the use of social media influencers will become even more common in the future. Finally, social media influencers often operate in niches (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017), and practitioners often distinguish between micro (i.e., low but relevant reach) and macro influencers (more than 100,000 followers and an established personality and content) (Domingues Aguiar and van Reijmersdal 2018). Future research should explore whether micro versus macro influencers yield different responses and what underlying mechanisms explain such effects.

Theory development would also benefit from future studies that take the networked nature of social media explicitly into account. For example, studies that help identify influentials (i.e., social media users with an above-average ability to encourage others) or information brokers (i.e., people who connect different user groups; see Araujo, Neijens, and Vliegenthart 2017).

Research on Personalized Brand Content in Social Media

A second key direction for future study is research into personalized brand content in social media. In particular, future research needs to focus on the types of personalization that are particularly important or unique to social media. Thus, in addition to focusing on personalization based on personal factors like gender and age that can be used in all (digital) media, research should focus on personalization factors that can be observed only via social media. An intriguing initial step would be to systematically map which variables are currently used by brands to personalize their messages on social media. Personalization could be based on the information consumers openly provide about themselves, for example, in their public profiles or based on the hashtags they use. However, it could also be based on information that consumers might be less aware of, such as their location, the

brands their friends have liked or shared in the past, the pictures they (or their friends) have posted or liked, or their profile pictures (see a very interesting article by Vilnai-Yavetz and Tifferet [2015] in which 500 randomly selected Facebook users were segmented based on their profile pictures). A next step would then be to test whether different types of social media personalization differ in effectiveness, intrusiveness, and privacy concerns. This type of research would help to develop theories about the conditions under which personalization on social media might be relatively effective for brands and might be more or less intrusive or acceptable for consumers.

Given the recent controversies regarding Cambridge Analytica, it would also be worthwhile to investigate whether the acceptance and effectiveness of personalized advertising would differ across contexts. For example, in the context of political advertising, people might fear the consequences of personalized ads more strongly than in commercial advertising, worrying about misinformation and filter bubbles (e.g., see Bol et al. 2018). Research focusing on both the wanted and unwanted consequences of personalized brand communication would help to develop full-fledged theoretical models on personalized communication in social media.

Research on Ethical Concerns about the Nature of Social Media Content and Consumer Empowerment

The native and data-based nature of brand communication in social media, as discussed in the section on theoretical and conceptual challenges, could spark a multitude of concerns, ranging from the disguised persuasive intent and limited persuasion knowledge of social media users to concerns about data collection practices and privacy. Furthermore, practitioners regularly expressed their concerns about the acceptance of the use of social media data for brand communication. Surprisingly, to date, relatively limited attention has been paid to ethical considerations regarding social media marketing and advertising in the top-tier advertising and marketing journals.

Future research should focus on ways to empower consumers to cope with the hidden persuasive intent of brand communication in social media and with data-collection practices. Regulations require marketers to explicitly inform consumers about the commercial nature of sponsored posts on social media (Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017). Future research should investigate whether different forms of information provided about native advertising or data-collection practices, such as disclosures, could empower consumers to cope with these practices on social media. Future research might also

want to investigate how privacy concerns and privacy protection behaviors influence consumer responses toward brand communication that makes use of data and what the boundary conditions are.

Because minors are heavy users of social media, future research should also investigate whether minors understand the persuasive intent of the native advertising techniques on social media and the consequences of the data-collection practices. Finally, future research might focus not only on the negative consequences for consumers but also on the potential consequences for brands. Recent scandals with Facebook violating the privacy of millions of users could have repercussions for brands that are present on a social media platform. Future research into the influence of privacy violations, fake news, or other fake content on the trust that people have in social media and in brand communication is highly relevant.

Research Focusing on Platform Characteristics Rather Than on Facebook

Based on the observations on the state of existing research, the theoretical and conceptual challenges related to channel characteristics of social media, combined with observations from the survey among media agencies, it can be argued that future research should rely less heavily on using Facebook as the research context. Although it is by far the most popular social media platform, it differs from other social media in several aspects, and new platforms come and go. Future research should focus on Instagram and messenger platforms and should more frequently compare different social media platforms. However, social media are a moving target, and platform-based research will quickly become outdated. Because of the different technological affordances and features of each social media platform, the comparison should consider these factors, such as modality, nature of connections, and private versus public access to content, in influencing consumer responses and marketers' use of the platforms. As long as researchers get to the abstract level of theorization rather than focusing on the specific practice, the research is less likely to become outdated. The theoretical categorizations of social media should thus be used in empirical research to investigate the role of channel characteristics on consumer responses to brand communication in social media. Prospective studies should, for example, test whether the theoretical categorizations of social media are related to a different susceptibility to brand communication in different types of social media platforms. Another concrete suggestion would be to provide insight into which characteristics of social media platforms would be most suitable or effective

regarding different brands, communication objectives, and target groups.

Research on the Integration of Social Media in the Media Mix and the Consumer Journey

Another direction of great importance is the interaction of social media with other digital and nondigital brand communication. Research focusing on both social media and other digital and nondigital media is scarce but needed, because we cannot get a full picture of the effects of social media without considering the cross-media nature of most campaigns (Voorveld, Neijens, and Smit 2011).

Therefore, in future research, social media should not be studied as a separate phenomenon. Concrete key questions for future research follow: Do brand communication effects differ between social and traditional media; how can brand communication in social media affect off-line purchase behavior; which combinations of digital and nondigital media are most effective in influencing engagement with brands on social media; if social media are combined with other media, which processes influence consumer responses toward such cross-media campaigns; and for more practical purposes, what is the optimal sequence of social and other digital and nondigital media in a communication strategy?

Future research should also investigate the use and impact of social media in the consumer journey. More knowledge is needed about how consumers use different (online) media and channels to search for information, interact with brands, share their experiences, and ultimately buy products. Existing research has mainly focused on sales. Although this focus on sales is in line with the media agencies' expectations about social selling, future studies should also focus on the role of social media in different stages of the decision process, such as need recognition, awareness, consideration, and evaluation (e.g., see Batra and Keller 2016; Voorveld et al. 2016). Finally, because social media are often used simultaneously with other media, future research on the effects of media multitasking with social media is important.¹

Research Using Real Social Media Data

I would like to propose a more methodological future research direction which does not tie into the theoretical factors that shape consumer responses to brand communication or to practitioner expectations but which is based on an important observation about the types of data that have been used in previous research. The previous scholarship identified in this paper mainly describe experiments and surveys. As compared to other media, social media are, however, unique with regard to the massive amounts

of data they provide. The data and metrics supplied by social media companies and the scraping of log data of social media platforms have great potential to examine and explain consumers' interactions and responses to brand communication in social media in a natural setting.

Future social media research should use these kinds of data more often for two reasons. First, such data can be used to measure exposure to social media and counter the challenges that the current media environment (e.g., media multitasking, fragmentation, different devices) poses on self-report measures of exposure to social media. Second, it can offer insights into the actual content to which consumers are exposed, which is needed to investigate how content characteristics influence consumer responses to brands (Dimitrova and Matthes 2018). Interdisciplinary teams, in which advertising and marketing scholars cooperate with computer scientists or data scientists, should be encouraged to make use of the possibilities that computational social science research or digital analytics have to offer to social media researchers (Boumans and Trilling 2016). The opportunities and challenges of computational research and big data are thoroughly described by Malthouse and Li (2017) (regarding advertising research), by Huh (2017) (regarding digital advertising research), and by Hargittai (2018) (regarding social media research in particular). Unfortunately, not all social media application program interfaces (APIs) are open for academic researchers and social media data scraping, as APIs are rapidly changing. Compliance with privacy regulations, such as the European General Data Protection Regulation, is essential when using social media data for academic research to protect the privacy of social media users.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to formulate an agenda for future research using a combination of a theoretical and a practically grounded approach. This was based on a keyword search within the top-tier advertising and marketing journals to identify previous scholarship in the field, a discussion of the theoretical and conceptual challenges of brand communication in social media, and a survey among practitioners about their expectations for the future. Taken together, the six key directions, which are discussed herein, help to define research on brand communication in social media for the future; they focus on both the key conceptual and theoretical challenges of social media and take into account the expectations of media agencies about what is coming down the pipeline.

One additional suggestion for future research must be offered. The survey among practitioners from the media industry shows that investigating current practices and viewpoints of practitioners provides useful input for

social media researchers. Therefore, future research among social media marketing and advertising professionals could be used to formulate a list of key propositions that reflect practitioners' perspectives on each of the six key directions, which can then be tested in academic research (Harms, Bijmolt, and Hoekstra 2017). Cooperation between academics and practitioners would be another way to stay connected to professionals in the field (Lamberton and Stephen 2016). Such collaboration can be based on the tenet that practitioners usually have access to real-life social media data but often do not analyze them beyond their immediate needs (Neijens and Voorveld 2015). Using these data could help academics to overcome the limitations of the typical 2×2 experimental design with student samples, to make use of the unique data that social media have to offer, and ultimately to allow academics to maintain a leading role in social media research. Of course, cooperation is only a good idea if academics can conduct their studies independently without vested interests and can offer more critical reflection and insights for the industry (e.g., see Ha 2008; Nyilasy and Reid 2012; Lamberton and Stephen 2016).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for providing such helpful feedback. The author also would like to thank Peter C. Neijens for his feedback on the manuscript and for being a great mentor during the past twelve years.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

An online appendix (Future Research Directions and Sample Papers) is available on the publisher's website at <http://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1588808>.

NOTE

1. For a thorough discussion of media multitasking, see the contribution by Brittany Duff and Claire Segijn in this issue.

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