Effectiveness of B2B social media marketing: The effect of message source and message content on social media engagement☆

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ABSTRACT

Social media message strategy is critical in determining how customers will engage with B2B firms on social media platforms. The present study examined the role of message source (i.e., firm-generated vs. employee-generated) and message content (i.e., emojis and objective information) in determining social media engagement. Four experiments were conducted to test the proposed relationships. The study findings revealed that employee-generated content leads to higher social media engagement (i.e., intentions and behaviors) than firm-generated content. Content-based trust and engagement-based trust were found to be the underlying mechanisms by which message source impacts social media engagement. Furthermore, we observed that, for an employee-generated message, including emojis has a greater impact on customer engagement than when they are included in a firm-generated message. Finally, no evidence was found concerning the effectiveness of incorporating objective information in social media messages on customer engagement. These findings have marked implications for B2B marketers in developing effective social media message strategies.

1. Introduction

As social media has become a crucial tool for B2B marketing strategy, business firms have been leveraging platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) to enhance communication with customers and stakeholders, as well as to provide information, promote products and services, augment brand awareness and reputation, and ultimately drive business performance through customer acquisition, lead generation, upselling, and cross-selling (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Krings, Palmer, & Inversini, 2021; Krishen, Dwivedi, Bindu, & Kumar, 2021; Leek, Houghton, & Canning, 2019; Pardo, Pagani, & Savinien, 2022). However, for B2B firms to use social media as a marketing tool effectively, understanding and measuring customer engagement on these platforms is imperative (Habibi, Hamilton, Valos, & Callaghan, 2015; Salo, 2017). Social media engagement refers to the intensity of customer interactions and involvement with a B2B firm's offerings and activities on social media (Sands, Campbell, Ferraro, & Plangger, 2022).

Despite B2B firms' growing use of social media, they still face significant challenges in crafting compelling messages that effectively engage customers (Cortez & Ghosh Dastidar, 2022; Deng, Wang, Rod, & Ji, 2021). For example, 27% of B2B respondents surveyed said that creating engaging brand posts was their biggest challenge (Needle,

2022). Although, customer engagement is consequential in determining the success of social media marketing (Silva, Duarte, & Almeida, 2020; Zhang & Du, 2020), scant research has focused on the mechanisms that drive customer engagement with the B2B firms on the social media (see Web Appendix 1). The present study addresses this research gap by examining how and when message strategy influences social media engagement with the B2B firms. Such understanding is important because it can help B2B firms tailor their social media message strategies to improve alignment with their customers' needs and preferences, resulting in increased sales and revenue growth (Cortez, Johnston, & Dastidar, 2023; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016).

An effective message strategy is critical for B2B firms to increase customer engagement on social media (Barry & Gironda, 2019). Message strategy refers to the planning and execution of the content and message that a B2B firm uses on social media to engage with customers and promote its products or services (Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, & Donthu, 2017). Such efforts include decisions about the type of content to share, tone and style of the message, and frequency and timing of the posts (Zhang & Du, 2020). Message strategy aims to create effective social media communications that resonate with customers and drive engagement (Zhang & Du, 2020).

Despite the critical role message strategy plays in customer engagement, scholars have given minimum attention to the topic. Moreover, studies that have centered on the issue contain certain limitations. For example, prior work has adopted a narrow perspective and primarily focused on message appeal (i.e., emotional vs. rational) and selling cues as determinants of customer engagement on social media (Leek et al., 2019; Swani et al., 2017). Furthermore, although some investigations have demonstrated that various message elements impact social media engagement, they have failed to provide comprehensive understanding of the subject, as they do not test the underlying mechanism or process by which message strategy affects social media engagement (Deng et al., 2021; Meire, Coussement, De Caigny, & Hoornaert, 2022). Finally, though the effects of emotional and informational cues in social media messages are well known (Habibi et al., 2015; Zhang & Du, 2020), how these cues interact with other message elements remains unclear.

The foregoing milieu motivated the current undertaking. Specifically, we address the aforementioned gaps by examining the effects of message source (i.e., who is communicating the message) and message content (i.e., how the message is being communicated) on social media engagement. We also explore the underlying mechanisms of content-based trust and engagement-based trust in this relationship.

The message source—which is a key element of message strategy—can influence customer evaluation of social media messages (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). Previous research suggests that the message source, depending on who is the communicator, influences customers' perceptions of message credibility (Korzynski, Mazurek, & Haenlein, 2020). Social media messages are derived from a variety of sources. For example, the B2B firm might create the message and share *it* with the audience on its official social media account. This is referred to as *firm-generated content* (FGC). In addition, users—such as employees (i.e., internal customers)—could compose the message, which is referred to as *employee-generated content* (EGC) (Agnihotri, 2020). Both FGC and EGC facilitate customer interaction and engagement with B2B firms on social media (Hu et al., 2019).

However, research on which type of message—FGC or EGC—is more effective in engaging customers is limited. Understanding the role of message source in social media engagement is critical as it helps B2B firms to understand the impact of source credibility on customer perception and decision-making (Cassia & Magno, 2021; Liu, 2020). Furthermore, this enables B2B firms to optimize their social media message strategies, leveraging the influence of different sources to foster engagement and drive positive business outcomes. Furthermore, the message source can serve as a signal or cue concerning the credibility and reliability of the information contained within the message (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Vieira, de Almeida, Agnihotri, da Silva, &

Arunachalam, 2019). This suggests that trust may play a key role in a customer's evaluation of the message source, which may impact his/her engagement with the B2B firm on social media. Although extant work has demonstrated that trust is important in social media use (Rose, Fandel, Saraeva, & Dibley, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2019), we extend those studies by exploring the role of trust (i.e., content-based and engagement-based) as a mediator in the relationship between message source and social media engagement.

Additionally, previous research on social media message strategy has shown that emotional cues are more likely than rational cues to increase customer engagement (Deng et al., 2021; Swani et al., 2017). However, message elements do not act in isolation but interact with each other to influence social media engagement (Deng et al., 2021; Swani et al., 2017). Furthermore, depending on the message context and audience, the way message elements interact to influence customer engagement may differ (Cortez et al., 2023; Mehmet & Clarke, 2016). However, scholarly work on how emotional cues (i.e., emojis) and rational cues (i.e., objective information) interact with the message source to influence social media engagement is limited. Effective use of message content that is tailored to the target audience's preferences can enhance customers' relatability to, trust in, and the relationship with the B2B brand (Sundström, Alm, Larsson, & Dahlin, 2021). By identifying how different types of message content (i.e., objective information, emojis) resonates with customers, B2B firms can create more engaging social media messages (Deng et al., 2021). As such, in this paper, we aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1. : What is the impact of message source on social media engagement, and how does use of FGC and EGC affect social media engagement?

RQ 2. : How do content-based trust and engagement-based trust influence the relationship between message source and social media engagement?

RQ 3. : How do emojis (i.e., emotional cues) influence the relationship between message source and social media engagement?

RQ 4. : How does objective information i.e., (rational cues) impact the relationship between message source and social media engagement?

The present study utilizes Social Media Communications Theory (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011) and Social Media Engagement Theory (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016) to develop the conceptual framework and establish the proposed relationships. Social Media Communications Theory (Michaelidou et al., 2011) posits that B2B firms communicate encoded messages on social media platforms, and customers interpret these messages, hence influencing their engagement with the B2B firm. Furthermore, when encoding social media messages, the B2B firm can strategically employ different message strategies to influence customer engagement with the B2B brand (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014). Social Media Engagement Theory (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016) builds on Social Media Communications Theory by emphasizing customer engagement as a critical factor in the effectiveness of social media strategy. Customer engagement (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016)—characterized by heightened involvement of customers leading to a personally meaningful benefit—is influenced by certain antecedents (e.g., message characteristics). Because message source and content are key elements considered in the encoding of a social media message in a B2B context (Deng et al., 2021; Liu, 2020), they play a consequential role in influencing customer perception and engagement.

The present study contributes to literature in several ways. First, because social media is now an integral part of B2B marketing, there is growing interest in how B2B firms can effectively use social media to engage various stakeholders—including customers—and what impact its use has on marketing and firm outcomes (Juntunen, Ismagilova, & Oikarinen, 2020). The complexity of product and service processes, importance of multiple stakeholders, and long-term relationships are

key factors preventing B2B firms from using social media marketing effectually (Aras, Xu, & Peñaloza, 2022). Understanding factors that enhance customer engagement on social media may well help B2B firms successfully leverage social media to improve their performance (Liadeli, Sotgiu, & Verlegh, 2023).

Second, studies that have examined customer engagement on social media have discerned that various message elements—including appeal and content—play a critical role in customer engagement (Cortez & Ghosh Dastidar, 2022; Deng et al., 2021). We explore how the source and content of the message impact social media engagement. The message source reflects "who" is communicating the message; the message content is "how" the message is communicated (Meire et al., 2022). Depending on the source, B2B firms (i.e., FGC) and employees (i. e., EGC) can write social media messages and then share them on the B2B firm's official social media profile. Prior research has investigated the individual effects of firm-generated and user-generated (UGC) content on firm performance and word-of-mouth (Kwon, Chan, Gu, & Septianto, 2022; Liu, 2020). However, there is limited evidence comparing the effectiveness of FGC versus EGC on social media engagement. Because multiple stakeholders participate in a social media discussion, gaining insight into the efficacy of social media messages created by various sources can aid in developing effective message strategies (Deng et al., 2021).

Finally, trust is crucial in influencing customer use of social media in B2B firms (Zhang & Du, 2020). However, little research has investigated the role of trust in determining the effect of message source on social media engagement. Because message elements can serve as reliable cues about the information being communicated through the message, we examine the underlying mechanism of trust in the relationship between message source and social media engagement. Addressing this issue is managerially relevant. Doing so aids B2B firms in developing effective social media marketing strategies that increase customer and other stakeholders' engagement (Liadeli et al., 2023).

1.1. Social media engagement

The growing interest of business customers in using social media during the buying process has sparked discussions about utilizing social media marketing strategies for B2B firms (Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021). However, despite the abundance of research on social media marketing in the B2C context, studies on its use in the B2B setting remain scarce (Agnihotri, 2020). Social media marketing in a B2B context is more complex than that in a B2C context. This is because it requires engagement with multiple internal and external stakeholders—such as customers, employees, distributors, intermediaries, suppliers, and competitors—during the different stages of the buying process (Cheng, Liu, Qi, & Wan, 2021; Pitt, Plangger, Botha, Kietzmann, & Pitt, 2019). Social media marketing allows B2B firms to gather insights about potential customers, existing clients, and decision-making influencers. It also helps foster connections and consistent communication with relevant parties in the buying process through networking (Ancillai, Terho, Cardinali, & Pascucci, 2019). Social media marketing also enables firms to facilitate creativity of internal stakeholders and maintain relationships with external stakeholders (Karampela, Lacka, & McLean, 2020). Engagement with stakeholders, particularly customers, is crucial for the success of social media marketing (Agnihotri, 2020). By engaging customers, B2B firms can gain enhanced understanding of customer needs and preferences and develop brand-centric communities, thus leading to improved business outcomes (Chirumalla, Oghazi, & Parida, 2018). Therefore, B2B firms prioritize customer engagement and consider how their social media marketing strategies impact it (Cortez et al., 2023; Youssef, Johnston, AbdelHamid, Dakrory, & Seddick, 2018).

The level of customer engagement on social media is critical for determining the success of B2B firms' social media marketing efforts (Hollebeek, 2019; Sundström et al., 2021). Social media engagement is

"the extent to which the organization's important customers are active in using social media tools" (Guesalaga, 2016, p. 75). Leek et al. (2019, p. 115) defines it "as a psychological state resulting from specific interactive episodes that a customer experiences with a focal agent or object." Agnihotri (2020) argues that customer engagement value in the context of B2B firms involves three key elements: ability to acquire prospects at a low cost through customer referrals (i.e., customer referral value), capacity to influence customer and prospects during the decision-making process (i.e., customer influence value), and facility to gain valuable insights and knowledge about customers (i.e., customer knowledge value) through engagement. Sands et al. (2022, p. 47) define social media engagement as "the intensity of the customer's interaction and connection with a brand or firm's offering or activities." Based on this foregoing work, the present study defines social media engagement as "*the level of interaction and involvement that business customers (e.g., end-users, gatekeepers, decision makers) have with a B2B firm on social media. It encompasses the extent to which customers are engaged with the B2B firm's content, campaigns, and activities on social media, as well as how they respond to and interact with the firm's social media presence.*"

Crafting captivating social media messages is vital to capturing customers' attention on social media. As a result, message strategies have taken center stage in firms' efforts to enhance social media engagement (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Rana, & Raman, 2021; Zhang & Du, 2020). Previous research has observed that different message elements— including content, appeal, and selling cues—influence customer engagement with B2B firms. For example, Deng et al. (2021) found that linguistic message features (e.g., post length, language, visual complexity) affect customer engagement through the central and peripherical routes of persuasion. Other researchers have shown that creative and interactive content, language complexity, emotional cues, and information richness are effective in augmenting customer engagement (Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä, 2015; McShane, Pancer, & Poole, 2019; Rose et al., 2021). Kwon et al. (2022), moreover, showed that visual elements of the message (i.e., colors in shared images) affect customer engagement and positive word-of-mouth behaviors. Crisafulli, Quamina, and Singh (2022) determined that digital influencers' competence and warmth (i.e., source characteristics) impact customer intentions to engage with B2B firms. According to Pardo et al. (2022), though a company's narratives on social media reflect its aspirational perspective, narratives shared by other actors are based on their knowledge and understanding of the company.

Although B2B firms recognize the significance of customer engagement in social media marketing, they must measure its efficacy to make apt strategic and tactical decisions (Agnihotri, 2020). However, measuring the effectiveness of social media marketing remains challenging, thereby creating difficulty for B2B firms to invest in social media marketing (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluoto, & Jayawardhena, 2012). For instance, assessing customer engagement across owned (e.g., company social media) and earned media (e.g., mentions and tags) is a significant challenge for B2B firms. Also, B2B firms may have specific goals for their social media marketing, so determining the right metrics for those goals can be fraught (Silva et al., 2020).

Researchers have used both financial and non-financial measures to evaluate customer engagement with B2B firms on social media. For example, Leek et al. (2019) and Deng et al. (2021) utilized non-financial social media metrics (i.e., retweets, and comments) to assess customer engagement. Similarly, Sundström et al. (2021) examined social media engagement using various non-financial metrics (i.e., impressions, reactions, click-through rates, shares, and comments). Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, and Yau (2019) and Rose et al. (2021) employed self-report measures to assess unidimensional customer intention to engage with B2B firms on social media. Youssef et al. (2018), however, measured customer engagement as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Similarly, Gopalakrishna, Malthouse, and Lawrence (2019) assessed customer

engagement in the tradeshow context with a multi-dimensional scale consisting of purchase-related, learning, and social dimensions. Cortez et al. (Cortez et al., 2023; Cortez & Ghosh Dastidar, 2022) applied both financial (i.e., sales revenue) and non-financial (i.e., clicks, comments, and shares) metrics to measure customer engagement and outcomes. The foregoing discussion suggests that, despite availability of various metrics, previous research has primarily relied on non-financial measures to evaluate the effectiveness of social media marketing efforts.

1.2. Hypothesis development

The conceptual framework for our study is presented in Fig. 1. We investigated the impact of message strategies—specifically, the source and content of the message—on social media engagement. We posited that EGC would lead to a higher level of customer engagement with the B2B brand on social media than FCG due to the mechanisms of content-based trust and engagement-based trust. Additionally, we proposed that inclusion of emojis (i.e., emotional cues) and objective information (i.e., rational cues) in message content would moderate the relationship between message source and social media engagement.

1.3. Effect of message source on social media engagement

Social media communications theory suggests that message strategy plays a critical role in determining how messages are encoded to increase customer engagement (Swani et al., 2014). We focused on message source as a key message strategy element when encoding social media messages. The source of the social media message—that is, the communicator conveying the message to the audience—is crucial in determining its persuasiveness (Cassia & Magno, 2021; Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). As noted earlier, social media messages can be either FGC or UGC (Hu et al., 2019).

FGC refers to the content, whether promotional or non-promotional, posted by B2B firms on their official social media accounts (Cheng et al., 2021). FGC encompasses a wide range of information tailored to the specific target audience. This may include promoting products or services, sharing industry news and updates, providing educational or informative content, highlighting company milestones or achievements,

sharing company activities and events, and offering customer service and support. By utilizing FGC in this way, B2B firms can foster customer interactions, stimulate customer behavior, and boost firm performance (Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar, & Van den Poel, 2019). Furthermore, by providing relevant information that considers the needs and concerns of target customers, FGC can actively engage customers with B2B firms on social media. Previous research suggests that FGC increases digital customer engagement (e.g., likes, shares, retweets) by cultivating a positive brand image of the B2B firm in customers' minds (Cheng et al., 2021). Cortez et al. (2023) showed that sales posts of B2B firms enhance engagement in terms of the number of website visits. Therefore, FGC can affect a B2B firm's social media marketing strategy; this is because it allows the firm to manage customer perceptions and attitudes on social media effectively.

UGC encompasses any customer-created content or messages on social media (Liu, 2020). However, business customers are not the only creators of UGC for B2B firms. Employees can also be strong brand advocates for B2B firms on social media (Pitt et al., 2019). EGC is a specific type of UGC that employees create and share on their personal social media pages (Hu et al., 2019). Similar to FGC, B2B employees might share a variety of information in their EGC—such as promoting products and services, sharing personal insights and knowledge about their field of work, showcasing their professional expertise, posting company events and activities, and highlighting company milestones or achievements. A B2B firm can display EGC by tagging its employees' social media messages on its official accounts. Though previous studies have explored the role of EGC in attracting talent (Korzynski et al., 2020), scholars have inferred that ECG can also be used as a strategic tool to enhance customer engagement on social media (Cartwright & Davies, 2022; Pitt et al., 2019). Indeed, extant work has determined that UGC has the potential to play a significant role in B2B social media marketing (Liu, 2020).

Although B2B firms can communicate on social media using both FGC and EGC, which is more effective in increasing social media engagement is unclear. On the one hand, FGC is perceived as more relevant than EGC to business customers, as B2B firms often have complete product information and are, therefore, more likely to include the technical details that customers typically expect (Vieira et al., 2019).
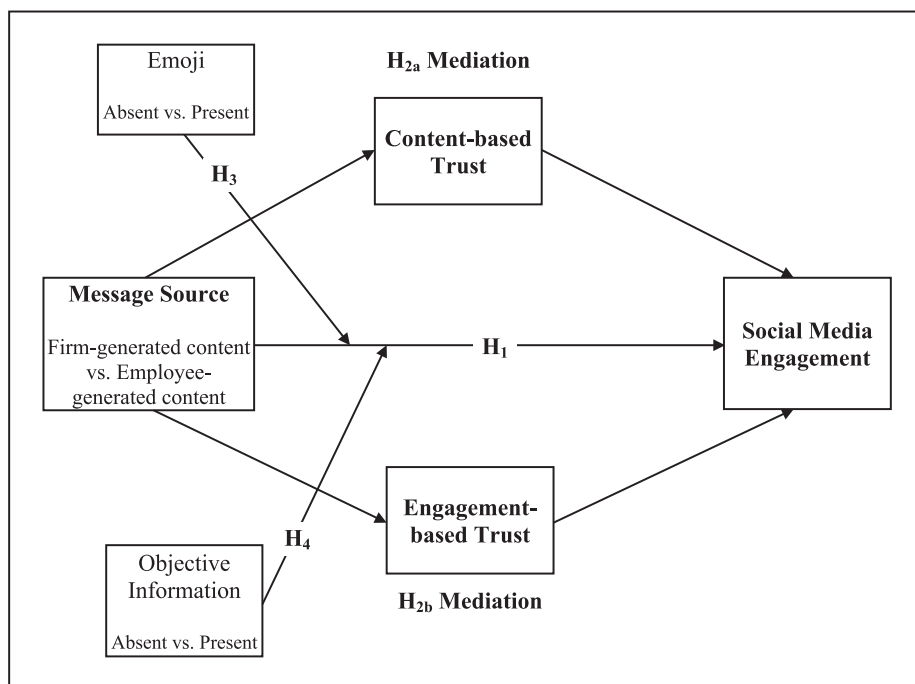

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

Additionally, compared to EGC, FGC is more formal and professional and tends to focus on promoting the B2B firm and its products and services (Cheng et al., 2021). Relative to FGC, EGC, on the other hand, is more personal and relatable; this is because it is written from the perspective of people working in B2B firms (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). EGC can be particularly effective in building a personal connection with customers on social media, as it allows them to see the human side of B2B firms (Duncan, Chohan, & Ferreira, 2019). This awareness can lead to increased engagement with social media content and with the B2B firm (Thakur & AlSaleh, 2018). B2B firms can also use EGC to demonstrate their employees' expertise and thought leadership (Cartwright et al., 2021), which is especially useful when engaging with customers on social media. In addition, developing a social media strategy that parlays EGC can help B2B firms augment customer visibility (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016).

Social Media Engagement Theory posits that users are more likely to engage with content that they find relatable and personal—such as checking and responding to messages. These characteristics lead to higher levels of engagement on social media (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). In the present study, we proposed that EGC is more likely to influence social media engagement than FGC. We contend that, because FGC focuses primarily on promoting products and services, customers may view it as the B2B firm's tactic to establish a favorable product image and influence their decision making (Zboja, Clark, & Haytko, 2016). If so, customers may view this effort as a persuasive appeal (Neuhaus, Millemann, & Nijssen, 2022), thus leading to unfavorable customer outcomes—including lower customer engagement on social media. Furthermore, because FGC is more formal and impersonal than EGC, customers may perceive a sense of distance and reduced relatability, thus decreasing their social media engagement (Habibi et al., 2015). On the other hand, customers may consider employees as trusted insiders (Chun & Davies, 2010) and feel that their social media messages are more personal and authentic. As such, engagement with the B2B firm on social media may rise. Furthermore, because customers avoid social media messages containing explicit selling language (Aras et al., 2022), we expect that EGC to foster social media engagement. Based on the above discussion, we propose the following:

H₁. : Message source impacts social media engagement, such that EGC has a more positive impact on social media engagement than FGC.

1.4. Mediation of content-based trust and engagement-based trust

Trust, defined as the willingness to rely on the B2B firm, is crucial in determining customer engagement on social media (Zhang & Li, 2019). B2B firms can establish themselves as trustworthy by sharing useful, relevant, and reliable information on social media (Rose et al., 2021). Furthermore, trust can reduce purchase risk, increase behavioral intentions, and improve brand loyalty (Zhang & Li, 2019). In the present study, we considered both content-based and engagement-based dimensions of trust to understand social media engagement.

Content-based trust relates to customers' perception of the social media message as being dependable and accurate in meeting their needs (Aladwani & Dwivedi, 2018). Engagement-based trust refers to customers' perception of the engagement style with which the social media content is presented. More specifically, it reflects the extent to which social media content is viewed as helpful, attentive, and constructive (Aladwani & Dwivedi, 2018). When evaluating social media messages, considering both forms of trust is important. This is because customer beliefs about the information presented in a social media message as being reliable, accurate, and constructive are critical to establishing trust, creating a sense of community around the B2B firm, and building long-term partnerships (Rose et al., 2021; Zhang & Li, 2019). Therefore, content-based trust is essential for B2B firms to consider, as it reflects the extent to which their customers find the information in the social media message relevant and helpful. Similarly, engagement-based trust is of

import, as it determines the ability of the B2B company to create an interactive and engagement social media environment through its messages (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Rana, & Raman, 2021).

Previous research has found that message source plays an important role in shaping customer trust in B2B communications (Marder, Angell, Akarsu, & Erz, 2022). When customers see a social media message, they may use the message's source to determine the information's reliability and helpfulness. FGC increases content-based trust by providing relevant information on the B2B firm's product specifications, policies, and performance (Marder et al., 2022). Furthermore, when B2B firms respond to customer inquiries and concerns in their FGC, doing so can positively influence customers' perception of the B2B brand as being helpful and responsive, thus enhancing their engagement-based trust (Gandhi & Kar, 2022). The opinion review literature (Mero, Vanninen, & Keränen, 2023) has suggested that individual opinions—such as EGC content on social media—can engender improved outcomes such as engagement. When employees share information about their experience and achievements or about the company's product offerings or information, their doing so showcases the B2B company's overall expertise and credibility, which, in turn, fosters authentic relationships and promotes transparency (Pitt, Botha, Ferreira, & Kietzmann, 2018). This augments content-based trust and engagement-based trust. Thus, we propose that both content-based trust and engagement-based trust are crucial in determining the effectiveness of a message source (i.e., FGC and EGC) on social media engagement. Therefore, we posit the following:

H₂. : Content-based trust and engagement-based trust mediate the effect of message source (i.e., FGC vs. EGC) on social media engagement.

1.5. Moderating role of emojis

B2B firms are making increased use of emojis, a form of emotional cues, in their social media messages to convey complex emotional connotations to their customers (Deng et al., 2021). Emojis, though, have received relatively limited attention in the B2B context. However, studies examining their role in social media messages have found that emojis (or emotional cues) can enhance conveying emotions, helping create a personal connection with the audience, and elevating purchase intention (McShane et al., 2019). Also, they can conjure a tone that helps build customer relationships and shows excitement and passion. Furthermore, by providing linguistic variety, emojis can convey complex and broad emotions, thoughts, and ideas in the B2B context (Swani et al., 2014). They can also reduce customers' cognitive load and post-purchase dissonance; this is because they decrease reading time and reduce customer anxiety (Kemp, Briggs, & Anaza, 2020). Extant work has shown that B2B social media message includes emotional cues to augment social media engagement such as likes (Swani et al., 2017). This is because emotional cues facilitate peripheral processing—which makes the message more engaging and persuasive (Deng et al., 2021). In summary, emojis afford B2B firms to create a positive mood by making social media communication more user-friendly and less serious (Kaye, Wall, & Malone, 2016).

In the present study, we propose that emojis may have a greater impact on the effect of EGC on social media engagement than FGC. Previous research has shown that using emoticons or emotional cues in professional communication may negatively impact customer perceptions of the communicator's expertise (Ko, Kim, & Kim, 2022). Because customers perceive FGC to be more professional and formal (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013), emojis may reduce the effectiveness of FGC by casting doubt on the communicator's expertise (i.e., the B2B firm). However, emojis allow employees to convey their mood and affective nuances in their social media messages with enhanced efficacy. They also help personalize EGC and make it more relatable than FGC to customers. The key distinction is the context in which emojis are used. Although they might be more inappropriate in formal communication, such as in FGC,

they can increase engagement for EGC. This is because they are perceived as a more authentic and personal form of communication. Therefore, we propose the following:

H₃. : Emojis moderate the impact of message source on social media engagement, such that including emojis in the EGC increases social media engagement more than FGC.

1.6. Moderating role of objective information

The use of rational cues (or objective information) in social media communication has gained attention in B2B literature (Cortez, Gilliland, & Johnston, 2020). Objective information refers to using factual, concrete, and logical data about product or service attributes, business performance, or market factors in social media communication (Deng et al., 2021). When included in FGC, such information can increase customer trust and engagement, as it presents verifiable facts and logical information, hence appealing directly to customers' thinking and awareness (Habibi et al., 2015). Additionally, objective information can serve as evidence for claims that the B2B firm asserts in FGC, resulting in elevated customer engagement (Chirumalla et al., 2018). Indeed, customers may feel that the information comes from an official source and that the B2B firm has more accurate and comprehensive information than do individual employees (Meire et al., 2019). Furthermore, because FGC communicates relevant product information in a professional or formal tone, including objective information may accentuate its impact on customer engagement (Zhang & Du, 2020). Customers are likely to evaluate objective information in FGC via the central route (Kumar & Möller, 2018), thus augmenting their involvement and engagement with the social media message. However, when EGC includes objective information, the contrasting signals (objective information→central and employee source→personal and less serious) may result in an unfavorable evaluation of the social media message, hence resulting in lower engagement. Thus, we propose the following:

H₄. : Objective information moderates the impact of message source on social media engagement, such that including objective information in FGC is more likely to increase social media engagement than in EGC.

1.7. Overview of studies

Four studies were conducted to test the proposed relationships. Study 1 examined the role of message source on social media engagement. We replicated the finding of Study 1 in Study 2 in a different context and examined the effectiveness of message source on actual behavior (i.e., the number of clicks). Study 2 also investigated the mediating role of content-based trust and engagement-based trust and ruled out the alternative mechanism of message attractiveness. Study 3 explored the moderating role of emojis (i.e., emotional cues) in the effects of message source on content-based trust, engagement-based trust, and social media engagement. Study 4 used the moderating role of objective information (i.e., rational cues) in the relationship between message source, content-based trust, engagement-based trust, and social media engagement. We tested the hypotheses in different contexts (i.e., lead generation and email marketing) to provide a more robust understanding of the phenomenon being studied and to increase the validity of the findings (Viglia, Zaefarian, & Ulqinaku, 2021).

2. Study 1: effect of message source on social media engagement

Study 1 examined the role of message source in influencing social media engagement. More specifically, it explored whether EGC results in a higher social media engagement level than FGC (H₁).

2.1. Method

The study used a one-factor, between-subjects design, where the message source was manipulated as either EGC or FGC. The study context was lead generation, and participants were recruited from Prolific Academic for monetary compensation. Lead generation is a critical aspect of the B2B selling process, as it helps identify potential customers for a B2B firm. B2B firms and sales professionals often use social media platforms to generate leads (Vieira et al., 2019). Accordingly, lead generation was deemed appropriate as the study context to examine the effectiveness of message source on social media engagement.

Sample. We recruited 250 U.S. participants meeting the screening criteria from Prolific Academic, an online marketplace. Approximately 54% were male, 62.8% were between 18 and 39 years old, and 51.6% had over ten years of work experience. Three screening questions were used to recruit participants for the study: working in a B2B firm, being involved in lead generation or prospecting for leads, and using social media for lead generation.

Experimental setting. Participants were instructed to imagine that they worked in a B2B firm and that their job was to generate leads or acquire business customers. They were then told that they had seen a social media post on a frequently used platform. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two message source conditions. In the EGC condition, participants were informed that the message they viewed was posted by Adam Smith, a social media manager at a B2B firm—Social Media Lead Generation (SLGC). The message contained information about lead generation and how SLGC's social media marketing team could provide personalized and targeted lead generation services to business customers. Participants read the same message in the FGC condition as in the EGC condition, but they were informed that the B2B firm, SLGC, had posted the message. In addition, personal pronouns were altered in the stimuli to indicate that they were posted by an employee or B2B firm (Meire et al., 2022).

Stimuli and measures. The stimuli were developed using actual messages from B2B firms on popular social media platforms. (See Web Appendix 2 for Study 1 stimuli.) Previous research suggests that B2B firms often use social media for information sharing, problem solving, and public relations (Cartwright et al., 2021). Therefore, the content in the stimuli focused on information sharing about the lead generation services SLGC offered.

Extant work has suggested that unlike in the 1970s when senior managers were assumed to be solely responsible for corporate communication, B2B firms now often encourage employees at all levels to post content on their personal social media platforms as part of their employers' social media strategy to expand their audience (Huotari et al., 2015). However, we took into consideration that B2B employees with direct experience with the product and service can have a greater impact than those lacking such experience. Therefore, we used the context of a social media manager and content generated by the social media manager as the EGC in our study. A fictitious B2B firm name and employee name were used to avoid familiarity biases.

The stimuli were pretested with 50 B2B employees recruited from Prolific Academic. The experimental manipulation of the message source was assessed by asking participants whether the social media post they had just viewed was from an employee of the B2B firm or the corporate account of the B2B firm, SLGC (Wang & Huang, 2018). Chi-Square analysis revealed that manipulation of message source was successful ($\chi^2_1 = 29.10$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's V = 0.763). In particular, results showed that those in the EGC condition were more likely to indicate that the message was from the employee (22, 91.7%) rather than from the B2B firm (2, 8.3%). Similarly, those in the FGC condition reported that the message was posted by B2B firm (24, 92.3%) rather than by an employee (2, 7.7%).

After assessing the stimuli, participants were asked about their social media engagement with the B2B firm. As noted earlier, we defined social media engagement as the level of interaction and connection that customers have with a B2B firm's offerings or activities on social media platforms (Sands et al., 2022). To measure it, we utilized a unidimensional scale consisting of five items from Zhang and Du (2020) and Osei-

Frimpong and McLean (2018) that reflected the definition of social media engagement adopted in our study ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Participants also answered questions on attitude toward social media posts. Attitude toward social media posts refers to the participant's overall feelings about the social media message. Past studies have shown that attitudes toward social media translate into actual engagement and behavior (Cannon & Perreault Jr, 1999). Thus, if customers have a positive attitude toward a social media message, they are more likely to interact with it, which in turn, will contribute to social media engagement metrics such as liking it, sharing it, or commenting on it (Pitt et al., 2019). In other words, we measured attitude as a useful proxy for social media engagement metrics. We assessed attitude toward social media posts with two items adapted from Itani, Agnihotri, and Dingus (2017) ($r = 0.93$).

Previous studies have found that age, gender, and work experience impact how individuals use social media for business purposes (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015). To account for this, we controlled for these three factors in our study. (See Web Appendix 3 for study measures.)

2.2. Results

ANOVA was conducted to test message source effect on social media engagement. As expected, participants in the EGC condition (M = 3.26, SD = 1.23) reported a higher social media engagement than those in the FGC condition (M = 2.82, SD = 1.21, $F_{1,248} = 11.05$, $p = 0.006$, partial eta^2 = 0.030). Shown in Fig. 2 are the plots of the effect of message source on social media engagement. The pattern of results did not change when control variables were included (age: $p = 0.23$; gender: $p = 0.578$; experience: $p = 0.945$; message source: $F_{1,245} = 7.65$, p = 0.006, partial eta^2 = 0.030). Thus, H$_1$ received support.

Another ANOVA revealed a significant effect of message source on attitude toward social media message ($F_{1,248} = 4.35$, $p = 0.038$, partial eta^2 = 0.017); specifically, EGC (M = 4.78, SD = 1.98) resulted in a more favorable attitude toward social media post than FGC (M = 4.26, SD = 2.02). Inclusion of the control variables did not change the significance of the message source effect on social media engagement (age: $p = 0.678$; gender: $p = 0.845$, experience: $p = 0.421$; message source: $F_{1,245} = 4.56$, $p = 0.034$, partial eta^2 = 0.018).

2.3. Discussion

Study 1 investigated the influence of message source on social media engagement in the context of lead generation. Participants reported a higher level of social media engagement with the B2B firm when the source of the social media message was an employee rather than the B2B firm itself. This finding was supported by two additional factors. First, participants in the EGC condition reported a higher level of attitude toward the social media message than those in the FGC condition. Second, the significance of the message source on social media engagement remained consistent even after controlling for the control variables. Therefore, Study 1 showed that EGC increases social media engagement, but it did not investigate why. As such, Study 2 explored the mechanism behind this effect.

3. Study 2: mediation of content-based trust and engagement-based trust

Study 2 tested the underlying mechanisms of content-based trust and engagement-based trust in the relationship between message source (i. e., EGC vs. FGC) and social media engagement. Furthermore, we replicated the effect of message source on actual behavior (i.e., number of clicks) while increasing the generalizability and validity of Study 1's findings. Number of clicks is a form of non-financial social media engagement metric; it reflected here the number of times participants clicked on the post or the report (Silva et al., 2020). Number of clicks indicates the level of interest users have with the social media content (Cortez & Ghosh Dastidar, 2022). In this study, we used number of clicks to assess how many respondents were actually engaging with the social media message (i.e., via actual behavior). Measuring both intentions and actual behaviors can help B2B firms understand how well the message strategy is resonating with the customers and can make informed decisions about which type of content to use to engage customers on social media (Gopalakrishna et al., 2019).

Ruling out alternative explanations for the effects of an independent variable on the outcome variable is an important step in establishing scientific rigor (Viglia et al., 2021). Doing so increases confidence here that the observed effect of message source on social media engagement is truly due to trust and not because of other factors. Accordingly, to accomplish this in the present study, we examined the mediating role of
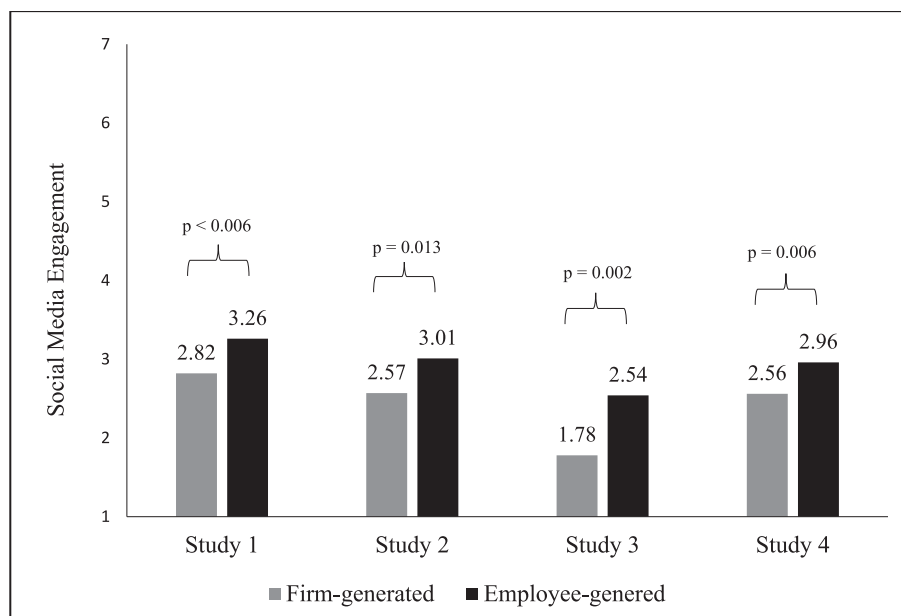

Fig. 2. The role of message source on social media engagement across the studies.

message attractiveness. Message attractiveness—which refers to how appealing customers find a social media post—plays a significant role in determining social media engagement (Sarkar, Sarkar, & Sreejesh, 2023). Studies have shown that appealing messages on social media lead customers to perceive augmented value and increase their engagement (Zhang & Du, 2020). Furthermore, the source of the social media message may also affect its attractiveness. Messages from employees are often seen as more personal and less biased, thus making them more appealing to customers. Meanwhile, messages from the firm may also be perceived as more professional and consistent with the firm's overall branding, hence making them more appealing (Cartwright et al., 2021; Kumar & Möller, 2018. Therefore, message attractiveness may be a potential mechanism explaining the impact of message source on social media engagement.

3.1. Method

Experimental context and stimuli. Study 2 followed a similar design to Study 1 but with four key differences. First, the study context was email marketing and sales training for sales professionals. Previous research has shown that sales professionals regularly use direct marketing communication methods, such as email marketing, to create positive perceptions and influence purchase decisions (Diba, Vella, & Abratt, 2019). As such, this context was deemed suitable for examining the effectiveness of social media engagement for B2B firms.

Regarding the manipulation of message source, participants in the EGC condition were informed that the message they viewed was posted by an employee (Sam Billing, a sales training consultant at STL); those in the FGC condition were told that the message was posted by the B2B firm (STL) (See Web Appendix 4 for study stimuli.) A pretest with 50 Prolific participants revealed that the message source manipulation was successful ($\chi^2_1 = 38.78$, $p < 0.01$, Cramer's V = 0.881). Chi-square analysis showed that those in the EGC condition were more likely to report that the message was from the employee (i.e., 24, 96.0%) rather than from the B2B firm, STL (i.e., 1, 4.0%). Similarly, those in the FGC condition identified the message as posted by the B2B firm, STL (i.e., 23, 92.0%), rather than by an employee (2, 8.0%).

Second, we included a link to a blog on the topic "improving email marketing response rates" in our stimuli. One of the authors created this blog and replicated it. A link to one of the replicated blogs was included in each stimulus. Participants were informed that they could click on the link to read the blog. The blogs were activated before data collection began, and the total number of clicks for the blogs across the two conditions was collected after the data collection procedure was completed. The number of clicks for the blogs for each condition was employed as a measure of customers' social media engagement behavior.

Sample. Third, we recruited sales professionals employed in B2B firms. A total of 250 U.S. Prolific panel members meeting the screening criteria participated in the study. Of these, 66.8% were male, 44.0% were between 18 and 39 years old, and 52.4% had over ten years of work experience.

Measures. Finally, along with social media engagement (scale α = 0.93) and demographic information (i.e., age, gender, and work experience), participants responded to content-based trust (α = 0.91), engagement-based trust (α = 0.90), and message attractiveness (r = 0.85) questions. Content-based trust and engagement-based trust were measured using three items each from Aladwani and Dwivedi (2018). Message attractiveness was measured with two items from Page and Herr (2002).

3.2. Results

ANOVA revealed that message source had a significant impact on social media engagement ($F_{1,248} = 6.19$, $p = 0.013$, partial eta^2 = 0.024). Specifically, EGC (M = 3.01, SD = 1.37) resulted in a higher level of social media engagement than FGC (M = 2.57, SD = 1.41) (see

Fig. 2). When the control variables were incorporated, the significance of the effect of the message source was unchanged (age: $p = 0.289$; gender: $p = 0.04$, experience: $p = 0.109$; message source: $F_{1,245} = 7.13$ $p = 0.008$, partial eta$^2 = 0.028$).

A contingency table was created to assess the effectiveness of message source on actual customer behavior (i.e., number of clicks). Results of a chi-square test revealed a significant association between message source and number of clicks ($\chi^2_1 = 74.92$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V = 0.56). In particular, EGC (i.e., number of clicks = 35) resulted in a higher number of clicks than FGC (i.e., number of clicks = 21). This finding further provided support for the effectiveness of EGC in enhancing actual social media engagement behaviors (H$_1$).

We found that content-based trust (M$_{EGC}$ = 4.21, SD = 0.90; M$_{FGC}$ = 3.79, SD = 1.1.32; $F_{1,248} = 8.49$, $p = 0.004$, partial eta$^2 = 0.033$) and engagement-based trust (M$_{EGC}$ = 4.30, SD = 1.40; M$_{FGC}$ = 3.67, SD = 1.32; $F_{1,248} = 13.38$, $p = 0.000$, partial eta$^2 = 0.051$) were significantly higher in the EGC condition than in the FGC condition.

The mediating roles of content-based trust and engagement-based trust were tested using Model 4 SPSS PROCESS macro with 5000 bootstrapped resamples (Hayes, 2018). We found a significant mediation of content-based trust (indirect = 0.09, SE = 0.05, LLCI = 0.01, ULCI = 0.21) and engagement-based trust (indirect = 0.10, SE = 0.06, LLCI = 0.01, ULCI = 0.24), as the 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect excluded zeros. We found that the direct effect of message source on social media engagement (β = 0.44, $t = 2.49$, p = 0.013) became non-significant when content-based trust and engagement-based trust were included in the regression (β = 0.24, $t = 1.37$, p = 0.172). As such, the mediating roles of content-based trust and engagement-based trust in the relationship between message source and social media engagement were manifested—thus confirming H$_{2a \ and \ 2b}$. Shown in Fig. 3 are the plots of the mediation of content-based trust and engagement-based trust.

[Insert Fig. 3 about here].

Post-hoc analysis revealed that message source had a significant main effect on message attractiveness ($F_{1,248} = 4.37$, $p = 0.038$, partial eta$^2 = 0.017$); specifically, EGC (M = 3.26, SD = 1.56) was perceived as more appealing than FGC (M = 2.85, SD = 1.57). However, the results of the mediating analysis using Model 4 SPSS Process macro with 5000 bootstrapped resamples revealed that message attractiveness did not explain the effect of message source on social media engagement; this was because the 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect included zero (indirect = −0.05, SE = 0.03, LLCI = −0.12, ULCI = 0.01). This finding rules out the alternative mechanism of message attractiveness in the relationship between message source and social media engagement.

3.3. Discussion

Using a different context (sales training) from Study 1, Study 2 provided additional support for the effectiveness of EGC in increasing social media engagement compared to FGC. Furthermore, we found that EGC increased actual engagement behavior—the number of clicks. By testing the effects of message source on social media engagement in different contexts and using both intentions and actual behavior, we enhanced the generalizability of the findings concerning the effectiveness of EGC. Study 2 results revealed that content-based and engagement-based trust were the underlying mechanisms behind enhancing social media engagement through EGC. Furthermore, we ruled out the role of an alternative mechanism involving message attractiveness in the relationship between message source and social media engagement. In Study 3, we examined the boundary condition of emojis in the relationship between message source and social media engagement.
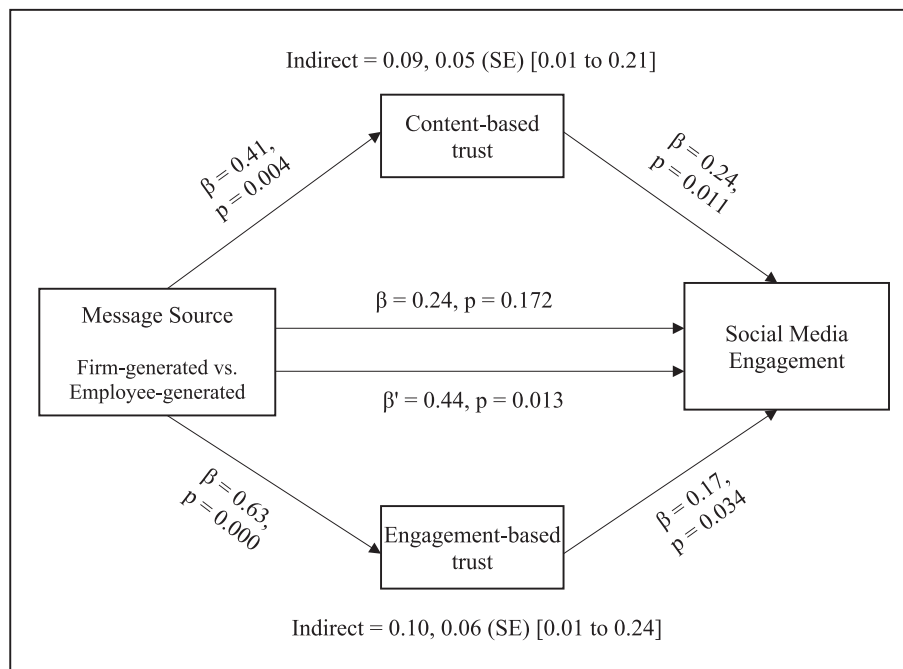
Fig. 3. Mediation of content-based trust and engagement-based trust (study 2).
Note. Figures in brackets are 95% confidence intervals, β' is the direct effect of message source on social media business brand engagement.

4. Study 3: moderating role of emojis in social media messages

Study 3 examined the moderating role of emojis in the effect of message source on social media engagement. Accordingly, it tested H_3.

4.1. Method

Experimental context. Study 3 followed similar research to Study 2 but with one major change. It focused on sales training and recruited sales professionals from the UK through Prolific Academic. A 2 (message source: EGC vs. FGC) x 2 (emoji: absent vs. present) between-subjects design was used. The manipulation of message source in Study 3 mirrored the method used in Study 2.

Experimental stimuli. Participants in the EGC condition were told that an employee (Sam Billing) working as a sales training consultant at STL posted the message. Those in the FGC condition were informed that the B2B firm, STL, posted the message. In the "emoji absent" condition, the social media message did not include any emojis. In the "emoji present" condition, however, the social media message included emojis (See Web Appendix 5 for sample stimuli used in Study 3.)

A pretest with 50 Prolific Academic participants was conducted to test the manipulation of message source and emojis in the stimuli (see Web Appendix 3 for study measures). A chi-square analysis revealed that participants in the EGC condition were more likely to report that an employee of STL posted the social media message (i.e., 24, 88.9%) rather than the B2B firm (i.e., 3, 11.1%). Similarly, those in the FGC condition identified that the B2B firm posted the message (i.e., 22, 95.7%) rather than an employee (i.e., 1, 4.3%) ($\chi^2_1 = 35.51$, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.843). Regarding use of emojis, findings demonstrated that participants in the "emoji absent" condition reported that the message did not include emojis (i.e., 24, 92.3%). Those in the "emoji present" condition, though, noted that the message included emojis (i.e., 24, 100%) ($\chi^2_1 = 42.60$, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.923).

Sample. We recruited 400 UK-based participants from Prolific Academic meeting the screening criteria of working as a sales professional in a B2B firm. Of these, 70.5% were male, 53.3% were between 18 and 39 years old, and 33.5% had over ten years of work experience. After evaluating the stimuli, participants answered questions concerning their social media engagement (α = 0.95), content-based trust (α = 0.92), and engagement-based trust (α = 0.90), as well as provided their age, gender, and work experience.

4.2. Results

ANOVA was conducted with social media engagement as the dependent variable, and message source (0 = FGC, 1 = EGC) and emojis (0 = absent, 1 = present) as the fixed factors. Results revealed a significant main effect of message source ($F_{1,396} = 36.82$, $p = 0.000$, partial eta^2 = 0.085). In particular, EGC (M = 2.54, SD = 1.34) resulted in a higher level of social media engagement than FGC (M = 1.78, SD = 1.16) (see Fig. 2). No significant main effect of emoji was observed on social media engagement ($F_{1,396} = 0.70$, $p = 0.402$, partial eta^2 = 0.002).

Moreover, we observed a significant interaction effect between message source and emojis on social media engagement ($F_{1,396} = 14.62$, $p = 0.000$, partial eta^2 = 0.036). Presented in Fig. 4 is the interaction plot. A simple slope analysis showed that, when emojis were included in EGC (M = 2.82, SD = 1.44), a higher level of social media engagement emerged than when emojis were not included (M = 2.25, SD = 1.17) ($F_{1,196} = 9.51$, $p = 0.002$, partial eta^2 = 0.046). Inclusion of emojis in FGC (M = 1.60, SD = 0.87), however, decreased engagement with the B2B firm compared to when they were omitted (M = 1.97, SD = 1.38) ($F_{1,200} = 5.16$, $p = 0.024$, partial eta^2 = 0.025). Incorporation of the demographic information did not change the significance of the results (age: $p = 0.819$; gender: $p = 0.209$; experience: $p = 0.612$, message source: p = 0.000; emoji: $p = 0.286$; interaction: p = 0.000). Accordingly, H_3 was confirmed.

Another ANOVA with content-based trust as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of message source ($M_{EGC} = 4.37$, SD = 1.19 vs. $M_{FGC} = 3.92$, SD = 1.39, $F_{1,396} = 12.15$, $p = 0.001$, partial eta^2 = 0.030). In addition, no main effect of emojis ($F_{1,396} = 0.01$, $p = 0.933$, partial eta^2 = 0.000) or an interaction effect of message source and emojis ($F_{1,396} = 2.69$, $p = 0.102$, partial eta^2 = 0.007) on content-based trust was observed.

An ANOVA that focused on engagement-based trust revealed that there was a main effect of message source ($M_{EGC} = 4.25$, SD = 1.20 vs. $M_{FGC} = 3.77$, SD = 1.37, $F_{1,396} = 14.43$, $p = 0.000$, partial eta^2 = 0.035)
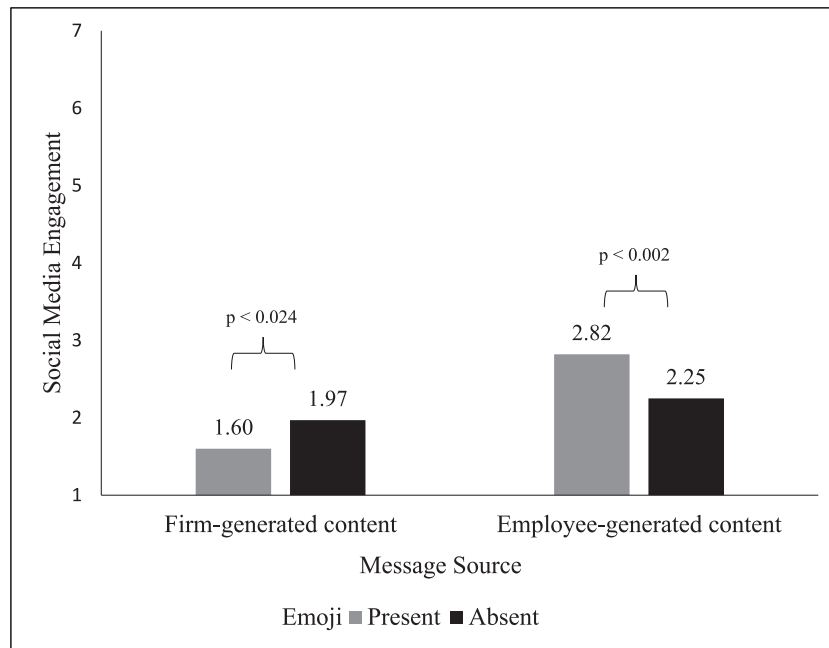
Fig. 4. Interaction effect of message source and emoji on social media engagement (Study 3).

and an interaction effect of message source and emojis ($F_{1,396} = 15.62$, $p = 0.000$, partial eta$^2 = 0.038$). No significant main effect of emojis was observed ($F_{1,396} = 0.13$, $p = 0.722$, partial eta$^2 = 0.000$). A simple slope analysis of the interaction effect revealed that, when emojis were included in the message ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.15$), EGC led to a higher level of social media engagement than when emojis were excluded ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.22$) ($F_{1,196} = 7.33$, $p = 0.007$, partial eta$^2 = 0.036$). In contrast, when FGC incorporated emojis ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.34$), social media engagement was lower compared to when emojis were omitted ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.35$) ($F_{1,200} = 8.34$, $p = 0.004$, partial eta$^2 = 0.040$). The interaction effect is illustrated in Fig. 5.

[Insert Fig. 5 about here].

The mediation of content-based trust and engagement-based trust in the relationship between message source, emojis, and social media engagement was examined using Model 8 in the SPSS PROCESS Macro with 5000 bootstrapped resamples. The results for content-based trust revealed that emojis did not have a significant moderation effect on the mediation of content-based trust. This was because the 95% confidence intervals for the index of moderated mediation (IMM) included zero (IMM = 0.13, SE = 0.09, LLCI = −0.03, ULCI = 0.31).

We found that emojis moderated the mediating role of engagement-based trust in the relationship between message source and social media engagement, as the 95% confidence intervals for the index of moderated mediation did not include zero (IMM = 0.36, SE = 0.11, LLCI = 0.17, ULCI = 0.58). Furthermore, the conditional indirect effect revealed that engagement-based trust mediated the relationship between message
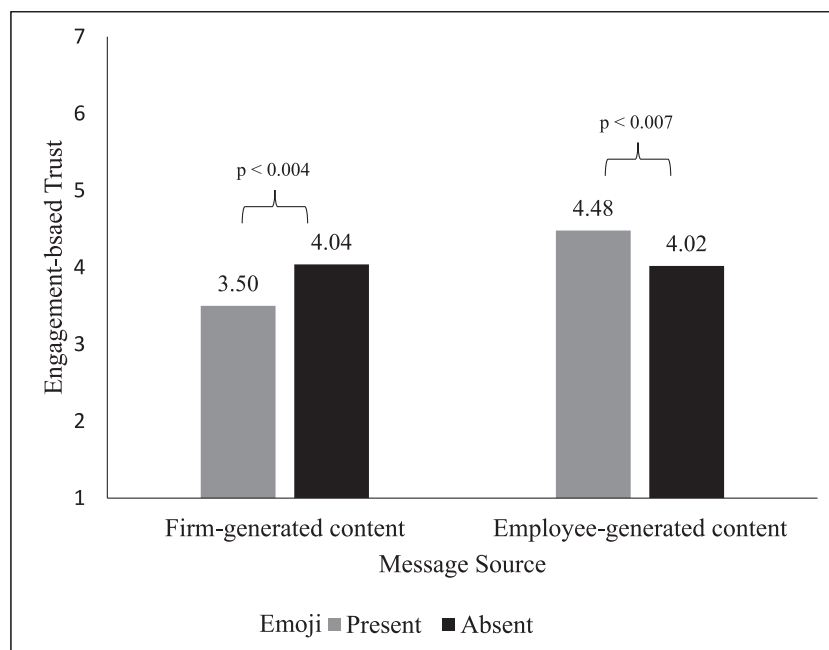

Fig. 5. Interaction effect of message source and emoji on engagement-based trust (Study 3).

source and social media engagement when emojis were included (indirect = 0.35, SE = 0.08, LLCI = 0.21, ULCI = 0.52) but not when they were excluded (indirect = −0.10, SE = 0.07, LLCI = −0.14, ULCI = 0.12).

4.3. Discussion

Study 3 results indicated that emojis have a significant impact on the effectiveness of message source on social media engagement. Specifically, including emojis in EGC increases social media engagement, but incorporating them in FGC reduces it. A plausible reason is that emojis in EGC—relative to in FGC—are more relatable and personal, thus enhancing customer engagement with the B2B firm on social media. However, FGC—relative to EGC—is usually viewed as more formal and less personal, hence making it less suitable for inclusion of emojis in such messages. Additionally, we ascertained that the relationship between message source and social media engagement is mediated by engagement-based trust.

5. Study 4: moderating role of objective information

Study 4 examined the influence of including objective information in the social media message in the relationship between message source and social media engagement. As such, it tested H_4.

5.1. Method

Experimental context and stimuli. Study 4 adopted a similar research design to Study 1 but with one significant change. A 2 (message source: EGC vs. FGC) x 2 (objective information: absent vs. present) between-subjects design was used. Individuals employed in marketing, sales, and advertising positions within B2B firms in the UK were recruited through Prolific Academic. In the EGC condition, participants were informed that an employee, Adam Smith, a social media manager at SLGC, composed the posted content. In the FGC condition, however, they were told that the official corporate account of SLGC posted the content. Inclusion or exclusion of objective information in the social media message was manipulated in the objective information condition (see Web Appendix 6 for sample stimuli used in Study 4).

A pretest was conducted with 51 participants from the Prolific Academic panel to evaluate the manipulation of the message source and objective information conditions (see Web Appendix 3 for the study measures). A chi-square analysis revealed that those in the EGC condition reported that an employee posted the social media message (i.e., 22, 88.0%) rather than the B2B firm (i.e., 3, 12.0%). Similarly, those in the FGC condition noted that the B2B firm posted the message (i.e., 26, 100%) rather than an employee (i.e., 0, 0%) ($\chi^2_1 = 40.24$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V = 0.888). With regard to objective information, participants in the "present" condition acknowledged that the message contained objective information (24, 100%). Those in the "absent" condition, though, indicated that the message did not contain objective information (i.e., 26, 96.3%) rather than contain objective information (i.e., 1, 3.7%) ($\chi^2_1 = 47.15$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V = 0.961). These findings showed that the manipulations worked as intended.

Sample. We recruited 375 UK-based respondents through Prolific Academic meeting the screening criteria (i.e., engaged in lead generation at a B2B firm). We dropped two responses because of incomplete information. Of the 373 participants, 64.1% were male, 61.7% were between 18 and 39 years old, and 22.5% had over ten years of work experience. After reviewing the stimuli, participants answered questions on social media engagement (α = 0.95), content-based trust (α = 0.95), engagement-based trust (α = 0.89), and demographic information.

5.2. Results

ANOVA findings revealed a significant main effect of message source

(M_{EGC} = 2.96, SD = 1.45 vs. M_{FGC} = 2.56, SD = 1.28, $F_{1,369}$ = 7.77, p = 0.006, partial eta^2 = 0.021). This provided support for H_1 (see Fig. 2). We did not find a significant main effect of objective information ($F_{1,369}$ = 2.67, p = 0.102, partial eta^2 = 0.007) or the interaction effect of message source and objective information on social media engagement ($F_{1,369}$ = 0.01, p = 0.943, partial eta^2 = 0.000). These results did not provide support for H_4. Including the control variables did not change the significance of the main or interaction effects (age: p = 0.043; gender: p = 0.740; experience: p = 0.941, message source: p = 0.003; objective information: p = 0.065; interaction: p = 0.892).

An ANOVA with content-based trust revealed significant main effects of message source (M_{EGC} = 4.01, SD = 1.27 vs. M_{FGC} = 3.69, SD = 1.13, $F_{1,369}$ = 6.72, p = 0.010, partial eta^2 = 0.018) and objective information ($M_{present}$ = 4.08, SD = 1.09 vs. M_{absent} = 3.62, SD = 1.29, $F_{1,369}$ = 14.48, p = 0.000, partial eta^2 = 0.038). However, no significant interaction effect between the message source and objective information ($F_{1,369}$ = 2.07, p = 0.151, partial eta^2 = 0.006) was observed on social media engagement.

Similarly, we found a significant main effect of message source (M_{EGC} = 3.95, SD = 1.32 vs. M_{FGC} = 3.52, SD = 1.27, $F_{1,369}$ = 10.49, p = 0.001, partial eta^2 = 0.028) and objective information ($M_{present}$ = 4.04, SD = 1.10 vs. M_{absent} = 3.41, SD = 1.43, $F_{1,369}$ = 22.59, p = 0.000, partial eta^2 = 0.058) on engagement-based trust. No interaction effect of message source and objective information on social media engagement was observed ($F_{1,369}$ = 0.78, p = 0.379, partial eta^2 = 0.002).

An analysis using Model 8 SPSS PROCESS macro with 5000 bootstrapped resamples showed that objective information did not moderate the mediation of content-based trust in the relationship between message source and social media engagement. This was because the 95% confidence intervals for the index of moderated mediation (IMM) included zero (IMM = 0.17, SE = 0.12, LLCI = −0.06, ULCI = 0.40).

Another analysis provided similar results for engagement-based trust. The 95% confidence intervals for the index of moderated mediation (IMM) included zero (IMM = 0.13, SE = 0.15, LLCI = −0.16, ULCI = 0.42). This suggested that objective information had no effect on the relationship between message source, engagement-based trust, and social media engagement.

5.3. Discussion

Study 4 results showed that objective information does not influence the effects of message source on social media engagement, content-based trust, and engagement-based trust. One possible reason for this could be that inclusion of objective information creates difficulty for the audience to focus on the most important information, thereby reducing the impact of objective information. Furthermore, possibly objective information is often included in B2B communications. Therefore, its inclusion in the message is not perceived as adding value to business customers.

6. General discussion

Social media continues to become an integral part of B2B marketing. It enables B2B firms to influence brand outcomes, enhance their brand image, increase brand awareness, and foster customer engagement (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Rana, & Raman, 2021). Previous studies have shown that different message strategies—including message content, appeal, and source—can affect adoption and effectiveness of social media marketing (Cartwright et al., 2021; Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015; Sundström et al., 2021; Swani et al., 2014; Zhang & Du, 2020). However, the understanding of the efficacy of social media marketing in driving customer engagement for B2B firms remains somewhat limited (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Deng et al., 2021). Our study partially addresses this research issue by examining how the message source (i.e., EGC vs. FGC) and content (i.e., emojis and objective information) impact customer engagement with B2B firms on social

media.

Four experiments were conducted to investigate how and when message source influence social media engagement (see Web appendix 7 for the summary of the studies). The results reveal that EGC leads to higher social media engagement than FGC. Specifically, EGC induces higher customer engagement intentions and behavior (i.e., clicks here) (H_1, Study 1 and 2). Furthermore, content-based trust and engagement-based trust are underlying mechanisms by which the message source impacts social media engagement (H_{2a-b}, Study 2). Regarding message content, including emojis in social media messages enhances engagement for EGC but not FGC (H_3, Study 3). However, study findings do not support our hypothesis that including objective information in FGC engenders enhanced social media engagement (H_4, Study 4).

6.1. Theoretical implications

The findings of this research offer important theoretical implications. First, B2B firms increasingly use social media to improve their internal and external communications. This helps to build trust with customers and partners, supporting sales, gaining insights into customer preferences, generating leads, and fostering innovation (Chirumalla et al., 2018; Lacka & Chong, 2016). Furthermore, its use by B2B firms directly influences market sensing, brand management, and customer relationship capabilities (Cao & Weerawardena, 2023). Extant work has found that social media helps build customer relationships in the early stages of the sales process by increasing awareness and connecting with prospects, as well as in the advanced stages of the sales process by directly facilitating completing deals (Agnihotri, 2020; Nunan, Sibai, Schivinski, & Christodoulides, 2018). Scholars have suggested adopting a social media engagement strategy as a systematic approach to promote the use of social media in B2B firms (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Rana, & Raman, 2021; Lacoste, 2016). A social media engagement strategy creates a framework for integrating social media into the B2B firm. It aligns social media's goals with the B2B firm's overall goals and defines the training and support needed to achieve them. It additionally enables measurement of the effectiveness of social media (Cartwright et al., 2021; Zhang & Du, 2020). As a result, researchers and practitioners have a growing interest in determining which social media practices are especially well suited to foster customer engagement and relationships (Zhang & Du, 2020). The current study provides valuable input about this issue through investigating the message factors influencing customer engagement with B2B firms on social media.

Second, B2B social media marketing studies have increased in recent years. However, there needs to be more research on social marketing message strategy, as only a few researchers have addressed this topic. For example, Swani et al. (2017) showed that brand cues, message appeal, direct call-to-purchase, and embedded links for additional information are important factors for social media engagement in the form of likes and comments. Zhang and Du (2020) demonstrated that message appeal and quality influence willingness to engage in social media through perceived customer value. Deng et al. (2021) found that linguistic characteristics of the message (i.e., language and visual complexity, emotional cues, interpersonal cues, and multimodal cues) impact customer brand engagement, as measured by likes and retweets. Meire et al. (2022) extended their work by showing that linguistic style alignment, content similarity, and readability affect engagement metrics (i.e., likes, retweets, and replies). Though these investigations provide empirical evidence of the factors that induce social media engagement, further research is needed to augment understanding of the intricacies of message strategies for developing an effective social media marketing strategy (Cartwright, Liu, & Davies, 2022; Juntunen et al., 2020; Sundström et al., 2021). Our undertaking contributes to the literature on social media communications theory (Michaelidou et al., 2011) and social media engagement theory (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016) through examining the effectiveness of message source and content in influencing social media engagement.

Third, previous B2B social media marketing research has examined the role of different message source on social media engagement. For example, Cheng et al. (2021) discussed how a rational or emotional appeal of FGC influences digital consumer engagement measured as likes, comments, and shares. Kwon et al. (2022) investigated how color features in FGC stimulate customer engagement measured as eWOM. Other scholars have explored the role of user-generated content on firm performance and engagement (Liu, 2020; Thakur & AlSaleh, 2018). According to Huotari et al. (2015), the source of a message—whether from the firm, employees, users, or professionals—significantly impacts the effectiveness of social media engagement in B2B firms. Previous research has individually explored the influence of various message source, suggesting that they significantly impact firm and customer outcomes. However, how these different message source compare to each other in determining social media engagement for B2B firms remains unclear (Cheng et al., 2021; McShane et al., 2019). This understanding is important as it enables B2B firms to strategically leverage the most effective message source to optimize the social media engagement and drive positive firm outcomes (Cassia & Magno, 2021; Liu, 2020). We thus contribute to this area through exploring the effectiveness of EGC versus FGC in customer engagement with B2B firms on social media.

Fourth, prior research has demonstrated that emotional cues in B2B communication impact how it is evaluated and can influence decision making. For example, Swani et al. (2014) found that B2B communication on social media includes more emotional than rational appeals. In a subsequent study, Swani et al. (2017) determined that emotional appeals in social media messages lead to more likes in a B2B context than in a B2C context. Moreover Deng et al. (2021) showed that emotional content in a message facilitates peripheral processing and positively impacts brand engagement metrics, such as likes and retweets. These investigations have hence indicated that emotional content in B2B communication offers a distinct advantage and improves customer engagement. Our efforts build on this previous empiricism by showing that, including emotional cues, such as emojis, in EGC enhances social media engagement. Our findings, though, also reveal that incorporating emojis in FGC impair social media engagement compared to not including them.

Fifth, studies in B2B communication have suggested that trust is a consequential factor in enhancing social media engagement and creating sustainable customer relationships (Sundström et al., 2021; Zhang & Li, 2019). That work has implied that establishing trust through B2B social media communication can foster an enhanced productive atmosphere, thus leading to ameliorated effective dialogue and interaction. Trust is interconnected with communication, and social media communication can increase customer trust through providing relevant information and being attentive to and constructive with customers (Juntunen et al., 2020). Our research demonstrates that content-based and engagement-based trust are underlying mechanisms by which message source impacts social media engagement.

Finally, this study responds to the recent call for experimental research in B2B marketing (Viglia, Ulqinaku, & Zaefarian, 2022). We employ experimental designs across four studies to investigate the causal relationship between message source, message content, trust, and social media engagement with the B2B firm. By conducting a manipulation check, ruling out alternative mechanisms, and exploring the effects on both intentions and behaviors (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020), our findings provide robust support for the effectiveness of social media message strategies.

6.2. Managerial implications

Social media engagement is critical for B2B firms, as it affords connecting with their customers and building relationships, improving brand awareness and reputation, generating leads, and increasing sales. Message source and content are important tools that B2B firms can use to augment social media engagement. This study reveals that

EGC—relative to FGC—leads to a higher level of social media engagement and trust. This finding suggests that B2B firms could encourage their employees to share information about it on social media platforms and strategically use that content on the B2B firm's brand page to increase social media engagement.

However, a B2B firm should exercise caution when allowing its employees to share information about it on social media. This is because employees may not have direct experience with the firm's product or service, and the firm likely has little control over the content that employees may post. B2B firms can benefit from developing a corporate social media policy to mitigate this risk. The policy should establish guidelines and protocol for employees to follow when representing the B2B firm on social media. It can also provide the tone, language, and visual guidelines to be utilized when creating and sharing content and for responding to customer comments and messages. By offering a clear corporate social media policy, B2B firms can increase the likelihood that their employees represent it professionally and appropriately. Oracle is an example of the foregoing approach. In particular, it specifies what employees can and cannot share (e.g., confidential information, information about future projects).

Including emotional cues, such as emojis, in EGC increases social media engagement. Using emojis can assist in conveying emotions and feelings while distinguishing this approach from traditional B2B communication—which tends to be more rational and professional. Emojis can also improve the visual appeal of social media content, thus augmenting the likelihood that it will be liked and shared. However, emotional cues should be used strategically and align with the overall brand strategy of the B2B firm. Furthermore, B2B firms should avoid using emojis in corporate communication, as their use reduces customer engagement with the B2B firm on social media.

6.3. Limitations and future research directions

The present study provides a valuable starting point for empirically demonstrating the importance of message source and content in B2B social media engagement. Nonetheless, it has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, differences between social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) can impact the effectiveness of social media engagement (Gruner & Power, 2018). Customers may respond differently to the message source and content on different social media platforms. Thus, subsequent studies should explore the effectiveness of message strategies on customer engagement across various social media platforms.

Second, the present research examined how message source (i.e., FGC vs. EGC) and message content (i.e., emojis and objective information) influence social media engagement. Deng et al. (2021) demonstrated that linguistic and visual cues and emotional and cognitive cues affect brand engagement. As such, future work should investigate the role of visual complexity (e.g., hashtags) and multimodal cues (e.g., videos) to enhance understanding of social media engagement. Furthermore, scholars could investigate the effectiveness of different message source, including content generated by end-users, suppliers, and intermediaries on customer engagement.

Third, our findings revealed that EGC is more effective than FGC in increasing customer engagement. However, in certain contexts, employees may not have direct experience with their B2B firm's product or service or its technical details. Thus, future research could examine boundary conditions wherein EGC is efficacious in elevating customer engagement. Additionally, our study did not consider the different job roles of employees (Men, O'Neil, & Ewing, 2020) or their impact on customer engagement. Consequently, researchers should explore customer perceptions of content that employees in different job roles generate vis-à-vis customer engagement.

Fourth, though the present study examined the effectiveness of FGC and EGC, B2B firms can use both concurrently, as well as those suppliers, partners, and end-users create. Arguably, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the effectiveness of FGC and EGC, not to determine the optimal message strategy for B2B firms (Meire et al., 2022; Neuhaus et al., 2022). To arrive at an especially apt message strategy, B2B firms need to select a mix of messages from different sources that can engage customers and stakeholders on social media effectively. Thus, further empiricism could explore message strategies that markedly augment customer engagement.

Fifth, our study failed to support the hypothesis which proposed that objective information in a social media message would impact customer engagement auspiciously. Previous research has established that emotional cues are more impactful than rational cues in driving customer engagement (Deng et al., 2021; Swani et al., 2017 et al). However, additional investigation seems requisite to determine when rational cues (or objective information) in social media messages can effectively engage customers with a B2B company. Finally, we did not investigate how message factors influence customers' engagement intentions. Although we examined the role of message source on actual social media behaviors (e.g., clicks), future studies should replicate the findings using secondary data on behavioral metrics such as likes, shares, following, and impressions.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2023.06.011.

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