

Deep Metaphors for Consumers Engaging in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the motives of consumers to engage in social media is of focal interest for business actors. Existent studies focus on surface-level motives to explain social web activities. By applying a novel concept of qualitative market research (ZMET), we gain deeper insights into consumers' mindsets and reveal underlying motives for engaging in social media. We show that there are subconscious, deep motivators for consumer engagement shared across cultures. The exploratory research approach reveals the meaning, values, and the impact of deep-lying motives regarding customer engagement in social media. Findings lead to new insights about key drivers that actively engage consumers in brand-related social communities. The paper outlines implications and opportunities for companies designing online communication strategies. Guidance is provided both for strategic issues of co-creation as well as for marketing tactics.

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UNDERLYING MOTIVES DRIVE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Social media constitutes without any doubt a key challenge for strategic marketing as it causes “shifts in loci of activity, power, and value” (Berthon et al, 2012). New interactive marketing spaces require new modes of consumer interactions (Ozuem et al, 2008). Assessing consumers’ reasons to engage in social media is thus relevant for marketing and communication management. A thorough understanding of user motives becomes of key importance as consumers’ online actions provide both opportunities as well as major threats to companies.

Motives are subconscious elements of the minds of the consumers. They exist on an implicit level which cannot be readily accessed when asked about explicitly. They are so abstract that it is difficult for consumers to articulate them in specific ways (Zaltman, 2003). Yet, current social media research focuses mostly on explicit verbalization of motives (e. g. Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009). Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004), for example, found that the motivation to participate in a virtual community of practice is based on the size and the practical relevance of the community. While such findings are operationally helpful, they are of limited use for designing a more far reaching social media strategy.

This study focuses on generally valid, unconscious deep metaphors. Deep metaphors determine thoughts, feelings, and knowledge structures, which are unconsciously hidden in the mind of consumers (Zaltman, 1997). These deep metaphors exist on an abstract level in order to explain general behavior of users and consumers, which is in turn driven by their existing value system(s). The latter are assumed to steer motives and actions. As deep metaphors explain consumer behavior based on their often subconscious values and attitudes, these metaphors reflect rather stable and long-lasting structures of attitude formation and behavior instead of superficial motives in concrete usage situations.

To retrieve metaphors for engaging in social media, the study uses the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET). We examine the business-to-consumer (B2C) motives to engage in company related social media content and show implications for marketing and communication management. We posit that subconscious metaphors are able to unveil the needs of users and consumers and permit focused strategy formation for social media activities.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND DATA COLLECTION

Established research methods are not able to investigate the above mentioned research hypothesis in depth. Closed questions do not lend themselves to elicit subconscious motives. Open questions are not helpful either as consumers do not have the ability to articulate deep motives because they are hidden in consumers’ subconscious minds. Certain qualitative research methods are, however, applicable in the context of this research approach. Methods from psychology and qualitative empirical research help to elicit metaphors in a structured way. Supphellen (2000) outlined the opportunities of qualitative research methods in consumer research and behavior investigation: (1) gaining access to hidden associations, (2) helping

respondents verbalize associations, (3) mitigating response censoring, and (4) validating reported associations.

We employed the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), a patented one-on-one in-depth interview and analysis approach, available for academic research. Several studies in a variety of areas and countries have demonstrated the ability of ZMET to gain deeper insights into consumers' minds (e.g., Cornelis, 2010; Khoo-Lattimore, 2009; Ling, Yang, Lin, & Tsai, 2009; Venkatesh, Joy, Sherry, & Deschenes, 2010). For example, Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter (2001) performed a study to analyze consumers' perception of advertising. This study revealed that advertising has a positive value in that it acts metaphorically as a hostess, teacher, counselor, or enabler, all of which offer information. It also acts as a performer who provides entertainment, and is seen as an engine that stimulates growth in the economy. The goodwill derived from these aspects of advertising, however, is countered by being intrusive and pushy, epitomized through omnipresent being, nosy neighbor, con-man, seducer, and evil therapist metaphors. In addition, three groups (ambivalents, skeptics, and hostiles) with varying levels of rejection of advertising emerged from this cross-case analysis.

ZMET is based on one-on-one interviews. This format is designed to overcome the shortcomings of focus groups. Focus groups are ill-suited to provide deep insight into the emotional landscape of people's thoughts (Griffin & Hauser, 1993; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman, 2003), due to group dynamic and social dynamic issues, groupthink, and very limited time to explore an individual participant's thinking. Khoo-Lattimore (2009) outlines in her paper the value of one-on-one projective techniques originally employed in clinical psychology, where patients were unwilling or unable to explain how they think and feel about certain issues. Hence, the ZMET analysis is an appropriate tool to elicit subconscious metaphors and values connected with the topic of social media and to investigate metaphors to engage in social networks.

Data Collection Step of the ZMET-Analysis

In a three country collaboration 28 interviews were conducted in Shanghai, China; Hamburg, Germany; and Boston and Pittsburgh, USA. Interviewers were highly trained in the methodology, either by being experienced freelance ZMET interviewers or employees of the supporting ZMET organizations. For practical reasons a convenience sample was used, which reflected a broad demographic representation in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, profession, and nationality. Individuals ranged in age from 18 to 50 years, and were active users of a variety of online social media, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and others.

Participants were asked to collect four to six images that represent their thoughts and feelings about online social networking. On the interview day, participants met individually with the interviewer and discussed the pictures using laddering and unbiased, non-leading probes. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to create a meaningful collage representing their feelings and perspectives about social media using their pictures. The interviews were transcribed, with a typical interview spanning 15-25 single-spaced pages.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Process of Data Analyses

The data analyses procedure is structured into four consecutive steps. These steps assure that the elicited motives are reliable and valid. Analyses were conducted based on approximately 600 pages of single-spaced transcripts and over 20 digital collages. In order to increase inter-rater reliability the analysis was conducted by six independently working individuals in three different countries trained through the same rigorous ZMET training protocol; and by analyzing country data separately and then comparing findings across countries. Specifically, two analysts extracted relevant excerpts from the interviews and structured them into groups of different meanings. After this step, the researcher team merged these first results by structuring the data and discussed the aggregated results regarding the elicited motives and metaphors articulated by participants. In the last step, the international researcher team elicited the aggregated metaphors which explain the general motives of the participants to engage in social media. Triangulation was used to increase validity. Researchers looked at the data in various ways (imagery, literal verbal expressions, metaphorical verbal expressions, and connections between concepts). Data was collected in four different locations with participants who had no connection with each other, based on the same research question and protocol. The following figure shows the process of data analysis:

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

ANALYSES AND KEY FINDINGS

Mapping of Motives: A Specific Example

In a first step, specifically elicited motive-constructs are mapped to provide an overall picture of the underlying motive structure. A means-end-chain analysis was applied as an established method to gain insights into consumers' motives. Most of the motives were elicited through laddering. This enabled us to extract "attributes", "consequences", and "values" of social media participants. Figure 3 shows an example from one participant (Germany). She had brought a picture of a "chain link" to the interview, which symbolized for her that she uses social media for (periodic) contacts with all friends. Laddering technique unveiled that "Connection" and "Balance" are the benefits of the "periodic contact" with friends. Deep values are "Safety" and "Security."

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

From the various pictures participants brought to the interviews we were able to elicit shared key motives for engaging in social media. Looking at all individual means-end-chains and searching for links between the motives we found common connections between various mental representations. Based on this, we developed mental maps of thoughts and feelings associated with the use of social media. These mental maps were used to create and visualize the key motives, which were expressed by nearly every participant in a similar way. This procedure enabled us to map all relevant associations and metaphors connected with the thoughts and

feelings of using social media and unveil the most relevant and common motives. Figure 4 shows the mental map of participant #2 (USA):

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

The mental map visualizes the three core metaphors that were uncovered in this research, Control, connecting, and Self-Expression. The construct "contact to friends" activates several important ideas. Memories, through their comforting emotions, give participants a sense of security. Contact to friends lead to a sense of connection, which activates being at ease (balance). This leads to not being alone, which links back to security. Considering economic and political insecurities in all three investigated countries the need for security is understandable.

In summary, the mapping of motives enabled us to develop the most frequently mentioned deep motives, or key deep metaphors, as developed by Zaltman (2003; 2008): Connection, Self-Expression, and Control. These three guiding metaphors were elicited in nearly all interviews. Furthermore, these key motives are consistent with the proposed deep metaphors unveiled by the literature review of existing social media studies regarding motives to engage within these networks (see Table 1).

Consolidation of Deep Metaphors: A Specific Example

A key output of ZMET is the constellation of deep metaphors that guide participants' thinking about the topic (Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman, 2003), as well as how participants express the key deep metaphors. A deep metaphor can assume many different forms, so the particular expression is strategically important. Figure 5, a consumer created collage from an interview (USA) provides a summary of the most important thoughts and feelings, as well as core deep metaphors.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

The main deep metaphors for engaging in social media are visualized by the use of a campfire, which represents social media as a place to meet with friends ("Connection") and as a place to tell and listen to stories ("Self-Expression"). This is the modern-day hearth around which people meet. Social media as a modern age campfire or hearth is a powerful conceptual metaphor. On the other hand, unlike the hearth of old, social media allows for the opportunity to act incognito, which offers a much larger amount of "Control." The participant illustrates this through representing herself and her friends as animals. Lastly, social media does allow for one-on-one, personal discussions, which is represented by participants gathering away from the campfire. To further illustrate these ideas we have included some excerpts from the interviews.

One of the aspects of Connection is that members of the crowd can vicariously partake in the storyteller's experiences. One participant expressed this in the following way: *"It's like a personal touch. I'm still in their lives and feel a part of their life despite being far away from home."* Another participant said: *"All weekend [friends on Facebook] wanted to know, how the play was, how that dinner was, how far you walked? So they really were a part of that weekend with us."* These statements unveil the clear tendency that participants use social media as a modern campfire and thereby fulfill a basic human need for connection.

This point is further emphasized by the key deep metaphor of Self-Expression: One participant brought a picture of a horse rider in a tournament. The picture unveiled the idea that social media users long for the attention and affection of a cheering crowd: *“They start to admire you and sending messages to you like congratulating you, so that makes you feel like you’re important.”* Another participant said: *“You feel that people actually care ... there’s people interested and happy for you and it’s reassuring and comforting.”* This attention is particularly attractive to users from the United States, who see themselves as celebrities performing on stage, empowered by the opportunity to shape how others see them: *“It’s almost as if you’re branding yourself.”*

In contrast to the deep metaphors Connection and Self-Expression, lack or loss of Control is a key danger of social media engagement and the degree of involvement. Just as the participant at the campfire (Figure 5) feared judgment from the elders and children in the crowd, social media users fear criticism from those in their networks who do not ordinarily classify as “friends”. Paradoxically, as the network grows to encompass more and more diverse relationships, and to offer a bigger and bigger stage, users experience less and less freedom to express themselves and connect with “real” friends: *“There’s different relationships that have never bumped and now they’re all kind of together on the system... [I feel] a little nervous about it... a little cramped in what I feel I can do.”* Furthermore, respondents perceive the need to decide with every post whether it is better to be open, honest, and vulnerable – or secure, silent, and alone: *“That [connected Earth] to me looks like what social networking is supposed to do...But you are being just very basically connected to a whole bunch of people without necessarily getting to the heart of the matter.”*

The excerpts reveal that the three key determinants may exert opposing influences on consumer engagement in social media. There is a lack of consistency, even lacking awareness, in terms of addressing these key determinants in corporate social media activities. Yet, all three core guiding ideas offer opportunities for social media activities. In the next section we will present and discuss implications, opportunities, and strategies based on these insights.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this exploratory study show that most participants experience a unique interplay between three key metaphors when thinking about online social networking: Connection, Self-Expression and Control. They collected images like the famous picture of E.T.’s finger connecting with the finger of a little child to express their deep need to connect with others and express themselves. They also brought pictures representing the fear of being vulnerable and lacking control over their personal image, such as people hiding, being isolated and lonely, or being spied on.

The basic deep social media motives are consistent across all three countries. This insight confirms Hypothesis 2, which assumed the generalizability of metaphors in the intercultural comparison. The main metaphors found in the intercultural comparison are Connection and Control. The need for personal expression varies more. It is very important in the US and

Chinese sample but not as relevant within the German sample. This seems in line with the more collectivistic and consensual setting in the German society.

In summary, our analysis has shown that there are indeed the same subconscious, deep motivators for consumer engagement in America, China, and Germany. Using ZMET we were able to gain deeper insights into consumers' mindsets and were able to validate some of the motives discussed in other studies. Accordingly, we can confirm our first hypothesis which anticipated a deeper understanding of user engagement, motives, and behavior in social media. We can show that motives discussed in other studies are mostly surface-level expressions of deeper drivers.

Our research leads to several marketing and media management implications. From the investigation of deep metaphors in the intercultural comparison three key implications arise: (1) the need to promote Connection and Self-Expression by collaborating with users to create meaningful stories, relationships, and perceptions of the brand; (2) the need to focus on quality relationships as opposed to purely focusing on numbers; and (3) allow for Control in addition to Connection and Self-Expression in order to give customers a greater sense of trust and openness.

Limitations of this study include the relatively small sample size and the convenience sample, which makes overbroad generalizations difficult. However, ZMET has been validated in terms of its effectiveness even with small sample sizes (citation). Users told personal stories that revealed their deep associations with online social media. These motives elicited by the structured qualitative interview technique are characterized by their validity for all users in our intercultural comparison. These insights can be an inspiration for strategic or tactical recommendations.

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FIGURES

Figure 1 Interviews and analysis procedure

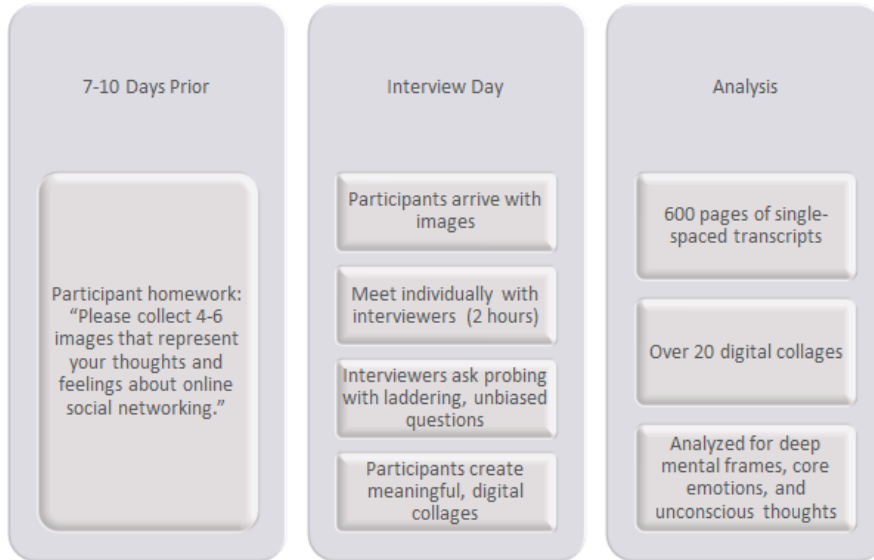


Figure 2 Process of the data analyses

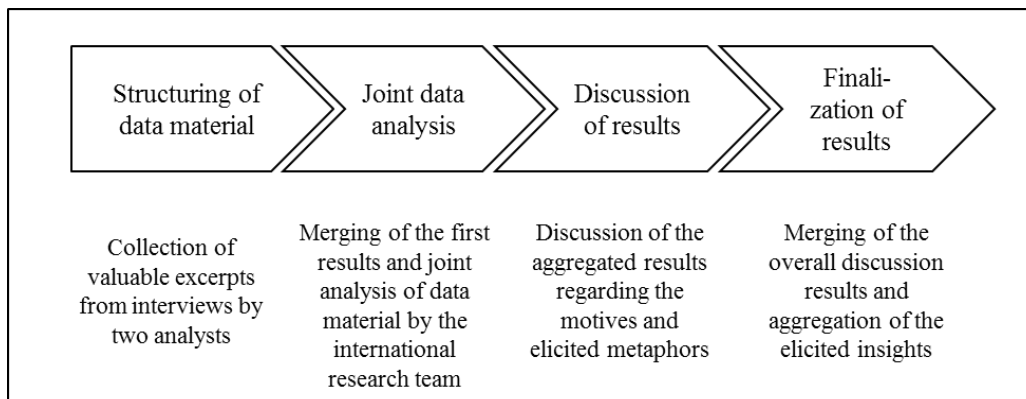


Figure 3 Means-end-chain of the motives (participant # 2)

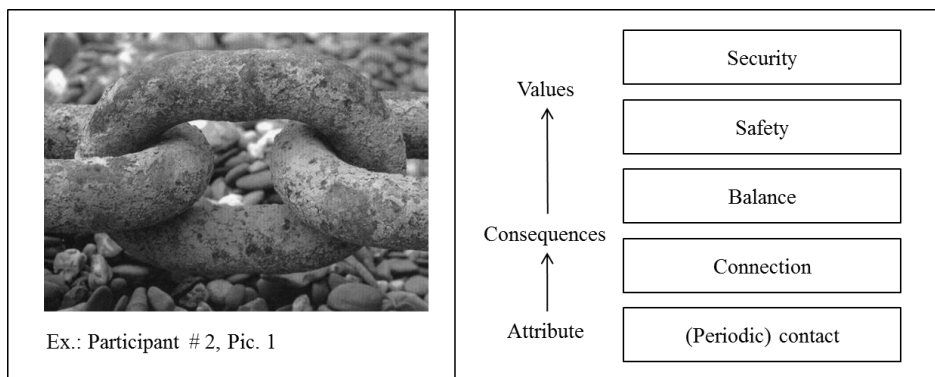


Figure 4 Mental map of participant # 2

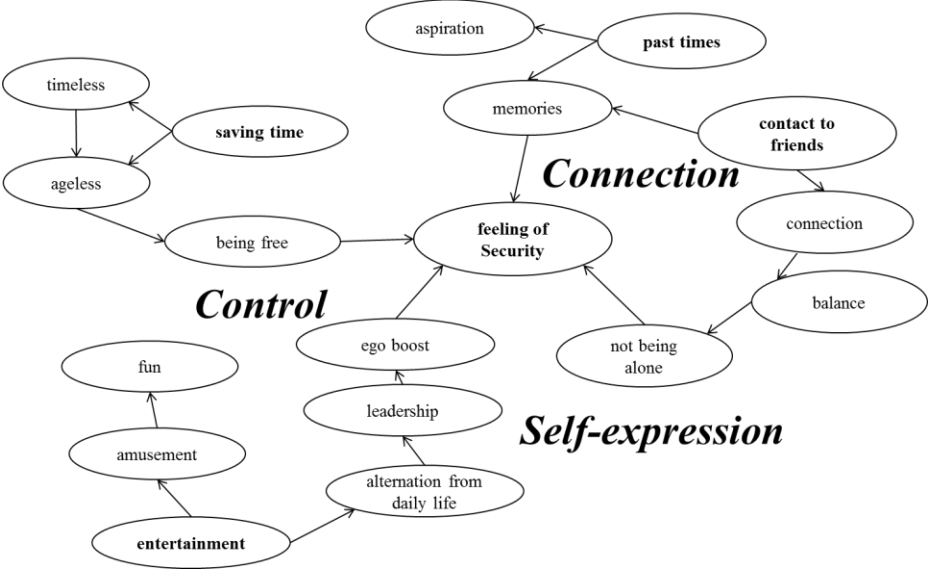


Figure 5 Collage about key motives to engage in social media

