

**Drivers Of Customer Engagement on LinkedIn:
Uncovering The Role of Employees as Spokespersons**

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Abstract

This paper explores drivers of customer engagement with corporate brands on LinkedIn and tests a theoretical model linking thinking processes and post source characteristics to customer digital engagement. The study design employs an exploratory content analysis of 788 LinkedIn posts and an experimental research study (N=334), in the context of the CRM industry. Findings show that content with an informational purpose and posts created or shared by employees, rather than company pages, result in greater engagement rates.

Drawing from attribution and source credibility theories the study also tests a model of serial mediation to explain attribution and source effects on engagement. Results show that both trustworthiness through identification mediate the relationship between attribution style and engagement. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Customer Engagement, Source Credibility, Attribution Theory, Identification, LinkedIn

Introduction

Brands seek to develop effective digital marketing strategies with the purpose to engage with current and potential customers on social media. Achieving customer engagement (CE) adds value to corporate brands, as it leads to building and sustaining long-term relationships, which in turn influence brand loyalty (Pansari and Kumar, 2016). Having an active presence on social networking sites allows corporate brands to interact directly with audiences, showcase their values and enhance their reputation (Lashgari *et al.*, 2018).

LinkedIn is the largest social network for professionals and B2B brands (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018). The LinkedIn interface allows brands to build a company page in which they can connect with their employees, post information about the company, recruit talent, nurture business relationships, interact with customers, and share high quality content such as photos, videos, text, and stories. However, despite its growing use and importance there is no previous academic research on the drivers of CE in the particular social networking site. Hence, the first objective of this study is to explore the types of content and sources that corporate brands utilize to drive engagement on LinkedIn. To this end, we employ an exploratory content analysis of 788 LinkedIn posts, in the context of the CRM industry.

In recent years employees play an increasingly important role in driving CE on LinkedIn, acting as spokespeople who post brand-related content. However, research evidence on their effectiveness as company endorsers in driving CE is nonexistent. The present study draws upon attribution theory, source credibility theory, and identification theory to examine the role of employees as spokespeople in generating engagement with branded content on LinkedIn. Through an experimental research design (N=334), we investigate how individual differences in attribution style (internal vs. external) affect engagement with a branded post. In addition, we investigate two important mediating processes that may explain potential differences in engagement: perceived source credibility

and perceived identification. Both constructs have been shown to play an important role in explaining endorser effects (e.g., Schouten *et al.*, 2020), but have never been studied in a B2B, digital engagement context.

In terms of originality and contribution, this is the first study that explores the role of employees as spokespeople driving CE with corporate brands on LinkedIn. Also, the proposed framework links two previously unrelated constructs, attribution style with engagement, thereby adding to the literature on CE. The results confirm the importance of employees as spokespeople for increasing engagement on LinkedIn, thereby extending the source credibility, identification, and attribution theories to the domain of employee advocacy. Finally, the model delineates a path for relationships between individual customer attribution styles, source credibility, identification, and engagement, helping our understanding of how thinking processes (attribution) through perceived source trustworthiness and identification drive behavioral intentions (engagement).

The paper is structured to include a literature review, followed by the methods and results. The final sections discuss the main theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and limitations.

Theoretical background

Customer engagement with corporate brands in a B2B setting

For over a decade, customer engagement is considered an important branding and digital marketing metric for marketing academics and practitioners alike (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021). There are several definitions and operationalizations of CE, as scholars explore it from different perspectives and under various contexts. CE has been defined as the psychological state that happens due to the interactive co-creative experience of customers with a central agent (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), or the state of mind of customers, based on the level of their

motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent status on direct brand interactions (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), or the intensity of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral participation of a person, which either the company or the person initiates, and it relates to a company's offerings or organizational activities (Vivek *et al.* 2012). In addition, Pansari and Kumar (2017), building on their previous work, suggest that CE is related to the different mechanisms by which customers add value to a brand, either by engaging in direct (i.e., purchases) or indirect (i.e., referrals, conversations in social media, feedback) activities. Recently, Hollebeek *et al.* (2019) postulate that the central operant assets are not only the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral ones, but also the social knowledge or skills.

Other scholars (e.g., Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Verhoef *et al.*, 2010) suggest that CE is behavioral-based only and argue that it refers to behavioral manifestations that spring from motivational drivers. Dolan *et al.* (2016) apply the concept on social media and describe it as "a customer's behavioral manifestations that have a social media focus beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers" (Dolan *et al.*, 2016, p. 265).

CE has been linked to several important outcomes, such as fostering long-term relationships (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Shawky *et al.*, 2019b), loyalty (Fehrer *et al.*, 2018), company competitive advantage (Pansari and Kumar, 2016), firm performance, and value co-creation. CE with corporate brands is considered essential as it leads to trust, commitment, reputation, and recognition (Hollebeek, 2011a; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). In the case of corporate brands in the complex B2B setting, CE may go beyond purchases, as corporate brands aim at promoting their brand image and reputation and forging strong relationships with different stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, partners, state authorities, media, and at distinguishing themselves from their competitors.

Customer engagement on LinkedIn

LinkedIn is the largest social network for professionals and B2B brands (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018). It gives B2B brands the opportunity to mimic real-life interactions with their customers, in a business online environment. The LinkedIn interface allows brands to build a company page in which they can connect with their employees, post information about the company and share the same type of content as the users on their profiles, such as photos, videos, text, and upload stories. 80% of LinkedIn users are decision-makers for their companies (Bump, 2020).

Although performance metrics indicate that LinkedIn is a platform that is appropriate for corporate brands to invest in, HubSpot research reveals that only 15% of marketers create content for LinkedIn, and even less (10%) tend to invest in the platform (Bump, 2020). Moreover, prior academic research investigates LinkedIn as a recruitment tool primarily or for employee branding purposes.

Users of LinkedIn manifest engagement in some form of online either by demonstrating active interaction with the content or through following the company, the brand, or the group. As Valentini *et al.* (2018) posit, engagement in a digital environment is a type of active online behavioral manifestation. On LinkedIn, customer engagement can take the form of liking, sharing, commenting on a post, follow the brand, and/ or connect to other professionals. It can occur either between company pages and individuals' profiles or between individuals. Hence, the current study builds on the behavioral dimension of CE and adopts the conceptualization of Dolan *et al.* (2016), which is in line with previous behavioral definitions and the evolving nature of SNS.

Study I: Exploratory Content Analysis

We first conducted a content analysis in order to explore the dominant types of sources and content that B2B brands utilize on LinkedIn. For this purpose, the three top corporate brands that operate within the CRM industry were chosen. This industry is currently on the rise, and Statista predicts that it will reach over \$40 billion by 2023 (Statista, 2020). CRM companies have active company pages on LinkedIn with millions of page followers, and they post frequently. The top three companies in this sector are: Salesforce, with 18.4% global market revenue share, followed by SAP and Oracle who have 5.3% and 5.2 % shares respectively.

The content analysis focused on a total of 788 posts collected over a two-month period. For the period October-November 2020, we analyzed all 528 posts created or shared by the three company pages, all 50 posts by employees explicitly mentioned in the companies' pages and a total of 210 most recent posts of 70 randomly selected employees.

The three groups of posts were categorized depending on the post characteristics, content purpose, and engagement metrics. Furthermore, in the case of the employees, the status and gender were recorded. By status, this paper refers to the job level seniority the employees have, i.e., senior, middle or entry-level. Gender refers to the biological sex of the individuals, i.e., female or male.

Post characteristics involve the type of visual format, the creative visual content, and whether the post is original or shared. Table I, presents the post characteristics.

Table I. Frequency of descriptive characteristics.

Descriptive characteristics

Type of visual format

Video	45.12% (n=245 posts)
Photo	54.88% (n=543 posts)
Total	100% (n=788 posts)

Creative visual content

Human	57.10% (n=450 posts)
Not human	42.90% (n=338 posts)
Total	100% (n=788 posts)

Originality of the post format

Original post	83.12% (n=655 posts)
Shared post	16.88% (n=133 posts)
Total	100% (n=788 posts)

Content purpose refers to the goal of a company when sharing a post (Andersson and Wikström, 2017). The four purpose categories were generated based on relative theory and following a priori coding (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). The review of the existing literature reveals that there is no accordance on a typology for the content purpose for corporate brands in a B2B context. The studies of Sundström *et al.* (2020), Zhang and Du, (2020), Magno and Cassia (2020), Lashgari *et al.* (2018), and Holliman and Rowley (2014) are the basis of deciding on the four categories of purpose. The top category of terms of frequency is “promotional”, referring to content that aims at promoting the companies’ services and products (29.2%, n=230 posts). The second category is “educational” (27.9%, n=220 posts) referring to posts that aim to educate the audience with content such as expertise, findings, and webinars. The third category is “interactivity”, referring to content that aims to initiate dialogue with the audience (26.8%, n=211 posts). The fourth category is “informational”, referring to content with the purpose to inform about company news or initiatives (16.1%, n=127 posts).

In terms of engagement, our analysis shows that the posts shared by the three company pages’ posts generate higher total engagement compared to the employees’ posts,

but the average engagement rate is significantly lower for company pages in comparison to employees, as presented in table II below.

Table II. Total engagement and engagement rate of the three groups of posts.

	Salesforce			SAP			Oracle		
	Company Pages	Random sample of employees	Mentioned Employees	Company Pages	Random sample of employees	Mentioned Employees	Company Pages	Random sample of employees	Mentioned Employees
Reactions	65,357	3,393	1,588	33,866	6,344	5,034	19,488	3,136	1,694
Comments	15,822	116	59	12,350	176	121	1,555	219	55
TE*	81,179	3,509	1,647	46,216	6,520	5,155	21,043	3,355	1,749
AER**	.0111	1.533	3.182	.0137	1.424	3.354	.0049	1.426	2.918

Notes TE= Total Engagement, AER= Average Engagement Rate

Findings indicate that on the company pages, video format results in a higher total engagement and engagement rate than the photo format. Sharing original content is an effective content approach for both the company pages, as well as for employees. Furthermore, the inclusion of human elements in the creative visual content impacts positively the total engagement scores for employees' posts.

Moreover, although at the industry level promotional posts represent the majority of posts at 29.2% (n=230 posts), informational posts generate a significantly higher mean rank of engagement (Company pages=345.50, employees=122.71), as compared to the mean ranks of the other three categories, i.e., promotional (Company pages=292.19, employees=98.66), educational (Company pages=273.89, employees=95.83), interactivity (Company pages=209.68, employees=92.77).

In comparing the strategies of the three CRM companies, each company employs a different approach in terms of posting frequency and types of content. The SAP page has a better content strategy overall in terms of total engagement (Mean rank = 361.34) and higher engagement rates (Mean rank = 393.46), in comparison to both Salesforce total engagement

(Mean rank = 215.95) and engagement rate (Mean rank = 232.84) and Oracle total engagement (Mean rank = 349.54) and engagement rate (Mean rank = 214.67).

Interestingly, even though Salesforce page has the highest total engagement (81,179), the SAP page generates the highest average engagement rate (0.0137), because it employs an overall better digital strategy. SAP prefers to either not mention anyone or to mention employees in 81.3% of their posts, while Salesforce has 61.9% of the same combinations and Oracle 61.4%. Additionally, SAP's main purposes are primarily (57.14%) informational and secondarily promotional (n=64 posts), while Salesforce's main purpose is primarily interactivity, with only 35% of the posts having informational and promotional purposes. Regarding the type of visual format, SAP shares 49.11% of video posts, in comparison to Salesforce which only shares 34.4%.

Finally, the analysis of the employees' posts shows that employees who are at a senior level position (Mean rank=110.06, $p=.010$), achieve higher total engagement scores, in comparison to mid-level employees. Same as the company pages, content purpose is important to total engagement scores ($p=.025$) and information purpose records higher total engagement scores.

Study II

Both recent management practices and the content analysis showed that employees play an increasingly important role in driving CE on LinkedIn, acting as spokespeople who post brand-related content. However, research evidence on their effectiveness as company endorsers in driving CE is nonexistent. Therefore, a second study was designed with the objective to explore the role of employees as spokespeople in generating engagement with branded content on LinkedIn.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Attribution theory

Attribution refers to the causal inferences people make in order to predict and explain the behaviors of self and others. Attribution theory is concerned with describing and explaining the thinking processes involved in individuals' causal explanations for human behavior or events (Heider 1958). In the marketing communications domain, attribution theory has been primarily employed to explain factors affecting the effectiveness of CSR messages and of celebrity endorsements (e.g., Mowen and Brown, 1981; Ellen *et al.*, 2006; Um, 2018). In an endorsement context, consumers make either an internal (dispositional) attribution that a spokesperson is publicly recommending a product because it reflects their true preference or an external (situational) attribution that the endorser is making a recommendation because they are profiting from it. In this sense, consumers who adopt a situational attribution style tend to doubt that endorsements reflect a spokesperson's genuine liking for a product.

Such thinking processes have also been referred to as correspondence inferences, that is, judgments in which consumers use an endorser's behavior (e.g., sharing a brand-related post) to infer congruent dispositions in that individual (e.g., the person shares the branded post for altruistic reasons). The work of Silvera and Austad (2004) indicates that congruent dispositions towards an endorser result in more favorable attitudes towards the brand. Similarly, the study of Um (2018) finds that consumers' attitude towards the ad, the brand, and purchase intentions are stronger when an endorsement is attributed to internal causes (genuine belief in the quality of the brand) compared to external causes (endorsement fee).

On LinkedIn employees play an important role in driving customer engagement, as brand advocates who post brand-related content. Effectively, when posting on behalf of their company, they act as endorsers for their organizations. Although being an employee may

signify a certain level of expertise and access to credible information, it does not necessarily mean that the employee has automatically earned a trusted-authority position among their network of connections. Holliman and Rowley (2014) argue that an important requirement for building a trusted authority position and increase engagement, is for customers to not associate the transmitters of brand-related content with opportunistic behavior and promotional-orientation. Based on the above:

H1: Dispositional attribution style will lead to higher engagement with the post, compared to situational attribution style.

The role of source credibility and identification

Previous studies have long identified two major processes that underlie the effect of a source on message effectiveness: perceived source credibility and identification (e.g., Sternthal *et al.*, 1978; Schouten *et al.*, 2020). Both processes have been linked to influence and celebrity endorsements as well as to content sharing on social media (e.g., Dedeoglou, 2019). In the B2B industry, endorsers or message sources include the CEOs, the founders of a company, the employees, or other stakeholders, such as key opinion leaders, editors, and industry experts. Based on this the present study seeks to explore whether the two processes of source credibility and identification can explain the above hypothesized effects of dispositional vs. situational attributions on engagement.

According to Belch and Belch (1994), source credibility is “*the extent to which the source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject*” (Belch and Belch, 1994, p. 189). Hovland *et al.* (1953) define expertise as the extent to which a transmitter of a message is perceived as able to communicate valid statements. Trustworthiness refers to the confidence of the receiver that the transmitter intends to communicate valid assertions. In short, when a source

is considered as an expert, it is inferred that they possess in-depth knowledge and skills on the topic they communicate. Moreover, if the source is considered trustworthy, it means that the content of communication will be perceived as valid and believable, therefore more engaging (Dedeoglou, 2019).

The B2B marketing literature suggests that expertise and trustworthiness are essential factors in fostering long term relationships between suppliers-buyers (e.g., Gligor *et al.*, 2019). Dirks and Ferrin (2001), Kramer (1999), and Tyler and DeGoey (1996) argue that source credibility can also have a positive influence on collaboration with the endorser. This is particularly important for LinkedIn, as the platform's primary goal is to encourage connections among professionals as well as between companies and professionals through high quality, credible content.

In this study we argue that when exposed to a brand-related post, individuals who exhibit a dispositional attribution style will be more likely to attribute the source's motivation to share the post due to internal dispositions, such as the source's willingness to share high quality content on a topic they genuinely care about. Individuals who adopt a situational attribution style will be more likely to infer a spokesperson's posting behavior in terms of context-specific factors, such as a sales agenda or personal career gains. The latter will be more likely to view the post as commercial content, hence of inferior information quality, and will be less positively predisposed to engage with it. This is because individuals automatically apply a schema-based suspicion toward advertising in general and differentially toward particular attempts (e.g., Ellen *et al.*, 2006; Obermiller *et al.*, 2005). We therefore expect that the attribution of a communicator's motive to self-serving reasons may increase people's skepticism towards the spokesperson's genuine intention (Rifon *et al.*, 2004). This is because the attribution to monetary gains has been found to decrease the communicator's

credibility, especially believability and trustworthiness (Moore *et al.*, 1994; Rifon *et al.*, 2004).

Hence, when individuals perceive the source as having more altruistic motives for sharing brand-related content, skepticism around the content value will decrease and they will be more likely to engage with it. We hypothesize that:

H2a: Dispositional attribution style will lead to higher perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the source, compared to situational style.

H2b: Perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the source will mediate the relationship between attribution style and engagement with the post.

Identification concerns actual or perceived similarity between an individual and an endorser. Studies have shown that identification with another person may drive changes in individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Cialdini, 1993; Um, 2018). When people perceive that they share certain interests, values, or characteristics with an endorser they are more likely of enacting a behavior (Bandura, 1986). In a recent study on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement, Schouten *et al.* (2020) show that when endorsing products, it is important that endorsers are perceived as similar to their audience.

In applying attribution theory to spokespeople, we assume that when individuals view a social media post, they automatically judge the spokesperson's motive (i.e., intrinsic vs. extrinsic) for creating or sharing the brand-related content. Based on Rifon *et al.* (2004), we expect that individuals will develop a more positive attitude toward a corporate brand when they attribute the spokesperson's activities to altruistic motives, i.e., to share high quality information with their network for informational or educational purposes. Along similar lines, Becker-Olsen *et al.* (2006) support that perceived self-centered behaviors generate more negative thoughts, more negative attitudes, and more negative behavioral intentions

among people. In this sense, the concept of consumer skepticism describes “*a momentary state of distrust of an actor’s motivations*” (Foreh and Grier, 2003, p. 349). When people infer monetary incentives as the motivating factor (extrinsic motive) for the post’s content they may discount the intrinsic motives of the spokesperson, i.e., a genuine willingness to support their network with valuable information, which influences a negative response. We therefore expect that the negative responses and skepticism caused by extrinsic attributions, such as personal or monetary gains, will work against identification with the endorser because it will create a psychological distance from the endorser. According to Lim *et al.* (2012) the psychological distance between users on social media concerns a perceived distance that an individual feels with objects, circumstances, and people. Consequences of psychological distance include difficulty in relating to each other or sharing a deeper level of interaction. Under such circumstances, social media users may view other users in terms of more abstract and higher level construals, making it more difficult for them to engage with content, establish co-experiences, and form deeper connections with each other (e.g., Chung and Park, 2017; Lim *et al.*, 2012).

We expect that individuals who make dispositional attributions are more likely to perceive the sharing of the brand-related post as an act of genuine willingness to add value to the network and to develop a more positive attitude towards the spokesperson, therefore, more likely to identify and engage with them.

H3a: Dispositional attribution style will lead to higher identification with the source, compared to situational style.

H3b: Identification with source will mediate the relationship between attribution style and engagement with the post.

Methodology

To test the hypotheses a between-subjects, experimental design was implemented utilizing a fictional post on LinkedIn. In this study, the main manipulation variable is an individual characteristic, i.e., the respondent's attribution style (dispositional or situational). This information was solicited with the main survey instrument, and the method by which respondents were placed in the dispositional or situational condition is described in the measures section below.

Moreover, following the results of the content analysis, and to ensure that any stereotype biases would be accounted for, four fictional LinkedIn posts were created manipulating two source characteristics, gender and status, while keeping an identical visual content and text.

SAP was selected as the stimulus corporate brand, given it is one of the top three CRM brands, according on global market revenue share for 2019, and generates the greatest engagement on LinkedIn, based on the findings of the content analysis.

The content of the post (visual and text) was taken from an actual SAP post, which was shared by employees in fall 2020 and resulted in above average engagement (587 total reactions and comments). A promotional kind of post was chosen, given that the most dominant purpose for creating branded content in this industry is to promote products and services, without it being overly commercial.

Four fictional employees were created as separate sources of the post, resulting in four questionnaire versions: (i) female employee, vice president at SAP; (ii) female employee, product manager at SAP; (iii) male employee, vice president at SAP; (iv) male employee, product manager at SAP.

The photos and titles of the fictional employees were selected based on studying 60 existing SAP employees' profiles on LinkedIn as well as a pretest conducted among a

convenience sample of 31 banking professionals. Participants were presented with photos of four male and four female models from the online platform canva.com and one real male and one real female employee of SAP. For each photo participants were asked to report the level of congruence with the roles of vice president and/or product manager at SAP. Congruence was measured through the seven-point semantic differential scale by David (2016).

For the main survey, the questionnaires were administered among four separate groups on the Qualtrics platform for a period of three weeks. A quota sample was used for a total of 460 participants living in Europe, 50.7% male and 49.3% female, all working in companies of more than 50 employees, using LinkedIn at least once a month, and a geographical distribution across France (12.6%), Germany (12.6%), UK (13%), Netherlands (12.6%), Sweden (12.2%), Italy (11.7%), Spain (12.4%) and Greece (12.8%).

Measures

Customer attribution style was measured with an open-ended question: *“In your opinion, what is the main reason why this person created this post on LinkedIn? Please type in a short answer, in the space below.”* The two researchers coded all answers independently as either dispositional or situational attributions or neither (non-report or unclassifiable answers). Dispositional style was assigned to those answers indicating that the source created the post due to internal, personality factors (person is knowledgeable, likes to share information, for fun, believes in the importance of data, etc.) Situational style was assigned to answers indicating that the source created the post for external reasons (to earn money, to gain status, advertise the company, advance their career, etc.) The few disparities between the two coders were subsequently resolved in a 45-minutes meeting. The original agreement for the classification of responses was high, at approximately 90%.

All other constructs were measured with validated scales from the existing literature. The factor structure was confirmed for all constructs. Measurement of engagement is based on the scale of customer brand engagement on Facebook by De Vries and Carlson (2014) and the scale of engagement with post on Instagram by Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2020), adapted for LinkedIn. Engagement is measured on a 7-point Likert scale with six items: I would like/comment/share/click on the post, follow the company, connect with the user ($\alpha=.94$).

Following the Schouten *et al.* (2020) study, source credibility was measured by using the two original subscales of trustworthiness and expertise of the source credibility scale by Ohanian (1990). Participants rated the source's trustworthiness and expertise on ten 7-point semantic differential scales, such as, insincere-sincere, unreliable-reliable, etc. (trustworthiness $\alpha=.85$; expertise $\alpha=.87$).

Identification was assessed by using a three-item scale that measures the ability to identify with an actor in an ad from Whittler and DiMeo (1991). Participants were asked to indicate their perception of the employee (source) by their level of agreement, on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree) on the following items: "a person I can identify with", "my type of person", "a person who can speak on behalf of a company" ($\alpha=.84$).

Results

Of the total 460 participants, 334 responses were usable for the study as 120 respondents did not provide an eligible answer to the attribution style question (e.g., unrelated answer, I don't know, missing values) and had to be removed from the analysis. In terms of attribution style, the remaining sample was almost equally divided among the two groups, 165 participants demonstrating a dispositional style and 167 participants expressing a situational style.

Unlike the results of the content analysis, no significant differences were found between engagement and the sources' gender or status. An independent samples t-test shows that participants exposed to the female employee's post did not have significantly different engagement from the groups exposed to the male employee's post, $t(332) = .917, p = .36$. Similarly, participants exposed to the vice president position status did not report significantly engagement from those exposed to the product manager status, $t(332) = 1.808, p = .08$. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the measured variables are presented below.

Table III. Means, standard deviations and correlations of variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Source Trustworthiness	5.11	1.18	-	(.85)			
2. Source Expertise	5.55	1.05	.65**	-	(.87)		
3. Identification with source	4.66	1.30	.52**	.43**	-	(.84)	
4. Engagement	3.99	1.62	.38**	.27**	.66**	-	(.94)
5. AStyle	-	-	-.21**	-.12*	-.17**	-.20	-

Notes $n=334$; * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$; internal consistency reliabilities are in parentheses

In terms of hypothesis testing, we conducted mediation analysis using Process macro v.3 (Hayes, 2018). The number of bootstrapping samples that were used to generate a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect was set to 5,000. The final model and results are depicted in Figure 1.

H1 proposes that a dispositional attribution style would result in higher engagement with the post than a situational style. This was confirmed by the analysis, $F(1, 332) = 6.630, p = .001$.

With respect to the effects of attribution style on the three mediators, both H2a and H3a were confirmed. Results show that, compared to situational attribution style, a dispositional style leads to higher perceptions of source expertise ($F(1, 332) = 4.241, p = .035$), trustworthiness, ($F(1, 332) = 4.97, p = .001$), and identification with the source, ($F(1, 332) = 4.43, p = .002$).

The mediation analysis indicates that only identification significantly mediates the relationship between attribution style and engagement with post, ($F(4, 329) = 68,921, R^2 = .46$). Results show that the direct effect of attribution style on engagement was no longer significant ($F(4, 329) = -.246, p = .069$), and that identification positively influences engagement ($b = .755, p = .000$), unlike source trustworthiness and expertise which were not significantly related to engagement. Hence, H3b is supported, confirming that identification with the source fully mediates the relationship between attribution style and engagement, as indicated by the 95% confidence interval that is entirely above zero (lower limit CI: 0.684; upper limit CI: 0.921; $p < .000$).

Following these results we tested a model of sequential mediation, with attribution style predicting the two source credibility components (expertise and trustworthiness), in turn predicting identification with source and ultimately engagement with post (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Overview of Serial Mediation Analysis between attribution style, source credibility, identification, and engagement.

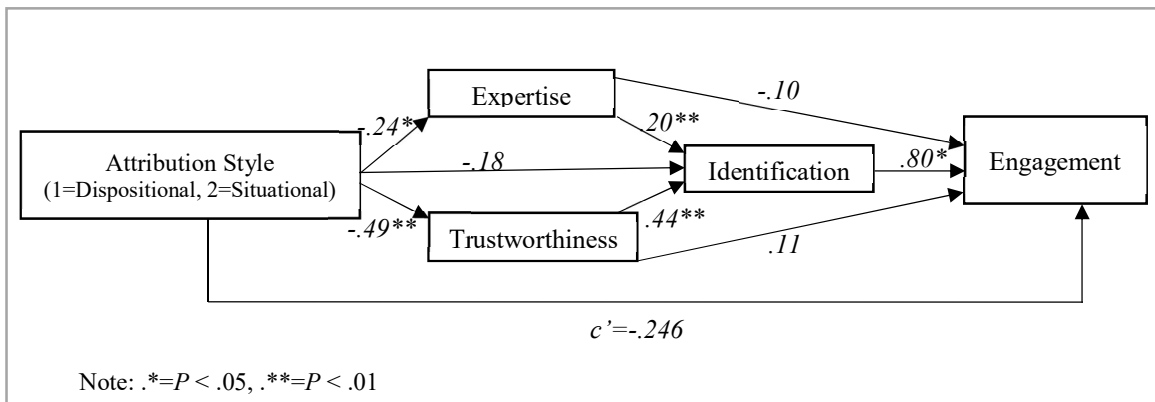


Table IV shows the estimates of the two proposed indirect effects and the total indirect effects, along with the 95 per cent bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals for the path estimates. Results indicate that although source expertise is significantly and positively associated with identification, and mediates the link between attribution style and identification, the path Attribution Style → Expertise → Identification → Engagement is not

significant. Trustworthiness operates in sequence with identification to mediate the relationship between attribution style and engagement, with an estimated effect = .18, at 95% CI [-.28, -.08].

Table IV. Indirect Effects

Mediation Path	Effect	BootSE	LLCI	ULCI
AStyle→ Expertise→ Identification→ Engagement	-.039	.027	-.1001	.0009
AStyle→ Trustworthiness→ Identification→ Engagement	-.0175	.052	-.2826	-.0822
Total Indirect Effects	-.383	.115	-.6111	-.1545

General discussion

The primary goal of this study was to investigate whether and how source characteristics, attributions, and source perceptions, impact engagement with brand-related content on LinkedIn.

Findings from the content analysis of 788 LinkedIn posts reveal that the company pages and the employees are the primary message source for branded content, with employees' posts generating a higher engagement rate. This is in line with the employee advocacy literature and the official LinkedIn data. Moreover, although the results show that the companies mostly create promotional posts, content created for informational purposes generates higher engagement.

The second part of our research extended the initial findings, by focusing on source perception effects on engagement with branded content on LinkedIn, by attribution style. To this end, we proposed and tested a serial mediation model showing how individual attributions of an employee's posting behavior (dispositional vs. situational), source credibility, and identification impact engagement.

In terms of source demographic characteristics, we found that gender and status differences are not significantly related to engagement. Yet, attributions regarding the spokesperson's motives for posting and perceptions of source credibility and identification

explain almost 46% of the variance in engagement with promotional content. Participants who made internal (dispositional) attributions about the motives of the spokesperson, displayed greater engagement intentions compared to those who made external (situational) attributions, confirming H1. Similarly, dispositional attributions were significantly related to higher levels of source expertise, trustworthiness and identification, providing support for both H2a and H3a. Participants appear to not significantly engage with a branded post if they perceive that commercial or personal gain factors motivate the spokesperson, providing further confirmation of the content analysis results.

A total of five mediation paths to engagement were tested. Results show that both trustworthiness and identification mediate the relationship between attribution style and engagement. Unlike expertise, perceived trustworthiness seems to play a crucial role in engaging with a spokesperson's posts on LinkedIn, a finding that corroborates previous studies on the effects of celebrity endorsement on advertising effectiveness (e.g., Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018; Schouten *et al.*, 2020). Hence, it is important for customers to feel confident that spokespeople have genuine motives, share credible information and their true beliefs about the brand-related content (McAllister 1995). This may minimize psychological distance in a network, help identification and enable users to feel connected and engaged. As such, perceived similarity with an endorser is an important explanation for engaging with posts, but its role depends on the attributions users make about the motives of the spokesperson.

Theoretical contributions

As such the present paper makes interesting theoretical contributions. First, it is one of the first studies to explore thinking processes, source perceptions and behavioral intentions with promotional content shared by employee-spokespeople on LinkedIn. It confirms the

importance of employees as spokespeople for increasing engagement on LinkedIn. In this sense, it extends the source credibility, identification and attribution theories to the domain of employee advocacy. Employee advocacy is growing in importance, as employees are perceived as more credible and authentic sources of content than the company pages of the corporate brands. Second, the study links two previously unrelated constructs, attributions with engagement, thereby adding to the literature on CE. Finally, it delineates a path for relationships between individual customer attribution styles, source credibility, identification, and engagement, helping our understanding of how thinking processes (attribution) through source trustworthiness and identification drive behavioral intentions (engagement).

Managerial implications

These findings suggest several managerial implications. Regardless of the source, an effective social media strategy should include informative content that primarily aims to add value to the LinkedIn professional audience, such as up-to-date information, solutions, and knowledge that depart from a sales pitch. This is in line with an inbound or content marketing strategy that aims at building trusting relationships with customers (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). This approach is more customer-centric, as it focuses on covering the needs of customers who seek advice and solution-oriented information for their own professional issues and companies.

Apart from the content, corporate brands should develop employee advocacy programs that encourage employees to act as spokespeople, disseminating original branded content to their network. Employees should be encouraged to offer their personal views in the text, making it more personalized, and thus more authentic, in order to increase trust and identification. Consequently, corporate brands should encourage their employees to participate by commenting and sharing their views on the company pages' posts. Since, they

are perceived as credible sources, it is important to showcase their own trust on the company they work for, by engaging with the company page as well, not simply by reacting to a post, but by investing time to write a comment and initiate a dialogue.

Limitations and further directions

The study has some limitations. In the content analysis, since LinkedIn company page impressions are not public, we could not report the actual engagement rate, but an estimated engagement rate. Without access to the pages' analytics, public access content analysis may only provide total engagement and engagement rate in relation to the page and personal followers. Second, in the experimental design engagement was measured as a self-reported behavioral intention, rather than actual engagement on the platform. Finally, this paper is focused only one industry in one B2B setting, therefore further studies across other types of industries as well as in B2B2C contexts, may shed further light on CE drivers with corporate brands on LinkedIn.

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