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# Socially active executives as digital influencers

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# Socially Active Executives as Digital Influencers

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Business  
James Madison University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Business Administration

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by Kelly Anne Pollhammer  
May 2014

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Marketing, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Business Administration.

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## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Kenneth Bahn, whose passion for teaching was reflected in his commitment to his students. His unconventional ways of improving the skills of his students' work were truly inspirational, and his contagious excitement for marketing is one that I will keep with me in my future endeavors.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Customers have always influenced one another, but now they do so 24/7 via social media, namely Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. In fact, “74% of consumers rely on social media to influence their purchasing decisions, and 81% are influenced by their friends’ posts on social media when making purchasing decisions” (Pant 2013). Recognizing the increasing prevalence of social media in the lives of consumers, corporate executives are beginning to engage with consumers in social media (hereafter, referred to as socially active executives (SAEs)). For example, 42% of CEOs of the FORTUNE 500 companies have a presence on a major social network (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+) (Bennett 2013). Should corporate executives actively engage with consumers in social media? There is disagreement on the topic. Table 1 provides illustrative quotes from the business press demonstrating this conflict.

Table 1: Pros and Cons of SAEs	
Quotes stating the PROS of SAEs	Quotes stating the CONS of SAEs
“80 percent of executives surveyed believe that it is a good way of sharing news and information about our company” (Gesenhues 2013).	“49.2 percent of CMOs have not been able to measure the quantitative impact of social media on their business” (Granados 2013).
“76 percent of executives surveyed agreed that having a social CEO shows that the company is innovative” (Gesenhues 2013).	“A CEO who decides to go on Twitter must be ready for the fact that they will see not only the good, but also have to address some negativity” (Velde 2013).
“It helps find and attract new customers” (Gesenhues 2013).	“People are listening and a misstep by your CEO can spread very quickly” (Velde 2013).
“Helps our CEO build good relationships with the news media (75%)” (Gesenhues	“A CEO’s Twitter presence is a direct extension of their personal, as well as

2013).	your corporate, brand. If these two are not appropriately mixed, it may not go over well” (Velde 2013).
“By not being a social CEO, a CEO runs the risk of not getting his or her message out” –a Fortune 500 CEO (Gesenhues 2013).	“My first question as the chairman if I find a CEO regularly tweeting is ‘what else could you be doing?’” – Rupert Soames, CEO of FTSE 100 (Tappin 2013).

The positive view focuses on those who believe executive activity can be beneficial to companies both internally and externally. These percentages show that employees and CEOs themselves see an enormous opportunity for executives to engage with consumers in their markets as well as news media. Taking advantage of the digital networking opportunities that social media has to offer may portray the whole company as more innovative.

The negative view emphasizes the risks involved with corporate executives openly displaying their thoughts on social networks. These risks include a poorly expressed or misinterpreted comment going viral, which could be detrimental for a company’s image. Another perceived risk is having the CEO in direct contact with consumers, and how to appropriately manage the mix of personal and professional dealings.

Based on the conflicting views and the lack of academic research on the topic, there is a need for more research to help determine whether CEOs should engage with consumers via social media. If so, what types of strategies should be implemented by SAEs on different social media websites.

Results from qualitative interviews involving nine socially active individuals (hereafter, referred to as Consumers) and six socially active individuals with professions (Professionals) suggests that SAEs may be more accepted on certain social networks rather than others, and for different reasons. The Consumers tended to prefer a company's presence on social media rather than the respective executives, due to a strong distrust towards SAEs. The Professionals were more trusting of SAEs and expressed several direct advantages to using social media for both internal and external purposes.

The paper begins with an in-depth discussion of digital influencers, followed by a discussion of past research identifying who and what influences consumers when making their purchasing decisions in an online setting. This involves the explanation of the different networks and parties involved in making an online purchasing decision. This structure will then be applied to an analysis of responses from qualitative interviews with the fifteen study participants. The interviews identify major themes that provide a better understanding of consumers' attitudes toward SAEs. The results of these interviews allow for confirmation and disconfirmation of previous research and reveal new ideas that improved our understanding of SAEs and their impact on consumers.

## **SAEs as Digital Influencers**

The research addresses several key questions relating to the degree of influence executives can have on social media. More specifically, this research aims to answer how consumers currently perceive SAEs. In what ways are managers utilizing social media websites? What is the future for top management on social media? To have a “social media presence” can mean many different things to people; are there certain ways that SAEs should be utilizing social media that are more appropriate than others? It is imperative that managers have a thorough understanding of what they should and should not be doing on social media, which can be found through analyzing feedback from consumers and professionals on these questions.

The process behind answering these research questions is similar to studies done in the past that are related to discovering the amount of influence that big names and celebrities can have on consumers’ purchasing decisions in an online setting. Celebrities have notoriously affected consumers’ decisions when endorsing products. One study concluded that “it may be that the perception of the celebrity's involvement exerts more influence on consumers' attitudes and purchase intent than actual involvement” (Keel and Natarajan 2012). Can SAEs reach this level of influence if they become more involved in their consumers’ decision process? Can they achieve the natural “likeability” that celebrities seem to exert when promoting or reviewing a product?

In relation to social media in particular, many people follow their favorite celebrity's Twitter account especially if the account is verified. According to Twitter.com:

“Any account with a blue verified badge on their Twitter profile is a verified account. Verification is currently used to establish authenticity of identities of key individuals and brands on Twitter. Twitter verifies accounts on an ongoing basis to make it easier for users to find who they're looking for. *We concentrate on highly sought users in music, acting, fashion, government, politics, religion, journalism, media, sports, business, and other key interest areas.* We are constantly updating our requirements for verification. Note, verification does not factor in follower count or Tweet count.”

Although no specificities are revealed, it appears that in terms of becoming verified, all criteria are the same regardless of the type of account.

When investigating what companies look for when selecting an endorser, studies indicate that corporate executives may stand a chance in becoming notable figures in the consumers' eyes. “Celebrities are seen as dynamic individuals with *likeable and attractive qualities.* Notable ex-politicians, successful mutual fund managers, and high-profile CEO's are now used with frequency to sell a variety of products” (Swerdlow and Swerdlow 2003). This gives CEOs, CMOs, and other notable executives hope for their presence to become noteworthy when putting it out in the media. Some seem to think that whether or not management should be involved in the consumers' decision depends on the industry and their purpose. "I think it can make a difference in categories that are poorly understood or that have had challenges, like automotive and retail banking," says Dorothy Crenshaw, head

of Crenshaw Communications. "Done right, it's very humanizing, a way to be authentic and a way for followers to engage and find common ground" (Lippert 2010). Discussions had with Consumers and Professionals examine how exactly this engagement can be "done right", and how important SAEs are on B2C and B2B purchasing.

## Theoretical Background

In order to understand the impact of SAEs, it is important to review research on who influences consumers and for what reasons. There are several concepts that have surfaced about the sources of information on social media that influence what consumers think and choose to do when purchasing from and/or supporting a company. To provide a relevant example, consumers may have once gone to a retail outlet such as Sears to consult employee experts in each department. Now, consumers may rely on the recommendation of a friend within their social media network (Forbes and Vespoli 2013). As a result, firms could influence future purchases by encouraging their users to post on various forms of social media. This leads to a related concept – brand influencers and advocates.

Someone considered an *influencer* might be a celebrity, blogger, or expert who has the ability to cause a behavioral change in others by mentioning a specific brand. An *advocate* is someone who communicates consistently regarding one specific brand, such as a paid celebrity endorsement (Klepik 2013). Further, there are subcategories of influencers, each geared towards specific platforms and audiences. Several examples include:

- *The Connector*: one who links people of the same interest
- *The Personal Brand*: promoting one's own products
- *The Analyst*: one who forms communicable insights
- *The Authority*: one with credible opinions

Each serves its own purpose, and “each exerts different levels of reach, resonance, and relevance” (Wilkins 2013). Some social media consumers are influencers, some advocates, and others just watchers, listeners, and followers looking to gain some insight on a certain product or company.

These social media users may be looking for different levels of interaction with other influencers, advocates, consumers, or top managers. Regardless of the exact demarcation between categories, previous research (Billington 2013, Vinerean, 2013) has determined certain key concepts when using social media as a marketing tactic to become a digital influencer. The prominent findings recommend the following:

1. Tapping the social media trend can help with relevance at all levels.

Consumers use the internet to seek popular trends, opinions, or insights. For business, relevancy and immediacy are essential.

2. Use the right online strategy according to the interest and activity of customers.

Just as in traditional marketing, figuring out what goes best for which particular audience in an online setting is imperative to finding success.

3. True customer engagement means commitment-focused, not transaction-focused.

Managers should be aware of the importance of social media sites in influencing online shopping by identifying and targeting different

types of customers and taking initiatives to recognize and highlight customer interests. It is necessary to take this “commitment-focused” concept to the next level with social media marketing, because investing the time in mining down to find the customers that could most benefit from social media interaction could be exponentially rewarding when they in-turn become digital influencers for your next market (Vinerean 2013).

This research helps strengthen the understanding that becoming a digital influencer requires a thorough understanding of the target market and consumers.

When looking at *what* causes a consumer to listen and react to another person reviewing a brand or product on social media, several factors come into play.

Sago (2010) and Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) suggest five main criteria:

1. Which *class of reference groups* the consumer’s influencer falls into: primary or secondary. Primary reference group members “have frequent interpersonal contact with each other, whereas secondary reference groups have less frequent and more limited interaction among members” (Sago).
2. *State of the social tie*: strength of connection between members – Is there an interpersonal connection between the two parties? In an online setting, social ties are found to be between the information seeker and the information source, which is a website.

3. *Source credibility*: to what degree is the information source valid and trustworthy?
4. *Homophily*: the similarity in character between the information seeker and information source.
5. *Nature of the content*: level of importance and urgency behind the message, as well as emotional appeal (positive or negative).

Several information sources that consumers use are *friends, family, companies, and celebrities*. Based on the five factors that determine which information sources the consumers choose, each source can be related. The majority of these consumers follow friends on Twitter, leading them to a larger exposure of thoughts on products and brands from people in the primary reference groups with whom they have strong social ties with and to which they are similar in character. Celebrities most likely appeal to consumers for reasons of homophily as well as credibility, depending on the product or brand. Family members are typically in a person's primary reference group and will have a large impact due to social ties between the family members. Lastly, consumers who follow companies are likely being influenced due to nature of the content and possibly credibility. One study confirmed this in its findings stating that "Overall, the results of two studies validate the positive relationship between the credibility of an online product review and purchase intention" (Jimenez and Mendoza, 2013).

Emphasizing the interrelation between these factors, credibility is also given to such product reviews *as a result of* homophily and social ties. Looking at the

process of online word-of-mouth (WOM), researchers were able to support that “Web sites to which respondents appeared to have closer ties were described, in ways such as ‘the one I think is most trustworthy’ or having ‘an extra prong of authority’” (Sago 2010). In terms of homophily, sites that dealt with subjects’ personal interests were commonly mentioned as more “safe”. Bringing it all together, it was found that “site tie strength and site homophily seems to activate the trustworthiness dimension of source credibility” (Sago 2010). Thus, these interrelated factors have a very strong impact on how consumers decide where to look when striving to learn more about a brand, product, or service.

## Methodology

To further examine this area of research regarding SAEs, fifteen interviews, each lasting 20-30 minutes, were conducted over the course of three months to gain recent and relevant insights from individuals who consider themselves active on social media. In one-on-one settings, interviewees were asked open-ended questions about how they use social media for personal purposes, as well as their feelings on social media and how it can/should be used for business purposes. To begin each interview, the interviewee stated his/her name, age, gender and occupation, as well as the social media websites frequently utilized. All fifteen were users of Facebook, and many also discussed their usage of Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. Table 2 displays the demographic information of the fifteen interviewees.

Interviewee Number	Gender	Age	Occupation / Student	Social Media Platforms Used
1 (C)*	M	25	Logistics Manager	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram
2 (C)	M	23	Caterer	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
3 (C)	F	21	Student	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
4 (C)	F	21	Student	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram
5 (C)	M	25	Project Engineer	Facebook, Twitter
6 (C)	M	21	Student	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn

7 (C)	M	23	Student	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram
8 (C)	M	21	Student	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
9 (C)	F	21	Student	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
10 (P)	F	34	Purchasing Director	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
11 (P)	M	35	Sourcing Manager	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
12 (P)	M	32	Account Manager	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
13 (P)	F	45	Procurement Director	Facebook, Twitter
14 (P)	F	40	Professor of Marketing	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+
15 (P)	F	41	Supply Management Director	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn

\* Notation signifies whether interviewee is part of the Consumer (C) or Professional (P) set

## Analysis

These interviews led to many new findings – some of which confirmed prior research, while others challenged it. The feedback was organized into themes that became apparent upon analysis. Ultimately, four main themes were established, each containing several sub-themes to be discussed:

1. The impact of SAEs on purchasing
2. The perception of motives behind SAEs
3. The preferred methods of SAEs
4. The perceived value of SAEs

### **Usage of Social Media: Overview**

First, Consumers were asked to discuss how they use each of their social media accounts, and if/how they use their profiles when they are interested in a brand, product, or company. The majority of Consumers stated that Facebook is used only for sharing/viewing information from *personal friends/family*, not from businesses.

Interviewee 9 strictly stated her feelings in regard to Facebook:

“On Facebook, I’m *only* friends with people that I know and trust. If I don’t personally know you, I will not accept your friend request. I don’t see the point in being friends with someone you don’t even talk to.”

This opinion seemed to surface in nearly every interview, implying that Facebook is mainly utilized as a platform to stay connected with friends and family to share photos and personal news. Moreover, most Consumers typically said that they do not follow businesses or managers on Facebook. The extent of their interaction with

businesses is just for promotions, coupons, updates on sales, etc., explained by

Interviewee 8:

“Sometimes a company will give you a coupon if you go ‘Like’ their Facebook page; I’ll do that but then never pay attention to it again.”

However, some did express that they have used Facebook to reach out to friends/family when looking for feedback on a product or brand. Interviewee 5 gave the following example:

“I remember one time when I was on the fence about which cell phone I wanted to buy, so I decided to post on Facebook something like “iPhone or Samsung Galaxy?” and within a day or so I had a full conversation going from friends who commented their opinions on either phone. It definitely helped me decide which to get ...because you trust them, and they’re not just some random person who could be paid to say which is better.”

This trust that Consumers have for their friends and family was expected and confirmed, and plays a major role in the structure of this analysis. Many admitted to being swayed by the opinions of someone they know rather than a stranger, especially in an online setting. Interviewee 8 explained:

“There’s always going to be product reviews out there for anything you’re looking for, but people seem to write them when they’re either extremely pleased with the product or extremely dissatisfied. You can never really tell if those kinds of reviews are actually representative of what you’re going to experience yourself, so that’s why I prefer to listen to people I know, because I know if they’re overreacting or not.”

Additionally, credibility was a major factor for Consumers that came into play when making a purchasing decision. According to Interviewee 3:

“If someone appears to be credible, I’ll generally trust their review a bit more than someone who clearly has no idea what they’re talking about”

When Consumers are looking to broaden their spectrum of followers and profiles, they go to Twitter. As a whole, Consumers were much more open to following people and/or brands that they do not personally know when they are on Twitter. Interviewee 4 in particular gave a clear definition of whom she follows and why:

“I follow brands, companies, comedians, musicians, athletes, big news accounts, and all of my friends on Twitter. It’s a good way to get snippets of what’s going on with the things that I’m interested in. And it’s super easy to just unfollow someone if their postings start to become irrelevant.”

Interviewee 6 provided some insight on how he felt about companies having a presence on Twitter. For example, *Firm XYZ* on Twitter:

“The brand needs to be out there. Having the name out as much as possible in a way that shows they know the service they’re providing is extremely important.”

Most Consumers agreed that it is necessary and beneficial for companies to be on Twitter and tweeting often. Interviewee 8 supported this by saying:

“It’s the nature of the industries today. You’ve got to be out there interacting with your consumers, or at least show that you’re there if people want to reach out to your brand about something.”

Interviewee 7 added:

“The more active a company is, the more people they’re going to find. It’s free marketing, so I don’t see why a company *wouldn’t* be on social media like Twitter.”

Not surprisingly, the technologically savvy Consumers expect their favorite brands to be tweeting, posting, and interacting with their target markets.

Opinions began to vary among Consumers when the discussion shifted more toward how they feel about top managers being active on social media. While there was reason to believe that Consumers would appreciate an active CEO from their favorite brand, the reactions were surprisingly underwhelming. Feeling no connection (i.e., no common relation) was one of the biggest reasons Consumers seemed to be indifferent about managers on their feeds. Their immediate shift in attitude prompted the development of the first theme to be analyzed.

### **The Impact of SAEs on Purchasing**

When discussing SAEs impact on purchasing with the interviewees, there was a clear difference in the opinions from Consumers and Professionals. Because of this, two main sub-themes were established:

1. The impact of SAEs on purchasing: *B2C*
2. The impact of SAEs on purchasing: *B2B*

While all responses differed slightly, there was a common attitude when the Consumers discussed how they feel about SAEs and their effects on purchasing decisions. Unfortunately for SAEs, it seems that at best, there is no significant effect. However at worst, it could actually damage the trust between Consumers and SAEs. Interviewee 4 described:

“I don't see there being benefits, I just see there being harm. You say something wrong, and all of a sudden millions of people hear. So, I think it's important for them

to have presences, and makes sure the presences are friendly and represent the company well, but I don't think they're going to have a major impact on buyers and consumers, just because there's no connection there.”

Interviewees were asked, if they were able to, give examples of times where they witnessed a post that proved to be detrimental for a CEO. Interviewee 8 immediately provided this example, suggesting that it is much easier to remember a tweet and a brand name once they embarrass themselves:

“It reminds me of the CEO of Lululemon that recently came under fire for making rash comments about who should and should not be wearing their yoga pants. From then on I definitely recognized the name more – but probably not for the reasons they’d hoped.”

Consumers also agreed on one thing when admitting that they are particularly hesitant to be influenced by SAEs – the assumed bias. Interviewee 8 went on to say that he would not be likely to patronize a brand after noting activity from a SAEs online:

“That's purely biased; it's advertising. They have full control over what's being said whereas independent sites have no incentive to review it one way or the other, and so not really. The only thing I think it would help with is that I'd be more likely to think about that brand in my research, and so when I'm in the market for a phone, you know, if I saw Samsung's CEO on Twitter, Samsung would be one of the companies I'd instantly think of to research as opposed to just being dismissed.”

The word “bias” was commonly used by consumers. According to Interviewee 2:

“I believe that there is kind of bias on the people that work for that company because, obviously, they're going to want to advertise theirs as the best. So I would much more rather have peer reviews than actual workers reviews, if you will.”

Other comments on this matter from Interviewees 5, 8 and 9 included “Of course the CEO is going to like their own brand” (5), “They’re just on there to promote their own products” (8), and “You’ve got to take everything with a grain of salt. If the executive for a company pushes his company, you kind of expect that” (9).

Unfortunately for SAEs, it seems that proving to be credible may be more of a challenge than expected.

On the other hand, Professionals seemed to find room for positive impact from SAEs on purchasing decisions. From a B2B perspective, these interview responses indicate that SAEs may be able to use social media to their advantage when building trust with other companies and professionals in their industry.

Interviewee 11 boldly stated:

“Social media presence [of SAEs] absolutely makes me more inclined to buy, since I probably have a better understanding of the product, how it’s used, as well as knowing which folks from my network are using it.”

Interviewee 12 works with social media on a regular basis and says that he’s noticed a rise in executive activity, particularly on a B2B level:

“I’ve seen more and more of it, and I think it really helps companies just expand their network on a B2B level. If it were me, I’d be more interested in working with a company if I saw that their executives were taking the time to be active on social media. It shows that our business goals have something in common.”

Speaking with another professional in the procurement field indicated that social media is also used in some industries for finding potential customers.

Interviewee 13 explained her company’s stance on social media:

“We’re currently trying to build our presence online. We use it to find potential companies that may be interested in attending our events and beginning to work with us”.

Taking all of this feedback into consideration leads to the second major theme, the perception of SAEs motives.

### **Perception of SAEs Motives**

There is no denying the fact that consumers do not initially trust SAEs motives. From their perspective, SAEs are biased, and simply trying to sell their companies’ products. Interviewee 7 discussed his feelings on his perceived motives of SAEs:

“I’m a marketer myself, so I understand what goes on behind the scenes in the online marketing world. While the main objective is obviously to reach out to the target market and potentially sway their opinions into liking the brand at hand, they can’t *all* be trying to deceive us. I’m sure some executives are testing the waters on social media to honestly try and get more involved with their consumers. But when it comes down to it... they’re going to say what they think we want to hear.”

Interviewee 8 questioned the validity of the SAEs themselves. Are they really who they say they are?:

“I know a lot of celebrities have their publicists just run their Twitter account and I see no reason why the CEO would kind of worry himself with such small details; should be focused more on the big picture things. I wouldn’t be surprised if many of them had interns running their social media accounts for them.”

Consumers generally seemed to be wondering if these SAEs accounts are honest, credible, and trustworthy – something that can be a bit challenging to prove online.

Similar to the first theme presented, the Professionals felt different. Rather than immediately judging the SAEs motives to be biased and simply necessary, several of these interviewees felt that SAEs can be thought leaders in their respective industries, and that they are looking to be innovative and easy to reach. Interviewee 11 said that his CIO came to mind when referencing SAEs:

“Our CIO is all over the place. He’s always sharing new articles on LinkedIn, which also links to his Twitter, that are industry relevant not only for me and others within our company, but for others who could possibly do business with us someday.”

Interestingly, Interviewee 12, who previously worked at the same company, also referenced the same CIO:

“The CIO at my previous company is really active on LinkedIn and on Twitter, and I follow him and get great updates. He'll repost stuff on technology and kind of the pie chain strategy, but also, just general leadership. You know, I know a lot about that company, having worked there, but I think that if I didn't, I would think more highly of it because their managers take time to engage on social media.”

Based on this, it appears that professionals appreciate the activity from others within their networks. Interviewee 14 said that she utilizes social media to catch up on the industry as well:

“There are a handful of executives that I watch on social media, to hear what they have to say and what they’re sharing within the marketing world.”

From a B2B perspective, SAEs are certainly welcomed more than in a B2C setting.

### *Preferred Methods of SAEs*

Subsequently, the third theme, the preferred methods of SAEs, was discussed and also broken down into sub-themes according to B2C and B2B preferences. The Consumers are questioning the validity and motives behind the SAEs, so is there anything they can do to win these consumers over? What do the Consumers want to see from the SAEs, if anything at all? Interviewee 9 explained that she follows a recruiter for a company she has interest in:

“I follow this recruiter to stay on top of possible openings and such. I want her to keep me updated with things like that. But if she were to start tweeting about her personal life and unrelated things, I’d unfollow her because that’s not what I followed her for at all.”

Interviewee 6 said that while there is not much SAEs can do to appear unbiased, he’d still appreciate relevant information about the brand:

“Give me some facts about your brand that provide me with new information or put things in a certain spotlight – then maybe your brand will come to mind more.”

Interviewee 14 also agreed that from a personal perspective:

“It can be effective for an executive to be on social media to a certain extent, so long as it’s as authentic as possible. Be responsive. If you’re going to be on there, be there. If the interactive component is missing, it’s a lost cause.”

Another common example that was brought up among interviewees is the expected response when a consumer exposes an issue they have with a brand or company.

Interviewee 6 stated:

“Be ready to defend your brand in a responsible way. If I tweet at a CEO or CMO because I had a bad experience with their product or something, I’d expect a personal

response showing concern and interest in me as a prospective customer.”

By capitalizing on these key qualities that consumers expect, being personal, relevant, and interactive, SAEs may be able to prove themselves to be a bit more credible and honest.

In the B2B realm, preferred methods seem to relate back to the motives previously discussed (i.e., being an innovative and active thought leader).

Interviewee 10 says:

“It’s an easy way for me to start my day – log onto LinkedIn, see what’s new in the industry. I *want* to hear from executives in my network. I feel like it keeps me updated and in the loop, whether it’s about my company or not.”

When asking her what she looked for in the content, nothing about keeping the content personal seemed to be a factor – she was mostly just looking for industry level, thought-provoking articles, interviews, etc. Interviewee 15 identified her main interests when on social media for business purposes:

“I look for new findings about the industry or our work from my employees, my bosses, and my competitors. Just hearing from others within my industry helps put a face to a name, and enhances their credibility in my eyes.”

Overall, the main aspect that Professionals agreed on when discussing preferred SAEs’ content was keeping updates at an *industry level*. Adding a personal touch probably wouldn’t hurt, but unlike consumers, impersonal postings are not frowned upon.

### *Perceived Value of SAEs*

Putting all of this together led to the development of the fourth and final major theme discovered through interview analysis: the perceived value of SAEs. A social media website that was hardly discussed in the beginning of each interview with the Consumers was LinkedIn. However, as each discussion led toward executive interaction, that social network was *consistently* brought up. Consumers don't want to hear from SAEs when they're looking for a product or brand. When they're looking for a job or general information however, the opinions shift. Career development stood out as the main aspect of perceived value that SAEs can bring to a B2C setting. As previously mentioned, Interviewee 9 is actively looking for an entry-level position. She went on to say:

“I think it would be awesome if a CEO or CMO was on social media helping recruit. I know that's not their job, especially in big companies, but if a small firm's top manager was active on Twitter or LinkedIn, it would be really cool way to begin possibly networking with them.”

Nearly all of the consumers agreed that when looking for a job, they immediately log on to LinkedIn.com. Interviewee 5 added:

“As a young professional, I want a company that stands out as technologically-savvy. If I see their CEO or someone being really active on LinkedIn, I'd definitely perceive them as more innovative and someone I'd want to connect with and/or work for.”

The B2B level again showed more acceptance when it came to perceived value of SAEs. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that professionals are simply looking to learn from one another, stay updated on their employees,

partners, and even competitors within the industry. Partnerships and purchasing possibilities could be established due to sparked interest on social media. The reasons previously stated in the “Pros” section of the SAEs argument table (e.g., innovation, internal communication, etc.) are relatively in line with the responses from the interviews conducted. Interviewee 10 explained how her company utilizes social media to stay connected, share updates, recommendations, tips, answer questions for one another, etc.:

“It’s an easy way to keep a nationwide company relatively in the loop with one another. We mostly use it for internal purposes, and it’s great to see people from all different levels of the company participate.”

Interviewee 11 expressed that he expects a positive outcome from the SAEs that are beginning to arise in his company:

“More and more in our company are hopping on board. I’d assume this will help make us come across as more advanced.”

Just as many previous studies had suspected, the potential for SAEs on a B2B level appears to be quite high.

While the themes developed create a better understanding of what consumers and professionals are looking for from their SAEs, the question that remains is *why* these feelings exist? From where is the immediate judgment from the consumers coming? Why are Professionals so much more likely to immediately trust their colleagues? An argument that can be made here is that all of these social media users instinctively use the five main criteria stated earlier when evaluating social media before making a decision. Consumers and Professionals alike appear to relate

to those in their primary reference groups – people they surround themselves with and feel comfortable speaking with whether it is personal or industry related. The state of the social tie also directly comes into play, especially when relating it to another criterion – homophily. In a B2C context, there is a lack of homophily. The social ties are essentially cut, and unless a prior relationship has been established, these consumers likely have no connection to their SAEs. Interviewee 9 expressed her feelings on this:

“To be honest, there’s an awkward disconnect that I don’t feel the need to mend. I don’t really care what top executives are saying to me, I don’t even know them.”

Other consumers in their interviews revealed that they automatically prefer to chat with people they personally know, rather than strangers. Consumers feel more comfortable in a peer-to-peer setting, versus the opposite, a client-server relationship.

That same social tie is immediately a bit more established in a B2B setting, because these professionals are in an online setting where their social network is full of others with their shared interests, industry relations, and professional goals. Homophily is established, explaining the immediate boost in trust/respect level in the B2B context that remained absent in B2C. Credibility – one of the most frequent factors that the interviewees mentioned – is more likely to be given when two peers share commonalities. The last criterion, nature of the context, also makes more sense when two individuals are communicating on a peer-to-peer level, whether it is two Consumers or two Professionals.

## Implications

With respect to managers' current perceptions of social media and executives becoming socially active, a few of the initial thoughts were confirmed. There is some potential risk in corporate executives presenting themselves in an online community. Confirmed by the interviewees and their examples, one wrong "tweet" or two and the brand image can quickly be destroyed. There is also a fine line between what is preferred that executives post/tweet about for personal reasons versus what the Consumers expect from them – relevant content. However, several of the positive expectations were also affirmed, especially from the Professional interviewees who stated that they believe SAEs are beneficial to their company.

A few things were disconfirmed. It was suspected that as corporate executives, consumers would find credibility in these accounts of SAEs. However, most of the consumer interviewees strongly disagreed with this and found the SAEs to be biased and not trustworthy. Consumers only feel connected to those they personally know, or have much in common with. Because of the distrust and absence of social tie, they are also not more likely to purchase from companies that have SAEs.

Along with these findings, a few concepts emerged from the interviews that have not been touched on by researchers thus far. A further examination of the apparent absence of social tie is something on which managers may want to focus. In what ways can this be mended? What will allow consumers to feel less distant from corporate executives? Additionally, managers may want to examine the

possibility of incorporating the most avid of their brand influencers into their social presence. If Consumers prefer to hear from other consumers and are wary of SAEs, this may be an appropriate middle ground to explore.

While the feedback was not overwhelmingly positive for SAEs, this is not a reason for SAEs to discontinue their use of social media. Currently, this study suggests that the proper place for SAEs is on LinkedIn, and possibly presenting themselves on Twitter as outlets for professional development. SAEs also have a large impact internally within their companies, and their employees appreciate their industry insight, thought-leadership, and innovative opinions.

In light of the decision making criteria, it becomes apparent that social media is extremely relevant to today’s consumer. They not only rely on how the companies present themselves, but also on how other consumers feel about a company’s product or service. This information is accessible quite easily through several different platforms – mainly Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs, etc. Consumers are using each of these platforms for certain reasons, and Table 3, seen below, lists the most popular influentials that consumers are looking to on each. Consumers are looking towards other consumers and experts, but hardly towards managers.

Table 3: Platform Influentials		
Twitter	Facebook	LinkedIn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Brand accounts</li> <li>• Affiliated consumers via “hashtags”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Friends of friends</li> <li>• Brand pages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-workers</li> <li>• Potential employers (SAEs)</li> <li>• Consumers in the same network</li> <li>• Experts and professionals</li> </ul>

Therefore, as it turns out, maybe some of these doubtful CEOs were right after all – they might not ever be the biggest digital influencer on consumers’ newsfeeds. PR managers are doing a great job sparking conversation online, and consumers admitted that they enjoy witnessing those types of interactions (i.e., promotions during the Super Bowl or responding to an unhappy airline customer who missed his flight). There may be a time when consumers begin to accept their SAEs on all networks, but for now, CEOs may be better off keeping their activity professional and internal.

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