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## **Sophisticated vs. Rugged: Examining Gendered Brand Communication Styles and Social Media Engagement**

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## Sophisticated vs. Rugged: Examining Gendered Brand Communication Styles and Social Media Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

Advertising and marketing managers understand that not all brands need to be on social media, but what is not clearly understood is consumers' engagement expectations for brands that are on social media. Therefore, this study investigates the impact of brand personality, specifically sophisticated and rugged brands, and gendered communication styles on consumers' social media engagement expectations. A scenario-based experiment was performed to test the hypotheses using a mock brand. The main study consisted of a Qualtrics consumer panel, and a MANOVA was utilized to examine three components of social media engagement (consumption, contribution, and creation) on the two brand personality dimensions. Results suggest that not all brands are expected to be as engaging on social media. Specifically, consumers expect higher levels of engagement with sophisticated brands (feminine traits) compared to rugged brands (masculine traits).

**Keywords:** *Brand personality, Sophistication, Ruggedness, Social media, Engagement, Consumer-brand relationship, Gendered communication styles*

### INTRODUCTION

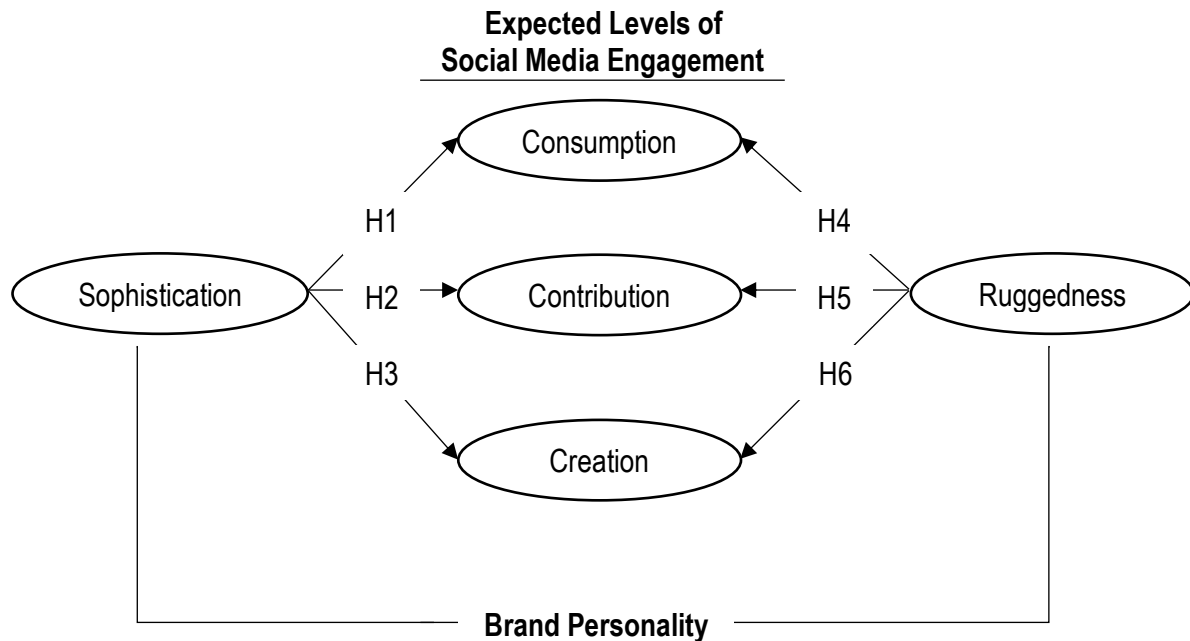
When social media first gained popularity as a marketing tool, brands quickly jumped in and often used social media for advertisements and promotions (Global Yodel, 2016; Rawat, 2018). Some brands soon discovered that not *all* firms need a social media presence (Wood, 2015). With a failure to emphasize the "social" part of social media marketing, brands focused on gaining followers rather than building awareness and interest through actively engaging and developing relationships with potential customers. Although there is value in building awareness through community presence, many advertisers and marketers are now focusing on facilitating active engagement within that community. For brands, the goal is likely to consider more active engagement beyond mere viewing or 'liking' content. There is a need for brand managers to understand when social media engagement should be a goal and when they can shift their efforts elsewhere. Therefore, this research extends the literature by examining the role of brand personality, specifically communication style, in setting those expectations for brand interaction on social media.

Effective communication between consumers and brands is key in developing consumer-brand relations, and it is the culmination of individual points of engagement and interaction that build a relationship (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Foster, 2010; Schurr et al., 2008). Marketers have long understood that expectations of relationship partners' behaviors impact relationship development and outcomes (Dwyer et al., 1987). Consumer-brand relationships involve two relationship partners, the consumer and the brand (Fournier, 1998; Foster, 2010). Some research has considered the role of consumer traits in impacting the likeliness to engage on social media (Ul Islam et al., 2017). Therefore, the advertisers and marketing managers who create the social media content are communicating as brand representatives and acting as relationship partners for the consumer – so considering the impact of personality traits and communication styles on both the brand and consumer side is essential.

Research has linked increased consumer engagement to positive brand and consumer outcomes (Brodie et al., 2013; Harrigan et al., 2017; van Doorn et al., 2010), and these engagement measures have been recently developed (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Schivinski et al., 2016). This focus on increasing social media engagement now begs the question: “Do all brands *need* to be engaging on social media?” After all, there is a wide variety of brands with a presence on social media. Schivinski et al. (2016) suggested that future research should answer the question, “What types of brands would most likely induce consumers to engage in social media?” (p. 74). As such, this study considers Aaker’s (1997) dimensions of brand personality to identify boundary conditions for social media communication and engagement.

It has been found that the type of brand personality may impact consumers’ expectations of brand communication and that consumers may expect sophisticated brands to be more engaging on social media than rugged brands (Cao et al., 2018). Considering Aaker’s (1997) descriptions of these two brand personality dimensions, they project what has traditionally been defined as feminine and masculine personality traits (Langstedt & Hunt, 2017; Xu et al., 2016). The sophistication dimension reflects glamour and romance, while the rugged dimension reflects an outdoorsy and tough personality. Therefore, it is expected that the perceived gender projected by the brand personality may impact consumers’ expectations of communication style and engagement levels. This paper argues that when these two personality traits are dominant in brand communications, consumers expect different levels of engagement (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Proposed Model of Brand Personality on Expected Levels of Social Media Brand Engagement**



The contribution of this study is two-fold. For academics, the results may help bridge the gap in understanding social media engagement by investigating how brand personality and communication styles affect consumers' expectations of engagement. Additionally, these results expand our understanding of how different types of engagement, from more passive (consumption) to more active (creation), may vary regarding their role or impact on social media engagement (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016). For advertising and marketing managers, the current study may help determine appropriate social media strategies and how much time and effort to devote toward their development. While many companies may believe it is necessary to develop a comprehensive social media strategy focused on engagement, it is worth examining whether this task is equivalently vital for all brands.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The social web is based on knowledge sharing and community building (Yaoyuneyong et al., 2013; Yuen et al., 2011). Businesses have leveraged these networks to expand their e-commerce, especially on social media platforms (Liang & Turban, 2011). Social media allows a direct path to interact with consumers, develop relationships, and create brand communities (Scarpi, 2010; Ul Islam et al., 2017). Brands may utilize social media marketing as an integrated component in a broader marketing communications campaign, an ongoing corporate communications channel, and/or a series of micro-campaigns designed explicitly for digital exposure (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). More specifically, it allows marketers and advertisers to promote customer engagement and loyalty, inspire consumer word-of-mouth promotion, increase brand awareness and liking, and potentially drive traffic to online and offline brand locations (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). However, Liadeli et al. (2022) found that despite the commonly held belief that social media accounts owned by businesses primarily increase engagement, research results show that social media have little impact on consumer engagement and sales.

The literature in marketing, advertising, and communications areas has established the importance of consumer expectations and the impact of meeting those expectations on consumer behavioral outcomes. In the consumer satisfaction literature, the widely used expectancy-disconfirmation model (Oliver, 1997) defines satisfaction as meeting or exceeding expectations based on an individual transaction. In the relationship marketing literature, expectations of relationship partners' behaviors are used to establish the social norms that build and strengthen relational bonds (Dwyer et al., 1987). For either of these positive consumer outcomes to occur, expectations of engagement levels must be met or exceeded. Therefore, understanding what might impact a consumer's expectation of engagement is needed.

### Brand Engagement on Social Media

Brand engagement has been defined broadly as a psychological state based on the interaction and co-creation between the consumer and brand (Brodie et al., 2013), consumer to consumer, and within brand communities (Coelho et al., 2019). The concept is grounded in relationship theory and explains how consumers develop brand behavioral expectations. For example, van Doorn et al. (2010) posit that consumer engagement goes beyond purchase transactions and includes all consumer behaviors focused on the brand or firm as a whole. This conceptualization falls in line with existing research on consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), where it has been more recently described as a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities occurring during, or related to, focal consumer/brand interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Brand engagement is a multi-dimensional, two-way communication that, in turn, leads to consumer behavioral outcomes, such as positive brand image (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Wikström, 2008), brand awareness (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Park et al., 2020), brand loyalty (Harrigan et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Schivinski et al., 2016; Solem & Pedersen, 2016), and relationship building (Foster, 2010; Fournier, 1998; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Engagement is often used to represent a broader level of psychological state (e.g., Brodie et al., 2011; Mollen & Wilson, 2010); while in the social media context, the term is typically used to represent specific consumer behaviors, such as 'liking,' 'sharing,' or 'posting' (Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). Other research focuses on the consumers' perspective and allows for consideration of different types of online engagement, from passive consumption of content to active content creation (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016). From the brand's perspective, engagement is not reflected in mere posting alone – it is captured in activities like responding to comments and commenting on others'

posts. Therefore, social media engagement focuses on the two-way interaction between the consumer and the brand on a social media platform. It seems valuable to consider how the brand is represented on those platforms.

Research has examined consumer engagement on social media platforms (e.g., Schivinski et al., 2016, Voorveld et al., 2018) and found that social media can help retailers increase brand engagement (De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Communication via social media can lead to increased loyalty (Kim & Ko, 2012), a more positive brand attitude, and, ultimately, increased purchase intentions (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Additionally, the personality traits of consumers, particularly the Big-Five model of personality, have also been found to influence social media engagement (Barger et al., 2016; Dodoo & Padovano, 2020; Islam et al., 2017; Lampropoulos et al., 2022; Marbach et al., 2016). However, while research on consumer brand engagement has increased, many aspects of the construct remain undiscovered (Dwivedi, 2015). For instance, when considering types of engagement with brands, Tsai and Men (2013) found that many users were not actively or meaningfully engaged with brands through social media, likely because customers felt little belonging or identification with the brand. Thus, the literature has not considered consumer expectations regarding engagement.

The current study considers the conceptualization of brand engagement by Muntinga et al. (2011) involving: (1) consumption, (2) contribution, and (3) creation, which reflect the consumer's response to brand prompts on social media. Consumption refers to consumers' mere viewing of brand-related content (created by the brand or others), such as reading a brand's Facebook post or viewing a TikTok video. Contribution refers to consumers' *passive* participation in brand-related content, such as 'liking' a brand's Instagram photo or retweeting a celebrity endorsement of the brand on Twitter. Finally, creation involves consumers *actively* creating and publishing new brand-related content, like writing a review on Facebook, stitching a TikTok video, or creating a branded filter on Snapchat. This engagement represents the highest level of active participation, and if positively valenced, consumers can become true advocates for the brand. Therefore, as consumers move from consumption to contribution to creation, their engagement becomes more active and participatory. Although there is value in all types of engagement, it would be expected that the more active types of social media engagement activities, such as creation, would have more of an impact on consumer outcomes.

### **Brand Personality & Engagement**

Brand personality refers to "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) and has a significant impact on relational outcomes, such as brand attachment (Goueron, 2006; 2008; Sung et al., 2015) and brand commitment (Ambroise et al., 2005; Ben Sliman et al., 2005; Goueron, 2008). Research often links the concepts of brand personality and the consumer-brand relationship. Consumer-brand relationships are built through a series of interactions (Blumstein & Kollock, 1988; Foster, 2010; Fournier, 1998; Hinde, 1979) between the consumer and brand, where the brand personality represents 'who' the brand is to the consumer (Aaker, 1997; Blackston, 2000). Scholars have called for future efforts to address how brands can better humanize and personify brands through social media (Tsai & Men, 2013); thus, brand personality is key in developing and maintaining relationships with consumers.

Individual brand personality traits can communicate different behavioral expectations (De Moya & Jain, 2013), have differing levels of consumer influence (Louis & Lombart, 2010), and positively impact engagement (e.g., Banahene, 2017; Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012). Goldsmith and Goldsmith (2012) examined a clothing retailer and found three personality dimensions, responsible (*i.e.*, competence), not-ordinary (*i.e.*, exciting), and sentimental (*i.e.*, sincerity), significantly associated with brand engagement. However, they did not examine whether this relationship exists online, in general, or specifically, in a social media context. Harrigan et al. (2017) validated an engagement scale developed specifically for the context of tourism and social media; the results confirm the suggestion of Hollebeek et al. (2014) that social media engagement leads to brand loyalty. However, brand personality was not considered a factor. More recently, Bairrada et al. (2019) examined the positive impact of brand personality on brand love, which positively influences engagement.

Recent research suggests that gender perceptions of a brand may impact consumers' expectations of brand engagement (Cao et al., 2018). Considering how the five dimensions of brand personality have been operationalized (Aaker, 1997; Grohmann, 2009), two stand out as being most closely tied to feminine and masculine traits – sophistication and ruggedness, respectively. Isolating specific brand personality traits, rather than considering all five simultaneously, is

an approach used in the literature (Sung et al., 2012; Yang & Lee, 2019). In one such study, findings suggest that softer-sounding brand names (with front vowels) are perceived as more feminine and sophisticated. In contrast, sharper-sounding names (with back vowels) are perceived as more masculine and rugged (Klink & Athaide, 2012). It has been found that brand gender may play a significant role in consumer brand perceptions (Grohmann, 2009; Wu et al., 2013) and expectations of online brand engagement. For instance, Brison and Geurin (2021) found that male social media influencers elicit greater engagement than female endorsers when endorsing sports brands. Hence, further study on gendered brand communication in this context is warranted.

### The Role of Gendered Brand Communication Styles

Although there has been a long-standing shared understanding that men and women typically communicate differently, it became a part of an everyday discussion in the 1990s with the release of Gray's bestselling book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. The author described women as using a relationship-oriented communication style focused on creating and maintaining positive relationships. In contrast, most men used a goal-oriented communication style focused on achieving results. Since the 1990s, the current conversation about gender has revolved around new terminologies that extend the traditional binary classification based on biological criteria (i.e., male/female) to view gender as a social construct existing on a continuum of masculine and feminine (American Psychological Association, 2012). As with prior research in gender studies and communication (e.g., Eisend & Rößner, 2022), we use the term *gender* to encapsulate the idea of biologically determined gender while also noting that gender is a social construct that includes both nonbinary and fluid aspects. A person's gender expression is distinct from their gender role or gender identity (Eisend & Rößner, 2022). Thus, *gendered brand communication* refers to a brand's style of gender expression, which exists on a spectrum of masculine and feminine.

Further research on gendered communication styles often considers how feminine vs. masculine traits or roles impact the communication style. Communication characteristics most associated with masculinity include bluntness, autocracy, authoritarianism, boastfulness, aggressiveness, and dominance, while those most associated with femininity include politeness, adaptiveness, expressiveness, and agreeableness (Basow & Rubenfield, 2003; Eagly et al., 1992; Hall & Matsumoto, 2004; von Hippel et al., 2011). In written communication specifically, men lean toward a more informational style, while women tend to demonstrate more involvement (Biber, 1995).

These differences can impact communication influence and effectiveness. Research has shown that women tend to have a softer approach when trying to influence others, which aligns with the feminine relationship-oriented style of communication (Mohindra & Azhar, 2012). When women do try to use more masculine styles to influence others, they are often viewed negatively. Interestingly, no disadvantage has been found when men use a feminine leadership style (Eagly et al., 1992). These findings suggest that consumers would have different expectations of interactions with feminine vs. masculine brands in the social media space. Therefore, it would be valuable for marketers to consider how gendered communication styles impact brand communications.

### Hypotheses Development

Brand communication refers to exchanging information between the brand and consumer, and differing communication styles impact brand perceptions and expectations of interaction. Consumers can and do view brands as relationship partners, partly due to the ability of a brand to project a personality based on specific traits (Aaker, 1997; Aaker & Fournier, 1995; Fournier, 1998). If individuals project certain communication styles that reflect gender, consumers can perceive brand personalities as more masculine or feminine. Studies have considered the role of the consumer's gender in brand communication, and it has been found that gender biases impact brand preferences and loyalty intentions (Rialti et al., 2017). However, the literature has yet to examine how the brand's perceived gender impacts consumer outcomes. Based on Aaker's (1997) dimensions of brand personality, some would be expected to reflect a more feminine communication style, while others would reflect more masculine communication traits. One dimension, *ruggedness*, appears to reflect more masculine personality characteristics – rugged, tough, strong, and outdoorsy. On the other hand, *sophistication* is described as glamorous, pretentious, charming, and romantic, reflecting a more feminine brand personality. Consequently, more two-way engagement might be expected from a sophisticated rather than rugged brand. It is important to clarify that we are focused on engagement in the form of two-way

communication exchanges, not one-way messaging. Therefore, our expectations are based on engagement activities, not the quantity of one-way posts that a brand might share on social media.

### *Sophisticated Brands*

Brands high on the sophistication brand personality dimension would reflect feminine traits (Aaker, 1997) and, therefore, a feminine communication style – which tends to be cooperative, expressive, and involved (Basow & Rubenfield, 2003; Biber, 1995; Hall & Matsumoto, 2004; Mohindra & Azher, 2012; von Hippel et al., 2011). Although not synonymous, luxury brands are often considered sophisticated based on key brand personality dimension descriptors, such as pretentious and glamorous. Kwon et al. (2017) found that brand, social, and individual differences lead consumers to engage positively with luxury brands. However, some suggest that higher levels of social media engagement may not be as beneficial due to dilution risks (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016), which may occur because consumers perceive the brands to be *too accessible* to the masses (Park et al., 2020) and not as exclusive. While some findings suggest that consumers do not expect high social media engagement from luxury brands (Pentina et al., 2018), it has been found that consumers tend to “have a positive attitude toward a luxury brand’s high level of consumer engagement on social media” (Park et al., 2020, p. 8).

Hassan (2021) states that luxury brands have incorporated high-quality images of their products into their social media strategy to effectively communicate their brand personality, establish a brand presence, and increase consumer engagement. Additionally, previous studies have demonstrated that visual images are more effective than text-based stimuli in shaping perceptions of brand personality (Ang & Lim, 2006; Delbaere et al., 2012). To convey certain brand personality traits, incorporating images or other visual elements into the text content on social media may be both more effective and more preferred (Zhange, 2017). Continuous exposure to the mix of visual images and text-based social media posts may augment consumer engagement for luxury brands. So, although findings related to luxury brand engagement are mixed, we expect the feminine traits reflected in the sophisticated brand personality will lead to higher expectations of engagement. Thus, we argue that:

**H1:** Consumers will expect higher social media engagement levels from sophisticated brands. Specifically, consumers exposed to a **sophisticated** brand on social media will expect **higher** levels of (a) consumption, (b) contribution, and (c) creation engagement.

### *Rugged Brands*

Rugged brand personalities are considered masculine and outdoorsy and tend to glamorize Western culture (Aaker, 1997; Maehle et al., 2011), so they would be expected to use a more masculine communication style. Several studies suggest that communication style impacts how brand personality is perceived (Bernritter et al., 2016; Labrecque, 2014; Sung, 2013). For example, communication style attributes defined as masculine include straightforward, authoritarian, dominating, blunt, boastful, aggressive, militant, and forceful (von Hippel et al., 2011). Therefore, a more cooperative engagement style would not be as useful for a rugged brand on social media. Additionally, Howden (1994) suggests that American men prioritize physical activities and spending time together over engaging in conversation. This preference may lead consumers to associate rugged brands with the concept of action-oriented pursuits, potentially resulting in decreased expectations for these brands' online engagement. Thus, we expect that:

**H2:** Consumers will expect lower social media engagement levels from rugged brands. Specifically, consumers exposed to a **rugged** brand on social media will expect **lower** levels of (a) consumption, (b) contribution, and (c) creation engagement.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Given the lack of empirical studies on brand engagement and personality, this study performed a scenario-based experiment to test the hypotheses. A mock brand, *Caspian Covers*, was used to avoid confounds, such as existing brand associations. The chosen product category was laptop and mobile phone covers. This category was selected because it appeals to consumers across many demographic categories and is a category that one would likely find on social media. The mock brand’s ‘About Us’ section was created to exemplify Aaker’s (1997) two brand personality

dimensions: Sophistication and Ruggedness. To assess whether the sections adequately reflected the brand personality dimensions, a panel of 10 expert judges (marketing or merchandising professors) reviewed each section and evaluated how well the descriptions reflected the intended brand personality dimensions. After analyzing the results from the expert panel, the descriptions were adjusted (see Appendix).

At the beginning of the study, subjects were asked to discuss a recent brand they interacted with on social media in the last three months. Those who did not engage with a brand on social media in the last three months were excluded from the study. Following the scenarios, questions regarding the mock brand and demographic questions were asked.

**Pilot Test**

Before the main experiment was performed, a pilot test was conducted on the established scales and experimental stimuli to ensure that the manipulations worked as intended. The pilot sample consisted of 55 subjects (representative of the U.S. population) from Amazon Mechanical Turk. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two brand personality scenarios and were asked about their expected engagement after reading the scenario on the mock brand’s social media page. Manipulation checks were carried out to ensure that the two dimensions of brand personality registered distinctly with the subjects. Specifically, subjects assigned to the sophisticated scenario were shown a black square, and subjects assigned to a rugged scenario were shown a brown square. Previous research (e.g., Labrecque & Milne, 2012) have found significant positive relationships between sophistication and black and ruggedness and brown. As such, the black and brown square images were used to associate the sophisticated and rugged scenario, respectively. Following the scenario, subjects were asked what color image was displayed after they read their respective scenario. A chi-square analysis was performed to assess differences between the conditions. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Manipulation Check for Pilot Study**

	<b>S</b>	<b>% Total</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>% Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>df</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Black</b>	28	50.90	0	0.00	28			
<b>Brown</b>	0	0.00	27	49.10	27	1	55	0.000
<b>Total</b>	28	50.90	27	49.10	55			

S = Sophistication, R = Ruggedness

Examining the conditions, the initial manipulations worked as intended. Subjects exposed to a sophisticated scenario viewed the brand as more sophisticated than those exposed to the rugged scenarios and vice versa,  $c^2(1) = 55.000, p = .000$ .

**Main Study**

The main study consisted of 121 consumer panelists representative of the U.S. population from Qualtrics (Table 2). As with the pilot test, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two brand personality scenarios and followed the same procedures. Subjects were 62.0% male and ranged between 18 and 73 years of age (mean age = 43). About 39% of the subjects were categorized as Generation Y or Millennials, followed by 28.9% as Baby Boomers. Most subjects identified as Caucasian/white (59.5%), and about half reported being married (48.8%). According to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau, the sample is relatively consistent with the U.S. demographic profile (e.g., the majority are Caucasian/White, about half are married, and older generation).



**Table 2. Frequency Distributions of Demographic Variables**

<b>Sample characteristics (N = 121)</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age</b>		
18-23 (Gen Z)	9	7.7
24-41 (Gen Y)	47	38.8
42-52 (Gen X)	30	24.8
53+ (Baby Boomers)	35	28.9
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	45	37.2
Male	75	62.0
Prefer to self-describe	1	.8
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Asian/Pacific Islander	14	11.6
Black/African American	27	22.3
Hispanic	10	8.3
White/Caucasian	72	59.5
Other	8	6.6
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	46	38.0
Married	59	48.8
Widowed	1	0.8
Divorced	14	11.6
Separated	1	0.8
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	2	1.7
High school degree or equivalent	26	21.5
Some college	35	28.9
Undergraduate degree	31	25.6
Master's degree	20	16.5
Professional/technical degree	5	4.1
Doctorate degree	2	1.7

*Preliminary Analyses*

To measure the constructs of interest, items were adapted from established scales. Consumer engagement, defined as a consumers' set of online activities related to a brand which varies in levels of interaction and engagement, is a multi-dimensional construct with three factors: consumption, contribution, and creation (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016). The lowest level, Consumption, measures the degree to which consumers engage in passive engagement of media, such as reading, watching, and following brands on social media (Schivinski et al., 2016). Contribution refers to a consumers' intermediary levels of engagement, such as "liking," sharing, and commenting on a brand's social media content (Schivinski et al., 2016). Creation, the highest level of engagement, requires consumers to create and post content, such as text, images, and videos (Schivinski et al., 2016). As such, Consumption was measured using five items, and Contribution and Creation were both assessed using six items each (Schivinski et al., 2016). All scales were transformed to utilize six-point Likert items (Strongly Disagree = 1; Strongly Agree = 6) for uniformity and to encourage subjects to consider the items more carefully and avoid neutral responses (i.e., the option to "Neither Agree

nor Disagree” was excluded). Initial analyses (using IBM SPSS Statistics 22) suggest that all constructs were unidimensional (Churchill, 1979). In addition, the Cronbach’s alpha of each construct was above the 0.7 threshold.

## RESULTS

### Overall Measurement Model

The latent measure structure was assessed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) (via IBM SPSS Amos 22) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). All loadings exceeded 0.7, and construct reliabilities were .94 and above, suggesting adequate convergent validity and internal consistency. The variance extracted estimates range from .82 to .84 and are larger than the corresponding squared correlation estimates (Table 3). Overall, the measurement model demonstrates discriminant validity, adequately represents the theoretical constructs and was found appropriate for further analysis.

**Table 3. Measurement Model**

Items	Consumption	Contribution	Creation	AVE	CR
I would read points related to X on social media.	0.92				
I would read fan page(s) related to X on social networking sites.	0.91				
I would view pictures/graphics related to X.	0.90				
I would follow blogs related to X.	0.90				
I would follow X on social networking sites.	0.91			.821	.96
I would comment on videos related to X.		0.89			
I would comment on posts related to X.		0.93			
I would comment on pictures/graphics related to X.		0.92			
I would share X related posts.		0.89			
I would “like” pictures/graphics related to X.		0.90			
I would “like” posts related to X.		0.91		.819	.96
I would initiate posts related to X on blogs.			0.93		
I would initiate posts related to X on social networking sites.			0.92		
I would post pictures/graphics related to X.			0.92		
I would post videos that show X.			0.93		
I would write posts related to X on forums.			0.93		
I would write reviews related to X.			0.87	.839	.97

### *Manipulation Check of Main Study*

The next step was to confirm that the manipulation in the main study was perceived as intended (Perdue & Summers, 1986). Similar to the pilot study, brand personality was manipulated on two levels: Sophistication and Ruggedness. Independent *t*-tests were used to assess the differences between the conditions. Subjects exposed to a sophisticated scenario viewed the brand as more sophisticated than rugged (Msoph: 4.45 vs. Mrug: 3.26,  $t(118) = 6.118, p = .000$ ), and subjects exposed to a rugged scenario viewed the brand as more rugged than sophisticated (Mrug: 4.77 vs. Msoph: 3.58,  $t(106.4) = -4.951, p = .000$ ). As such, the manipulation worked as intended (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Brand Personality Score Manipulation Check for Main Study**

	N	Mean	Std Dev	t	df	p	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower	Upper
<b>Sophistication</b>								
Sophisticated Scenario	58	4.45	1.12	6.118	118	.000	0.798	1.561
Rugged Scenario	62	3.27	1.00					
<b>Ruggedness</b>								
Sophisticated Scenario	58	3.58	1.48	-4.951	106.4	.000	-1.674	-0.717
Rugged Scenario	63	4.77	1.13					

### Main Analyses

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to assess levels of engagement (consumption, contribution, and creation) on the two brand personality conditions (Sophistication and Ruggedness), where consumption indicates the least engaged (passive engagement) and creation indicates the most engaged (active engagement). Prior to the MANOVA, assumptions were checked. First, there are no univariate outliers based on the boxplots, and there are no multivariate outliers based on the Mahalanobis' distance. Based on the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality ( $p = .000$ ), this assumption is not satisfied. However, the skewness of the distribution is within an acceptable range (consumption = .225; contribution = .144; creation = .412) for a sample size of less than 300. There is a linear relationship between each pair of dependent variables for each group of the independent variable. In addition, there is a homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices based on Box's M test of equality of covariance ( $F = 1.392$ ,  $p = .214$ ). Lastly, as expected, there is multicollinearity as the dependent variables are highly correlated, given that consumer engagement is a multi-dimensional construct with consumption, contribution, and creation factors.

### Hypothesis Test Results

The hypotheses considered consumers' expected levels of engagement on social media across the two brand personality types (Sophistication and Ruggedness). Hypotheses 1A-C argue that consumers exposed to a sophisticated brand will report *higher* levels of a) consumption, b) contribution, and c) creation, whereas Hypotheses 2A-C maintain that consumers exposed to a rugged brand will report *lower* levels of a) consumption, b) contribution, and c) creation. Based on the MANOVA results, there was a statistically significant difference in the types of engagement based on the brand personality dimensions,  $F(3, 117) = 4.511$ ,  $p = .005$ ; Wilk's lambda = .896, partial  $\eta^2 = .104$ .

To determine how the dependent variables differ for the brand personality conditions, the univariate ANOVAs were assessed. Results suggest that brand personality type statistically affects all three engagement levels (Table 5). When comparing subjects who were exposed to the sophisticated vs. rugged conditions, there were significant differences in consumption ( $p = .028$ ), contribution ( $p = .023$ ), and creation ( $p = .002$ ). Specifically, subjects exposed to a sophisticated condition reported that they would expect higher levels of consumption compared to those exposed to a rugged condition (Soph<sub>consumption</sub> = 3.70 vs. Rug<sub>consumption</sub> = 3.15), higher levels of contribution (Soph<sub>contribution</sub> = 3.76 vs. Rug<sub>contribution</sub> = 3.18), and higher levels of creation (Soph<sub>creation</sub> = 3.48 vs. Rug<sub>creation</sub> = 2.62).

**Table 5. MANOVA Results for Social Media Engagement**

Consumer Engagement	Mean	Std Dev	Brand Personality	Mean	ANOVA F	Sig.	Partial $\eta^2$
Consumption	3.41	1.40	Sophisticated	3.70	4.917	.028	.040
			Rugged	3.15			
Contribution	3.45	1.40	Sophisticated	3.76	5.345	.023	.043
			Rugged	3.18			
Creation	3.03	1.53	Sophisticated	3.48	10.093	.002	.078
			Rugged	2.62			

A post-hoc test was also performed to examine whether age played a role in levels of online engagement and brand personality. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed, controlling for age. There was a statistically significant difference between the brand personality dimensions on the combined dependent variables of social media engagement after controlling for age,  $F(3, 116) = 3.633, p < .05$ , Wilk's lambda = .914, partial  $\eta^2 = .086$ . The pair-wise comparisons show that sophisticated brands have higher contribution and creation engagement levels than rugged brands. Particularly, Gen Z and Gen Y expect a higher level of contribution and creation engagement compared to Gen X and Baby Boomers.

## DISCUSSION

Managing social media communications can be costly and time-consuming (Guttman, 2018; Moorman, 2020); hence, understanding how and when to devote resources to increasing social media engagement is valuable. This study aims to determine if gendered brand personality, based on Aaker's two brand personality dimensions that reflect gender, impacts the expectation of engagement with the brand on social media. Current findings reveal that brand personality impacts consumers' expectations, and consumers expect more social media engagement (including consumption, contribution, and creation) from sophisticated rather than rugged brands. This study provides advertising and marketing managers with insight to make better decisions regarding allocating marketing resources on social media platforms and how to better communicate with their target audience through social media.

As hypothesized, consumers expect high levels of online engagement with sophisticated brands. In particular, younger consumers in this study expect more engagement with sophisticated brands. This finding echoes previous research that found young consumers are attracted to luxury brands (Doss & Robinson, 2013), which show their style and aspirations (Kim & Ko, 2012) to evoke sophistication and elegance (Aaker, 1997). Hence, many luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton and Prada, have started to use social media to communicate and engage with young consumers – who likely expect them to maintain higher social media engagement levels. For sophisticated brands, social media communications should focus more on engagement as consumers expect it.

Additionally, as hypothesized, the results of this study reveal that consumers would not expect rugged brands, which are associated with toughness, masculinity, and the outdoors (*e.g.*, Aaker, 1997; Maehle et al., 2011), to be as engaging on social media. Further, according to Howden (1994), American men favor “action over talking” and prefer to spend time together pursuing activities rather than engaging in conversation. As such, consumers may associate the idea of “action over talking” with rugged brands, resulting in lowered expectations for engaging with such brands online. Marketing and advertising managers of rugged brands may get by with less emphasis on social media engagement since consumers do not expect it, suggesting they may want to consider alternative ways to use social media to communicate their brand to their target market better.

## THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This research extends the literature by identifying parameters for when brands should focus on social media engagement and considering the impact of gendered brand communications in the social media context. Much like early social media marketing research countered the initial assertion that all brands need to be on social media with “well, not *all* brands,” this study supports a similar approach for social media engagement. Social media engagement is important but may not be essential for *all* brands. This study found that rugged brands perceived as masculine are not expected to be as engaging on social media. Identifying situations where consumers do not expect brands to engage opens the door to exploring other conditions where social media engagement is unnecessary.

The results of this study have several implications for advertising and marketing managers. In a broad sense, these results allow advertisers and marketers to re-think how they approach social media engagement and communication. As mentioned, social media marketing has shifted from emphasizing social media presence to engagement (Harrigan et al., 2017; Wood, 2015). Results for sophisticated brands suggest that, for some brands, this assertion holds. However, the focus on engagement may not be necessary for all brands. Maintaining high engagement levels on social media is resource-heavy, so this may be good news for some advertising and marketing managers – especially those managing social media for rugged brands. Since consumers do not expect to engage in dialogue with these rugged brands, showing ‘action’ through photos may be just as effective as spending time being as responsive as other brands. This ability to reallocate resources toward more effective tactics is valuable, especially for smaller organizations. However, brand managers of sophisticated brands should be vigilant in engaging with consumers on social media. To encourage a high level of engagement, Chen and Wang (2017) suggest that luxury brands should ensure that their attempts appear more creative, personable, and approachable. Furthermore, sophisticated brands could encourage consumers to generate User-Generated Content (UGC) by co-creating the brand products’ visual content and then disseminating it on social media (Pentina et al., 2018). Then, the brands can showcase the UGC visual content on their social media.

## LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

There are limitations to this study and opportunities for future research. First, the generalizability of this study may not apply to other populations since the majority (59.5%) of respondents were Caucasian. Although this sample is representative of the U.S., future research may consider conducting a cross-cultural investigation on how culture influences consumer perceptions of brand personality on social media engagement. For example, Chen and Wang (2017) conducted a study exploring the perceptions of female Chinese consumers on Western luxury brands. They found that Western luxury brands tend to use rich media to build presence and engagement in social media; however, Chinese consumers view these attempts as inactive, distant, conservative, and not allowing high-level social media consumer engagement (Chen & Wang, 2017).

Second, prior findings indicate that brand gender may play a significant role in consumer brand perceptions (Grohmann, 2009; Wu et al., 2013). This research reveals that social media engagement expectations differ based on the masculine and feminine expressions of the brand itself. As with consumers differing in gender expression, many brands fall outside the gender dichotomy of strictly masculine or feminine. Extant research in gender communications suggest that congruity between gender expressions of brands and consumers could impact important outcomes for marketers (Eisend & Rößner, 2022). As such, areas for future research could investigate the fluidity of gender communications to capture the complex interplay among brand, consumer, and social media communications.

Third, this experimental study used a mock brand to control for external variables and asked subjects to imagine interacting with the brand. Future research could use existing brands to examine the issues within real-world brand interactions. Further research could also identify non-luxury feminine brands or different product categories to see if similar results are found. In addition, future studies might consider whether posts from rugged brands related to shared activities facilitate brand connection, even in the absence of active engagement. Lastly, this study focused on consumer expectations of brand engagement and did not consider the consumer side of the interaction. One of the key characteristics of social media engagement is that it can be reciprocal. Future studies can take a similar approach to the current research to see if consumer interaction levels vary based on dominant brand personality traits as well as

consumers' personality traits. Understanding consumer expectations is valuable, but understanding consumer actions would provide more insight into how brands develop and maintain relationships in the social media space.

## CONCLUSION

This study attempted to identify boundary conditions for consumer engagement in a social media context. Consumer predictions regarding their levels of active engagement were found to vary based on the expressed brand personality type – either sophisticated or rugged. These results contribute to our understanding of social media marketing, where the role of brand personality is key to determining engagement needs. For some brands, like those with a masculine and rugged brand personality, consumers do not seem to have as much of an expectation for social media engagement. Therefore, the current trend toward increasing social media engagement may not be the most effective approach for all brands. Brand personality is just one boundary condition for social media engagement. Future research should seek out others, which will help marketers gain insight into where best to place their time, money, and effort.

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## APPENDIX

### Brand Descriptions

Brand Personality Type	'About' Section
Sophisticated	Caspian Covers is a sophisticated brand. We are known for making smooth and sleek covers designed to evoke an air of refined elegance. Our charming covers add glamour to your technology and make you stand out, and above, those around you.
Rugged	Caspian Covers is an outdoorsy company based in the Western U.S. We are known for making super tough designs that protect your gear during any outdoor activity. No matter what rugged terrain your outdoor lifestyle takes you, Caspian will keep your gear protected!

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Lacey K. Wallace** (MBA, the University of Southern Mississippi) is a marketing doctoral student at the Culverhouse College of Business, The University of Alabama. Her research focuses on social perceptions and stigmatizations in the marketplace. She examines how these topics intersect to provide value for both consumers and practitioners, particularly in terms of brand communication and authenticity, pro-social behavior, and consumer well-being.