



Genuine, fake, or does it matter? exploring engagement behavior driven by self-presentation

Matthew Alexander^{a,*}, Elina Jaakkola^b, Archareeporn Thanvarachorn^c,
Anne Marie Doherty^a

^a Department of Marketing, University of Strathclyde, 199 Cathedral St, Glasgow G4 0QU, United Kingdom

^b Marketing Department, University of Turku, Rehtorinpellonkatu 3, 20500 Turku, Finland

^c The Shell Company of Thailand, 10 Soonthornkosa Road Kloengtoey, Bangkok 10110 Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Customer engagement research assumes engagement is underpinned by pre-existing purchase or usage relationships and genuine cognitive or emotional connections with a brand. However, social media research reveals extensive activity motivated by self-presentation, resulting in content that lacks veracity. This paper explores self-presentation-driven engagement behaviors on social media and the brand relationships that drive them. A qualitative study employing semi-structured interviews with 30 Facebook users was conducted, revealing three types of engagement behaviors for self-presentation (EBSP) — “staged,” “fanciful,” and “faked” behaviors — and identifying their underlying brand relationships and consumer motivations that deviate from existing assumptions in engagement research. This study contributes by (1) introducing new types of engagement behaviors informed by self-presentation theory; (2) challenging assumptions about the brand relationships that support customer engagement; (3) reframing how engagement should be conceptualized and studied; and (4) revealing how engagement behaviors reflect differing levels of congruity between the self and brand.

1. Introduction

Customer engagement is a hugely influential topic in both service and marketing literature (see [Lim and Rasul, 2022](#); [Wetzels et al., 2023](#)), with engagement research capturing the zeitgeist of contemporary customer relationships and increasingly complex customer journeys ([Azer et al., 2024](#); [Jaakkola and Alexander, 2024](#)). While customer engagement encompasses a wide range of interactions across various societal settings, social media has emerged as a critical context, where engagement behaviors are most visible and measurable, amplifying their influence on consumer journeys and brand strategies ([Brodie et al., 2013](#); [Dessart, 2017](#)). Given the importance of social media engagement, organizations must track not only customer purchase and usage but also the behaviors of engaged individuals who operate within and influence others through complex social networks ([Alexander et al., 2018](#); [Brodie et al., 2019](#)). This influence is particularly important given social media engagement's role in circulating firm content (e.g., likes, shares), providing independent validation (e.g., reviews, comments), and via

user-generated content — all of which significantly influence firms' marketing strategies. ([Dessart et al., 2015](#); [Harmeling et al., 2017](#); [Kunz et al., 2017](#); [Pereira et al., 2024](#)).

Engagement in marketing captures a “dynamic and iterative process that reflects actors' dispositions to invest resources in their interactions with other connected actors in a service system” ([Brodie et al., 2019](#), p.174). An individual's engagement disposition encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements, with customer engagement behaviors (CEBs, e.g., likes, comments, reviews, etc.) its visible manifestation ([Brodie et al., 2011](#); [van Doorn et al., 2010](#)). A commonly held assumption in engagement research is that CEBs are driven by a customer's emotional attachment or cognitive arousal towards a brand, triggered by pre-existing brand relationships ([Brodie et al., 2011](#); [Pansari and Kumar, 2017](#)). Thus, CEBs are considered genuine customer acts motivated by relational drivers ([Brodie et al., 2011](#); [Azer and Alexander, 2020](#); [Moliner et al., 2018](#)), and engaged customers are considered important because they invest more resources and are more loyal towards the brand ([de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020](#)).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: matthew.j.alexander@strath.ac.uk (M. Alexander), elina.jaakkola@utu.fi (E. Jaakkola), a.thanvarachorn@gmail.com (A. Thanvarachorn), annemarie.doherty@strath.ac.uk (A.M. Doherty).

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However, these assumptions concerning the nature of the brand relationship underlying CEB have not been problematized in customer engagement research to date. Indeed, academic and industry research, alongside anecdotal evidence, reveal that CEB often lacks a genuine connection to the brand, particularly on social media. Sham product reviews are estimated to account for some 16–33% of the total (Sahut et al., 2024), and industry reports suggest that more than half of Instagram posts and just under 45% of accounts are fake (Hickman, 2021). The impact of this content is significant, with big Tech companies, such as Meta, Google, and Amazon, criticized for failing to understand or address fake content (Woollacott, 2022). The need for organizations to mitigate against the impact of fakes is also substantial; for example, Amazon delayed user reviews by three days to tackle phony ratings to combat a backlash against diverse casting in Amazon's 'The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power' series (Hern, 2022).

The examples above suggest that prevailing theoretical assumptions about customer engagement behaviors may be naïve (Ng et al., 2020). As a result, this study seeks to address two underexplored knowledge gaps. First, there is evidence that social media activities are often driven by *self-presentational* goals (Krämer and Winter 2008; Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012), but the role of self-presentation in CEB has, to date, been overlooked in engagement research. Self-presentation, the process by which individuals project an idealized image to others (Goffman, 1978), is often enacted on social media through curated brand associations and content tailored to personal narratives (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012). For example, consumers may share luxury brand posts to signal their status, or post about fitness gear to appear more health-conscious. Previous engagement research has not discussed self-presentational motivations as a driver of engagement behaviors, nor has it explored self-presentation related CEB or its nature.

The second gap concerns assumptions about the brand relationships underlying customer engagement behaviors. Engagement research typically assumes an authentic emotional and cognitive connection to a focal brand, developed through a customer relationship based on purchase or usage (Brodie et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010), where positive emotions and trust towards the firm are important drivers of engagement (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). These assumptions are seldom questioned. Social media studies, too, often ignore the actual nature of brand relationships underlying "clicks and likes". At the same time, individuals may like a brand's post without owning any of its products or recommend a product without first-hand experience. As a result, some CEB, visible online, may not reflect authentic brand relationships, yet still be recorded as such by firms and researchers, potentially influencing customer sentiment or purchase decisions. At the same time, research on the outcomes of CEB has produced mixed results (e.g., Beckers et al., 2018; Pansari and Kumar, 2017), suggesting that engagement behaviors may not always stem from meaningful or profitable brand relationships, as commonly assumed.

Together, these gaps point to a need for a deeper theoretical and practical reconsideration of what constitutes authentic engagement. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to address the following question: *What kinds of self-presentation-driven engagement behaviors exist in social media, and what is the nature of the brand relationship that drives them?* To expand existing perspectives on engagement and address potential ambiguities in existing research, we conduct an exploratory qualitative study comprising 30 semi-structured interviews with Facebook users about their engagement activity on social media.

Our findings identify three new types of engagement behaviors that are driven by self-presentation motives: staged, fanciful, and faked engagement. These types differ in the degree of cognitive/emotional connection with the brand, purchase or usage interaction, and congruence between actual, ideal, or false selves, revealing that engagement behaviors on social media are not always grounded in genuine brand relationships or cognitive/emotional connections, as assumed in engagement literature. The study offers four contributions: (1) introducing new types of engagement behaviors informed by self-

presentation theory; (2) challenging assumptions about the brand relationships that support customer engagement; (3) reframing how engagement should be conceptualized and studied; and (4) revealing how engagement behaviors reflect differing levels of congruity between the self and brand.

2. Literature background

To understand the relationship between CEB, self-presentation, and brand relationships, we first review customer engagement research in the service domain to outline assumptions about the brand relationships that underpin CEB. Second, we explore existing insights on self-presentational social media behavior and associated brand relationships as discussed in broader marketing and psychology research.

2.1. Customer engagement behavior and brand relationships

The key assumption for research on CEB is that they are reflective of a genuine cognitive and emotional connection between an engagement subject, typically a customer, and a focal object, such as a brand or firm (Brodie et al., 2011; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014). This connection creates a willingness or tendency to engage, which has more recently been articulated as an engagement disposition (Alexander et al., 2018; Brodie et al., 2019). The implication is that specific beliefs, feelings, and intentions toward a focal brand manifest as engagement behaviors.

Customer engagement behaviors are defined as "voluntary resource contributions that have a brand or firm focus but go beyond what is fundamental to transactions, occur in interactions between the focal object and/or other actors, and result from motivational drivers" (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014, p.248). CEB thus encompass a wide range of customer behaviors beyond financial patronage, including word of mouth (WOM/eWOM), recommendations and referrals, blogging and web posting, providing ratings, co-developing new products and innovations, viral marketing, knowledge, and creativity (van Doorn et al., 2010; Kumar et al., 2010; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Harmeling et al., 2017; Azer and Alexander, 2020; Lim et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2024; Ozgen Genc et al., 2025).

These CEBs are considered critical to firms because they capture consumers' direct contributions to firms' marketing function (Harmeling et al., 2017; Kunz et al., 2017). Engagement research assumes that through CEB, customers seek to influence the firm/ brand (e.g., by providing feedback) or other customers (e.g., by providing recommendations) (Alexander et al., 2018). For example, through co-developing activities, customers contribute creativity and knowledge resources that shape firm offerings; and through influencing and mobilizing activities, they provide network and persuasion assets that influence other actors' perceptions, preferences, knowledge, or behaviors toward the brand (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Harmeling et al., 2017). CEB has been shown to deliver significant benefits for firms, influencing performance outcomes, shaping behavioral intentions, and stimulating word-of-mouth (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Recent research also reveals the potential power of CEB on customers, improving their brand evaluations or affecting other individuals' willingness to imitate or resharing intentions (Azer and Alexander, 2025), or creating a crowding-in effect, effectively encouraging others to engage (Fehrer et al., 2018). Thus, CEBs affect firms, the engaging individual, and other customers (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

Research on CEB is also rooted in relationship marketing and customer management literature and, thus, inherently assumes a pre-existing customer relationship with a brand or product, with purchase or usage at its heart (Brodie et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010). For example, Vivek et al (2012, p.133) note how customer engagement reflects "the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings or organizational activities", and So et al (2016, p. 186) emphasize the relevance of engagement in understanding customer-brand relationships as it "is based on

more direct customer outcomes and involves exchanges in the form of current or future transactions with the brand". Thus, CEBs are assumed to emerge from actual consumer experiences with, and genuine responses toward the brand, the principal focal object of engagement.

Aligned with this view, multiple well-understood relationship marketing constructs capture the antecedents or consequences of engagement, including involvement, participation, flow, rapport, trust, self-brand connection, satisfaction, loyalty, commitment, and customer lifetime value, all of which resonate strongly with a customer/brand purchase relationship underpinning engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). However, these assumptions, which predominate within the engagement literature, are rarely problematized or tested despite the existence of alternative explanations.

2.2. Self-Presentation and social media engagement

Social media research within marketing and psychology literatures reveals a different perspective on engagement behavior than that found in contemporary customer engagement research – a perspective which challenges its core assumptions. Studies on online behavior often draw on the concept of self-presentation because of its association with broader theories of the self (Goffman, 1978; Higgins, 1987). Here, the extent to which individuals present an accurate version of themselves online (the actual self) or an idealized version (the ideal self) are often explored (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012). Self-presentation is a common motivation for social media use, enabling individuals to show socially desirable versions of themselves to others that they aspire to be offline but have not yet realized (Krämer and Winter, 2008; Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). The lack of physical interaction, the ability to curate profiles, and the presence of weak ties on social media reduce the risk of social sanctions, facilitating self-expression (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Thus, an alternative self can be crafted through the curation of online images and the construction of a profile (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012).

Typically, an individual's ideal self, portrayed through self-presentation, seeks to generate positive impressions (Goffman, 1978). However, the psychology literature on social media activity also reveals that discrepancies between actual and ideal selves can ultimately lead to a 'false self,' a defensive facade that completely hides one's true self (Gill-Or et al., 2015). This false self involves behaviors that are not true to the actual self and stems from motives such as deception or exploration, both easily promoted on social media (Michikyan et al., 2015).

Psychology and marketing studies on social media reveal behavior regularly driven by self-presentation needs (see Table 1). Self-presentation¹ has been found to drive a range of online activities such as reacting, commenting, sharing, and posting, that resemble manifestations of engagement, for instance, electronic word-of-mouth, posting online reviews or creating content (e.g., Alexandrov et al., 2013; De Angelis et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2016), or interactions with fan pages (e.g., Wallace et al., 2014). Bareket-Bojmel et al (2016) noted that 36% of the status updates they sampled were rated as self-enhancement and 11% as self-derogation, suggesting nearly 50% of posts were associated with self-presentation. Drouin et al., (2016) suggest that individuals admit they feel comfortable lying on social media, presuming that others are doing the same.

Alongside the recognition that social media studies identify self-presentation as a key driver of engagement behavior, we can make three other observations. Firstly, we note that studies focus almost exclusively on measurable behavioral outcomes, including reactions (e.

¹ Other terms used within the literature related to self-presentation, social media and engagement include: Brand Engagement Self-Concept, Self-Enhancement, Self-Derogation, Self-brand connection, Self-congruence (congruity) with a 'liked' brand and Individualism (opportunity for self-enhancement).

g., likes), comments, shares, or WOM (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016). Here, CEBs will appear genuine and thus still influence others, but fail to address the motivations behind these activities. Secondly, social media research seldom considers the actual nature of the brand relationship that underpins the activity, instead relying on simulated purchases or hypothetical consumption experiences (e.g., Wien and Olsen, 2014; Eelen, Özturan, and Verlegh, 2017). Finally, existing research focuses exclusively on congruity between the actual and ideal self (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Escalas and Bettman, 2003); the extent to which this might morph into a false self is less well explored.

In summary, existing research on engagement assumes that engagement is driven by a customer's genuinely held cognitive or emotional connection and is associated with a purchase or usage relationship with the brand or firm. This connection manifests in CEBs, which focus on the brand as focal object and widely regarded as beneficial. Social media represents a key context for engagement, strongly associated with networks, connectedness, and ubiquity, and capable of influencing a range of actors while positively impacting marketing strategy. However, other social media research indicates a prevalence of behavior driven by self-presentation. This behavior could be faked or manipulated yet be perceived as credible by others who may still be influenced by it. However, alternative motivations for, manifestations of, and directions of engagement behaviors have rarely, if ever, been considered, and this is where our empirical work is directed.

3. Method

Given the research problems identified in the previous section, we adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach, which is well-suited to understanding how things occur and to "unravelling processes from the perspective of the informant" (Holmlund et al., 2020, p. 2). To explore the role of self-presentation in social media engagement, we conducted an exploratory study using abductive reasoning, in which theory emerges concurrently with empirical observations (Holmlund et al., 2020). We conducted semi-structured interviews with consumers, yielding rich insights to inform theory development.

3.1. Data collection

Transparency in data collection and analysis is of critical importance to ensure rigorous qualitative service research (Epp and Otnes, 2021; Witell et al., 2020); the following details our procedures in this regard. Our context was social media, an ideal environment for engagement activity due to the strong potential for interactivity, both between individuals and with focal objects, such as brands (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Facebook was chosen because it is a popular social media platform with the largest number of active users (3.6 billion, see Chaffey, 2024). In addition, Facebook's characteristics offer crucial elements for investigating engagement behaviors—specifically, the ability of actors to react (i.e., like, comment, share) and post about an almost limitless range of topics and focal objects. In addition, the Facebook news feed is a place where bonds between users and focal objects (i.e., brands) can be promoted (e.g., via 'likes' and 'follows'). Here, individuals can see posts from brands they like and view friends' activities, including friends' engagement with focal objects, which may differ from the individuals' own choices and promote further engagement (Luarn et al., 2015). Thus, the Facebook platform is highly interconnected and interactivity maximized, making it a hub for observable engagement activity (Dessart, 2017; Lim and Rasul, 2022).

Aligned with our qualitative design, we adopted a theoretical sampling approach. This method focuses on refining and explaining emerging categories by developing their properties, rather than aiming for random selection or representative distributions (Ligita et al., 2020). Unlike purposeful sampling, which is predetermined at the outset to serve a specific purpose, theoretical sampling evolves progressively and

Table 1
Social Media Studies: Self-Presentation and Engagement Related Outcomes.

Social media research on self-presentation			Relationship to Engagement Literature		
Authors (year)	Type of Study	Self-presentation (SP) Measure ^a	CEB-related outcomes	Dimensions Measured ^b	Measures Purchase or Usage ^c
Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)	Survey	Positive self-enhancement	WOM	B	N
De Angelis et al. (2012)	Experiments	Self-enhancement	Generation and transmission of WOM	B	N
Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012)	Qualitative	NA	Congruity or incongruity with ideal/actual self	C, E, B	N
Taylor et al. (2012)	Survey	Self-brand congruity	Likelihood to share	B	N
Alexandrov et al. (2013)	Experiment	Satisfaction of self and social needs	WOM	B	N
Wien and Olsen (2014)	Experiment	Individualism	WOM	B	N
Bareket-Bojmel et al. (2016)	Structural model	Desire for Enhancement; Desire for verification, Self-Enhancement; Self-Derogation	Facebook likes/Facebook comments	B	N
Wu et al. (2016)	Experiments	Self-enhancement motivation	Willingness to post online reviews	B	N
Claffey and Brady (2017)	Survey	Positive Self-Enhancement	Participation in value-creating activities (sharing info, expressing needs, providing suggestions)	B	N
Eelen et al. (2017)	Survey and Experiments	Self-brand connection/desire to help the brand	WOM	B	Y
Wallace et al. (2017)	Survey	Self-congruence with a 'liked' brand	Brand Loyalty/Brand Love/WOM	B	N
Marbach et al. (2019)	Survey	Self-enhancement	Social Value/Aesthetic Value	C, E, B	N
Swani and Labrecque (2020)	Survey and Experiment	Brand Relationship connection and Self-presentation	Like/Comment/Share	B	N

^a Measures used for SP includes antecedents/drivers, independent variables (IV) and moderators.

^b Does the study capture Cognitive (C), Emotional (E) or Behavioral (B).

^c Does the study capture actual purchase or usage behavior: Yes (Y) or No (N).

systematically, guiding data collection to support the development of the emerging theory (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009).

As a result, we targeted individuals who demonstrated behaviors closely aligned with the central phenomenon of interest: namely, regular users of Facebook and who evidenced self-presentation related interaction with specific focal objects (e.g., brands). Our sample was gathered via online Facebook groups, where the researcher sought permission from group administrators to recruit participants for the interviews. This method yielded just over half of the participants, with the remainder of the sample recruited to refine the emergent theory. Accordingly, our final sample of 30 individuals (56% female) included participants from Thailand, the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, Mexico, India, and New Zealand, countries that rank among the top 10 countries in the world for the number of Facebook users (Statista, 2024b). Theoretical saturation was reached as data coalesced around the three CEB categories we identified. Meta studies report between 21 and 31 interviews needed for saturation; thus, with our research at the upper end, theoretical sufficiency for an exploratory study of a new phenomenon was achieved (Dey, 1999; Holmlund et al., 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2021). The interviews were conducted in both English and Thai; for Thai interviews, transcripts were back-translated in line with similar studies (Dessart et al., 2015).

The average age of participants was 27 years, aligning with most Facebook users aged between 25 and 34 (31.1%, see Statista, 2024a). We asked the participants to describe their Facebook usage to ensure that they were regular users. Participants' social media use ranged from "every 15 min" to "30 min per day", representing a range of active usage patterns. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged from 25 to 50 min, with an average of 30 min (see Table 2). Participants were informed in advance of the interview format (specifically, that they would be asked to share their Facebook feed) using a participant information sheet. While a range of questions were asked, participants' Facebook profile activities were the primary focus of the interviews to

Table 2
Interview participants.

Phase 1 Participant Information			
Participant	Gender	Age	Nationality
Participant 1	Female	25	Thailand
Participant 2	Female	26	Thailand
Participant 3	Male	25	Thailand
Participant 4	Male	24	Thailand
Participant 5	Female	32	Thailand
Participant 6	Male	27	Thailand
Participant 7	Male	24	Thailand
Participant 8	Male	28	Thailand
Participant 9	Male	34	Thailand
Participant 10	Male	24	Thailand
Participant 11	Female	31	Thailand
Participant 12	Male	27	Thailand
Participant 13	Female	25	Thailand
Participant 14	Male	28	Thailand
Participant 15	Male	27	Thailand
Participant 16	Female	29	Thailand
Participant 17	Female	23	Thailand
Participant 18	Female	27	Thailand
Participant 19	Female	28	United Kingdom
Participant 20	Male	28	Turkey
Participant 21	Male	27	Italy
Participant 22	Female	33	Greece
Participant 23	Female	34	Spain
Participant 24	Male	26	United Kingdom
Participant 25	Female	32	India
Participant 26	Female	22	United Kingdom
Participant 27	Female	19	Cyprus
Participant 28	Female	29	Mexico
Participant 29	Female	25	United States
Participant 30	Female	22	New Zealand

help the researchers explore the participants' perceptions of specific

content. Participants were asked some initial questions about their social media activities (see Appendix A for the interview guide) and then asked to share their Facebook profile, where discussion of their posts emerged organically, and follow-up questions were needed. This technique gave participants a visual illustration of their engagement activities, helping them answer questions easily and clearly, and overcoming any issues related to self-recall bias.

3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis began immediately after data collection commenced. To evidence the rigor of our work, the following section provides in-depth details of data analysis procedures (Witell et al., 2020; Epp and Otnes, 2021). Coding was undertaken in the following two stages. In line with our abductive reasoning approach, we iterated between empirical data and existing literature. Stage 1 involved identifying engagement behaviors using the literature on social media engagement as a guide (e.g., individuals liking, commenting on, or sharing content relating to a specific focal product, brand, or organization). Once behaviors were identified, Stage 2 involved exploring each behavior in turn and examining the nature of an individual's motivations, relationships with, and dispositions toward a focal object, reflecting on existing engagement conceptualizations as well as social media and psychology research on self-presentation. Appendix B illustrates this coding, indicating identification of engagement behavior, purchase or usage relationship (or lack thereof), and cognitive or emotional connection (or lack thereof) for each of our types. This process allowed three discrete types of engagement behavior to emerge that deviate from existing assumptions about CEB. To ensure consistency, specific examples of the types were shared within the research group at regular intervals throughout the analysis, and descriptions of each were then proposed and discussed extensively across multiple iterations (Gioia et al., 2013). This approach offers the rigor Witell et al. (2020) consider necessary for excellent qualitative service research.

To ensure the validity of results, we triangulated our findings to achieve consensus. Firstly, we undertook member checking with interviewees who agreed to be contacted to ascertain the extent to which they agreed with our findings (Witell et al., 2020; Epp and Otnes, 2021). These participants largely agreed with the data, only adding some further explanatory comments. Secondly, we shared our findings with seven managers who worked within the industries mentioned during phase 1. In advance of a face-to-face meeting, each manager was shown explanations of the three categories with specific examples. The researchers then discussed each of the categories with them, with managers confirming that they recognized the behaviors exhibited:

“Oh wow, I see a lot of engagement in this way” (Manager D)

“It's so good that our customers think that our brand helps them in their presentation...and they engage with us because they believe that other people would appreciate it. That means that our products are good enough for them.... They think our brand is able to help them look good, right? (Manager B)

Our approach, therefore, also met a key relevance criterion for qualitative research by verifying findings with key stakeholders (Holmlund et al., 2020).

4. Results: Engagement behaviors for self-presentation (EBSP)

Our analysis reveals three types of engagement behaviors for self-presentation (EBSP) — “staged,” “fanciful,” and “faked” — and identifies the brand relationships and consumer motivations underlying these behaviors. Fig. 1 illustrates the core differences between these types along two dimensions: cognitive/emotional connection to the brand (weak/strong) and the presence of purchase or usage interactions (high/low). Extant engagement research assumes that CEBs are based on consumers' existing high purchase or usage interactions and a strong

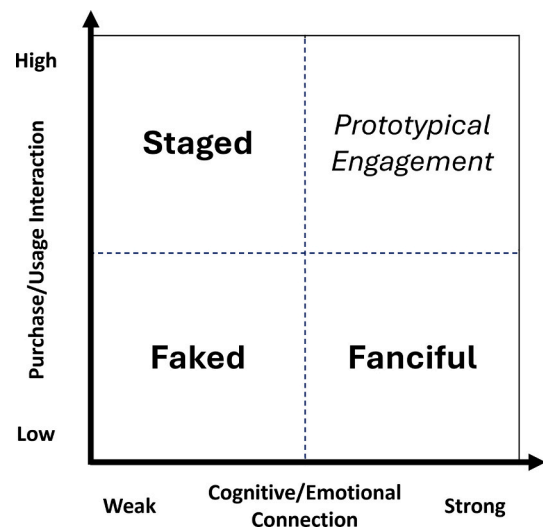


Fig. 1. Differences between prototypical engagement and types of EBSP.

cognitive/emotional connection to the brand (labelled “prototypical engagement” in Fig. 1). The three identified types of EBSP deviate from this assumption. *Staged engagement* is based on higher actual purchase/usage interaction, but on weak cognitive or emotional connections. For example, highlighting premium experiences while ignoring routine ones. *Fanciful engagement* reflects consumers' strong cognitive or emotional connections but exaggerates or fabricates the extent of actual usage. For example, erroneously claiming participation in events or ownership of products that remain aspirational. *Faked engagement* represents an extreme, purely instrumental form where purchase/usage interaction is low or non-existent and a genuine cognitive/emotional connection is weak or absent, but where individuals exploit a brand image to connect to specific social networks or groups. The following sections present our detailed findings regarding the three EBSP types.

4.1. Staged engagement behavior

The first type of EBSP identified is *staged* engagement behavior that we define as *consumers presenting aspects of their ideal self by displaying interactions with a brand without a strong emotional or cognitive connection to it*. Contrary to assumptions in engagement research (e.g., Jaakkola and Alexander, 2024), these engagement behaviors appear not to be based on consumers' heightened feelings or interest in the brand, nor on their desire to affect others' behavior toward the brand. Instead, these consumers' behaviors were driven by their desire to elevate their ideal self by presenting only what they want others to see. Interview data indicate that staged engagement behavior is associated with brands that serve such self-presentational purposes, the implication being that consumers would not post if an idealized self-image was not supported:

I “check in” to let others know that I have been here, as it is a famous noodle place [Roong-rueng]; I want others to see that I eat good food. But when I go for street food, I wouldn't check in as this wouldn't provide me with the image I want. (Participant 2)

Staged engagement behavior also appears to be spurred by a brand's high status that matches the consumer's ideal self. This echoes research around self-image and premium or symbolic brands (e.g., Lovett et al., 2013). If association with brands supports an individual's ideal self, then displaying that association through CEB helps disseminate this ideal self to others. Consumers may, therefore, use brands to signal personal qualities through brand ownership and endorsement:

Often, I check-in at university; I have many posts of this kind. I just want to tell others that I study hard, and I have a good education...just so I look clever in society back in my country. (Participant 27)

I've posted about how my Garmin helped me so much in accomplishing my training for the Sydney Marathon. In other words, I want to spread a message that I am fit enough to run the Sydney Marathon – that's it. You know... Garmin can't really help if my body is not ready. (Participant 30)

The positive expressions in staged engagement activities can appear to indicate that participants trust in and are satisfied with such focal objects. However, staged engagement behaviors may give a false signal of a consumer's relationship to the brand: our data revealed positive endorsement even when the consumer's disposition appeared ambivalent, and also a false negative statement, which highlights ownership of an exclusive product:

My caption in this post was "UK 50 Best Fish and Chips[,] with a thumb [s] up" because they say that they are in the top 50. People who see this post might think that I like this place because of the thumbs up[,] but no, I didn't actually find it tasty at all. I checked in at their place because they say they are top 50[,] so it looks like I came for good food. (Participant 8)

I've shared this music on the day they released their new album, I just posted because I was kind of showing [my] interest that I was listening to nice music and I'm early on this...in general these musicians are not my favorite group. (Participant 21)

I just want others to know that I drive this car [Mercedes-Benz], so I post in the form of a complaint that the after-sales service makes it so expensive to change the tires. That's how I let others know about my car. (Participant 4)

In staged engagement scenarios, engagement behaviors are related to impression management (Vargo et al., 2019). Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) note how brands are used as "subtle clues to represent [the self]" (p.396), underlining how consumers "choose brands that are congruent with their selves ... and why consumers publicly link themselves to brands to resolve conflicts engendered by different salient aspects of the self" (p.396). The implication here is that congruence between a brand and the self (here both actual and ideal) means the consumer is driven to endorse the brand even when a strong emotional or cognitive connection is absent. Here, the brand is a vehicle that helps the individual communicate their ideal self to others, but where interest in influencing the brand or other customers' behavior towards it is weaker.

4.2. Fanciful engagement behavior

The second engagement behavior type concerns situations in which consumers present aspects of their ideal self by displaying a strong emotional or cognitive connection with a brand but exaggerating the extent of interactions. Thus, while consumers have a stronger cognitive or emotional connection and wish to show support to the brand or the cause, their engagement behaviors do not reflect genuine user experiences or are misleading. Our data revealed how individuals exaggerate usage or ownership of a brand to signal a level of interest that supports their preferred self-image:

I click that I'm "going" to events like concerts [Coldplay, Ed Sheeran], but most of the time I don't make it. I just want others to know that I like live music and have great taste in music, which they will see because my activity appears in their news feeds. ... I do like all this music, but maybe not to the level that I would go to the concerts. (Participant 2)

Having an image of a biker in my profile allows me to be exceptional and stand out from the rest of the crowd. I feel good about having this image [,] so I emphasize it through posts. For example [,] I want others to perceive me as a "biker," so I share a lot of brand content about motorcycles, such as Triumph and Ducati. I think this is a better way to show my interests and to avoid others thinking I'm a show-off, even though I don't own those brands. (Participant 6)

Fanciful engagement also occurs when the consumer presents an extended or upgraded version of an existing purchase or usage

relationship, thus giving an exaggerated version of actual usage or ownership:

I "shared" this post from Apple [mobile phone] because they launched a new model of an iPhone in a new color, and it's a limited edition. I own an iPhone, but this one is a newer model...I wasn't going to pay for any upgrade. (Participant 25)

I 'shared' this post from Olympus because they launched a new version of a camera in a new color, it's a limited edition. It's not that I am going to buy it but I just want to tell others that I am also interested in photography. I own a Nikon camera but this one from Olympus is a better version. (Participant 18)

Other examples of fanciful engagement occur when individuals, in principle, support an idea or cause but do not actually behave accordingly. Projection of the ideal self through CEB thus requires exaggeration (cf. Hepper et al., 2011). With fanciful engagement, participants use social media to overstate the extent and nature of their relationship with a focal object, such as a product, brand, or cause. Thus, the fanciful engagement reflects a disposition to engagement but not actual behavior:

I've "shared" this post from National Geographic because I wanted to spread awareness of the environmental issues of plastic cup use..... Well, I know what I have to do, but I don't commit to it myself because I don't carry my own cup around. I always forget. But I think my post shows others that I care about this issue. (Participant 2)

I've shared how these high street brands [H&M, New Look] clothes were made from child labour, so stop buying otherwise they're gonna make children do it. Maybe if I want to be completely ethical, like I just said, I should stop buying right now but I still don't stop this habit. (Participant 27)

We find support for the notion of fanciful engagement in research on the digital self that is not entirely inconsistent with a consumer's real-life self, but where true association with a brand can be challenging to achieve due to financial, space, or proximal limitations (Schau and Gilly, 2003). For example, "consumers may feel Gucci expresses their identities but be unable to own Gucci items in RL [real life]" (Schau and Gilly 2003, p. 400). Thus, fanciful engagement is also likely to appear in situations where the brand association is congruent with the ideal, but not the actual self, as online brand associations are less restricted by an individual's material reality than they are in real life.

Fanciful engagement behavior bears some similarity to individuals who engage without purchasing (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2024), or psychological ownership (Kumar and Nayak 2019), but here, we offer an alternative explanation as individuals exaggerate brand relationships or offer a misleading narrative to aid self-presentation.

4.3. Faked engagement behavior

The most drastic type of EBSP is *faked engagement*, observed when consumers present a false self by displaying a manipulated version of both emotional or cognitive connection and interaction with a brand. With faked engagement, individuals recognize the value of brand association, but neither own, use, nor appear to care about it. Faked engagement is thus the most extreme version of EBSP, as it lacks both brand interaction and an identifiable engagement disposition underlying CEB. Such engagement activities reflect a false self-image that individuals wish to present, and the desire to share brand-related content emerges through its instrumental value of engaging a specific target group. Faked engagement occurred when individuals posted on social media to enhance their image in a way that lacked any grounding in ownership or usage of the brand:

I used to share posts about Google Pixel [mobile phone] when it had just launched, along with a caption that said something like "it's worth buying." But actually, I have no plans to change to a Google phone. Other

people probably think that I'm interested in changing phone[s,] and that makes me look like an early adopter among my friends. (Participant 10) I "shared" this post [Van Gogh Museum] because perhaps I just want to be a more rounded person, like I can talk with anyone about anything, including art. ... It's just like I have an interest in this piece of art. ... Hmm, I've never been there yet[.] I would say art is not really my thing. (Participant 20)

I used to "share" things about running events that were sponsored by Nike [sports brand], although I am not a sporty guy[.] and I'm not interested in doing marathons. ... But at that time, I felt it was a cool way to enhance my look. It's like I have hobbies and activities to do. (Participant 3)

Many interviewees shared content when they believed their social network connected with the brand in question. Thus, the basis of CEB was not the consumer's own relationship with the brand, but an assumption of a specific social network's brand relationship that could be leveraged to better relate with them:

Recently[.] I engaged with JD Sport. I've commented to tag my friends in one of the posts about the FIFA World Cup. ... I think it helps me relate more to my friends' activities because everyone has been talking about the matches. ... [W]ell ... it's not really about me, as I have no interest in such things[.] but this helps me to get along with friends and to show them that I also have some relations with the things they're interested in. (Participant 27)

I've "shared" this content from Kate Spade because the brand was on the news headlines for about a week. A number of people have been talking about the owner[.] so I've "shared" it because it's [the] "talk of the town" at the moment, but I've never owned its products because I don't like the colorful style. (Participant 1)

With faked engagement behavior, social media can make individuals appear more interested or concerned about specific offerings, despite the lack of any meaningful connection (Grewal et al., 2019). Faked engagement behavior is thus not triggered by cognitive or emotional connection, or by actual purchase or usage interactions, offering a stark contrast to existing engagement literature (Brodie et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013).

Research on the self often suggests that when presenting an ideal self, individuals rarely deviate much from their actual self. In other words, self-presentation reflects some reality (Schau and Gilly 2003). Both Escalas and Bettman (2003) and Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) indicate that individuals avoid situations and behaviors that risk contradicting their existing "self"; instead, they are motivated by things that reflect some similarity or congruity with their "self" to ensure self-consistency. Notably, Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) note that where there is incongruity, you either post the ideal self or nothing.

However, more recent psychology research identifies individuals who present a false self on social media. This 'false Facebook self' reveals an image that is more desirable and can 'shelter' an individual from a more vulnerable "true" self (Turel and Gil-Or, 2019). Presenting a false Facebook self is associated with both self-enhancement and a strong need for approval (Wright et al., 2018; Mun and Kim, 2021). Thus, individuals may be motivated to prefer an offering that is contrary to their real self when it offers something they can use in terms of the image they wish to present to others (White et al., 2012). This is consistent with literature arguing that individuals lie when the benefits they seek are not achievable through truthful means (Mazar et al., 2008). In engagement terms, faked engagement sees a cynical leveraging of the brand to further self-presentational goals.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The rapid growth of engagement research in recent years suggests that the time is ripe to problematize its core assumptions, particularly regarding the nature of the brand relationships that underpin engagement behaviors. Our findings reveal that social media engagement is not

always what it seems, raising doubts about the relationship among core dimensions of engagement. As summarized in Table 3, our research identifies three types of EBSP: staged, fanciful, and faked. Driven by a desire to promote status or personal attributes, staged engagement involves framing one's ideal self by highlighting specific brand interactions, while lacking a strong relationship with it. Fanciful engagement is motivated by a desire to communicate interests or preferences related to a brand but lacking access to it, resulting in exaggeration of the brand relationship that may nevertheless reinforce a strong cognitive/emotional connection. Faked engagement occurs when there is a total lack of brand relationship or cognitive/emotional connection; here, engagement serves a false self, driven by a need to elevate relationships within social networks or to exploit brand images for personal gain.

The three forms of EBSP and their motivational drivers identified in this study contradict basic assumptions held in the existing customer engagement literature: its grounding in existing purchase or usage relationships and emotional and cognitive connection toward the focal brand (Brodie et al., 2011; Harmeling et al., 2017; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). While all three forms are driven by self-presentational goals, they differ in terms of which self is presented, the degree of brand congruence between actual and ideal self, and the nature of the motivational drivers. These findings have important implications for engagement research and engagement marketing practice, as will be discussed next.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Our study addresses two specific knowledge gaps in the engagement literature: first, the role of self-presentation in engagement; and second, the assumed presence, nature, and significance of brand relationships underpinning engagement behaviors. In doing so, we make four inter-related contributions: (1) introducing new types of engagement behaviors informed by self-presentation theory, (2) challenging assumptions about the brand relationships that support customer engagement, (3) reframing how engagement should be conceptualized and studied, and (4) revealing how engagement behaviors reflect differing levels of congruity between the self and brand.

First, our analysis contributes a new understanding of how self-presentation drives engagement by introducing new types of engagement behavior for self-presentation (EBSP): staged, fanciful, and faked engagement. These forms represent novel manifestations of engagement not previously captured in the customer engagement literature. While existing research primarily conceptualizes engagement behaviors in terms of how they affect others, such as the firm or fellow consumers (e.g., Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Harmeling et al., 2017), our study reveals engagement behaviors that are predominantly self-directed, focused on enhancing social status, reputation, or relationships with social others, rather than the brand itself. In contrast to prior studies that describe how firms benefit from customer-provided resources (e.g., Kumar et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010), the EBSPs we identify reflect consumers' attempts to engage with other consumers rather than with the brand.

Second, our findings challenge existing assumptions about the nature of brand relationships that underpin engagement. The engagement literature generally treats engagement as a multidimensional and relational construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Alexander et al., 2018; Brodie et al., 2019; Vivek et al., 2012), assuming that these dimensions are closely aligned. Our findings reveal a more complex, inconsistent relationship between these dimensions, with weak or absent relational foundations. The three types of EBSP show that individuals may engage with brands for self-presentational purposes, without possessing either a strong engagement disposition or any history of consumption. This finding disrupts dominant narratives in the literature, which view engagement as an extension of relationship marketing concepts (e.g., Kumar et al., 2010). The implication here is that existing assumptions regarding relational

Table 3
Types of engagement behaviors for self-presentation (EBSP).

Types of EBSP	Staged	Fanciful	Faked
Definition	Displaying interactions with a brand without a strong emotional or cognitive connection to it.	Displaying a strong emotional or cognitive connection with a brand but exaggerating the extent of interactions.	Displaying a manipulated version of both emotional or cognitive connection and interaction with a brand.
Example	‘Checking in’ at a particular restaurant, not because you like it, but because it has prestige.	Liking a rock band and claiming you have attended a concert when you have not.	Posting about a fashion brand you do not own, or even like.
Self-Congruity and CEB			
<i>Which self is presented</i>	Ideal self	Ideal self	False self
<i>Actual Self/Brand Congruence</i>	Congruent	Incongruent	Incongruent
<i>Ideal Self/Brand Congruence</i>	Congruent	Congruent	Incongruent
Motivational drivers			
<i>Brand relationship motivations</i>	Brand’s fit with ideal self	Brand’s fit with ideal self, but lack of access despite interest.	Brand’s fit with false self and social others’ assumed engagement with it
<i>Cognitive/Emotional connection</i>	Weak	Strong	Weak
<i>Purchase/ Usage Interactions</i>	High	Low	Low
<i>Self-presentation motivations</i>	Impression management: promoting status and/or personal qualities through association with desirable brands	Communicating genuine interests/preferences by exaggerating access to brands.	Connecting to a specific social network or group by exploiting a brand’s image.
Implications			
Implications for organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for staging could increase brand awareness • Risk that individuals use staging for negative engagement • Individual network assets facilitate the spread of staged engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firms can benefit from understanding ‘non-buying’ engaged individuals and can attempt to convert them to customers • Risk that individuals may not be the right audience for the organization • Persuasion capital could increase the impact of fanciful engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for increased reach through social media influencers • Risks of customers receiving erroneous information • Ethical risks associated with fakes
Implications for future research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine how individuals use brands to signal identity or status. • Explore implications for brand message control and co-creation. • Assess effects on perceived brand authenticity among peer networks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study how aspirational engagement affects brand accessibility and inclusivity perceptions. • Explore influence on brand desirability among non-customers. • Examine tension between ideal self and brand use in socioeconomically constrained contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the role of deception in engagement and associated ethical challenges. • Assess impact on trust in brands and user-generated content. • Explore risks for vulnerable groups exposed to faked behaviors.

antecedents and consequences of engagement – including satisfaction, trust or commitment, perceived costs or benefits, consumption goals, and participation all associated with purchase relationships (see Brodie et al., 2011; van Doorn et al., 2010) – may not always hold for the CEB observable in social media and need to be interrogated more carefully in research settings.

Third, we challenge current assumptions regarding how engagement is conceptualized and studied. Engagement research often presumes that CEBs are manifestations of genuine relational attachment to a brand rooted in purchase or usage (Brodie et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010). This assumption is particularly dominant in social media settings, where engagement is commonly assessed through visible behaviors—such as likes, comments, or shares—that serve as proxies for deeper psychological connection (e.g., Harmeling et al., 2017). Our research suggests that such metrics may fail to capture the true nature of consumer-brand relationships. Conflicting findings in existing research regarding the value of engagement initiatives (e.g., Beckers et al., 2018; Pansari & Kumar, 2017) may, in part, be due to this disconnect between observable CEB and consumers’ actual brand relationship. Without capturing the cognitive and emotional connections underlying CEB, engagement metrics risk misrepresenting consumer sentiment, especially on social media.

Fourth, our study offers important contributions to social media research, particularly around the intersection of self-presentation, engagement, and brand relationships. While prior research acknowledges that self-presentation can drive online engagement behaviors (e.g., Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; De Angelis et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2016), few studies have unpacked specific forms of these behaviors or their implications for brand relationships. Our study addresses this gap by identifying distinct types of EBSP that vary in their alignment with the

self and the brand. For example, staged engagement is characterized by congruity between the actual self, the ideal self, and the brand image, despite deliberate impression management. Fanciful engagement, however, reveals an incongruity between the actual self and brand use due to the material reality of the consumer (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2024). Our more extreme third type, faked engagement, does not relate to the actual or ideal self at all and is, in fact, associated with the notion of a false Facebook self (Turel and Gil-Or, 2019). Thus, our findings contradict previous studies that posit how individuals are motivated to engage only when there is some congruity with their actual self, and that have not recognized situations in which engagement morphs into a false self (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Escalas and Bettman, 2003).

These contributions call for renewed attention to how brand relationships are conceptualized in the era of social media engagement. The use of easily quantifiable engagement behaviors as proxies for brand relationships, without attending to underlying emotional or cognitive dimensions, risks oversimplification. In our study, brand relationships vary widely in strength and type—ranging from transactional or symbolic associations to the total absence of relational ties. Yet, existing research and practice often treat all visible engagement behaviors as evidence of meaningful brand connection. Our findings reveal the potential for brands to be co-opted into self-presentational strategies with little regard for consumption history or brand value. In such cases, the brand serves not as a relational partner but as a backdrop for self-management. This perspective has been largely absent from the engagement literature. If studies measure only behaviors and fail to capture cognitive and emotional connections, we may never understand the subtler nature of the relationships underpinning social media engagement. In particular, the status of the brand/firm when they appear to be little more than a patsy, to be manipulated and used for an

individual's self-presentational goals, has, to our knowledge, not yet been considered.

5.2. Managerial implications

Customer engagement is widely seen as a strategic priority for organizations, expected to drive improved firm performance (Kumar et al., 2010) and enable systemic value co-creation (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). As engagement marketing gains momentum (Harmeling et al., 2017), organizations are investing substantial resources to elicit and amplify engagement behaviors (Verhoef et al., 2010; Pereira et al., 2024). However, empirical findings on CEB's value are inconclusive (cf. Beckers et al., 2018), and our study sheds light on why this might be the case. Specifically, all three of our EBSP types offer both opportunities and challenges for practice.

Staged engagement offers the clearest value for organizations. By creating platforms or campaigns that allow customers to "stage" their identity (e.g., user-generated content, branded hashtags), firms can harness individuals' self-presentation motives to amplify brand visibility and trust via their social networks (Harmeling et al., 2017). However, staged engagement carries reputational risks: users may hijack or subvert the brand message, especially in contexts where staging incentives are high but brand affinity is low.

Fanciful engagement reflects users who engage aspirationally, sometimes without any intent or means to purchase (Vivek et al., 2012; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2024). These individuals may still act as persuasive voices and spread positive messages (Harmeling et al., 2017), offering brands indirect value through their persuasion capital. Additionally, such users may represent a pool of prospective customers; identifying and nurturing these individuals could aid conversion. However, firms must ensure alignment between the message and the audience. Fanciful engagement may generate brand buzz in segments where the brand's offer is irrelevant or outside their material reality, leading to inefficient targeting and diluted brand meaning.

Faked engagement, while potentially beneficial for short-term reach, particularly in influencer ecosystems (Kim and Kim, 2021), poses the most significant strategic and ethical risks. Engagement from individuals who lack genuine interest or connection to the brand can distort feedback loops, undermine innovation initiatives, and compromise brand authenticity. There is also a risk in empowering individuals whose motivations are purely performative, especially when vulnerable audiences (e.g., children) are exposed to them (De Veirman et al., 2019). Firms must tread carefully when using engagement metrics as proxies for consumer loyalty or insight.

For organizations, our research has several important implications. Firstly, a need to move beyond volume-based metrics: Organizations should resist the temptation to equate clicks, likes, and shares with meaningful engagement. These surface-level signals may be driven by self-presentation motives rather than brand affinity. Secondly, firms should attempt to segment engagement types: Firms can enhance the diagnostic value of engagement data by developing tools to distinguish staged, fanciful, and faked behaviors. Qualitative analysis, sentiment tracking, and behavioral triangulation can support this effort. Thirdly, organizations can attempt to design for alignment: Engagement initiatives should be carefully designed to attract and reward users whose own goals align with the brand's values and desired customer base. Finally, organizations will need to manage reputational exposure: engagement marketing must account for reputational risk by establishing safeguards against message distortion, such as community guidelines, moderation policies, or engagement gating strategies (e.g., delaying reviews, as seen on platforms like Amazon; Hu and Li, 2011).

Ultimately, firms must recognize that self-presentation-driven engagement is often episodic and decoupled from long-term brand relationships. When engagement is used primarily as a vehicle for individual self-expression, its value to the firm becomes uncertain and uneven. Without mechanisms to discern the authenticity and intent

behind engagement behaviors, organizations risk misinterpreting data, misallocating resources, and misunderstanding their customers.

5.3. Limitations and further research

Our study focused on identifying EBSP types and did not assess their impact on either those performing the behaviors or those within their social networks. Given the nuanced interplay between engagement disposition and brand interaction across our three types, more research is needed to understand how different brand touchpoints influence self-presentation-driven engagement—particularly considering the complex customer journeys revealed in recent studies (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2024). For staged engagement, researchers could examine how individuals use brands as identity signals, the implications for brand co-creation and message control, alongside implications for brand authenticity or credibility. For fanciful engagement, further work is needed to understand how aspirational yet inauthentic displays affect perceptions of brand accessibility or exclusivity, the impact on brand desirability, and tensions between ideal self-expression and actual brand use, especially in socioeconomically constrained contexts. To investigate faked engagement, research should examine the role of deception, including potential ethical concerns and the risks it poses to both brands (e.g., trust) and audiences, particularly vulnerable groups.

The openness with which participants described these behaviors—and supporting evidence of normalization (e.g., Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016)—suggests that EBSP is a salient, socially accepted phenomenon. Given research showing negative psychological and psychosocial impacts associated with deceptive online self-presentation (Gil-Or et al., 2015; Michikyan et al., 2015), the potential risks to individual well-being posed by engagement marketing warrant prioritization in future inquiry.

A limitation of our study is its reliance on Facebook data. While other platforms, such as X/Twitter, may offer greater visibility, Facebook's higher degree of social control (Brandtzaeg, Lüders, and Skjetne, 2010) arguably provides a more fertile ground for identifying self-presentation behaviors. Future studies could compare EBSP manifestations across platforms with different affordances and visibility norms, particularly in contexts where social control is weaker. Moreover, collecting platform-level data—such as number of followers, followings, brand followings, and average usage time—could offer valuable insights into how user characteristics and engagement intensity or valence influence engagement behavior.

The role of user-generated content (UGC) strategies and influencer status also warrants further investigation. Future research could explore whether participants identify as influencers or produce UGC as part of a self-branding effort, and how these identities impact both the form and function of EBSP. These factors may significantly shape content development and dissemination, influencing both the reach and authenticity of brand-related engagement.

The effects of EBSP on other actors' perceptions and behaviors toward the focal brand also require further attention. Future work might examine whether it matters that engagement is driven by self-presentation motives and what risks arise when such engagement goes viral—particularly if it originates from actors with limited connection to the brand. As firms increasingly rely on customer-owned resources (Harmeling et al., 2017), there is a risk that decisions could be made based on inauthentic or misaligned perspectives. Sector-specific research could further explore how EBSP influences brand trust and evaluate strategies for firms to retain control over online narratives (e.g., purchase-verified reviews, content moderation protocols).

Finally, our findings highlight the need for more sophisticated methods to assess engagement. While visible engagement is often used as a proxy for brand connection, our research suggests that such behaviors may not accurately reflect emotional or cognitive commitment. Researchers should develop tools to distinguish between surface-level and meaningful engagement, potentially drawing on machine learning

or AI to interpret patterns in behavior and intent. This will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the quality of engagement and its underlying drivers.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Matthew Alexander: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Elina Jaakkola:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Archareeporn Thanvarachorn:** Writing – original

draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Anne Marie Doherty:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A.: Interview protocol

Phase 1: Introduction

‘Thank you for coming today, the purpose of this interview is to explore your brand engagement activities on social media. There is no right or wrong answers as I just would like to know what you do, so please feel free to say anything’.

‘I would like to ask for your permission to audio record this interview’

Phase 2: Discussion

1. Could you briefly tell me what do you normally do on Facebook?
2. How long do you normally spend on Facebook each day/week?
3. How often do you check your newsfeed?
4. How would you like to see yourself on Facebook?
 - i) What do you to express that?

‘Do you mind showing me your Facebook newsfeed? It would be easier for us to begin some conversation from that’

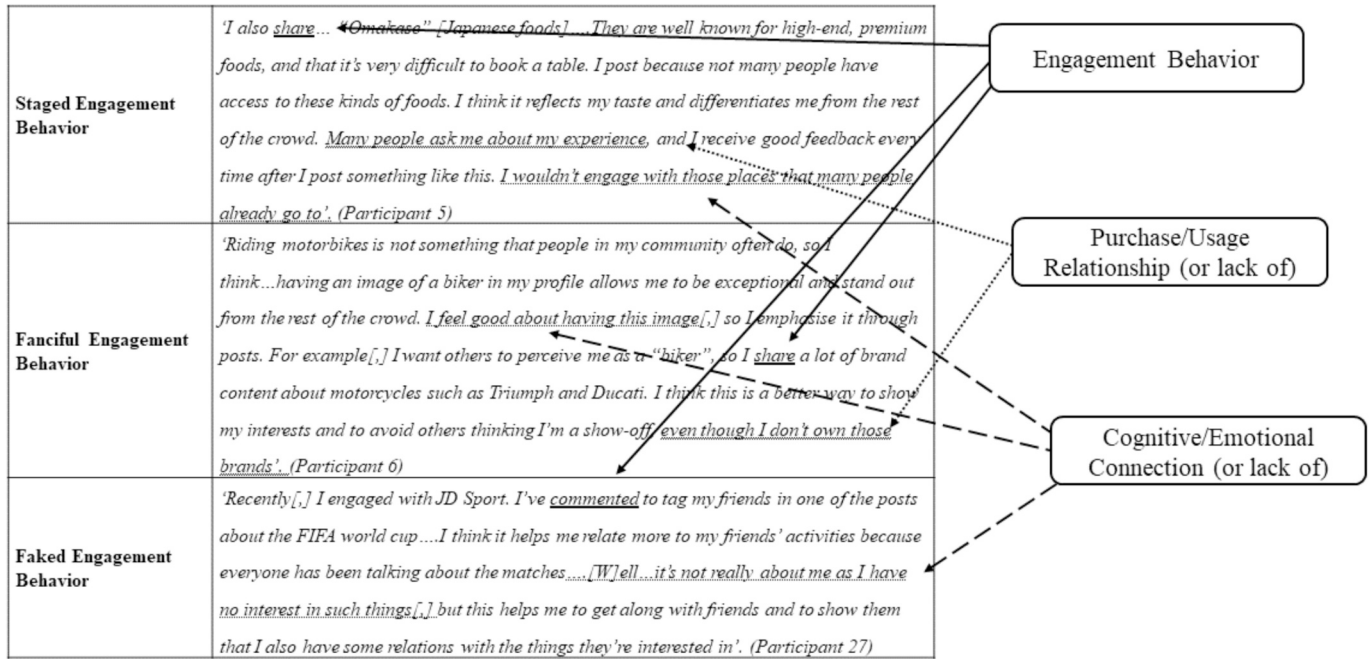
5. Can you tell me about your brand engagement activities on Facebook (i.e. like, comment, post, share)?
 - i) Do you think much about the brands you engage with?
 - ii) What is important to you when engaging with brands on Facebook?
 - iii) How do you engage?
6. How would you describe the relationship between you and those brands that you engage?
 - i) Which brands do you actually use their products?
 - ii) Can you think of brands that you never use/purchase?
7. We talked earlier about who you would like to be on Facebook, do you think it impacts the choice of brands you engage with?
 - i) How does this brand help to communicate ‘who you would like to be’ to others?
 - ii) What is the reaction/feedback you expect to get from your Facebook friends when you engage with a brand?
8. Can you tell me about your Facebook friends?
 - i) How well do you know them?
 - ii) How closely do you follow them?
9. What do you think about brand engagement activities of your Facebook friends?
 - i) Do you think those activities are genuine?
 - ii) How does it impact you?
 - iii) What make you think/feel this way?

***Repeat questions for more stories as many as interviewee is willing to share**.*

Phase 3: Closure

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
2. Thank you

Appendix B



Supplementary Fig. 1. Phase 1 interviews, Coding example.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Matthew Alexander is Professor of Service Research at Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde. His research interests are centred on Service Research and, in particular, on opportunities and challenges associated with an increasingly knowledgeable and proactive customer base. A principal focus is research on engagement, a concept capturing the blurring of boundaries between firms, customers and other external actors. He has published widely in a range of leading Marketing, Service and Tourism journals, is an Associate Editor for the Journal of Service Management and sits on the editorial boards of several prominent journals.

Elina Jaakkola is Professor of Marketing at Turku School of Economics, University of Turku, Finland. She specializes in service research and her current projects focus on topics such as customer experience and journeys, customer/actor engagement and circular economy. Her research has been published in the leading journals in marketing and service research. She is Associate Editor for Journal of Service Research and Industrial Marketing Management and serves in the Editorial Review Board of seven prominent journals. She has won a number of international awards for her scholarly activities and was named to the Clarivate's Highly Cited Researchers list in 2021 and 2022.

Dr Archareeporn Thanvarachorn is a PhD graduate from the University of Strathclyde now based in Thailand.

Anne Marie Doherty is Professor of Marketing at the University of Strathclyde and Vice-President of the Academy of Marketing. Her research focuses primarily on international marketing, with an emphasis on contemporary and historical perspectives on international retail marketing, fashion marketing and the internationalization of the firm. Her recent work focuses on market system dynamics, branding and sustainable market practices.