

## Brand-Event-Self Integration: An Emerging Theory for Social Media Hashtag Campaigns

John A. McArthur and Erin Hunt

*Through a grounded theory analysis of Chick-Fil-A's #cowappreciationday hashtag campaign on Instagram, this study evaluates the role of social consumers in extending brand messaging and affinity. Using a grounded theory analysis of Instagram posts, this study articulates emerging themes in user-generated messages which function as categories of social participation in the campaign. The relationships between these themes results in a conceptual framework for user participation in brand messaging that could be applied to further research on hashtag campaigns that utilize visual marketing strategies on image-based social media platforms. Based on this data, the emerging theory of brand-event-self integration is articulated for researchers and practitioners to enhance our collective understanding of strategic communication practice surrounding date-specific, event-oriented hashtag campaigns.*

**Keywords:** *Strategic communication, hashtag campaigns, brand strategy, social participation, grounded theory*

Event-specific hashtag campaigns have become a viable technique for developing and measuring consumer engagement with brand messages across a variety of social networks. These campaigns are often developed by brand managers in hopes that they will dynamically increase the reach of an event through an influx of user-generated content. However, brand managers try a variety of strategies to harness this engagement through an action-oriented, applied approach – the “let’s see what works” model of strategic communication. This study seeks to advance the study of hashtag campaigns by exploring a popular campaign-based, date-specific hashtag campaign. By examining an established, one-day hashtag event, this study can focus on the data present in user-generated content in a time-bounded environment to explore commonalities in the data that contribute to the success of hashtag campaigns.

By 2017, *Forbes Magazine* called Instagram the “top social media platform for customer engagement” (DeMers, 2017, para. 2) arguing that Instagram’s rapid growth, the particularly compelling nature of visual imagery, and the number of marketing accounts flocking to the site create a vibrant social media conversation. As a social networking site, Instagram privileges visual messaging with accompanying captions as the centerpiece of user-generated content sharing. Owned by Facebook, Instagram crossed the threshold of 800 million users in 2017, boasting over 500 million daily users on the site (Etherington, 2017). And by 2021, Instagram surpassed 2 billion monthly active users and was the most downloaded application in the fourth quarter of 2021, suggesting potential for future growth (Chen, 2022).

Strategic communicators attempting to target these massive audiences are using all sorts of strategies to create consumer engagement. Chick-Fil-A’s successful #cowappreciationday

---

Erin M. Hunt (MA) completed her Master of Arts degree in Communication at Queens University of Charlotte. John A. McArthur (Ph.D., Clemson University) is professor and chair in the Department of Communication Studies at Furman University. Previous versions of this research were presented at the annual convention of the National Communication Association. Readers can find both authors on Instagram and direct correspondence to: Dr. J.A. McArthur, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, SC, 29613, john.mcarthur@furman.edu

campaign is one microcosm in which researchers can study consumer-business interactions and social networks on Instagram. This study articulates an emerging theory – a theory of brand-event-self integration – that arose from the volumes of data available during the event-based, time-specific hashtag event. Through a grounded theory approach, this study used data available in the extant texts of the hashtag campaign to articulate a theory of consumer engagement that can be applied, employed, and tested across brands.

#### Social Media Engagement and Instagram

In strategic communication practice, branding and marketing have, in large part, been the responsibility and duty of the company. Marketing materials distributed to the public were for consumption only. However, with the introduction of social media, consumers became active users and creators of brand information rather than passive recipients (see Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015; Campbell, Anitsal, & Anitsal, 2013). The volume of users active on social media accounts and the internet is one motivating factor for companies to engage in social media marketing (Carim & Warwick, 2013), and provides the opportunity for strategic communicators to invest in paid, owned, and earned media approaches through social media marketing (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Moreover, as Ellison and Boyd's (2013) suggests, social networking sites offer users platforms in which they:

- 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site. (p. 158)

These characteristics of identification, articulation, and interaction speak directly to the development of user-generated content and its use as a tool for spreading messages among social circles. This concept, when harnessed by organizations for marketing purposes, creates new opportunities for transactional experiences online.

In their 2015 study, Chanthinok, Ussahawanitichakit, and Jhundra-indra drew specifically on the research and definitions from Barker, et.al. (2013) and Evans (2010) to define of social media marketing as “the scope of marketing activity, sales, public relations and customer service through social networking, online communities, or any online collaborative media to gain superior performance achievement” (p. 38). For the purposes of this study, an addendum to this definition from Weinberg (2009) adds nuance to this definition: “...and tap into a much larger community that may not have been available via traditional channels” (p. 3). These communities, made accessible by social media, develop their own rules, regulations, norms, and patterns of communication (see McArthur, 2009; Roschke, 2014; McArthur & White, 2016)

In 2011, 93% of companies reported that they were utilizing social media in their marketing strategy (Stelzner, 2011), and the three most commonly used social media sites for marketing were Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. However, with the introduction of Instagram in 2010 and its quick growth to over one million users within two months, it positioned itself to be the next tool for marketing managers to utilize. Linaschke (2011) pointed to the versatility of Instagram's content sharing features which allows users to share Instagram posts across multiple platforms. This allowed for increased exposure and flexible usability, which would increase user engagement and visibility at no additional cost of time or resources.

Instagram employs connective features to create intersections between posts including hashtags, mentions, geo-location tagging, likes, and follows. Of particular interest to this study is the hashtag function. Interestingly, at the end of 2017, Instagram expanded the hashtag function by allowing users to follow hashtag conversations in addition to following individual users (see Instagram, 2017). Instagram sets a limit of thirty tags that a user can add to each post, and users employ hashtags as descriptors of the image and the artifacts in it as well as “searchable signatures” that describe the user or characteristics of the context not displayed in the image itself.

Research conducted on Instagram or hashtags has articulated some patterns in their use. Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014) examined Instagram to understand the characteristics surrounding the photos shared on Instagram, as well as to understand whether the content of photos shared related in any way to Instagram users. After using a grounded theory approach to code data, results showed that Instagram photos typically fall into one of eight categories: self-portraits, friends, activities, captioned photos (pictures with embedded text), food, gadgets, fashion, and pets (p. 597). Knapp and Baum (2015) explained that the hashtag can be an effective tool in branding a company, targeting a specific audience, and monitoring a social media campaign's activity. By using hashtags within a company's social media marketing that either contain the company's name or the services it provides, users who search those hashtags will come across that company more often than if they were to have to just searched the company name. As McArthur and White (2016) illustrate, hashtags make social interactions visible, facilitate information exchange in real time, and develop patterns of shared meaning in digital communities. These three functions allow communities and affinity groups to form, coalesce, and serve as objects of study.

Date-specific uses of hashtags create unique opportunities for time-based connections. For example, crisis-specific hashtags are used to communicate important, real-time information during a crisis (Knapp & Baum, 2015). In 2011, state and local authorities, as well as Queensland citizens, shared important and real-time information via Twitter during the Southeast Queensland flood crisis (Bruns, Burgess, Crawford, & Shaw, 2012). During the 2013 Westgate Mall terror attack in Kenya, government officials, emergency personnel, and the public used Twitter to communicate via four different categories of hashtags, all relating to the event (Simon, Goldberg, Aharonson-Daniel, Leykin, & Adini, 2014). Like crisis-related hashtags, general event-related hashtags have also become popular on social media. For example, Blaszk, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, and Walsh (2012), studied the 2011 #worldseries to examine who was using the hashtag and how it was being used. Similarly, real-time social media tracking company, Key Hole, ran metrics for the hashtags related to Super Bowl 50 in 2016; keeping real-time updates throughout the game for posting statistics on game and advertisement related hashtags, and allowing those companies to monitor the impact of television advertisements during the Super Bowl (Lugmayr, 2016).

One of the biggest impacts of social media on strategic communication is the introduction of earned media based on user-generated information, namely, the ability for consumers to generate and share their own branded content via their own various social media platforms. Tuten and Solomon (2017) suggest that social consumers are engaged in the process of buying and reviewing, selling and rating products on the social web. User-generated brand messaging becomes, therefore, a goal for strategic communicators to aim for, and a conundrum for them to achieve.

Marketing strategies primarily driven by content-creation have proven to be more successful than others in the strategic communication sector, particularly in the genre of crowdsourcing. According to Zolkepli, Hasno, and Muhkiar (2015), "crowdsourced content encourages participation from the general market; including the brand loyalist and non-loyalist to deliver inclusive, strong, interesting and genuine content" (p. 283). In 2011, Coca-Cola shifted their marketing strategy to utilize crowdsourcing when they encouraged their consumers to tell their own brand stories through their personal experiences or those of people they know. Similarly, Lego Inc. utilized the crowdsourcing strategy by allowing their consumers to design their own Lego models and upload them to the website. The company rewarded their consumers' input by producing the designs and making them available for delivery (Zolkepli, Hasno, & Muhkiar, 2015). Furthermore, consumer-generated content can help develop online communities that create conversations and dialogue around a marketing campaign which creates more visibility as every time that content is shared (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). In one of the largest crowdsourcing fundraisers on record, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge raised more than 100 million dollars in 2014 and created an exemplar for social media campaigns (McArthur, 2015).

Given this emerging medium of hashtag campaigns and the popularity of Instagram for marketing and branding activities, the present study examines one social media hashtag campaign

to uncover the characteristics of user-generated messaging in brand strategy. This study utilizes grounded theory to ask the following two research questions: (1) What themes, if any, are present in the #cowappreciationday campaign on Instagram? And, (2) if themes arise, how might they articulate strategies for timed, date-specific, user-generated interactions through hashtag campaigns?

#### Method

Grounded theory was used to analyze Instagram posts from the #cowappreciationday campaign. As a method, grounded theory can be used to assess what is happening when new practical situations are being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to develop a set of themes which allow a theory to emerge from the data. To create a data set, the program Picodash was used to collect all public posts on Instagram that used the hashtag #cowappreciationday posted during the annual event on July 12, 2016. Collected data included over 13,000 public Instagram posts. Researchers formed the research sample for this study using a stratified random sample, identifying every 30<sup>th</sup> post to create a sample of just over 400 posts for analysis. Screenshots of each image with its accompanying captions and comments along with the hyperlink to the original post were captured before beginning the grounded theory coding process.

The posts included in the data set were analyzed as units in that each image along with its accompanying caption, comments, location tags, and hashtags were examined together, rather than breaking each post into its component parts. As noted by Highfield and Leaver (2014) and Laestadius (2017), analysis of each complete post as a unit is a critical step in the study of Instagram data.

Coding occurred in three phases – open, axial, and selective coding – based on Charmaz’s (2006) approach for analysis of extant texts using grounded theory. The open coding process involved assessing each individual post, one at a time, and making notes of relevant concepts (e.g. the content of the image, setting, pictured individuals and artifacts, the words/ideas present in the caption, comments, location tags, hashtags). Once the first round of open coding was completed for all the Instagram posts, the process was repeated; this continued until there were no new observations to be made. Once the open coding process was completed, all notes arranged in random order to begin the axial coding process. Notes were studied and arranged into relevant groups, defining and refining the notes as needed, and broad themes gradually began to emerge.

When all notes were organized into broader themes, researchers looked for supporting evidence from the original data to provide context to the ideas present in the themes. This data was then analyzed to look for themes that could be combined or expanded. Some themes were reassessed if there was a lack of relevant evidence to support the theme. A first round of selective coding produced several specific themes from the data. At this point, the selective coding process was paused and another round of axial coding took place to check for any then-relevant observations that could fit into the uncovered themes that may have not been noticed before. In the second phase of axial coding, the data was analyzed with the previously discovered themes in mind. This phase of axial coding continued until no new connections were made, and the final round of coding began. The last round of coding was a continuation of the selective coding process. Markey et al. (2014) called this process “theoretical coding” where the researcher “weav[es] the data back together again” (p. 20). The themes and their supporting evidence were honed and strengthened until theoretical saturation was reached and a final number of themes emerged, which are all strongly supported with evidence from the data. A negative case analysis was performed to ensure that all data in the sample fit into the emerging themes. These themes were then used to devise a theory from the data relating to how Chick-fil-A consumers and the Chick-fil-A brand interacted on Instagram through the date-specific #cowappreciationday hashtag campaign.

## Results

The data in this study revealed six themes, and four sub-themes: (1) attitude polarization (including sub themes “brand affinity” and “brand opposition”), (2) self and family traditions (3) hashtag hijacking, (4) business-consumer interaction, (5) user-product messaging, and (6) event engagement (including sub themes “person-event connections” and “person-brand-event connections”).

### Theme 1: Attitude Polarization

The category *attitude polarization* refers to the broad spectrum of users’ personal views concerning the Chick-fil-A brand. Posts in this theme typically either depict the user’s strong affinity for the brand through praise and gratitude towards the company (subtheme 1.1), or they depict strong opposition towards the company or through negative hashtags or angry rants (subtheme 1.2). In this sample, the brand affinity posts in subtheme 1.1 outnumbered the posts in subtheme 1.2, in which consumers expressed strong animosity towards the brand. Nationally, Chick-fil-A is a polarizing brand, and both the positive and negative aspects of that polarization are presented in this them, together as two sub-themes.

Subtheme 1.1: Brand Affinity. Posts in *brand affinity* sub-category demonstrated displays of strong affinity for the Chick-fil-A brand. The photo or the caption expresses gratitude, excitement, or love of Chick-fil-A. One post in this category depicts four children dressed in cow shirts standing around a cardboard cutout of a Chick-fil-A cow holding an “Eat Mor Chikin” sign. The caption reads, “Chick-fil-A is amazing! I fall in love with them even more every time we eat there! Awesome staff! Awesome food! Awesome in everything they stand for! #cowappreciationday @chickfila.” This representative post expresses value in and appreciation for the Chick-Fil-A brand. While many of the posts that would fall into this category are not as explicit in professing love for the Chick-fil-A brand, a sense of brand affinity is the common thread that tie posts in this subcategory together.

Subtheme 1.2: Brand Opposition. Posts in the *brand opposition* sub-category include posts from those users who display disagreement with or animosity toward the Chick-fil-A brand in their posts. This disagreement is shown through the use of negative hashtags in the caption, angry comments in the thread, or by depicting animosity in the photo/video portion of the post. In this specific data set, the most prominent reason for opposing the Chick-fil-A brand was to promote a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. In one video, a contributor recounts her experience when the police were called because she was protesting the event at a local store. The video is captioned with the hashtags: “Chick-fil-A #cowappreciationday #fingerlickinggood #vegan #vegansofig #chickfila #eatmorchikin #meatismurder #eatnoanimals #cops. A second post uses the image of three Chick-fil-A cows holding signs, changing Eat Mor Chikin to Eat Mor Veggies. The caption reads: “#cowappreciationday – cows are your friend, not your food. Share if you <3 animals!” followed by a series of hashtags including #eatingmeatismurderingaanimal (sic) and #nomeat. Both of these posts depict animosity towards either Chick-fil-A or the Cow Appreciation Day event by using hashtags such as #meatismurder and #youdontneedmeattosurvive. Other negative posts that fall into this theme included posts which implied that dressing up like a cow was immature, as well as posts promoting other fast food restaurants in their posts, such as Chipotle and Five Guys.

### Theme 2: Self and Family Traditions

The category *self and family traditions* signifies that participation in the annual celebration is a recurring tradition for individuals and families. Posts in this category depict families celebrating Cow Appreciation Day together or those that imply that Cow Appreciation Day is a tradition. Often, users included statements in the caption describing how many years the user and their family celebrated Cow Appreciation Day or depicting images of children participating across multiple years. As an example, one post in this category, depicts a collage of four images that include a baby dressed for cow appreciation day. The baby in the images is one year older in each of the first three images (several months in the first, a year in the second, and two years in the third and fourth

images). The caption reads “Three years of celebrating cow appreciation... #cowappreciationday #familyfun.” The notion of tradition is reflected in both picture and caption. Other posts in this category depict individuals and families celebrating Cow Appreciation Day in the photos and mention Cow Appreciation Day being an annual tradition in the captions.

### Theme 3: Hashtag Hijacking

*Hashtag hijacking* refers to the act of using a hashtag in a context other than its intended purpose. In this case, Chick-fil-A launched the event and hashtag as a brand promotion several years prior. Therefore, this theme is comprised of posts in which users used #cowappreciationday, but not in connection to the Chick-fil-A sponsored event. The content of these posts was mostly related to real cows and often dairy farming or show cows. For example, one post in the category depicts a man petting a cow while the cow grazes in a field. The caption reads “These guys deserve way more respect than we give them. I ♥ :: #cowappreciationday.” A second post in this category shows an image of a herd of cows with the caption: “#cowappreciationday, how did I celebrate? I made the 200 mile round trip to see my lady friends one last time before I leave Virginia! [cow emoji]” Like the other posts in this category, these two posts make no direct mention of the Chick-fil-A company or make any connection between Cow Appreciation Day and Chick-fil-A. Instead, these authors used the hashtag to describe and discuss their love for bovines in the field. The posts in this theme represent the power that consumers have to shape, alter, and reframe a hashtag’s intended purpose and context.

### Theme 4: Business-Consumer Interaction

The category *business-consumer interaction* refers to posts through which consumers interacted directly with local or regional official Chick-fil-A accounts. Posts making up this theme were typically either (1) originally posted by a Chick-fil-A restaurant’s individual Instagram account and then commented on by consumers, or (2) original posts by consumers in which an exchange of comments between an individual restaurant account and consumers took place.

As an example of a consumer-led interaction, one post in this category shows an image of a family of four dressed as cows with the caption “Couple of cows just trying to have some chicken for dinner @cfafairviewheights #cowappreciationday #eatmorechickin #freedinner.” The tagged restaurant’s Instagram account replied: “You & your family look absolutely darling! Thank you so much for joining us today! ☺” Another post in this category shows a mom with three children, all dressed as cows with the caption: “Oh what we’ll do for free Chick-fil-A ☺ #thankyou #chickfila #eatmorchikin #dresslikeacowday #cowappreciationday.” In addition, this user tagged the Chick-fil-A at Fashion Fair in her post. @cfafashionfair replied, asking if the account could repost the image; a request approved by the original author. In both of these examples, posts authored by Chick-fil-A consumers led to an interchange in the comments between the author and an account owned by an individual Chick-fil-A restaurant. In both cases, consumers used built in tagging functions in Instagram to interact with Chick-fil-A business accounts.

Conversely, as an example of a business-led interaction, @cfasevencorners posted an image of its standing-room-only dining room and a line wrapping through its parking lot with the caption: Thank you to all the cows who came to see us today! We loved serving you! (cow emoji) #cowappreciationday #chickfila.” The resulting comments included several back-and-forth business-to-consumer conversations. One commenter wrote, “that’s a lot of people,” to which @cfasevencorners replied, “we were really busy, but we had fun!!” Similarly, @cfanorthlakeparkway posted a compilation video depicting the fun and excitement people experienced when participating in the event at that location. The creator added music and had a mix of videos of customers and employees, both enjoying the day and smiling while eating Chick-fil-A food with the caption: “Thanks for coming to the party today! Your costumes were spot on (cow emoji) #cowappreciationday #moo #cfanorthlakeparkway #chickfila.” The resulting conversations between consumers and the local franchise were many. In all four of these examples, the conversation between business and consumer accounts revealed a key use of Instagram to promote local, site-specific, social media interactions.

### Theme 5: User-Product Messaging

*User-product messaging* refers to posts which include brand messaging of either the company or the free-food promotion. In these posts, users either explain the rules of the event, talk about the benefits of participation, or give any other details that may have also been included in company-generated marketing content. This theme is important to note when looking at the effect of consumer generated social media marketing because it goes beyond consumers passively promoting the event and moves towards active promotion and earned media for the brand. These posts include some of the same information that the company would pay to have advertised. For example, one user provided a visual representation of the food a costumed participant could receive at Chick-fil-A -- a Chick-fil-A sandwich beautifully staged with bright red tomato and leafy green lettuce. This image was a production-quality food shot with an isolated subject and blurred background accompanied by the caption: "What would you do for free food? #cowappreciationday #eatmorchikin." Other posts in this category used comments and captions to explain the rules of the event (or the fact that the 2016 rules differed from those of 2015). These representative posts suggest that the large volume of posts in this category functioned as user-generated versions of promotional materials, furthering the reach of Chick-fil-A's brand marketing.

### Theme 6: Event Engagement

*Event Engagement* refers to a variety of posts in which users visually documented their participation in the Cow Appreciation Day event. While the broad theme reflects user engagement, a distinction was noted is between those posts that expressed an overt connection with the Chick-fil-A brand, and those posts which depicted participation in the event without drawing attention to its connection to Chick-fil-A as a brand. The distinction between these two subthemes is important when considering the concept of self-identification involved with sharing a post on social media. The posts in subtheme 6.1 (self-event connections) depicted people identifying with the Cow Appreciation Day event without offering a connection to the Chick-Fil-A brand, whereas the posts in subtheme 6.2 (self-event-brand connection) depicted people as connected to both the Cow Appreciation Day event and the Chick-fil-A brand.

Subtheme 6.1: Person-Event Connections. Posts in the *person-event connections* category display participation in the Cow Appreciation Day event, but do not make a connection to Chick-fil-A or the Chick-fil-A brand in either the image, caption, or location tag. Rather, these posts typically included participants and their costumes. In one example, an image depicted a dashboard selfie of three women with sunglasses and cow masks, meaning that the image was taken inside a vehicle. The caption reads: "So this happened... #thingswedoforfood #freefood #cowappreciationday #notavegetarian." In this image, the act of participation in the event was depicted without a visual or written mention of Chick-fil-A. Likewise, a second post in this subcategory featured two women in black-and-white spotted dresses and ears posing next to the staircase of a home. It included the caption: "if you're a cow...I'm a cow (cow emoji) #freefood #cowappreciationday." Both of Instagram photos serve as exemplars of this category in which users actively promote their participation in Cow Appreciation Day without connecting the event to the Chick-Fil-A brand.

Subtheme 6.2: Self-Event-Brand Engagement. The category *self-event-brand engagement* refers to posts depicting user engagement in the Cow Appreciation Day Event combined with a visual, written, or locative connection to the Chick-fil-A brand. This connection was frequently demonstrated through the use of the Chick-fil-A brand name visually or in the comments; employing Chick-fil-A brand marks as visual cues in the image; or setting the image in a location that is recognizable as a Chick-fil-A restaurant. The critical point to this theme is that the Instagram user's connection to the Chick-fil-A brand is a self-selected component of their participation in in the Cow Appreciation Day event. In one example, a post features a couple dressed as cows holding a Chick-fil-A bag and Styrofoam cup and uses the outdoor Chick-fil-A road sign as a backdrop for their image. The post was captioned: "Free chicken if you're not too chicken to dress up! (cow emoji) #cowappreciationday." Featuring a Chick-Fil-A road sign, building exterior, or other lit

outdoor lighted sign was commonly seen in these types of posts. A second variety of posts in this subtheme employed interior shots with Chick-fil-A landmarks to connect the user, the brand, and the event. One post visually depicts two ladies dressed in cow shirts and ears standing in a Chick-fil-A restaurant holding sandwiches. In addition, their caption includes a brand reference: “Chick-fil-a is udderly amazing (and its more amazing when it’s free) #cowappreciationday.” Other posts in this category used the landmark as a component of the image, or further strengthened connection to the Chick-fil-A brand by self-describing as “longtime customers” or geo-tagging the specific Chick-fil-A location. Posts in this category depict the use of the brand name, brand marks, and/or settings as components of self-focused images of participation in the Cow Appreciation Day event and reveal strong affinity for the company and brand.

### Discussion: Illustrating an Emerging Theory

In the results, the categories articulated in the data speak to three major content topic areas that users chose to include in their Instagram posts: (1) information about the brand, (2) information about the event, and (3) information about the individual user. Furthermore, these three topics are posted in a variety of combinations: involvement in only one of the three areas, connections between two of the three areas, and integration of all three areas.

First, some posts focused on involvement in a single content topic area (either brand or event or self) without connection to the other two. For example, in the category labeled *attitude polarization*, posts only contained information about the brand, demonstrating **brand-focused involvement** in the campaign. These posts offered value statements (positive or negative) about Chick-Fil-A as a brand but did not comment on the user or the event. Similarly, in the category labeled *self and family traditions*, posts only contained information about the self, or **self-focused involvement** in the campaign. These posts had offered no information about the brand or the event, but rather focused on the user. Likewise, in the category labeled *hashtag hijacking*, posts only contained information about the event, or **event-focused involvement** in the campaign. The posts in this category were particularly interesting as they bore no relationship to Chick-Fil-A’s use of #cowappreciationday. Instead, they often assumed that cow appreciation day was a national holiday in which cows are widely celebrated (this is not the case as #cowappreciationday was a creation of Chick-Fil-A). These three categories each suggest that some posts in the #cowappreciationday hashtag campaign were limited to involvement with only one content area out of the three commonly found in posts; they were either brand-focused or self-focused or event-focused and did not connect to the other two content areas present in the data.

Second, some posts combined two major content topic areas, creating a connection between the two without noting the third. For example, in the category labeled *business-consumer interactions*, posts contained information about the brand and information about the individual user, but not about the event. These posts featured a **brand-self connection**, which might be highly valuable to the organization, could have occurred between the brand and user on any given day even though the event may have made them more likely to occur on this day versus another. Remember that these posts included direct communication between the Chick-Fil-A brand owner and customers. These posts represent the typical type of earned media a strategic communicator might seek on a daily basis, either business-to-consumer or consumer-to-business. Similarly, in the category labeled *user-product messaging*, posts contained information about the event and information about the brand, but not information about the user. These posts showcased a **brand-event connection**, describing the product or the company in relation to the event without any mention or depiction of the user as a participant or consumer. These posts function as event-inspired user-generated product messaging for the organization. Likewise, in the category labeled *person-event connections*, posts contained information about the individual user and information about the event, but not about the brand. These posts depicted a **self-event connection** by adding personal



stories to the event through earned media and serving the purpose of raising the profile of the event in user networks even though they refrained from mentioning Chick-Fil-A.

Finally, some posts integrated all three content areas into a single post. In the results, posts combining all three content areas formed the category titled *person-brand-event connection*. In the emerging theory, these posts demonstrate true **brand-event-self integration** by connecting information about the user with information about the brand and information about the event. For event-related hashtag marketing campaigns, these types of posts would become the most valuable form of earned media as they are timely, user-generated, event-related, and favorable for the brand.

Thus, an emerging theory of Brand-Event-Self Integration for hashtag campaigns incorporates these seven types of posts (event-focused involvement, self-focused involvement, brand-focused involvement, brand-self connection, event-self connection, brand-event connection, and brand-event-self integration) into a robust and testable theory that can be studied and applied to hashtag campaigns and other similar events (see figure 1).

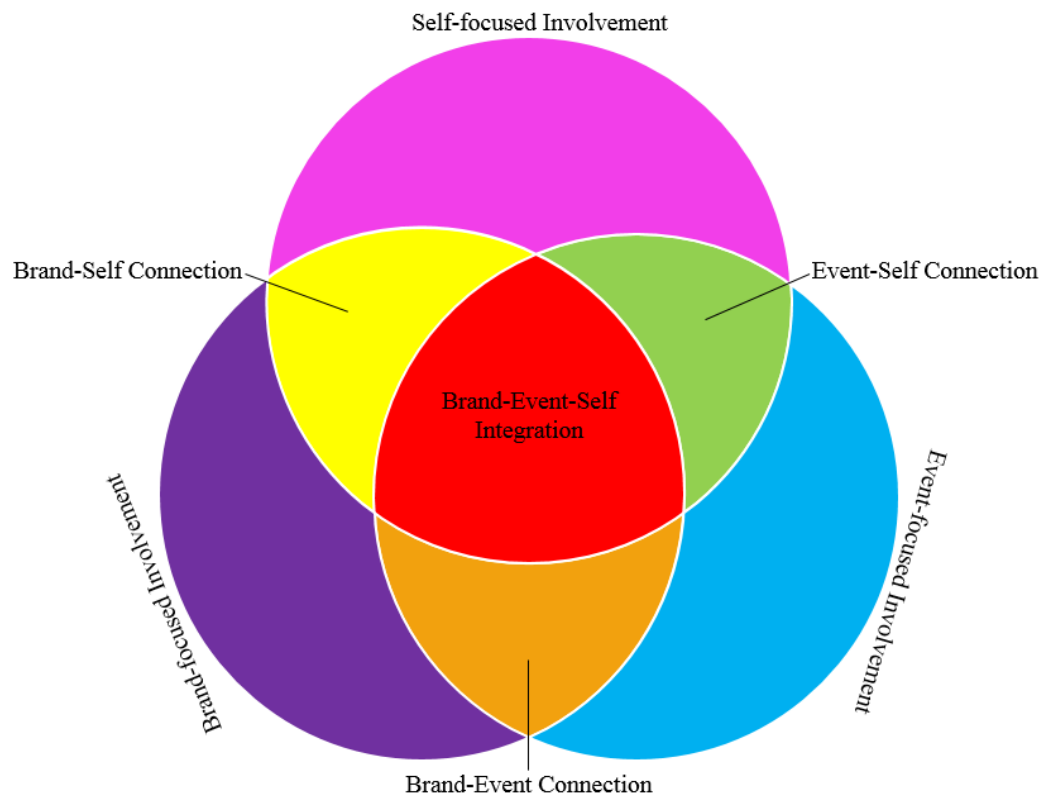


Figure 1: A Theory of Brand-Event-Self Integration

This emerging theory postulates that event-based hashtag campaigns should expect and encourage seven different types of user-generated posts on social media and social networking sites. These posts all feed into the hashtag event, as even the self-focused involvement and event-focused involvement posts can spread the hashtag campaign to unreached networks.

Looking back on Ellison and boyd's (2013) characterization of social networking sites, this theory injects the use of promotional materials into the experience of these sites. Users are no longer just interacting socially, but also (for better or worse) engaging with branded content and posting some of it on their own. Most major social networking sites to date have integrated promotional posts into the fabric of the user-experience, and this emerging theory explores the ways that user-generated content supports and facilitates this merger. In addition, this theory expands the notion of user-generated content in the literature on social media marketing, exploring it not only as a

targeted marketing technique, but also as a personally-motivated articulation of both sociality and brand affinity.

To test this theory, future research could conduct content analyses of event-related hashtag campaigns to assess if and how these seven categories operate for other similar campaigns. This coding and reporting could employ a typical quantitative analysis using large data sets or be assessed in case study format. In addition, strategic communicators can use the information in this theory to create successful hashtag campaigns for companies, non-profits, causes, or individuals on Instagram and other social media platforms.

In sum, this theory articulates a new, innovative, and data-driven approach to visual brand strategy on Instagram. While this data set is limited by its focus on one event for one brand, that same limitation allows similar campaigns to learn from, test, and employ the theory generated in this study. Instagram continues to become an increasingly useful tool for strategic communicators. Along with other theories generated from successful application of grounded theory to extant texts on social media, this theory has the potential to drive forward the conversation of theoretically-grounded uses of social media as strategic communication tools. Social media continues to serve as a dynamic and vibrant outlet for businesses, consumers, strategic communicators, and all of us alike to share our stories with the world. When research can uncover prospective and testable theories from social media data, the practice and understanding social media as a communicative tool can only increase. The theory of Brand-Event-Self Integration offered herein is one first step in the research to engage strategic communication practice visual medium of Instagram.

## References

- Barker, M., Barker, D.I., Bormann, N.F., & Neher, K.E. (2013). *Social media marketing: A strategic approach*. Mason, OH: South-Western, Cengage Learning.
- Blaszka, M., Burch, L. M., Frederick, E. L., Clavio, G., & Walsh, P. (2012). #WorldSeries: An empirical examination of a twitter hashtag during a major sporting event. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5(4), 435-453.
- Bruns, A., Burgess, J., Crawford, K., & Shaw, F. (2012). *#qldfloods and @QPSMedia: Crisis Communication on Twitter in the 2011 South East Queensland Floods*. Brisbane: ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.453.2259&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Campbell, S. R., Anitsal, I. & Anitsal, M. M. (2013). Social media's key success factors: an analysis of customer reactions. *Business Studies Journal*, 5(1), 43-57.
- Carim, L. & Warwick, C. (2013). Use of social media for corporate communications by research-funding organisations in the UK. *Public Relations Review*, 39(5), 521-525.
- Chanthinok, K., Ussahawanitichakit, P., & Jhundra-indra, P. (2015). Social media marketing strategy and marketing outcomes: A conceptual framework. *Allied Academies International Conference, Academy of Marketing Studies Proceedings*, 20(2), 35-52.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A practical guide through qualitative research*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Chen, J. (2022). Instagram statistics. Sprout Social. Retrieved from <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/instagram-stats/>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 4th ed. New York: Sage Publications.
- DeMers, J. (2017, March 28). Why Instagram is the top social media platform for engagement (and how to use it). *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2017/03/28/why-instagram-is-the-top-social-platform-for-engagement-and-how-to-use-it/#4ed9d84436bd>

- Ellison, N. B. & boyd, d. (2013). Sociality through social network sites. In W. H. Dutton's (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies* (pp. 151-172). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Etherington, D. (2017, Sept. 25). Instagram now has 800 million users and 500 million daily active users. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2017/09/25/instagram-now-has-800-million-monthly-and-500-million-daily-active-users/>
- Evans, D. (2010). *Social media marketing: The next generation of business engagement*. New York: Sybex, a Wiley Publication.
- Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2015). A methodology for mapping Instagram hashtags. *Frist Monday*, 20(1), Retrieved from <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5563/4195>
- Hu, Y., Manikonda, L., & Kambhampati, S. (2014, June). What we Instagram: A first analysis of Instagram photo content and user types. *Proceedings of the Eighth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 595-598.
- Instagram (2017, Dec. 12). *Now you can follow hashtags on Instagram* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://instagram-press.com/blog/2017/12/12/now-you-can-follow-hashtags-on-instagram/>
- Knapp, L., & Baum, N. (2015). Hashtags and how to use them on social media. *The Journal of Medical Practice Management: MPM*, 31(2), 131-133.
- Laestadus, L. (2017). Instagram. In L. Sloan and A. Quan-Haase (Eds.). *The Sage Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, Los Angeles: Sage, pp.573-592.
- Linashcke, J. (2011). *Getting the most from Instagram*. Berkeley: Peachpit Press.
- Lugmayr, L. (2016). The top trending super bowl 50 twitter hashtags. *I4U News*. Retrieved from <http://www.i4u.com/2016/02/104741/top-trending-super-bowl-50-twitter-hashtags>
- Markey, K., Tilki, M., & Taylor, G. (2014). Reflecting on the challenges of choosing and using a grounded theory approach. *Nurse Researcher (2014+)*, 22(2), 16-22.
- McArthur, J. A. (2009). Digital Subculture: A geek meaning of style. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 33(1), 58-70.
- McArthur, J. A. (2015). Altruism meets Participatory Video: A correlational study of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*, 3(1), 1-12.
- McArthur, J. A. & White, A. F. (2016). Twitter chats as third places. *Social Media + Society*, 3(2), pp. 1-9.
- Parent, M., Plangger, K., & Bal, A., (2011). The new WTP: willingness to participate. *Business Horizons*, 54, 219-229.
- Roschke, K. (Spring 2014). Passionate Affinity Spaces on Reddit.com: Learning Practices in the Gluten-free Subreddit. *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*. <http://www.jodml.org/2014/06/17/passionate-affinity-spaces-on-reddit-com-learningpractices-in-the-gluten-free-subreddit/>
- Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (2013). Searchable signatures: Context and the struggle for recognition. *Information Technology and Libraries (Online)*, 32(3), 5-19.
- Simon, T., Goldberg, A., Aharonson-Daniel, L., Leykin, D., & Adini, B. (2014). Twitter in the cross fire--the use of social media in the Westgate Mall terror attack in Kenya. *PLoS One*, 9(8).
- Stelzner, M. A. (2011). 2011 Social media marketing industry report. *Social Media Examiner*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/social-media-marketing-industry-report-2011/>
- Tuten, T.L., & Solomon, M.R. (2017). *Social Media Marketing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Sage Publications.
- Weinberg, T. (2009). *The new community rules: Marketing on the social web*. O'Reilly: California.
- Zolkepli, I.A. & Kamarulzaman, Y., (2015). Social media adoption: The role of media needs and innovation characteristics. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 43, 189-209.

Zolkepli, I. A., Hasno, H., & Mukhiar, S. N. S. (2015). Online social network citizen engagement on instagram crowdsourcing: A conceptual framework. *Electronic Journal of Knowledge Management*, 13(4), 283-291.