



Hi, I'm taking over this account! Leveraging social media takeovers in fostering consumer-brand relationships

Valeria Penttinen

Hanken School of Economics, Department of Marketing and CERS Centre for Relationship Marketing and Service Management, Arkadiankatu 22, 00100 Helsinki, Finland
Northern Illinois University, Department of Marketing, College of Business, Barsema Hall, 740 Garden Road, DeKalb, IL 60115, United States

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ABSTRACT

Brands' communications on owned media commonly are managed by social media marketing teams, although some brands have embraced a practice known as social media takeover, in which they temporarily delegate the responsibility for communications to selected employees or consumers. The current research aims to define the roles of two communication approaches (traditional and social media takeover) and two message types (transactional and relational) for developing consumer-brand relationships on owned media. The research results show that brand messages shared through social media takeovers (cf. traditional brand communications) have a stronger positive impact on parasocial interaction. Improved openness and social presence, as sensed by consumers, drive this effect. The outcomes further indicate that the impacts of social media takeover on social presence and, consequently, parasocial interaction, are particularly strong when consumers encounter transactional (cf. relational) messages. For managers, this research offers practical recommendations for leveraging brand communications with consumers on owned media.

1. Introduction

In crowded marketplaces, brands strive to take advantage of owned social media accounts to influence the perceptions and behaviors of followers—consumers who voluntarily subscribe to content shared by brands (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016). Brand messages targeting brand followers (rather than non-followers) are more likely to improve brand attitudes (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015; Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015), encourage positive electronic word of mouth (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016), enhance consumer loyalty (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Liadeli, Sotgiu, & Verlegh, 2022), and increase sales (Chang, Chou, Wu, & Wu, 2018; Zheng & Huang, 2022). For example, 85 % of consumers increase their spending on brands after they start following them on social media, 90 % buy products and services offered by brands they follow on social media, and 86 % choose such brands over competitors (Social, 2021). Hence, it is not surprising that brands continue to invest in improving their social media communication strategies on owned media to complement other media channels (Social, 2021; Colicev, Malshe, Pauwels, & O'Connor, 2018).

To take advantage of their owned social media accounts, brands can

leverage various types of messages in their communications, including *transactional messages*, which aim to increase awareness and sales, and *relational messages*, which aim to strengthen emotional bonds with consumers (e.g., Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, & Goodman, 2019; Tellis, MacInnis, Tirunillai, & Zhang, 2019). Whereas many brands rely fully on teams of marketing professionals to manage their diverse social media communications, others (e.g., Finnair, KLM) adopt a practice known as a *social media takeover*, for which brands invite selected employees and consumers (often social media influencers; Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022) to operate the brands' social media accounts temporarily. Although social media takeovers are particularly popular on Instagram (Sehl, 2019; Smith, 2022), brands also use them on other social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok (Nguyen, 2022).

Social media takeovers typically start with individuals invited to temporarily manage brands' accounts introducing themselves to brands' followers. Then, it continues with these individuals sharing diverse brand-related messages and interacting with audiences from their own (first-person) perspectives. That is, during social media takeovers, consumers (primarily brand followers) get to know the people behind the brand posts and replies, and this sort of personal contact differentiates social media takeovers from traditional (faceless) brand

E-mail address: valeria.penttinen@hanken.fi.

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communications on owned media (Men & Tsai, 2013).

Communications through owned social media accounts allow brands to foster intimate, albeit one-sided, connections with their current and potential consumers; such connection is known as *parasocial interaction* (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), a feeling that influences and shapes brand trust and consumer loyalty, strengthening long-term consumer-brand relationships (Labrecque, 2014; Yuan, Moon, Kim, & Wang, 2021). Brands commonly foster parasocial interaction through interactivity and openness in their social media communications (Labrecque, 2014; Kim, Yoo, & Doh, 2021). However, beyond the elements embedded in the scripts of brand messages, the factors influencing parasocial interaction are still uncertain. Furthermore, whether and how brands can use different types of communication approaches and brand messages to strengthen their consumer-brand relationships remains unclear.

In light of the ever-evolving ways in which brands can use their owned media to achieve diverse marketing goals and improve business performance (Appel, Grewal, Hadi, & Stephen, 2020; Li, Larimo, & Leonidou, 2021), there is a need to expand the current understanding of how brands can leverage their own social media accounts to foster relationships with consumers. This research aims to define the role of social media takeovers in influencing parasocial interaction with brands across two types of messages (transactional and relational) communicated on brands' owned media. In doing so, this research also aims to define the key factors underlining the impacts of diverse communication approaches (traditional and social media takeover) on consumer-brand connections. To achieve these objectives, this research relies on parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), social response theory (Reeves & Nass, 1996), and two studies that employ experiments with consumers who follow brands on social media. In addition to introducing the social media takeover concept to the social media marketing literature, this research offers three main theoretical contributions.

First, it provides novel insights into the role of communication approaches in driving parasocial interaction with brands (Kim et al., 2021; Men & Tsai, 2013). The combined outcomes of the two studies reveal that the choice of communication approach contributes to the development of parasocial interaction with brands—in addition to factors such as interactivity and openness communications cues embedded in the messages of brands (Labrecque, 2014; Penttinen, Ciuchita, & Caić, 2022). Second, this research proposes that perceived openness and social presence associated with brand communications function as mechanisms that explain the impacts of different communication approaches on the development of consumer-brand relationships on social media (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Lovett & Staelin, 2016). Third, this research contributes to the literature addressing the impacts of different types of brand messages on consumers' perceptions and behaviors (Eigenraam, Eelen, & Verlegh, 2021; Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar, & Van den Poel, 2019). In particular, it shows that while relational messages are generally associated with a higher social presence, social media takeover can significantly improve the perceived social presence of transactional brand messages.

For managers, this research provides practical recommendations for how to leverage communications in owned media contexts. Brands should consider implementing social media takeovers to strengthen relationships with their followers. But in so doing, they also must address several issues related to inviting selected individuals to manage their social media accounts, as detailed hereafter.

2. Research background

2.1. Fostering parasocial interaction with brands on social media

To explain the processes that underlie the development of relationships between brands and consumers in the context of owned social media, this research turns to parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956). According to this theory, consumers develop parasocial

interaction—special, albeit one-sided, connections characterized by connectedness, closeness, and intimacy—with various media personalities on social media, such as celebrities (Chung & Cho, 2017; Yuan et al., 2021), online influencers (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, & LaGroue, 2018; Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, & Luoma-aho, 2020), fellow consumers (Penttinen et al., 2022), and brands (Lee & Lee, 2017; Labrecque, 2014). Parasocial interaction then influences the degree to which consumers rely on information shared by media personalities; it also positively affects consumer responses, such as brand loyalty, attitudes, and purchase intentions (e.g., Lo et al., 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Tsiotsou, 2015).

Brands typically foster parasocial interaction with consumers on social media by leveraging interactivity and openness in their communications (Kim et al., 2021; Labrecque, 2014). *Interactivity* refers to the feeling associated with being engaged in two-sided conversations. Brands can improve interactivity of their communications by using a conversational style, asking questions, and replying to the comments of individual followers (Tsai & Men, 2017; Zhang, Zhang, Chang, Li, & Hou, 2022). *Openness* refers to the act of revealing information to target audiences (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Auter, 1992). Such information entails basic brand-related facts, including the year in which the brands were established and their country of origin, as well as lesser-known insights, such as how the brands contribute to solving diverse societal issues (Huaman-Ramirez, Lunardo, & Vasquez-Parraga, 2022; Labrecque, 2014).

Interactivity and openness in social media communications strongly affect the development of parasocial interaction, on their own (Chung & Cho, 2017; Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen, & Luoma-aho, 2019) or in combination (Labrecque, 2014; Penttinen et al., 2022). However, research shows that openness in brand communications plays a particularly important role in developing relationships because it allows consumers to get to know brands more personally and, consequently, to experience stronger feelings of intimacy and connection (Huaman-Ramirez et al., 2022; Perse & Rubin, 1989). This research further evaluates the role of openness in driving parasocial interactions by linking it to communication approaches brands can leverage on their owned media.

2.2. Social presence and social response theory

Consumers tend to experience particularly strong parasocial interaction with brands when they communicate directly with brand representatives (Labrecque, 2014; Lee & Lee, 2017). However, even though social media communications are highly interactive (Appel et al., 2020; Hudson et al., 2016), it is not always possible to provide one-to-one communications with all consumers interested in interacting with brands online. Against this drawback, scholars propose that in mediated environments, consumers are more likely to develop powerful connections with brands when they sense social presence (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019), that is, “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65).

Social response theory (Reeves & Nass, 1996) guides the understanding of social presence formation and impacts in the context of social media brand communications. According to this theory, when interacting with non-human media personalities exhibiting human behaviors (e.g., Miao, Kozlenkova, Wang, Xie, & Palmatier, 2022; Tsai, Liu, & Chuan, 2021), consumers are prone to apply the same social rules and practices as they do with humans (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Moon, 2003). This is due to the perceived feelings of “mindfulness” and “humanness” consumers unconsciously attach to these interactions (Nass & Moon, 2000; Wang, Baker, Wagner, & Wakefield, 2007). Brands typically leverage their social media accounts in similar ways as humans. For example, they post different types of content, use interactive functions in communications, and even engage with content shared by consumers, partners, and competitors (Thomas & Fowler, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Therefore, social response theory is well suited to explain consumer responses to the social media communications of brands.

Previous studies address consumers' experiences of social presence in interactions with artificial agents (Adam, Wessel, & Benlian, 2021; Pitardi & Marriott, 2021), websites (Cyr, Head, Larios, & Pan, 2009; Darke, Brady, Benedictus, & Wilson, 2016), celebrities, social media influencers, and regular consumers (Deng, Sun, Xu, & Ye, 2021; Jin et al., 2019; Kim & Song, 2016). These studies show that social presence improves with the adoption of anthropomorphic profile designs of artificial agents (Adam et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2021), the use of photos and videos featuring people on websites (Bleier, Harmeling, & Palmatier, 2019; Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015), and individuals' disclosures of personal information (Kim & Song, 2016; Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021). Taken together, these findings suggest social presence strengthens consumers' experience of human touch and affection (Hassanein & Head, 2007; Short et al., 1976). Accordingly, strong social presence improves intimacy and connectedness of communications (Bleier et al., 2019; Gefen & Straub, 2004). Such connectedness is further linked to the development of parasocial interaction with both human and non-human media personalities (Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021; Tsai et al., 2021).

2.3. Types of brand messages shared on social media

Social media platforms allow brands to take advantage of a wide range of different content types that can influence current and potential consumers. A review of the existing literature suggests brands' messages can be divided into several groups (e.g., Coelho, de Oliveira, & de Almeida, 2016; Liadeli et al., 2022), although a common categorization uses only two types of content involving transactional messages or relational messages (e.g., Dolan et al., 2019; Eigenraam et al., 2021). The current research adopts this categorization with the explicit recognition that along with this clear distinction, brands often use a mix of transactional and relational cues in their communications targeting consumers (Lou & Xie, 2021; Meire et al., 2019).

Generally, transactional messages include content that provides timely, relevant information that increases awareness and persuades the recipients to take action (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013; Tellis et al., 2019). Such information may include news about brands' offerings, current pricing, ongoing campaigns, or monetary incentives (Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021). Relational messages, on the other hand, aim to influence consumer brand attitudes and behaviors through emotional appeals (Dolan et al., 2019; Swani & Milne, 2017). Typical relational messages include information about the brand's values, history, employees, and community (Meire et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021).

Social media content focusing on transactional and relational messages influence consumer responses, such as engagement (Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2018; Rietveld, van Dolen, Mazloom, & Worring, 2020), brand evaluations (Kefi & Maar, 2020; Lou & Xie, 2021), and purchase behaviors (Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Liadeli et al., 2022). However, the impacts of brand messages on consumers also depend on factors that are external to the content of messages, such as the industries the brands represent (Lee et al., 2018; Swani & Milne, 2017), individual social media platforms (Coelho et al., 2016; Tellis et al., 2019), and consumers' existing brand-related perceptions and expectations (Eigenraam et al., 2021; Lou & Xie, 2021). For example, consumers interested in receiving emotional and experiential benefits are likely to respond more favorably to relational messages than consumers who tend to be interested in rational and instrumental benefits (Barcelos, Dantas, & Sénécal, 2018). The current research considers how two types of social media brand messages influence consumers, according to the distinct communication approaches used by brands.

3. Hypotheses development

This research aims to determine how brands can leverage different communication approaches to foster parasocial interaction with consumers on owned media across two message types. Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual model developed for this research, which draws on parasocial interaction theory, social response theory, and relevant literature on social media communications. Next, research hypotheses are formulated in accordance with the proposed conceptual model.

3.1. Effects on perceived openness of brand communications

Openness is an important part of communications in mediated environments that contribute to the development of interpersonal relationships between consumers and media personalities (Chung & Cho, 2017; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Generally, openness assumes revealing previously unknown information, including basic information, such as name and geographical location (Filiari, Raguseo, & Vitari, 2019; Munnukka et al., 2019), and more intimate information, such as feelings, memories, and secrets (Ferchaud et al., 2018; Penttinen et al., 2022). Referring to the social media communications of brands, Human-Ramirez et al. (2022) propose that openness can be characterized by sharing information that goes beyond what consumers typically gain from posts on brands' owned media and other sources. Such openness entails breaking away from the original role by revealing information that makes consumers feel stronger emotional connections (Auter, 1992) and lower levels of uncertainty (Chen & Lin, 2021; Labrecque, 2014).

Arguably, individuals responsible for sharing brand messages during social media takeovers contribute to building the representation of these brands (Torres, Augusto, & Matos, 2019; Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2020). Therefore, when consumers get to know brand representatives, even in limited ways, they passively acquire novel insights about brands too (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020; Sweeney, Payne, Frow, & Liu, 2020). Moreover, gaining information from the perspective of a particular individual, and not a team of social media professionals, presents an opportunity for seeing brands in a different light, which should contribute to increasing the perceived openness of brand communications (Human-Ramirez et al., 2022).

H1: Social media takeovers foster stronger perceived openness than traditional brand communications.

3.2. Effects on social presence

Social response theory (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Moon, 2003) proposes that consumers treat brands as social actors, suggesting the need for them to perceive there is a real person behind brands' social media accounts (Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021; Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018). Typically, communications on brands' social media offer no signal of the precise source (Men & Tsai, 2013). However, during social media takeovers, consumers get to know (to some extent) the individuals temporarily managing brands' social media accounts. Hence, in these unique interactions, consumers have clear ideas about the identities of the recipients of their engagement behaviors (e.g., likes, reposts, comments; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). In turn, such awareness should increase a sense of personal, sociable, warm human contact associated with brand communications (Bao & Wang, 2021; Kim & Song, 2016). In contrast, a lack of information about who receives consumer engagement behaviors may weaken a sense of social presence (Deng et al., 2021). Thus, this research proposes that social media takeover strengthens consumers' feeling of social presence.

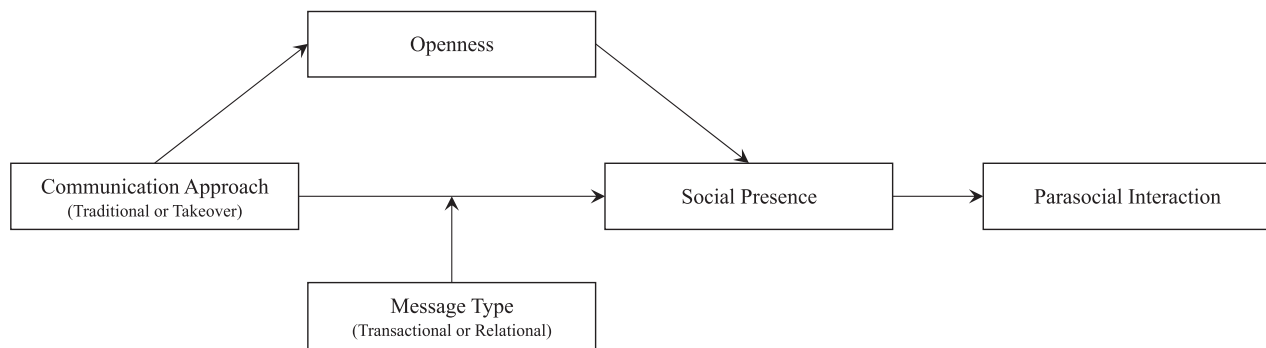


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

H2: Social media takeovers foster stronger perceived social presence than traditional brand communications.

3.3. Mediating roles of openness and social presence

According to parasocial interaction theory, brands can foster special connections with consumers through communications on social media (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Empirical studies on parasocial interaction (Labrecque, 2014; Zhang et al., 2022) demonstrate that brands can strengthen this special connection with consumers through openness in their communications. In particular, when consumers gain previously unknown information about brands, they develop stronger feelings of intimacy and connectedness, which underline consumer-brand relationships (Chen & Lin, 2021; Huaman-Ramirez et al., 2022). At the same time, because openness reflects social factors, it further contributes to improving the sense of social presence consumers experience in online communications (Kim & Song, 2016). Finally, emergent studies show that social presence contributes to the development of parasocial interaction (Bao & Wang, 2021; Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021). Therefore, openness and social presence can provide further explanations regarding the impacts of social media takeover on the development of consumer-brand relationships.

H3: Openness and social presence mediate the relationship between communication approaches and parasocial interaction.

3.4. Moderating role of message types

Brands can leverage their social media accounts to achieve diverse marketing goals (Li et al., 2021; Lovett & Staelin, 2016) by communicating transactional and relational messages. Both message types can influence consumer behaviors and foster consumer-brand relationships (Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Kefi & Maar, 2020). Transactional messages contain rational and factual information about products and services to create awareness and motivate consumers to take immediate action (Goh et al., 2013; Weiger, Hammerschmidt, & Wetzel, 2018). Relational messages, on the other hand, offer information about brands as media personalities (Dolan et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021) that help consumers form emotional benefits and experiences (Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Liadeli et al., 2022). Because emotion- and experience-related cues in communications are linked to human behaviors, consumers should generally sense a stronger feeling of social presence when they encounter relational messages than when they receive transactional

messages (Miao et al., 2022; Nass & Moon, 2000). Accordingly, the impact of social media takeover on social presence is likely to be affected by the type of the brand message communicated.

H4: Message type shared on brands' owned media moderates the impacts of communication approaches on social presence. Social media takeover (cf. the traditional approach) has stronger positive impacts on social presence for transactional (cf. relational) messages.

4. Empirical studies

Two experimental studies include consumers who follow brands on social media, specifically Instagram, for the purposes of this research. Instagram was chosen because of its prominence as a critical brand communications channel (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Needle, 2023), where social media takeovers are particularly popular. Study 1 addresses how the communication approaches of different types of brands (traditional and social media takeovers) influence the development of consumer-brand relationships (H1–H3). Then, Study 2 examines how the two types of messages (transactional or relational) shared on brands' owned media affect the relationships established in Study 1 (H4).

4.1. Study 1

4.1.1. Communication approaches pretest

The purpose of the communication approaches pretest was to ensure participants distinguished social media takeover from traditional brand communications. It also allowed testing whether there is a significant difference in how social media takeover variations (employee and consumer) influence parasocial interaction. This pretest featured a fictional gym brand, "ElixFit." To develop the experimental conditions, the author observed and documented social media takeovers of brands representing different industries (e.g., transportation, automotive, consumer goods, hospitality) on Instagram and Facebook.

Participants in the pretest were asked to imagine they had started following ElixFit on Instagram. They were then randomly exposed to Instagram stories posts (special social media content, visible by default for 24 h) with a brand message entailing a mix of transactional and relational cues. This message was shared through either (1) traditional brand communications or social media takeover performed by (2) an employee or (3) a consumer (see Appendix A for examples). Because research suggests that social presence and, consequently, parasocial interaction are likely to increase when brand content features people

(Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015), all the experimental conditions included photos of people. In addition, all conditions had interactive elements (e.g., inviting the audience to ask questions, see Appendix A), which are also typical in social media takeovers.

Before being exposed to the experimental conditions, all participants were asked several screening questions (e.g., “Do you follow brands on social media?” and “How often do you check Instagram updates?”). The survey also included several attention-check questions, which ensured the quality of the responses, in line with recommendations for online-based research (Aguinis, Villamor, & Ramani, 2021; Goodman & Pao-lacci, 2017). A total of 115 Amazon Mechanical Turk platform workers with at least a 95 % approval rate completed the survey. However, 25 respondents failed attention checks, meaning there were 90 usable responses (50 % in the 25 to 34-year-old age group, 59 % men, and 79 % with at least a bachelor's degree).

For the manipulation check, pretest participants rated two statements on a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”): “The person responsible for sharing Instagram posts introduced himself” as well as “I know exactly who the person sharing Instagram posts was.” The mean of the responses to these two statements served as a manipulation check. As expected, participants indicated a clear difference between communication approaches ($M_{\text{Traditional}} = 3.90$, $M_{\text{Takeover-Employee}} = 6.33$; $M_{\text{Takeover-Consumer}} = 6.19$; $F(1, 89) = 27.87$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.39$). The Tukey post-hoc test further showed that there is a significant difference between traditional brand communications and individual social media takeover conditions ($p < .01$), while indicating no significant difference between the two takeover conditions ($p = .92$). Therefore, the manipulation was successful.

To define whether there is a difference between social media takeovers performed by an employee and a consumer, ANOVA with an outcome variable parasocial interaction was performed. Parasocial interaction was chosen as the main outcome variable in the pretest because it reflects how consumers develop relationships with brands in the context of social media (Labrecque, 2014). The outcomes of the pretest reveal a significant difference in how communication approaches influence parasocial interaction with brands ($M_{\text{Traditional}} = 3.90$, $M_{\text{Takeover-Employee}} = 6.33$; $M_{\text{Takeover-Consumer}} = 6.19$; $F(1, 89) = 27.87$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.39$).

The Tukey post-hoc test also shows significant differences only between traditional brand communications and employee social media takeover as well as traditional brand communications and consumer social media takeover conditions ($p = .01$ and $p < .01$ respectively), and not between the two social media takeover conditions ($p = .86$). These outcomes suggest social media takeovers performed by employees and consumers have similar impacts on parasocial interaction experienced by consumers toward brands.

4.1.2. Experimental design and participants

The main experiment in Study 1 followed a procedure similar to the pretest. Participants in this study were introduced to the same ElixFit gym scenario and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which a brand message was shared through traditional brand communications or social media takeover performed by an employee. The condition with social media takeover performed by a consumer was not included because of the results of the pretest as well as the higher popularity of social media takeover with employees among brands. The survey in the experiment included the same screening and attention check questions as in the pretest.

The Prolific workers who qualified to participate had at least a 97 % approval rating, follow brands on social media, and are active on Instagram participated in the experiment. Among 117 completed

responses, three had to be removed because the respondents failed attention checks, resulting in 114 usable responses (74 % in the 25 to 44-year-old age group, 50 % men, and 75 % who completed at least some college).

4.1.3. Measures

All the measurement items used 7-point Likert scales (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”). The measures of openness adapt Chung and Cho (2017) and Labrecque's (2014) scales and consist of three items; the measures of social presence come from Gefen and Straub's (2004) five-item scale, and those for parasocial interaction adapt Labrecque's (2014) seven-item scale. Of the seven parasocial interaction items, two were removed due to low loadings. All the scales are reliable and valid, as shown in Appendix B. The participants were also asked about the main reasons why they follow brands on social media (multiple-choice question) to establish whether they are generally interested in developing relationships with brands or not.

4.1.4. Manipulation check

The experiment applied the manipulation used in the pretest. As expected, participants distinguished traditional brand communications from social media takeovers by indicating that they knew who was responsible for the brand communications ($M_{\text{Traditional}} = 1.96$, $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 5.83$; $F(1, 113) = 390.99$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.77$). The manipulation thus was successful.

4.1.5. Results

ANCOVA was used to test H1 and H2. The analyses included the following covariates: dummy variables of the communication approach (1 = traditional, 2 = takeover), gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age (1 = 18–34; 2 = 35–54), and an indicator of whether participants were interested in developing relationships with brands rather than only following them to receive news about products/services and deals (1 = no, 2 = yes). The outcomes indicate a significant impact of the communication approaches on perceived openness, $M_{\text{Traditional}} = 4.64$, and $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 5.07$ ($F(1, 113) = 11.34$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.09$), and social presence, $M_{\text{Traditional}} = 4.38$, and $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 5.36$ ($F(1, 113) = 26.55$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.20$). These outcomes offer support for both H1 and H2. Notably, the general interest of participants in developing relationships with brands has a significant impact on openness ($p = .03$). In particular, participants motivated to develop relationships with brands associate social media takeover with higher openness.

A further analysis, using Model 6 in the PROCESS macro (Version 3.5; Hayes, 2017), includes dummy variables for age, gender, and interest in developing relationships with brands on social media as covariates. The bootstrapping procedure (bias-corrected, 5,000 samples) confirms the significant sequential indirect effect of communication approaches on parasocial interaction via openness and social presence ($\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.06$, 95 % CI: 0.04, 0.27). The outcomes, therefore, confirm H3. Appendix C offers a graphical representation of the mediation analysis, with both direct and indirect effects.

4.2. Study 2

4.2.1. Message type pretest

The message type pretest aimed to establish whether consumers distinguish between transactional and relational types of communicated brand messages. Using a fictional airline brand, “Flynow,” two experimental conditions manipulated the two types of messages, such that the transactional message condition referred to Flynow's ongoing sale, whereas the relational message condition provided information about its

community. The pretest participants were 70 Prolific workers who follow brands on social media and are active on Instagram (57 % in the 25 to 44-year-old age group, 57 % men, and 88 % with at least some college). During the pretest, participants imagined they had recently started to follow Flynow airline on Instagram. Each participant randomly saw either transactional or relational messages shared through the traditional communication approach on Instagram. Finally, participants responded to a survey.

The items for the manipulation checks came from Tellis et al. (2019); on a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”), participants rated whether they perceived the message as focused on promotion (“Instagram posts include information about ongoing offers” and “Instagram posts employ advertising tone and call for action”) and whether it appealed to their feelings (“Instagram stories appeal to my emotions” and “Instagram stories made me think about the community around Flynow”). The analyses used the means of the two questions for each manipulation check. As expected, pretest participants distinguished the two types of messages: they appropriately perceived that the transactional message was focused on promotion ($M_{\text{Transactional}} = 5.56$, $M_{\text{Relational}} = 3.79$; $F(1, 69) = 26.94$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.28$) and that the relational message appealed to their emotions ($M_{\text{Transactional}} = 4.38$, $M_{\text{Relational}} = 5.37$; $F(1, 69) = 13.49$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.17$). Therefore, the manipulation was successful.

4.2.2. Experimental design and participants

During the main experiment, participants read the scenarios used in the pretest. The random assignment involved four experimental conditions that manipulated the communication approach (traditional or social media takeover) and message type (transactional or relational). Similar to the experiment in Study 1, the experiment in Study 2 only had conditions with social media takeover performed by an employee, and all of the conditions included pictures of people as well as interactive elements. After being randomly exposed to an assigned scenario, each experiment participant completed a survey that, in addition to the measurement items, included screening and attention check questions, as in Study 1.

The Prolific workers who qualified to participate had at least a 97 % approval rating, follow brands on social media, and are active on Instagram. A total of 216 participants completed the survey. Following the same procedure as in Study 1, responses from six participants were removed, leaving a sample of 210 participants (87 % in the 18–34-year-old age group, 50 % men, and 79 % with at least some college) for the analyses.

4.2.3. Measures

Study 2 employed the same measures for openness, social presence, parasocial interaction, and attitude to following brands on social media, as in Study 1. Two items were removed from the parasocial interaction scale due to low loading. All scales are reliable and valid, as shown in Appendix B.

4.2.4. Manipulation checks

The manipulation check for the communication approach was the same as that in Study 1; the checks for the message type were the same as those in the pretest. As expected, participants could distinguish between traditional brand communications and social media employee takeovers; they knew who was responsible for brand communications ($M_{\text{Traditional}} = 1.74$, $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 5.48$; $F(1, 209) = 440.24$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.68$). Participants also correctly indicated the promotional nature of transactional messages ($M_{\text{Transactional}} = 5.94$, $M_{\text{Relational}} = 3.76$; $F(1,$

209) = 204.97; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.50$), and perceived the relational messages as content conveying emotional appeals ($M_{\text{Transactional}} = 3.76$, $M_{\text{Relational}} = 5.29$; $F(1, 209) = 83.25$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.29$). Therefore, all the manipulations were successful.

4.2.5. Results

The analyses used dummy variables for the communication approach (1 = traditional, 2 = takeover). In addition, they included the same dummy variables as in Study 1 as covariates. ANCOVA shows the significant impact of the communication approaches on both openness ($M_{\text{Traditional}} = 4.56$, $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 4.88$; $F(1, 209) = 6.12$; $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$) and social presence ($M_{\text{Traditional}} = 4.51$, $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 5.05$; $F(1, 209) = 57.99$; $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$). The general interest of participants in developing relationships with brands has a similar impact on perceived openness in brand communications as in Study 1 ($p = .01$). These outcomes of Study 2 regarding H1 and H2 reconfirm those of Study 1.

Further analysis performed with the help of Model 6 in the PROCESS macro (Version 3.5; Hayes, 2017) addressed H3. As in Study 1, the covariates were dummy variables for age and gender and participants' general interest in developing relationships with brands on social media. The bootstrapping procedure (bias-corrected, 5,000 samples) shows significant sequential indirect effects of communication approaches on parasocial interaction via openness and social presence ($\beta = 0.10$, = 0.04, 95 %: 0.02, 0.18). In line with Study 1, the mediation analyses reconfirm H3. Appendix C offers a graphical representation of the mediation analysis, with both direct and indirect effects.

In addition to testing H1–H3, data collected in Study 2 allowed to test H4. With dummy variables for message type (1 = transactional, 2 = relational), another ANCOVA shows that relational messages have a stronger positive impact on social presence than transactional messages do ($M_{\text{Transactional}} = 4.23$, $M_{\text{Relational}} = 5.34$; $F(1, 209) = 39.71$; $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.16$). Additional analyses further show significant differences between brand and social media takeover conditions for transactional content: $M_{\text{Traditional}} = 3.80$, $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 4.66$ ($F(1, 107) = 10.60$; $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$); and not for relational content: $M_{\text{Traditional}} = 5.20$, $M_{\text{Takeover}} = 5.50$ ($F(1, 101) = 1.54$; $p = .22$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). Fig. 2 depicts the differences in social presence experienced by respondents assigned to different experimental conditions.

Then, Model 84 in the PROCESS macro (Version 3.5; Hayes, 2017) allows testing for the mediated moderation using the bootstrapping procedure (bias-corrected) with 5,000 samples. The model includes the same variables as in the serial mediation analyses and a message type as a moderator. The outcomes reveal a marginally significant interaction effect for social presence ($R^2 = 0.01$; $F(1, 202) = 3.56$; $p = .06$). According to the conditional effects, the moderation is significant for the transactional messages ($\beta = 0.69$, $SE = 0.22$, 95 % CI: 0.25 1.12) but not the relational messages. While social media takeover improves social presence and, therefore, parasocial interaction for relational content, its impact is particularly strong in the context of transactional content. The outcomes of Study 2 confirm H4.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Social media has become a crucial marketing channel that compels brands to continuously explore new ways of communicating with consumers. This research has sought to explain how brands can leverage two types of communication approaches (traditional and social media takeover) and two message types (transactional and relational) on their owned media to improve consumer-brand relationships reflected through parasocial interaction. In addition, this research aimed to

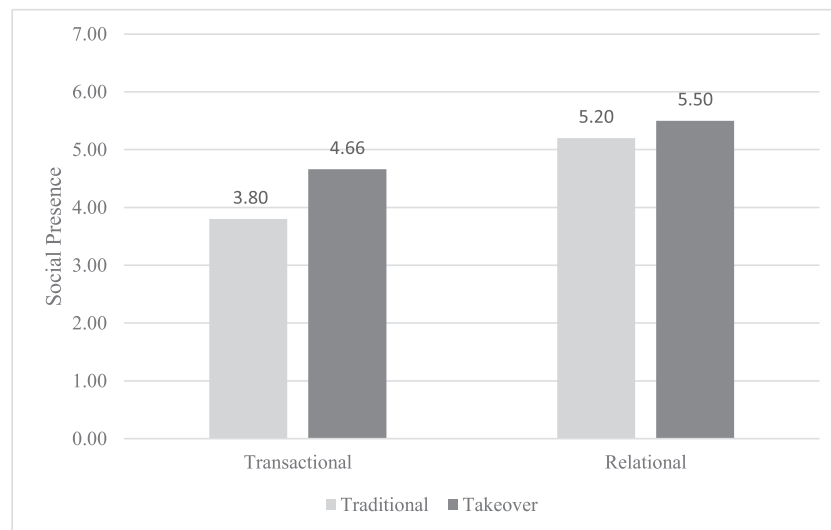


Fig. 2. Social Presence Experienced by Participants in Study 2.

investigate the underlying mechanisms through which these communication approaches affect the parasocial interaction experienced by consumers toward brands.

The outcomes of Study 1 and Study 2 consistently demonstrate that consumers experience stronger parasocial interaction after encountering brand messages shared through social media takeovers (cf. traditional brand communications). Such impact arises from an increased sense of openness and social presence consumers attach to brand communications delivered by selected brand representatives. These findings align with previous research evaluating the roles of openness (e.g., Chung & Cho, 2017; Ferchaud et al., 2018) and social presence (e.g., Bao & Wang, 2021; Tsai et al., 2021) in fostering parasocial interaction with media personalities. At the same time, the research outcomes indicate significant positive direct impacts of social media takeovers on openness and social presence. The magnitude of these impacts, however, appears to be weaker among consumers who are generally not interested in developing relationships with brands they follow on social media.

Concerning message types, Study 2 indicates that the positive impacts of social media takeovers are greater for transactional brand messages than relational brand messages. The outcomes of this study also denote that consumers generally sense a stronger social presence when engaging with relational (cf. transactional) brand messages. These findings complement previous studies addressing the role of message types in brand communications (e.g., Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Dolan et al., 2019), while also demonstrating that social media takeovers can enhance social presence, and, consequently, parasocial interaction attributed to diverse message types shared by brands on owned media.

5.1. Theoretical implications

With a foundation in parasocial interaction theory (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956), social response theory (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Moon, 2003), and social media brand communications literature (e.g., Appel et al., 2020; Beukeboom et al., 2015), this research clarifies the role of different communication approaches on brand-owned media (Colicev et al., 2018; Liadeli et al., 2022). By spotlighting a popular brand communications initiative, it introduces

the concept of social media takeover to the marketing literature and offers three main theoretical contributions.

First, as a contribution to the parasocial interaction literature (Chen & Lin, 2021; Yuan et al., 2021), the findings reveal how brands can strengthen their connections with consumers through communication on own social media accounts. Previously, scholars have established that brands can improve parasocial interaction by manipulating the cues of interactivity or openness in their communications targeted to consumers (Kim et al., 2021; Labrecque, 2014). As the current research shows though, communication approaches provide another antecedent of parasocial interaction brands can leverage on their owned media. In particular, it proposes that brands can foster parasocial interaction by allowing consumers to get to know and interact with selected individuals (employees or consumers) with whom the brands want to be associated. Notably, unlike communications involving brand ambassadors on paid media (Leung et al., 2022; Chung & Cho, 2017), social media takeover communications do not assume positive spillover impacts from brand representatives to the brand itself. Instead, the favorable consumer responses to this unique communication approach can be linked to brands directly, as they occur on brands' owned media.

Second, this research provides novel insights regarding the mechanisms underlining the development of consumer-brand relationships in social media contexts (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Lovett & Staelin, 2016). Empirical studies have established that openness and social presence explain the impact of distinct communication approaches on parasocial interaction. This suggests consumers are more likely to feel special connections with brands when they encounter social media takeovers because such communications entail more informational intimacy and human warmth (Huaman-Ramirez et al., 2022; Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021). The findings regarding the mechanisms provide further support to the stream of literature highlighting the importance of social presence in relation to the online communications of brands (e.g., Bleier et al., 2019; Darke et al., 2016). In particular, this research shows a strong link between social presence evoked in brands' communications and the development of relationships with consumers in the context of owned social media accounts. Because parasocial interaction with brands has favorable impacts on consumer responses (Chen & Lin 2021;

Zhang et al., 2022), defining the factors that contribute to its development sheds light on the likely reasons why some brand communications on owned media are more successful in achieving marketing goals than others.

Third, prior literature has investigated how various social media message types affect consumers' perceptions and behaviors (Eigenraam et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2018). The current research adds to this stream by showing that, compared to transactional messages, relational brand messages have stronger positive impacts on social presence, resulting in improved parasocial interaction. That is because relational messages entail disclosing human-like (emotional), rather than technical (practical), characteristics attributed to brands (Pitardi & Marriott, 2021; Reeves & Nass, 1996). At the same time, the findings of this research suggest that brands can leverage social media takeovers to significantly improve the social presence of their transactional messages, while arguing for the relevance of this distinct communication approach for relational messages. Considering that brands often have a mix of transactional and relational cues in their communications (Liadeli et al., 2022; Meire et al., 2019), the use of social media takeover is likely to help brands in dealing with lower levels of social presence attached to their communications.

To summarize, this research emphasizes the importance of communication approaches in prompting consumer responses to social media marketing efforts on brands' owned media (cf. Lee et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2022). It also offers novel insights into how brands can leverage distinct message types to achieve social media marketing goals (Appel et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021) in light of opportunities offered by the social media takeover initiative.

5.2. Managerial implications

Owned social media accounts allow brands to share relevant and timely information with consumers, primarily brand followers, and strengthen consumer-brand relationships. This research suggests how brands can take advantage of various communication approaches when designing their social media communications on owned media. The results of this research should encourage brand managers to consider incorporating social media takeovers into their social media marketing strategies as a means of disseminating diverse brand messages through owned media. As the success of brands, such as BMW and Fenty Beauty, reveal, this practice can be very effective for building relationships with social media audiences and for making brand communications stand out from those of competitors.

Having decided to add social media takeovers to their strategies, brand managers can select the type of messages to adopt, such as transactional messages and relational messages. While social media takeovers can foster a stronger feeling of connection for diverse message types, the inclusion of relational cues (e.g., information about values, beliefs, and communities) can allow brands to better achieve their goals of fostering parasocial interaction. That is, even if the main message communicated during a social media takeover is transactional (e.g., news about changes in the loyalty program), brands should consider including elements that can stimulate emotional connections (e.g., insights about the history of the loyalty program).

Besides, when implementing social media takeovers, brands can consider achieving additional goals linked to the implications of parasocial interaction. For example, they can instruct brand representatives to ask consumers questions (e.g., open-ended or multiple choice) to generate higher engagement. Brands can also request their representatives to share interactive links that might motivate consumers to make purchases, which can increase sales of products and services. By

stimulating the achievement of these associated social media goals, brands can also measure tangible outcomes (e.g., number of likes and sales), making it possible to objectively evaluate individual social media takeover turns.

Finally, beyond strengthening relationships with existing brand followers, social media takeovers have the potential to expand brand reach and engage with new consumers. This is because the individuals who participate in social media takeovers are likely to promote their involvement in this role on personal social media accounts, sparking interest in the brand among their own followers. Accordingly, brands may benefit from inviting employees and consumers who are active on their personal social media accounts and have relatively large numbers of followers. However, when implementing social media takeovers, brands must consider the potential risks, such as the possibility of inappropriate behaviors (e.g., the use of offensive language) of brand representatives and the potential negative spillovers triggered by their actions on personal accounts (e.g., posts promoting violence). Therefore, brands are encouraged to carefully evaluate the social media profiles of potential candidates before inviting them to be part of social media takeovers.

5.3. Limitations and further research

This research has several limitations that suggest avenues for further research. First, the empirical studies include two imaginary brands, both of which refer to service industries, in which interactions with others, especially communications with brand employees, play a central role in shaping consumer experiences. Additional studies could address the role of different communication approaches of brands in other contexts, such as consumer goods and apparel industries, and thereby investigate how various brand characteristics influence the impact of social media takeovers on different consumer responses, beyond parasocial interaction. Second, brands need insights into the potential long-term advantages or benefits of social media takeovers. For example, scholars could examine whether it is more beneficial for brands to appoint a new employee/consumer for each social media takeover or to ask the same individuals to participate several times. Third, this research does not consider how social media takeovers influence individuals taking over brands' social media accounts. Future research could address and specify the implications of social media takeovers from the perspective of the selected brand representatives, such as social media influencers.

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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.

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Appendix A. Examples of manipulations in the experiments

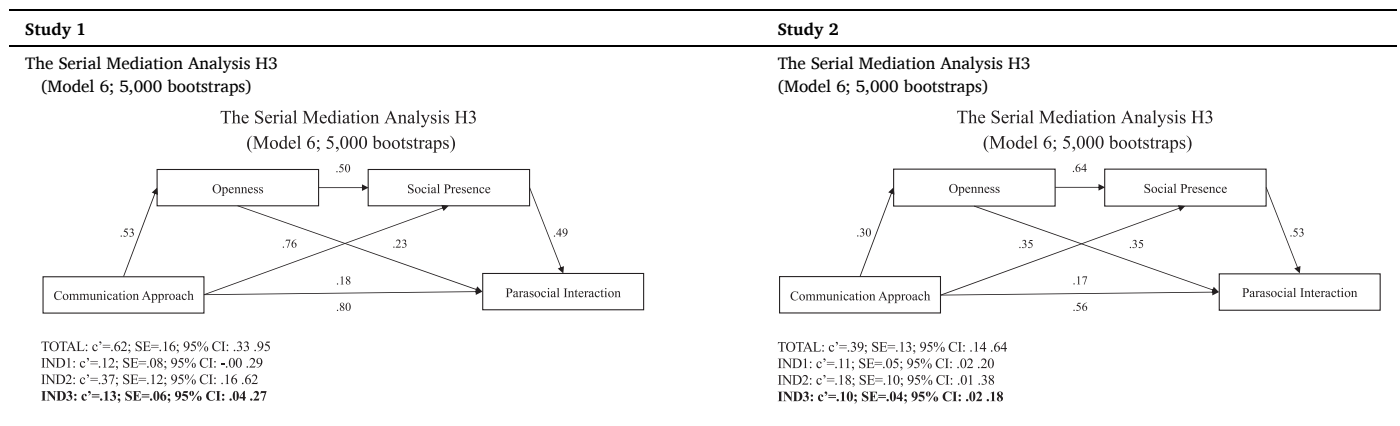
Introduction		
Traditional brand communications	Social media takeover (employee)	Social media takeover (consumer)
E elixfit 15h Hi, it's Elixfit! Let us share some interesting information with you today! Feel free to ask us questions! Send message	E elixfit 15h  Hi! My my name is John (@John_Wikman) and I am a fitness instructor at ElixFit (since 2020). Today, I am taking over @elixfit account to share some interesting information with you. Feel free to ask me questions! Send message	E elixfit 15h  Hi! My my name is John (@John_Wikman) and I am an accountant who enjoys working out at ElixFit (member since 2020). Today, I am taking over @elixfit account to share some interesting information with you. Feel free to ask me questions! Send message
Transactional cues	Relational cues	Closing (invitation to engage)
E elixfit 15h  1 month -10% 3 month -20% 6 months -25% 12 months -30% The sale only lasts until the end of this month! Send message	E elixfit 15h Come for a workout, stay for the community!  ElixFit strives to foster a friendly and welcoming space, where members can grow in their fitness journeys, while feeling the support of like-minded people. Send message	E elixfit 15h JOIN US! If you have any questions, ask them below! E Ask here! Type something... Send message

Appendix B. Measurement items

Construct	Source	Measures	Study 1		Study 2	
			α	Loadings	α	Loadings
Openness	Adapted from Chung and Cho (2017) and Labrecque (2014)	Rate the following statements (1 = Strongly disagree – 7 = Strongly agree):				
		[Brand] is open in sharing information.	0.84	0.90	0.84	0.88
		[Brand] lets me get to know it.		0.75		0.87
Social Presence	Adapted from Gefen and Straub (2004)	[Brand] doesn't hold back information.		0.94		0.86
		There was a sense of personal contact in [brand's] communications.	0.90	0.79	0.94	0.81
		There was a sense of human warmth in [brand's] communications.		0.86		0.88
		There was a sense of human sensitivity in [brand's] communications.		0.87		0.90
		There was a sense of sociability in [brand's] communications.		0.85		0.92
Parasocial Interaction	Adapted from Labrecque (2014)	There was a sense of personalness in [brand's] communications.		0.86		0.89
		[Brand's] Instagram stories made me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.	0.88	*	0.88	*
		[Brand's] Instagram stories made me feel included.		0.58		0.63
		I can relate to [brand].		0.92		0.82
		I like hearing what [brand] has to say.		0.73		0.74
		I care about what happens to [brand].		0.86		0.83
		I hope [brand] can achieve its goals.		*		*
		I feel a personal connection with [brand].		0.79		0.89

* Items excluded from the analysis due to poor factor loadings.

Appendix C. Graphical representation of the mediation analyses (SPSS PROCESS)



Notes: Numbers on the arrows indicate direct effect, and c' indicates the effect of the independent on the dependent variable through the mediator (i.e., the indirect effect); SE indicates standard error; and CI indicates confidence interval; IND indicates indirect effects as follows: IND1 = Communication approach → Openness → Parasocial Interaction; IND2 = Communication Approach → Social Presence → Parasocial Interaction; IND3 = Communication Approach → Openness → Social Presence → Parasocial Interaction.

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