

# Commentary: The Case for a Healthier Social Customer Journey

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Social media platforms such as Facebook, where Pernod Ricard USA spent more than half of its ad dollars last year, are indispensable business tools. They allow affordable, targeted advertising for even the smallest brands and businesses, and enable easy two-way communication with customers and brand fans. In addition, they help businesses facilitate search, increase website traffic, and demonstrate brand values and cultural relevance in real time. Social media platforms allow brands to interact directly with individuals in the midst of the customer journey, influencing customer decision making and purchase. As social media platforms continue to transform and evolve how brands and consumers engage, it is imperative for marketing researchers and practitioners to reevaluate current thinking on the customer journey framework. Hamilton et al. (2021, hereinafter Hamilton et al.) offer a framework for understanding the current role of various social influences on that journey—what they call the “social customer journey.”

Their work explores the potentially powerful impact of distal social others—“larger groups or the whole of society, whose members may not be individuated, present, temporally proximal, or even known to the customer” (Hamilton et al.)—at each step in the journey and the role these distal influences, or “traveling companions,” have on consumers’ motivations, search, evaluation, decisions, and postdecision sharing activities.

Marketers are currently grappling with one aspect of their model: the role of shared values in the social customer journey and the traveling companions, including brands, that leverage those shared values to influence decision making at each step of the journey. Hamilton et al. suggest the following questions for further research: How do consumers navigate conflicts between brand preferences and alignment with their broader social networks’ values (e.g., political ideologies, social causes)? How do consumers manage situations in which proximal motivational inputs are in opposition to distal social norms?

In simpler terms, how do consumers make choices when the act of choosing is an “identity signal” (Hamilton et al.) that either aligns them with or puts them in opposition to the norms and values of their personal social networks? These questions are critical for practitioners, who are increasingly communicating their values via social channels, leading to both positive and negative outcomes including boycotts, buycotts, increases or decreases in reputation, changes to loyalty and consideration, and becoming a target of society’s ever-growing “cancel culture.”

This past summer’s #StopHateForProfit boycott points to a critical question to explore about the role of brands in the social customer journey: What is the role of the business community in stopping “traveling companions” from toxifying the social media environment with hate speech and negativity? While Hamilton et al. acknowledge the influence these distal social others have on a specific customer journey, they do not address the influence they have on the overall environment in which individuals are making decisions. “Traveling companions” who spread hate in social media environments may have an outsized influence on the social customer journey, driving consumers to curtail or end engagement on social media, thereby diminishing trust in the social media platforms themselves and the viability of social media platforms as powerful business tools all brands can rely on.

This commentary extends Hamilton et al.’s view of the social customer journey by exploring the business imperative of addressing the toxic social environments created by “traveling companions” and a solution being developed by Pernod Ricard USA, in partnership with industry associations, to empower consumers, advertisers, and social media platforms to stop the spread of hate speech online.

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## #StopHateForProfit and Social Toxicity

In July 2020, more than 1,200 companies—including Pernod Ricard USA—joined the #StopHateForProfit boycott. Boycottees agreed to pause social media advertising on Facebook for the month to pressure the company's leadership to move with greater speed, effectiveness, and transparency in addressing the spread of hate, extremism, and misinformation on the platform. Many companies opted to pause advertising on all social channels for the month of July—and even for the remainder of 2020—to demonstrate the seriousness of the issue and to acknowledge that these problems exist on all social platforms. The boycott was intended to leverage the influence of the advertisers whose choices are directly responsible for Facebook's earnings, which reached \$70 billion in 2019,<sup>1</sup> and to hold the platform accountable for the toxic environment created by individuals who leverage it to spread hate.

The evidence of hate on social media is abundant. Research from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL; 2020) shows that 35% of Americans report experiencing harassment online due to racial, religious, or sexual identity, with LGBTQ+ individuals, Muslims, Hispanics or Latinos, and African Americans facing “especially high rates of identity-based discrimination.” And these levels are climbing, with research showing religion-based harassment nearly doubling year-over-year from 11% to 21%, and race- and ethnicity-based harassment jumping from 15% to 25% (ADL 2020).

The negative impacts of hate are just as evident. Of Americans who reported being harassed online, more than 45% reported physical, mental, or emotional impacts—trouble sleeping, incidents of depression and anxiety, and increased sense of fear in the physical world, according to the ADL. Researchers in the United Kingdom found that as the number of “hate tweets”—those deemed antagonistic in terms of race, ethnicity, or religion—made from one location increased, so did the number of racially and religiously aggravated crimes, which include violence, harassment, and criminal damage (Cardiff University 2019). And with teen suicide rates rising by nearly 60% between 2007 and 2018, cyberbullying and online harassment are often cited as factors in those deaths (Reinberg 2020).

For marketers, one particular finding in recent research highlights the tangible business imperative—more than 35% of Americans who experienced harassment online have changed, reduced, or stopped their online activity (ADL 2020). Consumers are leaving platforms because of the toxicity in the environment, causing these channels to be less impactful tools for all businesses.

While the boycott led to a deeper understanding of the problem, it also reinforced a key point about Facebook's business—the 1,200 organizations who joined the boycott are just a fraction of the more than eight million groups that advertise on the

platform. Furthermore, the top 100 advertisers reportedly generate less than 20% of Facebook's revenue (Iyengar 2020), while “the bulk of the company's sales come from millions of smaller businesses that rely heavily on the platform” (*New York Times* 2020). Without the small and medium business (SMB) community's participation, boycotts are not an effective solution for companies looking to detoxify social media environments. But without action from businesses, consumers will continue to leave the social platforms in search of safer environments.

## Social Media Safety and the #EngageResponsibly Initiative

Pernod Ricard USA's core value of conviviality compels us to take action on the issue of social media safety. In a pandemic where physically distancing ourselves from one another is critical to physical health, the need to be socially connected—to create conviviality—becomes even more important. Social media was made for this moment. But if action is not taken quickly to stop the hate and harassment that make social media environments toxic for many users, the health and well-being of people on and off the platforms are at risk.

While there is no simple, singular solution to this problem, inspiration can be found in other contexts where corporations, brands, products, and consumers intersect to create positive change. A parallel can be drawn between environmental sustainability and the actions corporations have taken to reduce their negative impact on our physical environment. Hate speech and online harassment are the social media analog of greenhouse gases or chemical waste, suggesting that sustainability thinking extends to social media, with a focus on the actions corporations can take to reduce their negative impact on the online environment. The environmental sustainability movement also demonstrates that real change only occurs when individuals, communities, corporations, brands, and products come together and work toward a shared vision for the future.

Drawing on this analogy, the #EngageResponsibly initiative ([engageresponsibly.org](http://engageresponsibly.org)) is an effort to spark collective action among all key stakeholders—consumers, brands, and social media platforms—to go beyond the boycott and create change that will directly result in a safer social media environment for all. Specifically, it seeks to achieve four goals: (1) give consumers a voice; (2) help brands leverage their influence to be true drivers of change; (3) engage SMBs in thoughtful ways; and (4) unify vision and voices across platforms to drive greater impact, accountability, and transparency. Next, I discuss each of these goals in turn and provide details of the #EngageResponsibly program.

### Give Consumers a Voice

#EngageResponsibly gives consumers a voice in three ways: awareness, action, and advocacy. Consumers will learn more about the problem of online hate speech and the actions they can take to stop it—including awareness of how to use existing

<sup>1</sup> <https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2020/Facebook-Reports-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2019-Results/default.aspx>

reporting tools on each social media platform—through a brand-led marketing campaign. The campaign will be amplified by influencers committed to promoting a safer social media environment and news stories about the initiative.

Importantly, individuals will have new tools at their disposal to take action, including a newly developed hate reporting tool that will allow social media users to report hate speech they encounter online using the direct message feature on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Research indicates that people are looking for more transparent and credible ways to have their voices heard. The ADL (2020, p. 21) finds that 77% of online users want hate content reporting to be easier and 62% seek independent reporting of online hate. By building this functionality into the platforms, we make it as easy as possible for individuals to report hate.

Once individuals use the hate reporting tool, #EngageResponsibly will introduce them to the “Initiative Hub,” which will house real-time social listening data on hate speech, trends in hate reporting based on used patterns from the hate reporting tool, details about coalition members, and more.

### **Help Brands Leverage Influence and Drive Change**

#EngageResponsibly will inspire brands and organizations to both empower consumers and hold themselves accountable to the highest standards of responsible marketing. To do this, platforms and brands will opt in to become “Anti-Hate Certified.” This certification will come with a seal of approval that can be used internally and externally and that serves as an easy visual marker to all audiences that the brand is committed to stopping the spread of hate on social media platforms.

Certification begins with #EngageResponsibly, in partnership with a credible third-party partner, calculating a “Platform Safety Score” for each social media platform. Scores will be based on a predetermined set of criteria that measure the volume of hate and the progress being made by the social platform to address it. The scores will be updated on a quarterly basis to understand what drives fluctuations, along with the scope and scale of hate at key points in time.

Next, brands will calculate their “Hate Footprint.” Using a formula based on the quarterly “Platform Safety Score” and the brand’s advertising spend on said platform, brands will learn their social media “Hate Footprint,” which will allow them to then invest in designated, pre-vetted nongovernmental and advocacy organizations supporting communities most affected by hate speech to offset their footprint. The “Hate Footprint” and size of the required offset will be developed in partnership with a credible third-party partner.

### **Engage SMBs**

As discussed previously, the bulk of Facebook’s revenue comes from SMBs and performance-driven advertising. Yet SMBs simply do not have the ability to participate in boycotts like #StopHateForProfit without putting themselves in financial jeopardy—especially given the fiscal impact of our current

global pandemic. However, according to research conducted by WPP in September for an internal Pernod Ricard report, 68% of SMBs say that they would join a coalition to fight hate speech, and 68% also say they would fight much harder if they were equipped with more tools and resources. #EngageResponsibly will create a program and toolkit to help all SMBs—many of whom are partners and customers of the corporations who participated in the initial boycott—to encourage responsible marketing for businesses of all sizes.

### **Unify Vision and Voices to Drive Greater Impact, Accountability, and Transparency**

A critical element of the initiative is to unify the vision and voices of all key stakeholders—including the social media platforms—to drive greater impact, accountability, and transparency by all, for all. Active engagement and partnership with the social media platforms will be critical to the success of #EngageResponsibly. The initiative will achieve this through three key actions: (1) generating new data that measure the problem, (2) providing a consistent standard of analysis, and (3) creating a program built around shared responsibility.

*New, independent data.* The actions taken by consumers and brands through #EngageResponsibly will provide significant new data and insights to help inform further changes to policy and functionality social media platforms can deploy to help stop the spread of hate speech. The hate reporting tool and social monitoring program led by the initiative will generate significant data on the scale of the problem, how many consumers are willing to use an independent reporting tool, what consumers need to more easily identify and report hate speech, what actions drive spikes or dips in hate speech, and more.

*Consistency of analysis across all platforms.* The Anti-Hate Certification element of the initiative, including the “Platform Safety Score” and “Hate Footprint” calculations, will use consistent, platform-agnostic formulas to assess the spread of hate speech on social media in a uniform way. This will allow consumers, brands, and the platforms themselves to more coherently assess the scope and scale of the problem on each platform.

*Shared responsibility.* The opt-in nature of the initiative, which requires brands to invest in the same level of transparency and accountability that consumers, communities, and businesses are seeking from the social media platforms, establishes a high level of trust and shared responsibility with the social media platforms from the outset.

### **Why It Works: Return on Responsibility**

Businesses, and marketers in particular, can no longer focus only on return on investment. They need to be equally focused on return on responsibility. Marketers must act responsibly if we are to be viewed credibly. #EngageResponsibly is the marketer’s opportunity to lead on return on responsibility. Clear, common-sense actions by corporations that reduce the spread

of hate speech online will have positive benefits for consumers, brands and, ultimately, the social media platforms themselves.

### *The Consumer Experience*

Through #EngageResponsibly, consumers will see brands empowering them to act; tangible, measurable actions they can take to stop hate speech; a visual marker that lets them know which brands share their anti-hate values; and transparent data about the action (or inaction) of social media platforms to stop hate speech.

### *The Brand Benefit*

Through #EngageResponsibly, brands will be able to engage their consumers and fans to drive real action in the fight against hate speech, transparently take accountability for the role they play in the problem, use the visual marker of certification to let the public know they walk the walk when it comes to being anti-hate, and provide tools to SMB customers and partners who want to demonstrate their anti-hate commitments. As a result, brands will experience greater trust, favorability and consideration from consumers, brand fans, and SMB customers and partners, as well credibility and legitimacy in demonstrating their commitment to the well-being of their consumers and communities.

### *The Platform Benefit*

Through #EngageResponsibly, social media platforms will have access to new data-driven insights on incidents of hate speech on their platforms and an informed understanding of how well they are doing at combating the problem relative to their peer set. Importantly, the consistent approach to “scoring” and reporting hate on all social media platforms will provide each with a better understanding of the scale of the problem, along with a better understanding of how users sparking hate travel from platform to platform, and what triggers those migrations. This will help platforms anticipate potential spikes in hate speech and act quickly to limit their spread, helping maintain the user activity that is critical to their business health.

## **Conclusion: A Healthier Social Customer Journey**

As Hamilton et al. illuminate, the social customer journey provides a new understanding of the complex proximal and distal influences on customers at each point in their online decision-making journey. But a missing element in the current analysis is how the social environment in which the decision is being made—especially when that environment contains toxins generated by hate speech—affects the journey or a customer’s willingness to remain on the social platform altogether.

The #EngageResponsibly initiative could help social media to become a safer, more responsible space for consumers and brands to interact, minimizing the negative impact of “traveling companions” who distract with hate. Yet, while #EngageResponsibly has strong potential to create positive

impact, it also has limitations. As an opt-in approach, it relies on actors willing to dedicate resources to test, learn, and iterate, rather than a mandate or policy required of all actors. As a coalition effort, the need to continually balance needs and goals of all parties will present challenges along the way. Without the engagement of government, the relative ability of regulation to provide tangible solutions to the problem of online hate speech remain unknown. We welcome collaboration with researchers interested in evaluating #EngageResponsibly.

In addition, marketing researchers can play a critical role in advancing this effort by analyzing other impacts of toxicity in social media environments for both individuals and brands. For example, researchers can explore the following:

- *The economic impact of hate speech on social media.* If consumers flee the platforms, what impact does that have on advertisers’ return on investment and the bottom line for companies engaging customers on social media? Is there a tipping point at which the platforms become less effective channels for advertising due to hate? What economic impact do individuals who abstain from social media participation face? What economic impact will social media platforms face if more consumers flee?
- *The cost of values-based marketing.* As companies choose not to advertise via mediums and outlets (print, broadcast, and social media) that do not adequately align with their corporate values, are there enough alternative channels to maintain or even increase impact? Where do economic impact and reputational impact intersect for businesses based on how they advertise? Are there greater or lesser economic impacts by channel (e.g., is there a greater or lesser economic impact for a company that chooses not to advertise on specific broadcast networks vs. specific social media channels)?
- *Defining toxicity and toxicity tolerance for individuals.* While platforms, organizations and brands work to define and diminish toxic social media environments, how do individuals define them? Do definitions of toxicity or tolerance for toxicity vary from individual to individual, or can correlations be made between groups with shared characteristics? How closely do individual’s definitions and tolerance levels align with proximal social others and distal social others?

In the social media environment, brands are friends, connections, and “traveling companions” of consumers. When those relationships are built on shared values, brands have an incredible ability to influence the choices consumers make on the social customer journey. However, when distal others are actively working to toxify the social media environment with hate speech, brands have both a need and responsibility to stamp out the hate. Brands that condone hate speech, through their own inaction, where social connections are built on shared values, will lose credibility and connections over time.

Hate is not good for humanity. It is not good for business. And it is not good for the long-term viability of social media

platforms. People need social media more than ever to maintain and strengthen their social connections in a world where physical distancing is critical to physical health. Now is the moment for brands, consumers, and social media platforms to work together to stop the spread of hate speech online and ensure the social media environment is safe, healthy, and viable for all.

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