

However, the use of Twitter accounts as information sources may not be the best way to utilize such a wide consumer reach. The range of page descriptions found by Case and King (2011), with firms like Dell attempting to build a community, and banks like Bank of America focusing on service issues, suggests a lack of uniformity that is indicative of there being no best practice found as of yet. An interesting area to therefore explore, in relation to the model of customer engagement presented by Bowden, is how to use the platform to move customers into a state of loyalty and commitment for a brand. In Aharony's study, Obama was the only political leader to create dialogue with people through retweets, but this interaction can be taken considerably further. From looking at the past 50 tweets of business leaders such as Howard Lindzon (founder of Stocktwits), Shawn Murphy (CEO of Switch and Shift) and Elizabeth Hamilton (founder of Besteveryou.com), interaction can also be fostered through tweet conversations and the use of hashtags, which inevitably increase consumer involvement. Often the higher rates of interactivity on such accounts are associated with lower levels of language professionalism, which I believe makes the Twitter profiles more human and relatable. A relatively untapped strategy by the larger firms is that of parasocial relationships, built on the interaction between a media user and the media being consumed, the 'lurkers' of online communities. Such relationships have been studied in depth in relation to television programmes, which create the illusion of interpersonal contact when media figures 'speak directly out of the television and address the audience personally' (Ballantine and Martin, 2005). Viewers often feel like they know and understand the persona in the same way that they do their real friends, based on belief that the persona is like other people in their own social circle. Perse and Rubin (1989) point out that parasocial interactions resemble interpersonal relationships in that they are voluntary and contain a personal focus, both types of relationship provide companionship, and social attraction is a precursor to both. In the case of television shows, viewing episodes becomes ritualistic in nature to maintain the relationship, and viewers may buy memorabilia or write to the show in order to keep the 'friendship' in tact. This can easily be extended to social networking sites like Twitter, as it is impossible to interact with all other Twitter users – some would have to be observed – thus replicating what has been seen before in TV shows. In the case of brand pages, the maintenance of the relationship would almost certainly lead to consumption related behaviour, and increase the loyalty and commitment users show to the firm. This I think is the way to use Twitter to maximize customer engagement, however as homophily is the best predictor of parasocial interaction, firms and individuals must move away from jargon-full, information based tweets, and begin to message their followers at a more personal level.

Whether the use of social networking sites like this is useful or not is yet to be decided. Is Twitter an effective tool for improving access to information, or merely a vehicle for outreach and self promotion? Often firms' and individuals' tweets exhibit both of these motivations, however I believe at present, the customer engagement that could be achieved is nowhere near being met. If firms are aiming to retain customers, locking them into affective commitment, the formation of parasocial interactions to create 'extras' for customers, afford them attention and encourage participation is I think the best way to move customers away from calculative commitment, and towards loyalty. Information is difficult to relate to, and to truly foster brand