



PRIMARY RESEARCH

# Understanding the layers of engagement through the consumption of online cartoons

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## Abstract

This article introduces the layers of engagement audiences transition through while consuming media content online. Specifically, the consumption of short-form online cartoons. The article contributes a new layered engagement model, building from wider literature, which considers concepts including involvement, flow, and value. This innovative model introduces the notions of deep and light engagement, as well as deep and light engagement experiences and behaviors, which influence and result from engagement. These levels of engagement represent the extremes of different layers audiences transition through as they ebb and flow from one object of consumption to another in highly competitive online environments. This engagement understanding is evidenced in practice with a case study that observes the development of audience engagement with online cartoons. The case study highlights content producers' difficulties in successfully engaging audiences with their creative ideas. This article, therefore, has both theoretical and practical implications. From the theoretical perspective, the article contributes a new understanding of engagement relevant to a media consumption environment subject to abstractness, subjectivity, and uniqueness and where goods are stripped of their tangible nature. From a practical perspective, the article contributes valuable knowledge for producers working in these environments, in how engagement can be modeled for success and foresight into the difficulties that may be faced.

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## INTRODUCTION

How audiences engage with media is constantly shifting, especially in evolving online environments where they are faced with an abundance of choices and new consumption platforms (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018; Kaur, Paruthi, Islam, & Hollebeek, 2020; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016). Subsequently, this affects how content is consumed and the relationships audiences have with content producers (L. D. Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Kaur et al., 2020). From a producer perspective, survival amongst a proliferation of choice is defined by an ability to establish engagement, with success often measured by metrics that stem from the concept (Hobbs, 2015; Kahn, 1990; Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2016). Therefore, understanding engagement in online environments is important for practitioners seeking to successfully engage audiences and obtain value from their creative work (Hobbs, 2015).

To address this need, this article presents a layered model of engagement that defines the varying intensities of experience and behaviors audiences encounter over time. This engagement model is established upon the extant literature on engagement and wider related concepts. However, the model fills a gap within this literature by defining the intensities of engagement and incorporating its antecedents (experiences) and consequences (behaviors), which also occur on a spectrum of intensity and subsequent value. Additionally, the article extends the existing literature by contributing an understanding relevant to media consumption in online environments. This is important as 'goods' in these environments suffer from an abstractness, subjectivity, and uniqueness that makes them difficult to evaluate without prior use and subsequently increases engagement difficulties. This layered model of engagement is then demonstrated through a case study, which observes the de-

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velopment of audience engagement in the context of on-line cartoons. This case study contributes practical knowledge to producers delivering content in these contexts and highlights possible difficulties. In particular, the article offers a cautionary forewarning that attempting to build engagement should not be taken lightly and requires significant resource investment to sustain a consistent delivery pattern and maintain engagement in competitive environments. This insight, therefore, contradicts the often-celebrated facet of digital environments in being able to level the playing field for all creators to compete.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Establishing a Definition of Engagement

The [Advertising Research Foundation \(2006\)](#) defined engagement as "turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding media context." This definition came when interest in the term was increasing. This interest coincided with a shift in audience behavior aided by Web 2.0 technologies, which allowed audiences to play a more active role in the consumption process ([Kaur et al., 2020](#)). While it can be argued that audiences have always been active, sites like Facebook and YouTube have made this role more visible. With new technological affordances, audiences have greater control over their choices and desire an active role in the consumption and creation of value ([Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018](#); [Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010](#); [Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016](#)).

Furthermore, with creation tools and distribution channels becoming easier to access, audiences are increasingly becoming producers and consumers of content. Consequently, the added value audiences bring through active engagement behaviors such as word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, remixing content, and helping create new products, has been recognized ([Kaur et al., 2020](#); [Tajvidi, Richard, Wang, & Hajli, 2020](#)). As such, relationships have shifted from one-way broadcasts to two-way interactive relationships as content producers seek ways of turning on prospects and eliciting value.

The ARF definition alone is too simplistic to understand engagement fully, and subsequent work has been conducted to establish a consensus on a definition. This work frames engagement as a multidimensional and interactive concept between producer and consumer. For instance, [Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek \(2013\)](#) define engagement as the psychological state of an audience based on interactive and co-creative experiences with a goal object, which shift in intensity and results in multidimensional reactions from the audience. This is echoed by [Gambetti and Graffigna \(2010\)](#),

who describes engagement as a complex concept influenced by many factors, including the consumer's social, interactive, and relational contexts. [Van Doorn et al. \(2010\)](#) also emphasize the multidimensional nature of engagement and show how engagement encompasses the audience's entire experience with a goal object, which may involve multiple interactions over time. Numerous other studies, particularly in customer-brand engagement, echo these sentiments ([Algharabat, Rana, Alalwan, Baabdullah, & Gupta, 2020](#); [Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018](#); [L. Hollebeek, 2011](#); [L. D. Hollebeek, 2011](#); [Rather, Tehseen, & Parrey, 2018](#); [Zhang, Zhang, & Lu, 2020](#)).

While providing a foundation for helping define engagement, many of these studies are linked to the consumption of tangible goods or required task involvement (e.g., student or employee engagement). This tangibility is stripped when considering media engagement online, and the voluntary nature requires consideration of alternative needs and motivations beyond those that are more extrinsic in required task involvement.

Studies that do explore media engagement are Annette Hill's work on engaging with drama and reality television (2019). Hill also argues that engagement is a multidimensional construct where audiences perform emotional, cognitive, and affective work. These dimensions vary as audiences transition across what Hill calls a 'spectrum of engagement.' This spectrum consists of three modes; positive (affiliation with a TV character or spreading positive WOM), negative (frustration with a storyline or voting for a show's character), and disengagement. The spectrum captures the subjectivity of engagement with media and explains how the audience's different experiences will influence their mode of engagement and position across the spectrum.

Furthermore, as audiences engage over time, they may flow between positive and negative modes or encounter both in a singular experience. This evidences the complexities of engagement. The multiple dimensions and modes show that engagement goes beyond just liking something and is a concept that invites action. This is argued by [Corner \(2011\)](#), and [Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel \(2009\)](#), who state engagement is based on purposive relationships between audience and producer, which causes cognitive and affective work from the audience.

### Views from a Wider Perspective

The importance of relationships in forming engagement links relationship marketing to understanding engagement. Relationship marketing is building and maintaining an au-

dience through interactive communication over time for the benefit of both sides (Shani & Chalasani, 1992). This two-way communication creates trust, which leads to relationship commitment and future loyalty with an increased likelihood of future interactions (L. D. Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; L. D. Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2019; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996). The desire to enter relationships can be motivated by a desire to reduce choice (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995), which is pertinent in online environments where there is an abundance. Rather than waste time searching or risk disappointment, audiences return to producers they have a relationship with and rely on to satisfy their needs. When seeking to satisfy needs, audiences are driven by a desire to obtain value, the perception of which is down to the individual consumer and influenced by contextual factors (situational, social, and personal) (Bloch & Richins, 1983; Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva, & Greenleaf, 1984; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Trade-offs also influence the determination of value between giving (money, time, effort) and getting (volume, quality, convenience, experience) components, which are also subjective. Even when value is determined, it is subject to change; it may endure, diminish quickly, or even be different from what producers had anticipated (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

This perspective is important due to the focus on understanding engagement with media online. These media objects have distinct characteristics, including abstractness, subjectivity, and uniqueness. This makes them difficult to evaluate without prior use (Botti, 2000), thus negatively affecting give components of value determination. Furthermore, the openness of online environments means content can be removed from the original creator, and the context of consumption is also subject to variation (alone vs. with friends, mobile device vs. desktop, home vs. commuting). Therefore, influence over value determination is removed from the producer, who must work harder in online environments to establish relationships that build trust and reduce uncertainty.

The subjectivity of consumption experiences and various value determinations show that engagement occurs for various reasons. As discussed, engagement goes beyond liking something, as shown by Hill (2017) positive and negative modes of engagement. Moreover, Higgins argues that it is possible to be engaged in pursuing value despite an unpleasant activity (Higgins, 2006). For example, many consumption experiences come with obstacles or challenges audiences must overcome. The effort to overcome the challenge may be unpleasant, yet engagement occurs in the hope that the reward will outweigh the effort. Here, we see a

balance between value determination and the give-and-get components. Challenges and unpleasant activities can be endured if the subsequent reward is deemed worthwhile. Furthermore, research into educational and employee engagement shows that challenge is a driver of engagement and increases the attraction of target objects (Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Kahn, 1990).

The presence of challenge is central to Csikszentmihalyi's Flow construct, which is described as the state of optimal experience. Csikszentmihalyi argues that these experiences may not be pleasant, but the subsequent sense of achievement leads to an overall positive reflection. Any activity that removes us from the boredom of everyday life can achieve flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihaly, 1990). As such, passive pastimes like watching television may be discounted from being able to provide an optimal experience. However, watching television extends beyond being passive and invites action that integrates deep into the audience's lives; flow-like experiences can be achieved. For example, Hill, in a study of *The Bridge*, discusses how viewers using the show as a trigger would immerse themselves across media content (television, social media, blogs) to solve puzzles posed by the show (Hill, 2018). Furthermore, even when media is being engaged passively, the activity still serves a use and has value for different audiences.

Insight from Uses and Gratifications theory identifies these various needs audiences seek from media use, including cognitive, affective, social, and tension release needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Thus, some audiences seek media to provoke thought or challenge themselves (cognitive), while others seek more banal media to elevate stress (tension release). This is demonstrated in a study of flow in computer use which found that people in low task jobs pursued challenges to increase skills, while those in high task jobs avoided challenges to reduce stress and uncertainty (Ghani & Deshpande, 1994). Similarly, a study by Khan (2017) on YouTube found that audiences engage in a variety of different ways, from both active participation (e.g., likes and comments) to simple passive consumption of content, depending on their goals. Therefore, engagement is relative to audience goals and may vary from low passive engagement to intense, active, and challenging engagement. The varying intensities of engagement, motivated by a desire to derive value, present similarities to involvement. Mittal and Lee (1989) define involvement as "The perceived value of a 'goal object' that manifests as interest in that goal object" (p. 365). Involvement varies in intensity, from low to high, and alters the cognitive effort invested in decision-making. Involvement is also distinguished as being either

situational (temporary and influenced by context) or enduring (long-term and influenced by previous experience) (Houston & Rothschild, 1978). Despite these similarities, engagement goes beyond involvement and moves it from a cognitive processing task to a state of active behavior. As described by Bloch and Richins (1983), "involvement is another internal state variable that serves as the intermediate step between perceptions of importance and overt action" (p. 76). Therefore, involvement is an antecedent to engagement, part of a process that moves audiences to overt action. In the process, audiences must first be motivated by a value signal, which initiates attention and becomes involved. Involvement focuses on the behaviors, interactions, and co-creative processes central to engagement.

The theoretical background helps establish engagement as a multidimensional construct that manifests as a level of involvement and results in a subsequent behavioral action. Engagement is also argued to be dynamic in terms of varying intensities and experiences being either positive or negative. Yet, engagement is often used as an all-encompassing term to cover the multitude of intensities, experiences, and behaviors. Therefore, what is proposed next is a conceptualization of engagement that defines the variation in intensity and captures the antecedents and consequences of engagement. The concepts and models introduced next are developed based on the insight drawn from this theoretical foundation before being applied to a case study.

#### **LAYERS OF ENGAGEMENT – CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT**

To distinguish the intensities within engagement, this next section proposes the concepts of Light Engagement (LE) and Deep Engagement (DE). Furthermore, discussing how multidimensional aspects of engagement occur over time leads to the proposal of light and deep engagement Experiences and Behaviours. These components illustrate engagement's temporal and complex nature and how audiences transition through layers of intensity. LE defines the lowest layer of engagement, where levels of challenge and effort required to engage are minimal. In opposition, DE defines the highest layer of engagement and requires greater effort and interaction due to higher challenges and increased barriers to entry. Between these extremes, audiences flow through varying degrees of experience.

This engagement distinction resembles the high/low and situational/enduring separations of involvement, which helps further define light and deep engagement. High, enduring involvement formed by a long-term interest in a goal object is likely to initiate DE. In opposition, low situational

involvement is short-term, less importance is placed on the goal object, and it elicits LE. These notions of light and deep engagement define the levels of engagement and involvement. Corner (2017) argues they surround media products, from "intense commitment" (DE) through to "cool willingness to be temporarily distracted" (LE).

While links to involvement remain, engagement includes behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. These dimensions are evident in how audiences consume media in online environments. Behavioral engagement is the idea of active participation, made easier by Web 2.0 tools, and can take various forms: from social media discourse to creating fan art or video mashups. Emotional engagement refers to positive or negative reactions, ranging from simple Facebook likes to more involved comments or reviews. Finally, cognitive engagement refers to the willingness to exert the necessary effort to engage. This could be a willingness to decipher the meanings behind complex storylines or to learn control mechanisms to master video games.

These dimensions exist in the entire consumption process: pre, during, and post-consumption. For example, when consuming a video game, the audience will first encounter a cognitive search phase where they decide what to play. Once the audience has selected a game and focused their attention, they will undergo a different cognitive process to evaluate the give (time, cognitive effort, money) and get (entertainment, inspiration, enjoyment, challenge) components to determine value. If the value is determined, they will engage. While playing, the audience will express emotional (enjoyment, fear), cognitive (decision-making, handling controls), and behavioral (continuing or disengaging) responses. Once the experience is finished, the audience will be evaluated (cognitive), which may lead to a positive or negative affinity towards the game (emotional). As a result, the audience will perform further behavioral actions, such as replaying the game, seeking more content, advocating the game, or disengaging.

While this example relates to video games, Figure 1 shows a generalized process representing engagement pathways in consuming various online media. In this process, we can see the transition through antecedents that build towards engagement, from initial attention to involvement, before the behavioral action(s) that defines engagement. The pathways show that the process may invite positive and negative reactions and lead to continued consumption or disengagement. Furthermore, the pathways show the process as cyclical, influenced by value judgments determining the audience's subsequent direction.

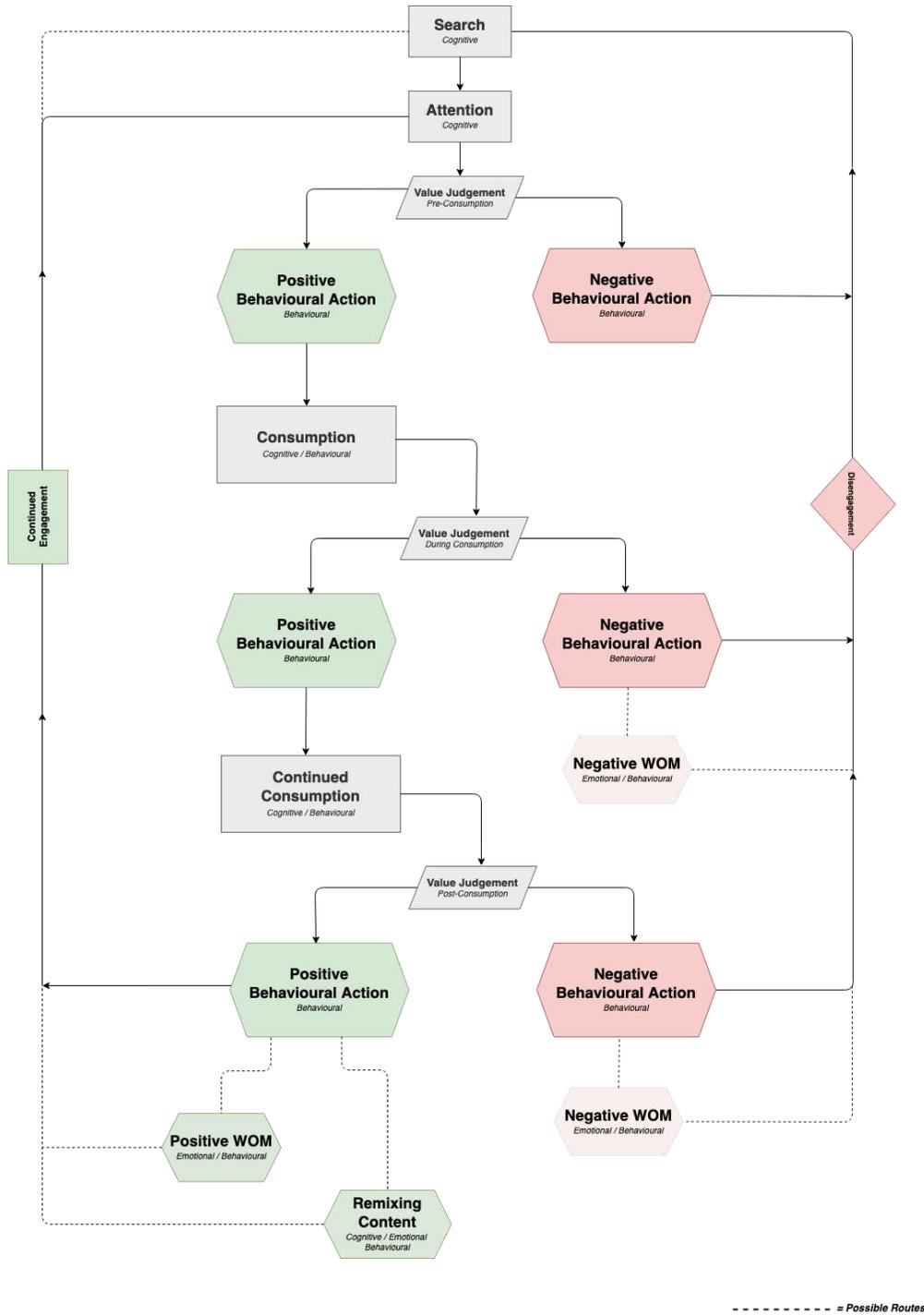


FIGURE 1. Pathways of engagement in online consumption experiences

This process will typically endure beyond a single encounter. Audiences may have several experiences with single or multiple consumption objects through a relationship with a producer. The proliferation of content and the fickle nature of online audiences means these experiences may also occur concerning a particular form of consumption. Rather than a relationship with one producer, the relation-

ship centers on a particular genre, fulfilled by multiple experiences from multiple producers.

During this time, audiences evaluate their experience, which may alter their emotional and behavioral responses and create global engagement evaluations. In a one-off encounter, the audience is still familiarising themselves. However, over time familiarity increases to provide a bet-

ter frame of reference than those with less experience (Bowden, 2009; L. D. Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Therefore, an engagement that endures over time pushes audiences towards DE; relational bonds between the audience and goal object are strong, trust is established, and lasting value is created. In opposition, one-off, short-term engagement forms LE, which might be devoid of value.

Arriving at LE or DE does not mean audiences will remain there. Levels of interest, emotion, and motivation alter over time. Once in a state of DE, an audience may revert to LE for social, personal, or burnout reasons. For example, consider the audience of a music artist. At their peak engagement (DE), they will act out numerous behaviors, including listening to the artist's music, attending live shows, creating fan covers, and engaging in social media. However, these behaviors may cease over time due to evolving tastes, switching to the 'next big thing, or becoming bored (burnout). Following a period of disengagement, interest may re-ignite; the artist may release a new album, the audience may return for nostalgia, or they may rediscover the artist after a break. Throughout this cycle, the audience will have numerous experiences that ebb and flow through layers of engagement between LE and DE.

This temporal nature of engagement, formed by multiple experiences, leads to the proposal that, alongside LE and DE, are light and deep engagement experiences (LEX/DEX). As such, LE/DE refers to the audience's overall global engagement evaluation, while LEX/DEX refers to each singular experience. Akin to LE, LEX is more accessible, less challenging, and less involved, and as such, the value derived from them is low. In opposition, DEX is more challenging; they require more active participation and greater time investment. Therefore, DEX can offer greater value returns and contributions to overall engagement evaluations.

DE/LE and DEX/LEX are entwined. DEX requires DE; greater barriers to entry in terms of challenge, participation, and time require higher levels of attention, trust, and multidimensional manifestations towards the goal object. In opposition, LEX only requires LE; lower barriers to entry mean there is less engagement risk. Encountering a DEX with LE means a consumer may disengage as perceived engagement costs are too high. Additionally, encountering a LEX with DE may result in disengagement as the experience is too routine, and the audience will seek alternatives to meet their needs.

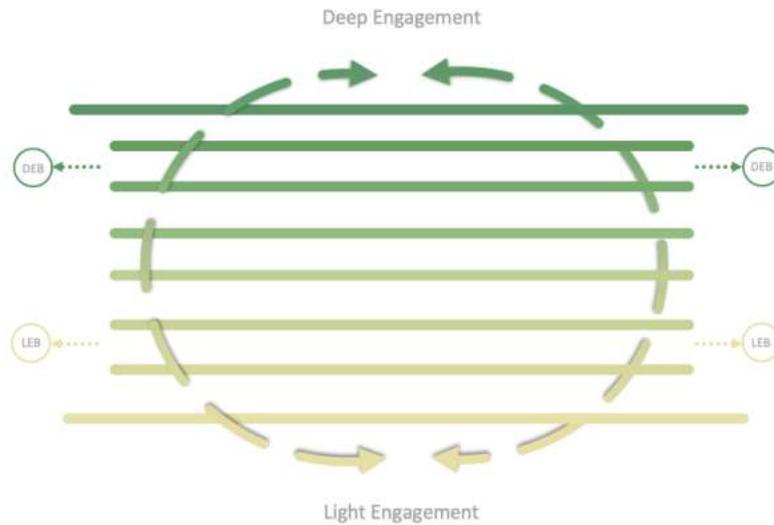
DEX and LEX account for the fact that audience needs and intensity of experiences are seldom constant. As discussed, there may be times when audiences desire LEX to alleviate stress, while at others, DEX is sought for a challenge, self-betterment, or to achieve a flow-like state. Thus, despite

connotations from the name, LEX is not a lesser experience but one best suited to the audience's context. As such, audiences will engage with different experience levels over time and use these to form an overall LE or DE evaluation.

The strong behavioral component of engagement also posits the existence of deep and light engagement behaviors (DEB/LEB). A consumer who has DE or has encountered a DEX will have greater motivation to enact deeper behaviors. For example, creating fan art or paying for online content would constitute a DEB due to increased participation, challenge and cost. Therefore, DE must deem the trade-offs between giving and getting components of value worthwhile. In opposition, the ease of following someone on sites like Twitter means they can be classed as a LEB. As argued by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011), "since people can follow as many users as they like, they also do not have any reason to 'unfollow' anyone". The lack of limits reduces the cognitive investment required to determine the value of following or unfollowing someone, thus reducing the levels of engagement involved. Similar patterns of deep engagement motivating deep behaviors are found by Zhang et al. (2020) in a study of service hospitality encounters.

This section has introduced the concepts of Light and Deep engagement, which define the outer layers of intensity that occur as the audiences engage over time. The addition of engagement experiences and behaviors, which also range from light to deep, account for the temporal and behavioral elements central to engagement. Thus, the audience's position between layers of engagement is constantly shifting, influenced by multiple experiences (DEX/LEX), which result in behavioral action (DEB/LEB) and lead to global evaluations of engagement (DE/LE).

This layered model of engagement is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the transition from light to deep, between which the audience has multiple experiences of varying degrees. These experiences invite action in the form of light and deep engagement behaviors depending on the value derived from the experience. The direction the audience moves is fluid, illustrated by the bi-directional arrows. This accounts for audiences moving back and forth as their experiences and overall engagement alter over time. This model defines the various intensity of engagement not present in existing literature while also capturing its antecedents and consequences. Furthermore, the model highlights the cyclical nature of engagement. This is particularly relevant to online consumption, where the audience, fickle in nature, cycles between multiple objects of consumption, either with a single producer, particular form, or genre of consumption.



**FIGURE 2.** A layered model of audience engagement

## METHODOLOGY

To illustrate this layered model of engagement in practice, a case study is presented next. This case study focuses on the launch of Cartoon Hangover, an online animation channel producing animated shorts and web series. This case study stems from a wider industry-based project conducted by the author, who was embedded in the animation studio producing the cartoon *Ace Discovery* for the channel's launch. The research presented here is therefore based on practice-led research, a naturalistic inquiry where research leads to new understandings of practice (Candy, 2006). The work also draws upon case study design, defined by Yin (2009) as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence (discussed next) and benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions (discussed previously) to guide analysis. This study follows the principles of a case-study design in that it develops insight through the direct observation and experimentation of practice within the real-life context of a working animation studio. In doing so, the study investigates issues about the contemporary phenomenon of digital environments and the practices of developing audiences in these competitive, information-rich platforms.

Following a case study design, insight for this study is based on multiple sources, including the author's reflective observation while situated within the studio, alongside qualitative (YouTube comments) and quantitative data obtained from publicly available and private analytics available to the author (video and social media analytics). Findings from this case study demonstrate the difficulties of developing audience engagement in competitive online environments.

Insight is offered into issues practitioners may face and how these difficulties may be managed.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

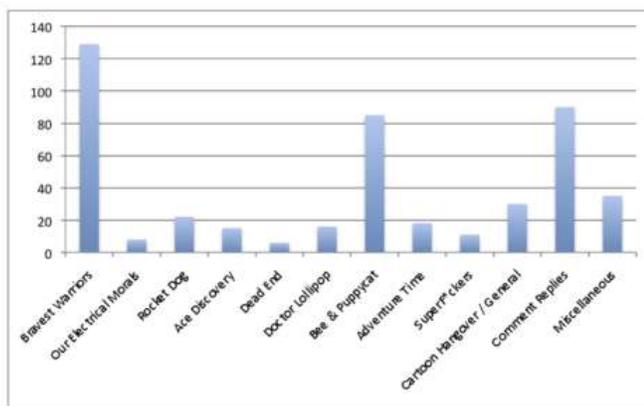
### Setting the Context

Cartoon Hangover was originally launched in 2012 as part of YouTube's \$100 million original channel initiative. The channel is owned by Frederator, a cartoon production company with a track record for producing hit cartoon series, including *Adventure Time*. Cartoon Hangover is part of the Channel Frederator Network that includes 3,000 creators whose work is viewed by 200 million subscribers averaging 3 billion monthly views (Channel Frederator Network, 2020). To look at how audience engagement developed with the channel, this case study focuses on the initial set of cartoons launched on the channel between 2012 and 2014. Cartoon Hangover launched with a series called *Bravest Warriors* by Pendleton Ward, a Well known cartoon director having previously created *Adventure Time*. In the first six months, the channel amassed over 120,000 subscribers. This initial traction was supported by YouTube's channel initiative and existing content precedence stemming from the previous work of Frederator and Pendleton Ward. As established earlier, having an existing relationship with a producer increases the likelihood of future interactions based on the trust and familiarity it develops (L. D. Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). This first series of *Bravest Warriors* ran between November 2012 and March 2013, initially released weekly before switching to a fortnightly schedule. To bridge gaps between the first and second series Cartoon Hangover announced a cartoon 'incubator' series titled *Too Cool!* Cartoons (incubator henceforth). This series was designed to

introduce new original characters and content creators to the Cartoon Hangover audience. The incubator included six one-off shorts, which had the potential to be extended into a series. Each short was made by different creators, ranging from relative unknowns to those who had an existing online presence. The incubator was first announced with a video trailer on 7 March 2013, coinciding with the final episode of Bravest Warriors series one (Cartoon Hangover, 2013).

### Evaluating Reception Towards the Too Cool! Cartoons

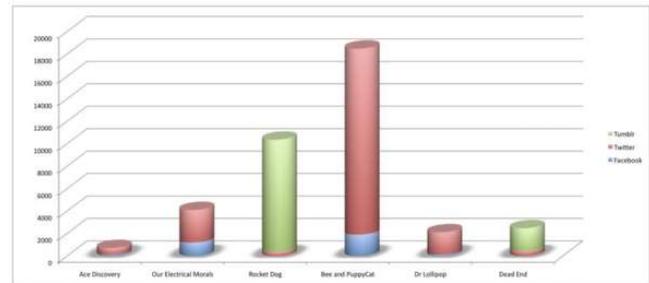
The YouTube launch trailer comments were analyzed to evaluate the reaction toward the incubator cartoons. The analysis focused on which cartoons were mentioned in comments and observing their tone (positive/negative). 565 comments had been received when the analysis was undertaken 1 week after release (Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3.** Too cool! Cartoon launch trailer – Comment distribution

As shown, comments focused on Bravest Warriors with people wanting to see more of the show rather than new cartoons: "your channel is most popular due to bravest warriors. Don't go off on a limb for other cartoons when your best one is still needed to be made" (Ricketts, 2013). This emphasizes how DE supported initial engagement with Pendleton Ward and Bravest Warriors rather than Cartoon Hangover. Therefore, the incubator announcement and waiting for more Bravest Warriors caused disharmony. However, other cartoons received attention, particularly Bee & Puppocat by Natasha Allegri. When the incubator was announced, Allegri had the largest online presence in comparison to the other incubator cartoon creators (Figure 4). This following had been established through her art style and existing content precedence having worked on Adventure Time, as illustrated by the following comment: "Aw sweet, I love Natasha Allegri! She's the one in charge of the Fionna and Cake comic. Her work is dangerously cute" (Cartoon Hangover, 2013b). Thus, anticipation for Bee & PuppyCat stemmed from an existing engagement with Alle-

gri and the design similarities with Bravest Warriors, which creates familiarity and trust to aid the transition of engagement.



**FIGURE 4.** Online presence of too cool! Cartoon creators

In comparison, creators of the other cartoons lacked an online presence and content precedence. This highlights issues with the intangible nature of online content, which, as discussed, can be difficult to evaluate without prior use. Without this frame of reference, audiences rely more on past experiences and previous relationships. Therefore, engagement with other cartoons was tentative.

Also evident are the complexities of engagement and how it flows between layers of LE and DE. Across the channel, Cartoon Hangover is seeking to build engagement around multiple consumption objects. However, the audience will have a variety of motivations for entering the relationship, some of which do not stem from Cartoon Hangover but an affinity with individual creators. Thus, the audience's position between layers of engagement differs for each cartoon and may not transition to Cartoon Hangover.

### Stacking Engagement Experiences

Despite disharmony within the reaction to the incubator cartoons, Cartoon Hangover's initial content strategy was well aligned to encourage movement through layers of engagement towards DE. We can argue that initial engagement began at LE as a new channel. The weekly episode experiences (DEX) enhanced this engagement, contributing to the initial movement towards DE. This engagement transitioned to Bee & Puppocat, again due to the presence of familiarity and further established trust with Cartoon Hangover. This helps create an environment where the audience may be receptive to new cartoons, basing their value determination on the existing precedence of other creators, as evidenced in this audience comment; "No lie, I loved adventure time, and I love the bravest warriors, even more, I will look forward to every release from cartoon hangover, thank you, sir, for making it XD" (Cartoon Hangover, 2013a). Therefore, while the intensity of experiences with the new cartoons might be less (towards LEX), Cartoon Hangover filled a gap between Bravest Warriors series to maintain overall

engagement with the channel.

The mix of experience intensities was also present in the weekly release of content. Between episodes of *Bravest Warriors*, *Cartoon Hangover* maintained engagement by posting promotional materials and fan art on social media. Behind-the-scenes and 'Best of content were also posted on YouTube. This content approach works by combining LEX and DEX, which moves the layers of LE and DE. This mixed approach benefits both audience and the producer, as discussed next.

The cartoon episodes represent a DEX; they are the main value object and motivator for engaging with *Cartoon Hangover*. The costs of engaging with the episodes are also higher; they take longer to consume (5-8 minutes), and the audience must consume multiple episodes to achieve full value. Productions costs and time involved in creating episodes mean they cannot be delivered with greater frequency. Therefore, LEX in the form of behind-the-scenes, promotional, and user-generated content is used to maintain engagement between these DEX episodes. On their own, the smaller LEX would struggle to motivate engagement beyond LE, as they are superficial without the value and context provided by the DEX episodes. *Visa-versa*, the DEX is enhanced by the LEX, which serves to maintain attention and continue the conversation as they move towards a new DEX.

Engagement experiences are stacked together in this process to form the audience's overall engagement. Each experience moves the audience through layers of engagement as intensities ebb and flow. These intensities are important for both producer and the audience. For the producer, constant delivery of DEX would burden resources, while constant LEX would be creatively unfulfilling. For the audience, constant DEX would cause burnout from the time and cognitive effort required to engage, while constant LEX would be mundane. This varying of intensities is consistent with research by Ariely, who argues that experiences with varied intensities and those that build upwards leave better positive evaluations (Ariely, 1998). Thus, the stacking of LEX towards each DEX episode provides a variation that 'ramps up to a deeper overall evaluation.

This pattern of stacked engagement continued with the incubator cartoons. These offered a bridge that maintained engagement until series two of *Bravest Warriors*. Providing a combination of the DEX cartoon shorts, connected by smaller, more frequent LEX content (behind-the-scenes content and teaser trailers). However, in comparison to the weekly release of *Bravest Warriors*, incubator cartoons were released monthly, increasing reliance on LEX content.

Also, as each incubator cartoon was standalone, upwards movement through layers of engagement was limited as the focal consumption object changed each time. Consequently, the audience became frustrated, as noted by this YouTube comment on the *Ace Discovery* cartoon:

"This would be great an all if only the people at *Cartoon Hangover* would work on producing the second episode of any of the other series, they have instead of releasing 1 episode and then 4 features about it" (Tarragon Spice, 2013)

This comment evidences the need to balance intensities of experience to avoid burnout on one end and boredom on the other.

### Paradoxes of Engagement

These comments also highlight difficulties in maintaining engagement upon platforms of abundance where audiences can seek alternatives if a service no longer provides sufficient content (Rashid et al., 2006; Schaedel & Clement, 2010). This can create a paradox of engagement, which occurs when producers seek engagement to establish an identity and monetize original content. However, to generate engagement, a regular content stimulus and thus resources to produce them are required, creating a paradox of which comes first. As such, producers may face vicious cycles of non-engagement that are hard to break for small producers. As discussed earlier, without existing content precedence, the intangible nature of online content makes evaluation difficult, inviting initial attention. Furthermore, this case study shows that even with the backing of *Frederator* and the YouTube Channel initiative, maintaining a sustained content stimulus that satisfies an online audience is difficult and, thus, even harder for smaller creators with limited resources.

This paradox is further evidenced in promotional material used for the launch of *Ace Discovery*. This included a Facebook page maintained by the show's production studio, independent from *Cartoon Hangover*'s main social channels. One promotional post invited the audience to design a space suit for the cartoon's main character. Over three weeks, only seven entries were received alongside seven self-created entries. The self-created entries were produced to avoid the paradox of non-engagement, as audiences are argued to be reluctant to act if there are signs of inactivity or if tools for participation are unclear (Kahn, 1990; Ksiazek et al., 2016; Schaedel & Clement, 2010). This reluctance to be the first to act heightens the paradox due to a need for user activity to initiate subsequent activity, again questioning which comes first.

### Matching Levels of Engagement with Desired Engagement Behaviours

Despite the intentions of the self-created entries, participation was still low. This can be explained by the audience only having LE with Ace Discovery. As noted earlier, while overall engagement with Cartoon Hangover might have been deeper, engagement with the new shows was tentative. Promotional material used for Ace Discovery was LEX, aimed at creating awareness. Therefore, until its full release, there was little content to create DE.

Creating fan art can be described as a DEB due to the increased effort involved in creation. Thus, the costume challenge was presented too early and created a mismatch between the requested DEB and LE of the audience. Those who did contribute were all within the director's first-degree network, engaged by default due to the personal connection of their relationship. This personal connection provides the trust and motivation to build the required levels of engagement for the DEB.

This mismatch of engagement is further illustrated by the voting process used to decide the contest winner. Compared to the DEB of designing the costume, commenting on voting is a LEB, with less participatory action required. As a result, engagement was much greater, with over 100 votes. Also, in contrast to the lack of costume entries received by Ace Discovery, calls to action for 'Fan Art Friday' on the main Cartoon Hangover social channels received consistent submissions. In particular, many submissions were for Bravest Warriors and Bee & PuppyCat, where engagement sat towards the upper DE layer. This level of engagement was heightened by the timing of calls for submission, which occurred the day after episodes were released. The increased value of the DEX episode provides greater potential for DE and the motivation required for the DEB.

Its higher viewing figures evidence continued DE with Bee & PuppyCat. The cartoon had over 200,000 more views a year after launch than the other incubator cartoons. Building on this engagement, Cartoon Hangover launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a full series. The campaign surpassed its 600,000 target, raising 872,133 with over 18,000 contributions, making it the most-backed animation project on Kickstarter. The campaign's success provides further evidence of DE motivating to support DEB, this time a willingness to pay for content. Engagement with Bee & PuppyCat was consistent from the outset, with the audience expressing existing engagement with the creator and anticipation for the show as soon as it was announced. This was enhanced by the initial episode that provided a DEX to push the audience through layers of engagement. These factors

offered several determinants deemed important in motivating to overcome the ambiguity and uncertainty of creative crowdfunding campaigns, including established social networks and existing content precedence (Hobbs, Grigore, & Molesworth, 2016). By launching the Kickstarter campaign after the first episode, when engagement is heightened, Cartoon Hangover was able to motivate the crowdfunding, DEB. Since the crowdfunding campaign's success, the series has received millions of views per episode. However, despite this success, difficulties were faced with it taking three years for the full first series to be released. Additionally, a second series cited as being due in 2019 is yet to be released. This first series was released over two years, initially on YouTube, before moving to VRV, a subscription-only platform (episodes were released on YouTube later). Cartoon Hangover cited production costs not matching the revenue gained through merchandise sales and YouTube advertising as reasons for this switch. Yet this delay and move to a region-limited subscription platform caused frustration among the audience, who could not easily engage anymore (Cartoon Hangover, 2016).

This further illustrates the difficulties of maintaining engagement online, where audiences desire easy and consistent access to content. This cannot be easy to satisfy due to the resources involved in consistently producing DEX. Cartoon Hangover's difficulties are despite revenue raised by the Kickstarter campaign, YouTube adverts, and merchandise sales. This highlights the scale of the problems facing smaller content creators with fewer resources, thus heightening the risk of facing paradoxes of engagement. Existing relationships and established content precedence are important factors in initiating and moving audiences through the layers of engagement. Yet, this can be difficult for smaller or new creators to provide, as demonstrated by the other incubator cartoons, which received less engagement and no further development after the initial short. Add to this the need for consistency to satisfy audience needs, and it can be increasingly hard to break paradoxes of engagement and establish an identity in highly competitive online environments without significant resources.

### CONCLUSION

This article proposes a conceptual understanding of engagement relevant to the nature of online platforms. Drawing on wider literature introduces a layered model of engagement that defines the intensities of engagement with outer layers moving from light through to deep engagement. Furthermore, this model encompasses the temporal and behavioral dimensions central to engagement by introducing

the notions of light and deep engagement experiences and behaviors.

The Cartoon Hangover case study evidences this model of engagement in practice. This includes how engagement may transition between consumption objects, a need to stack experiences of different intensities together for the benefit of both produce and audience, and showing how engagement levels need to map to desired engagement behaviors. In addition, issues of non-engagement, which can be particularly troublesome for smaller content creators, are introduced. This demonstrates engagement's complexities and shows there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Producers must be aware of the needs and goals of their audience and have a content strategy that can blend experiences of varying intensities. Furthermore, the case study highlights how success in these environments is variable and unguaranteed. Rather than level the playing field for all creators

to compete, digital environments are often led by rich-get-richer ecosystems due to the resources required to manage and sustain engagement.

Further work is invited to develop this conceptualization of engagement and its application to different practice areas beyond the context of online cartoons shown here. Continued exploration should consider the different components, including the further definition of what constitutes a DEX/LEX or DEB/LEB. A deeper understanding of how the audience enters or moves through layers of engagement, including how they might stack multiple experiences together, also provide fruitful avenues for further research. Furthermore, exploration of the paradoxes of engagement, including the subsequent impact on creators and methods and practices through which they can be circumvented, would offer valuable insight to practitioners.

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