Social Media as a Factor in Tourism Attraction
A Case Study

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Engagement *Social Media* *Cities* *Tourism* *Instagram*	*The field of tourism is one in which social networks have had a considerable impact, both in terms of enabling users to research potential destinations and document their experiences during their travels. Consequently, various tourist destinations have successfully established their positioning and attractiveness within the digital space.* *A key concept in this field is that of user engagement. This article analyses the official tourism account of the city of Valencia on Instagram. The account was examined over the course of the year 2022, and 362 posts were analysed based on twenty parameters. The study then proceeded to evaluate the account's ability to generate user reactions in terms of likes, comments and feedback. In the following discussion, the implications for the strategy to promote the tourist attraction of the destination will be considered.*

1. Introduction

The advent of social networks has had a profound impact on the tourism sector, effectively transforming online platforms such as Instagram into pivotal spaces for the promotion of destinations and the facilitation of direct interaction with users. The capacity of the networks to transmit visually appealing images has enabled tourist destinations to cultivate their image and capture the attention of potential visitors. This phenomenon has been further compounded by the mounting significance of the visual experience in the decision-making process concerning travel, with Instagram emerging as an optimal medium for the portrayal of iconic locations, authentic local experiences, and the lifestyles associated with specific destinations (Kusumowidagdo et al., 2023).

In particular, the concept of engagement, which measures the degree of user involvement through interactions such as likes, comments and feedback, has emerged as a key factor in digital tourism competitiveness. Engagement has emerged as a pivotal metric for evaluating the efficacy of tourism promotion strategies on social media platforms (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2024; Zaib Abbasi et al., 2023).

In the aftermath of the pandemic, there has been a resurgence in tourism, resulting in heightened competition among destinations. This has compelled cities to recalibrate their digital marketing strategies. A growing body of research has underscored the pivotal role of social media in the recovery, attraction, and promotion of tourism destinations (Ai et al., 2023; Ghosh & Mukherjee, 2023). As conventional destinations encounter saturation and growing tensions between tourists and residents, there is an imperative for more sophisticated strategies that accentuate the distinct character of each city and promote tourism that is more sustainable.

Although there has been some exploration of the impact of social media on destination promotion (Abbasi et al., 2024; Armutcu et al., 2023; Sano et al., 2024there is a paucity of research addressing the differences between cities in terms of content strategies and their effects on different forms of interaction (likes, comments, feedback) (Bonsón et al., 2017). In particular, there is a paucity of information that directly connects specific types of content (such as architecture, culture, events, museums or gastronomic experiences) with differentiated forms of engagement in a tourism context. This is a gap in the literature that this study aims to address, applying a methodology that has been applied and contrasted for other European cities (Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2021; Tugores-Ques & Bonilla-Quijada, 2023) as well as for other Spanish cities (Tugores-Ques et al., 2023). The results of this study can serve as a basis for suggestions on how to optimise the digital strategies of tourist destinations. It is important to emphasise the particularities of each destination, value its idiosyncrasy and personality, and recognise its ability to attract and retain the attention of users. The present approach is complementary to other approaches to analysis on how to enhance elements such as the assets of cities in various dimensions as elements of tourism promotion (de la Calle-Vaquero & García-Hernández, 2023; Rodríguez-Pose & Hardy, 2021). In the case of Valencia, the presence in its official tourism promotion account on Instagram of 361 posts (practically one per day) during the year 2022 represents a relevant critical mass for the commitment to this promotional channel, with a significant volume of interactions, followers and visitors.

This comprehensive review facilitates a more extensive evaluation of the most efficacious content types and strategies for generating engagement on social networks, with a particular focus on Instagram, a platform that prioritises visual content, rendering it an optimal medium for promoting tourist destinations that depend heavily on their visual appeal. Images of landscapes, monuments, cultural activities, events and other characteristic elements of cities tend to capture the attention of users, generating emotions and a desire to visit these places. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of research that has highlighted the capacity of tourism images to attract users and generate engagement (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

It is important to acknowledge the substantial global user base of Instagram. According to projections published in 2024, the platform is expected to reach approximately 1.44 billion monthly active users in 2025, representing around 31% of global internet users (Statista, 2024). This social network maintains significant penetration among young and middle-aged individuals, a key demographic segment for tourism. Its popularity enables tourist destinations to reach a broad and diverse audience, reinforcing its role as a powerful tool for tourism marketing. Research has demonstrated that Instagram is one of the platforms with the highest capacity to generate interactions, such as likes, comments and feedback. The visual and instantaneous nature of Instagram facilitates a rapid and emotional response from users,

allowing tourism accounts to effectively measure the interest and satisfaction of their followers (Hudson et al., 2020).

Instagram's functionality extends beyond the sharing of static images, encompassing interactive features such as Stories, Reels, and polls. These supplementary functionalities broaden the range of ways in which tourism accounts can interact with their audience, thereby promoting more dynamic and constant engagement (Kamboj & Sharma, 2023). Furthermore, Instagram facilitates the co-creation of content through direct interaction with users, who can share their own images and tourism experiences using hashtags and tagging official destination accounts. This co-creation enables tourism destinations to leverage user-generated content to fortify their brand image and enhance their visibility (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

The present study employs a content analysis methodology that has been utilised in research on tourism engagement. This systematic approach, as previously outlined in the extant literature, is employed in this analysis to examine the official tourism account of the city of Valencia on the Instagram platform. The analysis encompasses a total of 361 publications, it should be noted that the present study did not comprise a sample, but rather all the posts published during the entire year of 2022. These publications have been classified according to 28 items, including architecture, cultural activities, gastronomy, transport and reuse of user-generated photos, among others. These items are presented in Table 1.

The primary objective of this research endeavour is to identify the factors that contribute to maximising engagement on the official tourism Instagram account of the city of Valencia. The objective of this study is to ascertain which content and visual strategies result in elevated levels of user interaction, with a view to optimising the digital marketing practices of Spanish tourist destinations. In addition to the identification of content types that engender elevated levels of engagement, it is imperative to address the following issues, which have emerged in the course of analysis applied to other cities: firstly, the role of items that reflect idiosyncratic aspects of the personality of the tourist destination (singularities, in the case of Valencia, clearly linked to events such as Fallas or In a broader sense, the concept encompasses a range of features associated with a vibrant Mediterranean city). These include the potential role of user-generated content reuse and other elements of interaction, such as soliciting feedback from users ('search for complicity') and the potential function of posts with content that straddles the line between information and direct advertising by certain establishments.

The utilisation of social media not only facilitates the promotion of the unique personality of each destination but also enables the co-creation of value between tourists and the managers of official accounts, which can amplify the perception of authenticity and closeness to the visitor (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2023). In this sense, engagement is presented as a mechanism of "digital seduction" that directly influences the decisions of travellers, who seek idiosyncratic and personalised experiences in their tourist destinations.

The remainder of this study is organised as follows: section 2 presents the theoretical framework of the research, which addresses the role of social networks in attracting and retaining users of tourist destinations. Section 3 provides a comprehensive exposition of the research methodology employed in this study, while Section 4 presents the results obtained from the research. Finally, Section 5 offers a conclusion to the study and puts forward suggestions for future research directions.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section addresses the central notion of customer engagement, with particular reference to tourism (2.1); discusses some aspects of building a city's image or brand as a tourism destination to achieve engagement through social media (2.2); and how to connect the characteristics or facets of the city's image on visual social media such as Instagram with its ability to generate engagement in the form of user responses (2.3).

2.1. Customer Commitment

The symbiotic relationship between tourism and social media represents a seminal phenomenon in recent times, precipitating novel methodologies in marketing analysis and policy formulation. From the public's perspective, the search for information prior to trips and tourist visits is increasingly carried

out through the Internet and social networks. This phenomenon occurs not only during but also after the experience, with the utilisation of networks, the uploading of photographs, comments, and other such content, serving as a potent dimension that fosters satisfaction and experience. This process facilitates the dissemination of pertinent pieces of information and evaluation to other potential users (Filieri et al., 2021). It is evident that public institutions have been compelled to confront these emergent realities, metamorphosing their promotional channels and strategies in accordance with the evolving behavioural patterns. Achieving a higher degree of user/customer engagement on social networks has become a key objective for tourism promotion.

The notion of engagement is a particularly multifaceted concept, having been the focus of study in a wide range of fields, including psychology, sociology, organisational behaviour and marketing. A comprehensive definition asserts that it is "the attitude, behaviour, and level of connection between customers and the company" (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; p. 498). Capturing the attention of customers is a prerequisite for fostering engagement. The measurement of these constructs can be achieved via a number of methods, including those that draw upon cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions (Vivek et al., 2014). In addition to these approaches, other studies have identified the utility of functional and innovative dimensions in measuring these constructs (Carlson et al., 2019). Other studies have focused on the visual dimensions based on the power of the image (Mariani et al., 2018), which is a particularly salient aspect on Instagram.

2.2. Building the Image of a Tourist Destination

The rapid rise of social networks and their multiple implications for tourism are so evident that further justification is hardly required (Page & Duignan, 2023). The dimensions of this phenomenon are diverse. From the perspective of the users, the acquisition of information prior to the selection of a tourist destination has become an essential activity. Furthermore, utilising the tourist visit as a medium to articulate experiences in textual and graphic messages has become increasingly prevalent on social networks. From the perspective of those responsible for tourist destinations, the shaping of one's own image necessarily involves the use of social networks. According to Low (2017), the image projected through translated tourist brochures plays a key role in travelers' decision-making, significantly influencing their perceptions and choices. It is therefore incumbent upon Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) to consider these channels as a priority. In the context of intensifying competition among tourism destinations, the necessity to optimise the use of social media has become increasingly imperative.

The theoretical underpinning of the importance of these mechanisms combines several elements. In essence, the analysis encompasses two distinct yet interconnected facets of brand management. Firstly, there is the creation of a distinct "brand image," characterised by its unique personality and identity. Secondly, there is the examination of the interactions between the brand image or identity, as crafted by the promotional team, and the perception of that image by users or potential customers. This dynamic process, characterised by a continuous back-and-forth exchange, is conceptualised as a "circular, dialogic" process (Tugores-Ques et al., 2023). Specifically, research in these areas has analysed the content published by Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and by users. Of particular interest has been content involving certain types of interactions between the two. Research conducted by Conti & Lexhagen (2020) examined the ways in which users characterised their tourism experiences through textual and "visual" means, thereby highlighting the similarity between the two formats. In order to provide an example of the application of this concept, Giglio et al. (2019) utilised photographs captured by tourists on Flickr. De Rosa et al. (2019) analysed institutional tourism websites, such as TripAdvisor, while Mariani et al. (2018) used Facebook. The fact that this social network is increasingly being used by official tourism organisations in countries, territories and cities is a reason to apply our research to it. Other aspects of interest are the prominent role of interactions between DMOs and the "user-generated content" (UGC) that is sometimes used by authorities in their posts. This gives an additional dimension to comments and likes from followers in the study of interactions between administrations and the public.

Furthermore, there has been an increasing degree of detail in the analysis of interactions. A fundamental aspect that must be given due consideration is the characterisation of the typology of the content included in each of the messages or publications. In considering the multifaceted factors that

influence a user's decision to visit a destination, the extant literature has underscored the pivotal role of symbolic elements in shaping the distinctiveness of a locale. This notion of 'authenticity' (Rather & Sharma, 2019) or 'city brand personality' (Priporas et al., 2019) has been explicitly referenced in this context. Several lists of 'traditional elements' applied to cities have been published, including those of Choi et al. (2007), de Rosa et al. (2019) and Stepchenkova & Zhan (2013). These lists include interesting comparisons between tourists' social media posts and images from official accounts, and their implications. As explained below, the current practice of reposting users' photos on official accounts serves as a "bridge" between the two sources —user and official.

2.3. Connection Between Attributes and Commitment Generation

The multifaceted nature of the concept of commitment, as highlighted in the extant literature, opens multiple avenues for its quantification, using various approaches and measurement elements. The capacity to elicit or instigate user responses represents a highly efficacious approach, with a range of features contributing to this engagement. The assessment of this phenomenon is often determined through the quantitative analysis of interactions such as likes, comments and shares, as observed in various social networks. However, studies have also emphasised the pivotal role of the visual dimension in this context (Mariani et al., 2018). The present article establishes a correlation between the characteristics or elements of the visual dimension that are prominent on Instagram and the generation of engagement in the form of user responses/interactions. The objective of this study is to elucidate which characteristics in posts most induce interactions, such as likes and comments, beyond the aggregate number of interactions. The study will mark a statistically significant difference between the presence of each characteristic and its absence. It is evident that the primary specific dimension of this article is the combination of the aforementioned line of research with the categorisation of the attributes of each post and the generation of interactions. Furthermore, given that the degree of 'engagement' involved in comments and likes is different (a more 'impulsive' response in likes, a more 'elaborate' participation in comments), a distinction is made throughout the article between the two categories.

The present study aims to address the research gap identified by Rather & Hollebeek (2021), who emphasised that, despite the significance of customer engagement (CE) and experience as research priorities, empirical evidence on these concepts and their associations remains limited in several dimensions. On the one hand, it is based on some of the categories (28 variables) proposed in several previous analyses on the ability (effectiveness) to induce responses (indicators/symptoms of engagement) of the different families of variables related to image content and advertising paper. However, the present article offers an integrated formulation, with a common statistical methodology, to incorporate all these "families" and to add, in a coherent way, those of interaction, in its double aspect of soliciting a response and using user publications. Conversely, most studies refer to a specific destination or tourism market, highlighting its unique characteristics. The present article introduces a comparative methodology that facilitates the identification of both common elements and specific features associated with the characteristics —or "personality"— of each destination, as highlighted in Gupta et al. (2022) or Hollebeek (2018). This methodology can be used to assess the most generic and idiosyncratic components in terms of their effectiveness in generating responses and engagement.

Conversely, the concept of engagement is broad and multifaceted. However, in order to facilitate its quantification and comparability across official city accounts, the present study has chosen to focus on the number of likes and comments generated by the presence of certain features in posts (as opposed to their absence) as indicators of engagement. In more detail, given the different types of engagement implied by these two forms of response – likes being more immediate and emotional, and comments being more elaborated and evaluative – the two categories are differentiated throughout the article (Krämer et al., 2021).

3. Research Methodology

The design of this study is exploratory, non-experimental and cross-sectional, while the methodology employed is content analysis (Krippendorff & Wolfson, 1990). Grunig and Hunt (1984) define it as "a quantitative and systematic method of determining the content of media, clippings about an organisation and publications produced by a public relations department" (p. 293).

The fieldwork was conducted over the course of the year from 1 January to 31 December 2022, with the execution of the study occurring as of 1 April 2024, following a sufficient period to allow all posts to reach a maximum level of reaction. A comprehensive analysis was conducted on 361 posts, which, it should be noted, does not constitute a sample but rather encompasses the entirety of the posts in question. This analysis was undertaken with the objective of assessing their capacity to elicit user interaction, as measured by the number of likes, comments and feedback received. Each publication was classified according to 28 parameters related to visual, cultural, architectural and tourist services aspects, allowing the researchers to identify which type of content generated the most engagement. Consequently, for each post, the relevance to each of the 28 categories was identified, and the number of reactions that the publication generated, in terms of likes, comments and feedback, was counted. The comments were counted numerically, without undergoing analysis of sentiment, since, as these are international accounts, the comments could appear in different languages, which would be unintelligible to the coder. The sentiment analysis of images published is not conducted, as it is recognised that this analysis is more suitable for images created by users (User Generated Content). This is due to the assumption that the sentiment expressed in images published by the brand will invariably be positive.

In order to analyse the engagement generated by the official Instagram account of the city of Valencia, a total of 28 variables were studied. These include "user_photo" images and elements of visual interest such as "panoramic views", "religious architecture" and "civil architecture". A range of publications related to "cultural activity" and "alternative art" have also been evaluated, as well as those related to "folklore", "parks and gardens", "museums", "theatres and cinemas", "events", and recreational spaces such as "amusement parks" and "monuments". Furthermore, the content of the posts was analysed for the presence of "bars and restaurants" and "markets", as well as for the dissemination through the account of images of "posters", "public roads" or "public transport". A range of other variables were included in the study, with a particular focus on the promotion of catering and consumption in establishments within the city. These variables included "shopping", which reflected purchases and different types of advertising (hotels, restaurants and institutional). Finally, the analysis encompassed variations in light, encompassing daytime, night-time, dusk, and dawn photographs, in addition to the depiction of animals, people, and natural elements. This set of variables enables the evaluation of the type of content that generates the most interaction and attraction among the account's followers.

4. Results

As illustrated in Table 1, the results of the statistical analyses conducted on the posts on the official Instagram account of the city of Valencia are summarised. Each table displays the items that have been found to induce significantly higher (column +) or lower (column -) levels of engagement in each of the three types of user reactions, ranging from the most 'impulsive' (like) to the most 'elaborate' (comment and feedback). Each item displays the degree of statistical significance (ranging from *** to *). It is to be noted that only items which generate a statistically significant result (at least at the * level) in the bivariate analyses are presented in each table.

Table 1. Bivariate and multivariate results.

- LIKES	+ LIKES
Theatres and cinemas	Panoramic view
Hotel advertising *	Cultural activity
Nocturno * Nocturno * Nocturno * Nocturno * Nocturno * Nocturno	Museums
Nocturno	Nature

- COMMENTS	+ COMMENTS
Posters *	Museums* Museums* Museums
Hotel advertising *	Panoramic**
	Cultural activity * Cultural activity * Cultural activity * Cultural activity * Cultural activity * Cultural

	activity * Cultural activity * Cultural activity * Cultural activity
- FEEDBACK	**+ FEEDBACK**
Institutional advertising *	Events Sunset-sunrise Monuments *

Source: Own elaboration (2025).

The analysis of the table of results demonstrates the significant role played by the cultural dimensions in the case of Valencia, with a notable level of engagement in the form of 'likes' for items related to cultural activity and museums, as well as in the comments raised by both variables. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the most significant events generate a statistically significant degree of feedback. These characteristics, therefore, form part of the "personality" of the city's tourist attractions on Instagram. It is important to note that, in comparison with previous studies carried out for other cities, in the case of Valencia the cultural dimension – in a broad sense – is particularly significant. It is imperative to emphasise the variables that induce a greater number of responses through this channel, given the higher level of involvement associated with responses via feedback.

In alignment with the findings from previous studies conducted in other urban centres, monuments have been found to elicit substantial positive feedback, a phenomenon that is also observed in panoramic views and references to nature. Furthermore, a greater proportion of comments are attributed to panoramic views, and a higher volume of feedback is received regarding sunset and sunrise elements. In accordance with the findings of preceding studies in the domain of urban tourism, "negative" responses (indicating reduced engagement) have been observed for select items that could be construed as advertising (e.g., various types of establishments, including institutional advertising), or instruments such as posters. A "classic" theme thus emerges regarding the coexistence between the informative/advertising dimensions and the potential of Instagram to elicit more emotional responses, more "persuasive", for potential travellers and tourists. On the one hand, the "informative value" of some reference services for tourists, such as those of hotels and restaurants, is noted. On the other hand, it is pointed out that perhaps the Instagram user does not value being "induced/pressured" to contract these services, at least through this channel (possibly they are informed by other channels).

A non-result that merits further discussion, in light of prior analyses conducted in other cities, is the absence of significance in the elements of more explicit interaction with social network users, in the form of a 'bonus' for the reuse of photos from them. The incorporation of 'user photos' in online content has been examined in several studies (Confetto et al., 2023; Encalada-Abarca et al., 2024) as a method of fostering potentially valuable connections. However, the evidence from other cities is inconsistent, and there are no specific results from Valencia, which suggests the potential for a more focused and selective approach in future.

The results of this study serve to reinforce the notion that social networking platforms, with Instagram being a prime example, play a pivotal role in the promotion of tourism and the generation of user engagement. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies that have emphasised the growing relevance of social media in the selection of tourism destinations (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Research has demonstrated that tourism cities can differentiate themselves through the management of their social media profiles, thereby enhancing certain personality traits of their destination to attract diverse tourist demographics (Pike & Page, 2014).

In accordance with the hypotheses proposed, the study substantiates the notion that the incorporation of specific visual and thematic components can substantially enhance engagement, as evidenced by metrics such as likes, comments, and feedback. These results are consistent with research that claims images of tourist destinations have an emotional impact on users, generating greater interaction on social networks (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015). Moreover, the study by Hudson et al. (2016) emphasises the significance of authenticity in images, a phenomenon that was also observed in our study, particularly in instances of image reuse by users, thereby promoting the collaborative creation of content.

A noteworthy finding that emerges from the distinct characteristics of the Valencia results in comparison to those of other cities is the heterogeneity in the engagement generated. This suggests that not all strategies may be equally effective for all destinations. This finding aligns with prior studies that have indicated that contextual factors, such as local culture and the predominant type of tourism, may influence the efficacy of social media campaigns (Hasan & Sohail, 2021).

However, the study also highlights that not all visual elements generate the same level of engagement in the different forms of interaction (likes, comments and feedback). This finding is consistent with the observations of Gulfraz et al. (2022), who indicated that likes tend to reflect more impulsive reactions, while comments require a greater degree of reflection and emotional involvement. The present study lends further support to this hypothesis, observing that visually striking images (e.g., architectural monuments or iconic landscapes) tend to receive a greater number of likes, while posts that engage users directly (e.g., questions or requests for feedback) generate more comments and elaborate responses.

5. Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive overview of how the strategic use of Instagram by the official tourism account of a major Spanish city influences user engagement, highlighting important findings and contributions to the literature on digital marketing and tourism. Firstly, it confirms that social networks, and in particular Instagram, are a key tool for tourism promotion, as pointed out by Sigala et al. (2023) and Zeng & Gerritsen (2023). The visual capacity and interactive potential of this platform enables destinations to promote their attributes and establish emotional connections with users through images that convey the "personality" of the destination (Adamış & Pınarbaşı, 2022).

A salient finding is that not all types of content generate equivalent levels of engagement, which is consistent with prior research suggesting that certain visual and narrative elements better engage users (Kim et al., 2024). The conventional approach suggests that images emphasising architectural and cultural elements tend to garner more favourable responses, indicating a heightened visual appeal. However, it has been demonstrated that posts which invite reflection or interaction, such as those which include calls to action, tend to generate more comments and feedback, suggesting a greater degree of cognitive engagement on the part of the user. This differentiation between engagement types is significant and reinforces the need to diversify content strategies according to the destination's marketing objectives. The analysis of the Valencia account demonstrates the efficacy of cultural items and those pertaining to events associated with the city's identity.

This is particularly pertinent when considering the recognised importance, in an increasingly competitive environment, of tailoring social media strategies to the particularities of each destination. As has been observed in other studies, the perceived "personality" of a city can be a determining factor in its ability to attract different segments of tourists (Xiang et al., 2023). In this sense, cities that demonstrated higher levels of engagement exhibited more effective management of their digital identity, a factor which positioned them more competitively within the tourism sector.

This study also contributes to the debate on the co-creation of value between tourist destinations and users, suggesting a possible way for the city studied to deepen strategies in this regard, which are not sufficiently used. The reuse of content generated by visitors themselves, such as tagged or shared photos, has been demonstrated to reinforce the sense of belonging and connection with the destination, thereby favouring a closer relationship between the tourist and the city. This coincides with research approaches in the theory of co-creation of value in social networks (Munar & Jacobsen, 2022).

It is important to note that the effectiveness of engagement on Instagram is not solely dependent on the visual content; the ability of cities to construct an authentic narrative that aligns with their unique identity is also a contributing factor. This development has the potential to generate improved opportunities with respect to the attraction and retention of tourists, which in turn could positively impact the promotion of tourism. However, the limitations of the study are acknowledged, including the absence of analysis on alternative platforms and the potential influence of Instagram algorithms. These limitations encourage future research to explore these aspects in greater depth. Along the same lines of a broader research project to further explore the potential of social networks as a factor of tourist attraction, it is worth mentioning the analysis of other networks and platforms, including for example Tik-Tok, as well as more explicit and systematic comparative analyses between the results of the

analysis of the accounts of different cities, which could be relevant both to identify the specific elements of "personality" of each destination and for an eventual "benchmarking" in terms of strategies, in view of the cases in which higher levels of engagement are being achieved.

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