

Understanding the Interconnected Dynamics of Social Media Marketing, Consumer Engagement, and Brand Equity: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

In today's digital age, social media's vast reach and direct consumer interactions make it pivotal for marketers. However, research linking specific social media marketing (SMM) elements to brand-related outcomes remains limited. This study, grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response model and Uses and Gratification Theory, explores how SMM elements impact consumer-brand engagement (CBE) across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, considering varying consumer trust levels. The study also proposes a relationship between CBE and brand equity, offering theoretical and practical insights to enhance brand value through effective social media strategies.

Keywords

Social media marketing, brand equity, consumer-brand engagement, SMM, brand management

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Introduction

The study of consumer–brand engagement (hereafter, CBE) is gaining popularity in both practitioner and scholarly communities (Dwivedi, 2015; Obilo et al., 2021). It has been recognized as a focal area for investigation in the realm of marketing research (Hollebeek, 2019). This is due to its potential to positively impact the development of marketing and relationship variables, including but not limited to brand equity (Algharabat et al., 2020; Hepola et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2019), customer satisfaction (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019), brand loyalty (Adhikari & Panda, 2019; Kaur et al., 2020), and purchase intention (Verma, 2021).

Identified as a major brand-building mechanism (Cheung et al., 2022; Hollebeek et al., 2014), CBE is defined as “consumers’ brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity related to focal brand interactions” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 149). This engagement arises from the commencement of interactions between consumers and brands, forming the basis of their relationships. As social media has emerged nowadays and has become the most effective channel of communication for initiating such interactions, companies are using it to target consumers effectively. These interactions, aided by digital/social media, help develop consumer’s relationships with brands (Islam et al., 2018; Taylor & Carlson, 2021), forming CBE (Leckie et al., 2022; Schultz, 2017).

Social media technologies facilitate higher levels of interaction within well-knit consumer networks, allowing brands and consumers to share ideas, create unique brand narratives, and generate value (Gensler et al., 2013; Sashi, 2012). Consequently, the relevance of social media marketing (SMM) has surged, necessitating the design of effective strategies to attract and retain empowered consumers (Barger et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2010).

Given its effectiveness, marketers are increasingly incorporating SMM into their comprehensive marketing strategies to foster CBE and build valuable, enduring relationships with consumers (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Social media-based marketing communications have thus become essential for developing strong CBE.

Since CBE plays a vital role in forming strategic brand choices (Algharabat et al., 2020), marketers are curious about how it develops, grows, and is sustained (Harrigan et al., 2017; Wang & Lee, 2020). Thus, there are research solicitations to produce conceptual models and empirical evidence to reinforce the theoretical foundations that support CBE (Leckie et al., 2016), specifically concerning its drivers and outcomes (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Empirical research requires understanding the concept in different nomological networks informed by varied theoretical perspectives.

Previous research has linked SMM with various dimensions of consumer engagement, such as consumption, contribution, and creation (Cheung et al., 2021a; Liu et al., 2021; Mishra, 2019). However, to the best of the author’s knowledge, there has been a scarcity of studies examining the connection between SMM and Hollebeek et al.’s (2014) cognitive processing, affection, and activation dimensions, with the notable exception of the study by Cheung et al. (2020b). Additionally, while the subsequent effects of CBE on brand knowledge (Cheung et al., 2020b), brand loyalty (Aljuhmani et al., 2023), perceived brand value (Cheung et al., 2021b),

co-creation and repurchase intention (Cheung et al., 2020a), ongoing search behavior (Cheung et al., 2021c) have been examined across various contexts such as smartphones, airlines, and wearable healthcare technology, the specific linkage between CBE and brand equity remains underexplored in the literature. Although brand equity has been proposed as an outcome of consumption, contribution, and creation dimensions of consumer engagement proposed by Schivinski et al. (2016) but its direct linkage with Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) cognitive processing, affection, and activation dimensions is uniquely proposed in this study, highlighting its originality and contribution to the field.

This research proposes the influence of SMM elements on consumer engagement with brands, specifically across varying levels of brand trust, postulating it as a moderator. Previous studies have demonstrated that trust strengthens consumer–brand relationships (Halaszovich & Nel, 2017; Ndhlovu & Maree, 2023; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019; Samarah et al., 2021). While the role of brand trust as a driver (Ndhlovu & Maree, 2023; Nyadzayo et al., 2020) and as an outcome (Samarah et al., 2021) has been examined, its role as a moderator in the relationship with CBE has been scarcely explored, with only a few exceptions (Halaszovich & Nel, 2017). This study uniquely addresses this gap, providing novel insights into the moderating role of trust in enhancing the effectiveness of SMM on consumer engagement.

Viewed as a relatively recent marketing strategy, the role of SMM in shaping CBE has not been fully comprehended (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Proposing a generalized model that is applicable across diverse demographic, geographical, and industrial contexts is imperative. This study seeks to address this gap by integrating the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response model to inform the hypothesized relationships linking elements of SMM, CBE, and brand equity.

This article reviews the relevant literature on SMM, CBE, brand equity, and trust, and discusses the theories that inform and integrate the proposed model. Subsequent sections detail the development of hypotheses and the conceptual model. The article concludes with discussions on theoretical and managerial implications, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Perusing through the literature pertaining to SMM, CBE, and brand equity provides the foundation for crafting the theoretical framework and corresponding hypotheses. These serve as a roadmap for empirical study exploring the influence of SMM strategies on CBE and brand equity.

Social Media Marketing (SMM)

The expeditious proliferation of SMM has taken the marketing industry by surprise, empowering consumers to play a more active role in product production (Zahay, 2021). It is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that builds on the

ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61) and is phenomenal in connecting firms with customers (Liu et al., 2021). Diverse platforms, including social networking sites, microblogging platforms, and content communities, facilitate this interconnectedness. These platforms enable social networks to be centered around common interests and values (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Wirtz et al., 2013); thus facilitating the dissemination of brand-related messages.

In Asia, marketers widely embrace SMM as their predominant marketing strategy to foster brand trust (Upadhyay et al., 2022), nurture CBE (Aljuhmani et al., 2023), and influence purchase intentions (Balakrishnan et al., 2014). For instance, the study by Upadhyay et al. (2022) probed the interplay of SMM elements with brand trust and brand equity, leading to consumer response on brand pages of smartphone brands, showing the role of SMM efforts in impacting customer response through brand equity. The authors proposed that marketers deliver consumers with up-to-date information, share entertaining content, and offer personal information to reach the goal of building consumer preferences. These efforts help capture consumers’ interest, cultivate their relationship with the brand, and strengthen their favorable reactions to the brand.

Aljuhmani et al. (2023) examined the SMM strategies of the Facebook pages of Jordanian Airlines. They found that SMM is a strong predictor and important for fostering cognitive engagement and brand loyalty. In a latest research undertaken by Cheung et al. (2021a), the focus was on investigating how SMM influences users’ perceptions of luxury cosmetic brands in a social media environment. Their results suggested that elements of SMM, including interaction and entertainment, substantially impact consumers’ consumption, contribution, and creation behaviors within social media brand communities. These factors influence their continuous search activities and intentions to repurchase. Previous research indicates a recognized importance of SMM in fostering trust and enhancing the relationship between consumers and brands, ultimately resulting in positive business outcomes. Given the possibilities presented by SMM in fostering consumer trust (Ebrahim, 2020) and satisfaction (Chen & Lin, 2019), leading to the establishment of relationships between consumers and brands has become a central focus for marketers (Ismail, 2017; Liu et al., 2021; Mishra, 2019). They achieve this objective by implementing diverse marketing strategies that align with the elements of SMM. These elements include entertainment, interaction customization, trendiness, and electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM).

Entertainment

Being a crucial SMM component, entertainment happens as marketers craft experiences that are perceived by the users to be enjoyable and playful in their social media interaction (Cheung et al., 2021a). Engaging in recreational pursuits like playing games, viewing reels, posting videos, and engaging in contests may lead to consumers relishing their time on social media (Triantafillidou et al., 2018). Consequently, this enjoyment catalyzes their involvement in brand communities on social media (Hook et al., 2018). Entertainment fosters consumer–brand intimacy, enhancing their inclination to purchase (Kim & Ko, 2010).

Hence, within the social media setting, entertainment indicates the effectiveness of these channels in offering consumers exciting, funny, and interesting content and information (Gallaughner & Ransbotham, 2010). Marketers leverage this social media channel to entertain consumers by sharing photos, videos, stories, etc., to gain consumer's attention (Lee et al., 2019).

Customization

Customization involves tailoring services to suit individual preferences (Schmenner, 1986), individualizing marketing efforts (Cheung et al., 2021a), and personalizing messages (Buzeta et al., 2020) to meet customers' unique needs (Godey et al., 2016). It helps create value (Cheung et al., 2021b) and build consumer relationships (Kim & Ko, 2012). Through tailoring their website and brand pages, brands can personalize and showcase uniqueness, fostering a deeper connection and loyalty to the brand (Martin & Todorov, 2010).

Social media technologies facilitate the customization of messages, enabling marketers to engage in personalized conversations with consumers (Merrilees, 2016). Social media makes it possible to provide customers with individually tailored information from various sources (Seo & Park, 2018), thus providing marketers with a useful strategy to generate customer satisfaction (Ding & Keh, 2016). In this research, customization refers to the affordability provided by a brand's social media channels for individualized information search.

Interaction

The extent to which social media platforms enable mutual information and opinion exchange is referred to as interaction (Dessart et al., 2015). This will enable customers express their views on specific brands or products with others who have similar interests on social media platforms (Muntinga et al., 2011). These interactions with brands and other consumers influence consumer behavior more pronouncedly than conventional marketing and advertising methods (Villanueva et al., 2008; Vivek et al., 2012). The affordance provided by social media to interact encourages users to create their own content (Fischer & Reuber, 2011), favorably leading to trust (Kim & Park, 2013), positive brand attitude, and intention to purchase (Hajli, 2015). Sharing information tailored to target social media users' preferences promotes discussions and enhances the consumer–brands connections (Manthiou et al., 2014). It also confirms that marketers use social media to engage people in brand-related discussions (Zhu & Chen, 2015).

Electronic Word of Mouth

eWOM refers to “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 38). It is used by consumers to upload, share, and exchange brand-related information on social media (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). It takes various forms, such as online reviews, suggestions, and opinions, and has become increasingly significant due to the development of technological tools (Litvin et al., 2008). Research indicates that eWOM has greater trustworthiness, empathy, and pertinence for customers in comparison to marketer-generated information (Gruen et al., 2006).

Social media functions as a powerful tool for eWOM since consumers freely create and share brand specific information with other users without constraint (O'Donohoe, 2008), owing to perceived trust (Reza Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Jansen et al. (2009) investigated the Word of Mouth (WOM) activities related to brands on Twitter. Their research reveals that consumer posts initiate the dissemination of information, including comments, sentiments, and opinions about brands. Another study by Esch et al. (2006) found that eWOM positively influences consumer's perception toward the brands, thus reinforcing their purchase intention. In contrast, adverse eWOM results in less favorable brand-related consequences, detrimentally affecting consumer trust, attitudes toward the brand, and consequently, the brand's equity (Carvalho et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2009).

Trendiness

Trendiness is described as customers' views on how effectively social media offers the latest updates and trending discussion topics (Naaman et al., 2011). Social media platforms have gained popularity among consumers for seeking brand-related information because they are perceived to offer more useful and current information than traditional communication channels (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). This shift in consumer behavior has made social media a crucial tool for staying informed about brands. The preference for social media motivates marketers to continuously provide up-to-date information, thereby creating significant value for consumers (Laroche et al., 2013). Through these platforms, marketers and consumers actively exchange updates about brands, share product reviews, and discuss innovative ideas. This ongoing interaction fosters brand-related trust and contributes to stronger, more favorable brand assessments (Godey et al., 2016; Manthiou et al., 2016). As a result, social media has become an integral part of the brand–consumer relationship, enhancing engagement and loyalty.

Social-media Marketing and Consumer–brand Engagement

CBE is defined as a consumer's "psychological state" involving interactions and experiences rooted in consumer–brand relationships (Brodie et al., 2011). This concept is increasingly recognized in both practical applications and academic spheres within the marketing field (Hollebeek et al., 2014). CBE encompasses "a consumer's positively-valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions" (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). Studying CBE is crucial due to its positive impact on consumer behavior (de Villiers, 2015), loyalty (Vinerean & Opreana, 2021), trust (de Silva, 2020), brand equity (Mishra, 2019), and purchase intention (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020).

The literature delves into the systematic connections of CBE, exploring its drivers and results. This includes an examination of how social media brand communication affects CBE and its subsequent brand-related consequences (Algharabat et al., 2020; Aljuhmani et al., 2023). Authors have acknowledged the social media's efficacy in strengthening consumer–brand interactions (Kaltcheva et al., 2013; Schultz & Peltier, 2013), with some recommending paying attention to content-designing strategies to motivate social media engagement of consumers with brand posts (Barger et al., 2016).

Researches by Obilo et al. (2021) and Azar et al. (2016) indicate that consumers tend to interact with brand-related content that lacks a transactional nature and evokes emotions stimulated by a social-interactive environment (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022). Brand posts that are interactive and stimulate multiple senses will garner significant consumer engagement (de Silva, 2020; Yousaf et al., 2021). Studies have focused on these multisensory gratifications because of their efficacy in inducing higher levels of CBE. For instance, research conducted by Osei-Frimpong et al. (2022) investigates how “socio-psychological gratification variables” and “consumer values” interact to influence consumer involvement in engaging with brands on social media, suggesting addressing consumer’s psychological and social gratifications for engaging them with brands on social media.

The general contention is that social media platforms provide a useful avenue for businesses to strengthen consumer relationships (De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Park & Kim, 2014). This underscores the significance of engaging consumer experiences and relationships between consumers and brands for the CBE formation (Bento et al., 2018; Hepola et al., 2017), motivating marketers to craft brand experiences through various forms of SMM (Barger et al., 2016; Beig & Khan, 2018) Thus, SMM affords marketers the ability to create opportunities for brand engagement, prompting active customer participation on various social media platforms (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018). This validates SMM’s role as an antecedent in our study model.

Brand Trust

Brand trust denotes a customer’s readiness for depending on the capability of the brand for fulfilling its intended objective (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust in the brand is associated with a conviction of the customer about capability, truthfulness, and dependability of the brand (Doney & Cannon, 1997). Trust is founded on the beliefs of the trustee, labeled as “Trust beliefs” by Becerra and Korgaonkar (2011). Brand trust also influences important marketing outcomes such as purchase intention (Leite & Baptista, 2022), brand loyalty (Atulkar, 2020), satisfaction (Zboja & Voorhees, 2006), etc. In SMM, consumers must hold trust beliefs in the brands with which they engage. Developing trust is crucial for sustaining buyer–seller relationships (Selnes, 1998). Consumers who trust the brand are prone to develop cognitive and emotional responses toward the brand (Nyadzayo et al., 2020).

Brand Equity

Brand equity denotes brand knowledge’s impact on consumers’ reactions to a brand’s marketing when consumers hold “favourable, strong and unique brand associations in memory” (Keller, 1993, p. 2). It refers to the value that the product commands by virtue of a brand name (Hepola et al., 2017), helping consumers derive relational benefits by virtue of developing relationship with brands (Sánchez-Casado et al., 2018). As stated by Algharabat et al. (2020), brand equity elucidates the value bestowed upon the product by the brand. Yoo & Donthu (2001, p. 1) “define brand equity as the difference between consumers’ responses

to a focal brand and an unbranded product when both have the same level of marketing stimuli and product attributes.” The past studies have contended that actively interacting with a brand through social media can also contribute to establishing meaningful relationships, ultimately resulting in brand equity (Schau et al., 2009; Tsai & Men, 2013).

Underpinning Theories

Stimulus-organism-response Model

The conceptual model for this study is constructed based on the “stimuli-organism-response” (S-O-R) model, initially introduced by Mehrabian (1974) within the realm of environmental psychology. This foundational framework has been adeptly adapted to explore the dynamics of CBE triggered by brand communications, with a particular focus on SMM.

In this research, the elements of SMM are conceptualized as the stimuli that initiate and drive consumer engagement. These stimuli encompass various aspects of social media interactions, such as entertainment, interaction, customization, trendiness, and eWOM, all designed to capture and sustain consumer interest. As consumers interact with these stimuli, they experience engagement across three distinct dimensions—cognitive, affective, and behavioral—as delineated by Hollebeek et al. (2014).

The engagement of consumers, viewed as the organism within the S-O-R model, undergoes a transformation through these multidimensional interactions. Cognitive engagement involves the consumer’s mental investment in the brand, affective engagement pertains to the emotional connection and feelings toward the brand, and behavioral engagement reflects the actions and behaviors directed toward the brand.

Ultimately, this engagement culminates in a response, manifested as brand equity. Brand equity, in this context, signifies the value and strength of the brand as perceived by consumers, encompassing aspects such as brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations.

By integrating the S-O-R model with the specific constructs of SMM and CBE, this study offers a robust framework to understand how strategic brand communications via social media can effectively enhance brand equity. This comprehensive approach not only deepens our understanding of the interplay between stimuli, organism, and response but also provides valuable insights for marketers aiming to leverage social media to foster stronger consumer–brand relationships.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Recent technological progress has led to a surge in research on how audiences or consumers choose media and their motivations and satisfaction when engaging with different media. Scholars have attempted to comprehend these motivations by employing the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, drawn from the field of social psychology. Researchers utilize the U> as a motivational framework to gain understanding into the reasons individuals embrace and utilize technology

(Grellhesl & Punyanunt-Carter, 2012). U&G theory has been particularly useful and widely utilized in social media research (Phua et al., 2017) and online communication (McLean et al., 2021).

The core concept of the “uses and gratifications theory” entails individuals actively pursuing media for fulfilling their specific psychological or social needs, ultimately resulting in satisfaction (Weaver Lariscy et al., 2011). In the contemporary context, consumers predominantly utilize social media as their primary media platform. Hence, it becomes necessary to comprehend the gratifications consumers seek within the social media environment, leading to a surge in research for understanding the motivations for engaging in social settings (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022). Aspects of SMM, such as entertainment, interaction, customization, trendy content, and eWOM, interact with consumers’ motivations to use a brand’s social media.

Although U&G theory has been used to explain various psychological and social gratifications people seek via interactive platforms (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022; Zolkepli et al., 2018), its application to understanding the gratifications derived from SMM initiatives remains relatively unexplored.

Theoretical Integration of U&G Theory and Stimulus-organism Response Framework

The integration of the SOR model with UGT provides a robust theoretical foundation to explain consumer behavior in the context of SMM. The SOR model helps identify the external stimuli (SMM elements) that influence internal states (engagement), while UGT provides insights into the underlying consumer motivations driving this engagement. This combined approach offers a comprehensive understanding of how and why consumers interact with social media content, leading to enhanced brand engagement and improved brand equity. The interplay between the two has been described below.

Entertaining Content and Entertainment Motive

Entertainment content on social media, exemplified by humorous videos, engaging stories, and captivating visuals, addresses the entertainment motive by providing enjoyment and diversion from daily pressures (Lee & Ma, 2012). This type of content meets the need for psychological relaxation by offering a temporary escape from the routine demands of daily life (Ruggiero, 2000).

Interactive Content and Social Interaction Motive, Personal Identity Motive

Interaction opportunities, such as comments, likes, shares, and direct messaging, address the social interaction motive by enabling consumers to connect with others, including brands and peers (Kang, 2014). This element also supports the personal identity motive, as consumers engage in discussions and express their views, thereby reinforcing their self-concept and social presence (Shao, 2009).

Customization and Personal Identity Motive, Information Motive

Customization enables brands to deliver personalized content tailored to individual preferences, thereby fulfilling the personal identity motive by resonating

with consumers' unique tastes and self-concept (Piller, 2004). Furthermore, customized recommendations and content supply relevant information, thus addressing the information motive (Sundar & Marathe, 2010).

Trendiness and Personal Identity Motive, Information Motive

Trendy content keeps consumers informed about the latest developments, thereby fulfilling the information motive by providing current and pertinent information (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Additionally, engaging with trendy content enables consumers to align with contemporary societal norms, thereby supporting the personal identity motive by enhancing their social status and self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

eWOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) and Information Motive, Social Interaction Motive, Remuneration Motive

WOM, including reviews and user-generated content, fulfils the information motive by providing first-hand experiences and opinions about products and services (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Additionally, it caters to the social interaction motive as consumers share and discuss these experiences within their networks (Chu & Kim, 2011). Furthermore, eWOM can address the remuneration motive when positive reviews and recommendations result in perceived benefits or economic incentives for consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Understanding the intricate interplay between consumer motives, SMM strategies, CBE activities, and resultant brand equity is crucial for contemporary marketers striving to navigate the dynamic landscape of digital marketing. This section presents a series of hypotheses aimed at elucidating the nuanced relationships between these pivotal factors, shedding light on the underlying dynamics that shape consumer behavior and brand outcomes in the context of SMM.

Consumer Motives and Social Media Marketing Elements

Based on the findings of previous researches, social media platforms are frequently utilized by individuals for recreational purposes, as they actively seek out enjoyable and captivating content (Rohm et al., 2013). Based on this observation, it is posited that individuals driven by entertainment motives will demonstrate heightened levels of engagement with content tailored to entertainment on various social media platforms.

H_1 : The entertainment motive positively influences consumers' engagement with entertainment content on social media.

Social media inherently facilitates social interaction and connection (Dolan et al., 2019). People motivated by social interaction are likely to actively seek and engage with features and content that offer opportunities for communication, networking, and engagement with others on social platforms.

H_2 : The social interaction motive positively influences consumers' engagement with interaction opportunities on social media.

Social media platforms allow users to express themselves and shape their online identities through various forms of content (Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2019). Individuals motivated by personal identity seek content that resonates with their self-perception and values. Thus, it's expected that they will be more engaged with customized content that aligns with their personal identity.

H_3 : The personal identity motive positively influences consumers' engagement with customized content on social media.

Social media serves as a major information source about trends (Godey et al., 2016). Consumers motivated by the desire for information seek out content that is informative and up-to-date. Therefore, it is hypothesized that individuals with an information motive will exhibit higher engagement with trendy and relevant content on social media. The information motive positively influences consumers' engagement with eWOM on social media.

H_4 : The information motive positively influences consumers' engagement with trendy content on social media.

eWOM significantly influences consumer decisions on social media platforms. Consumers motivated by the information seek out reviews, recommendations, and opinions shared by others (Godey et al., 2016). Therefore, it is expected that individuals with an information motive will be more engaged with eWOM content on social media.

H_5 : The information motive positively influences consumers' engagement with eWOM on social media.

Remuneration, such as rewards or incentives, can influence consumer behavior (Muntinga et al., 2011). Consumers motivated by remuneration may be more inclined to engage with eWOM content, especially if there are potential benefits or rewards associated with such engagement. Therefore, it is hypothesized that individuals with a remuneration motive will exhibit higher engagement with eWOM on social media.

H_6 : The remuneration motive positively influences consumers' engagement with eWOM on social media.

Social Media Marketing Elements and CBE

Entertainment is used to refer to SMM-based brand communications having entertaining, enjoyable and playful elements that inspire consumption, with consumers deriving pleasure, enjoyment, and relaxation from such content (Manthiou et al., 2013; Merrilees & Fry, 2002; Tsai & Men, 2017). Such funny, amusing, and

interesting brand-related content in various forms such as videos, pictures, and posts motivates consumer visits to social media (Liu et al., 2021), capturing user attention and thus consequently prompting cognitive reflection and brand-related elaboration (Cheung et al., 2020a; Qing & Haiying, 2021), and therefore cognitively engage consumers. Also, providing content on social media that consumers find funny and playful (Enginkaya & Yılmaz, 2014) and entertaining them (Dholakia et al., 2004) strengthens their affection for the brand. As an illustration, social media content that features gaming elements, giveaways, music, picture, videos, and animations excites consumers, fulfilling their need for enjoyment and motivating them to engage with brands as well as their content (De Vries et al., 2012; Manthiou et al., 2014).

H₇: Entertainment has a positive impact on CBE.

It is of immense concern to marketers to reach relevant audiences economically, which is made possible through customizing messages on social media (Chu & Kim, 2011). This capability of delivering tailored brand-related information according to customers' specific needs, rendered by social media (Godey et al., 2016; Rohm et al., 2013), is of immense significance to marketers. In contrast to conventional broadcast messages, personalized information proves more effective in capturing attention and inducing gratification as people favor consuming pertinent information on social media. On social media platforms, marketers provide details about certain aspects of brands and products, such as prices, product characteristics, specifications, product attributes, and features, aligning with consumers' preferences and helping them fulfil their needs (Cheung et al., 2020b).

Customizations hold significance as it enhances consumer's overall commitment to a company (Lacey et al., 2007). Also, customizing messages on social media can potentially contribute to perceived brand value, trust, brand equity, and brand loyalty (Ebrahim, 2020; Ismail, 2017; Yadav & Rahman, 2018), engaging consumers cognitively. Moreover, providing personalized services based on consumer preferences will appeal more to the consumers, affectively engaging them (Leckie et al., 2016). Consumers will likely exhibit positive brand-related behaviors as they develop cognition and affection for the brand. Hence, we hypothesise:

H₈: Customization has a positive impact on CBE.

Interactivity in brand pages over social media refers to sharing and exchanging information, ideas and opinions among brands and consumers (Liu et al., 2021). Various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter allow like-minded people to form a community around a brand and exchange product or brand-related ideas, thoughts, and experiences, fostering connectedness among consumers and companies on the basis of their shared interests (Habibi et al., 2014; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015). These social media platforms nowadays offer an interactive environment for easy collaboration and sharing of content (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). In such dynamic online environments, interactivity can be boosted by including interactive content (images, videos, and infographics),

asking questions (quizzes, polls, and surveys), organizing contests and giveaways, conducting live videos, creating and promoting hashtags, storytelling, incorporating gamification elements, etc. (Merrilees, 2016). These brand-related activities are important for reinforcing consumer–brand interactions and contributing to the development of product characteristics and perceived brand benefits (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), trust (Cheng et al., 2017), and brand loyalty (Upadhyay et al., 2022), which effectively translates into consumer’s engaging with the brand. Hence, we hypothesize:

H_9 : Interactivity has a positive impact on CBE.

With social media taking center stage, consumers are now predominantly relying on eWOM to evaluate products and services (Lee & Youn, 2009). This requires more cognitive effort on the part of consumers to go through the details of products and brands (Xie et al., 2021), thereby cognitively engaging them. Moreover, eWOM communication is linked to articulating “positive emotions,” as Septianto and Chiew (2018, p. 6) suggested. eWOM is also synonymous with and driven by expressing positive feelings, thus deriving people’s engagement in eWOM communication (Jeong & Jang, 2011). Consumers perceiving a positive relationship with the brand are likelier to pass along brand messages (Shan & King, 2015). Furthermore, online social interaction, including eWOM, positively influences consumers’ behavioral engagement (Liu et al., 2019). This sums up the contention that people involved in eWOM behaviors will likely become effectively engaged. Thus, we propose,

H_{10} : eWOM has positive impact on CBE.

Consumers are driven to keep themselves informed about the latest brand advancements and pertinent trends, due to which they actively search brand-related trendy information on different social media (Cheung et al., 2020a; Yadav & Rahman, 2018). Therefore, brands strive to share the most current and trendy information with consumers. Given the growing prevalence of social media, customers expect instant availability of brand information and regularly rely on information accessible across various social media platforms to inform their purchase decisions (O’Donohoe, 2008). Sharing trendy content captures consumers’ attention and occupies the top position in consumers’ minds, thus translating to positive brand experiences (Chen & Qasim, 2021; Cheung et al., 2020b). Engaging in brand communities on social media involves sharing regular updates among friends and fellow consumers who share similar interests (Mishra, 2019), contributing to positive brand perceptions (Chan et al., 2014). Content trendiness thus contributes to consumers’ cognitive engagement on social media. Also, companies offer up-to-date content to motivate the consumers to like the brand pages to remain updated and thus engage them behaviorally (Pongpaew et al., 2017). Recent, up-to-date content evokes positive feelings for the brand due to consumers’ cognitive investment and identification with the content, leading to their behavioral engagement.

H_{11} : Trendiness has a positive impact on CBE.

Consumer Brand Engagement and Brand Equity

Consumers fully invested in brand interactions tend to form a robust emotional brand connection (Hollebeek, 2011), leading them to form “unique brand associations” (Keller, 1993; Smith & Aaker, 1992). Thus, brands strive to provide consumers with unique, informative, and the latest customized content in such brand interactions. Consumers also reciprocate with positive brand-specific outcomes, thus creating value for both the firms and consumers.

It is evident from the past research that when consumers interact and engage with brands on social media, they tend to develop a bond with the brand, leading to increasing levels of their trust, satisfaction, and brand commitment, thus, the formation of value (Brodie et al., 2011; Islam & Rahman, 2016; Kumar, 2020; van Doorn et al., 2010), and therefore future brand continuance and purchase intentions. Brand communications, the stimulus for initiating consumer–brand interactions, result in CBE (Gómez et al., 2019). Furthermore, earlier research has also confirmed the influence of brand communications in creating brand equity (Arya et al., 2022; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015), thus corroborating the significance of CBE in establishing brand equity. In alignment with the previous discussions on the potential of engagement, we propose:

H_{12} : CBE has a positive impact on brand equity.

Trust as a Moderator

In recent years, research has focused on brand trust, especially in social media environments (Irshad et al., 2020; Laroche et al., 2013). Brand trust has been defined as the “willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). Considered a significant factor, trust plays a fundamental role in shaping consumers’ choices for engaging with a brand and making purchases (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019). Individuals must possess certain predispositions or beliefs to engage in brand interactions, which serve as necessary conditions (van Doorn et al., 2010). Trust also constitutes a belief in a brand’s credibility and hence aids in consumer’s decisions to engage with the brand. To make consumers engage in social media, they need to trust the brand. As such, trust will likely strengthen the positive dynamics between SMM elements and CBE.

Thus, we hypothesize:

H_{13} : Trust positively moderates the relationship between SMM elements and CBE.

The proposed framework integrates SMM elements with consumer motives, leading to enhanced CBE and brand equity. It has been depicted in Figure 1.

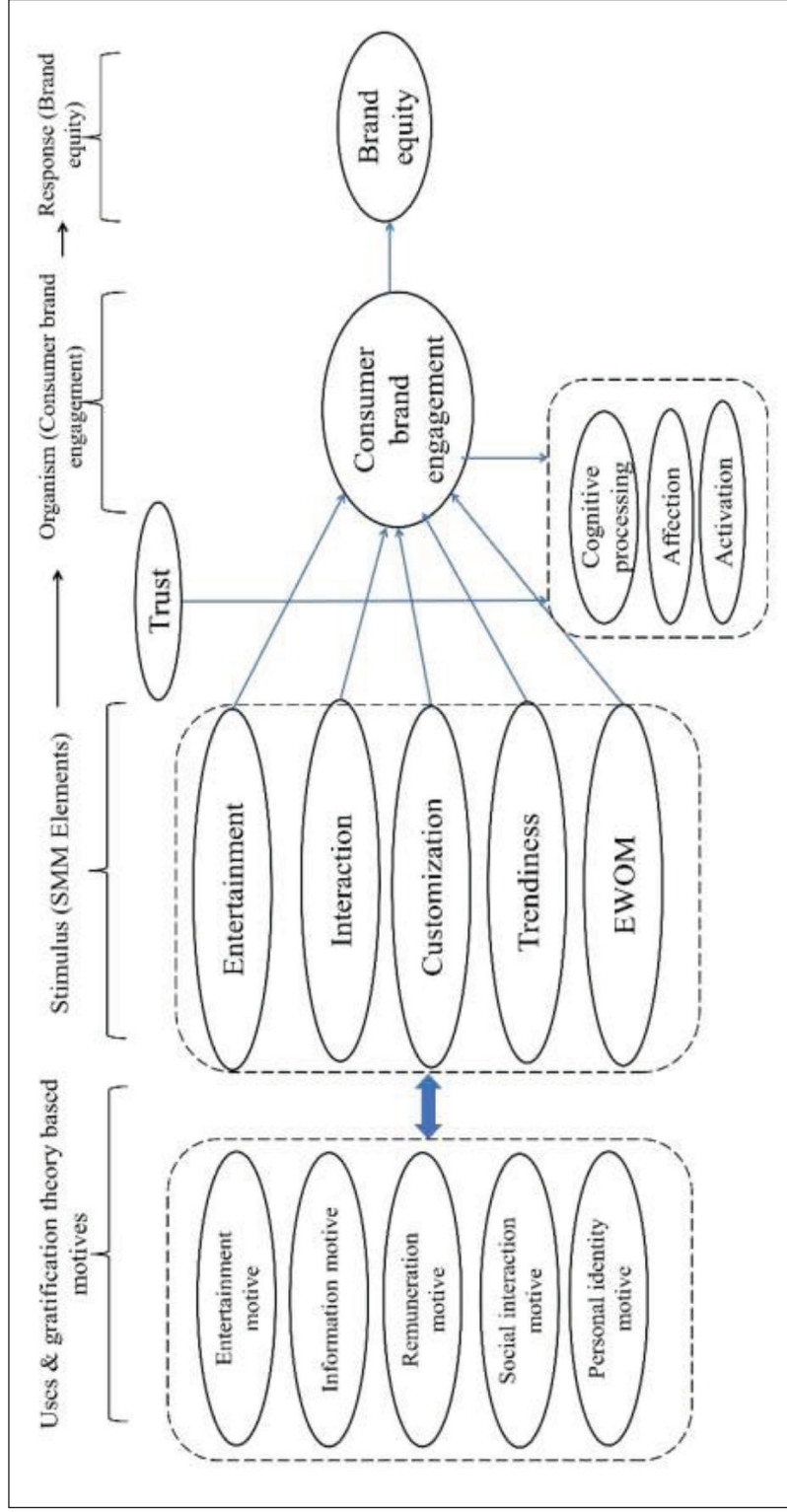


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Conceptual Framework

After reviewing the pertinent literature outlined above, six hypotheses have been put forward to explore the relationships among the proposed model's independent, dependent, mediating, and moderating variables. In the suggested theoretical framework, the independent (exogenous) variables consist of different aspects of SMM, encompassing entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and eWOM and consumer motives, consisting of entertainment motive, information motive, remuneration motive, social interaction motive and personal identity motive. Brand equity is the outcome variable. It is an indicator of value captured because of social media brand engagement and, thus, is of immense interest to brand marketers. CBE is a focal construct of study, the formation of which is critical for leading to valuable outcomes such as trust, commitment, satisfaction, loyalty, purchase intention, etc. The effective generation of CBE on social media has been a topic of debate, leading marketers to implement a variety of strategies. This study proposes using SMM strategies to be a stimulus to encourage brand engagement on social media, leading to consumer brand outcomes including CBE and brand equity. The research model delves into the intricacies of consumer brand-related dynamics influenced by SMM.

Discussion and Conclusions

A growing body of empirical research has investigated brand-building mechanisms within social media (Moro et al., 2016). Despite numerous studies proposing different avenues, research assessing the influence of various SMM elements on brand equity through CBE has been particularly scarce. This insight highlights the absence of scholarly comprehension in this area, even as effective SMM strategies are currently recognized as crucial for establishing robust brand-related cognitions, emotions, and behaviors among consumers. Recognizing SMM elements as useful brand-building tools, researchers have attempted to fill this significant knowledge gap by proposing a research model connecting the variables of interest.

CBE has become a focal construct for marketers, and understanding its antecedents, consequences, and mechanisms is crucial. The role of trust in strengthening the CBE generated through SMM elements is proposed, explaining how the relationship between SMM elements and CBE will gain strength, contributing to important implications for marketers. By integrating the S-O-R model with UGT, this study offers a nuanced framework that captures the complex interplay between SMM elements and consumer motives. This model not only identifies the key SMM elements that drive engagement but also elucidates its interplay with specific gratifications sought by consumers. Future research can empirically test this model to validate the proposed relationships and further explore the dynamics of consumer engagement in the digital age.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The key objective of this study is to understand the drivers and outcomes of CBE in social media. The study identifies motivation-based SMM elements and links them to be causing CBE in terms of cognitive processing, affection, and activation. Also, the study proposes brand equity to be the outcome of consumer's engaging with brands on social media. The study uses the conceptual basis of uses and gratification theory and stimulus organism response model to serve as theoretical foundations. This framework tries to further expand the work of Cheung et al. (2019) by providing a holistic view of the underlying mechanism for development of brand equity, thus providing foundations for development of lasting consumer brand relationships.

This study offers both theoretical and managerial implications. First, it provides a comprehensive understanding of how consumers respond to SMM communications based on various motivations. It elucidates how individuals engage with different SMM elements for diverse reasons, such as entertainment, information, remuneration, social interaction, and personal identity. Managerially, this insight emphasizes the need for marketers to recognize these distinct motivations and tailor their communication strategies accordingly to effectively appeal to their target audience.

Second, this study offers an integrated conceptual model that comprehensively addresses the drivers and outcomes of CBE on social media. It tries to develop positive consumer predispositions toward brands by using SMM strategies that resonates most with them according to their motives, thereby fostering engagement and ultimately contributing to brand equity development. This study makes a sincere attempt to provide marketers a complete mechanism in the form of attitudinal framework that can better explain brand equity development through the effective phenomenon of CBE.

Third, the study posits that trust acts as a moderator, strengthening the positive development of CBE through SMM strategies. This underscores the crucial role of trust in either enhancing or diminishing the impact of SMM efforts on consumer engagement. Therefore, managers should prioritize building and maintaining brand trust to maximize the effectiveness of their SMM campaigns.

Last, the model proposed in this research can be examined across diverse contexts, including various demographics, product and service categories, and geographic regions. Such an exploration would provide valuable insights into the generalizability and applicability of the model, enhancing its robustness and relevance in different settings.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This article has developed a model based on existing literature, with the intention of enhancing the theoretical comprehension of SMM-based brand-related dynamics. The conceptual model will contribute to the advancement of our comprehension

regarding how SMM elements will influence CBE and brand equity. While the anticipated results are poised to provide enhanced theoretical insights in this domain and propose recommendations for improved marketing practices, it is essential to acknowledge that this study is not exempt from limitations.

First, this study's main focus is on exploring the linkages of marketer-initiated SMM endeavors with CBE and subsequent impact on brand equity. The study does not explore the role of consumer-based drivers in generating brand-related outcomes. Future research can integrate this aspect to add to the robustness of the model (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015).

Second, this study assesses the CBE's impact on brand equity; other brand, customer or firm-related outcomes of SMM-induced CBE can be explored in future research.

Third, socio-demographic factors like income, gender, age, and education could exert a notable influence or act as moderators in the research model. Incorporating these factors in future analyses could enhance our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, providing a more comprehensive perspective (Godey et al., 2016).

Fourth, brand equity has been taken as a single construct. Using individual dimensions (like brand loyalty, brand associations, perceived quality, etc.) would yield nuanced results regarding consumers' engagement impact on each dimension. Understanding the association between CBE dimensions and specific elements of brand equity, along with the strength of these associations, would provide marketers with comprehensive insights and understanding.

Last, the study model has not considered the negative aspects of social-media brand interactions, such as negative eWOM. Future studies can consider this aspect to have a more robust model that can guide the formation of effective marketing strategies.

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