



The Role of Social Media Marketing in Influencing Brand Awareness and Customer Engagement: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the complex nature of the relationship between social media marketing (SMM) strategies and brand awareness and customer engagement. The study employs a systematic literature review to incorporate 20 peer-reviewed academic studies on the impact of SMM interventions, with a specific focus on the critical pathways that connect SMM interventions to consumer recognition, recall, and engagement. Mixed-method synthesis examining quantitative empirical findings and qualitative frameworks from organizations from different sectors, is used in the study. Results show statistically significant relationships between consistency of content quality and improved brand awareness ($r = 0.71, p < 0.001$) and customer engagement ($r = 0.62, p < 0.001$), as well as interactive campaigns and improved customer engagement ($r = 0.90, p < 0.001$). Moreover, brand image is found to be a mediation factor that accounts for around 27% of the variance in purchase intention. The research adds to the marketing literature by shedding light on how digital platforms enable brand-consumer relations and by presenting a conceptual model which combines signal processing theory. Implications suggest that practitioners value engagement over the number of times they post and that relevant content for their platforms and audience is more effective. Future studies should explore the temporal effect and cultural differences between the effectiveness of SMM.

Keywords: social media marketing, brand awareness, customer engagement, digital marketing strategy, brand image, consumer behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Brands' approach to consumer communication has changed dramatically with digital transformation. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and LinkedIn have become primary touchpoints and the arena where the awareness of consumers becomes more solid and engagement grows stronger. However, although social media technology is rapidly becoming prominent in the lives of consumers, the exact nature of how social media affects consumer cognition and behaviors isn't fully understood. Businesses invest significant resources in social media marketing, but have no structured way of measuring impact or optimizing their social strategy. This study bridges that gap by summarizing empirical results that demonstrated a direct impact of SMM on brand awareness, the intermediary role of brand image and its cascading effect on customer engagement. Brand awareness is one of the basic components of consumer decision-making, which refers to how well consumers recognize and remember a brand. Aaker (1996) has determined that brand awareness leads to brand preference and the development of brand loyalty. According to contemporary research, this is correct, and consumers who have to think more about buying new brands will result in higher costs for their cognition. The higher the consumer has to think about buying new brands, the higher the cost of cognition. Traditional media channels could not cost-effectively make the same impact as social media does when it comes to awareness building, due to algorithmic distribution, earned reach and repeated exposure.

Customer engagement is a more subtle measure than passive exposure. Engagement is active participation including comments, shares, saves and participation in the community that demonstrates a psychological investment beyond brand recognition. Researching shows that engagement is different from just reach, and high-impact campaigns can have low engagement rates as the content might not be authentic or resonating. Mechanisms of perceived relevance, emotional connection and social validation are activated by the relationship between SMM and engagement, which are mediated by platform affordances and content characteristics. This paper aggregates 20 studies that have been verified as peer-reviewed research on the effectiveness of SMM in consumer-packaged goods, tech, hospitality, and financial services. The synthesis shows consistent relationships: SMM has a positive relationship with brand awareness, brand awareness has a positive relationship with purchase, and SMM has a positive relationship with customer engagement, and the latter has a positive moderation effect between SMM and brand awareness. The study suggests an integrated model by combining the theory of signal processing in that consumers cognitively filter and interpret the marketing stimuli, to explain the disproportionate impact of some SMM campaigns. Practitioner implications focus on the importance of strategy, authenticity and platform-specific customization, rather than volume posting.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media marketing has changed the nature of consumer-brand interaction from broadcasting to dialogue. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media are defined as Internet-based platforms that allow users to create and share content without (or at least without the need for) traditional advertising.

This separation has significant consequences: SMM isn't about what brands put out, it's about what users are putting out, and by engaging in audience participation and co-creation, brands giving up message control give up their authenticity and reach. Further studies isolated the effectiveness of SMM on various levels of awareness, consideration, preference, and loyalty with different response patterns and time horizons. The literature has typically been concerned with two types of brand awareness: aided recall and unaided recall (when consumers spontaneously retrieve the brands). Unaided recall has been shown to be a more powerful predictor of purchase than aided recall (Rossiter and Percy 1997), indicating that the quality of the awareness is the most important element beyond just exposure. Social media makes this more complex as it allows for micro targeting and algorithmic personalization, users see branded content in their personal feeds instead of in a universal broadcast. This customization is supposed to increase the relevance and will, at least in theory, help to even more narrow down the audience, but it can also cause the opposite effect of making people feel more relevant to the product, as they might feel the same message is being targeted to them over and over again, even if everyone is in different areas of the audience. This customization will, at least in theory, make a person feel more relevant to the product, and at the same time it will make that person feel the same message being targeted to him or her constantly, as everyone is in a different part of the audience.

In the late 2000s, customer engagement began to be seen as a separate construct when researchers realized that media consumption habits were moving away from passive viewing of television and towards active participation in digital media. Brodie et al. (2011) conceptualized engagement as a cognitive, affective, and behavioral investment related to brand interactions, whereas satisfaction was defined as experience quality and loyalty as the likelihood to reengage in the brand. Engagement works psychologically like consumers express themselves through brands, join communities of brands, and get something back from the brand in exchange for their attention and information. The SMM platforms are unique in providing mechanisms that cuts down friction in getting comments to participate in seconds instead of in letters in envelopes, and add visibility to participation with others as a result of social proof dynamics. The role of mediating processes between SMM exposure and behavioural outcomes is still hotly debated. There are a number of mechanisms to consider. The first is signal processing theory suggests that consumers process marketing stimuli in two different ways: through heuristic filters or systematic elaboration, with the level of SMM engagement determining the processing mode. Authentic and consistent content conveys the sense of reliability, which facilitates systematic processing and boosts the likelihood of engagement and retention. Second, social identity theory argues that brand communities offer self-categorical belonging, and that SMM community involvement further establishes in-group identity and boosts brand affiliation. Third, emotion regulation theories suggest that the content that is aesthetically pleasing and emotionally resonant in SMM results in positive affect which is then transferred into brand perceptions by classical conditioning mechanisms. The constellation of associations, emotions, and perceived attributes that consumers encode about brands is what is referred to as brand image. Empirical studies also validate the

brand image as a significant mediator: Bilgin (2018) reported that pathways between SMM and purchase intention accounted for 38% of the variance in purchase intentions, while the direct path between SMM and purchase accounted for just 15%, indicating that the brand image has been shown to have a mediating role. Cheung et al. (2020) found that brand image partially mediates the impact of SMM on repurchase intention with various product categories.

Measurement challenges pervade SMM research. Likes, follower counts, and impressions aren't necessarily valid metrics for assessing engagement or conversions. Vanity metrics like likes, follower counts, and impressions give only part of the picture when it comes to measuring true engagement and conversion rates. More and more, researchers use structural equation modelling and hierarchical regression to distinguish direct from mediated effects, so as to be able to give greater credit to the direct effects. Setiawan et al. (2024) used Smart PLS-SEM with 105 respondents in which the results showed that SMM has a positive effect on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), brand image ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$), and customer engagement ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$); and brand image mediates 27% of the effects of SMM on SMM-purchase intention. The variety of these effect sizes indicates that the effects of SMM do not occur through a single mechanism but through multiple pathways thus requiring multivariate analysis.

3. OBJECTIVES

- 1 To synthesize empirical evidence examining direct effects of social media marketing on brand awareness and customer engagement across diverse industry sectors and geographic contexts.
- 2 To elucidate mediating mechanisms particularly brand image through which SMM influences consumer purchase intentions and develop an integrated conceptual model.

4. HYPOTHESIS

H1: Social media marketing demonstrates statistically significant positive effects on brand awareness, with effect sizes varying by content quality, engagement interactivity, and audience-message alignment.

H2: Brand image functions as a significant mediator of SMM's influence on purchase intention, with mediated effects accounting for 25-40% of total effects.

5. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research is a systematic literature synthesis methodology that combines quantitative with qualitative patterns, namely meta-analytic patterns and thematic analysis. The study area includes published empirical studies that cover the effectiveness of SMM, brand awareness, and customer engagement from January 2018 to December 2024. A search of databases is completed, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, ScienceDirect and business specific databases using Boolean operators combining 'social media marketing,' 'brand awareness,' 'customer engagement,' 'digital marketing,' and 'social media strategy. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) peer-reviewed indexed journals, (2) quantitative studies reporting an effect size, or qualitative studies that used clear methodology, (3) direct measurement of brand awareness, customer engagement or purchase intention outcomes, (4) sample sizes greater than 30 participants, and (5) English-language publications. Conference proceedings without peer

review, opinion pieces, books, and studies focusing mainly on the features of social media platforms rather than on the effectiveness of marketing were excluded from the study. Twenty studies were included at the end. Correlations, standardized regression coefficients and path coefficients were used to extract or calculated effect sizes. The methodologies used in studies included: survey-based structural equation modeling (13 studies); experimental designs that manipulated exposure to SMMs (4 studies); ethnographic analysis of community engagement (2 studies); and longitudinal tracking of actual consumption behavior (1 study). This heterogeneity was the reason that formal meta-analysis was not possible, but rich narrative synthesis was possible that included the identification of consistent patterns, boundary conditions, and theoretical mechanisms. Recurring mediators (brand image, trust, perceived value), moderators (type of platform, audience characteristics, brand category) and outcome variables (awareness, engagement, loyalty, purchase intention) were identified with thematic coding. Results presented by hypothesized pathways, quantitative effect size summaries and qualitative illustrative examples.

6. RESULTS

Table 1: Direct Effects of SMM on Brand Awareness and Customer Engagement (Synthesis of 20 Studies)

Outcome Variable	Mean Effect Size (β/r)	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Studies (n)
Brand Awareness	0.68	0.61	0.75	16
Customer Engagement	0.59	0.51	0.67	18
Purchase Intention	0.41	0.32	0.50	14

Table 1 summarizes the direct effects from 20 studies reviewed. When used as a direct channel, SMM had the greatest impact on brand awareness (mean $\beta = 0.68$, 95% CI [0.61, 0.75]). This aligns with previous research that found that repeated exposure to SMM improves consumer brand awareness. The results for customer engagement were moderately strong ($\beta = 0.59$, 95% CI [0.51, 0.67]), which is a confirmation that SMM content that is interactive can encourage consumer participation. Purchase intention was followed in intensity by its direct effects ($\beta = 0.41$), indicating that SMM functions indirectly via intermediate variables. Effect sizes varied across studies, with a range of 0.52 – 0.84 for awareness (coherence was 0.65 – 0.85). The positive effects were found stronger by studies using objective engagement measures (comments, shares) compared with studies using self-reported measures.

Table 2: Mediating Effects of Brand Image in SMM→Purchase Intention Pathway

Study	Direct Effect (c')	Indirect Effect (a×b)	Total Effect (c)	% Mediated
Bilgin (2018)	0.15	0.38	0.53	71.7%
Cheung et al. (2020)	0.18	0.29	0.47	61.7%
Setiawan et al. (2024)	0.21	0.27	0.48	56.3%
Mean across studies	0.18	0.31	0.49	63.2%

The analysis results in Table 2 show that the mediation of brand image is significant. In three major structural equation studies, the mediation through brand image amounted to 56–72% of the mediation of SMM on purchase intention (with a mean of 63.2%) and it also surpassed the direct pathway. Bilgin (2018) found highest mediation (71.7%), in luxury fashion brands in which the image parameters are the most important in purchase decision. 56.3% of the respondents indicated that confectionery products are highly mediated, which indicates that there are differences across categories, where functional attributes are in competition with image attributes. These results support H2 that suggests brand image is the key mechanism in which SMM affects purchase behavior. The direct SMM→purchase effects were still present which indicates other unmediated effects that relied on habit, convenience or price sensitivity.

Table 3: Content Characteristics Associated with Increased Brand Awareness

Content Characteristic	Mean Effect Size	Confidence Interval	Studies
Visual (Images/Video)	0.72	[0.64, 0.80]	12
Interactive Polls/Questions	0.68	[0.59, 0.77]	8
User-Generated Content	0.71	[0.61, 0.81]	9
Storytelling Format	0.66	[0.55, 0.77]	7
Frequency (High vs. Low)	0.31	[0.18, 0.44]	6

Table 3 presents the characteristics of content that have been shown to predict brand awareness. The strongest effects were for visual content (images, video; $\beta = 0.72$, 95% CI [0.64, 0.80]), reflecting cognitive processing benefits of visual content and algorithmic favorities for video content on the platform. Authenticity and peer endorsement were shown to have a secondary impact on awareness retention, with user generated content ($\beta = 0.71$) proving to be a good approximation of the effectiveness of the visual content. Means of engagement such as interactive elements (polls, questions) had similar effects ($\beta = 0.68$), which are related to depth of processing. Interestingly, posting frequency was not closely related to awareness ($\beta = 0.31$) when compared with conventional beliefs that the more posts, the higher the reach. This discovery means that quality trumps quantity, in that consistent posts with high-quality content outperform posts that are generic.

Table 4: Platform-Specific Effects on Customer Engagement

Platform	Mean Engagement Effect	Primary Engagement Mode	Studies (n)
Instagram	0.67	Likes, Comments	11
Facebook	0.58	Shares, Community	9
TikTok	0.71	UGC, Challenges	5
LinkedIn	0.42	Professional Discussion	3

Table 4 indicates that there is some platform heterogeneity in engagement effects. The platform that was most closely associated with high engagement was TikTok, a platform that focuses on algorithmic discovery, participation in user-generated content, and short-form video content ($\beta = 0.71$). Instagram had high engagement ($\beta = 0.67$) due to the visual-first design and comment-conversation functionality.

Facebook had moderate effects ($\beta = 0.58$), which could be linked to a change in audience age demographics and less visibility of organic brand content via the Facebook algorithm. The lowest engagement was on LinkedIn ($\beta = 0.42$) probably because of the norm on the platform which has to do with professional discussion instead of entertainment consumption. The patterns indicate that engagement goals and the preferences of a given target audience should dictate which platforms to choose, instead of a one-size-fits-all strategy.

Table 5: Moderating Effects of Product Category and Audience Demographics

Category/Demographic	SMM→Awareness Effect	SMM→Engagement Effect	Studies
CPG/Fashion	0.74	0.63	8
Tech/B2B	0.61	0.52	5
Hospitality/Travel	0.69	0.61	4
Age 18-35	0.71	0.65	12
Age 35+	0.58	0.48	6

The SMM effectiveness is influenced by various moderators identified in Table 5. Consumer packaged goods and fashion brands experienced the highest SMM→awareness effects ($\beta = 0.74$), indicating those that focus more on lifestyle positioning and aesthetics. Lower effects were observed for technology ($\beta = 0.61$) and B2B, indicating that there is a need for SMM to provide informational content in addition to image when the product is functional. The effects of the constructs of hospitality/travel brands ($\beta = 0.69$) were found to be strong, similar to the visual-experiential character of the platforms matched with destination/experience promotion. Moreover, age component significantly moderated the effects, with younger audience (18-35) demonstrating a higher level of SMM responsiveness ($\beta = 0.71$ awareness, $\beta = 0.65$ engagement) than older audience ($\beta = 0.58$, $\beta = 0.48$). This makes it essential to have audience-specific strategies and not a single-strategy approach to SMM.

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing Summary and Statistical Inference

Hypothesis	Prediction	Finding (Mean Effect/CI)	Support
H1: SMM→Brand Awareness	Significant positive effect	$\beta = 0.68$ [0.61, 0.75]	Supported
H1 Moderation: Content quality	Visual/UGC > Text	0.71 vs. 0.48, $p < 0.001$	Supported
H2: Brand Image Mediation	Mediated effect 25-40%	63.2% mediated, $\beta = 0.31$	Supported (exceeds prediction)
Secondary: SMM→Engagement	Significant effect	$\beta = 0.59$ [0.51, 0.67]	Supported
Secondary: Engagement→Purchase	Significant effect	$\beta = 0.44$ [0.33, 0.55]	Supported

The results of testing the hypotheses are summarized in Table 6. H1 predicted that H1: H1 (text) would show no significant differences from the other types of content in terms of the impact on brand awareness, and this prediction was confirmed with strong evidence ($\beta = 0.68$, 95% CI [0.61, 0.75]), with visual and

user-generated content significantly outperforming text (0.71 vs. 0.48, $p < 0.001$). The mediating mechanism of brand image explained 25-40% of the mediating effect of SMM on purchase intention, and empirical analysis showed greater mediatory effect than predicted (63.2% mediated), implying that the brand image is the main mechanism that affects purchase behavior. There were multiple simultaneous mediating pathways, as revealed in secondary pathway analysis, that found customer engagement explains around 35% of the SMM→purchase effects (indirect effect $\beta = 0.26$). All hypotheses were supported in an empirical fashion, with effect sizes evidencing statistical significance in all studies, where p values were < 0.05 .

7. DISCUSSION

This synthesis shows that social media marketing has significant yet distinct impacts on brand awareness and customer engagement. Results from the core finding SMM show positive influence in brand awareness ($\beta = 0.68$) is in line with the signal processing theory which predicts that repeated exposures to a brand will increase the ease of brand retrieval and cognitive availability. There was, however, some meaningful heterogeneity in effect size (range 0.52-0.84), indicating that this is not an effect size that holds true across multiple situations. Content characteristics proved powerful moderators: in general, content emphasizing visual and interactive aspects significantly outperformed text-based approaches, thus confirming the central tenet of cognitive psychology that perceptual salience and elaborative processing is a key factor in content effectiveness. Perhaps most interestingly, the number of posts had little correlation with awareness results ($\beta = 0.31$), which flies in the face of claims by practitioners that more posts equal more reach. This disconnect may be due to the importance of platforms' algorithms giving priority to engagement depth over the number of posts made; one high quality post gets more reach than multiple posts with lower quality. The discovery suggests that quality refinement should be the focus of the brands rather than frequency expansion in posting.

The results showed that the brand image was the most important mediating variable between SMM and purchase intention with 63.2% of the total effects. This behavior confirms Keller's brand equity model, in which brand associations and perceived quality are the key influencers of purchase. SMM works based on the image-building mechanisms: first, aesthetic presentation signals the quality of the product, second, the consistency of messages reveals the reliability of a product, third, community engagement signals social validity. Notably, mediation succeeded in improving the predictions that were initially made (hypothesized 25-40%, observed 63.2%) and therefore, the brand image mechanisms work more strongly than theorizing indicated before. The findings have real-world applications: the organizations should invest in brand image by adopting SMM content strategy instead of conversion through direct purchases. Although more touchpoints in this pathway than in the direct path, the indirect pathway shows more influence on actual purchase behavior.

Mechanisms of customer engagement require special consideration. Engagement ($\beta = 0.59$ direct effects) has moderate influence on the outcomes of SMM, but it also plays a significant role as a mediator variable

in the relationship between SMM and purchase intention (the indirect effects measured are 0.44, which is 35% of the relationship between SMM and purchase intention). This trend demonstrates that the engagement not only works as a psychological investment and social identity process to strengthen brand affiliation, but also acts as a bridge for information dissemination via peer networks (earned reach, WOM). Platform architecture significantly moderated engagement, with TikTok demonstrating the highest effects ($\beta = 0.71$), suggesting an array of affordances that prioritize user-generated content, algorithm-driven discovery, and community norms for participation. Instagram and Facebook demonstrated moderate effects (0.67, 0.58), while LinkedIn had less engagement ($\beta = 0.42$), indicating that the choice of platform should depend on the goals of engagement, not on a one-size-fits-all approach.

Demographic moderators and category-based moderators identified important boundary conditions. The difference among the SMM effects across the different categories was significant and the positive results were observed in consumer-packaged goods brands ($\beta = 0.74$ awareness) versus technology and B2B brands ($\beta = 0.61$), these pointing to categories' varying dependencies on image-based positioning. This is because younger audiences (18-35) were more responsive to the SMM than older audiences ($\beta = 0.71$ awareness, $\beta = 0.65$ engagement), further supporting differential adoption of social media platforms and differential socialization to social media norms. These patterns require audience segmentation strategies: a different SMM approach should be adopted for different segments as a function of demographic makeup and product category. In B2B environments that focus on functional differentiation, informational content needs to be incorporated into SMM efforts, and for categories where the younger generation is the primary user group, TikTok and Instagram will be more of a priority than Facebook and LinkedIn.

Theory of integration (signal processing theory) gives insight into mechanisms of observed effects. The signal processing theory states that consumers listen to marketing stimuli based on the relevance and the processing fluency. The processing costs savings (cognitive fluency) and the indication of brand reliability (signal quality) created by consistent and authentic SMM content that is aesthetically compelling leads to systematic elaboration, which boosts memory encoding and affect transfer. There is yet another way that platforms affect the signal: algorithms favour content with a high number of likes and comments, which results in a 'concentrated visibility' effect, meaning that content of a high quality is visible to a larger audience, while average content has a smaller reach. The reason why posting frequency correlation was very low, while content quality correlation was high, is because of the algorithmic filtering that increases the tradeoff between quality and quantity. Those that are using this algorithmic structure but doing it with a more "excellence" than "volume" oriented approach will get better brand awareness results. A few important caveats need to be highlighted. This synthesis brought together research done with different methodological approaches (survey-based SEM, experiments, ethnography, longitudinal tracking), and methodological variation sources due to the absence of formal meta-analysis. The effect sizes were directionally similar, but with a realistic range that indicated differences in operationalization of measurement of brand awareness some measured brand awareness by aided recall, others by unaided

recall/brand recognition, which could plausibly have different effect patterns. The geographic scope was mainly Western (North America and Europe), which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other markets with distinct social media platforms and cultural norms in communication. Future research should focus on the effect on emerging platforms (Instagram Reels/YouTube Shorts), temporal effects (the durability of the SMM effects and whether they wear out over time) and cross-cultural effects (whether the SMM effect is different across cultures).

7. CONCLUSION

There are clearly several interconnected ways in which social media marketing can impact brand awareness and engagement. Direct effects are still significant (SMM→awareness $\beta = 0.68$; SMM→engagement $\beta = 0.59$), which makes SMM a valid strategic tool to create consumer recognition and engagement. The primary influence of SMM is through image building mechanisms, however, as a dominant mediator, brand image accounts for 63.2% of SMM's influence on purchase intention. Quality of content is far more important than the number of posts as visual and interactive content is significantly superior to text-based content. Platform-specific customization offers better results than a one-size-fits-all strategy, with TikTok designed to drive engagement and Instagram to encourage awareness. Demographic and category-based moderators help to identify that SMM can differ in effectiveness, depending on the makeup of the audience and on the product being promoted, requiring audience-segmented strategies. Organizations should focus on creating content that is engaging, authentic, and visually appealing, using the form of the platform it is displayed on, with a strong emphasis on developing the brand image in a systematic way rather than on the immediate engagement goals. From the perspective of the 19th-century, these recommendations by practitioners can be explained by the integration of the theory of signal processing, which clarifies the mechanisms of how consumer cognition and behavior react to SMM stimuli.

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