



## The Impact of Social Media on Consumer Buying Intention

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### ABSTRACT

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Companies throughout the world are constantly seeking new ways to reach consumers. Just a few decades ago, television and print advertising were the fundamental components of marketing strategies. In the current era, these traditional marketing streams are just a small segment of the varied approaches used to market and brand products. The increasing focus on social media shaped state of the art advertising and shifted the way companies interact with their target groups. As a result, the effective use of social media has become an essential part of creating and maintaining a competitive advantage. Subsequently, companies now place considerable value on the way in which social media can be used to shape consumer brand perception and influence their buying intention. Companies integrating a strategic approach to the use of social media will have advantages over those that do not. In assessing the impacts of social media on branding and marketing approaches, an exploration of the existing literature on social media use and brand perception can help identify emerging and successful strategies for improving consumer engagement through social media.

### 1. Social Media

Increasing focus on global development and the expansive use of technology in marketing, advertising and promotion have led to shifts in the way in which companies focus on consumers (Quelch & Jocz, 2008). Researchers have recognized that technology has become a major component in expanding markets and have defined entire marketing strategies around global access to technology. At the same time, advertising and promotion often focus on the psychological, emotional, and social factors influencing consumer behaviours, elements that must be incorporated into technology-based marketing (Quelch & Jocz, 2008). As a result, even in the presence of global expansion and new technologies, companies need to look at the four essential "Ps" of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion (Quelch & Jocz, 2008).

Rust, Moorman and Bhalla (2010) maintain that while many companies have access to a variety of types of technologies that could enhance consumer interest, expand brand recognition and improve overall marketing, many underuse technologies as a foundation for interacting with customers. These researchers, though, seem to suggest that expanded use of information technologies and social media are going to be the trends in the future (Rust, Moorman, & Bhalla, 2010). Rather than focusing on short-term advertising through technology, adept companies are integrating social media mechanisms to enhance the relationship with consumers. Companies frequently focus on three of the most widely used social media platforms for use in product marketing and branding: Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011; Shi, Rui, & Whinston, 2014). More than any time in the past, companies are recognizing the value of the use of methods to engage consumers in a way that continually reintroduces the product, increases the appeal of

products, or identifies social components to product experiences. Social media websites have become the center of information distribution on products, including the introduction of new product lines, the creation of brand awareness, and methods to shape consumer behavior (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). Social media provides the unique opportunity to use word-of-mouth marketing to a widespread audience, supporting consumer-to-consumer communications and advancing brand awareness through a large-scale social network (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010).

Social media can be defined as "consumer-generated media that covers a wide variety of new sources of online information, created and used by consumers intent on sharing information with others regarding any topic of interest" (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014, p. 1). "According to eMarketer (2013), nearly one in four people worldwide use social network sites - a number of about 1.73 billion people. By 2017, the global social network audience is estimated to be around 2.55 billion people" (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016, p. 1). When assessing social media as a marketing tool, most researchers include both mobile and web-based technologies that focus on ways that users "share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated content" (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014, p. 1). This is considered by most to be a paradigmatic shift in the way companies market their products, because companies are relying on consumers more than ever before to direct their marketing process and create the discourse around branding (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014).

Unlike print or television advertising, social media is not an advertising platform in and of itself, and as a result, companies can be challenged with determining how consumer information and engagement impact the

branding process. Positive comments in social media venues can have a positive impact, but negative comments can also be a part of the brand dialogue and may not be able to be controlled by the companies using social media for marketing (Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013; Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014). At the same time, consumers participate in the discussion and exchanges that influence the branding process, all the while paying very little attention to their participation in the branding or marketing process (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014).

Of the three social media platforms identified as commonly used by companies to support marketing and branding (i.e. Twitter, YouTube and Facebook), Facebook is considered by some to be the "holy grail of marketers" because of its focus on the integration of advertising into participants social content. In the Facebook format, advertisers present their information about specific brands and products, Facebook users provide comments or "Like" content (showing approval of specific content), and this then drives additional similar content (Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Sharp, 2012; Shen & Bissell, 2013). The more consumers engage in behaviours around product advertising or comment on Facebook about specific products, the more content they will be provided that has similar products or brands (Shen & Bissell, 2013). Social media, then, has a significant impact on how marketers design their strategic approach, how they deliver brand information, and how they scale advertising to enhance consumer engagement.

Social networking sites like Facebook have provided a new way of introducing brand-related content and creating exchanges with consumers by generating consumer interactions (Shen & Bissell, 2013). The value of this approach is based on the shift in the way in which the Internet is being used, and social venues are progressing. Just a decade ago, the number one online activity was pornography, but just a decade later, this has shifted to social networking (Shen & Bissell, 2013). As a result, about 93% of businesses use some form of social networking for marketing and branding (Shen & Bissell, 2013). In their 2013 study, Shen and Bissell maintained that in any given year, there are more than 200 million active online users in the United States who spend more than 29 hours spent on online browsing, product assessment and networking. Of this large amount of social networking use, Facebook is the leader, with the most time spent on this social network leader (over 7 hours per person per week) (Shen & Bissell, 2013).

Because of the shift in the format through which consumers engage with products and product brands, the internet and e-technologies have become essential elements in branding. Consumers are now encouraged to interact with brands, share information with other consumers and create their content that reflects their brand preferences. The more consumers are engaged in this process, the more likely they are to encourage others to explore specific brands (Christodoulies, 2009). In understanding the role that social networks play in branding, it is important to recognize the views of businesses about the branding and marketing processes, their desire to create consumer engagement, and the impacts of social networks on influencing consumer purchasing decision-making.

## 2. Branding

Researchers generally recognize the importance of the concept of branding as it applies to product and marketing development (Campelo, et al., 2014; Keller, 1993). Seminal work on the long-standing approaches to understanding branding reflected the connection between branding process and marketing (Keller, 1993). A brand can be defined as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to

differentiate them from those of competitors" (Kotler 1991, p. 442, as cited by Keller, 1993, p. 1). Specific brands can include a number of different brand identities through which associations are made based on central brand characteristics. Consumers frequently assess brands, make comparisons between like brands, and make purchasing decisions based on brand affiliation (Keller, 1993).

In alignment with this view, brand meaning extends from social constructs related to the brand and consumer perceptions that are based on both brand comparisons and branding strategies (Campelo, et al., 2014). The social element of branding is one of the most significant aspects of how branding shapes the focus of marketing. Whether looking at Nike products or electric vehicles, the messages utilized in branding strategies become the defence that consumers use to determine their purchasing decisions. Campelo and colleagues (2014) maintained that branding is often influenced by social perceptions, including the value that individuals place on the brand, and social pressures, including the social messages that others place on brand ownership. Value linked to branding is influenced by components of the brand process, including brand message and brand knowledge.

Keller (1993) described brand knowledge as a component of brand equity, which is shaped by consumer knowledge of a brand and its products and consumer response to the marketing messages of a brand. Studies of brand equity often attempt to determine the consumer perceptions of a brand and its impact on decision-making. Aaker (1997) maintained that this is based on the perception of branding that influence reception to brand messages. Aaker described this in relation to brand personality, which includes the associations or characteristics of a brand. Brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 348). For example, advertising messages that attach adjectives like "cook, hip, contemporary" to Absolut vodka, while attaching characteristics like "intellectual, conservative" and older to Stolli vodka define how the products are branded and how they are distinguished by consumers (Aaker, 1997).

Brand personality can include traits like "sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness" (Aaker, 1997, p. 348). Consumers make connections between characteristics they find affable and characteristics associated with a product shaped through branding (Aaker, 1997). Because the influence of brands on consumer behaviours are linked to the perception of brand associations and memories of specific brand components, research indicates that psychological factors play a tremendous role in defining the effectiveness of marketing strategies (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993).

Brand experience includes how brands are perceived by consumers, but also how responses are communicated. Some brand experiences are perceived very cerebrally, while others are conceptualized around feelings, emotions, sensations, and behaviours. Brand-related stimuli become an important component of the transfer of brand information (Barkus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Depending on the type of product or service, specific consumer responses to brand images can result in feelings, thoughts or behaviours that are distinct to each brand. Associations made through response to brand stimuli shape not only knowledge of the brand characteristics but also enhances brand awareness.

Often consumer behaviours are shaped by brand awareness. Three coffee shops on a major street may present comparable products and services with a significant price differential. Even if Starbucks is the most

expensive of the three, consumer behaviours and choices are often driven by their perception of the brand and belief in a brand-based experience that is differentiated solely by recognition of the brand. A person may choose Starbucks not because they provide the best service, best coffee, or best-baked goods but because they are a recognised brand that has associated feelings, cognitions, and sensations. These determine consumer expectations and beliefs about the outcomes of purchasing decisions (Barkus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Keller, 1993). Kahr and colleagues (2016) recognized that consumer behaviour can be influenced by positive brand knowledge as well as by negative experiences that result in damage to a brand. For example, following the Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska in 1989, many consumers turned away from this industry leader because of the negative environmental impact and brand deterioration that followed. It took decades and a merger with one of their largest competitors, Mobil, in 1999 to reshape the brand and reduce the negative impacts of the disaster. Once a good image is lost, Kahr and colleagues maintained, it can be lost forever.

Brand equity becomes a part of this process, especially when applying branding strategies to widespread consumer interactions (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014). Brand equity can be defined as the introduction of some ways in which knowledge about a brand can influence the consumer behaviours in response to marketing approaches (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014). "The ultimate aim of branding is a favorable response from consumers/customers. Companies attempt this by marketing products to customers, highlighting differentiating characteristics" (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014, p. 2). Companies seek ways of differentiating their marketing approach in order to reach the largest number of consumers. Subsequently, brands can be differentiated through marketing focus and messages in order to appeal to different consumer populations.

A good example of this relates to the way in which Nike has integrated technology and social media in the branding of their products to many different consumer populations. Nike recognized that across populations, their sports-related products appealed to individuals seeking a greater motivation for individuals to excel physically (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2014). Their "Just do it" slogan was one that was recognized as a way to market their products to youths, adults, and even older adults by integrating a single message or slogan that could then be differentiated through the use of online advertising and population-specific content (Kohli, Suri, and Kapoor, 2014). This kind of differentiation is essential to branding process and promotes consumer loyalty while also ensuring brand knowledge.

## 2.1 Brand-Related Social Media

Brand loyalty becomes an increasing focus when companies consider the use of social media. Facebook, for example, has more than 955 million active users, most of whom log on at least once each month (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). About half of Facebook users access their accounts on a daily basis, either via the internet-based platform or through their mobile application (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). As a result of this widespread use, advertisers view Facebook and other social media platforms as the most beneficial technology to introduce brand-related content and promote brand associations.

While companies see Facebook as a means to promote brand awareness and gain consumer attention, not all of the responses to advertising in social media are positive. While brand-related content is being introduced at an increasing rate in the Facebook platform, social media-based advertising is sometimes viewed as an unwanted element, and companies have to be aware of how consumer responses to their advertisements can

impact the value of that brand-related content (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Researchers have maintained that it is important that companies recognize that the process of introducing advertising and brand-related content in social media requires a close scrutiny of the content and a focus on brand-based community building (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013).

Brand communities often form based on the presence of brand loyalty and positive response to brand-centric content. When creating a social media presence for a brand, the development of this kind of community requires an understanding of how social media works and how brand communities function through the application of social media. Brand communities are made up of individuals who choose to participate and demonstrate a relationship to the essential information, content, or materials that are being shared in the community. This can include commentary on products, responses to new products, incentivised elements that shape decisions about participation in the community, and methods to create a social connection that has emotional or socially driven experiential elements, including creating a sense of belonging (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). A key element for leaders like Facebook is to develop social interactions and create engaging environments (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). This means that individuals may be encouraged to engage in content by activities designed into the format. For example, content about a particular brand may appear on Facebook, linked to an individual's Web search for a specific product. The consumer is then asked to "Like" (show approval) or "Share" the content (showing approval by publically sharing the information with others) (Wallace, Buil, de Chernatony, & Hogan, 2014). These simple tasks engage the participants in an interaction that helps them make decisions around products and provides feedback for advertisers.

At the same time, there is an important element to be understood in the creation of brand-based social media content and engagement with the consumer based: There are very few methods built into the mechanised system of response to content that allows for negative feedback. Consumers may comment or engage in discussions about a product, but there are no opposite elements to the "Like" or "Share" options that can be selected in order to show opposition to the content in a public way. As a result, the content that is "Liked" or "Shared" becomes the content of value, and this results in the introduction of more similar content while ignoring these options does not necessarily result in similar content not being introduced.

From an organisational standpoint, brand managers become important in assessing data and providing direction related to the creation of brand communities and the information derived from consumer responses (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Effective measuring of consumer engagement in brand-related social media content can be an essential part of creating a social network marketing plan (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016). The creation of an internet presence for a particular brand is no longer a static process by which companies provide an internet presence or brand depictions without a feedback loop.

Different from the static websites in the early days of the Internet, the interactive nature of social media has ultimately changed the ways in which consumers engage with brands. When using social media on a regular basis, consumers are in contact with brands and products by reading, writing, watching, commenting, "Liking", sharing, and in many other different ways. The growth in popularity of social media across consumers and firms has opened a vast research field for scholars (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016, p. 2).

Researchers have indicated that there are different tools built into the social media platforms that allow for the creation of a brand community, the engagement of consumers, electronic word-of-mouth, communication amongst peer groups, and user-generated content, all of which support consumer engagement and create collective value (Fuller, Muhlbacher, Matzler, & Jawecki, 2009; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016). The focus on value and the application of social media to create value has become an aspect of marketing and branding processes in most modern organizations.

### 3. Collective Value Creation

When brand communities are developed, social identification in the community and social drivers play a role in the creation of value. The use of social media to create these communities helps to connect the growing technology use with the development of value-creating practices in business environments (Schau, Muniz, & Arould, 2009). These communities help to create value by sharing information, generating additional avenues to support consumption, creating dynamic and vital responses to products and developing a driving force for consumerism (Schau, Muniz, & Arould, 2009). Most researchers recognize that these elements fall into two different categories: elements created the company (firm-created), and elements created by users (user-generated) (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). Frequently, social media platforms like Facebook support a high degree of user-generated content that can be used to support social behaviours around products and enhance brand recognition (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012).

Some of the most powerful tools related to the use of social media to support consumer decision-making reflect the social mechanisms involved in creating collective value. Socialization around specific brand expectations and knowledge can influence decision-making and shape the way consumers assess brand-based information. In the same light, peer communications and social mechanisms can also influence how consumers perceive firm-created content (Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012). Frequently, brand value and purchasing decisions are linked more to the strength of peer communications and social mechanisms supporting brand image, rather than the firm-created content available in advertising segments. These factors support the belief that value is aligned with brand awareness (and the mechanisms that support awareness), and these elements subsequently influence how consumers respond to a brand or product.

### 4. Brand Awareness and Buying Intention

The increasing use of social media has led to a major shift in the approach to pursuing consumer brand awareness and making connections between brand awareness and intention to buy. A key shift is the fact that brands are no longer simply static descriptors or associations, but live as a part of a social process (Hollebeek, Glynn, Brodie, 2014; Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013). "Brands are now viewed as an ongoing social process (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Fuller et al., 2012), whereby value is co-created in the interplay and negotiations of various stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009)" (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013, p. 342). Brand awareness and brand value, then, are linked to social interactions and the response within social networks in which value becomes an element of exchange as a part of social mechanisms. Researchers are increasingly aware of the social nature of brands and the importance of brand relationships in creating value and supporting consumer decision-making (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013).

Adept companies recognize that consumers have countless brand opportunities and choices on a daily basis and social media impacts how they perceive different brands at the moment that they make buying decisions (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013). Even in the presence of changing social media mechanisms and the increasing use of technology, consumers still go through a common set of steps in making decisions that impact purchasing selections (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013). When determining what product to select, "the consumer first attains awareness and knowledge about a product, subsequently develops positive or negative feelings towards the product and finally acts by buying and using or by rejecting and avoiding the product" (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013, p. 344). Researchers have indicated that this model moves along a progression of effects that impact how a consumer makes decisions, the technologies being in the first stage of product recognition. In other words, a consumer decides in the first few minutes of viewing a product about whether to purchase it or not based on the initial recognition of the brand. If the consumer does not have a positive association with the recognising, it will never move on to the next stage of decision-making (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013). Because that first centre is essential in addressing consumer behaviours, companies must recognize the value of the use of social mechanisms as a behaviour tool in the hierarchy of consumer behaviours (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013).

Early involvement in a consumer's decision-making process can determine whether they continue to the next steps or not. This does not guarantee that early involvement will translate into purchasing intention but it does show that early involvement or early social recognition and brand awareness can ensure that the product remains in the loop of possible purchasing alternatives (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013). As the consumer moves further along in the process, evaluative structures and decision-making strategies are more individualized and may take longer to play out. For example, if a consumer is looking at a high-end automobile, they may immediately rule out seven different brands for brand-specific, knowledge-based reasons. They may also rule out these brands because of social media representations of brands, consumer comments on specific brands, and social mechanisms that shape brand perceptions (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013). Once the consumer moves on to the next stage where brand perception no longer immediately shapes their response, decisions may be based on another tier of perceptions that can be influenced by social media, including the consumer's needs, values, and interests, and the values and interests of those in their social collective (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013; Yuksel, Bilim, & Yuksel, 2014). Decisions are not always as simple as selecting a product or not; often consumers find themselves seeking better ways of evaluating a product and look to social networks for brand or product clues.

### 5. Strategic Approaches

The old approaches to marketing and advertising rarely apply when considering how influential social media is to achieving competitive advantage. "Traditionally, organizations have created advertisements, and customers consumed them. The intentions of advertisers have been reasonably clear: Organizations use these messages (mostly in broadcast or print media) to inform, persuade, or remind present and potential customers of their offerings or of the organization itself" (Berton, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008, p. 6). As passive recipients of this kind of advertising or communication, consumers relied heavily on the messages introduced and much less on the perceptions of others about specific products or brands. Companies have had to become much savvier in their use of marketing strategies because modern consumer populations rarely look at

advertisements the way they did in the past. A consumer will participate or engage in advertising in the first few seconds it is displayed, or dismiss it altogether (Berton, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008). The internet has provided companies with much more cost-effective ways of engaging with the consumer population, from creating responsive advertising and linked social networks to integrating surveys as a part of the consumer experience for a brand. "In 2013 alone, 43 percent of all research surveys completed in the United States were conducted online, generating total revenue of \$1.8 billion" (Fulgoni, 2014, p. 133). Online research that provides a responsive tool via social media for understanding consumer perceptions has been an effective mechanism for supporting new marketing strategies (Fulgoni, 2014). This has led to major investments in marketing in social media that exceeds over \$5 billion a year in marketing investments (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

With that level of expenditure, companies want to be sure that their social media marketing campaigns utilize the best strategic approaches, aligning existing theories on social mechanisms for buying intention with the best options for engaging consumers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). This has led to branded social media campaigns that are reflective of the fact that about 86% of marketers believe that social media is an important and pervasive element in marketing initiatives (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). "Branded social campaigns provide additional touchpoints to encourage ongoing interaction between the consumer and the brand story throughout the day, which can deepen consumer-brand relationships, help marketers uncover common themes in consumer feedback, and persuade consumers to engage with online content" (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 15).

One of the most significant shifts in marketing development that has led to social media-based strategies is the belief that consumers want to engage with product lines through user-generated content (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). "Consumer generated media encompasses opinions, experiences, advice and commentary about products, brands, companies and services-usually informed by personal experience-that exist in consumer-created postings on Internet discussion boards, forums, Usenet newsgroups and blogs. CGM can include text, images, photos, videos, podcasts and other forms of media" (Krishnamurthy & Dou, 2008, p. 2). An example provided by Ashley and Tuten (2015) was a Facebook-based campaign in which Procter and Gamble created a "Thank You Mom" campaign in which consumers were encouraged to share their family stories. This campaign integrated multiple social channels and a combined broadcast advertising campaign, but the primary elements were dictated by social media. The stories that Procter and Gamble sought were those that enhanced associations with the products while displaying the connection between mothers and their children. In the end, the campaign supported engagement by hundreds of thousands of female heads of households and "soccer moms," creating a positive response to the brand (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

User-generated content is one of the dynamic and emerging approaches used by companies to enhance their interactions with consumers and advance brand knowledge. This is based on a growing view of the role that social media plays in the personal lives of consumers, including the belief that consumers use social media as a means of creating or building social capital and of creating their sense of wellness through the psychosocial elements of the social media tools (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Recognizing this connection can play an important role in developing the content and shaping the relationship between the consumer and the company.

This speaks to an important aspect of the paradigmatic shift towards social media and user-generated content in marketing: the belief that companies are now creating, and must manage, a closer relationship with their consumers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). This creates additional expectations in this kind of relationship, and companies creating a social media presence and interactions with their consumers must consider how to manage these relationships, create more effective and responsive customer service, and ensure that generate a following through their marketing mechanisms. Customer engagement and the willingness of customers to share their stories, create their own content, and engage are aligned with the goals of social media campaigns (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

From a general perspective, most marketers believe that social engagement through marketing requires a high level of understanding of the goals of both the consumers and the companies in creating a social media presence. What is rarely addressed is the fact that social media platforms provide a context for the new creation of brand identity and for both positive and negative expressions of brand involvement.

Social media creates a venue through which computer-based word-of-mouth communication can significantly influence the brand image. Because one consumer can reach hundreds if not thousands of followers in a single post, companies must address their approaches to managing social networks before creating an online presence. This rarely occurs in advance of the introduction of the company in online forums. Instead, consumer engagement that is not positive is usually the first indicator that the company wants to apply focus on mitigating for negative social media responses. For this reason, user-generated content, which has been assessed as a valuable tool in creating consumer engagement, is not always the first choice for many companies.

Hautz, Fuller, Hutter, and Thuridtl (2013) maintained that user-generated content could be used effectively by companies who recognize that there are varied formats, and some of it can be more structured in a manner that reduces the impacts of negative messaging. By creating avenues for positive message streams, in the manner commonly applied in platforms like Facebook, companies can make their customers the "ambassadors for products and brands by producing and disseminating user-generated content" (Hautz, Fuller, Hutter, & Thuridtl, 2013). Bruhn, Schoenmueller, and Shafer (2012) maintained that user-generated social media communications could positively or negatively impact brand equity. Subsequently, social media communications must be managed and a plan created for effectively addressing the negative elements that can influence consumer perceptions (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Shafer, 2012).

Researchers have maintained that while user-generated content can help to secure consumer behaviours in relation to second stages of product decision-making, firm-created social media content has a greater overall effect on a brand image (Bruhn, Shoemuller, & Shafer, 2012). As has been previously stated, consumer decisions can be made in the first few seconds that a consumer assess a product. If the consumer has a positive association based on company-linked media content and brand image, the consumer will move on to the next stage of selection, the stage in which decisions are linked to perceptions of the brand by individuals within a social network. In align with this view, consumers need to consider the nature of their products, the capacity to maintain a brand image and the overarching value of social media networks in creating consumer engagement. Companies also need to recognize that branding itself is a complex process and requires a commitment to both traditional marketing

approaches and social media-based approaches, including those that are linked to user-generated content.

## 6. Conclusions

Increasing use of social media worldwide has led to the belief that this is a valuable tool in supporting consumer engagement. Companies are continually looking to new methods for reaching consumers and for shaping consumer behaviours, including brand loyalty and intention to buy. The changing technological era has led to increased activity in social network platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, all of which have created mechanisms through which consumers can develop rapport and create interactions with brand-specific content.

Companies that are adept at integrating strategic approaches to the use of social network platforms are likely to be most successful in reaching, engaging, and maintaining a consumer base moving forward. Factors that influence brand perception and intention to buy include things like the social mechanism that drive consumer perspectives, and the views of others posted demonstrated in social media posts. An emerging strategic focus is on the use of user-generated content, content that is created by consumers in response to specific brands or brand requests and influences the perceptions of other consumers. This kind of strategic approach requires a high degree of maintenance and companies utilizing this method should be prepared to designate a marketing service to the management of online customer relationships.

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