Social Media Marketing in the Digital Age: Empower Consumers to Win Big?

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Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to propose and test a research model outlining the chain effects of social media marketing activities (SMMA) on brand equity, encompassing the potential mediators of self-congruity, consumer empowerment, and brand experience.

Design/methodology/approach

An online survey was conducted, and 241 valid responses were acquired. The data was submitted to Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), complemented by the artificial neural network (ANN) analysis.

Findings

The results revealed that SMMA can foster the development of self-congruity and consumer empowerment. These two psychological responses represent the key drivers to reinforce the positive brand experience and ultimately lead to brand equity. The sequential mediating effect was confirmed. The ANN analysis offered further insights into the ranking of variable importance.

Originality/value

The present study presents a breakthrough by taking into account the roles of self-congruity, consumer empowerment, brand experience simultaneously, and assesses their sequential mediating roles in the linkage between SMMA and brand equity.

1. Introduction

Social media has permeated into aspects of consumers' lives in the last decade, and we are witnessing radical changes in consumers' consumption patterns. Consumers are now heavily relying on social media as a channel to learn about and shop for products/services (Aw and Labrecque, 2020). In parallel, marketers use social media as communication and transaction channels of marketing activities as part of their digital marketing strategy. Social media has the edge over traditional media due to its bi-directionality and interoperability (Park *et al*., 2021). Social media presents a community-building platform for marketers in which consumers can follow brands' fan pages autonomously or through enticements by marketers. More importantly, following or interacting on brands' fan pages implies that consumers are willing to accept information from brands and communities while also engaging in experience sharing with others. In this way, social media offers a lucrative opportunity for marketers to better identify and engage with existing and potential consumers. Currently, social media such as Youtube, Instagram, and Tiktok are among the top recognised platforms for delivering desired marketing outcomes. For example, it has been found that 70% of marketers use Facebook advertisements, and there were 10 million active advertisers on the platform in the third quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2021).

Correspondingly, social media marketing has become an indispensable marketing tool for brands in the digital era. To further explain, social media marketing manifests the practices of creating, communicating, and delivering offerings via social media, which involves fostering interaction, sharing information, personalizing recommendations, and generating word-of-mouth (Yadav and Rahman, 2017). For instance, luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton owns its Facebook page where they present content in various forms (e.g., pictures, text, stories, and videos etc.) which serve as the impetus for engendering consumer engagement (e.g., sharing, commenting, and liking) in social media (Park *et al*., 2021). Established evidence has indicated several positive brand-related outcomes of social media marketing such as enhanced brand attitude, brand awareness, and sales performance (Aw and Chong, 2019; Cham *et al*., 2021; Dwivedi *et al*., 2021). The existing literature has largely examined the linkage between social media marketing and brand equity, suggesting social media marketing activities (SMMA) as a key to achieving a brand's long-term success (Yu and Yuan, 2019).

Yet, although some studies have been devoted to this area of research, much more remains to be explored, especially in terms of the complex underlying process of brand equity

formation (Chen and Qasim, 2020; Cheung et al., 2020; Yu and Yuan, 2019). While authors of extant social media marketing studies demonstrated the role of brand experience in forming brand equity, they did not explicitly inform *what* and *how* social media marketing strategies guide the experience translation process (Zollo et al., 2020). For instance, Arya et al. (2022) articulated that social media brand communication fosters brand equity through brand attachment; Stojanovic et al. (2018) indicated social media use intensity contributes to a collection of brand equity outcomes. These studies offer insightful results but fall short of enlightening the fulfillment of the needs that drives the process. In addressing this research lacuna, we argued that an enhanced understanding of social media brand marketing and experience could be interpreted through the prism of psychological state attainment. The idea is built on the rationale that, at its very core, psychological mechanisms shape the trajectory of that social media marketing evolution, and consumers expect brand houses to fulfill their needs and desires. In particular, we contend that the relationship is not simple direct but involves a rather complex sequential mediating psychological mechanism. To this end, we aim to investigate two potentially relevant mediating explanators, namely self-congruity and consumer empowerment.

First, self-congruity denotes the psychological experience that arises from the interplay between an individual's self-concept and the product-user image (Sirgy, 1985). It is imperative in the marketing literature as a psychological mechanism in explaining consumer behaviour in relation to the brand, with the notion that consumers not only purchase for utilitarian purposes but also the symbolic meanings embedded within the brands, and they tend to behave favorably to brands that possess relevant meanings to them (Aw *et al*., 2019; McCracken, 1986). Therefore, self-congruity is posited to exert a real bearing on consumers' positively biased perception and experience towards a brand (Aguirre-Rodriguez *et al*., 2012). Second, consumers are said to be empowered in the social media marketing environment as they gain more access to information that enables sound decisions (Dwivedi *et al*., 2021). Unfortunately, the scope and role of the above-mentioned constructs (i.e., self-congruity and consumer empowerment) are still moot, particularly in the social media marketing literature. Whether these factors can be fostered by SMMA and their subsequent implications, remain unknown. Against this backdrop, we intend to propose and validate an overarching framework that delineates the comprehensive process of how SMMA can translate into brand equity, through a sequential mediation of self-congruity, consumer empowerment, and brand experience.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Development

2.1 Theoretical background

In the present study, we adhere to the notion of prior research in the social media context that no singular theory is sufficient to provide a holistic understanding of social media marketing's effectiveness in relation to consumer behaviour. Hence, we adopt the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) theory as the overarching theory, with consumer culture theory and consumer empowerment theory as the supporting theories. The S-O-R framework postulates that external environmental stimuli licit the internal organism of consumers, and in turn facilitate the formation of a particular behavioural response (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The framework has been well-accommodated in the marketing literature in which past studies showcased how online and offline retail environments as stimuli (S) (e.g., sales-staff assistance, social presence, service quality) impact consumers' internal states (O) (e.g., attitude and perceived enjoyment), and subsequent behavioural responses (R) (e.g., mobile shopping) (Hew *et al*., 2018). We modelled SMMA and brand equity as the stimuli and response, respectively.

We grounded in the self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) and consumer empowerment theory (Wathieu et al., 2002) in modelling the organism and response states. The self-congruity theory enables the explanation of why consumption motives of branded goods and services often extend beyond the functional benefits but are largely driven by the symbolic meanings behind brands (Aw et al., 2019) that serve the purpose of self-verification, maintenance, and enhancement (Sirgy, 1985). In accordance with the self-congruity theory, self-image congruity denotes the cognitive fit between a brand's image and consumer's self-concept, which determines brand evaluation and preference. The theory stipulates consumer-brand interaction, such as brand experience, as feedback to the self-concept assessment (Swann and Read, 1981). We assert that the development of self-congruity is augmented in the social media marketing context because the emergence of social media has increased the opportunity to present multiple selves, and marketers are urged to leverage them effectively as marketing channels (Rabbanee et al., 2020). Hence, we incorporate the self-congruity theory as a theoretical guidance underpinning the present study.

Besides, we argued that the other mechanism by which social media marketing can foster brand experience is through the curation of consumer empowerment. According to the consumer empowerment theory (Hu and Krishen, 2019), consumer empowerment denotes the experience in which a consumer possesses greater information and the ability to control. The

concept of empowerment becomes even more relevant in the techno-mediated consumption journey. Social media presents more enablers to empower consumers and facilitate greater brand/firm interaction and experience (Akhavannasab et al., 2018). Consumers are empowered by social media as they can acquire vast information more easily and educate themselves to attain a greater level of perceived freedom and authority to make decisions. The shifting of perceived control from retailers to consumers engenders a smart-shopping feeling and overall customer experience in the digital marketing environment (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). This affords us the opportunity to put the theory to the test and investigate the role of empowerment consumers have in their consumption process, particularly in the context of social media marketing. The complete research model is presented in Fig 1.

2.2 SMMA and Brand Equity

Social media has risen as the new frontier for marketing activities which offers marketers unprecedented opportunities to reach consumers and develop relationships with them (Godey et al., 2016). Indeed, the growing prevalence of the social media marketing landscape has changed how brand marketing is executed, particularly concerning brand content creation, distribution, and consumption. SMMA encompass five aspects, which are informativeness, interactivity, personalization, trendiness, and word of mouth (Koay *et al*., 2020). First, informativeness reflects the extent to which a brand's social media informs consumers about accurate, useful, and comprehensive information (Shareef *et al*., 2019). Social media users are concerned with marketing information that carries informative value and facilitates informed judgment (Lee and Hong, 2016). Second, brands have been using social media not only for customer service but more importantly a platform to stimulate discussion and exchange of ideas, with the ultimate aim of fostering credibility and affinity (Godey *et al*., 2016). The interactivity component denotes the extent to which a brand's social media enables consumers to contribute and share content and ideas with brands and other consumers. Third, personalization refers to the extent to which a brand's social media provides tailored offerings to meet consumers' preferences. According to Schulze et al. (2015), although a wide reach of marketing messages on social media is imperative, the relevance of messages is more potent in mitigating selective attention and engendering satisfaction because consumers generally favour highly relevant information to their needs to reduce cognitive effort. Fourth, trendiness indicates the extent to which a brand's social media disseminate trendy content. Consumers are compelled to seek the latest information about brands and products through social media to keep themselves up to date with the trend developments about brands,

explaining why social media has become core product search channels (Aw and Labrecque, 2020). Fifth, word-of-mouth in the social media marketing setting highlights how a brand's customers share brand experience on social media. It is undeniable that word-of-mouth is emerging as a reliable source of information for consumers in making a purchase decision, and social media represents a channel where word-of-mouth proliferates due to its ubiquity, mobility, and interactivity.

Keller (1993) introduced the most dominant paradigm toward understanding brand equity. From the author's perspective, brand equity is generally described as the value of brand generated from the consumers' perception and experience of the brand (Keller, 2016). The extant literature acknowledges that brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness as three components that constitute brand equity (Liu *et al*., 2017). Brand loyalty manifests the intensity level of consumer feeling pertaining to their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral attachment to a brand despite the existence of other alternative brands. Perceived quality refers to consumers' overall evaluation of the brands' features (Zeithaml, 1988). Brand awareness denotes the extent to which consumers can easily identify and trace the brand in their memory (Keller, 1993). A burgeoning number of marketing studies contends that brand equity development entails consistent marketing communications and reinforcement of consumer-brand relationships, paving the way to the necessity of SMMA (Koay *et al*., 2020; Godey *et al*., 2016; Šerić, 2017; Upadhyay *et al*., 2022). For example, Sun *et al*. (2021) found that the electronic word-of-mouth component of social media marketing can enhance consumers' attitude toward brand products and brand equity. Grounded in the S-O-R model, Koay *et al*. (2020) revealed that consumers' perceptions of multi-dimensional SMMA positively impact brand equity.

2.3 Brand Experience

The concept of brand experience reflects the overall feelings, sensations, cognition, and behavioural responses of a consumer toward a brand which derived from the interaction and engagement with the brand (e.g., design and communication) and its environment (e.g., stores and events) (Brakus *et al*., 2009; Chen and Qasim, 2020). Based on the conceptualization, it has been indicated that a total brand experience should go beyond the functional attributes (cognitive) of their product/service offering to encompass (sensations and feelings) (Iglesias *et al*., 2011). The appraisal theory of emotion contends that people engage in cognitive and

emotional appraisal processes during brand consumption (Nyer, 1997). When consumers recognize a brand as having the potential to support them in meeting their consumption goals, either hedonic or utilitarian, they experience positive outcomes. In this respect, consumers' perceptions of a brand are prompted, in part, by their experiences with the brand (Ding and Tseng, 2015).

A favourably perceived brand experience can enhance brand judgment (Koay *et al*., 2020). Brakus *et al*. (2009) explained that consumers are inherently craving for sensory stimulation, and thus brands are redefining themselves as a source of memories rather than goods that aim at providing experiential value (Mathwick *et al*., 2001). As a result, a brand that stimulates multiple experience dimensions can frame satisfaction judgments and build future-directed consumer loyalty towards the brand, as consumers are likely to repeat the positive brand experiences (Brakus *et al*., 2009; Yu and Yuan, 2019). Correspondingly, positive brand experience has been deemed the bridge to activating meaningful relationships with brands. Theoretically, a positive experience with a brand can foster a learned association whereby consumers with satisfactory brand experience tend to store these brand associations, and they are prone to perceive brand products as of high quality (Dwivedi *et al*., 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Brand experience is positively related to brand equity.

2.4 Self-congruity

To reiterate, the concept of self-congruity reflects the cognitive fit between self-concept and brand image (Sirgy, 1985). The term is used interchangeably with terminologies such as "self-image congruence" and "self-congruence" in the marketing literature. Typically, self-concept is defined as one's perception towards him of her "self" which encompasses four dimensions, including actual-self, ideal-self, social-self, and ideal-social self. According to the self-congruity theory, consumers are motivated to achieve self-congruity in fulfilling psychological needs (e.g., social approval needs and self-consistent needs) (Aguirre-Rodriguez *et al*., 2012). To this end, consumers engage in brand consumption as a means, particularly by choosing brands whose images align with their self-concepts (Aw *et al*., 2019; Roy and Rabbanee, 2015). Residing within the current marketing landscape where brand marketing and consumption are interwoven with social media, Belk (2013) argues that social media can trigger multiple self-concepts. This is because social media presents a platform

that facilitates peer communication and promotes idealized media images, thereby compelling engagement in social comparison (Burnasheva and Suh, 2020).

In general, brand marketing practices are driven to incorporate the brand into a consumer's self-concept (Phau *et al*., 2021; Rabbanee *et al*., 2020). The self-congruity theory posits that consumers make inferences about and compare the image of typical other consumers based on retail environment cues, including curation of marketing strategies such as price, promotion, and atmosphere (Sirgy *et al*., 2000). For example, marketing efforts in forging brand personalities tend to arouse people's perception to think of themselves as sharing similar traits with the brand, thereby augmenting the self-expressive value and self-congruity (Su and Reynolds, 2017). In a similar vein, the significance of effective marketing communication was brought to light by Berezan et al. (2017), suggesting that tailoring communication styles in line with members' identification is essential in reinforcing self-congruity. The SMMA, such as interactivity is concerned with enabling consumers to share their branded possessions and interact with other users, thereby appealing to their self- and social expressiveness. Similarly, personalization as a social media marketing activity supports the need for uniqueness, a psychological driver of self-congruity, whereby past research showed that there is a tendency for consumers to avoid being too similar to others (Aw *et al*., 2019; Roy and Rabbanee, 2015). Therefore, we hypothesise:

H2: SMMA are positively related to self-congruity.

The attainment of self-congruity can have a positive impact on affective and cognitive judgments. The self-congruity theory postulates perceptual bias on functional congruity formed when self-concept attains congruence (Sirgy *et al*., 2000), suggesting that consumers who possess a strong sense of self-congruity are more likely to recognize the product's utilitarian features, and vice versa (Aw *et al*., 2019; Lu and Xu, 2015). Therefore, according to Hosany and Martin (2012), the value consumers derive from brand consumption is likely to be assessed favourably by consumers due to self-congruity. In a tourism service context, Luna-Cortés *et al*. (2019) found that self-congruity results in greater satisfaction and social value among tourists. Aw *et al*.'s (2019) study highlighted self-congruity as a driver for perceived value towards coffee café brands. It has been revealed that self-congruity is an essential determinant of branding, and higher self-congruity leads to brand evaluation and preference (Liu *et al*., 2020). A closer study in the social media marketing context suggests

that personal integrative benefits, including the fulfilment of self-presentation needs, can forge positive memories with the brand (Zollo *et al*., 2020). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3: Self-congruity is positively related to brand experience.

2.5 Consumer Empowerment

It has been established in the literature that power grounds the basis of a social system and it influences the formation of human behaviour across a wide array of situations, including online and offline consumption activities (Labrecque *et al*., 2013). In the marketing realm, a consumer is empowered when he or she is benefitted in terms of gaining control of their own purchase choices (Wright *et al*., 2006). In light of the development of digital marketing, a shift in power is going on, from marketers to consumers, whereby the techno-mediated consumption journeys engender perceptions of being empowered and freedom (Labrecque *et al*., 2013; Del Bucchia *et al*., 2021). Although the existing literature has not directed much effort into understanding the role of SMMA in developing consumer empowerment, some works provided preliminary evidence of the relationship.

The uses and gratifications theory (Katz and Foulkes, 1962) may provide some clues in this respect. In the social media marketing setting, the clear cause of a brand is to persuade people by offering value or gratification through its marketing practices. Hu and Krishen (2019) highlighted the fact that consumer empowerment as the perceived benefit is a result of marketing efforts such as the provision of trendy product choices and information, as well as the accessibility of electronic word-of-mouth. Furthermore, the presence of social media marketing heavily emphasizes social interaction (e.g., share and like) and community engagement heightened consumers' communication with brands and other consumers (Hu and Krishen, 2019), thus empowerment is realized whereby consumers' cognitive needs about brands are fulfilled through SMMA while their voices are amplified (Zollo *et al*., 2020). Consumer empowerment is realized in the digital marketing environment when marketers provide personalization by offering control and opt-out options to consumers pertaining to receiving advertisements (Bhatia, 2020).

H4: SMMA are positively related to consumer empowerment.

The elevated power literature articulates the role of consumer empowerment in freeing individual consumers from various resource constraints, which results in the manifestation of disinhibited behavior and the attainment of gratification in brand consumption (Boyd *et al*., 2014). Empowerment reflected through the acquisition of cognitive benefits (i.e., additional

information about brands) contributes to meaningful usage and results in desired brand experience (Zollo *et al*., 2020). Further evidence suggests that the sense of empowerment in the social media marketing environment provides consumers the opportunities to voice their opinions and results in attitudinal and behavioural benefits (i.e., positive experience with the brand) (Acar and Puntoni, 2016; Irshad *et al*., 2020). On the one hand, Bandara et al. (2020) identified that a lack of consumer empowerment in terms of privacy can trigger defensive behavior by consumers (e.g., withdrawal and avoidance of digital service usage).

H5: Consumer empowerment is positively related to brand experience.

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection Method and Respondent Profile

The online survey method was undertaken to collect the data, whereby the questionnaire link was circulated on social media. A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit respondents who follow at least a brand's social media page. The approach is justified given that we do not have a complete sampling frame and only a specific group of people possess the required information (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Respondents were asked to identify one of their favourite brands and answer the subsequent questions based on the indicated brand. Responses that failed the filtering criteria were dropped and excluded for further analysis. After eliminating straight-lining responses and those responses without brand identified, 241 usable responses were obtained. The respondents were composed of roughly equal proportions of male (52.8%) and female (47.2%). Most of them were aged 22 to 26 years old (51.9%) and 17 to 21 years old (21%). Most of the respondents possessed a bachelor's degree or higher (71%).

3.2 Measures

The measurement instruments employed in this study were drawn from the existing scientific literature. The measurement items for SMMA and brand experience were adapted from Koay *et al*. (2020). We used the scale from Aw *et al*. (2019) and Zhang *et al*. (2018) to measure self-congruity and consumer empowerment, respectively. The measurement for brand equity was adapted from Dwivedi *et al*. (2018). All items were measured by 7-point Likert scales, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

4. Results

4.1 Common Method Bias

In terms of procedural remedies, we adhered to the recommendation Podsakoff *et al.* (2013) by informing respondents that there were no right or wrong answers and their anonymity will be preserved. For statistical remedies, we checked for common method bias by employing the full collinearity approach. According to Kock and Lynn (2012), the variance inflation factor (VIF) values greater than 3.3 indicate a concern of common method bias. Our finding turned out that all the VIF values were between 1.602 and 2.667, below the threshold of 3.3.

4.2 Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling

We employed PLS-SEM as the data analysis tool to validate our research model. The selection of PLS-SEM was justified because (i) the research model involves higher-order constructs modelling, (ii) the current study is designed to identify antecedents of and predicting the outcome of interest instead of theory confirmation, and (iii) PLS-SEM can accommodate to non-normally distributed data (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

4.2.1 Measurement Model

In this stage, we assessed three criteria, namely composite reliability (CR), indicator loadings, and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The CR of all constructs surpassed the cut-off value of 0.70. Most of the indicator loadings were above the recommended threshold of 0.70 and AVEs were above 0.50, thus supporting convergent validity (see Table 1). To note, there was one item with loadings below 0.70 but was not discarded because the loading value was in the range between 0.40 and 0.70, while CR and AVE showed satisfactory performance (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

The current research model involves second-order constructs which entail the execution of a two-stage method. The significance of the formative indicators was evaluated based on the outer weights. As exhibited in Table 2, some of the formative indicators were not significant (p > 0.05) but they were suggested to be retained for theoretical soundness, particularly for those indicators carrying absolute contribution (outer loading greater than 0.5) (Hair *et al.*, 2019). On top of that, all formative indicators showed VIF values below the threshold value of 3.30, suggesting no serious collinearity issue.

Subsequently, the assessment of discriminant validity was conducted based on the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations criterion. Table 3 exhibited that all

construct exhibited HTMT ratios below the suggested cut-off values of 0.90 (Hair *et al.*, 2019), indicating satisfactory discriminant validity.

4.2.2 Structural Model

In order to assess the structural model, we first proceeded by checking the explanatory power of the model by examining the coefficient of the determinant (R^2). The findings showed that the R^2 values of endogenous variables ranged from 0.170 to 0.527, which achieved acceptable explanatory power levels. After performing the bootstrapping procedure, the findings revealed that brand experience was significantly positively related to brand equity (β= 0.412; $p < 0.05$). SMMA had a significant positive relationship with self-congruity (β= 0.726; $p < 0.05$) and consumer empowerment (β= 0.596; $p < 0.05$). Both self-congruity (β= 0.486; $p < 0.05$) and consumer empowerment (β= 0.282; $p < 0.05$) exhibited positive impacts on brand experience. Therefore, all hypotheses proposed were supported. A post-hoc mediation analysis provided evidence for the sequential mediating roles of self-congruity, consumer empowerment, and brand experience because the confidence intervals did not straddle a zero in between for both mediating paths (see Table 4).

4.3 Assessment of Artificial Neural Network

While PLS-SEM is effective in detecting linear relationships, the approach is ineffective in capturing non-linear relationships (Wan *et al.*, 2021). Given this limitation, we adopted the Artificial Neural Network (ANN) analysis to detect both linear and non-linear relationships. We followed the approach taken by Wang *et al.* (2022) to use the feed-forward-back-propagation algorithm with multi-layer perceptron (MLP) sigmoid activation for both hidden and output layers. In order to overcome the issue of overfitting, we used a 90:10 split of training and testing samples in the ten-fold cross-validation procedure. The predictive accuracy was measured based on the mean values of Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE). Table 5 exhibited that all the ANN models can predict with high precision as the mean values were small and ranged between 0.085 and 0.136 (Ng *et al.*, 2021). We further analyzed the relative importance of the precursors by conducting a sensitivity analysis (Lee *et al.*, 2020). Due to the fact that only one single neuron exists in ANN models I, II and III, the results in Table 6 show 100% normalized relative importance (NRI). ANN model I shows that CE is the most important predictor (100%) and is followed by SC (99.243%). The path coefficients

in PLS-SEM and the NRI in ANN were used to obtain the ranking for the importance of variables. All ANN models in Table 7 show consistency in results except for ANN model III.

5. Discussion

Social media is evolving as a versatile marketing tool for brands' products and activities promotion while offering a podium to engage and interact with consumers (Chuah *et al*., 2021). In the current marketing landscape, many brands are struggling with engaging and reaching target consumers. Social media marketing can be of great benefit if it can be leveraged to the fullest by brand marketers. Having that said, the existing literature has offered only a partial view of the key mechanism of social media marketing governing brand outcomes. Grounded in a theory integration approach, our study established and empirically validated the theoretical ground in linking SMMA and brand equity, in which the roles of self-congruity, consumer empowerment, and brand experience are underscored.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

A considerable amount of study has been devoted to understand consumer behavior in social media marketing, yet there are still unresolved questions (Lee and Hsieh, 2021). Although a growing number of studies evidenced the power of social media for brand building, authors of extant studies have so far struggled to identify empirical evidence of how SMMA foster brand equity (Cheung *et al*., 2019; Godey *et al*., 2016; Zollo *et al*., 2020). The study is endeavoured to explore the underlying mechanism embedded in the relationship. Recent research offers preliminary evidence of the mediating role of brand experience (Chen and Qasim 2020; Koay *et al*., 2020). Yet, more efforts are needed by researchers to delve into the linkage as SMMA might not directly translate into a positive brand experience (Zollo *et al*., 2020). For instance, Yu and Yuan (2019) have mainly considered brand products' utilitarian and hedonic attributes in understanding brand experience. In the social media marketing context, the formation of brand experience is not only limited to product marketing and utilitarian evaluation but can be derived from the psychological benefits obtained from SMMA with the brand (Koay *et al*., 2020).

Built upon this line of argument, we contribute to the social media marketing literature by probing into the mediating effect of self-congruity and consumer empowerment. While past research has revealed the importance of self-congruity in brand consumption, such as generating a positive attitude and increasing purchase intention (Aw *et al*., 2021), there is a lack of research that investigates marketing practices that reinforce brand self-congruity and

whether self-congruity can foster brand experience. Our research represents the initial attempt to draw attention to the role SMMA plays in determining self-congruity. Further, we show that the biasing effect of self-congruity is not confined to product utilitarian aspects but can be extended to psychological feeling (i.e., brand experience). On the one hand, the role of consumer empowerment remains relatively underexplored despite its growing importance in the digital marketing realm where scarce research simultaneously taps into the process and outcome components of empowerment (Hanson and Yuan, 2018). In the present study, we showcase SMMA can be a driver to consumer empowerment and the feeling of being in control can cultivate a positive brand experience, paving the way to the new retailing and brand landscape where consumers are no longer passively consuming but increasing quest for free rein of choices in their shopping journey.

It has been argued that the existing literature has seldomly looked into the SMMA through a broader and richer perspective (Chen and Qasim 2020; Koay *et al*., 2020; Zollo *et al*., 2020), prompting us to reconsider the multi-dimensional approach by integrating trendiness, informativeness, personalization, word-of-mouth, and interactivity as a manifestation of SMMA. We further extend a similar approach in modelling brand experience (i.e., sensory, affective, behavioural, and intellectual experience) and brand equity (i.e., brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty), thereby complementing past research that applied a unidimensional lens. For instance, Cheung *et al*.'s (2020) investigated the impacts of SMMA on brand image and brand awareness independently, which might not accurately and sufficiently capture the essence of brand equity.

5.2 Practical Implications

Brands should move away from treating social media marketing solely as a means to reach consumers. Instead, SMMA should be geared towards building emotional effects with brands (Lee & Hsieh, 2021; Shimul *et al*., 2019). In order to achieve the ultimate goal of high brand equity, brand marketers need to focus on forging positive psychological feelings, particularly in terms of the congruence between self-concept and brand user image, as well as the feeling of being in control. The results suggest social media marketing as a viable method for brand marketers, with emphasis to be put on each specific SMMA component. In light of this, brand marketers should work on their social media communication strategies by effectively and efficiently responding to consumers' comments. Although the enormous number of consumer-brand activities occurring on social media sites may largely impede the provision of direct individual responses, new technologies, such as AI chatbots are available to

facilitate marketers in managing consumer-brand interactions. In addition, the provision of accurate, informative, and synchronised brand product information on social media is imperative, thus marketers need to ensure the information provided can help consumers to make an informed judgment and purchase. Furthermore, brand marketers should undertake a more targeted approach to delivering content and fostering customer co-creation that creates an authentic, one-of-a-kind experience. This can be done with the allocation of resources to personalised predictive recommendation engines on the brand's social media. Additionally, brand marketers should be vigilant in identifying and communicating trendy related news and current hot topics on social media, bearing in mind the fulfilment of four sub-motivations of trendy content, including knowledge, inspiration, surveillance, and pre-purchase information (Koay *et al*., 2020). Optimally, brand marketers should leverage the interactive and wide accessibility natures of social media to motivate consumers to generate supportive brand product content, which in turn needs the provision of functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits (Ryu and Park, 2020).

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions
The findings of the study should be interpreted with caution due to the following limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design applied in the present study may render the establishment of causality infeasible. Future research could complement and advance the current study by employing experimental design and nethnography approach to yield further insights. Secondly, as brand marketers increasingly gain access to more consumer data, the privacy and ethical concerns of social media marketing may need further attention (Dwivedi *et al*., 2021). Thirdly, future research can extend the current study by broadening the view of social media marketing to the metaverse context and artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled marketing environment (Dwivedi *et al*., 2022; Koohang *et al*., 2023). In particular, it would be fruitful to gain an understanding of how AI abilities and tools such as sentiment analysis, predictive analysis, chatbots, personalized retargeting can disrupt or revolutionize the current social media marketing strategy. Fourthly, in a similar vein, it would be fruitful to test the model in both luxury and non-luxury contexts and identify potential differences because social media marketing might trigger the paradox of exclusivity versus accessibility. An extended view into digital consumer culture and acculturation may be worth further research attention (Kizgin *et al*., 2020). Lastly, the current literature might be advanced by shifting the current view towards social media marketing, from understanding the positive implications to exploring the potential negative implications (consumers may be enchanted by the easiness of

information acquisition). When does social media marketing backfire? What are the boundary conditions and potential remedies?

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