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MASTER THESIS

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS IN BUILDING BRAND EQUITY

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AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

I, the undersigned, Domen Pavčič, student at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana (UL SEB), author of the submitted master's thesis entitled The Role of Digital Marketing Communications in Building Brand Equity, prepared in collaboration with my mentor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mateja Kos Koklič

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POVZETEK

Magistrsko delo preučuje, kako digitalno trženjsko komuniciranje prispeva k izgradnji premoženja blagovne znamke v očeh porabnikov (CBBE). Teoretični del sistematično predstavi glavne digitalne kanale in pristope, kot so družbena omrežja, SEO, plačani mediji, mobilno okolje, umetna inteligenca, personalizacija, uporabniško ustvarjene vsebine (UGC) in vplivneži, ter pojasni njihov pomen za gradnjo prepoznavnosti, zaupanja in zvestobe. Empirični del združuje kvantitativno anketno raziskavo (n = 154) in študijo primera Lam+, kar omogoča celovit vpogled v zaznavanje porabnikov in prakse podjetij. Rezultati potrjujejo, da dosledna večkanalna komunikacija, etična personalizacija in transparentna raba podatkov povečujejo zaupanje, medtem ko avtentični UGC okrepi zaznano kakovost, asociacije in pripravljenost porabnikov na zvestobo blagovni znamki. Delo tako združuje teoretična spoznanja z empiričnimi dokazi in ponuja praktične smernice za podjetja, ki želijo uskladiti kratkoročne komunikacijske aktivnosti z dolgoročno rastjo vrednosti blagovne znamke.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: digitalno trženjsko komuniciranje; vrednost blagovne znamke; personalizacija; umetna inteligenca; uporabniško ustvarjene vsebine; influencer marketing; SEO; večkanalnost

CILJI TRAJNOSTNEGA RAZVOJA

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how digital marketing communications contribute to building consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). The theoretical framework reviews key channels and approaches - including social media, SEO, paid media, mobile, AI-driven personalization, user-generated content (UGC), and influencer marketing - and outlines their relevance for brand awareness, trust, and loyalty. The empirical part combines a quantitative survey (n = 154) with a case study of Lam+, providing both broad consumer insights and practical organizational evidence. The findings demonstrate that consistent omnichannel communication, transparent data practices, and tailored personalization are significant drivers of consumer trust, while authentic UGC strengthens perceived quality, brand associations, and advocacy. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical validation, the thesis highlights the interplay of relational, ethical, and consumer-driven dimensions of communication, offering practical recommendations for companies aiming to balance short-term engagement with long-term brand equity growth.

KEY WORDS: digital marketing communications; brand equity; personalization; artificial intelligence; user-generated content; influencer marketing; SEO; omnichannel

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI - Artificial Intelligence

AR - Augmented Reality

B2B - Business-to-Business

B2C - Business-to-Consumer

CAC - Customer Acquisition Cost

CBBE - Consumer-Based Brand Equity

CEO - Chief Executive Officer

CPA - Cost Per Acquisition

CPC - Cost Per Click

CPM - Cost Per Thousand Impressions

CTR - Click-Through Rate

DEI - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

DMC - Digital Marketing Communications

eWOM - Electronic Word of Mouth

FB - Facebook

FSD - Full Self-Driving

GDN - Google Display Network

GMB - Google My Business

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

Gen Z - Generation Z

IG - Instagram

IoT - Internet of Things

KPI - Key Performance Indicator

PPC - Pay Per Click

PR - Public Relations

ROAS - Return on Ad Spend

ROI - Return on Investment

SEO - Search Engine Optimization

SMS - Short Message Service

UX - User Experience

UGC - User-Generated Content

VR - Virtual Reality

ZMOT - Zero Moment of Truth

1 INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing communications fundamentally change how brands and consumers interact, moving away from traditional media towards a more interactive, data-driven, and real-time approach (American Marketing Association, 2024). This evolution presents new opportunities for building brand equity, which can be defined as the value a brand holds in the minds of consumers, built upon key dimensions such as awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty (Aaker, 1991). This shift, driven by digital platforms, emphasizes active engagement over passive broadcasting, a transformation that continues to be central to modern marketing strategy (Cioppi et al., 2023). In this thesis, I examine the unique features of digital marketing communications and how they are strategically employed to build, enhance, and measure brand equity.

Digital marketing communications strategically contribute to brand equity by influencing awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty. Social media marketing and search engine optimization (SEO) significantly boost brand awareness by increasing visibility and reach among target audiences (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). Personalized and relevant content, tailored through consumer data analytics, enhances perceived quality by demonstrating responsiveness to consumer needs (Kumar & Singh, 2022; Bala & Verma, 2018). Brand associations are strengthened via influencer marketing and engaging content strategies, connecting brands with credible voices and authentic consumer experiences (Joshi et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2023). Lastly, ongoing interactive engagement through email marketing and social media fosters deeper emotional connections, reinforcing consumer brand loyalty (Kumar & Singh, 2022; Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

The purpose of this thesis is to comprehensively analyze the role that digital marketing communications play in building and sustaining brand equity. The primary goals are: (1) to identify and examine the key components of modern digital marketing strategies; (2) to investigate how these components influence the core dimensions of brand equity, such as consumer trust, loyalty, and brand perception; and (3) to provide empirical insights into these dynamics through both quantitative and qualitative research.

To achieve these goals, the thesis is structured across several chapters. The first chapter on digital marketing communications (DMC) provides a comprehensive overview of the field and its core components. The subsequent chapter delves into digital brand equity, exploring how these digital efforts enhance a brand's value. To provide empirical grounding, Study 1 presents a quantitative survey designed to measure consumer perceptions related to digital marketing and brand equity. Study 2 complements these findings with a qualitative case analysis of a company, illustrating the practical impact of strategic digital communication on brand development. Finally, the thesis concludes with a synthesis of key findings, highlighting their implications for both academic theory and marketing practice.

2 DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

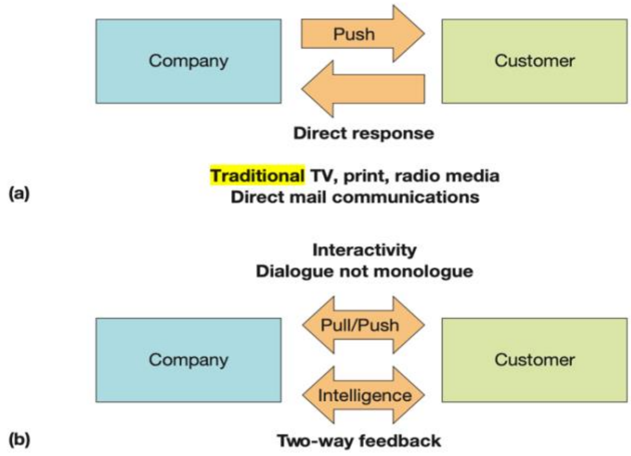
Digital marketing communications represent a paradigm shift from traditional media, emphasizing interactive, data-driven, and real-time engagement between brands and consumers (American Marketing Association, 2024). Unlike the one-way communication of the past, digital marketing facilitates a dynamic, two-way dialogue where messages are adapted based on direct consumer feedback and behavior. This interactivity is fundamental to modern brand building, as it allows companies to foster relationships and shape perceptions in ways that were previously impossible (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

This chapter provides an overview of digital marketing communications and its role in building brand equity. It begins by outlining the historical evolution from traditional to digital marketing. It then examines the key components that form a comprehensive digital strategy, including social media platforms, content marketing, email marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), digital advertising, and mobile marketing. Finally, the chapter will explore two critical strategic concepts: the importance of maintaining brand consistency across all digital channels and the ongoing evolution of online consumer behavior, both of which are essential for creating effective communication that enhances a brand's value.

2.1 Overview of digital marketing

While traditional marketing relied on one-way message broadcasts via mass media, the digital revolution has enabled continuous, two-way communication between brands and consumers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). This shift fosters relationship-building and real-time campaign adjustments based on performance data, creating a more dynamic and responsive environment essential for brand equity development (Bala & Verma, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates this transition - from a push-based model to interactive, feedback-driven communication - highlighting the core distinction between traditional and digital media.

Figure 1: Summary of communication models for (a) traditional media, (b) new media



Source: Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2022).

A primary advantage of digital marketing is the capacity for data-driven personalization. By analyzing large-scale consumer data, marketers can craft highly tailored messages that align with individual preferences, thereby strengthening the emotional connection between the brand and its consumers (Kumar & Singh, 2022). This personalization directly enhances brand loyalty, a core component of brand equity. This data-centric approach is complemented by robust measurement capabilities that were unavailable in traditional media, allowing marketers to track key performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate campaign success and optimize future strategies. This ensures that marketing investments contribute efficiently to building the brand's value (Bala & Verma, 2018).

The digital landscape has also amplified the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), as consumers sharing their opinions and experiences online has become a powerful force in shaping brand perception and establishing trust (Lin et al., 2023). In parallel, influencer marketing has gained prominence as a key strategy, with influencers serving as credible intermediaries whose authentic content often generates higher engagement. This, in turn, positively impacts brand equity by lending authenticity and reach to the brand's message (Joshi et al., 2023).

Successful digital strategies integrate these components into a coordinated mix of channels. A brand might use social media for initial awareness, email campaigns to nurture leads, and search engine optimization (SEO) to drive conversions. This integrated ecosystem ensures that brand messages are consistent across all consumer touchpoints, reinforcing a cohesive brand narrative and strengthening its overall market position (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

Technological advancements continue to drive the evolution of digital marketing, offering new methods for brands to engage consumers and measure the effectiveness of their communications. Emerging tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) in the form of chatbots enhance the user experience with real-time, personalized customer service, while programmatic advertising automates ad placements to maximize efficiency and reach (Bala & Verma, 2018; Pascucci et al., 2023). These innovations facilitate greater interactivity and provide valuable data that supports continuous strategy refinement, allowing brands to maintain a competitive edge in a fast-paced market (Homburg & Wielgos, 2022).

2.2 Key components of digital marketing

Digital marketing communications rely on several interdependent components that together form a dynamic and measurable strategy. Unlike traditional marketing channels, these digital approaches emphasize interactive engagement, data-driven personalization, and real-time optimization (Bala & Verma, 2018). This section examines the essential components of a modern digital marketing strategy, including social media, content marketing, email, SEO, paid advertising, and mobile marketing. It also covers the foundational role of analytics and data-driven optimization, as well as emerging technological trends, explaining how each element contributes to building brand equity.

2.2.1 Social media platforms

Social media platforms represent one of the most dynamic and interactive forms of digital marketing, enabling brands to engage with consumers in real-time and on a highly personalized level. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube allow companies to share content and communicate values as well as to respond to feedback in ways that traditional channels cannot replicate (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These direct interactions are essential for building brand equity, as they help develop the trust, familiarity, and emotional connections that form the foundation of consumer loyalty (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

By using social media, brands can foster communities around shared interests, create genuine dialogue, and encourage user-generated content that extends the reach and relevance of their messaging. For this to be effective, a brand's authenticity and consistency across all social platforms are critical for maintaining consumer engagement and sustaining brand trust. A disjointed or overly promotional presence can diminish credibility, whereas a humanized and transparent communication style fosters deeper brand affinity and strengthens brand equity (Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

Additionally, social media provides valuable tools for segmentation and targeting, enabling brands to tailor content to specific audience groups based on location, demographics, interests, or online behavior. The interactive nature of these platforms allows brands to track user responses and adapt their messaging in real-time, increasing the relevance of their communications and strengthening the overall consumer-brand relationship (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

One of the most significant evolutions in this domain has been the rise of influencer marketing. Social media influencers play a powerful role in shaping consumer attitudes, as their perceived authenticity and relatability often make their endorsements more persuasive than traditional advertisements (Joshi et al., 2023). By collaborating with influencers who align with their brand values, companies can enhance their credibility and expand their reach into niche consumer segments, thereby making the strategic use of social media a cornerstone of modern brand-building efforts (Godey et al., 2016).

2.2.2 Content marketing

Content marketing is a strategic digital communication approach focused on creating, publishing, and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience. This includes a range of formats such as blog articles, how-to guides, social media posts, infographics, podcasts, and video content, all aimed at delivering information that solves consumer problems or enriches their knowledge. Unlike direct advertising, content marketing does not explicitly push products but instead nurtures a relationship by providing meaningful value (Pulizzi, 2014).

A key advantage of content marketing lies in its capacity to drive long-term organic growth, enhance SEO performance, and establish the brand as a thought leader in its field. Over time, consistently high-quality content builds credibility and trust, which are foundational elements of brand equity, positioning the brand as a reliable source of insight or entertainment (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). According to Pulizzi (2014), storytelling is central to successful content marketing, as it creates an emotional bridge between the brand and the audience, enhancing recall and fostering brand loyalty. When executed effectively, content marketing can guide potential customers through the entire buyer's journey - from awareness to consideration to conversion - by offering useful and engaging experiences across various touchpoints.

In a saturated digital environment, content quality and relevance are crucial differentiators. Brands that successfully combine authenticity, visual appeal, and value-based messaging are more likely to maintain consumer attention and positively influence their perception of the brand's purpose and reliability, further strengthening its equity (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

2.2.3 E-mail marketing

E-mail marketing remains one of the most efficient and cost-effective tools for direct digital communication, playing a vital role in nurturing customer relationships and reinforcing brand positioning. Modern email marketing has evolved beyond simple promotional messages into a dynamic strategy involving audience segmentation, personalization, and automation to deliver timely and relevant content (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

Segmentation enables marketers to divide their contact lists into smaller groups based on factors like demographics or purchase history, allowing for highly targeted communication. This is often combined with personalization, where messages are crafted to reflect the specific preferences or needs of individual users, leading to higher engagement rates (such as open rates, click-throughs, and replies). Automation tools further enhance this by enabling context-specific delivery, such as welcome messages, re-engagement emails, or product recommendations based on a user's lifecycle stage or recent activity (Bala & Verma, 2018; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

When integrated into a broader digital strategy, email is instrumental in building long-term customer relationships and fostering brand loyalty (Kumar & Singh, 2022). Its effectiveness is highly measurable through performance metrics like open rates, click-through rates, and conversion rates, which provide direct feedback for refining campaigns and improving their impact on brand equity over time (Bala & Verma, 2018).

2.2.4 Search engine optimization (SEO)

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a critical, long-term component of digital marketing focused on improving a website's visibility in organic (non-paid) search engine results. It involves optimizing on-page elements (like content quality and keywords) and off-page elements (like backlinks) to align with the algorithms of search engines such as Google. The goal is to ensure that when users search for relevant terms, the brand's content appears prominently, thereby increasing discoverability and driving consistent, unpaid traffic (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

Effective SEO is a strategic necessity for building a sustainable digital presence, as a significant portion of consumer behavior begins with an online search. By achieving high rankings, a brand enhances its perceived authority and credibility, which are key drivers of consumer trust and, consequently, brand equity (Bala & Verma, 2018). Unlike paid advertising, which offers temporary visibility, a strong organic presence built through SEO can provide continuous returns and lower long-term customer acquisition costs. However, SEO is highly dynamic and requires ongoing adaptation to frequent search engine algorithm updates, making continuous monitoring and technical audits essential for success (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

The principles of SEO are not limited to traditional websites but also apply to other digital assets, including video content on platforms like YouTube and local business listings. When properly aligned with a brand's broader digital marketing efforts, SEO plays a foundational role in reinforcing visibility and consumer trust, making it a crucial element for building and maintaining brand equity in the digital age (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

2.2.5 Digital advertising

Digital advertising encompasses all online promotional activities where advertisers pay to have their content shown to users. It is one of the most versatile and data-driven components of digital marketing, enabling brands to target specific audience segments with precision. Common pricing structures include cost-per-click (CPC or PPC), where advertisers pay each time a user clicks on an ad; cost-per-thousand-impressions (CPM), where payment is based on the number of times an ad is shown; and cost-per-acquisition (CPA), where payment is tied to a specific action like a sale or lead (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

The digital advertising ecosystem spans several key domains, each offering unique formats and targeting capabilities. Search engine advertising (e.g., Google Ads) remains a cornerstone, allowing advertisers to bid on keywords and appear in sponsored results, capturing users with high purchase intent (Bala & Verma, 2018). This extends to the Google Display Network (GDN), which serves visual banner ads across millions of websites and apps, building brand awareness through contextual or demographic targeting (Choi et al., 2020).

Social media advertising on platforms like Meta (Facebook and Instagram) or TikTok embeds ads directly into user content feeds. These platforms offer granular targeting based on interests, behaviors, or lookalike audiences, making them highly adaptable for both brand-building and direct-response goals (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Video advertising, delivered via platforms like YouTube or Instagram Reels, has become increasingly dominant, leveraging storytelling and emotional appeal to drive high levels of engagement (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). Finally, display advertising, often facilitated through programmatic platforms, delivers visual banners across a vast network of websites and apps, reinforcing brand awareness and guiding users back into the conversion funnel (Choi et al., 2020).

Across all platforms, the core advantage of digital advertising is its measurability. Campaigns can be evaluated in real-time using key performance indicators (KPIs) like return on ad spend (ROAS) or customer acquisition cost (CAC), allowing for continuous optimization (Bala & Verma, 2018). However, the growing complexity of privacy regulations, such as the GDPR, has introduced new challenges for audience targeting and attribution, pushing the industry towards more responsible and transparent use of customer data (Choi et al., 2020). When integrated effectively across the customer journey, these advertising tools can amplify a brand's visibility, accelerate conversions, and build lasting consumer relationships, making them an indispensable part of a modern brand equity strategy (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

2.2.6 Mobile marketing

With the widespread adoption of smartphones, mobile marketing has become an essential pillar of digital strategy, encompassing all marketing activities designed for and optimized for mobile devices (Bala & Verma, 2018). This shift is driven by a fundamental change in consumer behavior, as mobile devices are now the primary tool for internet access for a majority of users globally (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Schutte & Chauke, 2022).

The foundation of effective mobile marketing is a "mobile-first" approach, which prioritizes a seamless and intuitive user experience (UX) across all screen sizes. This includes responsive design for websites, emails, and advertisements, which is critical for maintaining consumer attention and engagement in a fragmented digital landscape (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). A positive mobile user experience directly improves consumer satisfaction and conversion rates, thereby strengthening brand perceptions and overall brand equity (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

Beyond responsive design, mobile marketing leverages unique device capabilities to create highly contextual and personalized interactions. Tactics such as SMS and push notifications offer direct, real-time communication channels for delivering timely offers or important information. Mobile applications provide a dedicated brand environment where companies can deliver personalized content, loyalty rewards, and unique purchase opportunities. The quality of the user experience within these apps - defined by factors like intuitive navigation, speed, and visual design - has a direct and significant influence on user retention and conversion, making it a strategic priority for building a loyal customer base (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

As consumer behavior continues to shift toward mobile-first engagement, brands that successfully integrate responsiveness, personalization, and utility into their mobile initiatives are better positioned to capture attention, build loyalty, and drive the performance that enhances brand equity (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022)..

2.2.7 Analytics and data-driven optimization

Underpinning all modern digital marketing components is the practice of analytics and data-driven optimization. This involves the collection, measurement, and analysis of data to understand consumer behavior and evaluate the performance of marketing activities (Bala & Verma, 2018). By leveraging analytics, marketers can move beyond intuition-based decisions and adopt a more scientific approach to strategy, enabling continuous improvement and greater accountability (Homburg & Wielgos, 2022).

KPIs are central to this process, providing quantifiable measures of success for different marketing objectives. These can range from engagement metrics like social media likes and shares, to website traffic and bounce rates, to conversion metrics such as lead generation and ROAS. The real-time availability of this data allows marketers to monitor campaign performance as it unfolds and make timely adjustments to optimize outcomes (Bala & Verma, 2018).

This iterative process of measuring, analyzing, and optimizing is fundamental to building brand equity in a digital context. By understanding which channels, messages, and tactics resonate most with their audience, brands can allocate resources more effectively, improve the customer experience, and build stronger relationships. A culture of data-driven decision-making not only enhances the efficiency of marketing efforts but also provides the strategic insights needed to adapt to changing market dynamics and consistently strengthen the brand's position over time (Homburg & Wielgos, 2022; Pascucci et al., 2023).

2.2.8 Emerging trends and technological innovation

The digital marketing landscape is characterized by constant and rapid technological evolution, where innovations continually reshape established practices. Technologies that were once considered emerging, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and immersive realities like Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR), are now becoming integral to mainstream marketing strategies (Pascucci et al., 2023). AI and machine learning, for example, are actively used to power marketing automation, hyper-personalization through tools like chatbots, and predictive analytics that enable brands to deliver highly relevant consumer experiences at scale (Bala & Verma, 2018).

Immersive technologies such as AR and VR are transforming how consumers interact with products online. These tools allow for virtual try-ons, interactive product demonstrations, and engaging brand storytelling that blurs the line between the digital and physical worlds, thereby creating stronger brand associations and emotional connections (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). The Internet of Things (IoT) further expands the marketing ecosystem by creating new brand touchpoints through connected devices, from smart home assistants to wearables. These devices offer opportunities for seamless and context-aware marketing communications that can anticipate consumer needs (Pascucci et al., 2023). The strategic adoption of these technologies is no longer optional but essential for brands aiming to innovate and differentiate themselves. As these tools mature, they offer increasingly sophisticated ways to build deeper, more meaningful connections with audiences, providing a powerful mechanism for creating and solidifying brand equity in a dynamic marketplace (Pascucci et al., 2023).

2.3 Importance of consistency in digital communication

In a fragmented digital ecosystem where consumers interact with brands across numerous touchpoints, maintaining brand consistency is a critical strategic imperative. Brand consistency ensures that the core message, values, visual identity, and tone of voice remain coherent and recognizable, regardless of whether the consumer is interacting with the brand on social media, its website, a mobile app, or in a physical store (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

This unified presence is essential for building a strong and clear brand image. According to foundational consumer-based brand equity models, the power of a brand lies in what resides in the minds and hearts of customers; it is the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Therefore, a consistent brand image, built upon strong, favorable, and unique associations, is a key driver of consumer perceptions and preferences (Aaker, 1996; Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). When consumers repeatedly experience the same tone, style, and quality in a brand's communications, they are more likely to develop a strong sense of familiarity and trust, which in turn builds strong brand equity (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

The modern approach to achieving this consistency has evolved from a multichannel to an omnichannel strategy. While a multichannel approach uses multiple channels to communicate with customers, an omnichannel strategy focuses on deeply integrating these channels to create a seamless, unified, and continuous customer experience (Pascucci et al., 2023). This means that a consumer's journey can transition smoothly from one channel to another - for example, from discovering a product on Instagram, to researching it on a mobile website, to purchasing it in-store - without any disruption or contradiction in the brand experience. Such integration is essential for meeting the expectations of today's digitally-native consumers, who expect to move fluidly between online and offline worlds (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

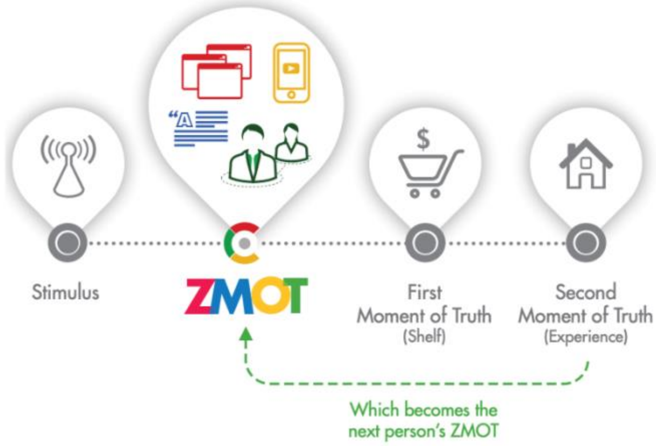
Successfully implementing a proper omnichannel strategy requires significant cross-functional coordination and a deep, data-driven understanding of the customer journey. However, the payoff is substantial. A seamless and consistent experience across channels enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty, which are direct drivers of brand equity (Pascucci et al., 2023). By ensuring that every interaction reinforces the same core brand identity, companies can build stronger, more resilient relationships with their customers, ultimately creating a more powerful and valuable brand (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

2.4 Evolution of online consumer behavior

The proliferation of digital platforms has fundamentally re-engineered the relationship between brands and consumers. This evolution is primarily characterized by the empowerment of the consumer, who has transitioned from a passive audience to an active, connected, and influential participant in the marketplace (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). Understanding these new behavioral dynamics is critical, as they directly influence the strategies required to build and sustain brand equity in a digital-first world (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

A pivotal concept in this shift is the "Zero Moment of Truth" (ZMOT), a term coined by Google to describe the crucial pre-purchase phase where consumers actively research products online through peer reviews, expert articles, and social media (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). As shown in Figure 2, ZMOT precedes direct brand interaction and shapes consumer perceptions early. From a brand equity perspective, it represents the first chance to influence judgments and establish perceived quality (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Negative feedback or lack of credible information at this stage can damage a brand's image and exclude it from the consumer's consideration set (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). Conversely, brands that manage ZMOT effectively - through positive reviews, accessible content, and strong user-generated input - can build trust and strengthen their image (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

Figure 2: Zero moment of truth



Source: Lecinski (2011).

This research-intensive behavior also gives rise to the phenomena of "showrooming" and "webrooming." Showrooming describes the practice of examining a product in a physical store only to purchase it online, often from a competitor offering a lower price (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). This directly threatens brands by creating channel conflict and lost revenue. For brand equity, a poor in-store experience that fails to provide sufficient value beyond being a mere product gallery can lead to negative brand judgments and feelings of frustration (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

In contrast, "webrooming" involves consumers researching products online before visiting a physical store to complete the purchase (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). This behavior presents a powerful opportunity. Brands that successfully integrate their digital and physical channels - for instance, by providing rich online content and then using features like online stock checkers to drive in-store visits - can create a seamless and rewarding customer journey. This integrated strategy reinforces the brand's reliability and customer focus, which directly enhances its perceived quality and strengthens the potential for building long-term brand loyalty (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

Ultimately, these behaviors underscore the transition to a non-linear, omnichannel consumer journey. A consumer may now interact with a brand across dozens of touchpoints, from social media ads and search engines to physical stores and mobile apps (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). The critical challenge for brands is to maintain consistency across this fragmented landscape. A seamless, high-quality experience at every touchpoint reinforces a brand's professionalism and reliability, fostering positive brand judgments (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Any friction or inconsistency, however, can damage the consumer's perception of the brand's credibility. Therefore, a cohesive omnichannel strategy is essential for maintaining brand salience and building the trust that underpins brand loyalty (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022; Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

3 DIGITAL BRAND EQUITY AND BRAND BUILDING

The process of brand building is the strategic endeavor focused on creating, developing, and enhancing the value of a brand in the minds of consumers (Aaker, 1996). At its core, it is guided by CBBE (consumer-based brand equity) models, which propose that the power of a brand lies in what consumers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about it over time (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Shown in Figure 3, Keller’s brand resonance pyramid conceptualizes this progression through four hierarchical stages: brand identity (salience), brand meaning (performance and imagery), brand responses (judgments and feelings), and brand resonance, which reflects deep loyalty and active consumer-brand relationships (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). The goal of this process is to build a strong brand characterized by favorable and unique associations, progressing from simple awareness to intense, active loyalty (Keller, 1993). This connection to digital brand equity is direct and foundational: the brand-building process is the set of strategic actions taken to create and grow brand equity, while strong digital brand equity is the valuable outcome of that process. In today's dynamic environment, these actions are continuous and must constantly adapt to real-time consumer interactions (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

Figure 3: Brand resonance pyramid

Source: Keller & Swaminathan (2019).

This chapter examines how digital marketing strategies support the development and maintenance of brand equity. It focuses on key areas such as the use of artificial intelligence and personalization, the role of user-generated content and influencer marketing, and the growing importance of interactivity. It also addresses emotional branding, omnichannel integration, digital crisis communication, and the challenges of building brand equity across different cultures.

3.1 The evolving landscape of digital brand equity

The traditional understanding of brand equity, rooted in consumer perception and the value derived from a brand, is undergoing a significant transformation within the digital realm. Digital brand equity encompasses how brands are perceived, valued, and interacted with across online environments, extending beyond conventional metrics. The digital customer journey is profoundly shaped by AI-driven technologies that facilitate personalized consumer-brand interactions across various curated touchpoints (Hardcastle et al., 2025). This necessitates a re-evaluation of current brand equity measurement tools, as existing metrics may prove insufficient for the fast-paced and dynamic digital landscape (France et al., 2025). This sub-chapter will first define digital brand equity in modern terms and then explore how consumer decision-making processes have become fluid in the digital era, shaping how brand equity should be measured.

3.1.1 Defining digital brand equity in the modern era

Digital brand equity extends traditional notions of brand value by incorporating dynamic elements unique to the online environment. Traditional models of brand equity - such as those advanced by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996) - focus on dimensions including brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty. In the digital era, these dimensions are expanded by new factors such as online engagement, interactivity, and the continuous flow of consumer-generated content, all of which contribute to the overall value of a brand in a highly connected marketplace. At the heart of digital brand equity is the ability of a brand to create and sustain a strong online identity. This identity is built over time through consistent and engaging digital communications that shape consumer perceptions. Keller and Swaminathan (2019) emphasize that consumer-based brand equity is not static but is continuously influenced by the consumer's interactions with the brand. Digital channels provide a platform for real-time feedback - through reviews, social media posts, and other forms of eWOM - that continuously informs and modifies consumer perceptions. In this regard, digital brand equity is seen as a dynamic construct that evolves with each consumer interaction.

Measuring brand equity is of vital importance to marketing practitioners and scholars. Academics and practitioners have developed a range of tools and metrics for measuring brand equity. Still, in the fast-paced and transformational digital era, current metrics may not be sufficient (France et al., 2025). The authors argue that digital brand equity metrics cannot be based only on social media and current digital indicators but also must include a human side of the brand and the technology-consumer nuances. Furthermore, while the concept of brand equity has been extensively explored within business-to-consumer (B2C) contexts, research on industrial brand equity is still recent, with many aspects remaining underexplored and lacking a comprehensive theoretical understanding. This represents a significant opportunity for both scholarly investigation and strategic development.

3.1.2 The fluidity of consumer decision-making

The contemporary digital environment is characterized by a significant shift in consumer behavior, particularly concerning decision-making and attention. Consumers are now "bombarded with more information on the internet every day," which has "substantially lowered their attention span" (Jia et al., 2022, p. 2). This intense informational landscape necessitates a fundamental rethinking of marketing communication tactics to capture and sustain consumer interest effectively. The "typical customer evaluation cycle's period has been dramatically lowered and turned into a new shape," resulting in a "modern consumer's decision-making process [that is] quite fluid" (Jia et al., 2022, p. 2). This fluid consumer decision-making process connects closely with the continuous and dynamic measurement of digital brand equity.

The rapid pace and transformative nature of the digital era fundamentally alter how brand equity must be assessed. The traditional, often static, measures of brand equity, such as periodic brand awareness surveys or loyalty metrics based on historical purchases, are no longer fully adequate

(France et al., 2025). The digital environment, characterized by real-time interactions, continuous feedback loops, and rapidly evolving consumer expectations, demands a more dynamic and constant assessment. This indicates a fundamental requirement for metrics that can capture the fluidity and instantaneous shifts in online brand perception, potentially incorporating real-time sentiment analysis, engagement rates across diverse platforms, and continuous conversion data. The very nature of brand equity measurement must evolve to become more agile and responsive, moving beyond periodic assessments to continuous monitoring and adaptive strategies that reflect the constant flux of digital consumer engagement (France et al., 2025).

3.2 Leveraging personalization and AI for brand equity

In the contemporary digital landscape, personalization has emerged as a cornerstone of effective marketing strategy, offering brands a powerful method for forging stronger consumer relationships and, consequently, enhancing brand equity (Bala & Verma, 2018; Kumar & Singh, 2022). By tailoring communications and experiences to individual needs and behaviors, brands can significantly increase customer satisfaction, trust, and long-term loyalty (Wuryantini, 2025). The delivery of such personalized experiences at scale is fundamentally enabled by data-driven technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), which allows for the analysis of vast amounts of consumer data to automate tailored interactions across the customer journey (Hardcastle et al., 2025). This section first explores the strategic foundations of personalization as a driver for building brand value. It then delves into how AI-powered technologies are reshaping customer journeys through hyper-personalized interactions and concludes by examining case studies of brands that have successfully leveraged these tools.

3.2.1 The strategic role of personalization in digital marketing

In the digital era, personalization has become a central strategy for companies aiming to increase customer engagement and build long-term brand loyalty (Wuryantini, 2025). The strategic value of personalization lies in its proven impact on consumer trust, which is a critical factor in strengthening a customer's loyalty to a brand. When consumers are presented with relevant, tailored experiences, it directly increases their level of trust, which in turn fosters a more durable and loyal relationship (Wuryantini, 2025).

However, for personalization to be effective, it must be grounded in a foundation of transparency. Trust is a crucial factor in determining the success of personalized marketing, and research shows that transparency has a significant positive impact on building that trust. Therefore, a key strategic imperative for marketers is to clearly and openly communicate their data practices to consumers. This includes explaining how customer data is collected, used, and protected. Furthermore, a transparent strategy should provide consumers with meaningful control over their data, including the ability to opt out of collection and use. By prioritizing transparency, brands can mitigate the risk of consumers perceiving personalization as intrusive and instead build the trust necessary for a lasting, positive brand relationship (Adler et al., 2025).

3.2.2 AI-Powered personalization in customer journeys

AI-powered personalization can streamline decision-making and improve consumer experience by aligning recommendations with past behaviors and preferences (André et al., 2018). However, such algorithmic curation may limit perceived autonomy, creating “filter bubbles” that subtly steer preferences and restrict exposure to diverse options (Wertenbroch et al., 2020). The ethical imperative lies in balancing relevance with autonomy. Ethical personalization practices include adopting transparent data-use policies, providing precise user control over preferences, and offering ways to explore beyond algorithmic suggestions - measures that reinforce trust and support long-term brand equity (André et al., 2018).

AI presents a double-edged sword for brand perception. While it can enhance brand equity by improving efficiency and aligning offers more closely with consumer preferences (André et al., 2018), algorithmic personalization may also limit perceived autonomy and reduce exposure to alternative options (Wertenbroch et al., 2020). Such effects can indirectly impact trust, a fundamental and irreplaceable component of brand equity (Mehta et al., 2024; ReputationX, 2025). Sustaining positive brand perception, therefore, requires balancing personalization with user agency, ensuring that consumers feel empowered rather than constrained by AI-driven experiences (André et al., 2018; Wertenbroch et al., 2020).

3.2.3 Examples of brands utilizing AI for personalized marketing

Numerous companies have successfully implemented AI-powered marketing automation to significantly enhance both customer personalization and operational efficiency, showcasing the tangible benefits of this technology. Below are examples of Coca-Cola and Calm App leveraging AI in their activities, which significantly boosted consumer engagement with their products.

3.2.3.1 Coca-Cola's AI-powered content creation

Coca-Cola, a global beverage leader, leverages AI to analyze customer behavior and preferences, enabling the generation of highly personalized marketing content. A notable example is their "Share a Coke" campaign, which utilized AI to identify the most popular names in different regions, facilitating personalized labels that significantly boosted sales and engagement globally. Furthermore, Coca-Cola partnered with OpenAI and launched a unique "Create Real Magic" contest in February 2023, inviting users to combine ChatGPT, DALL-E, and historic Coca-Cola ad creatives to generate new works of art. This innovative approach further involved customers and significantly increased brand awareness. This initiative exemplifies AI-enabled co-creation as a new avenue for brand awareness and engagement. This participatory approach, facilitated by AI, can significantly boost brand awareness and deepen customer engagement by transforming passive consumers into active brand advocates. This fosters a sense of ownership and personal connection with the brand, directly contributing to enhanced brand equity through a more immersive and interactive brand experience (DataFeedWatch, 2025).

3.2.3.2 Calm app's personalized recommendations

The popular meditation and sleep aid application, Calm, utilizes Amazon Personalize to offer super personalized content recommendations in real time. By dynamically recommending the most popular content (e.g., Sleep Stories) in a user's preferred style and intelligently removing content they have already listened to, Calm successfully increased its daily app usage by 3.4%. This demonstrates AI's role in sustaining customer engagement and fostering long-term loyalty by continuously delivering relevant value and preventing churn (DataFeedWatch, 2025).

3.3 The impact of interactivity and user-generated content (UGC) on brand equity

Digital media also allows brands to leverage the power of user-generated content. Consumers increasingly trust peer recommendations over traditional advertising. Online reviews, social media shares, and testimonials contribute to the formation of a brand's digital image, sometimes more powerfully than the brand's own messages. This democratization of information means that brands must be particularly attentive to the overall digital ecosystem in which their identity is being constructed. Proactive engagement in online communities, where brands can guide and moderate discussions, becomes essential to ensure that consumer perceptions remain aligned with the intended brand message (Cozma, 2025).

3.3.1 Fostering customer engagement through interactivity

In the contemporary Web 2.0 era, interaction has emerged as a core principle for value co-creation, particularly evident on social e-commerce platforms (Liang & Turban, 2011). The quality of interaction facilitated by opinion leaders demonstrably has a positive impact on customer engagement, which, in turn, significantly influences the platform's brand value (Liang & Turban, 2011). Opinion leaders are influential individuals within online communities who possess expertise or credibility that enables them to shape other consumers' opinions and behaviors through recommendations and endorsements (Joshi et al., 2023). Word-of-mouth communication and various interactive activities within social networks are identified as key factors that profoundly influence users' attitudes and behaviors (Liang & Turban, 2011). Additionally, it is noteworthy that some studies suggest virtual interactivity might have an insignificant positive impact on consumer purchase intentions (Jia et al., 2022), indicating that the quality, context, and purpose of interactivity are crucial determinants of its effectiveness.

There appears to be a contradiction between some researchers suggesting that interaction strongly enhances customer engagement and brand value (Liang & Turban, 2011) and those suggesting that virtual interactivity has a limited positive effect on consumer purchase intentions (Jia et al., 2022). This discrepancy can be explained by the moderating role of certain factors, which influence how the interaction impacts outcomes. A moderating factor affects the strength or direction of the relationship between two variables. In this context, the effect of interactivity depends on factors such as the platform type, product category, and the stage of the customer's decision-making process. Most importantly, the quality of the interaction - whether it fosters meaningful engagement, genuine dialogue, and valuable information exchange versus superficial or passive involvement - also plays a crucial role. Simply providing interactive features is not enough; interactions must be thoughtfully designed to be relevant and engaging to enhance brand equity effectively. This highlights the importance of strategic planning in creating interactive experiences rather than relying on interactivity alone (Jia et al., 2022).

Opinion leaders, such as social media influencers, play a pivotal role as intermediaries in building trust-based brand equity. Research demonstrates that the quality of their interactions positively influences customer engagement and strengthens the relationship between customers and brands, thereby enhancing overall brand value. These opinion leaders are perceived as credible, authentic, and reliable sources, which lends significant trust to brand communications and shapes consumer attitudes and behaviors. In the fragmented and information-saturated digital landscape, opinion leaders function as trusted filters for information and recommendations. This peer-influenced dynamic extends brand building beyond direct interactions between brands and consumers, creating a networked approach to brand equity development (Joshi et al., 2023).

3.3.2 User-generated content as a driver of brand equity

User-generated content (UGC) includes various media forms such as text, images, videos, audio, and reviews shared by consumers on platforms like social media, e-commerce sites, and forums. UGC significantly influences brand awareness, engagement, and conversion rates. Consistent use of brand identity elements - such as logos, packaging, and color schemes - within UGC enhances brand recognition and overall equity (Cozma, 2025). Research by Mayrhofer et al. (2020) shows that UGC has a more substantial positive impact on purchase intentions than brand-generated content, mainly due to its perceived credibility, usefulness, and especially authenticity (Cozma, 2025).

Consumers prefer UGC because it offers honest opinions, with 90% highlighting authenticity as a key factor when choosing brands. The trustworthiness of UGC is notably higher compared to other media types, being 50% more trusted and 20% more influential. This trust is powerful among younger demographics: Millennials find UGC 35% more memorable and trust it 50% more, while they believe UGC will be more credible in the next 3-5 years. From an advertising perspective, UGC-based ads achieve four times higher click-through rates and reduce cost-per-click by 50%. However, UGC must be perceived as authentic, as its effectiveness can decrease significantly if seen as inauthentic (Cozma, 2025).

Authenticity is the fundamental value of user-generated content (UGC) - credibility and especially authenticity drive UGC’s effectiveness. With 90% of customers emphasizing the importance of authenticity in brand choice and warnings that inauthentic UGC diminishes impact, it’s clear that UGC’s power lies not in volume or reach but in genuine trustworthiness. In an age skeptical of traditional advertising, UGC succeeds by offering real, unbiased peer perspectives, bypassing corporate messaging. Authenticity is essential for enhancing brand equity; without it, UGC loses influence and may even harm a brand (Cozma, 2025).

There is a notable generational gap in how user-generated content (UGC) is consumed and trusted. Younger generations, who have grown up immersed in digital and social media environments, place greater trust in peer-created content and authentic reviews than in traditional brand-generated advertising. For brands aiming to engage these vital consumer groups, developing a strong and carefully planned UGC strategy is essential for building brand equity. This approach aligns with younger consumers’ media habits, their preference for recommendations from peers, and their emphasis on authenticity, making UGC a critical component of modern digital marketing (Cozma, 2025).

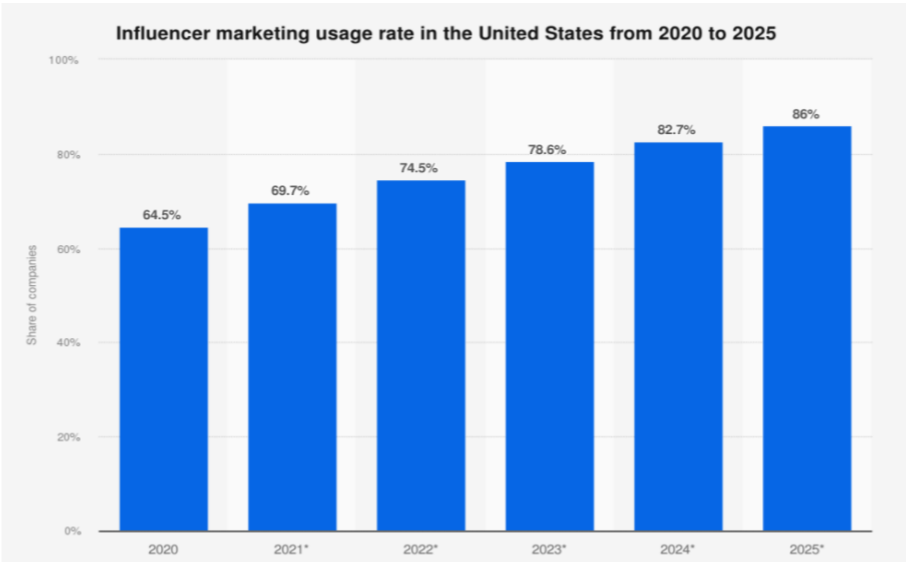
3.3.3 Managing the dual nature of UGC

The power of UGC is a double-edged sword: while positive UGC significantly boosts brand equity, negative UGC, such as unfavorable reviews, can severely erode it. The statistic that "60% of consumers say that negative reviews made them not want to use a business" vividly illustrates this vulnerability (ReputationX, 2025). This demonstrates that the exact mechanisms that amplify positive brand perceptions through UGC can equally amplify negative ones. Given that consumers read an average of "7 reviews before trusting a business" (ReputationX, 2025), managing negative UGC is not merely about damage control but about actively preserving brand equity. This necessitates robust online reputation management strategies, including continuous sentiment monitoring, transparently responding to criticism, and actively encouraging positive reviews (Soci.ai, 2025). This comprehensive approach is essential for harnessing the full potential of UGC while mitigating its inherent risks to brand value.

3.4 Influencer marketing and brand building

Influencer marketing has emerged as a formidable force in the digital marketing landscape, demonstrating exponential growth and solidifying its position as a cornerstone of modern advertising. The industry is projected to reach "$32.55 billion in 2025" (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025), reflecting its increasing strategic importance. A substantial majority of brands, with "63.8% confirming plans to partner with influencers in 2025" globally, and as shown in Figure 4, 86% of US marketers intend to do so (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025; Sprout Social, 2024). Instagram leads as the "top influencer marketing platform worldwide," favored by 57% of brands, with TikTok closely following at 52% (Sprout Social, 2024). For a successful influencer campaign in 2025, the strategy will increasingly involve "asking influencers with an audience overlap in the same niche to provide genuine reviews and exclusive promotions" (Sprout Social, 2024).

Figure 4: Influencer marketing usage rate



Source: Sprout Social (2024).

3.4.1 The strategic role of micro-influencers

The impact of various influencer types, particularly nano-influencers - defined as those with fewer than 10,000 followers - on brand awareness, trust, and engagement is notable. Influencer partnerships are most effective when perceived as honest, unbiased (67%), and entertaining (48%) (Sprout Social, 2024). A significant 64% of consumers consider genuine reviews the most effective influencer content, reinforcing the paramount importance of authenticity. This authenticity and engagement are crucial drivers of brand equity, as credible influencers build trust and deepen consumer relationships, thereby enhancing brand value (Joshi et al., 2023). The influence on purchasing behavior is substantial, with 86% of consumers making a purchase inspired by an influencer at least once per year, and influencer content driving almost half (49%) of consumers' regular purchases (Sprout Social, 2024).

Nano-influencers dominate TikTok (87.68%) and Instagram (76%) platforms, with TikTok nano-influencers achieving an average engagement rate of 10.3% - over three points higher than mega-influencers' 7.1% (Sprout Social, 2024). This higher engagement reflects a more intimate and trusted connection with their audience. Such authentic engagement contributes directly to brand equity by fostering stronger emotional bonds and loyalty, highlighting a strategic shift towards valuing genuine interactions over reach alone (Mukherjee, 2024; Mehta et al., 2024). The data clearly shows that despite their smaller follower counts, nano-influencers drive significantly higher engagement rates, making them vital players in contemporary brand-building strategies.

3.4.2 Strategic application of influencer partnerships

Influencer marketing is not confined to the B2C sector; its growing adoption in B2B marketing is evident, with "49% of B2B marketers predict[ing] influencer content will trend in 2025" (Sprout Social, 2024). For B2B brands, the primary goals for utilizing influencer marketing are "increasing brand awareness (67%)" and "raising credibility and trust (54%)," according to Sprout Social (2024), highlighting its versatility in building different facets of brand equity across diverse market segments. Furthermore, forming "long-term relationships with influencers helps brands save money," as stated by Sprout Social (2024), indicating a strategic advantage beyond immediate campaign results. The emphasis on genuine reviews and long-term relationships with influencers points to a maturation of influencer marketing from transactional campaigns to strategic partnerships for sustained brand advocacy. The finding that 64% of consumers consider genuine reviews the most effective influencer content type, coupled with the observation that long-term relationships with influencers help brands save money, highlights this evolution. This suggests that one-off, highly paid endorsements are giving way to more integrated and enduring collaborations where influencers become authentic extensions of the brand. Sustained brand building through influencers relies on cultivating trust and credibility over time, enabling influencers to genuinely integrate products or services into their content in a way that resonates deeply with their audience. This strategic approach fosters not just immediate sales but also long-term brand loyalty and positive perception, transforming influencers into valuable assets for enduring brand equity (Sprout Social, 2024).

3.4.2.1 CeraVe's TikTok "For You Fest" sponsorship

CeraVe partnered with TikTok Australia's "For You Fest" in 2022 to boost brand affinity and drive brand advocacy. The sponsorship provided CeraVe with 100% brand exclusivity, making it synonymous with the event. By leveraging its creators and ambassadors, CeraVe produced over 10 pieces of creative content, focusing on "edutainment" (education and entertainment) about skincare. This integrated partnership resulted in a 19.4% increase in brand affinity, a 13.4% increase in recommendation, and a 12.9% increase in purchase intent, demonstrating how aligning with cultural moments and creators on platforms like TikTok can significantly impact brand metrics. The campaign also had a stronger impact on the younger demographic, who appreciated CeraVe's efforts to engage with TikTok and influencers, fostering a sense of community and supporting creators (TikTok for Business, n.d.).

3.4.2.2 Nivea Luminous 630 on TikTok

Nivea Luminous 630 successfully leveraged TikTok to drive cultural relevance and engagement, boosting awareness, participation, and brand love (TikTok for Business, n.d.). This case further illustrates how digital platforms can be used to create culturally resonant campaigns that foster deeper connections with consumers, leading to enhanced brand equity.

3.5 Cultivating emotional bonds through digital marketing communications

The affective component of consumer perception, which refers to the emotions and feelings consumers associate with a brand, plays a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes, guiding purchase decisions, and fostering brand loyalty (Yuvaraj & Indumathi, 2018). Digital media provide powerful platforms for brands to evoke these emotions through authentic storytelling and engaging content. For example, social media campaigns featuring genuine customer testimonials or behind-the-scenes stories can build strong emotional connections, enhancing trust and loyalty. Yuvaraj and Indumathi (2018) emphasize that effective use of digital platforms amplifies emotional resonance and brand trust, which in turn strengthens overall brand equity. Moreover, Kumar and Singh (2022) highlight that these emotional bonds are reinforced through consistent interactions aligned with the brand’s core message and values.

3.5.1 Theoretical foundations of emotional branding

The digital realm offers a uniquely fertile ground for cultivating emotional connections between brands and consumers, profoundly impacting brand equity. Emotional factors such as "emotional brand attachment, trust, love, and engagement" are crucial for boosting brand loyalty and consumer engagement, particularly "in the context of digital marketing and social media interactions" (Mehta et al., 2024). This underscores the digital environment as a powerful medium for fostering deep-seated emotional bonds. Emotions play a crucial role in shaping consumers’ choices and building their loyalty to a brand. This highlights a direct correlation between emotional strategies and core dimensions of brand equity. The value of a brand, or brand equity, is significantly constructed from these emotional bonds, which are solidified through trust and loyalty over time. Emotions play a substantial role in shaping individual buying decisions (Mehta et al., 2024).

3.5.2 Strategies for developing emotional narratives

Brands can build emotional narratives and personalized experiences on digital platforms by employing several key strategies. Firstly, creating narratives that deeply resonate with consumers helps establish emotional bonds that go beyond functional benefits. These narratives often center around shared values, nostalgia, or aspirational themes (Yuvaraj & Indumathi, 2018; Mehta et al., 2024). Secondly, personalized experiences tailored to individual preferences reinforce feelings of being valued, which are foundational to brand love. For example, Spotify's "Wrapped" campaign effectively uses personalization to make consumers feel uniquely understood, strengthening emotional attachment (Kumar & Singh, 2022; Mehta et al., 2024).

Thirdly, fostering brand advocacy is essential. Campaigns that transform loyal customers into brand evangelists - through referral programs, social media, or user-generated content - capitalize on the emotional connection consumers have with the brand (Joshi et al., 2023; Mehta et al., 2024). Fourth, communicating authentic brand values, especially on social, environmental, or cultural issues, aligns brands with consumers' beliefs and fosters loyalty (Mukherjee, 2024; Mehta et al., 2024).

Moreover, digital personalization, when data-driven and authentic, acts as a powerful catalyst for emotional bonds like trust and belonging, which translate into increased brand loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices, thereby enhancing brand equity (Bala & Verma, 2018; Kumar & Singh, 2022; Mehta et al., 2024). Beyond individual connections, emotional branding increasingly involves fostering community and shared identity within digital ecosystems. Brands that enable consumers to see their values reflected and shared encourage deeper loyalty and engagement (Yuvaraj & Indumathi, 2018; Mehta et al., 2024).

3.6 Omnichannel integration: delivering cohesive brand experiences

A strong digital presence is vital for brands to succeed today. It goes beyond websites or social media profiles to include an integrated ecosystem of all consumer touchpoints. Consistent, authentic engagement across channels builds brand recognition, trust, and loyalty (Zai & Karen, 2022; Homburg & Wielgos, 2022). Omnichannel integration ensures a seamless customer experience, enhancing brand perception and supporting long-term brand equity (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025).

3.6.1 Theoretical foundations of omnichannel strategy

Digital presence begins with the consistent display of a brand's identity across various channels. Brands invest in well-designed websites, active social media profiles, mobile applications, and other digital assets that provide consumers with a seamless experience. A strong digital presence, therefore, improves brand awareness by ensuring that the brand is easily recognizable and consistently encountered by consumers across multiple platforms. When consumers repeatedly see the same visual and verbal cues - such as logos, taglines, and design elements - they are more likely to form lasting associations with the brand, which facilitates quicker recall and recognition (Zai & Karen, 2022).

In addition to visual consistency, an effective digital presence requires active engagement and interaction. Brands must respond promptly to consumer inquiries, monitor online discussions, and adapt their digital strategies in real time. Integrated digital marketing strategies that align brand messaging across channels are crucial for building consumer trust and credibility (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025).

Omnichannel operations represent a strategic imperative in modern retailing, signifying the seamless "integration of both physical and digital channels to establish a cohesive, unified customer experience" (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). This strategy enables organizations to "engage customers at their current location and deliver a uniform brand experience across all interactions" (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). The consistency provided by omnichannel integration is crucial for maintaining a strong and coherent brand perception. Beyond customer experience, the integration of traditional and online channels, particularly concerning "storage and distribution," can "minimize operational costs and enhance the environmental sustainability of the omnichannel approach" (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). These operational benefits indirectly bolster brand perception by demonstrating efficiency and alignment with sustainability values.

Brand equity plays a critical mediating role in enhancing omnichannel performance. Defined as "the value derived from how customers view the brand," brand equity can "act as a mediator" in the relationship between sustainability practices and omnichannel operations (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). Research indicates that "brand equity partially mediates the relationship between sustainability and omnichannel performance," suggesting that "sustainability initiatives improve omnichannel effectiveness, both directly and indirectly, through strengthened brand perception" (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). This establishes a clear causal link: sustainability efforts that improve brand equity - by increasing trust, loyalty, and perceived quality - lead to "better omnichannel performance because they improve customer engagement, retention, and conversion across sales channels" (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). Ultimately, consumers who perceive high sustainability-driven brand equity contribute to a "financial advantage in their sales through multiple channels, improved customer experience, and profits accrued over the long-term" (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). While technological advancements and market competition primarily drive omnichannel integration, its true value proposition for brand equity lies in its capacity to deliver a "uniform and cohesive brand experience" across all touchpoints (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025).

3.6.2 Brand equity as a driver of omnichannel success - Nike’s integrated digital ecosystem

Nike’s substantial brand equity forms the foundation for its successful omnichannel integration. The company’s well-established reputation and consumer trust enable it to create a cohesive digital ecosystem spanning its website, mobile applications, and social media platforms. According to a Consumer Goods report by Dominguez (2023), Nike maintains a consistent brand identity across its digital touchpoints, including its website, with over 100 million monthly visits and its Nike Membership program, which boasts more than 160 million active members. Popular mobile apps such as Nike Run Club and Nike Training Club foster personalized and interactive experiences, with over 100 million users engaging regularly. These platforms strengthen emotional connections and loyalty, encouraging consumers to interact deeply with Nike's omnichannel offerings (Dominguez, 2023).

Nike's established brand value and high consumer trust facilitate seamless integration between online and offline experiences. App-driven store interactions and personalized product recommendations enhance customer satisfaction and convenience, leveraging the brand's strong equity to drive engagement and retention. The company's direct-to-consumer model accounts for over 42% of total revenue, contributing to a 24% year-over-year increase in digital sales, which reached $13.3 billion in fiscal year 2023. This performance highlights how Nike's brand equity acts as a key driver of omnichannel effectiveness by fostering consumer willingness to engage across multiple channels, leading to sustained business growth. Moreover, Nike's use of data analytics, AI-driven personalization, and real-time consumer insights supports an adaptive yet consistent marketing approach, reinforcing its position as the world's most valuable apparel brand with an estimated brand value of $31 billion in 2023 (Dominguez, 2023).

3.7 Demographic and cultural factors in digital marketing for global brand equity

Demographic and cultural factors are integral to understanding digital brand equity because they fundamentally shape how consumers interact with digital marketing communications and perceive brands. In today's heterogeneous digital landscape, variations in age, cultural background, socioeconomic status, and education significantly influence consumer behavior. Younger consumers, such as millennials and other young adults, tend to be digital natives who engage extensively with interactive content and are quick to adopt emerging technologies. Their familiarity with digital platforms makes them more receptive to innovative marketing approaches, and they often favor authentic, personalized content that reflects current trends (Mayrhofer et al., 2020; Schutte & Chauke, 2022).

3.7.1 Theoretical foundations of cultural sensitivity in digital marketing

In contrast, older consumers should typically approach digital environments with a greater degree of caution. They value clarity, consistency, and reliability in communication and often rely on well-established indicators of credibility, such as brand history and consistent messaging. This demographic may not interact as frequently with fast-paced, interactive content, preferring instead to engage with digital communications that mirror traditional forms of advertising in terms of structure and tone. The disparity in digital engagement between younger and older consumers requires brands to adopt differentiated strategies that account for varied preferences and expectations. A nuanced approach is necessary to maintain brand equity across diverse consumer segments, as the same digital message may resonate differently with distinct demographic groups (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

In today's interconnected world, the significance of cultural sensitivity and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in digital marketing cannot be overstated. Prioritizing "Multicultural Marketing and DEI is not just a social responsibility - it's a smart business strategy" (Q.Digital, 2024). These inclusive approaches are a "key factor in driving customer loyalty, increasing profitability, and positioning your brand as a forward-thinking leader" (Q.Digital, 2024). Consumers are increasingly discerning, with a growing number "willing to pay more for products from brands that align with their personal values, including diversity and inclusion" (Q.Digital, 2024). Evidence shows that "64% of consumers are motivated or strongly motivated to support brands that sponsor multicultural events" and "advertise with multicultural and diverse storylines, influencers, and representation" (Q.Digital, 2024). This trend is particularly pronounced among younger demographics, with "81% of Gen Zers say multicultural/diverse communities greatly shape brand preferences" (Q.Digital, 2024). Brands that disregard this shift risk "losing a rapidly growing and highly engaged consumer base" (Q.Digital, 2024). Conversely, "performative diversity efforts can backfire, damaging brand credibility" (Q.Digital, 2024), as multicultural consumers expect brands to "invest in their communities and amplify their voices" (Q.Digital, 2024).

3.7.2 Practical applications of cross-cultural marketing strategies

Effective strategies for localization, tailored messaging, and community engagement across diverse markets are crucial for building global brand equity.

3.7.2.1 Localization of products and services

Coca-Cola, for example, localizes products by placing popular names on bottles in its "Share a Coke" campaign and adapts advertising for cultural events like Ramadan, highlighting family gatherings (Jeewa, 2024; Suresh, 2018). McDonald's excels in menu customization, offering region-specific items such as the McAloo Tikki burger in India or the Teriyaki McBurger in Japan (Suresh, 2018). This customization reflects McDonald's commitment to catering to local palates while integrating global standards (Suresh, 2018). IKEA adapts its product offerings and marketing strategies to align with local lifestyles and cultural celebrations (Suresh, 2018). Starbucks incorporates traditional Chinese architectural elements and design aesthetics into its stores in China, creating a familiar and welcoming environment for local customers (Suresh, 2018).

3.7.2.2 Culturally relevant campaigns and community engagement

Nike partners with local athletes like Yao Ming in China to enhance visibility and build emotional connections (Suresh, 2018). Its "Da Da Ding" campaign in India focused on female empowerment, featuring Indian personalities such as actress Deepika Padukone, which resonated deeply with the local audience (Jeewa, 2024). Nike's globally recognized "Just Do It" slogan is executed differently across markets; in India, campaigns feature local sports like cricket and kabaddi. Unilever's Lifebuoy soap brand launched the "Help a Child Reach 5" campaign in India, promoting handwashing rooted in the local cultural context, which enhanced brand perception and contributed to public health. Unilever also adapts its communication styles to fit local cultural norms (Suresh, 2018). Airbnb's "We Accept" campaign addressed discrimination, emphasizing acceptance and belonging, and encouraged hosts and guests to share their stories. The company also pledged temporary housing for 100,000 people in need. Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign challenged traditional beauty standards, promoting body positivity by featuring real women (Jeewa, 2024).

3.7.2.3 The impact of missteps: Bud Light

Digital brand equity is not only built through positive engagement but also profoundly affected when a brand missteps in addressing its diverse audience. A compelling case, as outlined in a Fox Business article by Parks (2023), is Bud Light's 2023 influencer partnership with transgender personality Dylan Mulvaney. Intended to modernize the brand's image and appeal to younger, progressive consumers, the campaign instead ignited severe backlash among its core, traditionally conservative demographic. Digital platforms amplified this cultural divide: within weeks, Bud Light experienced a double-digit drop in sales, and social media backlash - including trending boycott hashtags - eroded brand favorability across multiple regions. This incident underscores the critical role of demographic and cultural influences in shaping digital brand equity. As highlighted earlier, younger consumers are quick to adopt innovative digital content, whereas older consumers demand consistency and credibility. Bud Light's campaign, which misaligned with its established consumer base's values, illustrates how rapidly digital interactions can transform a brand's equity. The backlash, fueled by real-time, viral eWOM, not only led to measurable revenue declines but also demonstrated the necessity for brands to design culturally sensitive strategies that align with the varied expectations of their diverse audiences (Parks, 2023).

3.8 Digital crisis communication and online reputation management

In today's digital landscape, information spreads rapidly through social media, causing public opinion to shift almost instantly and complicating crisis communication. This environment demands swift, transparent, and authentic brand responses - speed and transparency are now critical imperatives. Consumers expect openness about the issue, corrective actions, and future prevention measures. Authenticity remains vital, particularly when involving influencers, to avoid perceptions of opportunism (Torossian, 2025a).

Effective crisis communication is essential for protecting and enhancing brand equity as a strong reputation drives sales and improves search rankings, while it also builds long-term customer loyalty (Soci.ai, 2025). Negative viral content can severely damage brand perception, but brands with established equity and social responsibility benefit from greater public forgiveness during crises; 63% of consumers are more likely to give socially responsible businesses the benefit of the doubt (ReputationX, 2025).

3.8.1 Theoretical foundations of digital crisis management

Brand crisis can be defined as (1) a negative event of (2) immense difficulty or danger that (3) a brand experiences for (4) a period of time, thereby (5) affecting the legitimacy of the brand and (6) necessitating the brand to take corrective actions to protect or restore that legitimacy (Lim et al., 2025). Generally, the literature categorizes the crises that brands may experience into two types: performance-related (i.e., product or service failures that reduce the functionality or utility promised by the brand) and values-related (i.e., unethical conduct that violates ethical or social norms within the environment where the brand operates) (Lim et al., 2025).

The speed and virality of digital platforms mean that a brand crisis can escalate almost instantly, directly threatening brand legitimacy and trust. This establishes a direct causal link: the rapid spread of information and public opinion shifts on digital platforms can lead to an almost instantaneous escalation of a crisis, which then directly threatens a brand's legitimacy and the trust consumers place in it (Torossian, 2025a; Lim et al., 2025). Effective digital crisis communication, characterized by real-time monitoring, swift transparency, and authentic accountability, is therefore not merely reactive damage control but a proactive mechanism for safeguarding brand equity. By acting quickly, transparently, and genuinely, brands can mitigate the erosion of trust and maintain their legitimacy, thereby preserving their brand equity (Torossian, 2025a).

3.8.2 Strategic approaches and case examples

Effective strategies for real-time monitoring, social listening, and leveraging digital platforms are essential to safeguard brand legitimacy and trust.

3.8.2.1 Key strategies for crisis response

The ability to "monitor social media in real time will be indispensable" (Torossian, 2025a). PR professionals will increasingly utilize "social listening tools to track mentions, analyze sentiment, and identify potential crises before they escalate" (Torossian, 2025a). These tools can alert PR teams to spikes in negative sentiment, enabling them to respond proactively rather than reactively. Real-time monitoring will allow PR professionals to track the spread of misinformation or negative narratives and address them quickly (Torossian, 2025a). AI is also enhancing reputation monitoring and response capabilities (Soci.ai, 2025). During a crisis, the "leadership team... must deliver consistent messaging across all platforms" (Torossian, 2025b), ensuring "every message should align with the organization's overall narrative" (Hure, 2024). "Effective crisis communication requires showing empathy" (Torossian, 2025b). Brands must convey that they are "listening to the concerns of their stakeholders and are committed to finding solutions" (Torossian, 2025b). It is crucial to "acknowledge mistakes openly" as "customers value honesty" and "a direct response builds trust" (Soci.ai, 2025). Showing accountability means brands "own mistakes and actively work toward solutions" (Soci.ai, 2025). PR professionals will "look to influencers and social media partners to help manage crises" (Torossian, 2025a) by delivering accurate information or helping to rebuild trust (Torossian, 2025a). Once the immediate crisis has been managed, brands "must continue to engage with stakeholders, providing updates on corrective actions, new policies, and any other relevant information" (Torossian, 2025b) to "rebuild trust and demonstrate a long-term commitment to change" (Torossian, 2025b).

3.8.2.2 Illustrative case studies

Real-world examples illustrate how crisis communication strategies affect brand reputation and equity. The cases below show the importance of transparency, timeliness, and engagement in managing public perception during crises.

- Tesla: Faces ongoing challenges with CEO controversies and regulatory scrutiny. Its crisis communication strategy in 2025 emphasizes "Timeliness and Transparency," "Unified Messaging," "Engagement and Empathy," and "Post-Crisis Follow-Up". This approach aims to quickly address issues, maintain a consistent narrative, show genuine concern, and demonstrate long-term commitment to resolving problems. For instance, if a Tesla vehicle is involved in an accident while using its Full Self-Driving (FSD) system, the company must ensure transparency about the incident while reassuring the public about ongoing safety improvements and rigorous testing (Torossian, 2025b).
- Slack: Handled a significant outage in February 2022 with a "swift and transparent response," posting frequent updates on its status page and Twitter, "openly acknowledging any errors made". This proactive and honest approach "reinforced its reputation as a customer-focused company". Slack's decision to use multiple platforms - its status page for detailed updates and Twitter for real-time communication - ensured that a broad audience was reached, preserving user trust and setting a strong example for effective crisis communication (Hure, 2024).
- Cracker Barrel (Negative Example): Opted for silence during a social media storm in February 2017, which became a "notable aspect of the crisis". When a customer publicly questioned why his wife was fired, his post went viral, leading to trending hashtags and widespread online mockery. Despite the growing public outcry and media attention, Cracker Barrel chose to remain silent, issuing no public response or comment. This case illustrates that "No Response is a Response," highlighting the potential damage of inaction in the face of public scrutiny (Hure, 2024).

Online reputation management in the digital age requires a holistic approach that integrates social listening, AI-powered tools, and proactive content marketing, moving beyond mere reactive review management to actively shaping the brand narrative and fostering long-term trust. The growing importance of social listening, AI-powered monitoring, and a focus on first-party data and owned platforms (Soci.ai, 2025) indicates that managing brand equity is a continuous, multi-faceted effort. While responding to negative feedback is crucial (as "60% of consumers say that negative reviews made them not want to use a business" (ReputationX, 2025), a strong reputation is also built by "proactively shaping public perception through strategic content marketing" (Soci.ai, 2025). This implies that brands must invest in sophisticated tools and integrated strategies that allow them to listen, analyze, respond, and proactively communicate their values and success stories. This comprehensive approach builds a resilient reputation that can withstand crises and enhance brand equity over time.

4 STUDY 1: SURVEY ON IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS ON CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

This section outlines the core objectives of the survey by presenting a set of empirically justified hypotheses. These hypotheses are systematically derived from a comprehensive review of existing literature in digital marketing, consumer behavior, and brand management, thereby establishing the foundational framework for the subsequent questionnaire design and data collection. Each hypothesis is formulated to be testable through quantitative survey methods, ensuring a clear progression from theoretical proposition to empirical validation.

4.1 Purpose and goal of the survey

The survey was designed to provide a structured, data-based understanding of how digital marketing communications influence the way consumers perceive, evaluate, and interact with brands in digital environments. Specifically, the questionnaire aimed to gather responses from at least 150 participants who actively use digital platforms, with a focus on their awareness of brand presence, perceived brand quality, and the nature of their engagement across various digital channels.

The primary objective was to determine how specific types of digital communication - such as social media interactions, email newsletters, or mobile applications - shape consumer perceptions of brand reliability, relevance, and trustworthiness. Furthermore, the survey aimed to explore the conditions under which digital messaging is perceived as engaging or persuasive, paying special attention to content frequency, tone, and consistency.

A secondary aim was to identify which digital marketing practices are most closely associated with long-term consumer trust and loyalty. Drawing on frameworks such as those proposed by Cioppi et al. (2023), the survey examined factors such as consistency, personalization, multimedia usage, and mobile optimization to assess their influence on consumer-brand relationships.

Finally, the survey considered whether these perceptions and behaviors vary significantly across demographic groups. Participants were asked to report their age, gender, and frequency of digital media usage, allowing for cross-comparison between subgroups. The survey also examined how consumers perceive brands with a strong digital presence in contrast to those with more traditional or limited digital outreach, to assess whether high levels of digital activity correlate with stronger brand equity in the eyes of the consumer.

4.2 Proposed hypotheses and empirical justification

This subsection details each proposed hypothesis, providing a concise empirical justification derived directly from the cited literature.

As established in the literature review, social media engagement is a cornerstone of modern brand-building efforts. It reflects a brand’s ability to foster interaction and participation through relevant and engaging content (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). These platforms enable brands to move beyond one-way communication and engage in real-time, personalized dialogue with consumers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Academic research demonstrates that such direct interactions are essential for developing the trust and emotional connections that form the foundation of consumer loyalty and, consequently, enhance brand equity (Kumar & Singh, 2022). Furthermore, strategic efforts on social media, such as fostering online communities and collaborating with credible influencers, directly boost brand equity by enhancing a brand’s credibility and expanding its reach (Godey et al., 2016). Based on this established link between social media engagement and brand value, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Social media engagement positively influences Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE).

While personalization is a key strategy for building consumer trust by delivering relevant experiences (Wuryantini, 2025), its effectiveness exists within a broader context of data ethics. Independently, a brand's perceived data transparency is also a powerful driver of consumer trust, as consumers are more likely to trust companies they believe are open and honest about how their data is used (Adler et al., 2025). Given that both factors are considered crucial in the literature, it is valuable to test the direct influence of each on building consumer trust. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a: Personalized digital content positively influences consumer trust.

H2b: Perceived data transparency positively influences consumer trust.

As established in the literature review, the modern consumer interacts with brands across a fragmented ecosystem of digital touchpoints. In this environment, maintaining a coherent brand identity is crucial for building a strong, clear, and recognizable brand image (Keller &

Swaminathan, 2019). An omnichannel strategy that integrates these channels into a seamless and unified customer experience is essential for delivering this consistency (Kencebay & Ertugan, 2025). When consumers repeatedly encounter the same tone, messaging, and values, it fosters a powerful sense of familiarity and reduces uncertainty, which are the direct foundations of consumer trust (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). Therefore, a direct relationship between consistency and trust is proposed:

H3: Consistent brand messaging and experience across digital channels positively influence consumer trust.

As established in the literature review, the rise of digital media has empowered consumers to become active co-creators of brand narratives through User-Generated Content (UGC). This content, which includes online reviews, social media posts, and testimonials, is often perceived by other consumers as more authentic and credible than traditional advertising (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that positive UGC has a direct and significant impact on the core dimensions of brand equity, including brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations (Cozma, 2025). Given that consumers increasingly rely on peer recommendations to form opinions and make purchase decisions, a brand's ability to foster and leverage positive UGC is a critical factor in building a strong and trusted reputation. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: The prevalence of positive User-Generated Content (UGC) is positively associated with Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE).

4.3 Survey methodology

This chapter details the methodology for the quantitative study, beginning with the research design and the operationalization of the questionnaire. It then provides a comprehensive overview of the advantages and limitations of the online survey method, followed by a justification for selecting Google Forms as the research platform.

4.3.1 Questionnaire design and operationalization

To empirically test the hypotheses, this study employs a quantitative survey design. This approach was chosen for its suitability in collecting structured data from a broad population and enabling the statistical analysis of relationships between defined variables (Meetingst, 2024; Nardi, 2018).

The survey instrument was developed through the process of operationalization, where each theoretical construct was translated into measurable questions. This ensures a direct connection between theory and data collection, following established practices in survey methodology (Nardi, 2002; Nardi, 2018).

The questionnaire, attached in Appendix 1, was divided into four parts. The first part included screening questions regarding social media usage and active following of brands. The second part measured perceptions of brand communication, with items reflecting engagement, interaction, consistency, and personalization. These dimensions align with established concepts of brand identity and communication in the literature (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). The third part assessed the respondent's relationship with the brand, focusing on trust, loyalty, and willingness to pay a premium, which are central dimensions of consumer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2009). The fourth part collected demographic information such as age, gender, and time spent on social media.

All items in parts two and three were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree), a widely applied tool for measuring perceptions and attitudes in consumer research (Nardi, 2002; Nardi, 2018).

4.3.2 Advantages and limitations of the online survey

A balanced understanding of the online survey method requires an examination of both its strengths and limitations. The primary advantages of this thesis are practical and methodological. From a practical standpoint, online surveys are highly cost-effective and allow for rapid data collection from a geographically dispersed sample (Trustmary, 2024; Meetingst, 2024). Methodologically, online platforms offer significant design flexibility, supporting diverse question types and features like the randomization of answer order to mitigate choice bias. Furthermore, the perceived anonymity of an online format can reduce social desirability bias, encouraging more candid responses from participants (Trustmary, 2024).

Despite these benefits, several limitations were carefully considered. Key challenges include the potential for high survey abandonment rates due to fatigue, various forms of respondent bias, and sampling issues related to excluding populations without internet access (Trustmary, 2024; Meetingst, 2024). Additionally, the method's "solitary" nature precludes the opportunity for an interviewer to ask clarifying follow-up questions (Meetingst, 2024). It is important to note, however, that many of these disadvantages are not inherent flaws of the medium itself, but are often linked to suboptimal survey design. This critical observation underscores the paramount importance of meticulous questionnaire construction and pre-testing to enhance the reliability and validity of the collected data.

4.3.3 Research platform: justification for Google Forms

Given the practical context of a Master's thesis, Google Forms was selected as the research platform. It is a cost-free, intuitive, and widely accessible tool that is well-suited for academic research with limited budgets. The platform offers extensive flexibility, supporting a wide variety of question types and advanced functionalities like skip logic to create a more engaging and efficient respondent experience. Crucially, its seamless integration with Google Sheets allows for real-time data collection and simple export for in-depth statistical analysis, making it a highly practical and effective tool for the scope and needs of this thesis (ChartExpo, 2024; Google Workspace, 2024).

4.4 Analysis of results

This section presents the findings of the empirical study. The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the demographic and social media usage characteristics of the sample are described to provide context for the dataset. Second, descriptive statistics and reliability measures of the constructs are reported, establishing the suitability of the data for hypothesis testing. Finally, the results of the regression analyses are presented for each hypothesis, indicating whether the proposed relationships were supported or not supported.

4.4.1 Sample description

The final sample consisted of 154 respondents. The largest age group was 25–34 years, representing slightly more than half of all participants (n = 80 or 52%). The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 80 male respondents (52%), 72 female respondents (47%), and 2 participants (1%) who did not disclose their gender.

Patterns of social media usage showed that the majority of respondents (n=54 or 35%) reported spending between one and two hours per day on social media platforms, followed by those spending between thirty minutes and one hour daily.

When asked about specific brands followed on social media, “swy” or “swy brand” emerged as the most frequently mentioned brand (n = 19, more than 12%). Other popular mentions included “Ryanair,” “Duolingo,” and “Gymshark” (each n = 6).

4.4.2 Descriptive statistics

To provide a detailed overview of the data, descriptive statistics were calculated for each survey item. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The results are presented below, grouped by thematic areas of digital brand communication, transparency, trust, and consumer–brand relationship.

Respondents generally expressed favorable views on the digital communication of the brands they follow. Social media content was perceived as engaging (M = 4.42, SD = 0.75) in response to the statement “This brand’s social media content is interesting and engaging” (Q4.1), and brands were considered to interact actively with followers (M = 4.28, SD = 0.80) based on the statement “This brand interacts with its followers on social media (e.g., replies to comments)” (Q4.2). The mean (M) represents the average agreement level across respondents, while the standard deviation (SD) reflects how widely individual responses varied around that average.

Consistency across digital channels received the highest evaluations. Respondents strongly agreed with the statement "This brand has a consistent look and feel across its digital channels (website, social media, emails)" (Q4.3; M = 4.51, SD = 0.70), and also with "The brand's messaging and tone of voice are consistent everywhere I see it online" (Q4.4; M = 4.47, SD = 0.73).

Personalization received somewhat lower evaluations. The item "The advertisements and communications I receive from this brand seem tailored to my interests" (Q4.5) received a mean score of 4.06 (SD = 0.95), while "This brand provides me with relevant product or service recommendations" (Q4.6) was rated more moderately (M = 3.92, SD = 1.00).

The role of user-generated content was acknowledged, though with less intensity than direct brand actions. Respondents indicated agreement with the statement "I often see other customers posting positive things about this brand online" (Q4.7; M = 4.06, SD = 0.89), while the item "Online reviews from other users have positively influenced my opinion of this brand" (Q4.8) received a somewhat lower score (M = 3.76, SD = 1.05).

Transparency-related items received the lowest evaluations of the entire questionnaire. The statement "I have a clear understanding of how this brand uses my personal data" (Q5.1) was rated poorly (M = 2.66, SD = 1.15), as was "The brand is transparent about its data privacy policies" (Q5.2; M = 2.77, SD = 1.10).

Trust-related items, by contrast, demonstrated consistently high evaluations. Respondents agreed with "I trust this brand" (Q5.3; M = 4.28, SD = 0.81), "This brand is reliable and keeps its promises" (Q5.4; M = 4.27, SD = 0.82), and "This brand is honest and sincere in its communication" (Q5.5; M = 4.36, SD = 0.78).

Finally, the measures of brand loyalty and advocacy also produced favorable results. Respondents moderately agreed with "I consider myself loyal to this brand" (Q5.6; M = 3.91, SD = 0.93). Stronger agreement was expressed with "I would recommend this brand to my friends or family" (Q5.7; M = 4.32, SD = 0.85). High ratings were also observed for "I believe this brand offers high-quality products/services" (Q5.8; M = 4.35, SD = 0.79), while the statement "I would be willing to pay a premium price for this brand over its competitors" (Q5.9) was evaluated somewhat less strongly (M = 3.94, SD = 0.97).

4.4.3 Hypotheses testing

This subsection presents the results of hypothesis testing. For each hypothesis, the relevant questionnaire items used for operationalization are specified, followed by the applied statistical test and the corresponding findings. Where appropriate, regression output tables and correlation coefficients are included to provide a transparent overview of the results.

H1: Social media engagement positively influences Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE)

To test H1, social media engagement was measured using items from the survey (Q4.1 and Q4.2), which assessed whether the brand's content was engaging and whether the brand interacted with followers. Consumer-Based Brand Equity was measured using items from the survey (Q5.6 to Q5.9), which included trust, reliability, honesty, loyalty, recommendation, perceived quality, and willingness to pay a premium.

A simple linear regression was conducted with social media engagement as the predictor and CBBE as the outcome. Table 1 shows that the model explained virtually no variance in CBBE ($R^2 \approx .000$, $F(1,152) = 0.00$, $p = .983$). The regression coefficient was not significant ($\beta = –0.002$, $p = .983$).

These results indicate that social media engagement did not influence consumer-based brand equity. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

Table 1: Regression analysis of social media engagement on Consumer-Based Brand Equity

Predictor	**β**	**R²**	**F(df)**	**p**	**Decision**
Social media engagement	–0.002	.000	0.00(1,152)	.983	Not supported

Source: Own work.

H2a: Personalized digital content positively influences consumer trust.

To test H2a, perceived personalization was measured using items from the survey (Q4.5 and Q4.6), which assessed whether brand communications were tailored and whether recommendations were relevant. Consumer trust was measured using items from the survey (Q5.3 to Q5.5), which referred to trustworthiness, reliability, and honesty.

A multiple linear regression was conducted with personalization, data transparency, and consistency as predictors of consumer trust. Table 2 shows that the regression coefficient for personalization was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .216$, $R^2 = .285$, $F(3,150) = 19.91$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that personalization had a significant influence on consumer trust. Therefore, H2a was supported.

H2b: Perceived data transparency positively influences consumer trust.

To test H2b, perceived transparency was measured using items from the survey (Q5.1 and Q5.2), which evaluated whether the brand was clear about data use and transparent about policies. Consumer trust was measured using items Q5.3 to Q5.5.

As shown in Table 2, the regression coefficient for transparency was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .209$, $R^2 = .285$, $F(3,150) = 19.91$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that greater data transparency increased consumer trust. Therefore, H2b was supported.

H3: Consistent brand messaging and experience across digital channels positively influence consumer trust.

To test H3, brand consistency was measured using items from the survey (Q4.3 and Q4.4), which assessed whether the brand's look, feel, and messaging were consistent across digital channels. Consumer trust was measured using items Q5.3 to Q5.5.

Table 2 shows that the regression coefficient for consistency was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .377$, $R^2 = .285$, $F(3,150) = 19.91$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that consistent brand messaging had the strongest influence on consumer trust. Therefore, H3 was supported.

Table 2: Multiple regression analysis of personalized digital content, perceived data transparency, and brand consistency on consumer trust

Predictor	**β**	**R²**	**F(df)**	**p**	**Decision**
Personalization	.216	.285	19.91 (3,150)	<.001	Supported
Transparency	.209	.285	19.91 (3,150)	<.001	Supported
Consistency	.377	.285	19.91 (3,150)	<.001	Supported

Source: Own work.

H4: The prevalence of positive User-Generated Content (UGC) is positively associated with Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE).

To test H4, user-generated content was measured using items from the survey (Q4.7 and Q4.8), which assessed whether participants noticed positive posts or reviews from other users. Consumer-Based Brand Equity was measured using items from the survey (see Appendix, Q5.6 to Q5.9), including trust, reliability, honesty, loyalty, recommendation, perceived quality, and willingness to pay a premium.

Given the associative nature of this hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was applied. As shown in Table 3, the results indicate a strong, positive correlation between UGC and CBBE ($r = .53$, $n = 154$, $p < .001$). This suggests that a higher prevalence of positive user-generated content was significantly associated with greater brand equity. Therefore, H4 was supported.

Table 3: Pearson correlation between User-Generated Content and Consumer-Based Brand Equity

Variables	r	n	p	Decision
UGC–CBBE	.53	154	<.001	Supported

Source: Own work.

Overall, the hypothesis testing produced mixed results. While social media engagement (H1) did not demonstrate a significant influence on consumer-based brand equity, all other hypotheses were supported. Personalization (H2a), perceived transparency (H2b), and consistency of digital messaging (H3) each showed significant positive effects on consumer trust. In addition, user-generated content (H4) was strongly and positively correlated with consumer-based brand equity. These findings establish a clear distinction between the constructs that significantly contribute to trust and brand equity and those that did not yield measurable effects within the sample.

4.5 Interpretation of findings

From a theoretical perspective, the findings provide support for established concepts in the literature while also offering nuanced insights. The strong effect of consistency aligns with Keller's (1993) framework of brand image coherence and Aaker's (1996) emphasis on brand identity as a driver of trust and credibility.

This confirms that coherence across channels remains a decisive factor for consumer perceptions in digital contexts. The confirmation of personalization and transparency as significant predictors of trust extends previous research by showing that relational and ethical dimensions of digital communication must operate together (Adler et al., 2025). This suggests that trust is not solely built on relevance but also on openness in data practices.

The significant association between user-generated content and brand equity supports prior findings that consumer contributions play a central role in shaping perceptions of loyalty, recommendation, and quality (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Conversely, the absence of a significant relationship between mere social media activity and brand equity challenges the assumption that activity volume directly translates into brand strength. This nuance aligns with research emphasizing that consumer-driven communication exerts stronger effects than firm-driven output (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

One explanation is that in markets where brands are already highly valued, additional activity may have diminishing returns, as consumers already perceive strong equity and further exposure contributes little incremental value. A second explanation relates to the quality versus quantity distinction: frequent but superficial activity (e.g., repetitive posts) may not strengthen consumer perceptions if not accompanied by meaningful engagement and authentic dialogue (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). A third possible reason lies in consumer fatigue; when audiences are oversaturated with brand messages, additional activity may not only fail to improve equity but could even reduce credibility if perceived as intrusive or inauthentic (Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

Taken together, these findings confirm and refine existing theoretical perspectives on consumer-based brand equity, demonstrating that coherence, transparency, and consumer contributions are interconnected drivers of trust and value. At the same time, they highlight that the effectiveness of digital activity depends on brand maturity, message quality, and consumer receptivity, rather than sheer frequency of communication.

4.6 Implications of results

The findings highlight several practical implications that are directly derived from the results of this study. Consistency across digital channels emerged as the strongest driver of consumer trust, which underlines the importance of maintaining a uniform visual identity, tone of voice, and messaging across all digital touchpoints. Based on these findings, companies may benefit from establishing clear internal guidelines to ensure coherence and reliability in their communication (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022).

The confirmation of personalization and transparency as significant predictors of trust suggests that both relevance and openness play a role in shaping consumer confidence. In practice, personalization should enhance engagement without creating uncertainty about data usage. Providing clear and accessible explanations of data practices and safeguards may help transform personalization into a trust-building element. Brands that combine relevance with transparency are likely to strengthen credibility among their audiences (Adler et al., 2025).

The significant relationship between user-generated content and consumer-based brand equity indicates that authentic consumer contributions can enhance brand perceptions. Encouraging satisfied customers to share experiences and integrating such content into communication strategies may therefore support loyalty and positive associations. However, the present study did not examine specific mechanisms for fostering UGC, and further research could explore this in more detail.

At the same time, the absence of a significant relationship between social media engagement and brand equity suggests that frequency of posting or activity level alone may not strengthen consumer perceptions. This result points to the importance of focusing on the quality and authenticity of interaction rather than quantity of content.

Finally, the findings indicate that the relative importance of these factors may vary depending on brand maturity. For established brands, trust-related aspects such as consistency and authenticity appear more decisive, while for emerging brands, consistent activity combined with consumer participation may still contribute to building visibility and awareness.

Taken together, these results suggest that in the observed sample, coherence, transparency, personalization, and consumer participation were most closely linked to trust and brand equity. These implications are limited to the context of this research and should be interpreted accordingly..

5 STUDY 2: A COMPANY CASE ANALYSIS

To complement the broad, quantitative insights gathered from the survey, this section presents a focused qualitative case analysis. While the survey identifies how specific digital marketing strategies statistically influence key consumer perceptions like trust and overall brand equity across a large sample, this case study explores how and why by examining a single, real-world brand in depth. The aim is to provide a rich, practical context to the theoretical concepts discussed earlier, illustrating the strategic decisions, implementation details, and nuanced challenges involved in using digital communication to drive consumer engagement, shape brand perception, and build long-term loyalty.

The brand selected for this case is Lam+ (Lam Plus), a Slovenian aesthetic clinic that has undergone a comprehensive digital transformation since its launch. The entire digital marketing strategy was developed and executed by Apollo Digital, the agency led by the author of this thesis, allowing for direct insight into the planning, execution, and ongoing optimization of the brand's online presence. By examining the key components of their digital activities - ranging from Meta advertising and social media content to SEO and influencer collaborations - this case explores how consistent and targeted digital communication can shape brand performance and reputation in a competitive local market.

5.1 Purpose and goals of case analysis

The purpose of this case analysis is to provide a practical, in-depth exploration of how a strategically implemented digital marketing plan can build brand equity in a competitive local market. The case focuses on Lam+, a Slovenian aesthetic clinic that built its presence entirely through digital channels, offering a real-world illustration of the concepts discussed in the quantitative study. As the digital strategy for Lam+ was fully developed and executed by the author's agency, Apollo Digital, this analysis provides a unique practitioner's perspective on the planning, execution, and optimization required to build a digital-first brand from the ground up over two years.

A key objective was to understand how Lam+ utilized a multi-channel digital mix - including Meta (Facebook and Instagram) advertising, content marketing, influencer collaborations, and SEO - to achieve its primary strategic goal: positioning itself as a professional, high-standard clinic, distinct from lower-tier competitors. This was achieved through consistent brand messaging and a premium visual identity across all touchpoints. The strategy remained adaptive; for instance, after testing platforms like TikTok, resources were refocused on higher-return channels like Instagram, and content was optimized for AI-based discoverability to align with evolving consumer search behaviors.

In summary, the Lam+ case highlights how a coherent and precisely executed digital marketing communication strategy can build a strong, trustworthy brand. It underscores the importance of strategic platform selection, message consistency, and performance tracking, demonstrating that even a smaller, local brand can achieve significant market impact through digital innovation.

5.2 Case analysis methodology

This case employs a qualitative, data-supported methodological approach, combining descriptive analysis with practitioner insight. It centers on the digital brand-building process of Lam+, a Slovenian aesthetic clinic, whose entire digital marketing strategy - from brand conceptualization to execution - was managed by the author’s agency, Apollo Digital. The methodological approach is therefore grounded in direct strategic involvement, supported by a comprehensive set of performance metrics, platform analytics, and content development archives.

All data analyzed in this case spans the period from December 2023 to March 2025, allowing for a longitudinal perspective on brand development and campaign effectiveness. This timeframe captures both the initial launch phase and the strategic scaling of the brand’s digital presence, providing a complete view of its evolution and performance trends. The data is sourced from Meta Ads Manager, Meta Business Suite, and TikTok for paid and organic social performance; Google Search Console and Google Analytics for traffic and user behavior analysis; SEMrush for SEO visibility, rankings, and growth tracking; and Google My Business for engagement at the location level, including user reviews and map-based interactions.

The methodological process involved several key steps, depicted in Figure 5. First, a complete inventory of the digital marketing activities conducted by Lam+ was compiled and categorized according to platform, content type, frequency, and objective. This included blog publishing schedules, social media calendars, paid media strategies, and influencer outreach campaigns. Each component was then examined in terms of its alignment with the brand’s core positioning: to establish Lam+ as a high-end, professional aesthetic clinic, clearly distinct from lower-tier service providers in the local market.

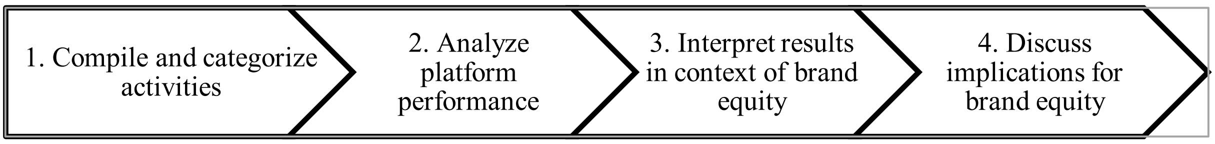
Second, a platform-level performance analysis was conducted to assess audience engagement, visibility, and conversion across channels. For Meta platforms (Instagram and Facebook), campaign-level metrics such as reach, impressions, content interactions, click-through rates, and bookings were collected via Meta Ads Manager. Organic engagement and audience behavior were interpreted using in-platform insights, focusing particularly on Instagram due to its stronger performance in follower engagement and story interactions. On the website side, Google Analytics and Google Search Console provided granular data on visitor volumes, traffic sources, content performance, and search behavior. SEMrush was used to track keyword rankings, domain authority, and organic visibility trends over time.

Third, the study reviewed customer sentiment and public-facing feedback using Google My Business reviews, user-shared Instagram stories, comments, and post mentions. These served as qualitative indicators of brand perception and trust. Special attention was given to the clinic's ability to generate e-word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and attract repeat customers, a factor critical for sustained brand equity in a service-based business.

Additionally, the case analysis reflects on the brand's strategic decision-making and adaptability. Lam+ tested emerging platforms such as TikTok but ultimately withdrew based on performance misalignment with its audience and professional positioning. Instead, resources were redirected to strengthen channels with higher ROI, especially Instagram and blog-based SEO, where monthly growth rates demonstrated consistent upward trends. The brand also implemented forward-looking practices such as content optimization for AI-driven discovery, recognizing the growing role of large language models and semantic search in shaping consumer behavior.

Throughout the case, theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in the thesis - such as consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), consistency in cross-channel communication, and the role of perceived professionalism in service branding - are used to interpret the real-world decisions and outcomes observed in the Lam+ strategy. The interplay between platform-specific tactics and the brand's overarching positioning is examined in depth, revealing how granular communication efforts contribute to broader brand-building goals.

Figure 5: Several key steps depicted graphically



Source: Own work.

This methodology not only allows for a detailed exploration of what actions were taken and how they performed but also lays the groundwork for critical reflection on which tactics contributed most meaningfully to brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention. The following section (5.3) presents the analysis of results, offering a structured interpretation of performance outcomes and their implications for the brand's market position and digital equity development.

5.3 Analysis of results

This section synthesizes the data collected over the 16-month observation period (December 2023 – March 2025) to evaluate the impact of Lam+'s digital marketing communications on brand development. The analysis proceeds in four steps: first, outlining the specific marketing activities undertaken; second, assessing the performance of individual platforms; third, interpreting the results within the framework of brand equity theory; and finally, considering the strategic implications of these findings. The combination of quantitative performance metrics and qualitative indicators ensures a balanced perspective, allowing for both the measurement of immediate outcomes and the assessment of longer-term brand-building effects.

5.3.1 Activities

Over the 16-month observation period (December 2023 – March 2025), Lam+ implemented a structured and multi-channel digital marketing program. Activities spanned paid advertising, organic social media content, search-engine-optimized blogging, influencer collaborations, and platform-specific engagement strategies. Each channel was selected and maintained based on its capacity to advance one or more of the clinic's strategic brand-building objectives: direct bookings, engagement, search visibility, social proof, and credibility.

Paid promotion was conducted exclusively through Meta advertising, covering both Instagram (IG) and Facebook (FB). A total of 32 ad sets were deployed, each designed to drive direct service bookings via the clinic's website. Organic social media content comprised 110 posts published on Instagram and subsequently reposted to Facebook, aimed primarily at engagement and audience nurturing. TikTok content, totalling 42 posts, was tested in the initial phase but discontinued in October 2024 after performance misalignment with the target audience was observed.

Search visibility and inbound website traffic were supported through an intensive content marketing program. Over the analysis period, 68 blog articles were published, optimized for high-intent search terms relevant to aesthetic services. The brand also leveraged 12 influencer collaborations to enhance social proof, credibility, and reach, primarily through Instagram mentions, stories, and post features.

Offline-linked credibility building was further supported by Google My Business reviews, which the clinic was collecting organically, without having any specific processes in place for review generation or being proactive on consumer feedback, with 39 five-star ratings across the clinic's two physical locations (Kranj and Ljubljana). No reviews below five stars were recorded, reflecting consistently positive sentiment in customer feedback.

Two significant changes in activity mix occurred during the period. TikTok was discontinued in October 2024, with resources reallocated to higher-ROI channels. Organic Instagram and Facebook posting was phased out in early 2025, while Meta advertising, SEO blogging, influencer partnerships, and review collection continued at a consistent pace. A consolidated overview of all activities conducted during the observation period is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Overview of activities

Activity Type	Platform(s)	Volume	Primary Objective(s)	Notable Changes
Paid Advertising	Meta Ads (IG, FB)	32 ad sets	Direct bookings, brand awareness	No notable changes
Organic Social Media Posts	IG, FB	110 posts (IG) reposted to FB	Engagement	Phased out in early 2025
TikTok Content	TikTok	42 videos	Brand awareness	Discontinued in Oct 2024
SEO Blog Articles	Website	68 articles	Search visibility, inbound traffic	Continued at consistent pace
Influencer Collaborations	IG (posts, stories, tags)	12 collaborations	Social proof, credibility, reach	Continued at consistent pace
Google My Business	Google Maps	39 five-star reviews	Credibility, local search visibility	Perfect rating maintained

Source: Own work.

5.3.2 Platform performance analysis

The performance analysis evaluates the relative contribution of each channel to Lam+'s brand-building objectives over the 16 months (December 2023 – March 2025), using verified platform analytics and campaign records.

Meta advertising (Instagram and Facebook) delivered the strongest measurable performance in terms of direct conversions. Across 32 ad sets, campaigns generated a total of 2,761,227 impressions and 64,863 clicks in the observed period, resulting in an average click-through rate (CTR) of 2.35% and a cost-per-click (CPC) of €0.18. An estimated 650 bookings were directly attributable to paid campaigns, resulting in an average cost per booking of €18.02.

Precise attribution of all bookings and narrowing down the exact cost per booking is not possible due to offline conversions (phone calls, email inquiries). However, the data indicates that Meta ads were a primary driver of appointment generation.

Organic performance on Instagram and Facebook showed steady audience engagement, though with a clear dominance of Instagram. Both platforms averaged a 1.5% engagement rate, with Instagram posts generating approximately 2,200 total interactions (likes, comments, shares) over the period, while Facebook achieved roughly 10% of this volume (~220 interactions). The most successful content format across both platforms was vertical video (9:16) featuring doctors explaining procedures or commenting on aesthetic trends. Net follower growth was estimated at +600 on Instagram and +200 on Facebook for the observed period.

Search engine optimization (SEO) and blog content emerged as a key long-term growth channel. Over 68 published articles, the site received approximately 65,000 visits and 20,000 clicks, with an average CTR of 3.8% and a mean search position of 15.9 (average ranking position on Google search results). Quarterly growth trends averaged +33% in clicks and +45% in impressions, indicating compounding returns from consistent content output and coverage of relevant topics.

Influencer collaborations contributed to brand awareness and credibility. Across 12 collaborations, the estimated reach was 117,000 via posts and an additional 50,000 via stories, with over 1,500 combined interactions. This exposure, while less directly measurable in conversions, aligned with Lam+'s positioning strategy by associating the brand with trusted public figures in the Slovenian market.

Google My Business (GMB) supports location-level visibility and customer engagement. The clinic maintained a perfect record of 39 five-star reviews across its two locations, acquired organically without solicitation. Monthly averages across the period included 250 direction requests, 110 phone calls, 600 profile interactions, and 170 website clicks. These figures suggest strong local discovery and conversion potential from map-based searches.

Finally, TikTok was tested as an experimental channel until its discontinuation in October 2024. Over 42 published videos, the account generated 406,000 views, 11,473 likes, 528 shares, and 413 comments, achieving a total of 745 followers. While engagement was reasonable for the follower base, platform audience alignment and ROI considerations (high cost of content production) led to the decision to reallocate resources to other channels. A consolidated comparison of platform performance is presented in Table 5, summarizing key metrics relative to Lam+'s brand-building objectives.

Table 5: Consolidated comparison of performance

Platform / Channel	Impressions (or Reach)	Clicks / Engagement
Meta Ads	2,761,277	64,863
Instagram Organic	150,000 (est.)	2,200 (est.)
Facebook Organic	15,000 (est.)	220 (est.)
SEO (Blog)	65,000	20,000
Influencers	167,000	1,500
Google My Business	12,000 (both locations, est.)	600 (both locations, est.)
TikTok	406,000	11,473

Source: Own work.

5.3.3 Interpretation of results in the context of brand equity

The Lam+ case results can be mapped against Keller's Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model through the brand resonance pyramid discussed in Chapter 3. Such an approach reveals how the clinic progressed through key stages of brand equity development over the 16 months. The data suggests a deliberate and coherent movement from initial awareness generation to loyalty cultivation, supported by consistent multi-channel communication.

Brand awareness expanded substantially through paid and organic channels. Meta advertising generated more than 2.7 million impressions and over 64,000 clicks, while SEO content brought approximately 65,000 visits. Influencer collaborations extended reach to more than 117,000 users via posts and 50,000 via stories, complemented by recurring organic mentions from satisfied clients. Branded search queries grew by an estimated 5% monthly, suggesting greater top-of-mind presence.

Brand associations were reinforced through consistent premium positioning. Visuals and messaging across ads, blog content, and influencer materials conveyed professionalism, high service standards, and medical expertise. Long-term influencer partnerships further cemented credibility, portraying Lam+ as both technically proficient and aesthetically refined.

Perceived quality was strengthened by qualitative indicators such as a perfect record of 39 five-star Google reviews across two locations and recurring client praise for professionalism and skill. The inclusion of advanced medical procedures alongside cosmetic treatments elevated the perceived calibre of the clinic's entire service offering, differentiating it from less specialised competitors.

Brand loyalty emerged in the form of an estimated 25% return rate, with repeat bookings often prompted by targeted social media promotions. This retention rate is notable in a sector where practitioner trust is critical to repeat business. Positive electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), through both formal reviews and user-generated Instagram content, reinforced loyalty loops by validating the brand experience for prospective clients.

Finally, communication consistency acted as the connective tissue between all touchpoints. Cross-platform coherence in tone, visual identity, and messaging reduced the likelihood of fragmented perception, while e-WOM amplified brand credibility without additional media spend.

Taken together, the findings show that Lam+ has advanced through the hierarchical stages of Keller's brand resonance pyramid. Initial brand salience was achieved through strong awareness-building activities, with paid and organic campaigns generating millions of impressions and thousands of monthly visits. Brand meaning was established through performance indicators (professional service delivery, advanced medical procedures) and imagery (premium positioning and aesthetic identity). These elements shaped brand responses, reflected in consumer judgments of credibility and professionalism, as well as positive emotional reactions evidenced in reviews and e-WOM. At the apex, Lam+ demonstrated emerging brand resonance, visible in repeat bookings, loyalty loops, and advocacy through user-generated content. This progression suggests that within the observed period, the clinic effectively strengthened each stage of the CBBE model, resulting in a brand position defined by trust, professionalism, and sustained client relationships.

5.3.4 Implications of findings on brand equity

The results indicate that Lam+'s digital marketing communications have moved beyond short-term campaign performance to deliver measurable, long-term brand equity gains. These outcomes have several implications for the clinic's ongoing strategic positioning in the Slovenian aesthetic services market.

First, channel integration has proven essential. Paid Meta campaigns effectively drove immediate bookings, while SEO-driven content and influencer partnerships nurtured awareness and trust over longer decision cycles. This confirms that brand equity in the aesthetic sector benefits from a blend of short-term activation and sustained brand-building activities. This balance should be preserved in future planning.

Second, service mix and positioning create a competitive moat. The dual offering of advanced medical procedures and cosmetic treatments enhances perceived quality and sets Lam+ apart from lower-tier providers. This differentiation should remain central to communications, particularly when targeting demographics seeking safety, expertise, and premium service.

Third, consumer perception metrics should inform retention strategies. The perfect five-star review record, high referral frequency, and long-term influencer relationships are signals of trust capital that can be leveraged for loyalty programmes, targeted remarketing, and testimonial-driven campaigns. Given the 25% return rate, structured efforts to deepen repeat engagement could further compound equity gains.

Fourth, sustained visibility is critical for conversion. The consistent 5% monthly growth in branded searches and steady user-generated content highlight the cumulative impact of ongoing exposure. For high-consideration services, this reinforces the need for continuous presence rather than sporadic bursts of activity, particularly across search and social platforms.

The integration of these case findings with the survey results strengthens the implications further. The survey confirmed that trust is primarily shaped by personalization, transparency, and especially consistency, while brand equity is most strongly influenced by user-generated content. For Lam+, this means that its emphasis on consistent premium positioning is not only strategically sound but also aligned with broader consumer expectations. At the same time, the clinic's accumulation of user-generated content and reviews corresponds with the survey evidence that peer contributions have the strongest effect on equity. The absence of a direct impact of social media activity on brand equity also reflects Lam+'s experience, where success did not come from activity alone but from coordinated, credibility-driven communication.

Finally, while Lam+ lacks a founder-led personal brand - a common differentiator in the sector - its strong SEO performance, consistent positioning, and credible endorsements compensate for this gap. Future brand development could focus on humanising the brand through expert-led content, while remaining attentive to the survey implication that equity is built less through frequent activity and more through coherence, transparency, and consumer participation.

6 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the role of digital marketing communications in the process of brand building. The research was guided by three main goals: to define the key elements of digital communication strategies, to investigate their influence on consumer-based brand equity, and to provide empirical insights through a survey and a case study.

The literature review established the theoretical foundation by outlining how digital tools and channels affect consumer perceptions and contribute to the creation of trust, loyalty, perceived quality, and willingness to recommend a brand. On this basis, four hypotheses were formulated and tested in the survey. The results showed that personalization, transparency, and consistency are significant antecedents of consumer trust, while user-generated content is strongly associated with consumer-based brand equity. The hypothesis concerning the influence of social media engagement on brand equity was not supported, which suggests that activity alone does not strengthen consumer perceptions.

The case study of Lam+ provided further confirmation of these findings in practice. The analysis demonstrated that the clinic's brand equity growth was not the result of isolated campaigns but of coordinated and consistent communication across channels. Paid Meta campaigns generated immediate responses, while SEO content, influencer engagement, and reviews contributed to long-term trust and awareness. The accumulation of user-generated content and positive consumer evaluations proved to be decisive for strengthening perceptions of credibility and quality.

Together, the two studies highlight that brand equity in digital environments depends primarily on coherence, transparency, and consumer participation. While activity on social media platforms may drive short-term engagement, sustainable equity arises from communication strategies that combine personalization with openness in data practices and that systematically cultivate authentic consumer voices.

This thesis contributes to theory by clarifying the mechanisms through which digital communication supports trust and equity and by showing the limits of social media activity as a brand-building factor. It also contributes to practice by emphasising the importance of integrated strategies that align paid, organic, and consumer-driven channels to build long-term relationships with consumers.

Conducted research is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The survey relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and subjective interpretation of questions, thereby limiting the precision of the findings. In addition, the study employed a cross-sectional design, meaning that causal relationships cannot be inferred with certainty. The sample was also geographically and demographically restricted, which affects the generalisability of the results beyond the surveyed population.

The case study further narrows the scope by focusing on a single company within the Slovenian aesthetic sector. While this provides depth and contextual relevance, it restricts the breadth of conclusions and limits transferability to other industries, cultural contexts, or company sizes. The findings, therefore, need to be interpreted with caution when applied to broader settings.

Future research could address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples across multiple demographic groups and industries, enabling comparative insights. Longitudinal research designs would be particularly valuable for examining how digital communication strategies influence brand equity over time, beyond short-term consumer perceptions. In addition, qualitative approaches such as interviews or focus groups could complement survey data by providing deeper insights into the mechanisms behind trust, loyalty, and consumer engagement. Expanding research across different cultural environments would further enhance the understanding of how digital marketing communications contribute to brand equity in diverse contexts.

In conclusion, the thesis confirms that digital marketing communications can significantly contribute to brand equity when they are consistent, transparent, and consumer-centred. These elements provide the foundation for trust and long-term relationships that extend beyond the effects of individual campaigns or short-term promotional activity.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The impact of digital marketing on brand perception

Master's Thesis Survey - School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana

** Indicates required question*

Section 1: Introduction and Consent

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. My name is Domen Pavčič, and I am a Master's student at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana. This survey is for my Master's thesis, which explores how brands use digital marketing to communicate with consumers like you.

The survey should take approximately 5-7 minutes to complete. Your participation is completely voluntary, and all your responses will be anonymous and confidential. The data will be used for academic purposes only.

There are no right or wrong answers; I am interested in your personal experiences and opinions.

By proceeding, you confirm that you are over 18 years old and consent to participate in this research.

Section 2a: Use of Social Media

1. Do you use social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok) at least a few times per week?*

[ ] Yes

[ ] No (The respondent is re-directed to the end of the questionnaire and the questionnaire is submitted)

Section 2b: Brand Following

2. Do you actively follow any brand on social media?*

[ ] Yes

[ ] No (The respondent is re-directed to the end of the questionnaire and the questionnaire is submitted)

Section 2c: Brand Selection

3. Please think of a brand you actively follow on social media. Write the name of this one brand below. (For the rest of the survey, please answer all questions with this specific brand in mind.)*

Section 3: Your Perceptions of the Brand

The following statements are about the brand you just named. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each one.

4. The Brand's Digital Communication*

Statement	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
4.1 This brand's social media content is interesting and engaging.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.2 This brand interacts with its followers on social media (e.g., replies to comments).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.3 This brand has a consistent look and feel across its digital channels (website, social media, emails).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.4 The brand's messaging and tone of voice are consistent everywhere I see it online.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.5 The advertisements and	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

communications I receive from this brand seem tailored to my interests.					
4.6 This brand provides me with relevant product or service recommendations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.7 I often see other customers posting positive things about this brand online.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.8 Online reviews from other users have positively influenced my opinion of this brand.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. Your Relationship with the Brand*

Statement	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
5.1 I have a clear understanding of how this brand uses my personal data.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5.2 The brand is transparent about its data privacy policies.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.3 I trust this brand.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.4 This brand is reliable and keeps its promises.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.5 This brand is honest and sincere in its communication.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.6 I consider myself loyal to this brand.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.7 I would recommend this brand to my friends or family.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.8 I believe this brand offers high-quality products/services.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.9 I would be willing to pay a premium price for this brand over its competitors.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section 4: About You

Finally, please provide some basic information about yourself for statistical purposes.

6. What is your age?*

[ ] 18-24

[ ] 25-34

[ ] 35-44

[ ] 45-54

[ ] 55+

7. What is your gender?*

[ ] Male

[ ] Female

[ ] Other

[ ] Prefer not to say

8. On average, how much time do you spend on social media per day?*

[ ] Less than 30 minutes

[ ] 30 minutes to 1 hour

[ ] 1-2 hours

[ ] 2-3 hours

[ ] More than 3 hours