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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CONSUMER BRANDING AND RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Social media, also known as social websites, has become a key method of communication development and a key driver in the way individuals and organizations around the globe create a collaborative environment. Although social media is widely used by individuals, it is not well understood how consumers are connected to social media for brand follow-up and purchase purposes. Thus, this work has studied the impact of social media on consumer branding and relationships in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This work was carried out based on quantitative and qualitative research method. A mini focus group comprising of 5 people was conducted in order to collect qualitative data. In order to validate the research, a sample of 100 consumers was approached and questionnaire was used through to fulfill the requirement of a quantitative approach. The results have shown that, individuals' attitude and buying behavior of brand are influenced by the use of social media. Thus, it is concluded that social media has a significant impact on consumer branding and relationships.

1   INTRODUCTION

Social network websites and blogs enable individuals to connect and establish relationships [1]. People can interact with the product or company when products or companies join those sites. This interaction is personal to users due to their

previous experience with social media site interactions [1]. This encourages users to repost remarks made about the product being advertised, about sharing the response; more user contacts are able to see the statement, thereby attracting more users.

Social media marketing is growing more prevalent today. Social media marketing is a type of online marketing that uses social networking channels as a marketing tool [2]. The aim of social media promotion is to create information that consumer can share with their social platform in order to help a business improve brand awareness and expand consumer reach. Social network marketing allows an organization to get direct input from consumers and future buyers, while making the business more responsive [3]. Interactive aspects of social media offer consumers the ability to ask questions or express grievances and feel like they are being heard. This aspect of social media marketing is called customer relationship management [3].

Social media marketing became more common with the increased popularity of websites such as Twitter, Facebook, My space, LinkedIn, and YouTube [4]. In addition, the government revised its regulations to cover social media ads. If a business or the advertisement agent provides a writer or any digital critic with complimentary goods or certain rewards to create favorable publicity about a product, digital reviews may be lawfully regarded as endorsements [4]. Both the columnist and the business will be kept accountable for maintaining that the offers are specifically and conspicuously reported and that the columnist's reports do not make false or unsupported claims and therefore conform to federal regulations on false or malicious ads. Furthermore, the world's top brands use social media as a constructive way to strengthen their interactions with their clients. Customers communicate and hold social media discussions about organizations [5]. As a result, as companies connect via social media, they are more likely to develop a long-term partnership that can, in turn, improve their brand equity and growth [5].

Unlike other contact channels, social networking platforms not only provide users with the ability to connect with each other, but also allow users to identify related individuals [6]. When users of online social networking sites find other participants, they may create their own groups on the basis of their shared interests. Digital media networks have not only changed the way people interact, work and play, but also the way they buy goods and view various types of products and services [7]. In recent times, it is not unprecedented for many organizations, including the business and non-profit industries, to carry out their social networking marketing initiatives and establish branding exercises [7].

Various researchers have agreed that social networking websites are radically changing the marketing landscape and will continue to be a key driver of successful marketing communication. According to Alves et al. [8], social

networking sites have the potential to revolutionize information and advertising by visual signage linked to users and pertaining to their tastes. In comparison, Duffett [9] deduced that social media is the driver that turned the network from a one-way communication platform to a two-way sharing system. It encourages people to join the networking space community, which in turn affects their interests and desires. In addition, Lankova, et al. [10] found that the structured management of brands across networking sites would lead to an increase in the efficiency of brand management, which in turn improves return on investment. Likewise, Stephen [11] observed that social media provides a holistic view of the brand evolving activities , particularly with the prevalence of social networking sites, since they are interactive, enjoy the social relation with the penetration of the internet. In addition, Dahl [12] found that, in order to attract customers positively to the product, a company needs to build a strong social media presence. Building a strong social media presence allows customers to be loyal to their brand.

The impact of social media through its development and boom can be seen in the Kingdom, as Saudi Arabia comprises a large percentage of consumers looking for insight into products and services through these social networking sites [13]. Consumers depend on social media to obtain information about products and brands that will result in companies enjoying the benefits of engaging directly with consumers and reaching their target audiences [14]. This gives rise to an interesting discussion about how social media sites are helping to build long-lasting relationships with consumers in Saudi Arabia [14]. It will be interesting to look at how companies build relationships through the social media site and how they benefit from this new marketing of social media. Thus, to the author's best knowledge, minimal works have been explored in this area in Saudi Arabia. Thus, this work has studied the impact of social media on consumer branding and relationships in Saudi Arabia.

2   METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a mixed research approach. It consisted of a qualitative and quantitative research method. In this work, data collection was done using two methods, which are interview and survey questionnaire. The sample population for this work was consumers from Jeddah who use social media for brand associations. The sample size for the questionnaire was 100 people. In addition, interview was conducted among a close focus group of 5 people. People in the focus group were between 25 and 50 years of age, both males and females. The data were analyzed in terms of basic percentage statistics.

3   RESULT AND DISCUSSION
3.1   Survey Analysis

The respondents were asked which social media platform does the use the most frequently. Based on Figure 1, 79 % of the respondents stated Facebook, 4% stated Twitter, 5 % stated Instagram, and 12 % stated YouTube. Next, the respondents were asked if social media has the ability to change their view about a product or service. Based on Figure 2, 85% of the respondents stated yes and 15% stated no.
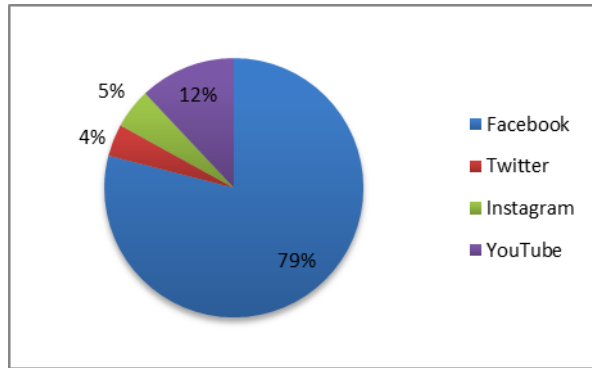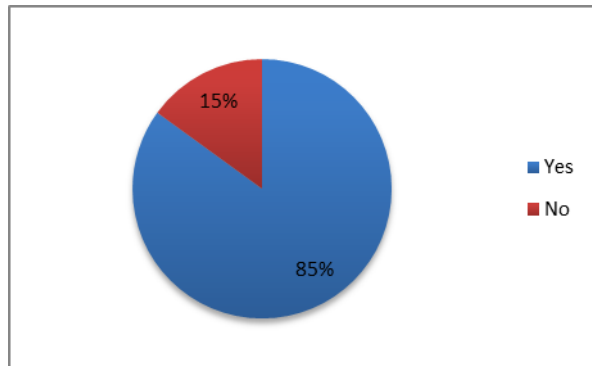

Figure 1: Social media used

Figure 2: Does social media change the view about a product and service

Next, the respondents were asked if social media has helped them to be well updated with the fashion lifestyle brands that are currently available. Based on Figure 3, 80 % of the respondents stated yes and 20 % of the respondents stated no.
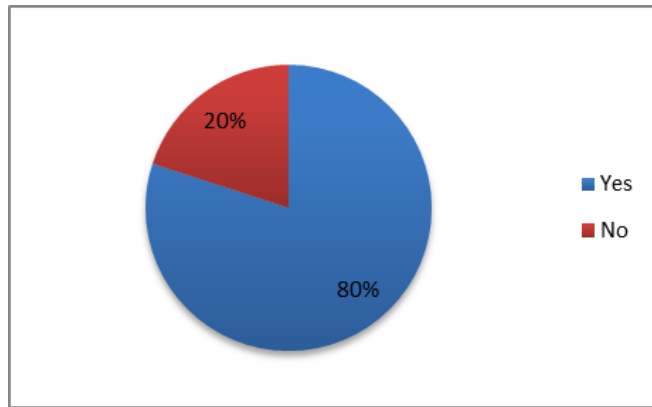
Figure 3: Social media assisted to be updated with fashion lifestyle brands

Next, the respondents were asked why do they visit fashion lifestyle brands. Based on Figure 4,35% of the respondents stated to purchase the products, 30 % stated to identify discounts, 10 % stated to find general information, 15% stated to read reviews and 10% stated to be connected to the product.
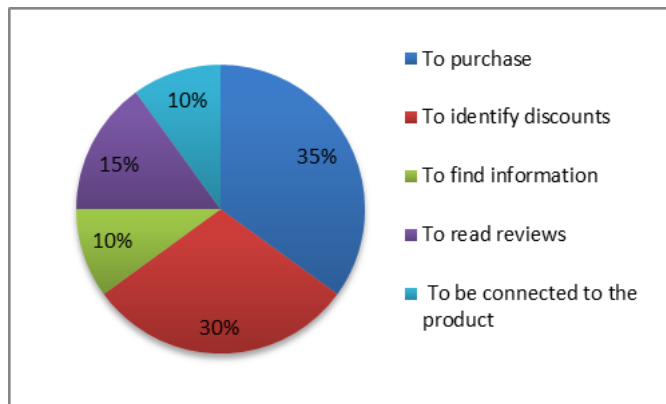

Figure 4: Purpose of visiting fashion lifestyle brand social media

Next, the respondents were asked what effect they believe in interacting with lifestyle brands through social media has on their intention to purchase the brand. Based Figure 5, 45% of the respondents stated that social media significantly influences their purchase intention, 25% stated it increases the purchase intention, 20 % stated that it decreases the purchase intention and 10% stated that there is no effect on the purchase intention.
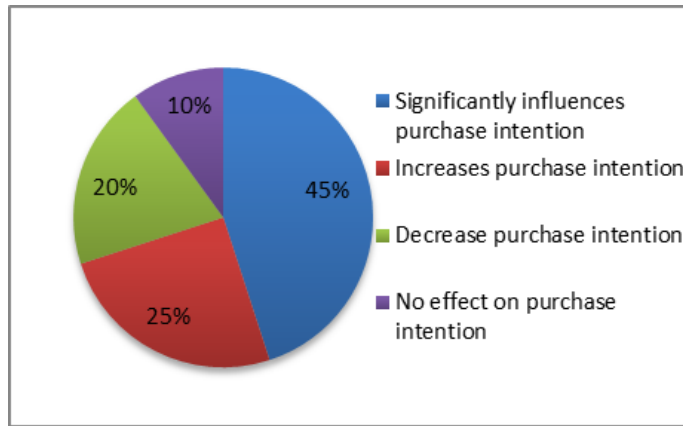
Figure 5: Effect of social media on fashion lifestyle brand purchase intention

Next, the respondents were asked on what are the key factors that they consider while purchasing from a business brand in social media. Based on Figure 6, 50% the respondents stated quality, 20% stated service, 20 % value for money and 10% stated brand value.
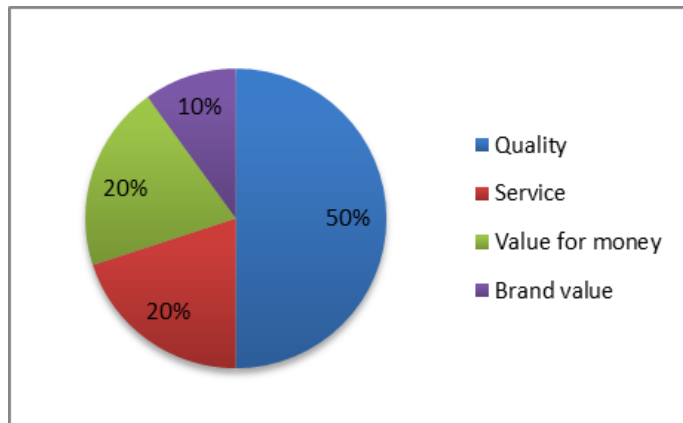

Figure 6: Key factors considered while purchasing from business brand in social media

3.2   Interview Analysis

The findings of the close group interview are discussed as follow. First the respondents were asked "How has social media affected their relationships with brands/ products?". The group replied that the social media it has allowed them to become more aware of brands and it is easier to get information about any products and brands.

Next, the respondents were asked "What are your thoughts on organizations utilizing social media to communicate?". The respondents have collectively replied

that utilizing social media is very innovative and a faster way to communicate to others particularly when it comes to advertising jobs and other ads via online. Furthermore, the respondents stated that social media outlets and being ahead of the game allows for any organization to stay modern and also increases the organization visibility to users and therefore better known.

Next, the respondents were asked "Why should brand/ products use social media to communicate?". The respondents stated that social media should be used as it will enable to reach a broader audience at low cost and it's efficient, and gives consumers immediate answers.

Finally, the respondents were asked their thoughts on organizations utilizing social media to communicate externally. The respondents stated that social media is a great way for organizations to communicate externally with their stakeholders. It allows for instant feedback, and if done properly it can reach new audience members and expand the overall audience.

3.3   Overall Discussion

A social habit is the tendency to use social media sites a few times a day. Consumers spend more time on social media sites, trying to find new ways to connect and engage with consumers and brands throughout the day. From the conducted survey it is found that Facebook dominates more for brands, as majority of consumers prefer to connect with brands on Facebook. Facebook is a much more familiar place to be. Consumers spend a lot of time connecting with friends and family, so it's a little effort on their part to connect with brands [15]. Second, Facebook users are strongly influenced by their friends. If a friend likes a brand, they're going to like a brand. Finally, Facebook offers a more user-friendly and visually interesting interface than other platforms [15]. This allows brands to leverage more attractive offers, gifts, contests and other entertaining content.

Social media has also changed how people view the products/services as per the research results. Majority of the consumers said that it has allowed people to become more aware of the brands and helped consumers to get immediate answers. It also helped in building long lasting relationship between customers and marketers, while also helps to know more about the brands [12]. In addition, it is also seen that consumers connect through lifestyle brands through social media sites as consumers receive general product information through social media. In addition, the intention to purchase a specific brand is more attractive and powerful through social media. Interacting through social media sites has also strengthened their relationship with people as it has made it easier for them to contact and get in touch with them more often [12]. Consumers rely more on brand-based website information than on offline communications. Social media gives brands the opportunity to interact directly and immediately with their customers.

4   CONCLUSION

This work has examined the impact of social media on consumer branding and relationships in Saudi Arabia. The overall result have shown that social media has an important impact on consumer branding and relationship. Furthermore, social media is a great tool for building symmetrical brand relationships, in which both the brand and the consumer give equal returns on their relationship. Focus should be on the exchange of value in the social media campaign. Brands should explore new ways of marketing social platforms that help build trust and credibility. It is advisable that companies do not ignore the opportunities to jump in and expand their customer base. In conclusion, social network advertising thrives in the age of social networking of end-user interactions.

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