Francisco J. Martínez-López
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Advances in Digital Marketing and eCommerce

Fifth International Conference, 2024

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Preface

The Digital Marketing & eCommerce Conference aims to bring together leading researchers and research scholars to exchange and share their experiences and research results on any aspects of e-commerce and digital marketing. It also offers a platform for academicians and practitioners to present and discuss the most recent breakthroughs, trends, and concerns as well as practical challenges encountered, and solutions adopted in the fields of e-commerce and digital marketing.

For this year's (fifth) edition, the DMeC Conference's key theme is entitled *"The Future of Analytics in Digital Marketing and E-commerce: How Digitalization and Sustainability Affect Consumers, Firms, and Policymakers"*. Digital marketing and e-commerce are constantly evolving, driven by ongoing digitization. Furthermore, environmental issues, such as consequences due to climate change, crises, and wars, are massively influencing economies worldwide. As a result, there is an increasing relevance for analyzing both digitalization and sustainability. Although numerous research papers related to digitization have been published in recent years, most publications focus on examining specific (and sometimes too narrow) perspectives, thus overlooking the interplay between different stakeholders, such as consumers, firms, and policymakers. However, this interplay is precisely vital for mastering the tremendous upcoming challenges of our society. If firms know how to respond appropriately to changing consumer demand and policymakers create the conditions for a sustainable society, for example by integrating more climate-friendliness into economic thinking, society can benefit substantially in the future from the ongoing developments in e-commerce and digital marketing.

A total of 30 papers have been accepted for publication in this book, addressing diverse topics and areas of application, namely social media; digital nudging; digital luxury; trends; crowdfunding; virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and metaverse; generative artificial intelligence (AI); green e-commerce; environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG); electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM); gamification; text mining; customer journey; mobile traveling; private label brands; among other areas. All papers have gone through a stringent peer review process by the members of the Program Committee. With this 2024 edition, the conference continues its commitment to encourage, promote, and publish high-quality contributions on digital marketing and e-commerce that can aid academics and practitioners in dealing with a wide range of issues.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the support of our sponsors and publisher. Last but not least, we would like to thank all the contributing authors, members of the Program

Committee, and the rest of the Organizing Committee for their highly valuable work in enabling the success of the 2024 DMeC Conference.

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Contents

Negative WOM for Liking Brands vs Positive WOM for Disliking Brands: Differences in Length and Content of WOM

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Abstract. Although there is considerable literature on the motives for posting word of mouth (WOM), little is known about the characteristics of WOM generated by posters' motives and circumstances. This study clarifies the influence of brand sentiment (linking/disliking) and text content (positive/negative) on the quantity and quality of WOM, based on an online survey of 3,036 users of two representative e-commerce sites (Amazon and Rakuten) in the Japanese market. First, the WOM perspective is confirmed. Negative WOM contains more words than positive WOM. Furthermore, positive WOM about disliking brands had the shortest word count, while positive WOM about liking brands and negative WOM about disliking brands were significantly more numerous. Next, from the perspective of WOM quality, this study evaluates the percentage of quality, cost, and delivery (QCD), which captures the sources of corporate competitiveness. Consequently, compared to the other groups, positive WOM toward liking brands had a significantly higher rate of mentions of costs and delivery. In other words, the psychological state in this situation tends to express the most concrete value.

Keywords: word of mouth · e-commerce site · motivation · QCD

1 Introduction

There are three main reasons why word of mouth (WOM) is important for companies: (1) it is a decision-making material for customers who are considering purchasing, and it affects business performance (Li et al. 2019); (2) customer loyalty changes depending on a company's response to WOM posted by a customer after purchase (Chen et al. 2019); and (3) WOM can be utilized in the development of next-generation products and services (Filieri 2015). Hence, objectives (2) and (3) require a detailed understanding of the feelings of the WOM posters.

Although considerable literature has stated the motives for posting WOM, little is known about the characteristics of WOM generated by the motives and circumstances of the posters. Knowing the differences in the psychological states of those who post long concrete WOM and those who post short abstract WOM will make it easier for practitioners to determine an appropriate response method. Therefore, this study focuses

on two representative e-commerce (EC) websites (Amazon and Rakuten) in the Japanese market and examines the effects of brand sentiment (linking/disliking) and text content (positive/negative) on WOM's quantity and quality.

2   Related Work and Hypotheses

The motivations for posting positive and negative reviews differ (Nam et al. 2020). Here, the motivations of both parties are sorted, and hypotheses are derived.

Positive: Three main motivations exist for posting positive reviews. The first is altruism. This included two targets: customers and brands. The motivation is to help other consumers have the same experience and contribute to brand sales by sharing positive experiences with products and services (Hu and Kim 2018). High levels of commitment and attachment to a brand motivate people to talk about and interact with it (Loureiro and Kaufmann 2018). Motivated by the desire to help the brand, customers strive to share positive experiences (Jeong and Jang 2011). The second reason is self-enhancement. Customers motivated by self-enhancement seek opportunities to gain prestige by spreading positive reviews (Sohaib et al. 2020). In other words, WOM is an effective means of advertising superiority over others (Ruvio et al. 2020). The third factor is economic incentives. When brands or WOM platforms provide financial or non-financial incentives, consumers tend to post positive WOM (Chen et al. 2023; Yen and Tang 2015).

Negative: There are three main motivations for posting negative reviews: The first is altruism. Altruism occurs when a WOM poster wants to prevent others from encountering the same complaints (Yen and Tang 2015) and help the company improve (Bronner and De Hoog 2011). The second factor was venting dissatisfaction. To resolve negative emotions caused by unpleasant experiences, consumers post WOM on online platforms (Yen and Tang 2015). The third is revenge. This occurs when the second motive is a stronger negative emotion. Consumers who have had bad experiences want revenge on companies and hope to reduce their frustration and anxiety by sharing their bad consumption experiences (Sohaib et al. 2020).

Thus, there are both positive and negative aspects. However, feelings of dissatisfaction have a stronger influence on WOM than feelings of positivity (Kato 2023; Nam et al. 2020). As consumers' negative feelings are strong, companies need to provide more detailed responses to negative WOM than to positive WOM (Chen et al. 2019). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Negative WOM toward disliking brands has more characteristics than positive or negative WOM toward liking brands and positive WOM toward disliking brands.

By contrast, positive emotions toward a favorite brand are caused by its intrinsic value. This study derived the following hypotheses based on quality, cost, and delivery (QCD), a model that captures the sources of corporate competitiveness (Pham and Thomas 2011).

H2-1: Positive WOM toward a liking brand refers to **quality-related** content more than negative WOM toward a liking brand or positive/negative WOM toward a disliking brand.

H2-2: Positive WOM toward a liking brand refers to **cost-related** content more than negative WOM toward a liking brand and positive/negative WOM toward a disliking brand.

H2-3: Positive WOM toward a liking brand refers to **delivery-related** content more than negative WOM toward a liking brand or positive/negative WOM toward a disliking brand.

3   Method

This study conducted an online survey of users of Amazon and Rakuten, the two top EC sites in Japan in terms of market share, from August 21 to 29, 2023. Surveys were collected from 4,000 people; those who did not use EC sites (3,585 people) and those who used EC other than Amazon and Rakuten were excluded (3,067 people). A total of 3,036 people were selected through the WOM screening process as described below. Table 1 lists the distributions of the attributes.

The following six questions were asked: (1) gender, (2) age, (3) the device used to answer the survey, (4) frequency of using (visiting) EC sites, (5) favorite brands (Amazon and Rakuten), and (6) WOM. As shown in Table 2 in (6), respondents were randomly divided into four groups, specified the brand (Amazon or Rakuten) and content (positive or negative), and asked to write WOM in a free format. Consequently, conditions such as consumer attributes were homogenized for each group. Given the methods used to collect WOM worldwide, it was not possible to compare these four situations under the same conditions.

Table 1. Respondents' attributes

Item	Breakdown	Number of Respondents	Ratio
Gender	Male	1,488	49.0%
	Female	1,548	51.0%
Age	20s	617	20.3%
	30s	652	21.5%
	40s	588	19.4%
	50s	616	20.3%
	60s	563	18.5%
Response Device	PC	1,229	40.5%
	Smartphone	1,807	59.5%
EC Site Visit Frequency	About a few times a year	415	13.7%
	About once a month	983	32.4%
	About 2–3 times a month	770	25.4%
	About once a week	661	21.8%
	At least once a week	207	6.8%
Liking Brand	Amazon	1,644	54.2%
	Rakuten	1,392	45.8%

Table 2. Group composition

Group	Brand	Review	Number of Respondents
Group 1	Like	Positive	752
Group 2	Like	Negative	759
Group 3	Dislike	Positive	773
Group 4	Dislike	Negative	752

To test H1, we used the number of words in WOM. However, as shown in Fig. 1, although most people write 100 characters, whereas others write approximately 200 words. Therefore, data from people who did not fall within the range of 2–100 words were excluded as outliers, and data from 3,036 people were targeted. In addition, to verify H2, detecting the words that belong to the QCD is necessary. Therefore, as shown in Table 3, this study defines the words belonging to each factor and determines whether each QCD factor is mentioned in the WOM.

Table 3. Words detected by each factor

Factor	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
Quality	product quality	product concept	product assortment
Cost	cost performance	affordable	discount
Delivery	fast delivery	delivery on time	careful delivery

4   Results

Positive WOM was 8.670 words and negative WOM was 9.414 words. Considering that the Japanese version of this paper's abstract is 407 words long, and the English version is 190 words long in English-speaking countries, the number of characters listed above is estimated to be approximately double. Next, when evaluating brand sentiment and text content, as shown in Fig. 2, positive WOM toward disliking brands has the shortest number of words, whereas positive WOM toward liking brands and negative WOM toward disliking brands was the longest. Applying the Shapiro-Wilk normality test to the number of words in WOM showed that the p-value was <0.000, which does not follow a normal distribution. Accordingly, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used. As shown in Fig. 1, significant differences were detected between Group 3-Group 1 and Group 3-Group 4, and H1 was partially supported. Finally, regarding the proportion of WOM mentioning QCD, Group 1 was significantly higher than the other groups in terms of cost and delivery, and a significant difference was detected. In other words, H2-1 was not supported, whereas H2-2 and H2-3 were supported (Fig. 3).
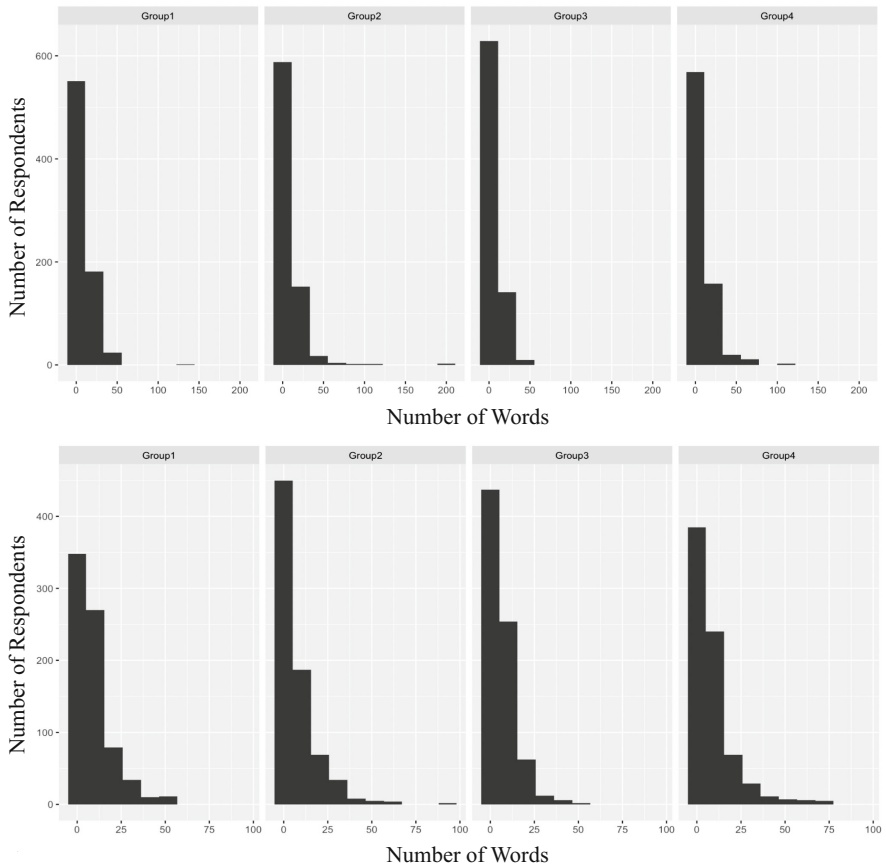
Fig. 1. Distribution of word counts (upper row: raw data, lower row: screened data)

5   Implications and Future Work

The practical implications of this study are as follows: First, practitioners should be aware that it is difficult to obtain positive WOM for unfavorable brands. To improve products/services, understanding the positive factors that low-loyalty consumers consider is crucial. However, as this study shows, this situation has the lowest motivation for WOM. This study conducted forced asking in a survey environment, but it is rare for this to occur naturally in actual WOM. Notably, when designing consumer surveys, one should avoid overlooking crucial voices. Second, consumers tend to consider cost as the most attractive EC site, followed by delivery. Looking at this result from the manufacturer's perspective, many consumers visit third-party EC sites, such as Amazon, in search of lower prices. Therefore, manufacturers who want to maintain their brand value should place more emphasis on their own EC sites than third-party EC sites.

This study had several limitations. First, the results are limited to Japan and should be extended to other countries. Second, because the strength of an attitude toward a brand
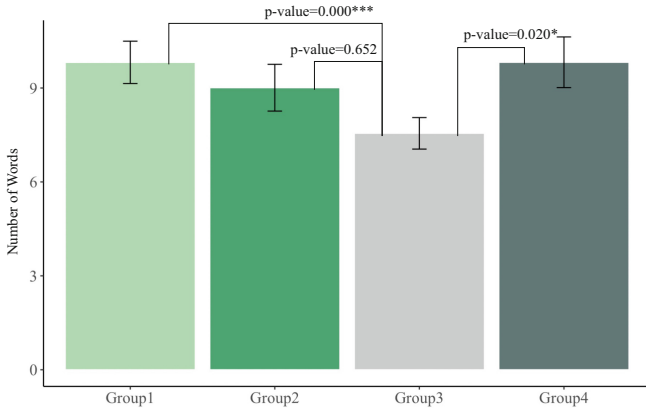
Fig. 2. Differences in the number of words in each group
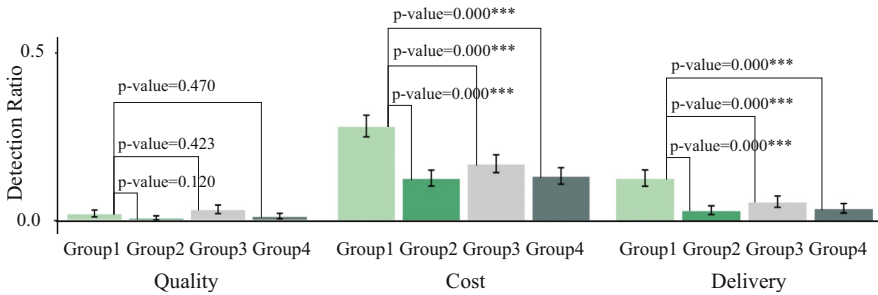
Fig. 3. Differences in the detection rates of QCD words in each group

has not been sufficiently considered, it would be more effective to measure it according to the degree of like or dislike. These topics should be considered in future research.

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The Impact of 3D Digital Content on Consumer Satisfaction with Brand Experiences

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Abstract. Brands are using different kinds of content to interact with customers and offer immersive and impactful experiences during the consumption journey. Existing research about the impact that different kinds of content have on human reactions is mostly focused on games and its players. This research aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the influence that more immersive 3D brand content has on consumer satisfaction if compared to 2D content. By using a within-subjects experimental method, it was possible to conclude that 3D experiences elicit higher consumer satisfaction with the experience. The mechanisms that help us explain this effect are the increased levels of enjoyment and surprise that consumers feel when interacting with more immersive content. These findings are relevant not only for the development of communication strategies for e-commerce or digital marketing but also for brands that intend to incorporate virtual reality experiences in their interactions with clients.

Keywords: Virtual reality · consumer experience · satisfaction · enjoyment · surprise

1 Introduction

Experiential marketing is becoming more technologically advanced and personalized. That happens due to the proliferation of digital tools and related immersive technologies (Weber and Chatzopoulos, 2019). Immersive experiences usually include tools such as virtual and augmented reality, stereoscopic 3D content, facial recognition, holography and ultra-haptics, wearables, touchscreen, and geo-location technologies.

This research will focus on the experience fostered by digital content, especially content that is shared by brands with consumers either in a 2D or a 3D format. 2D content is normally produced for any type of screen, while 3D content is usually used in stereoscopic 3D displays or virtual reality experiences. In a nutshell, special devices (e.g., stereoscopic glasses) take 2D visual objects from the left and right sides of an image and combine them into a 3D object (Pietschmann et al., 2013). In the case of LED, one

can see 2D visual content, while with special polarized glasses and a stereoscopic 3D display, one can see objects in volume.

Exploring specific technology features and effects may open new opportunities to enhance the experience, which will likely create satisfaction, and brand equity that leads to brand advocacy and thus generate real market profit. Innovative 3D images or virtual reality (VR) could be used as communication and branding tools (Bialkova and Barr, 2022). Among the positive consumer reactions that brands want to elicit are the positive attitude (Holdack et al., 2022) and experience satisfaction (Babin and Griffin, 1998). Emotional responses are aspects that may help to better understand these effects. Interacting with more immersive content or advertisement can stimulate enjoyment perceptions (Pereira and Tam, 2021) while also resulting in surprise with the experience (Hutter and Hoffman, 2014).

Considering the theoretical foundations this research aims to answer the following research questions: "What is the impact of different immersive content (2D and 3D) on customer satisfaction?" And "What is the role performed by surprise and enjoyment in consumer responses?

2 Theory and Hypothesis

The consumer experience refers to what the individual goes through during a marketing experience (Chun et al., 2017). Experiences have become vital to understanding consumer behavior since they may lead to brand awareness, brand loyalty and positive consumer reactions (Mishra et al., 2021). One way that brands have to offer innovative experiences is with consumer-technology interaction in the marketplace (Rohden and Espartel, 2024). Another possibility is by using immersive content such as 3D or VR content (Alcañiz et al., 2019). These experiences elicit positive consumer attitudes, behavioral intentions such as technology use and higher levels of consumer satisfaction (Pantano and Servidio, 2012).

Satisfaction is the consumer assessment between what was received from the company and what was expected (Oliver, 1981). The more value individuals attribute to an experience, the more satisfied they will feel (Babin and Griffin, 1998). Following the view that immersive technologies may bring more enhanced experiences and that positive interaction with brands usually results in satisfaction, we may assume:

H1: 3D content has a more positive effect on consumer satisfaction than 2D content.

Surprise may be elicited by sudden or unexpected events. Because of the reinforcing nature of surprise, the intensity of consumer responses triggered by it should be higher than if surprise had not preceded them (Izard, 1977). Communication and digital content may elicit surprise in consumers (Hutter and Hoffman, 2014). When marketers surprise customers it may arouse their curiosity thereby increasing satisfaction (Berman, 2005). Previous research not focused on technology has suggested that individuals who were pleasantly surprised by brand experiences reported higher levels of satisfaction than the ones who were unsurprised by similar experiences (d'Astous and Gagnon, 2007). Therefore, we would expect a similar effect as an outcome of more immersive experiences.

H2: Surprise mediates the effect of immersive technologies on consumer satisfaction with experiences.

Emotional aspects of the consumption experience can positively influence one's responses to the situation. One of these potential outcomes is enjoyment, which is the perception of how enjoyable a product or an experience is, regardless of how it performs (Holdack et al., 2022; Pereira and Tam, 2021). Enjoyment has been confirmed as a factor that influences the levels of technology use (Holdack et al., 2022), and satisfaction with the service provided (Pereira and Tam, 2021). VR use has already been tested as a tool that elicits user enjoyment, which in turn influences positive user responses not only in the game setting (Jang and Park, 2019), but also in retailing situations (Kim et al., 2021). Hence, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H3: Enjoyment mediates the effect of immersive technologies on satisfaction with experiences.

3   Method

We adopted a causal approach which was operationalized by way of a between-subject single factor experiment. Participants from Prolific were assigned randomly to the conditions (2D content or 3D content). For the pretest and the study, the participants were screened considering their location (UK) and language (English).

The manipulation of the immersive content was made with a video, shown on their devices' screens with no sound and a duration of 51 s. It was some sort of demonstration of the interior of a living room, where pieces of furniture appeared consistently along the whole watch. In the 3D version, the elements had a 3D effect, i.e. flying over the edge of the image and rotating, therefore imitating a 3D space environment. While in the 2D condition participants only saw images of the living room and the same furniture, without the movement and other 3D elements. After seeing the video participants answered the questionnaire manipulation checks, control measures, and demographics.

3.1   Measurements

The questionnaire is made up mostly of 7-point Likert scale questions. The first manipulation check was a closed question asking if the participant saw special 3D effects in the video shown at the beginning of the questionnaire. The second question proposed that respondents classified their perceptions in a bipolar matrix ranging from "2-dimensional" to "3-dimensional". The constructs were assessed with validated scales for satisfaction (Babin & Griffin, 1998), surprise (Izard, 1977), and enjoyment (Kowalczuk, 2018). Moreover, we collected demographic data and respondents' familiarity with 3D content.

3.2   Pretest

The pretest was held to check whether the conditions were perceived by the audience properly with a full understanding of the differences between the visual effects. Data analysis was carried out with the help of SPSS. We recruited a group of 40 respondents on Prolific. Our initial manipulation check question was: "How did you perceive the video?" (the scale ranged from "Definitely 2-Dimensional" to "Definitely 3-Dimensional"). An independent t-test showed that the manipulation worked with marginally significant

results (t = −1.807, p = 0.079) where individuals in the 2D group reported seeing a video with 2D characteristics (Mean = 3.76, SD = 1.45) if compared to individuals in the 3D condition (Mean = 4.42, SD = 0.69). Thinking of how to enhance the manipulation without changing the video and keeping all the other potential cofounds controlled, we decided to ask directly if the audience saw 3D effects such as objects flying out of the edge of the image. So, we incorporated this version of the question into the final questionnaire. No other changes to the survey or the manipulation of conditions were made after the pretest.

3.3 Study 1

For Study 1 we ran the survey and received 131 qualified replies. Video with 3D effects was shown to 66 people, whereas 2D was exhibited to 65 people. There were no outliers and missing values, and the sample had a normal distribution. Demographic descriptive analysis noted that most respondents were women (66%). The average age was equal to 40 years old, with 18 y.o. as a minimum and 73 y.o. as a maximum. By analyzing the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha confirmed acceptable levels for satisfaction (.897), surprise (.855), and enjoyment (.927) (Malhotra and Birks, 2023).

The t-test confirmed that the manipulation results were significant (t = −3.34, p = 0.01) with people in the 2D condition seeing the image as such (Mean = 4.35, SD = 0.26) and individuals in the 3D condition perceiving the scenario as more immersive (Mean = 5.50, SD = 0.23). The results of a t-test confirmed the main effect of the type of visual stimuli on consumer's levels of satisfaction was significant (t = −3.44, p = 0.001). Respondents' levels of SAT in the 2D scenario (Mean = 4.16, SD = 1.28) were lower if compared to respondents who saw the 3D video (Mean = 4.86, SD = 1.03). In other words, interacting with 3D content seems to have a positive impact on satisfaction, which confirms H1.

The t-test comparing surprise levels was also significant (t = −5.17, p = 0.001) with the 3D video eliciting more surprise (Mean = 4.10, SD = 1.35) than the 2D stimuli (Mean = 2.97, SD = 1.12). A similar result happened when we tested for differences in enjoyment levels (t = −4.42, p = 0.001). The participants seem to have enjoyed more interacting with the 3D content (Mean = 5.38, SD = 1.06) if compared to the ones who were exposed to 2D content (Mean = 4.43, SD = 1.31).

To test the mediation effects, we used the SPSS Process (Model 4). The effect of visual stimuli on surprise was significant (β = 1.126, t (1,129) = 5.172, p = 0.001). The effect of surprise on satisfaction was also significant (β = 0.514, t (1,129) = 7.435, p = 0.001), which means that the more surprised the person is, the higher his/her satisfaction level will be. The direct effect of the visual stimuli on SAT is significant (β = 0.702, t (1,129) = 3.442, p = 0.008), which was already demonstrated by the previous t-test. The interesting aspect is that when we include the variable surprise in the model, the direct effect of visual stimuli is not significant anymore (β = 0.122, t = 0.653, p = 0.514). The impact of 3D technology on levels of satisfaction is explained by the indirect effect (β = 0.478, CI 0.292 to 0.695), which means there is a full mediation of surprise on reported satisfaction. This result supports H2.

The mediation of enjoyment was tested with a similar procedure. The impact of the type of content on engagement levels was significant (β = 0.923, t (1,129) = 4.426, p

= 0.001). Engagement also positively influences consumer satisfaction as expected (β = 0.697, t (1,129) = 11.485, p = 0.001). Interestingly, when we consider the indirect effect of enjoyment on the dependent variable (β = 0.529, CI 0.308 to 0.752), the direct effect was no longer significant (β = 0.052, t = 0.383, p = 0.702), which confirms a full mediation and hypothesis H3.

4 Conclusion

This research confirmed that when a brand offers 3D content as a part of its experiential marketing activity, consumers end up being more satisfied as opposed to 2D content. The mechanisms that help us explain this positive effect are the levels of surprise and enjoyment elicited by a more immersive experience such as a video in three dimensions.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings are aligned with previous research, however, we shed some light in terms of the research context. Some studies that compared 2D to 3D content, for instance, are focused on the human resources field, especially in job seekers exposed to content while wearing VR glasses (Bialkova and Ros, 2021). Furthermore, previous research focused on retailing context only considered face-to-face shopping context experiences (Pantano and Servidio, 2012). The ones that explored the digital consumer journey were rather focused on purchase choices and variety seeking (Meißner et al., 2020), considered a try-on technology in the purchase (Bialkova and Barr, 2022) or used a descriptive approach (Dieck et al., 2023; Holdack et al., 2022). To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first research that compares the impact of 3D and 2D digital content on consumer satisfaction with experience.

Moreover, research findings confirm that surprise is an antecedent of consumer satisfaction (Hutter and Hoffman, 2014), but also an outcome of a more immersive digital experience. As far as we are aware, the mediation of the surprise of seeing immersive content on consumer satisfaction has not been tested before. Another explanatory mechanism for the impact on satisfaction is the perception of enjoyment elicited by interactions with technology. In this sense, we advance previous research by shedding light on digital content which is not necessarily focused on sales, or purchase choices (Pereira and Tam, 2021), and does not assess aspects such as the telepresence of other individuals (Kim et al., 2021). This can be especially insightful if we consider content and inbound marketing strategies.

4.2 Managerial Implications

Consumer interaction with new technologies is becoming a reality both in online and offline experiences with brands (Rohden and Zeferino, 2023; Rohden and Espartel, 2024). Among several kinds of new technologies are immersive tools, which have the potential to revolutionize consumer experiences, leading to new forms of engagement and emotional responses. This heightened sensory engagement can lead to increased surprise and enjoyment as consumers encounter novel and captivating experiences, which

positively influence their responses. These research findings can be applied by marketing professionals in several different ways.

Event marketers, for instance, may surprise their audience with new experiences, employing different content, and creating new campaigns for the specific brand's needs. For example, brands that participate in trade fairs or huge events may employ 3D content instead of its 2D analog. Not just the design of a stand, but the content provided should surprise and create a joyful experience for participants.

Furthermore, retailers can also offer immersive in-store experiences focused on attracting consumers to the point of sale, while creating a fun and happy experience. The outcome may be not only more in-store traffic but also brand recommendations and ideally increased sales.

Another area that can apply the findings of this research is digital marketing by offering more 3D content instead of 2D videos. Considering the positive emotions it can elicit (enjoyment and surprise) and the impact on consumer satisfaction, minor changes in the content shared in digital strategies can potentially have other positive impacts such as enhanced engagement and word of mouth.

4.3 Research Limitations and Future Studies

This research was limited in the tools for demonstrating 3D content. The main channel was chosen to be a video on personal mobile devices. The format itself is quite limited in opportunities to engage in the 3D world, so just special 3D effects could give a bit of the sense. Besides that, the research method was a lab experiment where respondents were in front of their mobile devices, which could offer some distractions. Future studies could therefore move on from a lab study to a field context where consumers are exposed to 3D content. Moreover, neuromarketing tools such as EEG could be used in the next research to gather more granular information about these emotional responses to immersive technologies.

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Love Me, Love Me Not: The Counterintuitive Relationships in Social Networking Sites

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Abstract. Brand connections are one of the key marketing fields that have seen growth through social networking sites (SNS). The literature agrees that SNS users have positive relationships with their favorite brands based on their experiences. However, such acceptance could be formed prematurely, because sometimes analysis of consumer relationships excludes the mediator position of the social network itself. This study seeks to examine the mediating role in consumer relationships between affective and cognitive customers and SNS. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 41 people were conducted to establish qualitative research designs. The results indicate a deep affective customer-SNS partnership, which implies that SNS consumers and brands work together in a counterintuitive way. The results suggest that while SNS are trusted and highly valued by users, they do not always support brands. This shows that close relationships with social platforms outweigh users' relationship with other brands on these SNS platforms. This study shows that SNS have an interfering adverse impact on consumer-brand relationships within these platforms. The research discusses the counterintuitive influence of social platforms on consumer-brand relationships.

Keywords: Social networking sites · Social media · Brand relationship · Brand community · Consumer experience

1 Introduction

Consumer experience on social networking sites (SNS) typically leads to positive rather than negative emotions (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Most studies have mainly focused on consumer engagement on SNS rather than on a potential consumer relationship with these social platforms. In addition, the literature on brand relationships tends to examine brand relationships within online brand communities with little or no consideration for the role of customer-SNS relationships (Kamboj and Rahman, 2016). However, only recently has a handful of studies paid attention to the mediating role of SNS in customer-brand relationships. Numerous studies have looked either at the positive or at the negative side of brand relationships on SNS (Ramadan *et al.*, 2023c) with no examination of the simultaneous co-existence of such influences of the customer-SNS relationship on brand relationships.

Recent studies have indicated potential positive interference by the host SNS in customer-brand relationships (Hudson *et al.*, 2016). This positive role of SNS on these relationships has encouraged brands to be proactively engaged in SNS marketing strategies (Ramadan *et al.*, 2018). Notwithstanding the importance of brand relationship building on social media, little is known about the potential negative consequences of SNS on customers' relationships with brands and the extent to which SNS-based brand relationships are associated with undesired and unintended consequences. This has been emphasized by Simon and Tossan (2018, p. 175), who argued that customer-SNS-brand interactions can provide value for consumers.

This study addresses this gap in the literature and suggests that the customer-SNS relationship might generate a counterintuitive impact on the customer-brand relationship. Fournier and Avery (2011) warned brands to be cautious about their involvement with SNS, implying that the complication of brand relationships on these platforms extends beyond being simply perceived as a tool to generate interactions with customers (Ramadan *et al.*, 2023a). Despite the complication of this interaction, studies have not directly explored the impact of SNS on customer-brand relationship. This study offers three key contributions to the field. First, it examines users' experiences with SNS and their affective and a cognitive relationship with these platforms. Second, the study contributes to the existing literature through the identification of the counterintuitive effect of customer-SNS relationship between customer-brand relationship, as the extant literature clearly lacks attention to this field. Third, it discusses the ensuing effects of the latter relationships on the social networks' monetization model and the ensuing implications for brand relationships.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

– RQ_1: Do affective and cognitive relationships with the SNSs have counterintuitive effects on brand relationship?
– RQ_2: To what extent do affective and cognitive relationships with the SNSs positively or negatively mediate the relationship between customer experience and brand relationships?

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Experience with Friends on Social Networking

Over the past decade, customer social networking experience has become at the center of researchers' attention. One important area that has received reasonable attention is customers interactive experience on SNSs (Handarkho, 2020). Through online communities on these platforms, people tend to build strong relationships with other people whom they feel similar to (Ramadan et al., 2018). Such interaction between consumers present significant challenges and opportunities for brands. One manifestation of the social network experience is the selection of friends who enjoy doing or talking about the same things. Similarity has a huge effect on driving people to like each other, leading to a unique experience with friends (Peslak and Bhantnagar, 2011), and to a heightened acceptance of brand endorsements. Thus, the SNSs' experience is not only about socialization and interaction amongst users, but it is also about value for brands that exist within SNSs (Ramadan *et al.*, 2018).

2.2 Cognitive and Affective Relationships with the SNS

The cognitive and affective dimensions of any relationship constitute two psychological processes that are independent of each other but are essential to our understanding of relationships. According to Dabholkar *et al.* (2009), the insertion of cognitive and affective aspects of relationship in our studies helps in understanding the psychological processes and in enhancing marketing practices of managing and maintaining relationship with customers. Cognitive relationships are also essential in online brand relationships, as they shape consumers' intentions to either interact or not with online brands (Pavlou *et al.*, 2007). They also decrease uncertainty, online security-related issues, and opportunism, hence promoting a much closer brand relationship (Ramadan and Kanso, 2023; Ramadan *et al.*, 2023d). In addition, cognitive dimensions are part of the interaction mechanism between the two parties, which is vital to the sharing, exchanging, and creating new relationships between customers and users (Bowden, 2009; Ramadan *et al.*, 2023b).

2.3 Online Brand Relationship

Consumer-brand relationship is defined as "the tie between a person and a brand that is voluntary or is enforced interdependently between the person and the brand" (Chang and Chieng, 2006, p. 935). Various studies (Abosag *et al.*, 2020) have identified a broad spectrum of constructs that contribute to consumer–brand relationships, such as affective-based constructs (love, liking, and passion), self-connection (social and self-identity), trust, commitment and loyalty. Brand relationships have flourished on SNSs and online sites, resulting in positive purchase intentions (Farah *et al.*, 2020), reduced brand switching, and positive word of mouth (Hudson *et al.*, 2016). On both Instagram and Facebook, users reflect their interests and what they love by linking themselves to brands with which they identify similarity.

3 Methodology

A total of 41 in-depth interviews were conducted. Even though data saturation principles indicate that a sample size of 5 to 25 is considered sufficient (Farah, 2017), the convenience sample was increased in order to capture users from various age segments using different SNS platforms. The pre-selection criteria ensured all respondents were SNS users and brand followers on these platforms. Most respondents have been using SNS for the past six years and have been following and interacting with brands on these platforms for over two years. Interviews lasted for an average of 40 min. The interview questions were developed following the literature review that guided this research work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, coded verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 8. Qualitative reliability techniques ensured the accuracy and validity of the findings. The data was also checked for validity through triangulation, member scrutiny, and examination of participants' experiences using specific qualitative research approaches. Inter-coder reliability checks were also conducted between the two coders to corroborate their independent findings.

4 Findings

Four key themes emerged from the research in relation to the relationship with social networking sites and their potential risks in brand relationships: (1) experience with friends on social networking sites, (2) the affective relationship with the social networking site, (3) the cognitive relationship with the social networking site, and (4) brand similarity.

4.1 Experience with Friends on Social Networking Sites

SNS made use of social networking services in communication and interaction and contributed to increasing the overall connectivity and sociability between people (Nie, 2001). In terms of experience with friends on social networking sites, the latter enabled people to maintain good relationships and to connect easily with others independent of their looks or locality (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). As per the literature, liking and similarity have an important impact on the flow of social networking experience in which they are the primary phases in the development and enhancement of the overall experience.

a) Similarity with friends

Similarity with friends on SNS was basically one of the most sought-after categories in this research. A person interacts more with people to which he/she feels similar. This is reflected in the following statements:

"Similarity is a wide word, but yes I do feel similar to them, but not too many, I say that I'm of course similar to people I am close to and not to all"

"Similar to my circle only, since we share backgrounds and some thoughts but different from many"

b) Friend Liking

SNS members consider liking and communication between users to be central aspects of an enjoyable experience on SNS. Friend liking, particularly on Facebook, is a component used to provide a mode of communication between social network users. This was shown in the following statements:

"I like my Facebook friends to a high extent, I really do, these are the people I somehow love and want to be around"

"I love the fact that I can find my friends on these social networking sites and bond with them virtually"

4.2 Affective Relationship with the Social Networking Site

Love was perceived as having a strong positive effect on the overall interaction process between SNS and their users. While people mainly join SNS to socialize, it seems that these platforms are actually driving people to form an emotional attachment with them. The following statements mirrored this:

"I love Facebook; I even start scrolling in my page without me even noticing. I am really attached to it"

"I log into Instagram several times a day, sometimes unconsciously. It became part of my daily routine"

Facebook and Instagram are considered the most popular network spaces for personal representation. Facebook is developing both platforms in a way that allows its users to build and enhance their relationships (Ramadan *et al*., 2018). In fact, these platforms are becoming an icon of love in the minds of their users, as seen in the following statements:

"I am attached to Facebook, there is a huge deep connection between us, I don't pass a day without checking it very often"

"I feel addicted to Instagram, as I always feel the urge to check the latest posts by my friends. I just love it!"

Nonetheless, while people start getting attached to SNS, their users seem to focus less on their relationship with brands being featured on these platforms.

"Brands and their ads on Facebook are useless; we are on Facebook to interact. I'm not there to check brand updates"

4.3   Cognitive Relationship with the Social Networking Site

Trust is considered a positive key for interpersonal relationships in various aspects (Ramadan, 2018; Farah *et al*., 2023). SNS trust is considered by its participants as a vital factor in good social networking experience, as it is a crucial element of any online presence. Moreover, trust at the brand level was deemed to provide genuine brand image and equity as per the following statements:

"I do trust Facebook as a brand as a platform, and this is the main reason why we are all still on Facebook. Why would I stay if I don't trust it?"

"Facebook is my search engine on brands level, it is replacing Google in some places. When I check brands, I don't refer to any source other than Facebook"

4.4   Brand Relationship

A brand community is a group of participants with a common interest in a given brand, which often develops into a subculture around the brand (Cova and Pace, 2006). Recently, brands have started depending on social media as an integrated marketing tool (Ramadan, 2019). On Facebook, participants endorse brands when they 'like' them, forming a relationship with the brands featured on this platform. In fact, the study participants were aware that there is a strong relationship and close association with the brands they are following on the SNS platforms:

"It is my world, and of course I feel similar since I choose what I follow, it resembles me"

"Pretty similar, brands are our mirrors, the brands we choose is the mirror of what we are interested in"

5 Discussion

The research gap focuses on the impact of users' relationship with social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, on the customer-brand relationships. The study addresses this gap through an in-depth exploration based on SNS users. The results show a noteworthy finding that these SNS are now considered as stand-alone brands, rather than facilitators of the consumer-brand relationships. Indeed, this bond becomes a strong, cherished one, which appears to interfere with the customer-brand relationships on these platforms.

The findings from this current study are important in two respects. First, the analysis differentiated between two levels of relationships, namely cognitive and affective. This is a stepping stone in understanding the impact of customer-SNS relationships on customer-brand relationships. Second, the findings have not only unveiled the positive impact based on the cognitive component of this relationship, but it has also revealed the negative impact on the customer-brand relationship. Essentially, the key finding of this study is the identification of a counterintuitive relationship between users and SNS that negatively affects customer-brand relationships. Accordingly, the accepted assumption by some studies on the positivity of the customer-SNS relationship on brand relationship must be used cautiously, given its potential impact on the management of customer-brand relationship within SNS.

Indeed, this research posits that, when people get too emotionally attached to SNS, this would negatively affect how they feel toward the featured brands on these platforms. In fact, the findings suggest that, when bonding and engaging with a particular SNS, users are likely to forego some potential relationships with brands featured on this platform. The findings of this study also suggest that, whilst SNS are trusted and highly liked by users, they do not always lend a helping hand to brands that exist on these platforms. Therefore, brands on these social platforms must be aware of any negative influence, which could have a diluting effect on their own relationship with consumers.

6 Implications

SNS are now converting their users from casual customers into loyal fans, hence building a trust-love relationship (De Vries *et al.*, 2012). From a scholarly perspective, this research fills a gap in the literature by highlighting the potential change in the role these platforms play. This shift in roles, from a typical mediating platform to that of a relational brand object, ultimately affects the overall monetization model of SNS. From a managerial perspective, the findings revealed that people join SNS primarily to socialize with other people. Indeed, SNS users genuinely cherish the bond that happens between them and the platforms, which gives them the opportunity to socialize with friends they feel similar to. Accordingly, companies need to develop a method through which they can increase their awareness of the level of affection that their customers have for platforms. Furthermore, they need to counteract the potential negative impact from the relationships between their customers and SNS, managers should engage with their customers through affective stimuli and emotionally based activities.

This study also has several implications for social networking sites. While SNS should push for a deeper type of bonding with their customers, they should try to keep