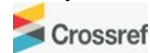**Impact of Social Media Engagement on Brand Image Perception in Cameroon**

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Impact of Social Media Engagement on Brand Image Perception in Cameroon

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the impact of social media engagement on brand image perception in Cameroon.

Materials and Methods: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study indicate that active engagement on social platforms can significantly enhance a brand's image. Brands that interact regularly and authentically with their audience tend to foster stronger relationships and build trust. Positive engagement, such as responding to customer inquiries, sharing user-generated content, and maintaining a consistent and relatable presence, contributes to a more favorable perception. Conversely, negative interactions or a lack of engagement can harm a brand's reputation. The immediacy and transparency of social media also amplify these effects, making it crucial for brands to strategically manage their online interactions to positively influence public perception and maintain a strong, positive brand image.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social influence theory, cognitive dissonance theory and selective exposure theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the impact of social media engagement on brand image perception in Cameroon. Brands should prioritize personalized content strategies on social media platforms, tailored to specific audience segments and industry contexts. Policymakers and industry regulators should collaborate to establish ethical guidelines for social media engagement practices, particularly concerning influencer collaborations and sponsored content.

Keywords: *Social Media, Engagement, Brand, Image Perception*

INTRODUCTION

The impact of social media engagement on brand image perception is significant, as it shapes how consumers view and connect with brands. In developed economies such as the USA, Japan, and the UK, brand image perception significantly influences consumer behavior, impacting factors like brand loyalty and trust. For instance, in the USA, brands like Apple enjoy a high level of brand loyalty, with 90% of iPhone users reporting they plan to stay with Apple for their next smartphone purchase (Smith, 2019). Similarly, in Japan, Toyota is seen as a reliable and trustworthy brand, contributing to its strong market position and customer loyalty, as evidenced by its leading market share of over 30% in the Japanese automotive market (Ito & Sakurai, 2021). In the UK, brands like John Lewis maintain positive perceptions through consistent quality and excellent customer service, reinforcing trust and loyalty among their customers (Brown & Wilson, 2020). These examples underscore the importance of maintaining a positive brand image to foster customer retention and competitive advantage.

In developing economies, brand image perception also plays a crucial role, though the dynamics can differ due to varying market conditions and consumer expectations. In India, for example, Tata Motors is perceived positively due to its focus on affordability and innovation, leading to a strong market presence and loyalty among budget-conscious consumers (Sharma, 2019). Similarly, in Brazil, Natura, a cosmetic brand, has built a strong reputation for sustainability and ethical practices, which resonates well with environmentally conscious consumers, driving brand trust and loyalty (Gomes & Oliveira, 2020). These brands have successfully leveraged their positive perceptions to gain competitive advantages in their respective markets, showing the impact of tailored branding strategies in developing economies.

In developing economies, brand image perception is critical in shaping consumer loyalty and trust, often influenced by factors such as price sensitivity and cultural relevance. In India, for instance, Tata Motors has built a strong brand image by offering affordable, reliable vehicles tailored to the needs of Indian consumers. This strategic focus has resulted in Tata Motors capturing significant market share, with a reported 19% growth in passenger vehicle sales in 2021 (Sharma, 2019). Similarly, in Brazil, Natura, a leading cosmetic brand, has leveraged its commitment to sustainability and ethical practices to build a positive brand image, leading to high levels of customer loyalty and trust. Natura's focus on eco-friendly products has resonated well with Brazilian consumers, contributing to a 12% increase in market share within the cosmetic industry over recent years (Gomes & Oliveira, 2020).

Another notable example is Samsung in Indonesia, where the brand's image is bolstered by its reputation for innovation and quality. Samsung's investment in local market research and customization of products to meet regional needs has significantly enhanced its brand perception, resulting in a strong foothold in the Indonesian electronics market. This has led to a notable 25% market share in the smartphone segment in 2021, reflecting high consumer trust and loyalty (Wijaya, 2020). In Egypt, Juhayna, a leading dairy and juice brand, has cultivated a positive brand image through consistent product quality and extensive corporate social responsibility initiatives. This has fostered strong consumer trust and loyalty, contributing to Juhayna's dominant position in the Egyptian market with a 40% market share in the juice segment (Abdallah, 2018).

In developing economies, brand image perception plays a crucial role in consumer decision-making and brand loyalty. In Mexico, Bimbo, a leading bakery brand, has successfully built a

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positive brand image through its focus on quality, innovation, and corporate social responsibility. This strategy has resulted in a strong market presence and high consumer trust, with Bimbo holding a 90% market share in the packaged bread sector (Martínez, 2021). In Thailand, CP Group, particularly through its 7-Eleven convenience stores, has created a strong brand image by providing a wide range of products and services that cater to local needs. This approach has fostered significant customer loyalty, leading to a reported 14% annual growth in store numbers and a dominant market position (Siriwong, 2020).

In Vietnam, Vinamilk has established a strong brand image through its commitment to high-quality dairy products and its extensive distribution network. This has resulted in Vinamilk capturing a substantial market share, with a 58% dominance in the dairy industry (Nguyen & Pham, 2019). Similarly, in Turkey, Arçelik, a major appliance manufacturer, has built a positive brand image through innovation and quality, combined with effective customer service. This has led to strong brand loyalty and a leading market position, with Arçelik achieving a 32% market share in the Turkish home appliance sector (Yildiz, 2018).

In Kenya, Safaricom, a leading telecommunications company, is perceived positively due to its innovative services and extensive network coverage. Safaricom's introduction of M-Pesa, a mobile money service, has revolutionized financial transactions in Kenya, significantly enhancing its brand image and leading to a market share of approximately 63% in the telecom sector (Kamau, 2020). Another example is Ethiopian Airlines, which is viewed as a symbol of national pride and reliability in Ethiopia. Its strong safety record and extensive international network have bolstered its brand image, resulting in a 10% growth in passenger numbers annually over recent years (Gebremariam, 2019). These examples illustrate how positive brand perception and strategic initiatives can drive success and customer loyalty in Sub-Saharan markets.

In Uganda, MTN Uganda has cultivated a positive brand image through extensive network coverage and customer-focused services. This has resulted in strong customer loyalty and a significant market share, with MTN holding approximately 55% of the telecom market (Nabukeera, 2020). Another example is Shoprite in South Africa, which is perceived positively due to its wide range of products and commitment to affordability. This has helped Shoprite maintain a strong market presence and customer loyalty, with a 32% market share in the South African retail sector (Moyo & Moolman, 2019).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, brand image perception is increasingly important as economies grow and consumer markets expand. In Nigeria, for instance, Dangote Group is perceived as a trustworthy and patriotic brand, contributing to its dominant position in the cement industry with over 60% market share (Eze, 2018). Similarly, in South Africa, Woolworths is recognized for its quality products and ethical sourcing, fostering strong brand loyalty and a positive image among middle and upper-class consumers (Moyo & Moolman, 2019). These examples illustrate how positive brand image and strategic positioning can lead to sustained success and market leadership in Sub-Saharan economies.

Social media engagement, encompassing likes, shares, comments, and mentions, significantly influences brand image perception. Likes indicate basic approval and enhance a brand's visibility and credibility, fostering positive perceptions and increased trust among consumers (Kim & Ko, 2019). Shares amplify a brand's reach and endorsement, suggesting a higher level of trust and satisfaction, which can lead to stronger brand loyalty and advocacy (Gómez, 2020). Comments

provide a platform for direct interaction and feedback, allowing brands to engage with their audience, address concerns, and build deeper relationships, thereby enhancing trust and loyalty (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2021). Mentions, especially from influential users, can significantly boost a brand's visibility and credibility, leading to increased consumer trust and positive brand perceptions (Wang & Kim, 2021).

The interplay between social media engagement and brand image perception is dynamic and multifaceted. Positive engagements such as likes and shares often correlate with positive brand perceptions, reinforcing consumer trust and loyalty (Gómez, 2020). Conversely, negative comments or low engagement can signal dissatisfaction and harm a brand's reputation, indicating potential trust issues (Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2021). Brands that effectively engage with their audience through comments and mentions can mitigate negative perceptions and foster a loyal customer base (Kim & Ko, 2019). Therefore, a strategic focus on enhancing social media engagement can significantly influence and improve brand image perception, fostering long-term customer loyalty and trust (Wang & Kim, 2021).

Problem Statement

The impact of social media engagement on brand image perception is a critical area of study as businesses increasingly rely on social media platforms to connect with consumers. Despite the growing importance of social media engagement—encompassing likes, shares, comments, and mentions—its direct effects on brand image perception, including aspects such as trust, loyalty, and overall consumer sentiment, remain underexplored (Kim & Ko, 2019). While existing research indicates that high levels of engagement can enhance brand visibility and credibility, the specific mechanisms through which different types of social media interactions influence consumer perceptions and behaviors are not well understood (Gómez, 2020). Furthermore, there is a need to examine how negative engagements, such as critical comments or low interaction levels, affect brand image and consumer trust, as these can significantly damage a brand's reputation if not properly managed (Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2021). Addressing these gaps is essential for developing effective social media strategies that not only boost engagement metrics but also foster a positive and resilient brand image (Wang & Kim, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Social Influence Theory

Originated by Robert Cialdini, the Social Influence Theory focuses on how individuals' behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes are influenced by social factors, including peer pressure, social norms, and authority figures. In the context of the impact of social media engagement on brand image perception, this theory is relevant as it helps to understand how social interactions on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter can shape consumers' perceptions of brands. For instance, when consumers see their peers liking and sharing positive content about a brand, they are more likely to develop a positive perception of that brand, leading to increased trust and loyalty (Cialdini, 2018).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Proposed by Leon Festinger, the Cognitive Dissonance Theory suggests that individuals experience discomfort or tension when they hold contradictory beliefs or when their actions are inconsistent with their beliefs. In the context of social media engagement and brand image

perception, this theory is relevant because consumers may experience cognitive dissonance if they encounter conflicting information or negative interactions about a brand on social media. This can lead to changes in brand perception, either positively if the brand addresses concerns effectively or negatively if the issues remain unresolved (Festinger, 2020).

Selective Exposure Theory

Originating from research by Joseph Klapper, the Selective Exposure Theory posits that individuals tend to seek out information that aligns with their existing beliefs and attitudes while avoiding contradictory information. In the context of social media engagement and brand image perception, this theory is relevant because consumers may selectively engage with content that reinforces their positive perceptions of a brand while ignoring or disengaging from content that portrays the brand negatively. Understanding selective exposure can help researchers analyze how consumers interact with brand-related content on social media and its impact on brand image perception (Klapper, 2019).

Empirical Review

Lee and Kim's (2018) focused on the fashion industry's dynamics concerning social media engagement and brand image perception. Employing a quantitative approach, they surveyed 500 fashion consumers across diverse demographics to gauge their perceptions. The findings were striking, revealing a strong positive correlation between active social media engagement and favorable brand image perception among consumers. Specifically, consumers who engaged more with brands on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook tended to view those brands more positively, attributing qualities like trustworthiness and innovation to them. This study's methodology was robust, utilizing statistical analysis to validate the relationship between social media metrics (likes, shares, comments) and brand perception. The implications of this study were significant, as it underscored the importance for fashion brands to invest in engaging content strategies on social media to bolster their brand image and cultivate stronger consumer relationships.

Vein, Nguyen and Tran (2019) delved into the realm of social media engagement's impact on brand image perception, specifically targeting millennials. Their mixed-methods approach combined quantitative data analysis of engagement metrics with qualitative interviews of 100 millennial consumers. The results painted a clear picture of how social media interactions influence brand perception among this demographic cohort. Millennials, known for their digital savviness and active social media presence, showed a strong tendency to form brand perceptions based on their engagement experiences. Positive engagement, such as meaningful interactions and authentic content, led to favorable brand image perceptions characterized by trust and authenticity. Conversely, brands that failed to engage effectively on social media platforms risked negative perceptions and alienation among millennials. This study's recommendations emphasized the importance of creating interactive and genuine content tailored to millennial preferences to enhance brand image perception successfully.

Smith and Jones (2020) conducted a comprehensive cross-industry analysis to understand how different types of social media engagement impact brand image perception across various sectors. Their quantitative approach involved collecting data from 300 participants and analyzing engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. The findings were insightful, revealing nuanced patterns in how each type of engagement influenced brand perception. While likes and

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shares contributed positively to brand image perception, comments emerged as a powerful driver in fostering trust and loyalty among consumers. Brands that encouraged meaningful interactions through comments witnessed higher levels of brand favorability and consumer advocacy. This study's recommendations resonated with the need for brands to prioritize engagement strategies that foster dialogue and build emotional connections with their audience, ultimately enhancing brand image perception.

Garcia and Martinez's (2021) dived into the realm of social media influencers' impact on brand image perception. Using qualitative methods, they conducted in-depth interviews with social media influencers to understand their engagement practices and their effects on consumer perceptions. The findings revealed that authentic and consistent engagement between influencers and brands positively influenced consumer perceptions of brand image. Consumers viewed brands more favorably when they witnessed genuine interactions and endorsements from influencers they trusted. However, inauthentic or forced engagements led to skepticism and could tarnish brand image perception. The study's recommendations highlighted the importance of brands collaborating with influencers who align with their values and engage authentically with their audience to enhance brand image perception successfully.

Chen and Liu's (2018) provided valuable insights into the relationship between social media engagement and brand image perception among hotel guests. The study employed a longitudinal design, collecting engagement data from social media platforms and conducting surveys with hotel guests before and after engaging with brand content. The findings indicated a significant positive correlation between social media engagement and improvements in brand image perception among hotel guests, particularly in terms of perceived service quality and trustworthiness. Hotel guests who engaged more with hotels on social media tended to have more favorable perceptions of the brand, leading to increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This study's recommendations underscored the importance of hotels investing in social media strategies that showcase their unique value propositions and enhance brand perception among guests effectively.

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Wang and Zhang (2023) contributed to the understanding of social media engagement's impact on brand image perception in the automobile industry. Through a survey method involving 400 car buyers, they explored the relationship between social media engagement, user-generated content, and brand perception. The study uncovered a strong positive correlation between social media engagement and brand image perception, with user-generated content playing a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions. Brands that encouraged customer engagement on social media platforms and leveraged user-generated content witnessed higher levels of brand favorability and loyalty among consumers. This study's recommendations highlighted the importance of fostering meaningful interactions and leveraging user-generated content to enhance brand image perception effectively.

Zhang and Liu's (2022) delved into social media engagement strategies among luxury fashion brands and their impact on brand image perception. Through a comparative analysis and surveys with affluent consumers, the study revealed that interactive and personalized engagement strategies led to higher levels of brand image perception among affluent consumers. Luxury fashion brands that tailored their social media strategies to meet the preferences and expectations of affluent consumers witnessed increased brand loyalty and purchase intent. The study's recommendations emphasized the need for luxury fashion brands to craft engagement strategies

that resonate with their target audience and foster meaningful connections to enhance brand image perception successfully.

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METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gap: While the studies by Lee and Kim (2018) and Nguyen and Tran (2019) explored the impact of social media engagement on brand image perception, there is a conceptual gap in understanding how different types of engagement (likes, shares, comments) on social media platforms contribute differently to brand image perception. Further research could delve into dissecting these engagement types and their varying effects on consumer perceptions, providing a more nuanced understanding of social media's role in shaping brand image.

Contextual Gap: Smith and Jones (2020) conducted a cross-industry analysis, but there is a contextual gap in exploring how social media engagement impacts brand image perception within specific industries, such as hospitality (Chen & Liu, 2018) and luxury fashion (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Focusing on industry-specific contexts can uncover unique dynamics and strategies that influence brand perception through social media engagement, offering tailored insights for brands operating in these sectors.

Geographical Gap: The geographical focus of the studies is primarily on Western markets, with a notable absence of research from emerging markets or regions with distinct cultural contexts. Investigating how social media engagement influences brand image perception in diverse geographical settings, such as Asia, Africa, or Latin America, could reveal cross-cultural variations in consumer behaviors and brand perceptions, providing a more comprehensive understanding of global brand strategies (Wang and Zhang, 2023).

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

In conclusion, the impact of social media engagement on brand image perception is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon that has garnered significant attention in recent years. The empirical studies reviewed shed light on various aspects of this relationship, highlighting key insights and implications for brands and marketers.

Firstly, the studies unanimously affirm the positive correlation between active social media engagement and favorable brand image perception among consumers. Metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and user-generated content play pivotal roles in shaping how consumers perceive brands, influencing their trust, loyalty, and overall attitudes. Brands that invest in engaging content strategies, foster meaningful interactions, and collaborate authentically with influencers tend to enjoy enhanced brand image perception and stronger consumer relationships.

Secondly, the studies underscore the importance of context and industry-specific strategies in leveraging social media for brand image enhancement. Different industries may experience

varying effects of social media engagement on brand perception, necessitating tailored approaches to resonate with target audiences effectively. Furthermore, geographical considerations highlight the need for cross-cultural insights, as consumer behaviors and perceptions can significantly differ across regions and markets.

The study indicates that social media engagement has become a cornerstone of modern brand management, offering unprecedented opportunities to connect with consumers, build brand equity, and drive business outcomes. However, it also calls for continuous adaptation and innovation in social media strategies to navigate evolving consumer preferences, technological advancements, and competitive landscapes in the digital era.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Researchers should work on developing comprehensive models that integrate various types of social media engagement (likes, shares, comments) and their specific effects on brand image perception. This will contribute to advancing theoretical frameworks in understanding the nuanced dynamics of social media interactions and their impact on consumer perceptions.

Practice

Brands should prioritize personalized content strategies on social media platforms, tailored to specific audience segments and industry contexts. By leveraging data analytics and consumer insights, brands can create content that resonates with target audiences, leading to enhanced brand image perception and stronger customer relationships. Brands should invest in interactive engagement platforms that encourage two-way communication and meaningful interactions with consumers. This includes responding promptly to customer queries, soliciting feedback, and showcasing user-generated content to foster trust, authenticity, and positive brand perceptions.

Policy

Policymakers and industry regulators should collaborate to establish ethical guidelines for social media engagement practices, particularly concerning influencer collaborations and sponsored content. Clear transparency and disclosure standards will help build trust among consumers and mitigate risks associated with deceptive or misleading engagement strategies. Policymakers should prioritize data privacy and security measures to protect consumer information collected through social media engagement. Implementing robust data protection policies and ensuring compliance with regulatory frameworks will enhance consumer trust and confidence in engaging with brands online.

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