

Leveraging Social Media to Enable Emerging Consumer Brands to Compete with Established Brands

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of social media has fundamentally altered the competitive landscape of consumer markets, enabling emerging brands to challenge the dominance of established firms. Historically, established brands benefited from superior financial resources, strong brand recognition, and control over traditional advertising channels. In contrast, emerging brands faced significant barriers to market entry and visibility. Social media platforms have reduced these barriers by offering accessible, interactive, and cost-efficient channels for brand communication, consumer engagement, and value creation. This study examines how emerging consumer brands leverage social media to enhance competitiveness through strategic branding, consumer engagement, analytics-driven decision making, and innovation support. By synthesizing existing theoretical and empirical research, the study demonstrates that social media enables direct brand–consumer interaction, facilitates electronic word-of-mouth, and supports the development of online brand communities. These mechanisms allow emerging brands to strengthen brand equity, improve customer relationships, and accelerate brand awareness despite limited resources.

The findings further suggest that the strategic use of social media analytics and influencer collaboration enhances content effectiveness and performance measurement, while social media participation in product development fosters innovation and organizational learning. Overall, the study positions social media as a competitive equalizer that enables emerging consumer brands to adopt agile, data-informed, and engagement-driven strategies to compete with established brands. The research contributes to marketing literature by offering an integrated perspective on how social media reshapes brand competition and strategic brand management in contemporary consumer markets.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Emerging consumer brands, Brand competitiveness, Consumer engagement, Digital branding, Online brand communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Consumer Brand Competition

Competition within consumer markets has historically been shaped by structural advantages held by established brands. Large consumer brands typically benefit from strong brand equity, extensive distribution networks, and substantial marketing budgets that enable sustained visibility and customer loyalty. Brand equity theory explains how long-term investments in brand identity, awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty create competitive advantages that are difficult for new entrants to replicate (Keller, 1993). Similarly, strategic brand-building frameworks emphasize the importance of consistent brand positioning, recognition, and emotional connection with consumers in maintaining market leadership (Aaker, 2012).

Traditionally, consumer brand competition relied heavily on mass communication channels such as television advertising, print media, radio broadcasting, and retail promotion campaigns. These channels required significant

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financial investment, which created high entry barriers for emerging consumer brands. Established firms could dominate consumer attention through sustained advertising exposure and large-scale promotional campaigns, while smaller brands often struggled to achieve visibility in crowded markets.

Distribution systems also contributed to competitive imbalance. Established brands typically maintained strong relationships with retailers, supply-chain partners, and

marketing intermediaries, allowing them to secure shelf space and maintain consistent market presence. Emerging brands, by contrast, often faced difficulties accessing these distribution networks, further limiting their ability to compete effectively.

However, the digital transformation of marketing communication has begun to reshape these competitive dynamics. The expansion of online communication technologies, mobile connectivity, and digital platforms has introduced new mechanisms through which brands can interact with consumers directly. As a result, the competitive structure of consumer markets is increasingly influenced by digital communication environments that reduce dependence on traditional advertising and distribution channels.

Emergence of Social Media as a Marketing Infrastructure

Social media platforms have fundamentally transformed marketing communication by shifting the flow of information from firm-controlled messaging toward interactive and participatory communication systems. Social media can be understood as internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share, and exchange content within virtual communities and networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These platforms include social networking sites, content-sharing platforms, discussion forums, and microblogging environments that facilitate real-time interaction between brands and consumers.

Unlike traditional marketing channels, social media enables two-way communication in which consumers actively participate in brand conversations. Marketing communication is no longer limited to firm-generated advertising messages but includes consumer-generated content, peer recommendations, and online discussions. This transformation has led to the development of marketing environments characterized by collaboration, participation, and transparency.

Social media has also been described as a hybrid element of the promotional mix, combining traditional marketing communication with consumer-driven interaction (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In this hybrid system, firms maintain the ability to communicate brand messages while consumers simultaneously influence brand perception through online engagement and electronic word-of-mouth communication.

The development of social networking platforms has further strengthened this transformation. Social network sites allow individuals to construct profiles, connect with others, and share content within digital communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These networks enable emerging consumer brands to communicate directly with audiences, build relationships, and cultivate brand communities without relying on traditional advertising infrastructure.

Consequently, social media has evolved from a communication tool into a strategic marketing infrastructure

that supports branding, customer engagement, market research, and product innovation.

Research Problem

Despite the growing importance of social media in marketing strategy, emerging consumer brands continue to face significant competitive challenges when compared to established brands. Limited financial resources, lower brand recognition, and restricted access to distribution networks often constrain their ability to compete using traditional marketing approaches.

While social media offers cost-effective communication channels and opportunities for direct consumer interaction, the mechanisms through which these platforms enable competitive positioning for emerging brands remain insufficiently integrated in existing marketing literature. Prior research has examined individual elements such as brand communities, electronic word-of-mouth, influencer marketing, and social media analytics, yet fewer studies provide a comprehensive framework explaining how these elements collectively support competitive brand development.

The central research problem addressed in this study is therefore how emerging consumer brands can leverage social media strategically to compete with established brands in consumer markets. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how engagement-driven communication, data-driven marketing strategies, and digital innovation processes interact to create competitive advantage.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the strategic role of social media in enabling emerging consumer brands to compete effectively with established brands. The specific objectives are to

- examine how social media supports brand competitiveness in consumer markets;
- analyze the role of consumer engagement and online brand communities in brand development;
- evaluate social media analytics and influencer strategies in shaping brand performance;
- explore the role of social media in innovation and new product development.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to provide a structured understanding of social media as a strategic branding and competition-enabling environment.

Contribution of the Study

This research contributes to marketing literature by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives into a unified explanation of social-media-enabled brand competitiveness. The study connects brand equity theory, social media marketing strategy, consumer engagement theory, and innovation theory to explain how emerging consumer brands can build competitive advantage in digital environments.



First, the study extends brand equity theory by examining how social media interaction contributes to brand awareness, loyalty, and perceived value. Second, it contributes to social media marketing literature by linking engagement, analytics, and influencer strategies to competitive brand performance. Third, the study highlights the role of social media in innovation processes, particularly in new product development and organizational learning.

By synthesizing these perspectives, the research provides both theoretical insight and practical guidance for emerging consumer brands seeking to compete with established brands in digitally mediated markets.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Brand Equity Theory

Brand equity theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how emerging consumer brands can compete with established brands in highly competitive markets. Customer-based brand equity refers to the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to marketing activities (Keller, 1993). Strong brand equity is developed when consumers form positive associations with a brand, perceive its value as superior, and demonstrate loyalty over time.

Keller's conceptualization of brand equity emphasizes three major components: brand awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty, all of which contribute to long-term competitive advantage (Keller, 1993). For emerging brands, building these components through traditional marketing channels is often constrained by limited financial resources and market visibility. However, digital communication platforms provide alternative pathways for establishing brand recognition and consumer trust.

Aaker's brand-building framework further expands the understanding of brand equity by emphasizing brand identity, differentiation, and positioning as strategic assets (Aaker, 2012). According to Aaker, brands achieve competitive advantage by developing a distinctive identity that resonates with consumers and clearly communicates value. Differentiation enables brands to stand out in saturated markets, while positioning ensures that the brand occupies a meaningful place in consumers' perceptions.

In the context of emerging consumer brands, brand equity development increasingly depends on interactive communication environments where consumers actively participate in brand meaning creation. Social media platforms provide such environments by allowing brands to communicate consistently, reinforce identity, and cultivate loyalty through engagement-driven interactions. Thus, brand equity theory serves as the theoretical foundation for understanding how social media can support competitive brand development.

Social Media Marketing Theory

Social media marketing theory explains how digital platforms have transformed marketing communication into a participatory and interactive process. Social media platforms enable organizations to create, share, and exchange content with consumers in real time, fundamentally altering the structure of marketing communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media marketing can be understood as a strategic communication system that integrates content creation, audience interaction, and community development (Tuten, 2023). Unlike traditional marketing, which relies primarily on one-way communication, social media marketing facilitates two-way and multi-directional communication between brands and consumers.

Mangold and Faulds (2009) describe social media as a hybrid element of the promotion mix, combining traditional marketing communication with consumer-generated communication. This hybrid nature enables brands to influence consumer perceptions while simultaneously allowing consumers to shape brand narratives through online interactions.

The emergence of social networking platforms has played a significant role in this transformation. Social networking sites allow individuals to construct profiles, connect with others, and interact within digital communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These platforms have evolved into critical marketing infrastructures where brand communication, customer engagement, and reputation management occur simultaneously.

For emerging consumer brands, social media marketing offers cost-effective tools for building visibility, engaging customers, and communicating brand value. As a result, social media marketing theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding how digital platforms enable smaller brands to compete in markets traditionally dominated by established firms.

Brand Communities and Consumer Engagement

Brand communities represent an important mechanism through which social media strengthens relationships between brands and consumers. A brand community is defined as a specialized, non-geographically bound group of consumers who share a structured set of social relationships based on admiration for a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). These communities foster emotional attachment, shared identity, and long-term loyalty.

Online brand communities are particularly significant for emerging consumer brands because they enable consumers to actively participate in brand development and communication. Participation within brand communities contributes to trust formation, identity reinforcement, and relationship building between brands and consumers.

Electronic word-of-mouth communication plays a central

role in this process. Electronic word-of-mouth refers to consumer-generated statements about products or brands that are shared online and influence purchasing decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Unlike traditional advertising, electronic word-of-mouth is perceived as more credible because it originates from other consumers rather than organizations.

Consumer engagement theory further explains how individuals interact with brands in digital environments. Engagement includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral participation in brand-related activities (Dessart et al., 2015). High levels of engagement are associated with stronger brand relationships, increased loyalty, and positive brand advocacy.

For emerging consumer brands, online brand communities and consumer engagement provide opportunities to build loyalty and credibility without relying on large advertising budgets. These mechanisms allow smaller brands to compete by leveraging participation, trust, and social interaction.

Strategic Social Media Branding

Strategic social media branding focuses on how organizations manage brand identity, communication, and consumer relationships within digital environments. Social media has transformed brand management by shifting control of brand meaning from organizations alone to collaborative interactions between brands and consumers (Gensler et al., 2013).

In social media environments, brand communication is continuous, interactive, and publicly visible. This dynamic communication environment shapes consumer perceptions of brands. Research shows that social media communication significantly influences brand awareness, brand image, and purchase intention (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

Effective social media branding requires coordinated strategies that integrate content creation, engagement management, and performance measurement. Felix et al. (2017) propose a holistic framework for strategic social media marketing that includes organizational structure, platform strategy, content strategy, and monitoring systems. This framework highlights the importance of aligning social media activities with overall brand strategy.

Strategic social media branding is particularly important for emerging consumer brands because it enables them to build brand recognition, develop relationships with customers, and communicate value propositions efficiently. By leveraging social media strategically, emerging brands can strengthen brand equity, enhance consumer engagement, and improve competitive positioning.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMPETITIVE EQUALIZER FOR EMERGING CONSUMER BRANDS

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally altered the competitive dynamics between

emerging consumer brands and established market leaders. Historically, established brands benefited from large advertising budgets, strong distribution networks, and long-standing brand recognition. These advantages often limited the ability of new brands to compete effectively in consumer markets. However, the emergence of social media marketing has introduced new mechanisms through which smaller firms can build visibility, engage customers, and establish brand identity without the financial intensity associated with traditional marketing systems.

Social media platforms provide accessible communication channels that allow brands to interact directly with consumers, bypassing many of the structural barriers present in traditional marketing environments. By enabling content sharing, user participation, and real-time feedback, social media has become an important strategic tool for emerging consumer brands seeking to compete with established firms in increasingly digital marketplaces.

Reduced Barriers to Market Entry

Traditional marketing systems often required substantial financial investment in television advertising, print campaigns, retail placement, and distribution partnerships. These requirements created significant entry barriers for emerging brands, as marketing success depended heavily on access to capital and established communication channels. Social media platforms have reduced these barriers by offering low-cost alternatives for brand communication and customer engagement.

Through social media, emerging brands can develop marketing campaigns using digital content, storytelling, and interactive communication strategies. These activities allow firms to build brand awareness and credibility without relying on expensive mass-media advertising. The participatory nature of social media further enables consumers to become active contributors to brand communication, thereby amplifying brand visibility through sharing and engagement.

Research on entrepreneurial branding indicates that social media enables small firms to build customer relationships and communicate brand values effectively despite limited marketing resources (Isibor et al., 2021). Similarly, evidence from small and medium-sized enterprises shows that digital platforms provide opportunities for experimentation, allowing firms to test marketing strategies and refine brand messaging based on consumer responses (Amoah & Jibril, 2020). These capabilities significantly reduce both financial risk and market-entry uncertainty for emerging consumer brands.

In addition, algorithm-driven content distribution on social media platforms enables smaller brands to reach targeted audiences without requiring large promotional budgets. This targeted visibility contributes to a more balanced competitive environment, where creativity, authenticity, and engagement can influence brand success alongside financial resources.



Social Media and SME Brand Growth

Beyond reducing entry barriers, social media plays a crucial role in supporting the growth and sustainability of emerging consumer brands. Social media platforms facilitate ongoing interaction between brands and consumers, enabling relationship-building processes that strengthen brand identity and customer loyalty.

Empirical studies demonstrate that small businesses frequently use social media to increase brand awareness, promote products, and maintain customer relationships through interactive communication (Isibor et al., 2021). These activities contribute to stronger brand recognition and improved customer trust, both of which are essential for long-term competitiveness in consumer markets.

In developing economies, social media has become a particularly important marketing tool for entrepreneurs who face financial and infrastructural limitations. Research indicates that social media allows small firms to implement innovative advertising and communication strategies that would otherwise be inaccessible through traditional marketing channels (Amoah & Jibril, 2020). By enabling consistent interaction with customers, social media supports the development of brand communities and encourages consumer participation in brand promotion.

Studies focusing on entrepreneurial branding in Nigeria further highlight the role of social media as a strategic growth mechanism for small enterprises. Social media platforms enable entrepreneurs to expand market reach, communicate brand value, and build customer engagement networks that contribute to business growth (Otokiti et al., 2021). These findings suggest that social media supports not only brand visibility but also organizational development and competitive positioning for emerging consumer brands.

Integrated Digital Marketing Communication

Social media platforms also support integrated marketing communication by allowing brands to coordinate advertising, customer interaction, brand storytelling, and promotional messaging within a unified digital environment. This integration enables emerging consumer brands to maintain consistent brand identity across multiple communication channels while improving marketing efficiency.

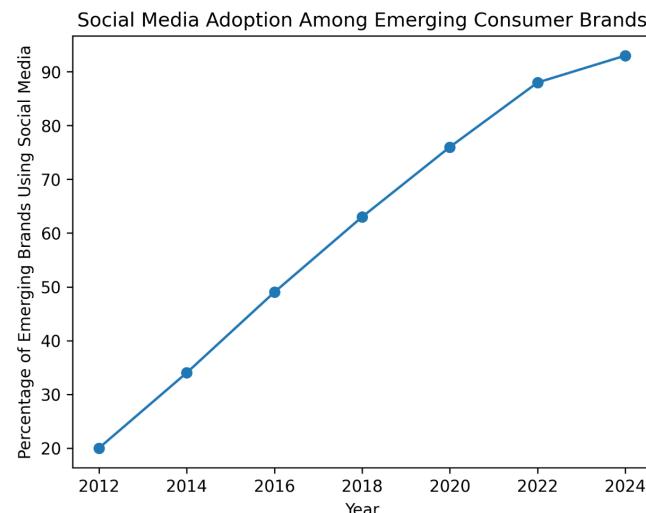


Figure 1: Increasing adoption of social media marketing among emerging consumer brands.

Source: Synthesized from SME digital marketing adoption literature.

Integrated digital marketing communication is especially relevant in emerging markets, where social media often functions as a primary communication channel between brands and consumers. Research shows that combining social media engagement with digital advertising and content marketing strengthens brand recognition and customer loyalty (Chakraborty & Jain, 2022). Through coordinated communication strategies, emerging brands can create coherent brand narratives that reinforce consumer perception and trust.

Social media also enables real-time feedback mechanisms, allowing brands to adjust marketing strategies in response to consumer preferences and market trends. This adaptability improves marketing effectiveness and enhances brand authenticity, both of which are important for emerging brands seeking to compete with established firms.

Furthermore, integrated communication strategies encourage consumer participation in brand development. Consumers contribute to brand narratives through reviews,

Table 1: Comparison of Traditional Marketing and Social Media Marketing for Emerging Consumer Brands

| Marketing Dimension | Traditional Marketing | Social Media Marketing |
|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Entry cost | High | Low |
| Communication flow | One-directional | Interactive |
| Consumer participation | Limited | Extensive |
| Feedback speed | Slow | Immediate |
| Targeting capability | Broad | Precise |
| Brand-building speed | Gradual | Accelerated |
| Accessibility for SMEs | Restricted | Widely accessible |

comments, and content sharing, thereby strengthening the relationship between brands and audiences. This collaborative communication model represents a shift from traditional promotional marketing toward participatory brand-building processes that support long-term competitive advantage.

CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT, ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH, AND BRAND COMMUNITIES

The emergence of social media has fundamentally reshaped how consumers interact with brands. Rather than serving as passive recipients of marketing messages, consumers now actively participate in communication processes that influence brand perception, reputation, and growth. For emerging consumer brands, these participatory dynamics provide an opportunity to build visibility and trust without relying on large advertising budgets. Three interconnected mechanisms enable this transformation: online brand communities, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and customer participation in value co-creation.

Together, these mechanisms form a digital engagement ecosystem that allows emerging brands to compete more effectively with established brands by leveraging social interaction, community participation, and consumer-generated content.

Online Brand Communities

Online brand communities are networks of consumers who share a common interest in a brand and interact with one another through digital platforms. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define brand communities as specialized, non-geographically bound communities structured around a shared admiration for a brand. These communities are characterized by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility among members.

Social media platforms have significantly expanded the scale and accessibility of brand communities. Platforms such as Facebook groups, Instagram pages, and TikTok communities allow consumers to interact directly with brands and with other consumers in real time. These interactions strengthen collective brand identity and foster long-term loyalty.

For emerging consumer brands, online brand communities serve as powerful and cost-effective branding mechanisms. Community members frequently act as brand advocates by sharing experiences, providing recommendations, and generating user-created content. This form of community-based promotion increases credibility and trust, particularly when compared to traditional advertising.

Brand communities also reinforce emotional attachment between consumers and brands. Participation in a brand community contributes to identity formation, where consumers associate personal values with brand values. This

alignment strengthens loyalty and increases the likelihood of repeated engagement (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Furthermore, brand communities provide emerging brands with continuous feedback loops. Consumers share opinions, suggestions, and experiences that help brands refine communication strategies and product offerings. This interaction reduces uncertainty and supports adaptive brand management in competitive markets.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Networked Narratives

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is one of the most influential mechanisms through which social media supports emerging brand competitiveness. eWOM refers to consumer-generated communication about brands, products, or services shared through digital platforms.

Unlike traditional word-of-mouth communication, eWOM operates within networked environments where information can spread rapidly across large audiences. Reviews, ratings, comments, and shared content contribute to the formation of brand reputation in digital spaces.

Kozinets et al. (2010) explain that consumers participate in "networked narratives," where personal brand experiences become part of broader online storytelling processes. These narratives shape collective perceptions of brands and influence purchasing decisions.

For emerging brands, eWOM serves as a substitute for traditional advertising by building credibility through peer communication. Consumers tend to trust other consumers more than firm-generated promotional messages, making eWOM particularly valuable in competitive markets.

Social media platforms amplify these narratives through algorithmic visibility. Content that receives high engagement is more likely to be promoted, allowing emerging brands to reach wider audiences without proportional increases in marketing expenditure.

Additionally, eWOM contributes to brand authenticity. User-generated content, reviews, and testimonials create transparent brand narratives that strengthen consumer trust. As a result, networked storytelling becomes a central mechanism through which emerging brands establish legitimacy in digital markets (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Customer Participation and Value Co-Creation

Customer participation in social media environments extends beyond communication into collaborative value creation. Social media platforms enable consumers to contribute ideas, feedback, creative content, and product recommendations, making them active participants in brand development.

Carlson et al. (2019) demonstrate that customer participation in social media brand communities improves brand relationship performance by strengthening trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Participation increases consumers'



Table 2: Consumer Engagement Drivers in Social Media

| Engagement Driver | Description | Brand Impact |
|----------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Informational Value | Provision of useful brand or product information | Improves brand knowledge and trust |
| Entertainment Value | Creative and enjoyable content | Encourages sharing and interaction |
| Social Interaction | Communication among consumers and brands | Builds community relationships |
| Brand Identification | Alignment between consumer identity and brand values | Strengthens loyalty |
| Responsiveness | Brand reaction to consumer feedback | Enhances credibility |

(Source: De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Carlson et al., 2019)

psychological investment in brands, which leads to stronger engagement outcomes.

Engagement in social media environments is influenced by several key drivers. De Vries and Carlson (2014) identify informational value, entertainment value, social interaction, brand identification, and perceived responsiveness as major factors influencing engagement behavior.

Informational content improves consumer knowledge about products and services, while entertaining content increases sharing behavior and visibility. Social interaction between brands and consumers fosters community belonging. Brand identification strengthens emotional attachment, and responsiveness from brands enhances perceived authenticity.

For emerging consumer brands, value co-creation provides a strategic advantage by leveraging consumer creativity and participation. Rather than relying solely on internal marketing resources, brands can collaborate with consumers to develop content, refine messaging, and improve product offerings.

This participatory model transforms consumers into co-producers of brand value. As engagement increases, brand awareness and loyalty grow simultaneously, allowing emerging brands to compete more effectively with established competitors (Carlson et al., 2019; De Vries & Carlson, 2014).

SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYTICS, INFLUENCERS, AND BRAND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

The ability to measure, interpret, and strategically act on social media data has become a defining factor in contemporary brand competition. While established brands traditionally relied on large-scale market research, advertising analytics, and proprietary consumer data, social media analytics has significantly lowered these informational asymmetries. For emerging consumer brands, analytics-driven marketing enables evidence-based decision-making, efficient allocation of limited resources, and continuous performance optimization. Social media analytics, influencer strategies, and content performance measurement together form an integrated system through which emerging brands can enhance visibility, credibility, and competitive positioning.

Social Media Metrics

Performance measurement is a foundational element of effective social media marketing. Peters et al. (2013) propose a structured framework for social media metrics that categorizes performance indicators into reach, engagement, conversion, and relationship metrics. This framework enables firms to systematically evaluate how social media activities translate into meaningful marketing outcomes.

Reach metrics capture the extent to which brand content is exposed to audiences. These metrics include impressions, follower growth, content visibility, and audience size. For emerging brands, reach metrics are particularly important as they provide insight into brand awareness growth without the need for costly mass-media campaigns. High reach indicates successful content dissemination and increasing brand presence in digital environments.

Engagement metrics measure the degree of consumer interaction with brand content. Likes, comments, shares,

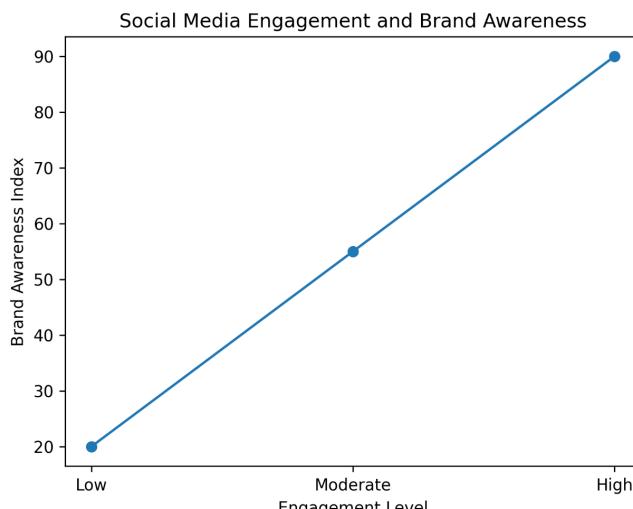


Figure 2: Relationship between social media engagement and brand awareness. Increased consumer engagement in social media environments is associated with higher brand awareness.

mentions, and click-through rates indicate the level of audience involvement and interest. Engagement is a critical indicator because social media platforms algorithmically prioritize content that generates interaction, thereby amplifying visibility. Peters et al. (2013) emphasize that engagement metrics are more strategically meaningful than reach alone, as they reflect active consumer participation rather than passive exposure.

Conversion metrics assess whether social media interactions lead to desired behavioral outcomes, such as purchases, registrations, or inquiries. These metrics connect social media activity directly to business objectives. For emerging consumer brands, conversion metrics provide evidence of return on investment and allow marketers to identify which platforms and content strategies produce tangible results.

Relationship metrics focus on long-term outcomes such as customer loyalty, advocacy, trust, and brand attachment. These indicators reflect sustained brand-consumer relationships rather than short-term campaign success. Relationship metrics are especially valuable for emerging brands seeking to build enduring brand equity and compete with established firms over time.

Collectively, these metrics allow emerging consumer brands to continuously monitor performance, refine strategies, and compete more effectively despite limited financial resources.

Influencer Strategy

Influencer strategy represents a critical mechanism through which emerging consumer brands can extend their reach and build credibility. Booth and Matic (2011) conceptualize influencer identification as a process of mapping social networks to identify individuals who possess disproportionate communicative power due to their credibility, connectivity, and audience trust.

Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, social media influencers often derive influence from perceived authenticity, expertise, and relational closeness with their followers. This form of influence is particularly valuable for emerging brands, which may lack the institutional legitimacy associated with established firms. Influencers act as intermediaries who translate brand messages into socially credible narratives.

Influencer mapping involves analyzing social network

structures to identify users with high engagement rates, centrality within communities, and alignment with brand values. Booth and Matic (2011) argue that influence is not determined solely by follower count but by the ability to shape opinions and stimulate conversation within relevant communities.

For emerging consumer brands, collaboration with micro-influencers and niche opinion leaders offers a cost-efficient alternative to traditional advertising. These influencers often maintain highly engaged audiences and operate within specific interest domains, allowing brands to target consumers more precisely. Influencer strategies thus enable emerging brands to overcome visibility limitations and accelerate trust-building processes.

Content Strategy and Engagement Performance

Content strategy plays a decisive role in determining engagement outcomes on social media platforms. Ashley and Tuten (2015) emphasize that creative branded content, characterized by storytelling, interactivity, emotional appeal, and visual richness, significantly enhances consumer engagement. Rather than relying on overt promotional messaging, effective social media content fosters participation, entertainment, and value creation.

De Vries et al. (2012) further identify key determinants of brand post popularity, including vividness, informational value, interactivity, and posting frequency. Highly vivid content such as images and videos attracts attention, while interactive elements encourage consumer response. Informational content enhances perceived usefulness, and consistent posting maintains audience interest.

For emerging consumer brands, content strategy offers a critical competitive advantage. While established brands may rely on advertising scale, emerging brands often compete through creativity, authenticity, and community engagement. Social media algorithms reward engaging content, allowing smaller brands to achieve visibility comparable to larger competitors.

Effective content strategies enable emerging brands to strengthen brand identity, stimulate engagement, and foster emotional connections with consumers. Engagement performance thus serves as both an outcome and a driver of brand growth in digital environments.

Table 3: Key Social Media Performance Metrics for Emerging Consumer Brands

| Metric Category | Representative Indicators | Strategic Relevance |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Reach Metrics | Impressions, follower growth | Brand visibility and awareness |
| Engagement Metrics | Likes, comments, shares | Consumer interaction and interest |
| Conversion Metrics | Purchases, inquiries | Business impact |
| Relationship Metrics | Loyalty, advocacy | Long-term brand equity |
| Influencer Metrics | Engagement rate, credibility | Influencer effectiveness |



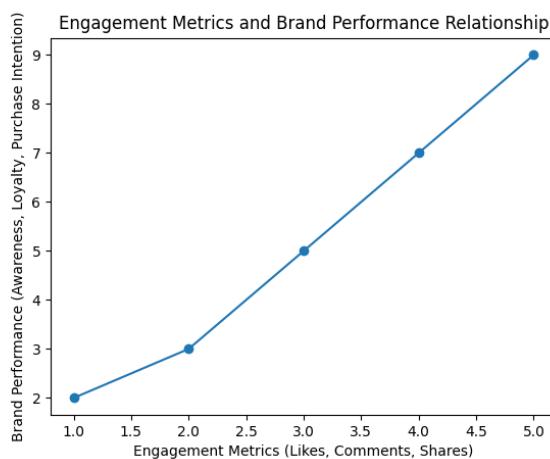


Figure 3: Engagement Metrics and Brand Performance Relationship

Big-Data-Driven Social Media Analytics

The proliferation of user-generated content has transformed social media into a rich source of big data. Zhang et al. (2022) explain that big-data-assisted social media analytics enables firms to extract insights from large volumes of unstructured data, including text, images, interactions, and network relationships.

Big-data-driven analytics tools support various strategic applications, such as sentiment analysis, which assesses consumer attitudes toward brands; network analysis, which reveals patterns of influence and information diffusion; and predictive analytics, which forecasts consumer behavior and campaign outcomes. These techniques allow firms to move beyond descriptive metrics toward explanatory and predictive insights.

For emerging consumer brands, big-data analytics reduces reliance on intuition and anecdotal evidence. Data-driven insights support strategic decisions related to content optimization, influencer selection, product positioning, and competitive benchmarking. The ability to monitor consumer sentiment and market trends in real time enhances strategic agility and responsiveness.

By leveraging big-data-driven social media analytics, emerging brands can align marketing strategies with consumer expectations, identify emerging opportunities, and respond quickly to competitive threats. This analytical capability plays a crucial role in enabling emerging consumer brands to compete effectively with established firms.

The line graph illustrates a positive relationship between engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) on the horizontal axis and brand performance indicators (brand awareness, loyalty, purchase intention) on the vertical axis. The upward trend demonstrates that increased engagement is associated with stronger brand performance outcomes.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN INNOVATION AND PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Social media has evolved beyond a communication and branding platform into an important infrastructure for innovation and product development. By enabling interaction between firms and consumers, social media platforms provide access to real time feedback, collaborative idea generation, and market insight that were previously difficult to obtain. For emerging consumer brands in particular, social media functions as both a research environment and a co creation space where consumers actively contribute to product design, refinement, and validation. This transformation reflects a broader shift from firm centered innovation toward network based innovation processes supported by digital platforms.

Social Media in New Product Development

Social media plays a growing role in new product development by enabling firms to gather consumer insights throughout the innovation lifecycle. Roberts and Candi (2014) explain that social networking platforms allow firms to observe customer needs, collect feedback, test concepts, and evaluate prototypes in ways that reduce uncertainty in innovation processes. Unlike traditional market research, which often relies on periodic surveys or focus groups, social media provides continuous interaction between firms and consumers.

Through digital engagement, emerging brands can identify unmet consumer needs and respond quickly to changing market preferences. This interaction reduces development risk and improves product market fit. Social media also supports collaborative innovation by allowing customers to participate in product ideation, testing, and refinement. Such participatory innovation processes are especially valuable for smaller firms that lack extensive research and development resources.

Additionally, user generated content and online discussions provide insights into consumer expectations and product performance perceptions. These insights help firms refine product features and design strategies that align with consumer preferences. As a result, social media becomes an important component of the innovation pipeline, enabling emerging brands to compete more effectively with established brands that traditionally rely on larger innovation budgets.

Social Networks and Radical Innovation

Social networks contribute to radical innovation by connecting diverse actors who can share knowledge, ideas, and perspectives. Iacobucci and Hoeffler (2016) argue that innovation increasingly occurs within networks rather than within isolated firms. Social media platforms facilitate these networks by enabling collaboration between consumers, entrepreneurs, designers, and marketers.

Radical innovation often emerges from the combination of different knowledge domains. Social networks enable this integration by connecting individuals with varied expertise and experiences. Emerging brands can leverage these connections to access external creativity and knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable.

The network structure of social media also accelerates idea diffusion. Innovative concepts can spread rapidly through online communities, allowing firms to test consumer reactions and refine product ideas before market launch. This dynamic reduces innovation risk and encourages experimentation.

For emerging consumer brands, social networks function as innovation ecosystems that support idea generation, validation, and diffusion. These ecosystems help compensate for resource limitations by enabling access to distributed knowledge and creativity.

Organizational Learning Through Social Media

Social media also supports organizational learning by enabling firms to collect, interpret, and apply knowledge generated through online interactions. Zhan et al. (2020) explain that social media platforms create mechanisms for knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, and knowledge integration within organizations.

Through continuous engagement with consumers, firms gain insights into product usage, customer satisfaction, and emerging market trends. These insights contribute to adaptive learning processes that improve innovation performance. Social media interactions also allow firms to monitor competitor activities and industry developments, further strengthening strategic learning.

Organizational learning through social media involves both formal and informal processes. Formal processes include analytics driven decision making and structured feedback systems, while informal processes include observation of consumer discussions and community participation. Together, these processes help firms refine innovation strategies and improve responsiveness to market needs.

For emerging brands, social media based learning is particularly important because it provides access to market intelligence without requiring extensive research infrastructure. This learning capability enhances innovation efficiency and supports continuous product improvement.

Creative Consumers and Web 2.0 Marketing

The rise of Web 2.0 technologies has transformed consumers from passive recipients of marketing messages into active participants in value creation. Berthon et al. (2012) describe this shift as the emergence of creative consumers who contribute ideas, content, and innovation through digital platforms. Social media enables consumers to influence product design, branding, and marketing communication.

Participatory marketing environments encourage collaboration between brands and consumers. Through social

media platforms, firms can invite customers to contribute ideas, vote on product concepts, and share experiences. This collaboration strengthens brand relationships and enhances innovation outcomes.

Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) emphasize that effective social media brand strategy requires integrating consumer participation into marketing and innovation processes. Brands that successfully leverage participatory environments can build stronger emotional connections with consumers while improving innovation effectiveness.

Creative consumers also contribute to brand storytelling through user generated content, product reviews, and digital advocacy. These activities reinforce brand identity and increase visibility for emerging brands. As a result, Web 2.0 marketing environments support both innovation and brand development simultaneously.

In this context, social media becomes not only a marketing channel but also a collaborative innovation platform where firms and consumers jointly create value. This participatory model enables emerging consumer brands to develop innovative products, strengthen customer relationships, and compete more effectively with established brands.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media has fundamentally transformed the competitive landscape of consumer branding by reducing structural advantages traditionally held by established brands. Drawing from brand equity theory, social media marketing frameworks, engagement theory, and innovation literature, the discussion highlights how emerging consumer brands can strategically leverage digital platforms to build brand visibility, credibility, and customer relationships. Social media does not eliminate competitive differences between firms, but it significantly reduces barriers related to communication access, consumer interaction, and brand storytelling.

The discussion integrates insights from the literature review and conceptual analysis to explain how engagement, analytics, and innovation mechanisms collectively support competitive positioning for emerging brands in digital markets.

Social Media as a Competitive Equalizer

One of the most significant insights from this study is the role of social media as a competitive equalizer in consumer markets. Historically, established brands benefited from large advertising budgets, distribution networks, and long-standing brand equity (Aaker, 2012; Keller, 1993). Social media platforms have altered this dynamic by enabling emerging brands to communicate directly with consumers at relatively low cost.

Social media environments facilitate two-way communication, allowing brands to build relationships through interaction rather than relying solely on mass advertising (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).



This interactive communication structure allows smaller brands to compete through authenticity, responsiveness, and community-building strategies. Online brand communities, as described by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), create shared identity and loyalty that are not dependent on firm size.

Electronic word-of-mouth communication further strengthens this equalizing effect. Consumers actively share experiences, reviews, and recommendations in digital environments, influencing brand perception and purchase decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kozinets et al., 2010). For emerging brands, positive electronic word-of-mouth can substitute for traditional advertising exposure.

Evidence from SMEs and entrepreneurial branding research also supports the equalizing role of social media. Studies show that small businesses use digital platforms to enhance brand awareness, customer engagement, and market growth (Amoah & Jibril, 2020; Isibor et al., 2021; Otokiti et al., 2021). These findings suggest that social media reduces the importance of firm size in brand communication effectiveness.

Strategic Implications for Emerging Consumer Brands

The analysis suggests that emerging consumer brands must view social media not simply as a promotional tool but as a strategic brand-building infrastructure. Strategic use of social media enables emerging brands to develop customer-based brand equity through consistent interaction, storytelling, and value creation (Keller, 1993; Tuten, 2023).

Creative content strategies play a central role in this process. Ashley and Tuten (2015) demonstrate that engaging and interactive content significantly improves consumer engagement outcomes. Similarly, De Vries et al. (2012) show that content characteristics influence brand post popularity and interaction levels.

Emerging brands should also leverage brand communities as strategic assets. Consumer engagement in online brand communities strengthens emotional attachment, trust, and loyalty (Dessart et al., 2015; Carlson et al., 2019). These relational outcomes contribute directly to long-term brand performance.

Integrated marketing communication across social media platforms further enhances brand consistency and visibility (Chakraborty & Jain, 2022). When strategically managed, social media allows emerging brands to develop distinctive brand identities that compete effectively with established firms.

Integration of Engagement, Analytics, and Innovation Perspectives

Another key insight from this study is that competitive advantage in social media environments emerges from the integration of engagement, analytics, and innovation processes. These three dimensions operate as interconnected mechanisms that support digital brand development.

Consumer engagement provides the relational foundation for brand growth. Social media analytics provides measurable insights into consumer behavior and brand performance. Innovation processes use these insights to guide product development and marketing strategy.

Social media analytics frameworks enable firms to monitor engagement metrics, brand sentiment, and campaign effectiveness (Peters et al., 2013). Big-data-driven social media analysis further supports strategic decision-making and competitive positioning (Zhang et al., 2022).

Innovation literature shows that social media platforms support product development by enabling customer feedback, idea generation, and collaborative innovation (Roberts & Candi, 2014; Iacobucci & Hoeffler, 2016). Organizational learning through social media interaction strengthens innovation capabilities (Zhan et al., 2020).

The integration of these mechanisms creates a feedback loop in which engagement generates data, analytics produce insights, and innovation transforms those insights into competitive value. This integrated perspective aligns with strategic social media marketing frameworks proposed by Felix et al. (2017) and Gensler et al. (2013).

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study suggest that emerging consumer brands should prioritize social media strategy as a core component of brand development. Managers should focus on building interactive relationships with consumers rather than relying solely on promotional messaging.

First, firms should invest in engagement-oriented content strategies that encourage participation and community interaction. Brand communities can serve as long-term assets that strengthen loyalty and advocacy (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Dessart et al., 2015).

Second, managers should implement social media performance measurement systems. Monitoring engagement metrics, influencer impact, and content performance enables data-driven decision-making (Peters et al., 2013; Booth & Matic, 2011).

Third, firms should integrate social media insights into innovation processes. Customer feedback obtained through social media platforms can inform product development and improve market responsiveness (Roberts & Candi, 2014; Zhan et al., 2020).

Finally, emerging brands should adopt holistic social media marketing strategies that align communication, analytics, and innovation activities. Such integration improves brand competitiveness in digital consumer markets (Felix et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study examined how social media enables emerging

consumer brands to compete more effectively with established brands in contemporary markets. The findings indicate that social media functions as a strategic equalizer by reducing traditional barriers associated with brand building, marketing communication, and customer engagement. Unlike traditional media channels that require substantial financial investment, social media platforms allow emerging brands to develop visibility, credibility, and consumer relationships through interactive and participatory communication processes.

The analysis shows that consumer engagement, electronic word of mouth, and online brand communities play central roles in strengthening brand awareness and brand equity for emerging firms. Engagement driven interactions such as user generated content, brand storytelling, and digital participation contribute to customer value creation and long term brand relationships (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Carlson et al., 2019). Electronic word of mouth further amplifies brand communication through networked consumer narratives (Hennig Thurau et al., 2004; Kozinets et al., 2010).

The study also highlights the importance of social media analytics, influencer strategies, and performance measurement systems in improving brand competitiveness. Social media metrics allow emerging brands to evaluate engagement outcomes and adjust marketing strategies in real time (Peters et al., 2013). Influencer collaboration enhances credibility and visibility in digital markets (Booth & Matic, 2011). In addition, social media contributes to innovation processes by supporting organizational learning, product development, and consumer feedback integration (Roberts & Candi, 2014; Zhan et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings confirm that social media marketing is not merely a communication tool but a strategic infrastructure that supports brand growth, innovation, and competitive positioning for emerging consumer brands.

Contributions to Marketing Literature

This research contributes to marketing literature in three important ways. First, it integrates brand equity theory with social media marketing frameworks to explain how digital engagement mechanisms support brand competitiveness. By linking customer based brand equity concepts (Keller, 1993) with social media strategy (Felix et al., 2017; Gensler et al., 2013), the study provides a unified perspective on digital brand development.

Second, the study extends brand community and consumer engagement literature by demonstrating how social media environments enable emerging brands to develop relationships comparable to those of established brands. The findings reinforce the role of online brand communities and engagement driven communication in shaping brand perception and loyalty (Dessart et al., 2015; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

Third, the study contributes to research on digital innovation and marketing strategy by highlighting the role

of social media in product development, organizational learning, and entrepreneurial branding. This supports prior research suggesting that social networks and digital platforms play a growing role in innovation ecosystems (Iacobucci & Hoeffler, 2016; Berthon et al., 2012).

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research is conceptual and literature based, meaning that empirical validation through quantitative or mixed method studies would strengthen the conclusions. Second, the study focuses primarily on consumer brands operating in digital environments and may not fully capture industry specific differences across sectors such as industrial goods or regulated markets.

Third, social media platforms evolve rapidly, and marketing strategies that are effective in one period may change due to technological developments, algorithmic adjustments, or shifts in consumer behavior. Finally, variations in digital infrastructure and social media adoption across different countries may influence the generalizability of the findings, particularly in developing market contexts (Amoah & Jibril, 2020).

Future Research Directions

Future research can build on this study in several ways. Empirical studies using survey data, experimental designs, or longitudinal analytics could examine the relationship between social media engagement and brand performance more directly. Comparative studies between emerging and established brands across industries would also provide deeper insights into competitive dynamics in digital markets.

Another promising direction involves examining the role of artificial intelligence driven analytics, personalization systems, and data driven marketing strategies in social media brand development. Researchers may also explore the long term sustainability of social media dependent branding strategies and their relationship to customer trust and brand loyalty.

Finally, future studies could investigate regional and cultural differences in social media branding strategies, particularly in emerging markets where digital entrepreneurship continues to expand. Understanding how social media ecosystems support small and emerging brands across different economic contexts would further strengthen the theoretical and practical understanding of digital brand competition.

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