

*Research Paper*

## **The Influence of Social Media Friendship on Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention: Evidence from young adult consumers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study is to analyze the impact of social media friendships on young adult consumers' approach to brands in terms of awareness, image, trust, and purchase intention among. The quantitative research method was used in this study, the population of which consisted of students who were studying at undergraduate level in Turkey and who use either Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter actively. In this study, the convenience sampling method was used. Research data was collected from 1069 undergraduate students through online questionnaires on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The data obtained were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling. The results of the analysis showed that social media friendships among young adult consumers had a positive impact on brand awareness, brand image, brand trust and purchasing intentions. In addition, brand awareness was found to have a strong impact on brand image and brand trust among young adult consumers. However, brand trust was more influential on the purchase intention of young adult consumers than brand image and brand awareness.

**Keywords:** Brand awareness; brand trust; purchase intention; reference groups; social media

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of reference groups, as a social factor, on consumer behaviors is a subject accepted and frequently studied among marketers. A reference group is a real or imaginative group considered to be linked with the assessments of individuals, their demands, and behaviors to a certain extent (Solomon, 2011). Reference groups can consist of a group of friends whose ideas are taken into account when an individual forms an attitude towards specific subject (Perreault et al., 2013), shopping groups, business groups, virtual groups or communities, and action groups (Schiffman et al., 2008). Reference groups that perform functions such as informing, usefulness and expressing value on consumers (Solomon, 2011), are reliable sources of information for consumers (Schiffman et al., 2010). Accordingly, consumers frequently consult reference groups in terms of product or brand preference, ask their opinions, and take their suggestions into consideration (Preece, 2001).

In today's age of communication, social media is the leading channel that has a significant impact on the consumer behavior of reference groups. Social media, the technological foundation of which is based on Web 2.0, can be described as a series of internet-based applications that allow users to create and change content. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). Filo et al. (2015) defined social media as "new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations (e.g. teams, governing bodies, agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g. consumers, athletes and journalists)". Technology-based communication channels have become an inevitable part of life for young consumers, primarily known as the Z-generation (Duffett, 2017). Social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Google+ allow young consumers to create personalized online websites and communicate with other users by sharing the contents they create or product-based and

brand-based information (Matthee, 2011).

Social media, which removes the borders of the time and place in consumer interaction with its real-time sharings, is relatively influential on the prevalent communication of young adult consumers with reference groups. The findings obtained from the studies conducted on this topic have indicated that social media is highly effective on consumer behaviors (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012; Laroche et al., 2012; Ioană & Stoica, 2014; Hajli, 2014; Mousavi et al., 2017). The fact that social media has a more permanent and influential role on consumers compared to traditional media such as radio, television, print and billboards, has led marketing managers to use social media to introduce and market their brands to young consumers. There are various studies in the literature analyzing the marketing activities on social media and the impact of social media on consumer preferences (Gallaughar & Ransbotham, 2010; Kim & Ko, 2012; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014; Bilgin, 2018). However, studies on the repercussions of interactions on social media among young consumers on their product and brand preference are limited.

The main issue approached in the present study was how interactions on social media communication channels between young adult consumers affected their opinions, attitudes and behaviors regarding brands. Within this context, three objectives were identified to solve this issue: 1) examine the impact of the social media interactions among young adult consumers on their brand awareness, brand image, brand trust and purchase intention, 2) test the influence of brand awareness on social media on brand image and brand trust and 3) explore the effect of brand image and brand trust on social media on purchase intention.

In the literature section, the concept of social media, as an element that facilitates the interactions of young adult consumers with reference groups, was reviewed. The conceptual framework of the study was created by explaining concepts such as brand awareness, brand image and brand trust. In the methodology section, the interactions between the variables were systematically scrutinized, the hypotheses were grounded and proposed research model was demonstrated. The population, sampling, data collection tools and data analysis method of the study were mentioned in the methodology section. Then, the findings obtained from data analyses were presented. Lastly, the results obtained from the findings of the study were stated and suggestions were made for future studies.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Social media communication**

Social media is a mass medium or platform that generally facilitates the interaction, cooperation and sharing of content (Kim & Ko, 2012). Social media can also be defined as a channel of communication in which consumption habits, preferences, thoughts, likes and experiences are reflected in the perceptions of consumers (Gallaughier & Ransbotham, 2010; Hajli, 2014). Consumers use social networks to communicate with their social environment, including their friends, relatives and colleagues. These social networks facilitate the establishment of real-time interactions for users, especially by adding other users to their networks called friends or followers (Ahuja & Galvin 2003). These affordable communication channels used among consumers without a limitation of time or place are relatively influential in the interaction between consumers and the person or brands identifying themselves (Scott, 2010; Lindmaa, 2011).

Social media communication channels are ideal tools for users to create and share information regarding brands with an online network consisting of friends (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). Lindmaa (2011) stated that the most noticeable prevalent impact of social media interaction on products or brands was the recommendations made by friends. On the other hand, Cabosky (2016) reported that the communications created on social media channels increased the access of consumers to the opinions of other users and that shares and comments were seen by other users beyond friends and family, and accordingly these communication channels extended across the peer-to-peer communication models. Research findings show that social media interactions increase the effect of consumers on their attitudes towards the product and the brand and their purchasing intentions (Lu & Hsiao, 2010; Park & Cho, 2012; Hajli, 2014).

The most obvious influence of social media interactions among users is seen in brand communities. Consumers keep in communication with other users whose opinions are similar to theirs, make new friends, provide emotional support, enjoy themselves and flirt by subscribing to the social media communities related to the products or brands that they identify with themselves (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Laroche et al., 2012). Reichheld and Schefter (2000) stated that, in recent years, most consumers tended to turn to their friends or the members of brand communities recommending products or

brands for help and guidance instead of calling the customer services of the brands.

## **2.2. Brand awareness**

Brand awareness refers to the level of consumers' identification, acceptance, and recall of a brand in any situation. Brand awareness means the level of defining, accepting and remembering of consumer in any situation (Perreault et al., 2013). Keller (1993) described brand awareness as the power of a brand in a consumer's mind. Aaker (1991) defined brand awareness as the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or remember the brand to which a product in a product category belongs. Brand recognition is about consumers' ability to distinguish the brand through what they have seen, heard or experienced (Keller, 1993). The recall is about the first brand that comes back to the consumer's memory when a product class is specified (Farjam & Hongyi, 2015). Being the first brand that comes to mind means being the most known brand (Aaker, 1996). Social media speeds up and facilitates the sharing of thoughts, comments and experiences regarding a brand among consumers. Thus, it can be said that social media is an important element that increases consumers' familiarity with brands.

## **2.3. Brand image**

The success of managing a brand is based on clearly understanding and checking brand image and loyalty to create the powerful features that can affect the decisions of consumers (Karam & Saydam, 2015). Brand image involves the information and opinion about other products belonging to a brand and the characteristics of the brand apart from the product (Lee et al., 2011). Keller (2009) defined brand image as "consumer perceptions of and preferences for a brand, as reflected by the various types of brand associations held in consumers' memory". In the literature, brand image is explained in two ways: functional and symbolic (Simms & Trott, 2006). While functional brand image states what the consumers think about products and services (Gökerik et al., 2018), symbolic brand image means the consumption of a brand by consumers to express themselves and the symbolic usage of it to reflect the self-identity of the consumer (Lau & Phau, 2007). While brand awareness is the reflection of a brand's concrete indicators such as name, sign, symbol and slogan, brand image is related to the position of the brand in the consumer's mind (Bilgin, 2018).

## **2.4. Brand trust**

Brand trust is considered as one of the main components that creates a strong bond between the consumer and the brand (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007). For this reason,

brand trust is a constant topic of interest for researchers working in consumer behavior and brand management (Matzler et al., 2008; Alwi et al., 2016; Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) defined brand trust as the reliance an average consumer has on the brand being able to fulfill the expected functions. Brand trust is formed as a result of the experience processes of consumers. These processes involve cognitive and affective aspects (Srivastava et al., 2016). Cognitive brand trust expresses information-oriented causality in consumers' preference of a brand, while affective trust is the emotional aspect of the trust that a brand builds with consumers (Ballester, 2004). In this sense, it can be stated that reference groups with which consumers have emotional bonds play an effective role in building brand trust. Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017) determined that consumers trusted the opinions shared by their personal environment such as their friends and families on social media as a brand communication channel and that they are affected by these opinions.

### **2.5. Purchase intention**

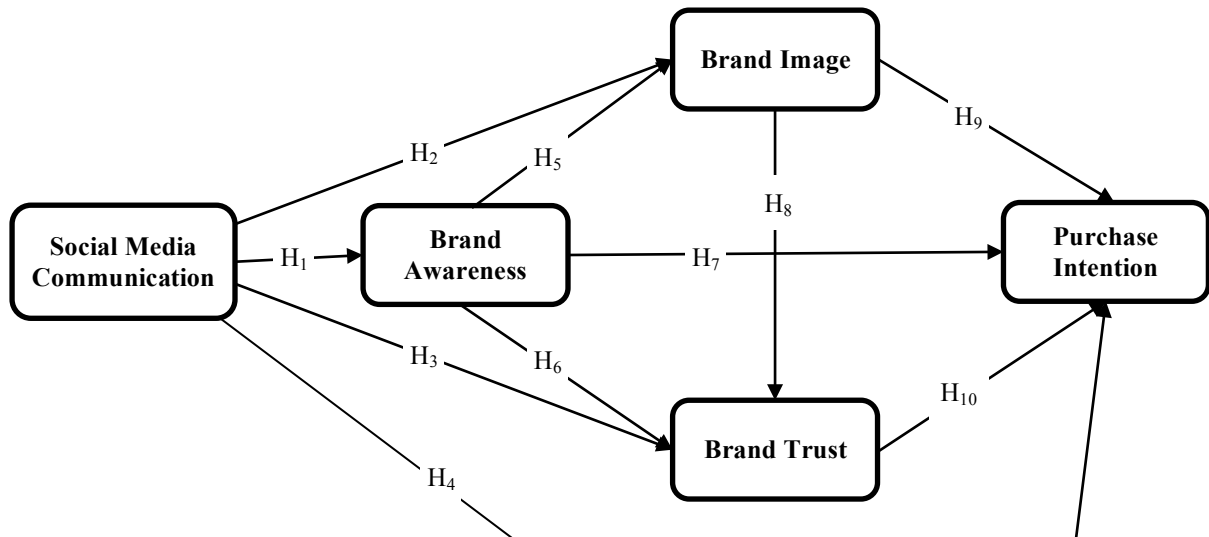
Understanding the purchasing intent of consumers is an important issue for brands, as consumer actions often follow the intent (Hsu et al., 2017). Purchase intent can be considered as an estimation of the current purchasing behavior (Shin, 2015) and the psychologically planned or unplanned future purchasing behavior of consumers (Chakraborty, 2019). Beneke et al. (2016) defined purchase intention as “the likelihood that an individual will purchase a particular product based on the interaction between customer needs, attitude and perception towards the product or brand” (p.176). Purchase intention serves as a link between the concentration of consumers in purchasing a product and the possibility of purchasing that product (Wu et al., 2015). Strongly influenced by the individual's emotions and impulses, purchase intention determines the strength of a consumer's willingness to make a purchase (Lee et al., 2017). Lee et al. (2019) stated that purchase intention can be used directly in the evaluation of consumers' purchasing behavior.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Research model**

The latent variables of this study were social media communication, brand awareness,

brand image, brand trust and purchase intention. The quantitative method was used to test the relationships between the variables. The research model for the variables of the study and for testing the relationships between these variables is showed in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** - Research Model

## 3.2. Hypotheses

### 3.2.1. Effects of social media communication on brand awareness, brand image, brand trust and purchase intention

As the usage intensity of social media increases, the interaction among consumers also increases (Stojanovic et al., 2018). Therefore, social media is highly functional in ensuring brand familiarity among consumers (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Hutter et al. (2013) determined that fan pages on Facebook affirmatively affected the brand familiarity of consumers. Isoraite (2016) stated that the interactions between consumers increased brand awareness more than the marketing activities conducted on social media by the brands themselves. Various studies in the literature found that there was a strong relationship between social media interaction and brand awareness (Mohammadian & Mohammadreza, 2012; Debono, 2013; Sasmita & Suki, 2015). In this context, to test the impact of social media communications among young adult consumers on their brand awareness, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H1: Social media communications have a positive influence on brand awareness.*

Social media enables consumers to declare their social identity or status to others by sharing text or visual content (Tan, 2016; So et al., 2017). In this regard, it is expected that shares made on social media will be effective on brand image. In their study on tourism, telecommunication and pharmacy, Bruhn et al. (2012) determined that the use of content created by users increased the impact of social media interactions on brand image. Previous studies confirmed that social media interactions influenced brand image in a positive way (Fortezza & Pencarelli, 2015; Seo & Park, 2018). In the present study, the hypothesis to be tested to measure the impact of social media communications among young adult consumers on brand image was determined as follows:

*H2: Social media communications have a positive influence on brand image.*

On social media, interactions between consumers take place outside the marketing and brand communication activities of businesses (Kohli et al., 2015). The lack of profit in the interactions between consumers increases consumers' trust in the evaluations and comments made by others (Hajli, 2013). Moreover, consumers who want to reduce any kind of risk care more about the recommendations, evaluations and comments related made by other consumers. Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) suggested that individuals trusted the opinions shared on social networks by their friends and other people in their environment much more than those shared by brands on social networks. Various studies in the literature, determined that social media interactions had an impact on brand trust (Jakic et al., 2017; Chen & Cheng, 2019). The hypothesis developed in this direction is given below:

*H3: Social media communications have a positive influence on brand trust.*

Social media influences the purchase decisions of consumers by facilitating communication with social media users create with their friends regarding a product or brand (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Jakic et al. (2017) stated that interpersonal interactions that encouraged interactions between consumers and brands on social media, friend groups adopt each other's linguistic styles to develop trust and preserve their communication styles during the interactions. Cabosky (2016) emphasized the role of social media reference groups, stating that contrary to traditional reference groups, consumer decisions regarding purchasing was gradually increased through the



permanent messages seen by other users in an online environment. Hajli (2014) reported that social media was effective on consumers' purchasing decisions. In this regard the following hypothesis was created:

*H4: Social media communications have a positive influence on purchase intention.*

### **3.2.2. Effects of brand awareness on brand image, brand trust and purchase intention**

Expanding and maintaining the brand awareness of consumers by increasing their information level, makes them more familiar to the brand and their approach to it more positive (Debono, 2013). Hence, increasing information level and brand awareness leads a brand to gain a strong place in the consumer's mind (Hutter et al., 2013; Yazgan et al., 2014). In this regard, social media is a significant source for young consumers to acquire information related to a brand and gain awareness. To young consumers, social media has the capacity to clearly recognize a particular product or brand and create a mental portrait of its features (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Stojanovic et al. (2018) identify that the impact of brand awareness increases the brand image according to the level of social media usage intensity. Various studies in the literature found that brand awareness influenced brand image among young consumers (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). The hypothesis developed within this scope is as follows:

*H5: Brand awareness has a positive influence on brand image.*

The familiarity of consumers to a brand is the sign of their trust in that brand (Hoek et al., 2000). Therefore, the trust of the consumers increases as the level of brand communication goes up. Recently, brand awareness has become an important factor for creating trust in consumers, especially due to the increased risk perceived in virtual markets (Ruparelia et al., 2010). Yoon (2002) found that brand awareness affects brand confidence at a high level. The number of studies in the literature analyzing the impact of brand awareness on brand trust is very limited on social media (Seo et al., 2020). The hypothesis created within this context is given below:

*H6: Brand awareness has a positive influence on brand trust.*

Contrary to traditional marketing communication paradigms, social media interactions have a characteristic extending from consumer to consumer. Thus, these interactions are relatively functional tools that can be used to improve brand awareness (Seo & Park, 2018). As consumer interactions on social media occur outside the intervention of businesses, social media has a significant effect on consumers' awareness and trust

levels (Bilgin, 2018). Sashi (2012) determined that the content created by the users of a brand and online peer-to-peer communication were highly effective on the decisions of other users. Koniewski (2012) stated that the awareness of brand had a more powerful effect on following purchase behavior once a product meets the expectations of the user. The hypotheses developed within this scope is as follows:

*H7: Brand awareness has a positive influence on purchase intention.*

### **3.2.3. Effects of brand image on brand trust and purchase intention**

Brand trust is established by the impressions that a brand creates in consumers' minds from past to present. (Dogan & Ozkara, 2013). In this respect, brand image is a powerful element that affects brand trust (Chinomona, 2016; Alwi et al., 2016). When the consumers define the image of a brand functionally in their minds, they know that they can trust the brand to supply with their needs. Lau and Lee (1999) determined that the brand features that created brand image had a significant effect on the consumers' trust in a brand. Various studies in the literature found that brand image influenced brand trust (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Chinomona, 2016). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H8: Brand image has a positive influence on brand trust.*

A brand that consumers are familiar with can increase the current sales of the business and make it easier to reach consumers by building sub-brands (Burt & Davies, 2010). Interaction between consumers in social media can be an effective way for businesses to provide brand familiarity and to develop and spread a positive brand image (Halligan & Shah, 2009). The recommendations, comments and shares made by consumers that have had previous experiences with the brand, along with the emergence of positive brand image, have a strong effect on the future purchase behavior of consumers. Simms and Trott (2012) stated that brand awareness was not enough for consumers to purchase a product or service, and that an effective brand image must be developed. Previous studies have shown that brand awareness affects purchase intention. (Hütter et al., 2013; Sharifi, 2014; Chakraborty, 2019; Lee et al., 2019). The hypothesis created within this context is as follows:

*H9: Brand image has a positive influence on purchase intention.*

### 3.2.4. Effects of brand trust on purchase intention

The shares and comments made on social media by consumers regarding a brand are relatively effective on the trust of other consumers in that brand (Zboja & Voorhees, 2006). Ridings and Gefen (2004) and Mousavi et al., (2017) suggested that today, most consumers subscribe to online brand communities and plunge into a quest to make friends to benefit from the experiences of other consumers and obtain social support. This is because the trust in the experiences of reference groups or other users is one of the key points that consumers take into consideration when deciding on whether to make a purchase (D'Alessandro et al., 2012). Alwi et al. (2016) emphasized that trust in a brand was a key variable Alwi et al. (2016) emphasized that trust in a brand was a key variable to maintain a long-term relationship between consumers and brands. Mishra et al. (2016) determined that consumers stuck to the same brand even in situations where they had negative thoughts towards it due to their lack of trust in other brands. Various studies in the literature suggested that brand trust affected purchase intentions affirmatively (Ruparelia et al., 2010; Srivastava et al., 2016). The hypothesis developed within this scope is as follows:

*H10: Brand trust has a positive influence on purchase intention.*

### 3.3. Population and sampling

The study population consisted of students who were studying at undergraduate level in Turkey and who actively used Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and followed at least one brand on these social networks. According to the Council of Higher Education (2019), there are 4,420,699 students at undergraduate level in Turkey. However, information about how many students are social media users, how many accounts are real and used actively is limited. Therefore, the convenience sampling method, which is a non-probability based sampling method was used in this study.

### 3.4. Measurement tools

A questionnaire, consisting of five parts, was created to collect the data. In the first part, descriptive information about the demographic characteristics and social media usage of the participants was asked. The second part included seven items regarding the social media communication of the participants. In the third part, there were five items regarding brand awareness. The 12 items in the second and third part were taken from the study conducted by Duffett (2017). The fourth part of the questionnaire consisted of three items related to brand image. These items were taken from the study by Sasmita

and Suki (2015). In the fifth part, there were three items about brand trust. These items were adopted from the study carried out by Laroche et al. (2012). The final part was comprised of five items related to the purchase intentions of the participants. These items were taken from the study conducted by Duffett (2017).

The validity of the structure, which consisted of 22 items in total, was tested by considering the opinions of two academicians, both of which are experts in marketing and were not a part of the research group. Then, the validity of the expressions in the measurement model was retested in accordance with the opinions of two interpreters. The demographic structure of the participants was measured with close-ended questions. The opinions of the participants regarding the variables were measured by using a 5-point scale (1= Certainly disagree, 5= Certainly agree).

### **3.5. Data collection and analysis**

A pretest for the measurement model, namely the questionnaire, in which reliability was tested, was carried out prior to the data collection stage. In this context, in the first stage, the questionnaire was applied to 86 of the participants online and to 12 of the participants face-to-face. Through face-to-face questionnaires, content validity was retested. The results of the analysis showed that the Cronbach's alpha value was 0.921 for all items in the measurement model. Thus, the measurement model was found to be reliable as a whole. After the pre-test, the data were obtained from 1069 university students through online questionnaires between May 1 and June 11 in 2019. The obtained data were analyzed by using the Amos 21.0 package program.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1. Demographic characteristics**

Out of the 1069 participants, 599 were female and were 470 male. The most actively used social media communication channel (51.8%) was determined to be Instagram. The daily average time that the participants spent on social media varied between 1-3 hour and 3-5 hours. It was determined that 44% of the participants followed three or less brands on social media. The demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

<i>Categories</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage %</i>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	599	56.03
	Male	470	43.96
<b>The most actively used social media communication channel</b>	Instagram	554	51.8
	Facebook	253	23.7
	Twitter	262	24.5
<b>The daily average time spent on social media</b>	Less than one hour	143	13.4
	Between 1-3 hours	413	38.6
	Between 3-5 hours	316	29.6
	More than 5 hours	197	18.4
<b>The number of brands followed on social media</b>	3 or less	472	44.2
	4-5	285	26.7
	6-7	129	12.1
	8 or more	183	17.1
<b>Total</b>		<b>1069</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 1** - Demographic characteristics

#### 4.2. Measurement model

In the study, firstly, the compatibility validity of the measurement model created was examined. Within this scope, the obtained data were subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA). In EFA, it has paid attention that the eigenvalue of the factor was at least 1, factor loadings at least 0.50, and the difference between factor loadings of items under two factors at least .10. The results of KMO value (.962) and the Barlett test ( $\chi^2 = 22648.706$ ,  $p < .000$ ) obtained from the EFA confirmed that the data was suitable for factor analysis. It was observed that the factor load of an item (SMI7) that measured the social media communication latent variable in the EFA by using varimax rotation was below .50. Thus, this item was excluded from the analysis. Following this process, the items in the measurement model were collected under five factors describing 81.015 of the total variances. The factor loadings of the items in the measurement model were assessed between .688 and .840. The EFA results showed that the measurement model conformed with the designed structure.

In the next stage, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to the regulated data. Accordingly, a five-factor measurement model comprised of social media communication, brand awareness, brand image, brand trust and purchase intention was tested by using CFA. The results obtained from the CFA showed that the measurement

model had a satisfactory fit (Table 2). In addition, the fact that each of the observed variables in the measurement model were loaded into the related latent variable at a high level and the standardized  $\lambda$  coefficients were above 0.6 (Steenkamp and van Trijp, 1991) verified the validity of the measurement model. Table 2 presents the results of CFA.

<i>Latent Variables</i>	<i>Observed Variables</i>	<i>Cronbach's <math>\alpha</math></i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>	<i>Standardized <math>\lambda</math></i>
<b>Social Media Communication</b>	SMI1	0.95	0.951	0.767	0.654
	SMI2				0.787
	SMI3				0.823
	SMI4				0.738
	SMI5				0.817
	SMI6				0.785
<b>Brand Awareness</b>	MF1	0.94	0.939	0.756	0.753
	MF2				0.774
	MF3				0.797
	MF4				0.712
	MF5				0.745
<b>Brand Image</b>	MI1	0.82	0.822	0.611	0.664
	MI2				0.642
	MI3				0.630
<b>Brand Trust</b>	MG1	0.94	0.937	0.832	0.872
	MG2				0.887
	MG3				0.738
<b>Purchase Intention</b>	SN1	0.94	.938	.752	0.704
	SN2				0.701
	SN3				0.845
	SN4				0.789
	SN5				0.726

**Fit Indices:**  $\chi^2= 705.794$  (199),  $\chi^2/df = 3.54$ , AGFI= 0.925, CFI= 0.98, GFI= 0.941, IFI= 0.978, NFI= 0.969, RMR= 0.28 RMSEA= 0.049

**Note:** AVE- average variance extracted; CR - composite reliability

**Table 2** - CFA results

Hair et al. (2010) suggested that the reliability levels of variables should be over 0.50. In the present study, the reliability levels ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ) of the variables in the measurement model were quite high. In addition, the correlation coefficients confirmed the discriminant validity ( $< 0.8$ ) of the measurement model verified in the CFA. Table 3 shows the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

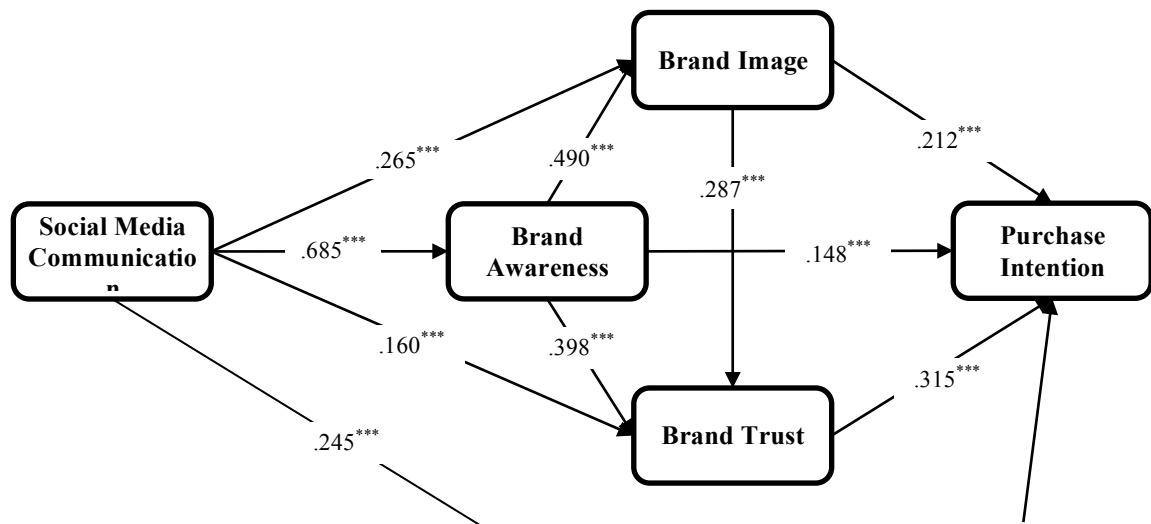
Variables	Average	Standard Deviation	Number of items	SMC	BA	BI	BT	PI
SMC	3.25	1.00	6	.797 <sup>a</sup>				
BA	3.25	0.95	5	.469	.859 <sup>a</sup>			
BI	3.00	0.89	3	.360	.453	.628 <sup>a</sup>		
BT	3.38	0.95	3	.366	.490	.422	.556 <sup>a</sup>	
PI	3.05	0.98	5	.440	.461	.439	.497	.896 <sup>a</sup>

**Note:** SMC= social media communication, BA= brand trust, BI= brand image, BT= brand trust, PI= purchase intention.  
<sup>a</sup> = Square root of average variance explained

**Table 3 - Discriminant validity**

**4.3. Structural model**

The hypotheses proposed in the study were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum probability estimation. The results of the path analysis showed that the structural model had a good fit. Figure 2 presents the results of the structural model.



**Goodness of Fit Index:**

$\chi^2 = 720.771(200)$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.604$ , AGFI= 0.924, GFI= 0.940, NFI= 0.968, IFI= 0.977, TLI= 0.973, CFI= 0.977, RMR= 0.030, RMSEA= 0.049

**Note:** p< 0.01\*\*\*

**Figure 2 - Results of the structural model**

The results of the road analysis showed that social media communications positively affected participants' approach to brands in all aspects. In addition, on social media, brand awareness was found to have a positive effect on brand image ( $\beta = .442$ , CR = 12.002,  $p < 0.001$ ), brand trust ( $\beta = .368$ , CR = 10.175,  $p < 0.001$ ) and purchase intention ( $\beta = .145$ , CR = 3.882,  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, brand image was found to positively effect brand confidence ( $\beta = .293$ , CR = 7.519,  $p < .001$ ) and purchase intention ( $\beta = .231$  CR = 5.710,  $p < .005$ ) of the participants. Lastly, it was determined that brand trust had a positive effect on the purchase intention ( $\beta = .334$  CR = 8.984,  $p < .001$ ) of the participants. According to these findings, the proposed hypotheses were accepted. The results of the hypotheses are summarized in Table 3.

Hypotheses	Structural relationships	Standardized coefficients	Results
<i>H1</i>	Social Media Communications → Brand Awareness	.685***	Supported
<i>H2</i>	Social Media Communications → Brand Image	.265***	Supported
<i>H3</i>	Social Media Communications → Brand Trust	.160***	Supported
<i>H4</i>	Social Media Communications → Purchase Intention	.245***	Supported
<i>H5</i>	Brand Awareness → Brand Image	.490***	Supported
<i>H6</i>	Brand Awareness → Brand Trust	.398**	Supported
<i>H7</i>	Brand Awareness → Purchase Intention	.148***	Supported
<i>H8</i>	Brand Image → Brand Trust	.287***	Supported
<i>H9</i>	Brand Image → Purchase Intention	.212***	Supported
<i>H10</i>	Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	.315***	Supported

Note:  $p < 0.01$ \*\*\*

**Table 3** - The standard path coefficients between the hypotheses and variables

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study focused on the issue of how interactions on social media, which remove time and space boundaries in communication between reference groups, influences the approaches of young adult consumers towards brands. The findings of this study showed that social media communications positively affected the brand image perceptions, brand awareness and brand trust of young adult consumers. However,



brand awareness was found to be the variable that social media communications had the most impact on among young adult consumers. The results complied with those found by Bilgin (2018).

This study also determined that although social media communication had a significant effect on brand trust, the level of influence was quite low. This result contradicted the findings of Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017) and Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014), suggesting that the sharing of a brand by reference groups such as friends and relatives on social media changed consumers' trust in the brand at a high level. Brand trust was identified as the most critical variable affecting the purchase intention of consumers. This result was consistent with the findings of Alwi et al. (2016), D'Alessandro et al. (2012) and Zboja and Voorhees (2006). Accordingly, it can be stated that social media communications for young adult consumers are deficient to build brand confidence or that the level of trust of young adult consumers in the content created by reference groups on social media is low.

In addition, it was determined that brand awareness among young adult consumers was an essential factor affecting brand image on social media. Moreover, brand awareness on social media also had a significant impact on brand trust. Another variable affecting brand trust on social media was brand image. These results supported the findings of Sasmita and Suki (2015), Stojanovic et al. (2018), Lau and Lee (1999) and Anwar et al. (2011).

The results of the present study showed that brand awareness on social media affected the purchase intention of young adult consumers less than brand image and brand trust. Thus, it can be stated that brand awareness, not supported by image and trust, is inept for the purchase actions of consumers. Therefore, the research results show that there is no significant relationship between the frequency of a brand being shared on social media and the purchase intent. Nevertheless, social media communications were found to have a direct influence on the buying intent of young adult consumers. This result complied with the findings of Hajli (2014) and Hutter et al. (2013).

### **5.1 Limitations**

This study had various limitations. Firstly, the results presented in this study were obtained for young adult consumers studying at undergraduate level in Turkey. In other words, young adult consumers who have not studied at university but are social media users were excluded from this study. Furthermore, the impact of social media

communications on the approach of consumers to brands and purchase intentions may vary between younger consumers, who do not have a clear image, the confidence and experience with brands, and older consumers, who have high levels of experience with brands. In addition, the results were obtained only for young adult consumers using Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and the usage of other communication channels, such as Youtube, LinkedIn and WeChat, which are widely used by young adult consumers, were considered .

## 5.2 Future Studies

In future studies, the impact of social media communications on the brand preferences of young adult consumers can be analyzed in terms of specific brands and products, and online brand communities. In addition, the impact of reference groups on the brand perceptions and purchasing behaviors of young adult consumers can be analyzed by comparing social media reference groups and actual reference groups.

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## APPENDIX

### ***Social media communication***

I use social media to get new information about products and brands.

Shares made on social media by my friends provide me with valuable information about products and brands.

Shares made by my friends on social media regarding brands are fun for me.

I share my experiences regarding any brand with my friends via social media.

I consider the opinions shared on social media by my friends on products and brands.

I have positive feelings towards the brands advertised or shared by my friends on social media.

### ***Brand awareness***

Shares made by my friends on social media about any brand increases my awareness about that brand.

Shares made by my friends on social media about brands are informative about the brand's name and products.

The ads shared by my friends on social media attract my attention to certain brands.

I can remember all of the advertisements shared by my friends on social media easily.

I see/click on the ads shared by my friends on social media because they attract my attention.

### ***Brand Image***

The brands shared by my friends on social media are the leading brands in their sector.

I have good memories about brands and products shared by my friends on social media.

I think the brands shared by my friends on social media are customer-oriented.

**Brand Trust**

The opinions shared by my friends on social media regarding a brand affect my expectations from that brand.

The thoughts and comments of my friends on social media regarding a brand affect my trust in that brand.

The views of my friends on social media regarding a brand affect my trust in that brand.

**Purchase Intention**

I buy products shared by my friends on social media.

I use most of the products promoted on social media by my friends.

Shares made by my friends on social media regarding a product positively affect my purchasing behavior.

Shares made by my friends on social media regarding a brand I use increases my tendency to buy it again.

When I have the financial opportunity, I buy products recommended on social media by my friends.

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