

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54663/2182-9306.2023.v11.n20.226-256>

Research Paper

Factors Affecting the Relationship between Brands and Digital Consumer in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to develop a theoretical model to understand which digital communication factor is most relevant in establishing a positive relationship between the brand and the consumer so that the latter becomes its organic ambassador. The authors gathered empirical data through a Web-based questionnaire from 258 respondents, all considered valid as they met the requirements of the sample selection. The findings suggest that Consumer profile, perceived content quality, and Organic Brand Ambassadors directly impact the relationship between brand and consumer. As this is empirical research, other unexamined constructs may add to the explanation of building brands' digital communication on social media platforms.

Keywords: Social media marketing, content marketing, digital brand communication, brand-customer relationship, brand activity on social media

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Received on: 2023/01/25

Approved on: 2023/03/15

Evaluated by a double-blind review system

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital communication or online communication corresponds to the digitalization of both information media and the interaction and interconnection of the content generated by the consumer and the brand (Whitburn et al., 2020), which has allowed marketers to be more customer-centric than ever before (Valos et al., 2016). A survey conducted by KEMP(2022) shows that of the 10.15 million population of Portugal, 8.5 million of Portugal's citizens are using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. According to DoubleVerify (2020), consumers spend about 7 hours daily engaging with branded content online. Due to the constantly creating and sharing of information by consumers and retailers (Grewal et al., 2022), digital communication is considered inherently dynamic (Batra & Keller, 2016). Thota (2018) claim that companies could utilize social media platforms to understand consumers' product requirements to stimulate brand conversations that can provide a positive perception of products, services, or ideas. In 2021, 59 % of European Union (EU) enterprises used at least one type of social media, (Eurostat, 2021). Social media platforms are used for consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions to share information about products, services, and brand experiences (Thota, 2018). Often through similar interests, social media users are connected; therefore, content created by an individual user or a company can be spread worldwide within minutes (Song & Yoo, 2016). In addition, social media platforms provide opportunities to strengthen the emotional attachment between users and brands (Yuksel et al., 2010). Because of this reason, the applications of social media are constantly rising (Barreda et al., 2020; Wang & Kubickova, 2017) and social media applications have become a vital tool to change marketing strategies; thus creating and developing effective marketing strategies for social media is critical for brands to strengthen relationships with customers (Song & Yoo, 2016). Nowadays, firms attempt to elevate their form of communication, instigating a change in their concept and undergoing modifications in their processes (Galvis Ardila & Silva Agudelo, 2016), actions, words, and appearance (Leal, 2017). Firms use a multi-platform social media strategy to manage customer engagement with brand communications across multiple social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter)(Unnava & Aravindakshan, 2021).

Various strategies allow companies to acquire a solid and loyal audience, provided they are planned and executed correctly since the secret of any strategy lies in the credibility and emotional proximity established with customers (Arjona-Martín et al., 2020). With the use of digital platforms, considered potent tools for strengthening relationships between brands and customers, companies can create brand communities that can engage, integrate and defend the brand through daily or weekly posts, which must be interactive so that they arouse interest in consumers and the desire to spread the word with their friends and family (Valerio Ureña et al., 2015). Previous studies have demonstrated that companies taking advantage of different social networking platforms and social media technologies such as outperformed competitors and have enhanced efficiencies and reduced costs (Harris & Rea, 2009; Mujahid & Mubarik, 2021), interacting with current and potential consumers (Koivisto & Mattila, 2020), brand loyalty (Fetais et al., 2022), brand equity (Godey et al., 2016), Word-of-Mouth (Kozinets et al., 2010; VanMeter et al., 2018), customer equity (A. J. Kim & Ko, 2012), brand management (Kaplan, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and consumer behavior (Chu et al., 2013). However, these studies lack an explicit focus on how the communication carried out on social media platforms will interfere with consumers' perceptions and how the consumers can become an organic ambassador for a brand. To address this lacuna, this article examines the main factors such as Brand activity on social media, Customer profiles, Consumer motivations, and Perceived content quality of the content influencing the relationship between brand and consumer. This is because brands can gain the necessary information via social media platforms regarding the products/services they present, thus increasing their impact and market position (Busca & Bertrandias, 2020; Slijepčević et al., 2020). In addition, customer profiles give organizations crucial information for identifying their valuable customers and their customer behavior (Tuzhilin, 2012).

While studies have emphasized consumer motivations for general internet usage (Dholakia et al., 2004; Sook Kwon et al., 2014), this study aimed to examine the impact of consumer motivations on the relationship between brand and consumer. Furthermore, Ho et al. (2020) argued that content marketing is strongly connected with value creation for building relational brand relationships. In content marketing, there is a scant amount of research on the impact of quality and attractiveness. Ambassadors play an essential role in digital communication, one of the most critical communication channels for sharing content (Järvinen et al., 2012). Heald (2017) argues

that organic ambassadors promote a brand. However, a study on brand ambassador programs indicates little attention has been paid to study on the direct effects of the relationship between brand and consumer on the creation of an organic brand ambassador.

Unexamined constructs may add to the explanation of building brands using social media platforms (Barreda et al., 2020). Thus, the study focused on factors affecting the relationship between brands and consumers on social networks. To our understanding, such empirical research on brand-customer relationships must be improved. Moreover, by considering the role of organic brand ambassadors, this study is one of the first empirical research on the consumer-brand relationship in Portugal. In addition, this study contributes to the literature by providing further empirical evidence concerning the impact of consumers' demographics on building the relationship between brand and consumer. Finally, the model addresses the significant factors that might influence the relationship between brand and consumer, which may help brands build solid online relationships with their customers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital brand communication

Digital Brand Communication has been studied in many studies with different names, such as internal brand communication (Sujchaphong et al., 2020), online brand communication (Liebrecht et al., 2021), and brand social media communication (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2020). Nowadays, Social media platforms have changed traditional marketing communication, and users of such platforms are gradually shaping a new type of brand communication controlled and managed by companies (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015). The platforms provide facilities for all users and customers to create and share content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012) (including brands and products); such facilities have caused the companies, not the only primary and available sources of brand communication (Berthon et al., 2012). Previously, companies had a few communication channels to achieve their brand communication strategies (Batra & Keller, 2016). According to Judson et al. (2006), internal brand communication or digital brand communication tools are divided into three types of communication as follows: The first type is "one-to-one communication,"; which is the most personal form of communication and which includes a daily interaction, and meeting of one person with another individual. The second type is "segment" communication which is used for "task/process, group, and engaging,"; and the

third type is “all,” which is applied for “process, inform, instruct and motivational” (Ind, 1997). While the most personal method of communication is the “one-to-one,” the “all” is the minor private type (Ind, 1997; Judson et al., 2006).

Considering what has been explained above, the studies clarify that consumers prefer personalized messages via digital communication in response to messages of consumers (Liebrecht et al., 2021). Thus, brand social media communication is considered a brand-building tool.

2.2. Relationship between brand and consumer (Brand-customer relationship)

The relationship between the customer and the company (brand) can provide positive outcomes for both parties. According to Fournier (1998), the consumer-brand relationship is a psychological bond. Similarly, Aggarwal (2004) claimed that customers usually interact with companies that are similar to their social (personal) interactions, and the identical interaction rules that administer their interpersonal connections might be used in their brand relationships (Aggarwal, 2004).

To conceptualize and measure consumer-brand relationships Tsai (2011a, 2011b) pointed out the three categories of theoretical paradigm. 1. “Brand relationship quality (BRQ)” paradigm: BRQ is considered a higher-order construct reflecting partner quality, and it includes a brand commitment; self-connection, and interdependence (Fournier, 1998). 2. “Brand love paradigm”: In this paradigm, consumers have emotional attachment and passion/love toward a brand (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Fetscherin, 2014; Tsai, 2011a, 2011b). 3. “Brand commitment paradigm.” In this type, interdependence (i.e., satisfied customers) and social/communal (i.e., brand trust) directly impacts brand performance (Albert et al., 2013). Moreover, Tsai (2011a, 2011b) applied the “commitment-trust theory” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002) and a perspective of “interpersonal relationship theory” to examine the impact of consumer-brand relationship levels on customer commitment and brand loyalty (Balaji, 2015). The results of their study indicated that satisfaction, trust, and self-concept connection (relationship components) have a direct positive effect on brand loyalty. Also, brand commitment and love mediate between the relationship components and brand loyalty (Tsai, 2011a, 2011b).

2.3. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses Development

To build the research model, the authors reviewed the extant literature, which has mentioned the linkage between any constructs of our proposed research model.

One of the widely used theoretical frameworks to assess "how" and "why" users are using certain media to satisfy their particular needs is the Uses and gratification theory (Ho Nguyen et al., 2022). Many extant theories, such as the "Uses and Gratification Theory" (Malik et al., 2016), have been applied to the concept of the Brand-customer relationship. Traditionally, the use and gratification theory has been used in the context of traditional media (i.e., newspapers, radio, and television) (Ifinedo, 2016). The U&G model allows researchers to discover why people adopt technology and media (Grellhesl & Punyanunt-Carter, 2012). Based on the "Uses and Gratification Theory," Malik et al. (2016) showed that affection, attention seeking, habit, information sharing, disclosure, and social influence impact the satisfaction of social media users. Social media is a powerful tool for message exposure (Mason et al., 2021), and it has converted individuals from the natural community into a virtual community that allows people real-time communication. The usage of social media has become part of an individual's life (Sundararaj & Rejeesh, 2021).

One of the marketing theories that provide insight into the consumers' motivation to buy or not buy (or to use or not use) is the Theory of consumption value (TCV) (Sheth et al., 1991). TCV is based on the three main fundamental propositions, including (1) consumer choice is a function of multiple consumption values, (2) consumption values make different contributions in any given choice situation, and (3) consumption values are independent (Lin & Huang, 2012). The theory states five dimensions that determine a consumer's preferences: a) functional value, b) social value, c) emotional value, d) epistemic value, and e) conditional value(Chakraborty et al., 2022). In addition, many researchers used Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) to understand consumer behavior regarding technology adoption, mainly the use intentions (Ghobakhloo et al., 2012; Ho Nguyen et al., 2022; Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2015). In this study, similar to studies o Gómez-Ruiz et al. (2022), and van der Heijden (2003), by using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), we believe that perceived content quality in social media platforms affects the creation of the brand-customer relationship.

Therefore, this study is based on three relevant theoretical models (i.e., the Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G), the Theory of consumption value (TCV), and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) processes framework.

2.3.1. Brand activity on social media

Studies show that social media platforms are utilized for brand image and the affiliation initiated, maintained, and fostered by (Song & Yoo, 2016), and the number of social media usage has increased, enhancing the emotional attachment to a brand. Social media marketing is the “utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders” (Tuten & Solomon, 2014; p21). The efficiency of social media have emphasized by many researchers; Researchers mainly consider Social media as a marketing tool which widely explored in business-to-consumer (B2C) (Cartwright et al., 2021). Given the nature of B2C marketing in general, the B2C social media marketing strategy focuses on the interactions of a firm with consumers, consumer engagement, and consumers' interactions with each other (Kaplan, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media platforms enable companies to maximize their communication ability by promoting employees' capability to consumer engagement via up-to-date technologies (Kaplan, 2012).

With the increasing development of digital media, brands can access all the necessary information regarding the products/services they present, thus providing an increase in their impact and market position (Busca & Bertrandias, 2020; Slijepčević et al., 2020) through attractive, careful, and well-designed communication (Galvis Ardila & Silva Agudelo, 2016). Social media platforms present a unique channel for marketing communications and branding development; social media activities include interactivity, benefits, and rewards customers obtain (Sung et al., 2010). The involvement provides opportunities for companies to establish direct relationships with their audience, promoting lasting relationships and moments of interaction through creating, co-creating, editing, and sharing content to ensure a positive impact with current and potential consumers (Filipe & Simões, 2015). New consumers are more involved with the brand and positively affect the influences, not only of purchase but also the dissemination of the same in the most diverse media (Whitburn et al., 2020). Based on the literature, social media activities influence the formation of branding elements that, in turn, significantly impact a successful emotional attachment, and social media-based relationships lead to positive word of mouth. (Hudson et al., 2015). Researchers argued that the role of social media activities is fundamental to be examined because the impact of social media activities is still in development (Barreda et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2013); Also, social media activities have

a direct effect on customer decision-making and brand development. Similarly, Munar and Jacobsen (2014) indicate that the influence of social media on building long-term relationships must be continuously examined. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Brand activity on social media positively influences the relationship established with the consumer*

2.3.2. Customers' profiles (consumers' demographics)

The customer's profile is defined by demographic and psychographic characteristics (Postigo-Boix & Melús-Moreno, 2018). Businesses that want to develop and manage their relationship with their valued customers efficiently are concerned about creating profiles for specific customers (Apeh et al., 2014). Well-constructed customer profiles give organizations crucial information about their most valued clients, including 1) Who they are and who their valuable customers are, and 2) What they do and how they behave (Tuzhilin, 2012). Likewise, social networks allow the creation of campaigns segmented for a specific user profile, thus creating greater engagement and effective results (Afonso & Borges, 2013). Pereira (2014) argued that it is possible to develop targeted communication for consumers, segmenting them according to their profile and behavior to obtain more effective results.

Demographic data plays a vital role in user segmentation strategy (Seufert, 2014); therefore, identifying the demographic characteristics of consumers is the first stage of customer relationship management (Islam et al., 2022). Consumers' demographics can help brands create ready-made groupings based on income, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and political affiliation (Palomba, 2020). The impacts of consumers' demographics were used to predict online behavior (Hood et al., 2020; Soopramanien & Robertson, 2007). Demographic factors are found to play critical roles in the online environment. For example, gender plays a vital role in e-shopping behaviors (Ren & Kwan, 2009), and women are most likely to engage in online shopping more frequently than men (Mortimer et al., 2016). Studies have focused on the age of online shoppers and found more frequent use among younger age groups (Clarke et al., 2015; Mortimer et al., 2016). Lubis (2018) find that income levels are vital in purchase decisions. Consumers' demographics significantly affect brands' marketing programs (Chawla & Joshi, 2020; Nawaz et al., 2020). However, the impact of consumers' demographics on Consumer-Brand Relationships is not well documented in the literature (Nawaz et al., 2020). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *The consumer profile positively influences the relationship established with the consumer.*

2.3.3. Customer Motivation

Social networks are a source of information to know the customer's needs and motivations (Afonso & Borges, 2013; Pereira, 2014). Social networks have started gaining more space in society, accompanying the various generations. According to Campo Oliveira (2018), a new era - Generation C- represents the users: Content, Creation, Consumption, and Connectivity. Many studies on motivation have highlighted consumer motivations for general internet usage (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia et al., 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Sook Kwon et al., 2014). According to Sook Kwon et al. (2014), “incentive seeking,” “social-interaction seeking,” “brand usage/likeability,” and “information seeking” are four primary motivations for customers to follow a brand on Twitter. Dholakia et al. (2004) recommended that consumers are willing to participate in virtual communities for five reasons: “purposive value, self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement, and entertainment.” Consistent with Dholakia et al. (2004), the literature on consumer motivations indicates that consumers are interested in the support of a person through social interactions (Madupu & Cooley, 2010) and the need for social support, integration, cohesion, and well-being, which includes personal self-esteem and life satisfaction (Chi, 2011). According to Oliveira (2018), consumers follow certain brands because they are emotionally connected to them. Additional consumer motives include gratifications such as revealing personal identity, revealing a passion for brands (Sung et al., 2010), looking for convenience, and monetary and non-monetary encouragements (Muntinga et al., 2011). To carry out a complete study, it was crucial to understand what motivates a consumer to promote a brand and to check what convergences could arise or if there was syntony. The current study seeks to identify whether consumer motivations impact the relationship between brand and consumer.

Hypothesis 3: Consumer motivations positively influence the relationship established with the consumer.

2.3.4. Content marketing (CM)

Content marketing (CM) is a marketing format that involves creating and sharing publishing content to acquire customers (Nosrati et al., 2013), and it is directly linked with digital marketing. Numerous definitions of content marketing abound, but thus far, Content marketing's

purpose of (Content Marketing Institute, 2015) is still prevalent. It is a “strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”

Kilgour et al. (2015) argued that content marketing is the active role of consumer participation in sharing and participating in media space that becomes their interest. Some studies examined CM from a created “value-in-use” basis for engaging consumers in a digital content business (J. Y. C. Ho & Dempsey, 2010; Rowley, 2008; Zerbini et al., 2007). Campo’s (J. Y. C. Ho & Dempsey, 2010) previous studies claim that value leads to consumer motivation and content sharing. Koiso-Kanttila (2004) introduces the concept of digital content marketing. Digital content has been defined by Koiso-Kanttila, (2004) as: “Digital content and digital products are conceptualized as bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels” (p.46). According to Rowley (2008), Digital content marketing is “the management process responsible for profitably identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer requirements in the context of digital content, or bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels.”

Companies use social media to promote the brand name in their communications with their customers to increase brand awareness, strengthen loyalty, and use various appeals to encourage the customers to interact with the posts and thus increase popularity (Swani et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Ahmad et al. (2016) claimed that social media marketing can only function well with content as the content itself is something businesses can share and post to customers. Similarly, Quy and Sun (2021) mentioned that where technology has integrated into almost every part of an individual's life, and everyone's extensive use of social media platforms, Digital content marketing is rising as a new subgroup of content marketing.

Perceived content quality

Many insights from previous studies on the role of the content type indicated that social media content had been conceptualized into three different types (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021): The first type is defined as "Rational," which is referred to as informational, functional, educational, or current event (Coelho et al., 2016; Dolan, Conduit, et al., 2019). The findings of previous studies have highlighted conflicting results regarding the relationship between rational content and its influence on engaging (Relationship between brand and consumer (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). The findings of Coelho et al. (2016) revealed no significant relationship between the effect of rational content on engagement. Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) empirically

demonstrated the form of likes and comments. The second type is "Interactional." This may include the experiential, personal, employee, and brand community (Coelho et al., 2016; Dolan, Seo, et al., 2019; Tafesse, 2015). Similar to rational content, several scholars provided mixed results on Interactional. For example, Dolan, Seo, et al. (2019) suggested that entertaining content affects engagement in the form of likes, but (entertaining content) did not influence active engagement in the form of comments. Tafesse (2015) found that humorous, funny, and artistic content (entertaining) is more likely to be liked on Facebook than more serious content. The third type is named "Transactional," referred to as remunerative, brand resonance, and sales promotion (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; D.-H. Kim et al., 2015). Transactional content is used for sales marketing promotion and brand quality content (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). This type of content focuses on using direct calls to purchase and the promotional approach (Swani et al., 2013) within social media content. Previous studies suggested that the use of remunerative content (these studies explored the concept of transactional content under the label of "remunerative" content) significantly reduced the number of likes (passive engagement) (Pletikosa Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Swani et al., 2013).

In addition, previous studies indicate that attractiveness features such as design, color, and logo play an essential role in shaping technology consumer attitudes (Gómez-Ruiz et al., 2022; Hwang & Chung, 2015). Attractiveness is defined by van der Heijden (2003) as "the degree to which a person believes that the website is aesthetically pleasing to the eye" (p. 544). Gómez-Ruiz et al. (2022), using Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989), showed that attractiveness and usefulness, and ease to use have the most vital relationship with the intention to use fitness apps based on their attractiveness. Similarly, van der Heijden (2003) investigated an extension of the TAM to show that the "perceived visual attractiveness" of the website influences the usage of websites. Kim (2021) asserted that platform quality has a direct effect on a long-term relationship with content providers, and the study conducted by him indicated that platform quality has a significant impact on satisfaction and loyalty among content providers. Much research has focused on the effects of providing more "good" information in an online context (Boon-itt, 2019; Gao et al., 2012; Hunter & Perreault, 2007; Shabani shojaei, 2015). According to Boon-it (2019), "perceived information quality is related to the amount of information, variety of information, the richness of content, and navigation" (p.4), and it is essential in the creation of a trust-building relationship (Wong & Hsu, 2007). Thus, providing

high-quality content has become crucial for gaining a Brand-customer relationship. In the current study, by a combination of general arguments on attractiveness related to visual elements (overall design, i.e., colors) and quality of the content (informational content), we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Perceived content quality positively influences the relationship established with the consumer.

2.3.5. Organic brand ambassadors

Brand ambassadors are crucial to promoting a business organically and making it grow faster. Many firms utilize “ brand ambassadors” to represent the brand among the general population (Crabb, 2019). The statistic shows the growing importance of social media influencers for brands to connect with their audiences. According to Digital Marketing Institute (2021), not only do 49 percent of consumers depend on influencer endorsements, 40 percent of customers reported they purchased a product after seeing that product on Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. It should be noted that brand ambassadors are different from influencers or celebrity endorsers, and brand ambassadors are non-celebrity persons who are passionate about a brand (Crabb, 2019; Geurin, 2020).

Although the use of brand ambassadors is not a pretty recent phenomenon in the business world (Andersson & Ekman, 2009), research on brand ambassador programs indicates little attention has been paid to the Organic brand ambassador; However, in the fields of tourism and hospitality management, some work has been published. For example, Andersson and Ekman (2009) highlighted four main categories of ambassador networks: the citizen-focused network; the business-oriented network; the fame-focused network; and the niche network focused on one specific discipline. Rehmert and Dinnie (2013) examined brand ambassadors for the city of Berlin, and based on their findings, benefit-driven and altruistic are categories of motivation amongst ambassadors. While the present study differs from hospitality management, some of the conclusions of these studies are relevant to the current line of inquiry. Xiong et al. (2013) studied the role of employees in the hospitality industry as brand ambassadors for their company. They highlighted that it is essential for employees acting as brand ambassadors to experience a meaningful connection to the brand to the establishment of customer-brand relationships. According to Menezes (2018), the brand ambassador concept originates from marketing

strategies; it is also interpreted as delivering value and honor to the individual involved in the process.

To our knowledge, the organic brand ambassador should have been applied in marketing studies. However, the literature reviews show that some researchers have studied voluntary brand ambassadors. In the context of Human resources, Xiong et al. (2013) argued that “employees must see the brand as being meaningful and relevant to embrace their role as brand ambassadors.” Similarly, employees can serve as employer brand ambassadors to interact with people outside the company; employees convey experiences and messages about a brand (Backhaus, 2018)

Rehmet and Dinnie (2013) analyzed citizen brand ambassadors' motivations and their effects. They studied brand ambassadors and voluntarily shared their experiences with others. The study showed that participating in the citizen brand ambassador program resulted in perceived positive effects for ambassadors. A brand ambassador can be considered any person (employee, particular customer, digital influencer) who can promote the image of a specific brand, product, or service and may or may not be paid for it (Woebcken, 2021).

These organic brand ambassadors can be:

1. When satisfied with the company's policy, brand employees produce positive feedback, thus triggering significant results through word-of-mouth and strengthening brand awareness. That is, it exposes the brand and products to a more substantial number of people (Woebcken, 2021);
2. Customers who, when satisfied, can go beyond loyalty and become true partners of the same, through the dissemination of positive feedback on social networks, with appealing content, comments, and testimonials (Woebcken, 2021).

Heald (2017) further argues that only organic ambassadors genuinely passionate about a brand will promote it authentically. Although brands cannot control organic content (in terms of metrics, results, and design, one of its main drawbacks), it can impact and praise the brand so significantly that it will authentically impact consumer choices. Habib et al. (2021) claimed that relationship marketing encourages customers to become brand ambassadors to spread electronic word of mouth (EWOM) for a brand. The strength of this relationship will be reflected in the ambassadors' communications with other consumers and potential consumers.

This study defines the organic brand ambassador as "someone (customer or employee) who has a passion for the brand and even voluntarily spreads information about a brand." Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Organic brand ambassador positively influences the relationship established with the consumer.

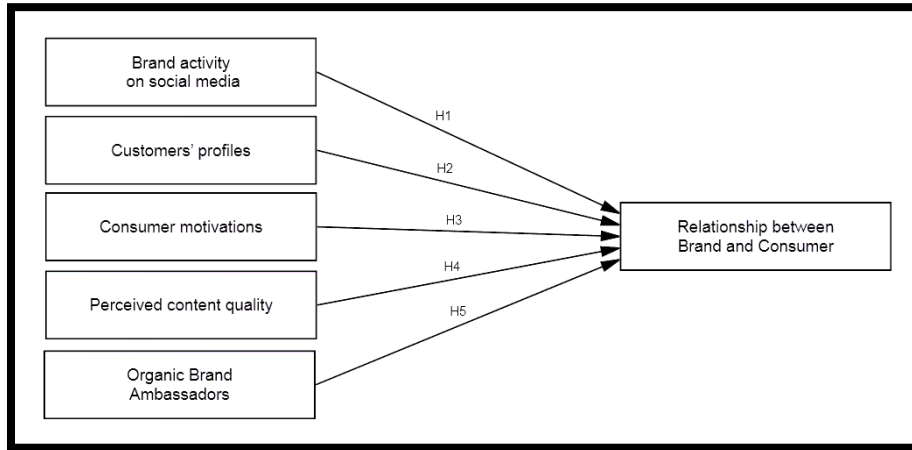


Figure1. Conceptual model

3. METHODOLOGY

According to the Research Process Onion presented by Saunders, et al. (2012), this study used a deductive approach (Theories, developing hypotheses, and confirmation/rejection). To operationalize the research strategy, cross-sectional research and survey methods were applied. This study used quantitative research methods. An online questionnaire used for collection in Portugal,

3.1. Measure development

Survey scales were adapted from existing studies for Brand Activity on Social Media (Filipe & Simões, 2015; Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Meire et al., 2019; Valerio Ureña et al., 2015), Consumer Profile and Consumer Motivations (Afonso & Borges, 2013; Pereira, 2014), Relationship between Brand and Consumer (Lackermair et al., 2013; Whitburn et al., 2020), Organic Brand Ambassadors (Heald, 2017; Lackermair et al., 2013; Menezes, 2018; Whitburn et al., 2020). Scales were designed on a five-point Likert scale, anchored with

"Strongly Disagree" and "Strongly Agree." Concerning construct validity, the measurement scale used constructs identified and used in previous studies and theories.

Measurement validity

In this study, the measurement validity has been done in three steps. 1) Similar to other marketing studies (Graça, 2021; Zhou et al., 2005), all the measures were professionally translated into Portuguese by a professional translator and then back-translated to English to ensure translation equivalence. 2) To ensure content validity and face validity and detect problems in the questionnaire contents, wording, and whether there are any ambiguous or biased questions, a pretest of the questionnaire was made by two experts (two academic experts). The academic experts reviewed the questionnaire's original English and Portuguese versions before the Pilot study. 3) Following the completion of a pretest with experts, the first version of the questionnaire was pilot tested among 25 people. All suggestions from the pre-test were considered, and we found preliminary evidence that the scales were reliable and valid. We used Cronbach's alpha to analyze the scale's reliability in this step. For the evaluation of the reliability coefficient, the Cronbach alpha evaluates the consistency of the entire scale and is the most commonly used to assess the "reliability" of scales (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The values of Cronbach alpha were above 0.6 for all the variables, confirming the scale's reliability.

Following data collection, an online questionnaire was applied to consumers. A 30-item questionnaire has been used to measure the five construct variables. The questionnaire was created in the Google Forms tool, given its ease of usability, completion, and dissemination, and distributed for completion on the social networks Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. The data were collected between 15 May 2022 and 12 June 2022, gathering 305 responses. Finally, 258 questionnaires were used for the data analysis. We used regression analysis to test the hypotheses.

3.2. Population and sample characteristics

The target respondents of this study were individuals who have social media and are using different social media platforms to communicate/follow (i.e., Facebook, website) the brands in Portugal. We applied the convenience sampling technique. From the descriptive analysis, out of 258 respondents, 68.6 percent are Female (n=177), and 31 percent are Male (n=80). 1 of the respondents preferred not to reveal their gender. The age distribution of the sample covers several age groups, and the highest concentration of individuals is in the age group 26-35, about

113 (43.8 percent), representing the majority of the sample. It should also be noted that the 18 to 25 age group presented a significant rate representing 38 percent (n= 98) of the sample. After analyzing the academic qualifications, it was found that most respondents have a high level of education, with graduates representing around 45 percent (116) of the sample. A significant number of respondents have completed the 12th grade, 72 (27.9 percent).

4. RESULTS

In this study, descriptive and inferential analyses were applied to the cleaned data set to describe the sample. Then, we used regression analysis to test the hypotheses. Tables 1 provide summaries of the statistical results. The mean scores for all items across the study indicate that the mean value is above average (Table A appendix). A generally accepted rule is that Cronbach's alpha 0.60-0.70 indicates an acceptable level of reliability (Hulin et al., 2001; Ursachi et al., 2015). The results of Cronbach's alpha for all six constructs investigated are above the lower limit of acceptability, 0.60. (Table A appendix). This confirms that the measurement set that was used was reliable. This study used the skewness and kurtosis values to examine the multivariate normal distribution. The values for skewness and kurtosis were between -2 and +2, which is considered acceptable to prove normal univariate distribution (George & Mallery, 2010).

4.1. Results of hypotheses testing

To test hypotheses 1 to 4, multiple linear regression was performed to determine if there exists a linear relationship between the dependent variable (H1. Brand activity on social media, H2. Consumer profile, H3. Consumer motivations and H4. Perceived content quality of the content) and the independent variable (Relationship between brand and consumer). Table 1 presents a summary of the linear regression test.

Table 1. Result of multiple regression

Paths	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
H1. Brand activity on social media to Relationship between brand and consumer.	0.095	1.592	0.113	0.573	1.744
H2. Consumer profile to Relationship between brand and consumer	0.114	2.001	0.046	0.622	1.608
H3. Consumer motivations to Relationship between brand and consumer.	0.083	1.549	0.123	0.701	1.426
H4. Perceived content quality to Relationship between brand and consumer.	0.441	7.295	0.001	0.555	1.802
H5. Organic brand ambassadors to Relationship between brand and consumer.	0.142	2.559	0.011	0.657	1.523
R Square = 0.490; F= 48.39 (p < 0.01)					

Table 1 shows that these independent variables have explained 49 percent of the Relationship between brand and consumer ($R^2 = 0.490$). We considered the tolerance and VIF (the variance inflation factor) values to test the impact of multicollinearity. The problem of collinearity may occur when VIF is more than 10, and tolerance is below 0.1 (Hair et al., 1998, 2006). Table 1 indicates that the values of Tolerance that the average ranged from "0.555 to 0.701 " and VIF ranged from "1.426 to 1.802", indicating that the results were reliable and had no multicollinearity problems among the variables.

The results provide a positive but not significant relationship between the "Brand activity on social media to Relationship between brand and consumer" (H1. $\beta = 0.095$, $p > 0.05$). In addition, the impact of Consumer profile on the Relationship between brand and consumer is confirmed (H2. $\beta = 0.114$, $p < 0.05$). Similar to H1, the impact of Consumer motivations on the Relationship between brand and consumer is rejected (H3. $\beta = 0.083$, $p > 0.05$). The results show that Perceived content quality directly affects the Relationship between brand and consumer (H4. $\beta = 0.441$, $p < 0.001$). The regression analysis results for the impact of the Organic Brand Ambassadors on the Relationship between brand and consumer demonstrate strong evidence that Organic Brand Ambassadors affect the Relationship between brand and consumer (H5. $\beta = 0.142$, $p < 0.05$).

5. DISCUSSION

In recent decades, with the increasing evolution of consumer preferences, companies have felt the need to elevate their form of communication, instigating a change in their concept and undergoing modifications in their processes (Galvis Ardila & Silva Agudelo, 2016) actions, words, and "appearance" (Leal, 2017). Thus, this study examined the factors affecting the relationship between brand and consumer. We reviewed related research, and the authors attempted to integrate all such studies that addressed this research and provided the theoretical framework for this study.

As to the former, our findings indicate that Brand activity on social media (H1) and Consumer motivations (H3) were not confirmed. However, Consumer profile (H2), Perceived content quality (H4), and Organic Brand Ambassadors (H5) lead to relationships between brand and consumer.

Although previous studies (Busca & Bertrandias, 2020; Slijepčević et al., 2020) highlighted that the more significant activity of brands on social networks motivates customers to remain in the relationship with the preferred brand, the findings showed the impact of the Brand activity on social media is an insignificant influence on relationships between brand and consumer. The results showed that Consumer profile affects the relationship between brand and consumer. Palomba (2020) argued that consumers' demographics could help brands create ready-made groupings and that consumers' demographics can be used to predict online behavior (Hood et al., 2020; Soopramanien & Robertson, 2007). Further, the result indicated that the effect of consumer motivations (H3) on the relationship between brand and consumer is not confirmed. This finding was contrary to prior research by Sung et al. (2010), which has found that consumer motivations lead to relationships between brand and consumer. Oliveira (2018) claimed that consumers follow certain brands because they are emotionally connected. Sung et al. (2010) stated that consumer motives include revealing their identity and passion for brands. Sook Kwon et al. (2014) showed that "incentive seeking," "social-interaction seeking", "brand usage/likeability," and "information seeking" are four primary motivations for customers to follow brands on social media platforms (i.e., Twitter). The results showed that perceived content quality (H4) directly and significantly impacts the relationship between brand and consumer. In line with previous studies on the online environment (Boon-itt, 2019; Gao et al., 2012; Hunter & Perreault, 2007; Shabani shojaei, 2015), the findings of this study emphasized

that Perceived content quality has a direct effect on long-term Brand-customer relationship (J. Kim, 2021).

In supporting hypothesis 5, the empirical results indicated the Organic Brand Ambassadors to the relationship between brand and consumer. Brand ambassadors represent the brand among the general population (Crabb, 2019). Woebcken (2021) argued that a brand ambassador could be considered any person who can promote the image of a particular brand and may or may not be paid for it. In this study, we asked respondents. According to Habib et al. (2021), relationship marketing serves customers as brand ambassadors to spread electronic word of mouth (EWOM) for a brand. The findings of this study show that ambassadors who described a primarily positive experience have an impact on customers to build a Brand-customer relationship.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the factors affecting the relationship between brands and consumers on social networks. This study is one of the first empirical works to incorporate concepts from three relevant theoretical models (i.e., Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G), Theory of consumption value (TCV), and Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) processes framework. Very few studies have attempted to integrate the concepts of the mentioned models as potential antecedent factors of the Relationship between brand and consumer. Most previous researchers examined the effect of social media activities on purchase intentions and consumer decision-making (Barreda et al., 2020); therefore, this study fills a gap in the requirements for analyses with different contexts. To the best of our understanding, empirical research on brand activity using social media needs to be more extensive. Current research clarified the impact of brand activity on social media, consumer motivations, and perceived content quality on the relationship between brand and consumer. Thus, this research fills the gap in understanding the relationships between "Brand activity on social media, Consumer motivations, Consumer profile, Perceived content quality, and Organic Brand Ambassadors" and "Brand-customer relationships." Identifying and examining the role of organic brand ambassadors is the critical implication of this study because empirical research on brand-customer relationships is lacking. Thus, this study will be a starting point for future empirical research on organic brand ambassadors. The research is relevant to digital marketing management as it studies issues related to a phenomenon that has revolutionized and empowered the entire digital medium, organic brand ambassadors. So, this

study is one of the few studies empirically finding that organic brand ambassadors influence Brand-customer relationships. This study opened a gateway to studying consumer motivations and demographics in social media studies. It provided the directions to explore further such constructs and their impact on building the Brand-customer relationship.

The findings of this study could help brands develop a better understanding of consumer behavior in the field of Brand-customer relationships. Social media provide opportunities for companies to establish direct relationships with their audience; Brand activity on social media positively influences long-term relationships between brands and consumers. Thus, companies can use social media platforms to create, communicate, and enhance their relationships with potential consumers. Moreover, while brand activity on social media is essential for all types of businesses, and companies may be willing to engage with consumers on social media more than in the offline environment, they must be careful not to encourage behaviors that lead to social media fatigue (Mason et al., 2021). To counter this threat, businesses can engage in offline brand-related activities encouraging customers to interact with them and later post about such activities on social media. In addition, the results heightened that understanding the consumers' demographics by companies is essential to the relationship between Brand and Consumer. Thus demographic characteristics of customers can be used for brands' marketing programs (Chawla & Joshi, 2020; Nawaz et al., 2020). Therefore, marketers must understand and analyze the demographic characteristics that may help organizations build online Brand-customer relationships. In addition, the respondents of this study were mainly from younger age groups (less than age 35); the results suggest that brands may engage with the young respondents on social media platforms (i.e., Twitter and Instagram), which are popular among age groups (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017).

One of the key elements of consumer motivations is Emotional connection; consumers follow certain brands because they are emotionally connected to (Oliveira, 2018). Thus, social media platforms offer practitioners interactive platforms to build emotional connections with customers (Barreda et al., 2020). Concerning the results found, the study recommends that managers provide high-quality content has become essential for gaining a Brand-customer relationship; thus, it is necessary to concentrate on high-quality content to build a Brand-customer relationship when using social media platforms. Moreover, Social media content created by the company can generate a viral response that can help spread original advertising to the larger public (Schivinski

& Dabrowski, 2016). Therefore, to achieve better results, marketers must routinely support user-generated content and encourage consumers to produce content that helps their companies' brands and products.

Finally, brand ambassadors can help brands to spread information to potential customers. This investigation should yield further implications for brands to better their internal and external marketing strategies to promote their employees or customers as brand ambassadors; in competitive business circumstances, brands must formulate effective strategies to encourage employees or customers to become their brand ambassadors.

Despite the contributions of the current study, it has several limitations. This study intended to bridge, in some way, this gap; however, it is limited to what happens in Portuguese territory; it would be fascinating to develop a longitudinal study with a larger sample to understand the evolutions that occurred in the behavior of both brands on the theme under investigation, and to obtain feedback from individuals through an international questionnaire, as well as interviews with international brands, to get complete research and with the presentation of global perspectives and opinions about the concepts explored. Finally, as this is an exploratory study, other unexamined constructs may add to the explanation of building brands' digital communication on social media platforms. As an indication for future research, it is suggested to strengthen and continue the study regarding the theme of ambassadors, especially organic ones, which needs to be explored with the increasing market mutation. The research found that there are still few studies done in this area, especially regarding the analysis of the relationship between brands and consumers to win ambassadors organically because there are many offers related to the concept of paid ambassadors/influencers. Still, with the organic ones, it is entirely extinct. The following limitation is that our research was conducted for respondents using different social media platforms to communicate/follow the brands. We did not focus on a specific category of brands (products or services). Future studies can be oriented toward building our research model for a particular brand. Some of the findings of this study need to be more consistent with previous studies, and therefore, to understand the reason for these inconsistencies, further studies are required. Due to a lack of convergent validity, performing a structural equation analysis was impossible.

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APPENDIX

Table A: Measurement Items and Descriptive Statistic (N=258)

Variable	Mean	S.D	alpha
Brand Activity on Social Media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) (Filipe & Simões, 2015)(Valerio Ureña et al., 2015)(Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019)(Meire et al., 2019)			
C1.1- In my opinion, the presence of brands on social networks is crucial for their visibility.	4.29	0.48	0.602
C1.2- In my opinion, the creation, co-creation, editing, and sharing of content by the brand are important on social media.	4.49	0.55	
C1.3- If the brand publishes regularly on its social networks, it awakens more interest in me, and the will to disseminate its content to my friends and family is greater.	4.35	0.58	
C1.4- The greater the activity of brands, on social networks, the more informed I am.	4.39	0.58	
C1.5- The volume of content produced by brands and their activity present on social networks, is crucial for their engagement with me (as a consumer).	4.36	0.6	
Consumer Profile (Afonso & Borges, 2013; Pereira, 2014)			
C2.1- In my opinion brands should produce content according to the user/consumer profile on their social networks to create greater engagement.	4.29	0.55	0.664
C2.2- In my opinion, the definition of the type of content has to meet my needs as a consumer.	4.38	0.64	
C2.3- In my opinion, the age of the brand's followers interferes with the type of content it should present.	4.35	0.63	
C2.4- In my opinion, brand campaigns should be segmented according to the age and location of the consumer.	4.31	0.64	
C2.5- In my opinion, the type of language used in brand communication should meet the profile of its target consumer.	4.36	0.62	
Consumer Motivations (Afonso & Borges, 2013; Pereira, 2014)			
C3.1- I follow a brand and the content published by it because I am emotionally connected to it.	4.01	0.74	0.684
C3.2- I follow a brand, and the content published by it, to feel included and accepted in my group of friends/family.	3.67	1.09	
C3.3- I follow a brand and the content published by it because it offers me discounts and vouchers.	3.29	1.12	
C3.4- I follow a brand because of the content and information on its products.	3.85	0.89	
C3.5- I follow some brands on social networks because that way I can share content, evaluate and criticise.	3.56	0.99	
Perceived content quality (Koob, 2021; Leal, 2017; Schreiner et al., 2021)			
C4.1- The quality and attractiveness of the content published by brands interfere with my feelings towards them.	4.27	0.61	0.610
C4.2- If the brand presents good content, with an appealing and attractive design, the probability of sharing is high.	4.3	0.7	

C4.3- In my opinion, spontaneous and emotional content is more shareable.	4.3	0.66	
C4.4- In my opinion, more aesthetic and informational content is more shareable.	4.15	0.78	
C4.5- In my opinion, the verbal content of a publication is more important than the visual component.	4.23	0.76	
Relationship between Brand and Consumer (Lackermair et al., 2013; Whitburn et al., 2020)			
C5.1- In my opinion, the content disclosed by a brand influences the type of relationship established with the user.	4.33	0.55	0.607
C5.2- In my opinion, if a friend/family member of mine shares content from a brand, I will believe in it faster.	4.24	0.68	
C5.3- In my opinion, the opinion of others about a brand interferes with the feeling/relationship that I will have with it.	4.22	0.78	
C5.4- In my opinion, when a brand publishes content directed at its target audience it more easily creates positive relations with them.	4.28	0.6	
C5.5- I only follow brands that I believe in and trust.	4.4	0.63	
Organic Brand Ambassadors (Heald, 2017; Lackermair et al., 2013; Menezes, 2018; Whitburn et al., 2020)			
C6.1- I trust a brand more where publications are shared by my friends/family (organic) than by influencers and celebrities (paid).	4.19	0.67	0.637
C6.2- In my opinion, organic ambassadors convey more trust and honesty than paid ambassadors.	4.28	0.68	
C6.3- In my opinion, it is more beneficial for companies to produce shareable and interesting content for organic ambassadors than for paid ones.	4.23	0.76	
C6.4- In my opinion, a brand has greater reach and transparency with organic ambassadors than with paid ones.	4.19	0.82	
C6.5- In my opinion, the results with paid ambassadors are better than with organic ambassadors. (Deleted item)	3.81	1.12	

How to cite this article:

Oliveira, Z.; Silva, A. F.; & Teixeira, S. (2023). Factors Affecting the Relationship between Brand and Digital Consumer in Portugal. *International Journal of Marketing, Communication and New Media*, Vol. 11, N° 20, 226-256.