
Exploring the relationship between social media marketing activities and customer equity in the training context: a literature review and a case study approach

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media marketing activities (SMMAs) and customer equity (CE) in the training context, which has never been tackled before in the literature. This research illustrated the use of a qualitative methodology to inductively understand the connection between SMMAs and CE from the company's point of view. To do this, a case study approach was employed, and data collected through semi-structured interviews with social media experts from a client-centric training provider. Thematic analysis revealed that trainees follow training providers' social media for entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The SMMAs were positively correlated with CE and customer equity drivers (CEDs), namely, brand equity (BE), value equity (VE), and relationship equity (RE).

Keywords: marketing; marketing communication; social media; customer equity; brand equity; value equity; relationship equity; training context.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, the use of social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, SnapChat, Instagram, Blogs, Tumbler, etc. has increased dramatically (Yadav and Rahman, 2018). In 2020, there were over 3.6 billion social media users globally, and this number is projected to increase to 4.41 billion by 2025 (Tankovska, 2021). This large customer base makes social media popular not only among users but also among businesses that use it as a marketing communication medium (Yadav and Rahman, 2017). According to The CMO Survey (2021), marketers expect to increase social media spending in the next five years, reaching 34% of marketing budgets. This rapid expansion of social media marketing (SMM) channels has redefined new ways for businesses to reach, and interact with customers (Ebrahim, 2020). Thus, companies are investing in technology to boost their presence on social media, and are incorporating social media into their marketing strategies because they see it as a less expensive platform on which marketers can perform integrated marketing activities with minimal effort in a cost-effective way (Aggarwal and Mittal, 2022; Kim and Ko, 2012). Moreover, social media also allows businesses or brands to make changes in response to current trends (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Sedej and Justinek, 2013).

Since SMM is currently monopolising marketers' attention, it requires new and special strategies to maximise long-term profit. Hence, the concept that customers, like any other asset, should be considered by a company to guide its decision-making regarding customer acquisition and retention (Di Benedetto and Kim, 2016). From a marketing perspective, social media is seen as the technological module of communication, transaction, and relationship building (Andzulis et al., 2012). Social media is also being used by training service providers to build customer assets through better communication with customers. By 2023, training providers are expected to make about \$14.2 billion, and this number is expected to keep rising (Huhn, 2019). Nonetheless, business-to-customer (B2C) service companies showed the highest return on investment (ROI) from SMM (The CMO Survey, 2021). Thus, training service providers should use SMM in a way that makes sense for this type of industry and audience in order to generate a high long-term profit, build good relationships with their customers, and give them something of value. Kotler and Keller (2016) say that the main goal of any marketing program is to increase the value of stakeholders and build and maintain strong relationships with customers. Since the foundation of social media is relationships (Yee et al., 2022), this study aims to understand how social media marketing activities (SMMA) can maximise customer equity (CE) in the training sector.

Since social media is still a relatively new phenomenon, measuring its impact has not been thoroughly investigated (Ebrahim, 2020). Previous studies focused on luxury fashion brands (Kim and Ko, 2012), airlines (Seo and Park, 2018), banking (Hafez, 2021), supermarkets and e-commerce (Yadav and Rahman, 2018), telecommunications (Ebrahim, 2020), and cinema (Yee et al., 2022), but SMMA's effects on CE have never been investigated in the training industry. Hence, scholars have also called for more research on SMM and CE in other services, such as training. Our study seeks to fill this gap and contribute to the existing SMM literature, examining how SMMA affect CE in the training sector; and validating five dimensions of perceived SMMA, namely interactivity, entertainment, customisation, trendiness, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM), based on prior research and our empirical study. These five activities grasp key characteristics of SMM and thus illuminate this phenomenon further.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Social media marketing activities

Social media is “a collection of Internet-based applications that build on the philosophical and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC)” [Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010), p.61]. Social media is now used by 4.7 billion people worldwide, which means that more than half of the world’s population (59%) are now social media users (Chaffey, 2022). This growing social media user population demonstrates the importance of social media in business, particularly in marketing, including viral marketing and online advertising. Businesses are using social media to actively perform integrated marketing activities with less effort and cost due to a growing audience (Ismail, 2017). The global social media market increased from \$193.52 billion in 2022 to \$231.1 billion in 2023 at a compound annual growth rate of 19.4% and is anticipated to reach \$434.87 billion by 2027 (ReportLinker, 2023). In 2020, social media advertising spent 132 billion US dollars, and by 2024, it will exceed 200 billion (Statista, 2023). Hence, if a company’s online marketing strategy does not include SMM, it will inevitably miss out on numerous opportunities to reach potential customers (Palalic et al., 2020). Several attempts have been made to provide a definition of SMM, but no collective agreement has been reached as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Literature’s definitions of SMM

<i>SMM definitions</i>	<i>Reference</i>
An important tool for developing and maintaining customer-brand relationships.	Cheung et al. (2020, p.3)
The commercial marketing events or processes that use social media in an attempt to positively influence consumers’ purchase behaviour.	Chen and Lin (2019)
It allows companies to communicate with consumers easily and quickly.	Seo and Park (2018, p.38)
A process by which companies create, communicate, and deliver online marketing offerings via social media platforms to build and maintain stakeholder relationships that enhance stakeholders’ value by facilitating interaction, information sharing, offering personalised purchase recommendations, and eWOM creation among stakeholders about existing and trending products/services.	Yadav and Rahman (2017, 2018, p.3)
A pure communication tool to push content to customers, the community, or employees.	Felix et al. (2017, p.121)
A dialogue often triggered by audiences, or a business that circulates amongst the stated parties to set in motion a revealing communication on some promotional information so that it allows learning from one another’s use and experiences, eventually benefiting all of the involved parties.	Alalwan et al. (2017, p.1179)
Is the utilisation of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organisation’s stakeholders.	Tuten and Solomon (2017)
It is an effective tool for developing relationships with customers and building brand loyalty within the social media-based brand community.	Ismail (2017, p.137)

Table 1 Literature's definitions of SMM (continued)

<i>SMM definitions</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Engaging with customers through SNSs is commonly known as SMM that brings several benefits to companies, such as creating word-of-mouth, positively affecting customer equity, enhancing customer loyalty to the company, and increasing purchase intention of the company's products or services.	Choi et al. (2016, p.772)
SMM, which uses social networks such as Facebook to enable content sharing, information diffusion, relationship building, and fan cohesion.	Chang et al. (2015, p.777)
The company's process of creating and promoting online marketing-related activities on social media platforms that offer value to its stakeholders.	Pham and Gammoh (2015, p.325)

Kim and Ko (2012) defined SMMA as interaction, entertainment, trendiness, customisation, and eWOM, which affect consumers' SMM perceptions and customer equity drivers (CEDs). Several researchers extensively used this well-known five-dimensional SMM model to evaluate SMM's impact on CE or one or more of its drivers (Ural and Yuksel, 2015; Godey et al., 2016; Cheung et al., 2020; Ebrahim, 2020; Koay et al., 2020; Hafez, 2021). This study used Kim and Ko's (2012) SMMA that have been shown to work in service literature (Sano, 2014; Hafez, 2021; Yee et al., 2022). This study defines SMM as effective communication methods that capture engaged consumers' perceptions of SMMA through five dimensions: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and eWOM (Kim and Ko, 2012). Perceived entertainment represents the fun and pleasure acquired from social media usage (Yadav and Rahman, 2017, 2018). Perceived interactivity is customers' perception of the extent to which social media allows them to share content and views with the company and other customers (Yadav and Rahman, 2018). Perceived customisation denotes the degree to which a service satisfies diverse customer preferences based on their needs (Seo and Park, 2018). Trendiness is the degree to which the information provided via social media is new and up-to-date (Kim and Ko, 2012). Customers' perceptions of how much they recommend and share their experiences on social media are referred to as eWOM (Sano, 2014).

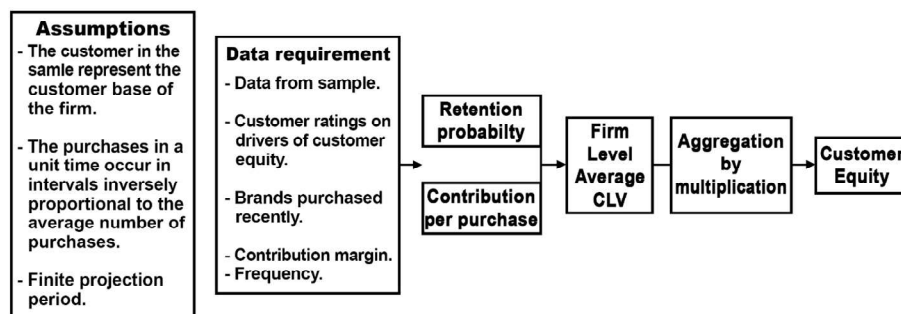
2.2 *CE and its drivers*

CE is a crucial aspect of marketing investment returns (Blattberg and Deighton, 1996). Marketing practises have become increasingly customer-centred, and brand-centred marketing is giving way to customer-centred marketing in the service industry (Zeithaml et al., 2001). The shift from product-centred to customer-centred thinking necessitates a corresponding shift from product-based strategy to customer-based strategy (Hao and Chon, 2021). Marketing, for example, has shifted its emphasis away from short-term transactions and towards long-term customer relationships (Rust et al., 2004). In other words, a company's strategic opportunities may be best viewed through the lens of the company's ability to improve CE. The philosophy underlying CE is that customers are the primary source of current and future financial flows. Therefore, CE is utilised as a potent instrument to maximise the return on marketing investments and optimise the marketing budget allocation (Villanueva and Hanssens, 2007). The transition from brand equity (BE) to CE signifies a shift in emphasis from products to services, from a product

orientation to a customer orientation, from transactions to relationships, and from customer acquisition to customer retention (Zeithaml et al., 2001).

There are several frameworks available to understand the drivers of CE, including the “Berger and Nasr (BN) approach; Gupta and Lehmann (GL) approach; Blattberg, Getz, and Thomas (BGT) approach; and Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml (RLZ) approach” [Kumar and George, (2007), p.158]. Kumar and George (2007) classified these approaches based on their measurement and maximisation of CE, underlying assumptions, data needs, and computed metrics (Aggarwal and Mittal, 2022). The RLZ framework was developed by Rust et al. (2004), building on Rust et al. (2000) and Lemon et al. (2001). This framework appears to be the most relevant for this study, because it is the only one that uses data from respondents in a selected sample and individual-specific ratings of consumer equity drivers, as this study does. Kumar and George’s summary of the RLZ approach is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 RLZ approach



Source: Kumar and George (2007)

According to the RLZ approach, CE was defined as “the total of the CLV summed over all of the firm’s current and potential customers” [Rust et al., (2004), p.110]. It was also defined as “the concept in which customers are viewed as assets with quantitative and qualitative values determined” [Lemon et al., (2001), p.21]. In a nutshell, the goal of developing the CE approach was to

- 1 understand what customers value and, based on that, guide decision-making about where to invest
- 2 provide accountability for those investments in the short and long-term (Gao et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2008).

The RLZ model proposed CEDs as drivers of loyalty intentions, and it is driven by three key components, which are BE, value equity (VE), and relationship equity (RE). These three elements can work independently or together, but according to several studies that were also based on the RLZ approach, mixing all three of them together has the best impact on customers’ loyalty and their perceptions (Gao et al., 2020; Hao and Chon, 2021; Vogel et al., 2008). VE refers to “the customers’ objective assessment of the utility of a brand based on perceptions of what is given up for what is received” [Vogel et al., (2008), p.99]. It is critical for complex decision-making processes, and is measured by quality, price, and convenience (Vogel et al., 2008). BE is defined as “the customers’

subjective assessment of a product's intangible aspects, above and beyond its objectively perceived value" [Rust et al., (2004), p.110]. A strong level of BE provides high-quality services to customers (Mokha, 2021), which contributes to the development of stronger CE (Aggarwal and Mittal, 2022). RE refers to the "customer's view of the strength of the relationship between the customer and the firm" [Rust et al., (2000), pp.55–56]. If RE is well considered, it would have a significant impact on the company's long-term profit and overall CE (Anggraini and Hananto, 2020). Consumer-company relationships can be nourished through a variety of relationship-building activities such as loyalty programs, community development programs, reward programs, special recognition and treatment, and affinity programs, which are considered keystones of RE (Rust et al., 2004).

2.3 The relationship between SMMA and CE drivers

SMM has supplanted traditional advertising and contributed to an increase in sales and long-term profit. According to Srivastava et al. (1998), marketing can be defined as an investment aimed at enhancing CE and CEDs. The importance of implementing effective SMMA cannot be overstated in terms of acquiring customers and ensuring long-term profitability (Ismail, 2017; Kim and Ko, 2012). As a result, organisations engage in SMMA with the aim of enhancing their relationships with customers and ultimately improving their profitability. The literature suggests that SMMA relate positively to CE and CEDs. Perceived e-commerce SMMA positively affected all CEDs (Yadav and Rahman, 2018). In the fashion industry, Kim and Ko (2012) found that SMMA positively affect CEDs and purchase intention. In the automotive industry, Ural and Yuksel (2015) discovered that CEDs mediate SMMA-purchase intentions.

According to Koay et al. (2020), brands that effectively communicate with their consumers on social media are more likely to captivate their attention and arouse their emotions. Therefore, consumer perception of communication stimuli influences BE positively (Yadav and Rahman, 2018). Increased SMM will lead to increased BE, according to research. Telecommunications' SMMA boost BE, according to the finding of Ebrahim (2020). Seo and Park (2018) revealed that airline SMMA boost brand awareness and image. Godey et al. (2016) confirmed that fashion brands' SMMA strongly relate to BE. In banking, higher BE means better SMMA (Hafez, 2021).

The principal aim of marketing is to create and provide value (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Thus, all marketing endeavours will be focused on enhancing VE. Users often engage with social media platforms to find products or services that provide the best value, meaning they seek items that strike a balance between affordability and quality. According to literature, SMMA's VE-related data can also improve product or service quality and convenience (Godey et al., 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012; Yadav and Rahman, 2018).

SMMA let customers interact with the brand and other users in a genuine and friendly way, increasing RE, according to Kim and Ko (2012). Relationship marketing emphasises the significance of establishing and maintaining strong consumer relationships (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Hence, it is probable that SMMA maximise RE. Several empirical studies (Kim and Ko, 2010; 2012; Ural and Yuksel, 2015) demonstrated a positive correlation between SMMA and RE.

The research problem arises from the need to ascertain the extent to which SMMA impact CE, which has never been explored in the training context. The research problem can be reflected in the following research questions:

- Q What is the impact of training providers' perceived SMMAs on CE?
- Q.a What is the impact of training providers' perceived SMMAs on BE?
- Q.b What is the impact of training providers' perceived SMMAs on VE?
- Q.c What is the impact of training providers' perceived SMMAs on RE?

These four questions serve as a framework for investigating the relationship between SMMAs and CE in the training sector and how primary training providers view the most effective SMMAs for maximising CE. Research questions help guide scholars in the direction of new insights that can enrich or expand upon the existing body of knowledge.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research context

The study was conducted in Egypt, where social media can mobilise millions of citizens (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011). For instance, Egypt is one of the largest markets, with 106.4 million consumers in 2022 (Trade.gov, 2022). The number of social media users has grown along with the population. In January 2022, Egypt had approximately 51.5 million active social media users (Galal, 2022). The strategic location of Egypt provides businesses with a platform from which to conduct business in the Middle East and Africa. The training industry is the best-prospecting industry sector for Egypt (Trade.gov, 2022). Training providers have also turned to social media as a means of constructing customer assets through effective customer communication. The case study focuses on one of the training providers catering to the private sector and which specialises in digital marketing training services.

3.2 Research design

In order to answer the study's research questions, qualitative research methodology was employed. The qualitative approach inductively understands human experience in context-specific situations (Amaratunga et al., 2002). This research sought the company's perspective on SMMAs and their relationship with CE, so a qualitative approach was considered the most suitable method. As a result, a single case study approach was utilised. Yin (1994) argued that the use of case studies is appropriate when the researcher wants to cover contextual conditions. Based on that argument, a qualitative case study was deemed the most effective method for the current study.

3.3 Case

The researchers looked at one of the best-known training companies in Egypt, which had more than 52 employees. It launched its Facebook page in 2014 with over 250,000 active and engaged followers, followed a month later by Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube channels. This training provider operates seven days a week, from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm. Since 2016, it has ranked fourth in Egypt's training market, with a 15–17% market share in general and 35–40% in digital marketing. According to their business plan and internal

documents, this company actively promotes itself as market-oriented. It was seen as relevant because SMM was its main marketing strategy.

3.4 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most effective method for addressing the research questions through the ability to follow up and seek clarification (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Six qualitative one-on-one interviews with the company's SMM practitioners were held on 26 August 2022, to understand the company's view of SMMA and CE. This approach was chosen as the most suitable form of interpretive research, which aims to explore the subjective interpretations and understandings of a phenomenon to gather insights that could develop theoretical propositions. Personal, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to effectively observe nonverbal cues, tone of voice, or any reactions to emerging issues during the interview (Hastings, 2007). Consequently, these interviews yield a greater level of comprehensive data pertaining to the topic of investigation. The interviews were recorded in audio format and afterwards transcribed. In addition, two moderators, who are working as social media copywriters, took notes during the 60–90-minute interviews. The interview guide included questions and space for further discussion. General questions were followed by study-related questions in the interviews. To confirm and consolidate the key issues, the interviews ended with a discussion about the informants' understanding of the relationship between SMMA and CE.

3.5 Sample selection (participants)

In order to enhance the understanding of a single case design, certain subunits of the case were chosen, meeting the requirements for an embedded case, as exemplified by Joia (2002) in their utilisation of a single case study research approach. After the identification of the organisation, the population from which the subunits (sample) were selected had to be specified (Zikmund, 1997). The population were chosen from among the company's stakeholders, who represent the company's perspective on the research topic. Upon examining the organisational structure, it was seen that the communication team, trainers, and digital account team exhibited the highest level of interaction with trainees who follow the training provider on social media. Consequently, a sample of the teams' representatives was chosen for the purpose of conducting interviews. Thus, six social media specialists and communication officers were selected. Purposive sampling was used because "it is a precise method for obtaining more representative and informative findings by focusing on selecting the most 'relevant' and 'meaningful' sample for the study's purpose" [Maschi and Drisko, (2015), p.38]. These factors determined their selection:

- 1 Each has at least 40,000 social media followers.
- 2 The informants – male and female – have extensive social media experience (see Table 2 for informant profiles).

Table 2 Informant profiles

<i>Experts ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Job title</i>
1	Male	27	CEO and digital marketing trainer
2	Female	42	Social media strategist
3	Male	32	Digital marketing manager
4	Female	38	Communication officer
5	Male	46	Digital marketing trainer and content creator
6	Male	28	Copywriter and media buyer

3.6 Data analysis strategy

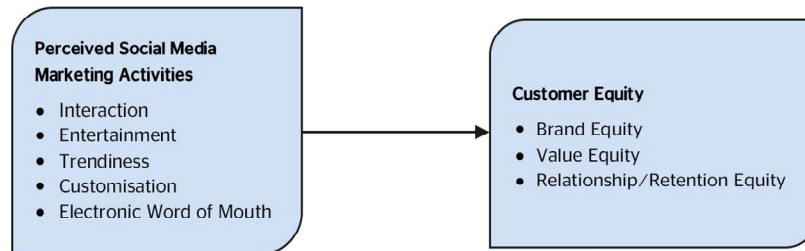
The voice recordings were transcribed in order to ensure that the data accurately represented the statements made by each informant, thereby obtaining descriptive validity or credibility (Maxwell, 1992). In accordance with the grounded theory tradition (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), the transcribed data were then coded using NVivo 11.4.3, and then inductive thematic analysis was employed. Negative case analysis and investigator triangulation strengthened the findings' reliability. Three academics reviewed the codes and discussed possible data interpretations. This method improved precision and coherence (Denzin, 1978). Moreover, researchers examined overlapping findings to identify codes that needed to be refined, combined, or separated to increase the theoretical validity of identified patterns (Craike et al., 2013). This procedure informed the final themes and strengthened the theoretical validity of the patterns (Maxwell, 1992). In order to ensure discipline as opposed to relying on intuition (Stake, 1995), the tests advocated by Yin (1994), namely construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability, are satisfied; as a result, the validity and reliability of this study are enhanced. Through the use of multiple sources of evidence, the establishment of a chain of evidence, and member checking, as well as the use of replication logic, a semi-structured interview protocol, and a case study database, the presented findings have been subjected to disciplined inquiry. The validity of the results was further strengthened by ensuring that the interviewees possessed a considerable amount of expertise in the field of SMM. In addition, these interviewees effectively cultivated substantial followings through their social media communities and predominantly relied on SMM as their primary promotional strategy as opposed to employing other marketing methods. Furthermore, the selection of informants was contingent upon their aptitude for showcasing proficiency across a diverse range of social media platforms, as well as their frequency of interactions with those platforms.

4 Findings

The researcher categorises insights from in-depth interviews that explain the relationship between the training provider's SMMAs and CE, as illustrated in a structured model in Figure 2. This framework demonstrates connections between CE, its key drivers, and SMMAs. The model is based on that of Kim and Ko's (2012) and other recent studies that followed their model (e.g., Ural and Yuksel, 2015) and was developed by the

researcher. The interviews' interpretation revealed five main themes and five sub-themes of the first theme. These themes will be discussed next.

Figure 2 The SMMAAs-CE framework (see online version for colours)



4.1 Social media is an effective marketing tool

Interview thematic analysis revealed that training providers promote their services primarily through SMM. Unlike traditional marketing efforts, SMM tools target their audience, and therefore, SMM has gained customers' attention. The informants said that businesses are progressively communicating brand information via SMMAAs, including advertising on SNSs. They also mentioned that training providers advertise mainly on Facebook. Training providers reach a wide audience at a low cost via social media. Facebook has a direct impact on the company's total revenue:

“By understanding their preferences, more audiences can be targeted through social media.” (Informant 4)

“More than 90% of our customer base has been built because of digital marketing and SMM in particular.” (Informant 2)

“For the training industry, Facebook comes first as a top channel for SMM.” (Informant 1)

4.1.1 Entertainment is a key social media component

Fun social media posts engage more customers with the brand (Kim and Ko, 2012). According to the informants, by using entertaining social media content, training providers can convert customers and maintain relationships with them. Consumers' desire for entertainment heavily influences their motivation to produce and share UGC on social media platforms. Thus, it would boost brand perception, service quality, and customer loyalty. Games, video sharing, and contests encourage brand community participation (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Entertainment on social media enlarges customer base, and increases engagement, and long-term profit:

“Entertainment is, on top of the SMMAAs, a training provider ‘must’ for attracting more leads and boosting brand name.” (Informant 5)

“Entertaining social media content has significantly contributed to building our customer base, engaging current customers, and attracting new ones.” (Informant 2)

4.1.2 Interaction is a key social media component

According to the informants, interaction has a significant role in enhancing social media conversion rates for training providers as well as fostering stronger ties between customers and the organisation. The informants, also emphasised how interaction drives social media by turning customers from passively being connected to being interactive. For instance, Facebook simplifies communication with emojis, GIFs, stories, and short phrases (e.g., ‘feeling happy’ or ‘feeling excited’). The informants believed interaction gave them first-hand feedback on users’ needs, attitudes, and perceptions, allowing them to tailor their strategies and content:

“Some customers will indicate their emotion by pressing longer on ‘like’ to indicate ‘love’, ‘wow’, ‘angry’, or ‘sad’ on Facebook.” (Informant 6)

“We make a poll to let customers select which digital content they want to know more about, and they inform us.” (Informant 2)

4.1.3 Customisation is a key social media component

Customisation is the extent to which a tailored services or information can fulfil individual’s preferences (Kim and Ko, 2012). According to the informants, trainees often seek tailored services. The informants confirmed that social media allows for more cost-effective targeting of a specific audience through customisation, when compared to other traditional media. They also indicated that customers who feel like their needs are being met will be able to reduce the time and effort they spend on information screening, improving the quality of their decisions. Utilising social identifiers to frame a message in a context that is meaningful to the customer (e.g., by displaying images of individuals with the same age, gender, and ethnicity as the receiving customer) is one of the magic social media features that businesses should make the most of:

“Tailoring social media fulfils customers’ needs.” (Informant 6)

“Trainees are usually busy professionals. They do not want to spend hours on information screening.” (Informant 1)

“The social media customised-content contributes to improving customers’ quality of decisions.” (Informant 3)

4.1.4 Trendiness is a key social media component

Customers are increasingly using social media platforms to find current product and service information, making them seem more useful and current than traditional channels. The informants, insist on trendy information that includes brand update, service reviews attract customers to follow training providers’ social media platforms. They believed that there is always something new in the training industry, so keeping their social media updated with the latest service-related trends increases brand recognition and long-term ROI. Informants also clarified that trendy social media content should provide:

- 1 Monitoring, which represents an individual’s social surroundings being observed and kept informed about.
- 2 Company-relevant knowledge about training services.
- 3 Pre-purchase information that includes services’ referrals and reviews

4 Inspiring customers to innovate and explore new ideas:

“Since the labour market is changing, it is important that training providers enrich their social media with up-to-date content.” (Informant 1)

“Customers always love to find the most recent training and service-related information on social media.” (Informant 2)

“The trendiness aspect of training providers’ social media should inspire clients to innovate new ideas about company-relevant information.” (Informant 2)

4.1.5 eWOM is a key social media component

Customers’ perceived eWOM is what they share with other customers (Kim and Ko, 2012; Seo and Park, 2018). According to our informants, social media can encourage more users to evaluate a product or service, thereby enhancing eWOM. For our informants, eWOM helps training companies grow their customer base, because they regard eWOM information obtained from SNSs as highly credible. Online testimonials and ratings are a significant source of eWOM, which influences consumers’ decisions. Customers may represent the company by sharing its useful messages with their networks, especially if they want to thank the training provider:

“Online customer reviews and ratings significantly contributed to expanding our customer base and maximising our long-term profit by fostering customer trust and enduring relationships.” (Informant 3)

“Our customers often share information from our social media pages on their own pages to express their appreciation for our efforts.” (Informant 1)

4.2 SMMA’s boost a company’s long-term profit

A customer’s value to a company is not limited to the profit from each transaction, but rather to the cumulative profit they can generate over time (Kumar and George, 2007). The customer’s view of the brand, the value offered, and the relationship between the customer and the business all affect the customer’s profit for the company. Due to the two-way nature of social media communication and its engaging content/activities, the long-term profit of training providers will increase. According to our informants, training companies can build loyal customer relationships and change how customers see the service and the brand by using social media as a way to talk to them. The more effective a company’s SMMA’s are, the greater the consumers’ perception of the value of training, the stronger their attachment to the brand, and the greater the long-term profit:

“The presence of brands on social media attracts consumers’ attention, which in turn increases sales and profits.” (Informant 1)

“The social media content is the best way to present the value of the services we offer.” (Informant 4)

“Using social media activities in a way that help the brand flourish, and gives clear information on the courses and how customers will benefit from them, is what increases profit.” (Informant 1)

“We measure our success by the long-term profit we achieve through our social media activities, which play a crucial role in retaining our customers.” (Informant 6)

4.3 *SMMAs boost BE*

According to Koay et al. (2020), brands that successfully engage in effective communication with their consumers through SNSs have a higher probability of capturing their attention and evoking emotional responses. Hence, the impact of consumer perception of communication stimuli on overall BE is found to be favourable (Yadav and Rahman, 2018). According to the informants, SMMAs aligned with training providers' mission, vision, and values promote their value and brand image. Our informants also mentioned that the influence of customers' perceptions of the effectiveness of SMM efforts is anticipated to impact total BE:

"We focus on branding social media posts, and we use the social media content that promotes our mission, vision, and values." (Informant 3)

"Thanks to social media, our brand name and logo have become simple to recall due to our engaging SMM efforts." (Informant 5)

"Undoubtedly, effective SMMAs play a pivotal role in evoking customers' emotional responses and, in turn, bolstering training providers' long-term profit." (Informant 1)

4.4 *SMMAs boost VE*

Informants said that training providers use SMMAs to illustrate the value of their services. According to our informants' response, SMMAs have the potential to enhance client value by providing unique and innovative offerings, in contrast to traditional marketing strategies. The informants explained that customers use social media to search for courses, prices, and benefits. They also said that social media can best promote the training provider's service quality:

"It is crucial to include in our social media plan posts that shed light on the quality of our services." (Informant 6)

"One of the most important roles of social media is that it can be the best promoter of the company's value, making customers realise that the value they receive is worth even more than what they pay." (Informant 2)

4.5 *SMMAs boost RE*

SMMAs can improve customer-company relations (Kim and Ko, 2012). Our informants said that social media is essential for communicating customer service and loyalty programs, which can build strong relationships with trainees. According to the informants, when consumers are well-treated and their expectations are met, RE is high:

"Good customer service on social media is a key to getting people interested in a company and making them feel more connected to it." (Informant 4)

"We offer a 5–10% discount on training if it is the customer's second course; that makes them feel appreciated." (Informant 2)

5 Discussion

The findings of our study revealed that social media is a crucial marketing tool for training providers. Moreover, entertainment, interactivity, customisation, trendiness, and eWOM are key social media components that are anticipated to improve the customer-company relationship and maximise the overall CE. Several researchers extensively used this well-known five-dimensional SMM model for evaluating the impact of SMM on CE as a whole or one or more of its drivers (Cheung et al., 2020; Ebrahim, 2020; Hafez, 2021; Koay et al., 2020; Ural and Yuksel, 2015). Hence, the themes and sub-themes were supported, research questions were answered, and the findings fell in line with the existing literature.

Social media is an efficient marketing tool and is growing rapidly. This is in line with Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) study, which mentioned that SNSs are convenient for customers because they offer low-cost marketing, user friendliness, and direct communication. 90% of firms promoted themselves on social media in 2021, spending \$48 billion (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The results are also consistent with Galal's (2022) findings, which estimated that there are 51.5 million Egyptian social media users. Compared to other social media platforms, Facebook has become the primary source of revenue (Hainla, 2018), which is aligned with the current study's findings.

Social media entertaining content increases the consumer base, engagement, and long-term profitability. This also mirrored the findings of Kim and Ko (2012) and Liu et al. (2021), which indicated the information thought to be entertaining, exciting, interesting, or fun and more likely to spread virally. This was also in line with Manthiou et al. (2013), whose study revealed that people who use social media for reasons of pleasure are thought to be looking for entertainment, and their virtual community is organised around their obvious interests.

The results showed that social media is interactive. Emoticons, GIFs, and stories help social media users communicate. Training providers benefit from interactions with users since it provides them with direct feedback regarding their needs and perceptions. This feedback helps trainers adjust their strategies accordingly. Furthermore, social media also allows customers to have productive interactions and share important ideas. This supported Kim and Ko (2012) and Godey et al. (2016).

The study's findings revealed that trainees are often seeking personalised courses and trainings, which is in line with Kempfski (2019), where in the training context, learners of all ages desire more personalised instruction. In addition, customised social media content helps to avoid the problem of information overload and facilitates decision-making. This was consistent with Kim and Ko's (2012) and Yadav and Rahman's (2018) findings, which found that perceived personalisation facilitates customers' ability to shrink information screening costs and consequently, augments the quality of customers' decisions.

Customers trust the social media activities that provide the most up-to-date information. Furthermore, customers are increasingly using social media platforms to find current product and service information. This was consistent with studies by Ashley and Tuten (2015), Cheung et al. (2020) and Kim and Ko (2012). Nevertheless, Liu et al. (2021), Muntinga et al. (2011) and Yadav and Rahman (2018) found that trendy social media information covers four sub-motives: surveillance, knowledge, pre-purchase information, and inspiration, which supported the current study's findings.

This study emphasised that eWOM is crucial to training providers' social media component. Web 2.0 makes social media the top online WOM-sharing channel. eWOM from online reviews and ratings helps customers make smart decisions, which is in line with previous studies. Over 90% of respondents consult online reviews, blogs, and other UGC before buying a new product, and nearly 46% of them say online reviews influence their purchases (Anggraini and Hananto, 2020; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Seo and Park, 2018).

SMM has replaced advertising and increased sales and long-term profit. According to Srivastava et al. (1998), marketing is an investment that improves CE and increases profitability. Customer acquisition and long-term profitability require effective SMMAs (Kim and Ko, 2012). In this regard, training providers' SMMAs enhance relationships and boost long-term profits. Kim and Ko (2012), Ural and Yuksel (2015) and Yadav and Rahman (2018) support this.

SMMAs provide training providers' consumers with service updates, customised material, entertaining activities, and two-way communication. This suggests that BE, VE, and RE rise as training providers employ effective, attractive SMMAs to inform clients about their services, improve brand perceptions, and strengthen customer-company bonds. If SMMAs rise, CE tends to rise as well. Hence, training providers' perceived SMMAs have a positive relationship with CE. This was in line with the findings of previous studies conducted by Aggraini and Hananto (2020), Kim and Ko (2012), Ural and Yuksel (2015) and Yadav and Rahman (2018).

Utilising SMMAs in a way that promotes the brand name, image, and uniqueness of a training provider will imprint the brand in the minds of customers. This indicates that as more training providers promote their services via social media, consumers' perceptions of the brand improve. Thus, a positive brand experience boosts BE among consumers. Consequentially, it is essential for training services providers to construct a reputable brand. Positive BE indicates that consumers have a high level of brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived brand quality, which may lead to sales. When presented with cheaper alternative brands, customers are more likely to purchase and pay a higher price for a product from a brand with which they have strong positive BE (Buil et al., 2013). Therefore, SMMAs have a positive effect on BE. This was consistent with previous research by Ebrahim (2020), Godey et al. (2016), Hafez (2021), Ismail (2017), Kim and Ko (2012) and Yee et al. (2022).

Like other customers, training providers' customers search marketing messages for service information. Since the goal of marketing is to establish and maintain contact with many customers, marketers can share product information and offerings with them (Kim and Ko, 2012).

Consumers would use SNSs to find services that offer the best value for the desired quality and features (Anggraini and Hananto, 2020). Thus, SMMAs' VE-related data can help training providers improve service quality and convenience and consequently, maximise VE. This was in line with previous studies by Anggraini and Hananto (2020), Kim and Ko (2012) and Yadav and Rahman.

Lemon et al. (2001) defined RE as a customer's propensity to stay with a brand or organisation despite their objective and subjective assessments. Evaluation criteria include "preferred treatment, customer service, brand image congruence, and overall affection" [Kim and Ko, (2012), p.1482]. SMMAs can strengthen training companies' relationships with their customers by emphasising how much the company values its

customers. If the perceived SMMAs increase in an attractive manner, the relationship's equity will increase. Consequently, SMMAs have a positive effect on RE. This was consistent with the findings of Anggraini and Hananto (2020), Kim and Ko (2012), Ural and Yuksel (2015) and Yadav and Rahman (2018).

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study adds to the growing body of research on SMM by looking at the role of SMMAs in improving CEDs in the context of training, which has not been examined before. Since there is a lack of research in that area, training providers struggle to manage SMMAs and CE. Locally speaking, very few studies on the concept of CEDs have been conducted in Egypt (Ebrahim, 2020). Furthermore, there is a paucity of studies that examine the relationship between SMMAs and CE. In the global context, the relevant literature is limited to specific industries or countries. Most previous studies were conducted in the context of luxury fashion brands (Kim and Ko, 2012), the airline industry (Seo and Park, 2018), banking (Hafez, 2021), the e-commerce industry (Yadav and Rahman, 2018), electronic gadgets, and smartphones (Ebrahim, 2020), with inadequate attention paid to the training context. Thus, there is a need for research to validate the findings of previous studies in other industrial contexts (Aggarwal and Mittal, 2022; Yadav and Rahman, 2018). Christodoulides et al. (2015) recommended testing CE measures with service brands. In addition, SMM has not been exhaustively examined in the literature, because it is a new phenomenon (Ebrahim, 2020). Drawing upon the extant literature on SMM and aligning with the outcomes of our empirical study, we have successfully substantiated five distinct training providers' perceived SMMAs, namely entertainment, interactivity, customisation, trendiness, and eWOM. These five activities encompass the essential characteristics of SMM, thereby; shedding more light on this phenomenon. Hence, this study fills the aforementioned research gaps in the SMM and CE marketing literature.

5.2 Managerial implications

This study is anticipated to encourage training providers to market their services through social media with greater vigour. The findings of this study, for instance, validated the five dimensions of training providers' perceived SMMAs, previously listed, that attract their audience the most and; hence, prompt those training providers to allocate a marketing budget and efforts to them, which will increase their CE in return. Since customer relationships are what strengthen the customer-brand bond, the use of SMM appears to be a suitable strategy for training providers. Consequently, these findings will enable training providers to establish and maintain successful brand, value, and relationship communication on social media by prioritising individual communication with customers and paying close attention to content sharing, with an emphasis on the interactive, trendy, eWOM, and entertaining nature of social media content. Therefore, this study will benefit training providers by supplying them with a road map for maximising their CE, including BE, VE, and RE, by utilising SMMAs in a manner that attracts customers.

6 Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This study provides an exhaustive understanding of SMMAAs and CE in the training sector, which has never been addressed in the literature. It contributes to the theory of SMM, CE, and training service marketing strategies. This study also equips training providers with guidelines for implementing value-added communication activities via social media and increasing their CE. This study responds to calls for more research on SMM and CE in other industries, products, and services (Aggarwal and Mittal, 2022; Christodoulides et al., 2015; Yadav and Rahman, 2018) by examining how SMMAAs affect CE in the training sector and identifying and validating five dimensions of perceived SMMAAs, namely interactivity, entertainment, customisation, trendiness, and eWOM, based on prior research and on this empirically grounded study. These five activities grasp key characteristics of SMM and thus, highlight this phenomenon further. This study used a qualitative approach to inductively understand the company's perspective on the connection between SMMAAs and CE in the training context. This was done through a case study, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with social media professionals from a client-centric training provider. Thematic analysis revealed that trainees follow training providers' social media for entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and eWOM. Nonetheless, the SMMAAs positively correlated with CE and CEDs, namely BE, VE, and RE.

The limitations of this study were predominantly contextual and geographical in nature. Firstly, the data were collected from a single training provider using a case study, which limits the results' applicability to the entire population. For a better generalisation of the results, it is recommended that future researchers collect data from various training companies in Egypt. Secondly, the study was conducted in one location (Egypt). Consequently, future studies could be carried out in various geographical regions with different cultural backgrounds. Hence, different results might be revealed. Lastly, the study looked at the effect of SMMAAs while disregarding the unique characteristics of each social media platform, and therefore, this limitation should be considered in future studies. Based on the limitations of this study and the empirical findings, future studies evaluating these limitations would provide practical information not only to Egyptian training providers, but also to marketers from other industries seeking solutions for SMM strategies and decision-making.

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