The Impact of Marketing Activities on e-Word of Mouth Through Social Network Sites, and the Impact this has on Brand Image and Purchase Intention in the Context of Saudi Arabia

تأثير أنشطة التسويق في الكلام الشفهي الإلكتروني على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، وتأثير ذلك في صورة العلامة التجارية والرغبة في الشراء في المملكة العربية السعودية

Ibrahim Alkandi

Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration, College of Administrative and Financial Sciences, Saudi Electronic University

إبراهيم الكندي

أستاذ مشارك _قسم إدارة الاعمال، كلية العلوم الإدارية والمالية، الجامعة السعودية الالكترونية

الملخص: تهدف الدراسة إلى تحديد عوامل التسويق عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي التي تدخل في تكوين الكلام الشفهي الإلكتروني عبر مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، وتأثير الكلام الشفهي الإلكتروني في صورة العلامة التجارية والرغبة في الشراء. تم اقتراح نموذج متكامل وتطويره بناء على نظريات معينة. وتم تطبيق نمذجة المعادلة الهيكلية لتحليل البيانات التي تم الحصول عليها من 622 مستخدمًا لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في المملكة العربية السعودية لاختبار النموذج الذي انتهجه بحثنا. أشارت النتائج إلى أن أنشطة التسويق عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي لها تأثير إيجابي ملحوظ ومباشر على تكوين الكلام الشفهي الإلكتروني. كما أظهرت نتائج البحث تأثير الكلام الشفهي الإلكتروني على تكوين صورة إيجابية للعلامة التجارية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن صورة العلامة التجارية الإيجابية التي تكونت بفضل التواصل عن طريق الكلام الشفهي الإلكتروني تعزز الرغبة في الشراء لدى مستخدمي الشبكات الاجتماعية. إن هذا البحث من شأنه أن يساهم في توسيع نطاق المعرفة من خلال تقديم نموذج شامل وتجريبي بمتغيرات متكاملة. ومن الناحية العملية، فإن الدراسة تمنح مديري التسويق عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي رؤية ثاقبة تمكنهم من تحسين فعالية القرارات التي يتخذونها، وتطوير قنوات اتصال ناجحة، وتحسين استراتيجياتهم التسويقية باستمرار في النطاق التنافسي لمواقع الشبكات الاجتماعية بناءً على نموذج البحث ونتائجه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التسويق في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، الكلام الشفهي الإلكتروني، العلامة التجارية، الرغبة في الشراء، المستهلك السعودي.

Abstract: The aim of this study is to identify the factors of social media marketing involved in creating electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) via social networking sites (SNSs), and the impact e-WOM has on brand image and purchase intention. A proposed integrated model was developed in accordance with theoretical background. Structural equation modelling was applied to analyze the data obtained from 622 social media users in Saudi Arabia to test our research model. The results indicate that social media marketing activities have a significant positive direct effect on creating e-WOM. The research findings also show the impact of e-WOM on generating a positive brand image. In addition, a positive brand image initiated by e-WOM communication promotes intention to purchase among social network users. This research contributes to broadening the scope of the literature by providing a comprehensive and empirical model with integrated variables. In practical terms, the current study offers insight, to social media marketing managers, in terms of improving the effectiveness of their business decisions, developing successful communication channels, and continuously refining their marketing strategies for the competitive arena of social network sites based on the research model and findings.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, e-WOM, Brand Image, Purchase Intention, Saudi's Consumers.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have contributed to the development of e-commerce and general socioeconomic levels (Lea, Yu, Maguluru, & Nichols, 2006), increasing the speed of growth of small and medium enterprise (Abed et al., 2015). In fact, social network sites (SNSs) have become increasingly popular in the internet and technology world, with the number of active users growing daily. Across the globe, millions of people interact via SNSs for both social and economic reasons, building relationship to stay connected, exchanging photos and experiences, chatting with friends on a regular basis, and keeping informed about news, products, and trends. Communication through SNSs for all kinds of purposes is now much easier than ever. Moreover, business relations managers now promote their products and services using business accounts on SNSs rather than conventional tools of communication such as phones and e-emails. It is an interesting means of communication since the service is free of charge, available 24/7, easy to use, and convenient. Moreover, SNSs may help small and medium size enterprises (SMSs) as they are easy to use, offer lower costs, and present fewer barriers to sharing information and business ideas with their customers (Abed et al., 2015), all of which makes them more attractive than using traditional marketing modes of communication.

In 2018, the revenue of the social media giant Facebook grew by approximately 800%, with advertisements being the main source of revenue as e-commerce and online marketing showed significant effectiveness in attracting consumers (Clement, 2020). Only 2% of Facebook's revenues in 2017 were not generated from a social media marketing agency (SMMA), which indicates that the new era of digital interactive media advertising has taken a huge step forward in the shift from traditional methods of marketing. Interactivity on social networks and the attractiveness of advertisements have been among the main factors in this SMMA growth (Wu, 2016). According to a study conducted among Saudi users of SNSs by Al-Ghaith (2016) the total number of active Twitter users in the Arab world reached 5,797,500, and the country with the highest number of active Twitter users is Saudi Arabia with 2.4 million, accounting for over 40% of all active Twitter users in the Arab region. Saudi Arabia has the largest number of social media users in the Middle East, ranking 7th globally in terms of user accounts (Albinahmed & Ahmed, 2017).

The type of user of an SNS depends on the nature of its platform and is based on shared interests, activities, economic gains, political views, and social interests (Mikalef et al., 2012). Some sites attract users who wish to share videos and photos instantly, such as Snapchat, while others, such as Twitter, attract people wishing to exchange news, information, products, and services. Other SNSs include Linkedin (business, recruitment), Instagram (business, social, fashion), and Facebook (multi- purpose), etc. All of these applications provide a specific platform type

for their users. Sites also vary in the communication device they rely on; for example, Snapchat and TikTok are mainly meant to be used on mobile phones for the user's convenience, therefore the nature of these connections vary from one site to another. For marketers, the consumer's behavioral attitudes regarding site preferences depend on the technology, behavior, and indeed the applicability of certain marketing factors utilized to persuade consumers. For instance, the Decomposed Theory of Planned Behavior (DTPB) proposed a model constructing variables such as perceived usefulness as well as perceived ease of use and compatibility that may influence users' attitudes toward adopting particular network sites. The DTPB focused on utilitarian motivations to understand consumers' behaviors toward social media adoption for purchasing.   However, in illustrating the advantages gained from SNSs, the aim of the research is twofold: to focus on specific factors of social media marketing (entertainment, interaction, trending, and advertisements) that enable the influencing of e-WOM through SNSs, and the impact it has on brand image and purchase intention. The rationale for conducting this research was based on several considerations: first, the business value generated through SNSs is remarkable and hence cannot be ignored. According to Abed et al. (2015) businesses are increasingly adopting social media as a new channel of communication, information sharing, promotion, and other marketing gains. Second, the SNS user base, as mentioned earlier, is increasing dramatically which, along with the technological developments they have introduced, make social media marketing activities unique tools to attract customers and provide a financial benefit for companies in return. For instance, one advertisement made by a celebrity on Snapchat for any type of product can trend instantly and their followers then like it, recommend it, and spread the word among friends and even beyond their own circle which may contribute to improving brand image and increase their desire to purchase. Third, the experience of online browsing and shopping experience through SNSs is different from that of offline shopping, hence the presentation of products and services uses different activities, different advertisement content, promotional channels, and other tools such as entertainment in attractive ways. Fourth, these factors have been found to be critical determinants in several consumer behavior studies. Social media and social media marketing are hot topics in the research agenda due to the development of Web 2.0 (Akar & Nasir, 2015). Also, Che Nawi et al. (2020) found that the broader objective of SMMAs is the achievement of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Therefore, this research argues that these four factors of SMMAs, if they function successfully, will encourage consumers to communicate and interact in certain ways, which may increase e-WOM communication and generate brand image in the consumer's mind which will ultimately stimulate consumers' intention to purchase. A number of studies have investigated other factors that create e-WOM and generate the consumer's online intention to purchase (Siddiqui et al., 2021; Yaman, 2018; Mikalef et al., 2012). Discussions of these studies will be presented in the following section. The purpose of the current study is to understand

consumers' behavior toward products presented on social network sites. It aims to explore the role of specific marketing activities in creating e-WOM stimulation via SNSs and the impact this has on brand image and purchase intention, specifically in the Saudi context. Thus, the following research questions are addressed:

1-What is the role of social media marketing activities in creating e-word of mouth through SNSs in kSA?

2-What is the effect of e-word of mouth on brand image in KSA?

3-What is the effect of e-word of mouth on purchase intention in kSA?

Hence, this research contributes to broadening the scope of the literature by providing a comprehensive integrated and empirical model. In practical terms, the current study offers an insight, to social media marketing managers, in terms of improving the effectiveness of their business decisions and developing successful marketing strategies for the competitive arena of social network sites.

In Section 2, the theoretical background and related studies in the field of marketing, various aspects of e-WOM, brand image, and purchase intention are introduced. Section 3 describes the theoretical model used in the research and how the research hypotheses were developed. Section 4 introduces the method and materials used, including the core constructs of the study and how the data analysis procedure was performed. Following that, the results of the empirical research are presented in Section 5. In conclusion, the outcomes of the analysis were discussed, and the implications that arise from this research are highlighted.

2. Literature Review

The aims of this research are to explore the role of social media marketing activities in creating e-WOM and its impact on brand image and purchase intention. Therefore, the current research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by attempting to tie theoretical concepts to the existing variables of marketing activities in the real world of social network sites. In doing so, and to answer the research questions posed in section 1, this section looks at the related literature.

2.1 Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA)

Market researchers have confirmed that consumers are significantly affected by the content of advertisements (Kapoor et al., 2018). The use of advertisements seems to be an easy way to accommodate the needs of e-commerce consumers, but developing an effective advertisement is a far more complicated process than it seems. Users communicate regularly on social platforms by endorsing or criticizing products and advertising content, with both positive and negative reviews of a product. Although marketers have limited control over consumers' conversations, frequent interaction with consumers enables them to re-

duce frustration and insecurity, at the same time increasing awareness of their products and providing the latest information and peak events which could influence consumers' intention to purchase.

Social network platforms have become an important part of daily life. They facilitate communication and doing business and improve the level of digital services for companies. This has forced marketers to adopt creative ideas in order to grab consumers' attention. In fact, the trade of products and services as a result of such advanced technology has shifted, to a certain extent, to online mode. This does not mean that traditional physical trading has been replaced, rather than an alternative and different experience has been introduced in the form of online purchasing and communication. This has probably caused marketers from all industries to ask questions such as: how can consumers' behaviors be understood through SNSs? The answer to this requires an understanding of the consumer's motivations; to be more specific an understanding of the hedonic motivations that shape their behaviors towards carting action is needed. Barry et al. (1994) identified two perspectives in shopping motivation: utilitarian and hedonic. The latter refers to the entertainment and pleasure phase of the whole shopping experience, while the former refers to the rationality of the consumer's shopping process (Cheung et al., 2012). Indeed, social media platforms can be exciting and fun which requires marketers to be more creative in terms of placing, arranging, and presenting their advertisements to grab consumers' attention and sell what they want to sell. In hedonic marketing of activities through SNSs such as entertainment and friendship interaction, trending is of paramount importance and cannot be ignored when attempting to create e-WOM. Among social network communities, it is important for trends to be seen as a lifestyle and a way of keeping users interactive (Rijnsoever & Donders, 2009).

As a result, an important aspect of marketing is the generation of a brand image in the consumer's mind - which is greatly influenced by SMMAs - in which companies' marketing strategies should include an SMMA in order to reach wider consumer bases (Kim & Ko, 2010). Many modern businesses view social media networks as an effective and solid platform from which to target consumers from different backgrounds (Kohli et al., 2015; Gao & Feng, 2016; Popp & Woratschek, 2016; Harrigan et al., 2018). Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and WhatsApp are examples of network applications inspired by material created by users and business which are referred to as social media networks or social network sites.

Kierzkowski et al. (1996) developed an e-marketing framework by identifying specific social media marketing activities as electronic marketing tools to replace traditional marketing methods. The authors cite five essential steps associated with successful e-marketing: relate, attract, engage, retain, and learn. They also note that the main role of companies is to persuade consumers with a combination of attentiveness and participation in order to engage them in these five marketing elements. Further studies have been

built on the work of Kierzkowski et al. (1996) such as Teo (2005) and Chan & Guillet (2011), which also emphasized the important role of SMMA as a critical aspect of marketing communication strategy. Other researchers divided SMMA components into entertainment, interaction, trending, and customization (Kim & Ko, 2012). Yadav and Rahman (2017) highlighted five SMMA factors: interactivity, informativeness, personalization, trending, and word of mouth. Sano (2014) found that integrating entertainment into social media positively increases consumer interaction and develops long-term association and positive feelings towards a brand. As a result of those studies and many others, a growing number of companies have shifted their marketing approaches and efforts toward social media by investing a considerable amount in advertising on such websites to attract new consumers. Social media interaction allows users to share and discuss ideas, exchange opinions, and help others by sharing personal experiences to resolve issues. It also allows the brand to connect with customers directly and gain their trust (Kim & Ko, 2012). SMMA aids brands by creating trends that can increase customer interaction and engagement. Studies have also shown that remaining on trend is one of the most important SMMA components. It provides the latest information about services or products and keeps consumers engaged and using their sites more often (Seo & Park, 2018; Rijnsoever & Donders, 2009). Advertisements are meant to influence the behavior of consumers who read, hear, or see them. People will be more willing to behave according to the message conveyed in an ad if they find that the information provided is trustworthy and reliable (Dhanesh & Nekmat, 2019; Ebrahim, 2019; Shieh et al., 2018). The effect of marketing aspects of social network sites on consumers' e-WOM has been significantly related to three antecedents: reputation, sense of belonging, and enjoyment (Cheung et al., 2012), and a positive relationship between entertainment and the shopping experience. They emphasize the role of hedonic motivation rather than relying on online consumer reviews that affect sales of products and services. Thus, previous studies have considered a variety of variables and antecedents, and their results have shown a relationship between variables applied in social media and online consumer behaviors. Nevertheless, it is clear that different outcomes are expected in different contexts. Based on the aforementioned literature, the current research predicts that four main social media marketing activities (advertisements, trending, entertainment, and interaction) play an important role in creating electronic word of mouth among Saudi SNS users.

2.2 Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

Word of mouth (WOM) is a longstanding method of marketing communication (Dellarocas, 2003). One early definition describes it as a method of communication between a communicator and a receiver who considers information about a brand, product, or service to be non-commercial (Arndt, 1967). Another definition of the concept according to Litvin et al. (2008) is that WOM is the exchange of information between consumers on a product, service, or company in which the sources are considered to be free of commercial influence. Katz & Lazarsfeld (2017) and Daugherty & Hoffman (2013) state that it also impacts on consumers' purchasing decisions. Thus, it is clear that WOM is a life variable which is changeable according to a person's social environment and most importantly how that person perceives, accepts or values it, and then adapts their behaviors. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to measure, since countless variables contribute toward shaping it. In this regard, the theory of psychological hedonism can help us to explore the role of marketing activities used by marketers to motivate consumers' behaviors toward intention to purchase.

However, with the appearance of SNSs a new form of WOM is recognized as electronic word of mouth (Yang, 2016). The importance of this new emerging form of WOM is credited to the inception of new online platforms that have made e-WOM the most important source of communication influencing consumers' behavior (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). According to Chaparro-Peláez et al. (2015), electronic word of mouth is a powerful media communication tool that supports data collection, marketing activities, and purchasing experience. A customer's experience of purchasing a product and a service, either positive or negative, can be described through e-WOM. Furthermore, e-WOM provides recommendations to potential customers whereby higher trust is built in the business when the recommendation is positive. Hidayanto et al. (2017) indicate that the recommendations of people with more experience are usually more credible and will affect the purchasing behavior of future customers towards the seller or e-commerce business.

Psychological studies by Keller & Fay (2016) and Huba (2013) found that when hedonistic aspects such as pleasure and fun are perceived by consumers, they are emotionally more motivated to convey their experience via e-WOM to others which may have an impact on loyalty. Empirical studies relating to word-of-mouth communication of cumulative satisfaction, have shown that positive word of mouth helps to retain existing customers and highlights the attractive features of a company, incentivizing new customers to make a future purchase (Andreassen, 2001; Cheung et al., 2012). The idea is that the only way to make consumers involve and interact with SNSs is by motivating them which is important to understand their behaviors.

On the other hand, a negative e-WOM is more impactful than a positive one as it remains even after being refuted Chiosa & Anastasiei, 2017). It is usually the result of an imbalance in hopes and observations, so a consumer who has a negative experience is more likely to display their emotions than one who has a positive experience. These negative emotions may lead to dislike of a brand or avoidance even before actual purchasing, causing the end of a loyal customer relation and the loss of potential customers. Unfortunately, marketers have limited control over SNS users' conversations and their intended behavior (Thomas et al., 2012).

A study conducted by Siddiqui et al. (2021) focused primarily on factors creating e-WOM credibility. It highlights four factors that are significant in creating e-WOM credibil-

ity: a high level of involvement with SNSs, trust in SNSs, recommendation by SNS members, and message content. Consumers share their experiences by endorsing products or services to their peers, commonly offering truthful e-WOM with balanced reviews (Cheung et al., 2009). Consumers trust the opinions of online reviews as they consider it unlikely that reviewers will misguide potential customers by providing false e-WOM (Fong and Burton, 2006). In this respect, reviews, trust, and recommendation by SNS members are important determinants in creating e-WOM and may also direct consumers' behavior toward certain attitudes such as intention to purchase. However, subjective logic should be applied when purchasing, since a combination of conflicting opinions is usually given for the same product or service by different reviewers. This may create lack of credibility due to reviewers' differences in judgment, experience, wish to influence consumers toward certain behaviors or attitudes, or simply due to followers' naivety. Yu Zhao et al. (2016) argue that one of the factors affecting e-WOM is that reviewers can remain anonymous.

A large volume of opinions is available online due to the increase in consumers searching for and sharing information (Reichelt, Sievert, & Jacob, 2014). As a result, purchase intention is highly influenced by e-WOM initiated from a variety of factors (Moran et al., 2014). When SNS users engage in discussions and interact with each other on a product-related topic, they are most likely to adopt specific views or attitudes. An interesting aspect of research is predicting whether users' interaction plays a mediating role between their compound attitudes, such as behavioral or conative component, and e-WOM. However, the outcomes are not aimed at misdirecting consumers' actions; judgment and assessment are left to the buyer (Leonard-Barton 1985). According to Moran and Muzellec (2014), e-WOM depends on the four Cs: community, competence, content, and consensus. Community is related to the e-WOM sender and receiver's relationship. Traditional offline WOM communication was built on strong relations, with people being connected as acquaintances, friends, or family members, whereas e-WOM is posted anonymously (Kozinets et al., 2010). An anonymous consumer may be a customer sharing their true experience, nevertheless there are some marketers who pose as satisfied customers in order to deceive people into buying their product or service (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). Competence refers to the level of experience the sender and receiver of e-WOM have with a certain brand (Phelps et al., 2004); for example, a YouTuber who is known for reviewing tech products would be considered more competent and credible by viewers than someone who is not. Generally, claims are considered more believable when the reviewer has greater experience, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. Content requires a clear message that targets the important features of a product or service making it more credible than one that is ambiguous and only states whether a product is good or bad (Gershoff, Mukherjee, & Mukhopadhyay, 2007).

The current research argues that advertisements are an important part of marketing communication which can reflect, deliver, build relationships with clients, and im-

prove communications, particularly when such activity is combined with entertainment, interaction, and trending, in order to generate positive e-WOM. According to Keller & Fay (2016), who based their model on the work of Learfield; & Katz (1955), advertisements alone are ineffective at directly changing consumers' behavior. They claim that the advertisement is an effective tool because it prompts interactive conversation between influencers and other people who then become consumers. They demonstrated that SNS influencers act as mediators in the relationship between advertisement content and creating e-WOM which can then impact on purchase intention. However, the effectiveness of an advertisement is seen when entertainment, interaction, and trending are perceived by consumers. These activities vary between users according to their interests, values, and other socioeconomic environmental context.

e-WOM is considered an essential factor in ffecting consumers' behavior toward purchasing intention, therefore it is important to explore the factors influencing e-WOM. Effective advertising is an important factor which could influence e-WOM and generate a good brand image in the consumer's mind. Media advertisements when combined with entertainment, interaction, and trending performed by businesses and their references, and even sometimes by loyal customers, should not be ignored when considering the creation of e-WOM (Keller, & Fay, 2016). These social media marketing activities performed on social platforms using influencers truly create e-WOM by involving hedonic shopping motivation to satisfy psychological needs (e.g., emotions and entertainment). Word of mouth can relate to the spreading of information of any feature, person, or thing. A good example of this is given by Huba (2013) who describes how Lady Gaga gained huge loyalty by turning her followers into fanatics. A study by Cores & Bartels (2021) attempted to understand why young people purchase products endorsed by social media influencers by analyzing the mechanism of social identification. From a sample of 415 individuals the authors found that trending, entertainment, and friendship are among the motivational factors which cause users to follow social media influencers' purchasing behaviors. The study found that information sharing, and information seeking are isolated motivations. It should be noted here, the current research does not aim to investigate the role of influencers in creating e-WOM, rather it illustrates how firms involve influencers in advertising by using the hedonic aspects of SMMA to satisfy followers' psychological needs in order to create e-WOM and action behavior. The wise judgment of the users combined with hedonic factors can truly affect e-WOM (Leonard-Barton, 1985).

However, with regard to social networking services (SNSs), this can be technically based on the number of likes and dislikes a post has. It is well noted that there is always a concern of e-WOM from a psychological perspective, particularly the hedonic aspects such as pleasure and fun (e.g., entertainment) (Abendroth & Heyman, 2013). Although considerable studies have provided fruitful insights regarding various factors that contribute to

creating e-WOM via the online mode, less attention has been paid to social media marketing activities based on psychological perspectives. In fact, many of those studies were related to factors such as information, content, trust in SNSs, and recommendation by users (Siddiqui et al., 2021). For instance, marketers of online games use virtual reality technology, which gives the player the sense of actually being in the game allowing them to be interactive as well as being entertained. It should also be kept in mind that 30% of the total Saudi population are between 15 and 24 years old. This fact cannot be ignored when formulating marketing strategies. Kim & Ko (2012) argue that in addition to these factors, consumers also want to satisfy their needs by excitement, interaction, and the ability to browse freely (Falk, 1997). Being entertained - for example watching funny sketches or videos - is likely to grab the attention of users and influence their behavior (Cores & Bartels, 2021). The online environment where users do not know each other requires more than recommendation and trusted information; there is also a need for other factors to be identified such as advertising, interacting, entertainment, and trending which act as motivational drivers to create affective e-WOM communication. Therefore, the SNS community environment should include hedonic aspects, not only utilitarian ones. At the same time, the current research also accepts that those factors which are predicted to influence e-WOM may not be applicable to other country contexts due to differences in cultures, political systems, and other socioeconomic factors. For example, a study by Askool (2012) found that motivational factors in Saudi Arabia impact on behavioral intention and actual decision due to cultural aspects. This research can argue here that motivational factors for creating word of mouth and generating intention to purchase vary between countries and societies, and the ways in which users perceive hedonic aspects within society are diverged.

2.3 Brand Image and Purchase Intention.

There are numerous definitions of brand image in the marketing literature. Kotler (2000) defines brand as the name, symbol, design, or a combination of them all. However, Dibb et al. (2001) argue that brand is not restricted to the elements defined by Kotler but relate to other features; they argue that brand embodies a whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs. Nevertheless, researchers have found that brand plays an essential role in influencing purchasing intentions (Gordon et al., 1993), affecting the attitudes of buyers and causing them to pay a premium price for the same type of product (Mudambi et al., 1997). Furthermore, consumers' perceived risks can become significantly lower or perceived value can become significantly higher with positive brand image and well-known brand products (Rao & Monroe, 1988). Moreover, research conducted by Wang & Tsai (2014) indicates that brand image increases consumers' purchase intention.

As illustrated in the marketing literature, brand image has been studied from two perspectives: the company and the consumer. The company perspective looks at improvement of marketing activity and positioning while the consumer perspective is concerned with attitudes and behaviors to-

ward the image of brands and brand equity (Kotler, 2001; Janonis et al., 2007). It is true that strong brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci are likely to increase consumer loyalty, and eventually purchase intention because these brands have attained positive e-WOM through trending and interactivity with consumers. An example of hedonic aspects that marketers used during Gucci's 2021 Flora Fantasy fragrance campaign is that of a Hollywood night of dancing and entertainment performed by Snoop Dogg and the model Liu Wen. However, strong brands have strong and positive word of mouth, which sticks in consumers' minds and searching behaviors, whether they are goal-directed or exploration-search consumers (Moe, 2003). When hedonistic aspects such as pleasure and fun combined with social identification are perceived by consumers, they are emotionally more motivated to convey their experience via e-WOM to others which may have an impact on brand loyalty (Keller & Fay, 2016; Huba, 2013; Rijnsoever & Donders, 2009). According to the marketing literature, the perceived value and quality of a product or service, is positively influenced by a favorable brand image (Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991; Monroe & Krishnan, 1985), lowering the perceived risks and increasing the intention to purchase (Akaah & Korgaonkar, 1988; Rao & Monroe, 1988; Loudon & Bitta, 1988; Fredericks & Slater, 1998; Romaniuk & Sharp, 2003; Aghekyan, Forsythe, Kwon, & Chattaraman, 2012).

In strategic management, particularly resource-based view of a firm (Barney, 1991; Fahy, 2000) an effective brand strategy prompts a firm to stay ahead of the competition and thus leads to superior performance as the firm enjoys market leadership through sustained competitive advantage. Differentiation strategy can be initiated and developed from a variety of intangible aspects of a firm in any given market, including brand image and brand loyalty (Porter, 1980) and therefore is valued by customers, difficult to imitate, rare, and non-substitutable in order to achieve and sustain superior performance (Barney, 1991). Thus, brand image is considered a source of competitive advantage due to the relatively high barriers to entrants and difficulty of acquiring such a resource that have been created by marketing techniques (Wen-Cheng et al., 2010).

Intention can be defined as behavior that is influenced by motivational factors which indicate how willing people are to try and how much effort they will exert (Ajzen, 1991). However, purchase intention can be defined as the willingness and probability of consumers to purchase a product that was recommended to them through SNSs (Choedon & Lee, 2020). The likelihood of consumers planning or being willing to purchase a product or service in the future is indicated by purchase intention (Wu et al., 2016). Moe (2003) developed an empirically tested typology of store visits, which varies according to the shopper's underlying objective. The study argues that purchase intention can be linked to goal-directed or exploration-search behavior. Goal-directed refers to behavior whereby the consumer has planned the purchase, whereas exploration refers to behavior in which the consumer is not planning to purchase and therefore the search is stimulus-driven. An example of the

latter is a free-trial product or service which attempts to generate a propensity of purchase intention through which consumers may make a one-off unplanned purchase based on hedonic stimulation. In other words, when exploration-search behavior occurs based on being entertained (eyes, ears, feelings), or social identification, purchase intention is likely to occur at any time. However, positive brand image generated from word of mouth leads to positive engagement and promotes the desirable intention to purchase (Martins et al., 2018), and the willing power of a consumer to buy something is reflected by purchase intention (Dodds et al., 1991). As pointed out by Morwitz & Shmittlein (1992), willingness to make a purchase is widely used as a way to predict the consumer's future purchasing behavior. Positive e-WOM created by marketing techniques can encourage the user's intention to purchase a product or service (Binwani & Ho, 2019), where users' purchase intentions are a powerful predictor to actual purchasing and an indicator of new product sales (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to Chen & Lin (2019), after consumers collect data about a product or a service, they evaluate it and may then compare it to other options in order to finalize their purchase decision. Behavioral intention is often measured using purchase intention of consumers and the purchase intention for a specific product is subjective in this regard (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It is believed that purchase intention is impacted by consumer experience derived from several marketing activities which are predicted to create WOM and inform the decision-making process of potential customers (Park et al., 2007). People's willingness to perform a certain behavior, and how they carry out a particular action, is indexed by their intentions illustrated by Ajzen (1991). In contrast, lack of intention to make online purchases of services or products is the main obstacle facing e-commerce according to a study conducted by He et al. (2008). Since marketers have limited control over users' conversations and other factors such as reviewers' feedback, the role of social media marketers is to understand SNS consumers' behaviors by adopting direct and indirect motivations in order to increase their propensity of purchase intention.

3. Research Model and Hypotheses Development

Following the discussion of the theoretical background and related literature on marketing consumer behavior, this study proposes an integrated model using social media marketing activities as independent constructs which are predicted to create electronic word of mouth (dependent construct) among social media users stimulated through social network sites, (Figure 1) encompassing all the aforementioned aspects.

These factors of the SMMA were selected based on two conditions: first that they are applicable to social media networks, and second that they have been found to be significant in effecting e-word of mouth in a variety of studies. The researcher of this study acknowledges that there are other aspects of SMMA influencing e-WOM and hence

impacting on social media users' intention to purchase; however, these four aspects are critical in creating e-word of mouth on social network sites via marketing strategies when electronic word of mouth is perceived by social media users. The second part of the proposed model uses e-WOM as an independent construct in order to determine if and to what extent it has an impact on brand image and purchasing intention on social network sites. The final part of the research model examines the direct effect electronic word of mouth has on brand image and purchasing intention, as depicted below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Research Model
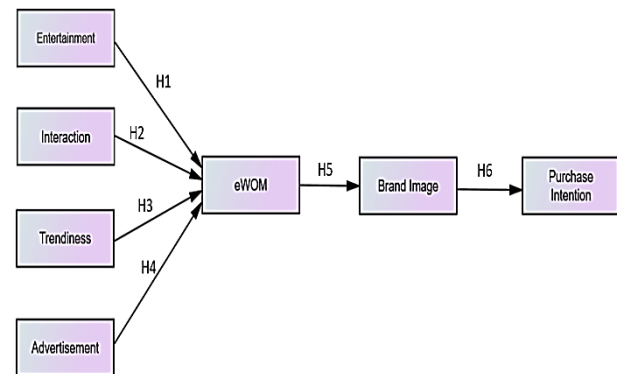
Based on the related marketing literature, theoretical background, and the developed integrated model, we hypothesize the following:

• H1: Entertainment on SNSs has a positive and significant effect on e-WOM

• H2: Interaction with SNS users has a positive and significant effect on e-WOM

• H3: Trending on SNSs has a positive and significant effect on e-WOM

• H4: Advertisements on SNSs have a positive and significant effect on e-WOM

To test the impact of e-WOM on brand image and the purchase intentions of consumers, the following hypotheses were proposed:

• H5: e-WOM has a positive and significant effect on brand image.

• H6: Brand image has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention among SNS users.

3.1 Methods and Materials

This research aimed to identify social media marketing activities which create electronic word-of mouth (e-WOM) through social networking sites (SNSs), and the impact of e-WOM on brand image and purchasing intention in the Saudi Arabia context. A conceptual methodological approach was adopted for the study, whereby framework constructs were proposed to specify the relationship between variables using a set of specific and interrelated variables. A review of the related literature on mar-

keting consumers' behaviors highlighted certain variables, and accordingly the conceptual framework was proposed as illustrated in figure 1.

In operationalizing the research, a quantitative approach was conducted using cross-sectional data collected from February to March 2022 via a questionnaire developed for the objective of the study and distributed by email, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and Twitter using Google Form created for the purpose of collecting data. Purposive sampling approach was considered most appropriate for the aims, objectives, and research methodology of the study, therefore, only individuals involved in the social network sites buying experience in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were selected. Social networking, and snowballing techniques were used to facilitate the data collection process. The survey was designed with five sections. The first section, comprising four questions, looked at the socio demographic characteristics of the participants (e.g., gender, duration of social networks site usage, age group, and occupation); Section 2 consisted of the psychographic instruments to be measured; Section 3 related to marketing activities; Section 4 was concerned with e-WOM; Section 5 looked at brand image; and Section 6 focused on purchase intentions. Pre-validated scales were adapted from previous studies to measure the constructs of interest as shown in Appendix A. A review of the existing literature related to the current research variables resulted in a questionnaire being developed comprising 20 items measured using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree. To avoid any misunderstandings, the entire questionnaire was sent to two experts in marketing consumer behavior, one male and one female, from two Saudi universities. Minor modifications were made after their feedback was received in order to make the items more understandable. A Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was conducted in order for the instruments to be tested for internal consistency. More than 700 questionnaires were distributed of which 622 were returned and eligible for data analysis. Hypothesis testing and model estimation were carried out using Two-step Structural Equation Modeling.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedure

A generally accepted approach in conducting SEM, the two-step modelling method developed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), was employed. In the first stage, the researcher identified each latent construct and its respective indicators and errors are included in the model.

Items' reliability and their respective loadings on their particular latent constructs were assessed independently (see tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7). The aforementioned stage tested the reliability, factor loadings, and goodness-of-fit for each scale of the study. In the second stage, the structural model stage, we focused on the overall relationships between constructs by specifying how each construct appeared in the model (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The Structural Model
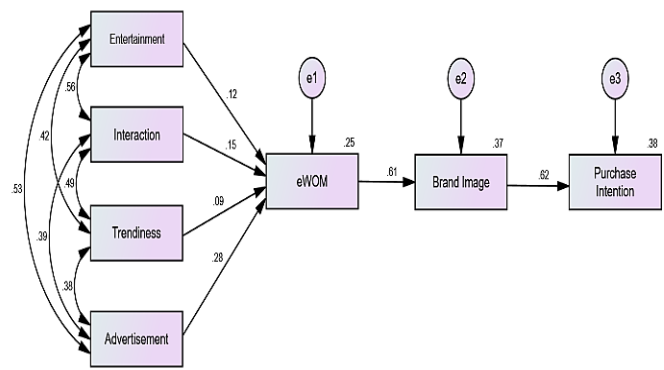
Notes: n = 622. Bootstrap resample = 5,000; percentile and bias corrected confidence intervals is on 95 per cent. e1-e3: errors terms for the endogenous variables

The objective behind this two-step approach was to achieve an accurate representation of the reliability of the indicators scale while avoiding interactions between measurements and the structural model (Diamantopoulos et al., 2000) and simultaneously conducting the path analysis for testing for direct, indirect, and total effect.

Table 3. Dimensionality of Entertainment

Items (*total variance explained* 67.56%)	Factor loadings
Ent 1	0.64
Ent 2	0. 90
Ent 3	0.88

Table 4. Dimensionality of Interaction

Items (*total variance explained* 55.6%)		Factor loadings
Int 1		0.74
Int 2		0.77
Int 3		0.74

Table 5. Dimensionality of e-WOM

Items (*total variance explained* 58.53%)	Factor loadings
e-WOM 1	0.75
e-WOM 2	0.79
e-WOM 3	0.76
e-WOM 4	0.78

Table 6. Dimensionality of Brand Image

Items (*total variance explained* 67.67%)	Factor loadings
Brand 1	0.8
Brand 2	0.84
Brand 3	0.81

Items (*total variance explained* 71.37%)		Factor loadings
Purch 1		0.87
Purch 2		0.85
Purch 3		0.82

4. Results

4.1. Sample Profile and Descriptive Analysis

The demographic characteristics are provided in Table 1. According to the results, 80.4% of the sample were male and only 19.6% were female (500 males and 122 females). A total of 35% of the respondents were between 24-35 years old and 39.1% between 45-54 years old. Regarding duration of time using social network sites, 34.9% of the respondents spent 2–4 hours per day, 26.5 % spent between 30 minutes - 2 hours per day, while 12.9% spent more than 6 hours per day, and only 4% spent less than 30 minutes per day using SNSs.

Table1. Socio demographic characteristics

Variable (*n=622*)	Frequency	%
Age (years)		
<24	28	4.5
24-35 years old	218	35.0
35-44 years old	133	21.4
45-54 years old	243	39.1
Social Networks Sites usage		
Less than 30mins/day	25	4.0
30mins – 2 hrs./day	165	26.5
2 – 4 hrs./day	217	34.9
4 – 6 hrs./day	135	21.7
+ 6 hrs./day	80	12.9
Gender		
Male	500	80.4
Female	122	19.6
Your current status		
College Student	43	7.0
Private employee	279	44.9
Entrepreneur	42	6.8
Government	120	19.3
Unemployed	138	22.2

4.2 Reliability of constructs & correlation coefficients

Correlation coefficients and Cronbach's Alpha for all the study variables are highlighted in Table 2. Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which ranged from a minimum of 0.67 to a maximum of 0.8 for each construct in our results. Previous research has demonstrated that a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.7 or higher indicates acceptable internal consistency (Taber, 2018; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), but a score of 0.6 is also considered acceptable (Daud et al., 2018). Pearson's correlation coefficient magnitude revealed a strong correlation between the four variables (advertisement, trending, entertainment, and interaction). No weak or moderate correlations were found between constructs at the 0.01 significant levels.

Table2. Reliability of constructs & correlation coef.

Latent variables	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Ent.	Int.	Trend
Entertainment(3-items)	*0.74*			
Interaction(*3-items*)	0.67	0.56***		
Trending(*2-items*)	0.49 (*cor. coef.*)	0.48***	0.49***	
Advertisement(*2-items*)	0.72 (*cor. coef.*)	0.53***	0.39***	0.38***
e-WOM (*4-items*)	0.77			
Brand Image(3*items*)	0.74			
Purchase Intention (3-*items*)	0.8			

4.3 Measurement Model:

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was computed using AMOS 22.0 to test the measurement models. Model fit was established first, followed by model estimation and adequacy by assessing the internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity. As part of confirmatory factor analysis, factor loadings were computed and evaluated for each item. The indicators of the constructs Entertainment, Interaction, e-WOM, Brand Image, and Purchase Intention were loaded adequately on their respective factors. With regards to the two indicators, Advertisement and Trending, their correlations were computed and analyzed because calculating Cronbach's Alpha is restricted to the following assumptions: unidimensionality, uncorrelated errors, essentially tau-equivalence, and there being at least three items (Rammstedt & Beierlein, 2014).

4.4 Hypothesis Testing Results

The model was tested using path analysis and estimation of direct and indirect effects, in addition to using bootstrapping procedure in AMOS (performing 5,000 resamples) at

a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. Additionally, statistical significance for indirect/direct/total effects was determined at 95% bias and accelerated confidence intervals which is standard in social sciences (Hayes, 2009). See Tables 8a, 8b and 9.

Table 8a. Standardized Regression Weights (Bootstrap bias-corrected)

Variables			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
e-WoM	←	Ent	.116	.052	2.519	.012
e-WoM	←	Int	.149	.055	3.351	***
e-WoM	←	Trend	.094	.046	2.285	.022
e-WoM	←	Adv	.281	.031	6.700	***
Brand Image	←	e-WoM	.610	.030	19.164	***
Purchase Intention	←	Brand Image	.619	.035	19.615	***

Table 8b. R Squared

Variables	Estimate
e-WoM	.253
Brand Image	.372
Purchase Intention	.383

Table 9. Direct Effects - Two Tailed Significance

Variables	Ent	Adv	Trend	Int	e-WOM	Brand Image
e-WoM	.022	.000	.05	.004	...	...
Brand Image	...	...	...	...	.000	...
Purchase	...	...	...	...	...	.000

According to our data and the calculation parameters applied, the statistical results demonstrated the following findings: there is a significant positive direct effect between Entertainment and e-WOM, therefore Hypothesis 1 is supported. The standardized coefficient for direct effect has the following parameters (β = 0.116; p<0.05 = 0.012). There is a significant positive direct effect between Interaction and e-WOM, therefore Hypothesis 2 is supported. The standardized coefficient for direct effect has the following parameters (β = 0.149; p<0.05 = 0.000). There is a significant positive direct effect between Trending and e-WOM, therefore Hypothesis 3 is supported. The standardized coefficient for direct effect has the following parameters (β = 0.094; p<0.05 = 0.022). There is a significant positive direct effect between Advertisement and e-WOM, therefore Hypothesis 4 is supported. The standardized coefficient for direct effect has the following parameters (β = 0.281; p<0.05 = 0.000). Hence, the aforementioned four IVs have a relatively good effect size on the DV e-WOM with an R-squared of 0. 253.

There is a significant positive direct effect between e-WOM and Brand Image, therefore Hypothesis 5 is supported. The standardized coefficient for direct effect has the following parameters (β = 0.61; p<0.05 = 0.000). e-WOM, has a good effect size on Brand Image with an R-squared of 0. 372. There is a significant positive direct effect between Brand Image and Purchase Intention.

Therefore, Hypothesis 6 is supported. The standardized coefficient for direct effect has the following parameters (β = 0.619; p<0.05 = 0.000). Brand Image, has a good effect size on Purchase Intention with an R-squared of 0. 382.

5. Discussion

This study investigated social media marketing activities (SMMA) creating electronic word-of mouth (e-WOM) through social networking sites, and the impact of electronic word-of mouth on brand image and purchasing intention. The results found that there is sufficient evidence that social media marketing activities - Entertainment, Interaction, Trending, and Advertisement - have a significant impact on e-WOM. The results of the current study show that these four factors directly affect e-WOM, and Table 8b shows that these four variables explain 25% of the variation in e-WOM. However, there are other factors that could create e-WOM among SNS users which were not considered in this study. The analysis also showed a positive direct effect of e-WOM on brand image with an R-squared of 0. 372. A significant direct positive effect was also seen between brand image and purchase intention by consumers. Therefore, this research demonstrated that the four factors of social media marketing activities play an important role in creating e-WOM, and brand image is an important antecedent of purchase intentions. These results support the findings of previous empirical research (Wu, 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012; Cheung et al., 2012; Yadav & Rahman, 2017; Clement, 2020).

According to the results, advertisements were found to be the most important marketing feature in creating e-WOM via social network sites. Thus, it could be demonstrated that the more effective the advertisement content sent to or received by consumers, the more powerful word of mouth is created which will generate positive brand image and, eventually, purchase intention. Advertisements are meant to influence the behavior of consumers and consumers will be more eager to purchase according to the conveyed message in an advertisement if they find that the information provided is trustworthy and reliable (Dhanesh & Nekmat, 2019; Ebrahim, 2019; Shieh et al., 2018). The current study also found that entertainment is vital in creating e-WOM. The ability of a social network site to entertain consumers based on their interests through SNSs along with reliable content can influence e-WOM which may contribute to increasing current or future purchase intentions. This hypothesis supports the findings of previous research (Kierzkowski et al., 1996; Kim & Ko, 2012). Entertainment is an important component factor of social media marketing activities, causing consumers to interact with other followers, even beyond their social platform circle. In this activity, people need to feel they are socially involved, not isolated, part of current conversations, and possibly contributing to trending. When consumers are entertained, the message will be understood and shared to a wider base of potential consumers which leads to increasing the positivity of e-WOM and ultimately to increasing their purchasing intention. This is in line with Sano (2014) and Siddiqui et al. (2021) which found that interesting content of advertisements on social networks engages consumers and may lead to recommendations. In addition, trending is an important aspect of marketing activities because companies aim to keep their consumers informed with the latest and most positive information

related to products and news. In addition, companies are informed to what extent users interact with current topics and find out if they are interested in their products and services by the frequency with which they access the site and how interactive they are with conversations. In the SNS culture, online marketers gain advantage by being seen more by users in searches, spreading positive word of mouth, increasing brand awareness among consumers, and encouraging their intention to purchase. The current study confirmed the findings of previous studies regarding the role of trending in creating e-WOM and its impact on brand awareness and purchase intention (Seo & Park, 2018; Kim & Ko, 2012; Yadav & Rahman, 2017). These outcomes were in line with similar study of Milad et al. (2018), although those authors used different constructs in the fist part of the model, and their sample size was mainly 369 young students in Iranian university. It should be noted that other group of SNS users and different generations who might be influenced by the social media marketing activities. Therefore, the significance of social media marketing activities and their hedonic features in creating e-WOM, leading to a positive brand image and possible purchase intention has been demonstrated with empirical evidence from the Saudi Arabia context.

6. Limitations of this Research and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is confident that it has met its aim and objectives and has contributed to broadening the scope of the literature by providing a comprehensive and empirical model. In practical terms, it offers an insight to social media marketing managers in terms of improving the effectiveness of their business decisions and developing successful marketing strategies for the competitive arena on social network sites. By considering the four identified aspects of SMMA and their hedonic features in creating e-WOM through SNSs, managers can generate a positive brand image for their products which leads to purchase intention. However, akin to other studies, this study faced a number of unavoidable limitations, which need to be addressed. Making any generalization with a sample of 622 is impossible, therefore a larger sample size including other Gulf countries with a similar culture and e-commerce environment may provide more definitive and wide-ranging results. Thus, the findings of this research should be treated solely as an indication of a specific situation and geographical area. The four SMMAs are extremely important, particularly in the Saudi context, yet there are other factors which contribute toward creating e-WOM found in similar studies which have been also acknowledged by this current study. Future studies should try to identify other factors influencing e-WOM and generate intention of purchase among Saudi users in order to present a set of proposals that will lead to developing successful marketing campaigns, such as perceived advantages, brand associations, social media influencers, and other hedonic factors, for example the influence of consumer behaviors by religion as an attractive respective value.

Appendix A.

1- **Marketing Activities :Source** (Kim and Ko 2012; Ahmed and Zahid 2014; Yadav and Rahman 2017b; Zhang et al. 2016; Seo & Park 2018)

Entertainment

- Ent1- Interacting with social networking sites is fun.
- Ent2- Content of the products and brands on social networking sites is Interesting
- Ent3- The products and brands on social network sites are very attractive

Interaction

- Int1- The products and brand on social networking sites enables information sharing with others.
- Int2- It's easy to deliver my opinion through social networking sites.
- Int3- I like the Interactivity of Information about products and brand on social networking sites is updated.

Trendiness

- Tr1- The content shared in social networking sites regarding the products and brands is the newest information.
- Tr2- Interacting with the products and brands in social networking sites is highly trendy

Advertisement

- Adv1- I like the ads that social networking sites have published on products and brands.
- Adv2- social networking sites ads positively affect my attention for products and brands.

2- E-Word of Mouth Credibility :Source (Siddiqui, M.S et al; 2021; Hwang et al. 2014; Seo & Park 2018).

- online reviews of products and brands by other fellow members in social networks help me making the right decisions to buy the right products or brands
- Consulting and advising from online reviews of products and brands provided by other fellow members in social networks help me making the right decisions.
- I always publish my experiences with products and brands in social networks
- I discuss the variety of the products and brand with other fellow members in social networks.

3- **Brand Image** Source (Jalilvand, M.R et al; 2012).

- Products or brands introduced by my friends in social networks creates a brand image of products.
- Credibility on Social Networking Sites creates a brand image in my mind.
- Consumer's online review creates a brand image in my mind.

4- **Purchase Intentions** :Source (Jalilvand, M.R et al; 2012. Wang, J.C et al; 2013, Yoo, B., et al; 2001)

- I have a high intention to purchase the products or brands introduced by fellow members in social networks.

- I have a high intention to purchase those products or brands whose information is provided by my credible social network
- I have a high intention to purchase the products or brands based on online reviews by consumers in social net.

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