

Master of Business Administration Programme
Dissertation (LCMB7035)

**The Role of Social Media Marketing in Brand Development:
An Analysis of Marks & Spencer in the UK**

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Introduction

Social Media marketing has become one of the significant tools in the modern brand development mechanism. It helps organisations to communicate the brand values, create awareness in consumers and engage them with the brand over a period of time. In the UK retail sector, with an increased level of digital competition and new consumer expectations, social media has become strategically important in ensuring continued brand relevance (Zeqiri *et al.*, 2025). In this environment, established UK retail brands find it particularly difficult. Many were erected on good heritage and traditional marketing approaches, and hence can limit their ability to quickly respond to digital change. As a result, it means that these brands have to rethink their communication strategies without losing their core identity (Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2020).

This research is based on Marks & Spencer, a long-established retailer in the UK that is currently in the process of digital transformation. Marks & Spencer has the right case due to its strongest brands and new focus on social media marketing. This study aims to explore the role played by social media marketing in helping a brand at Marks & Spencer in the UK develop. The research objectives cover the aspects of brand identity, customer involvement, brand visibility and effectiveness of social media as a long-term branding tool.

Research Problem and Rationale

Social media marketing is clearly embraced by retail organisations, but its business role in long-term brand building is underexplored. Existing research frequently focuses on short-term performance metrics such as engagement and reach as opposed to analysing the contribution of social media to sustained brand identity, perception and relevance (Kasemsap, 2018). This leaves a space between understanding, especially for retail brands which have strong heritage positioning.

UK retailers face mounting pressure to remain relevant in a digitally-driven market, without sacrificing the fundamentals of the brand identity. For heritage brands, this balance is complex. Social media, therefore, provides opportunities for brand revitalisation and customer engagement, but the usefulness of social media as a tool for brand development is not fully understood (Seyyedamiri and Tajrobehkar, 2021). This study has selected a qualitative document analysis strategy of Marks & Spencer, an established UK retailer in the process of digital transformation. The point of this research would be to gain a better understanding of the role that social media marketing plays in the development of brands

within the legacy retail brands. The findings aim to contribute to the academic branding literature on the one hand, and the practical marketing strategy on the other hand.

Research Aim and Objectives

To critically examine the role of social media marketing in supporting brand development at Marks & Spencer within the UK retail market.

1. To explore how social media marketing is used by Marks & Spencer to communicate brand identity and values in the UK market.
2. To analyse the role of social media in enhancing customer engagement and brand–consumer relationships at Marks & Spencer.
3. To examine the influence of social media marketing on Marks & Spencer’s brand visibility and public brand perception.
4. To critically evaluate the effectiveness of social media marketing as a tool for long-term brand development within a large, established retail brand.

Research Questions

1. How does Marks & Spencer use social media marketing to communicate its brand identity and values in the UK?
2. What role does social media marketing play in building customer engagement and brand relationships at Marks & Spencer?
3. How has social media marketing influenced brand visibility and brand perception of Marks & Spencer in the UK market?
4. To what extent is social media marketing an effective tool for long-term brand development for an established retail brand?

Literature Review

This part focuses on an overview of the important academic literature that is related to brand development and marketing in the social media arena. It provides the foundation for the study on a theoretical level and reveals the gaps that will justify focusing the study. The review is based around brand development theory, social media marketing in branding and the relationship between social media, engagement and brand perception.

Brand Development and Brand Equity

Brand development is the strategic process whereby organisations develop, maintain and create brand value over time. It means sculpting the identity of the brand, strengthening the associations with customers and achieving consistency across all touchpoints (Hafez, 2021; Jacobson, 2020). Strong brand development supports differentiation and long-term competitiveness, especially in saturated markets. Brand equity is the most important aspect of this process. Aaker's model of brand equity identifies some of the key dimensions, which are brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty (Algharabat, 2017). These elements help define the value a brand possesses in the eyes of consumers as a whole. Similarly, Keller's customer-based brand equity model emphasises the influence of brand knowledge created through the consumer's experiences & communications in creating brand strength. Both models place focus on the fact that brand development is not static (Algharabat, 2017). It requires continued reinforcement from meaningful and relevant interactions.

For already stores development of the brand plays an important role in the stores. Trust and presence that are built up over the years often bless heritage brands. However, they are at risk of also experiencing brand stagnation (Cheung *et al.*, 2021; Ebrahim, 2020). Without adaptation, really great heritage can turn into a constraint, not an advantage. Academic literature suggests that established brands have to actively manage brand meaning in order to help them remain relevant (Ardiansyah and Sarwoko, 2020). This includes matching traditional values with modern-day consumer expectations. As a result, brand development is becoming closely linked with the communication and development of brands through digital environments.

Social Media Marketing and Branding

Social media marketing has changed the way in which brands communicate with consumers. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms provide the ability to instantly interact with content and share and continuously converse (Jamil *et al.*, 2022). This shift has re-oriented branding as an activity less in control of a brand, more as a participatory activity.

The literature places importance on social media's strategic branding tool and not merely as a promotional channel. It enables brands to tell their personality, values, and associations of lifestyle and in real-time. Through visual content, storytelling and interactive features, brands are able to humanise their image and proceed to evoke higher levels of emotion (Tajvidi *et*

al., 2020). This is important, particularly in such competitive retail markets where there are limited functional differences between products.

Social media is also helping in Relationship Marketing. Scholars say sustained interaction via such social platforms strengthens the relationship between the brands and the consumer. It is no longer just about exposure that is important; engagement is (Ardiansyah and Sarwoko, 2020). This reflects a general trend within the marketing world of moving away from transaction-based marketing to branding that includes the relationship. Two-way communication allows consumers to respond, giving opinions and co-creating the meaning of the brand (Tajvidi *et al.*, 2020). However, this, in turn, decreases the control of the brands. The literature notes that inconsistent messaging or negative interactions can hurt the credibility of the brand. Therefore, brand identity and social media content alignment are the key.

Social Media, Engagement, and Brand Perception

Customer engagement in social media branding research: Customer engagement is one of the prominent concepts in marketing research around social media branding. It relates to the level of cognitive, emotional and behavioural involvement that consumers have with a brand (Jeswani, 2023). Engagement is often expressed through taking such actions as liking, commenting, sharing and participating in conversations around the brand. Academic studies link greater levels of engagement with greater levels of brand relationships and positive perceptions of brands.

Social media has a significant impact on brand visibility. Platforms enable a brand to grow in a presence that traditional media cannot reach. Algorithms and sharing amongst users result in more exposure and often at less expense (Khan *et al.*, 2019). Increased visibility can result in increased brand awareness, particularly amongst younger consumers and digitally-savvy consumers. However, visibility in itself is not the sure way of securing positive brand perception (Zollo *et al.*, 2020). The tone, consistent and consistent, authentic nature of content is a factor in how brands are judged.

Through social media content interactions, brand perception is created. This positive engagement may reinforce perceptions of relevance, trust and modernity (Ardiansyah and Sarwoko, 2020). On the other hand, the messaging that is not aligned can create issues with brand image. This is especially relevant when it comes to heritage brands. Literature suggests that for established brands, it is important that the brands strike a balance between innovation and continuity (Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2019). Social media offers the opportunity to

refresh the brand image and maintain underlying values. Yet, empirical studies regarding how heritage retailers are making this balance are still scarce.

Research Gap and Justification

Despite the large amount of research on social media marketing, there is not much attention given to how social media marketing works in the long term for the development of a brand in established brands with retail businesses (Zollo *et al.*, 2020). Much of the current literature relates to the concept of digitally native or fast-moving consumer brands (Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2019). There is a scarcity of case-based analysis in-depth that explores ways heritage retailers use social media for developing, building and showing the brand identity, engagement and perception over time.

This gap forms a justification for studying Marks & Spencer in particular. As a long-established UK retailer in the process of digital transformation, Marks & Spencer provides a useful context to examine how social media marketing is assisting the development of their brand in the context of a heritage brand (Wibowo and Wiangin, 2021). The research aims to make a contribution to the theory of branding and develop a strategic understanding of the practical use of social media for established retail organisations.

Methodology

This study is designed to follow a certain methodology in a systematic fashion, which is based on the research onion framework. The methodologies used reflect the exploratory approach of brand development and an interpretive approach to social media marketing. Each of the methodological choices upholds the research aim and brings consistency to the research study.

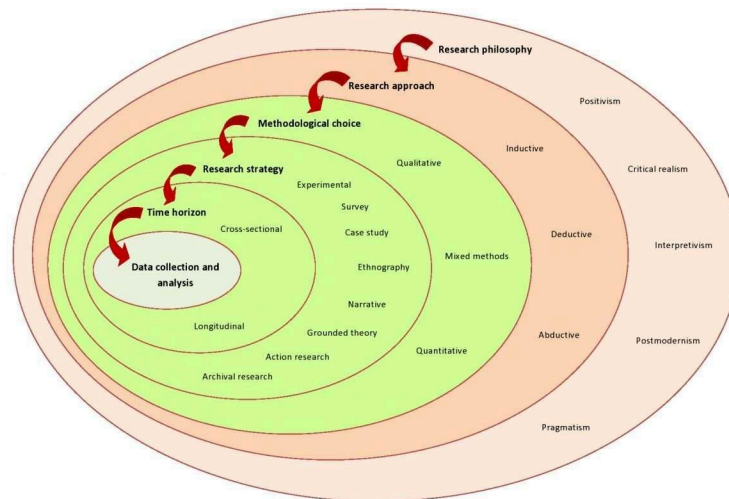


Figure 1: Research Onion Framework

Source: (Kasemsap, 2018)

Research Philosophy

The research philosophy of the interpretivist approach is adopted for this research. Brand development is affected by what is perceived, what is thought and communication. These elements cannot only be comprehended in terms of quantity (Kasemsap, 2018). Social media marketing, in particular, comes in conjunction with the symbolic interaction of brands and consumers. Interpretivism allows for research attention to the questions of brand identity and values as manifested and understood in social media activity. It provides backing for analysing perspectives currently available in academic literature, industry reports and organisational stories (Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2019). This philosophical position is therefore suitable for the study of branding in a real-life situation of retailing.

Research Approach

A deductive methodology to research is used in research. The research is anchored in up-to-date brand development, brand equity and social media marketing theories. These theories do have a framework on which to be analysed, as opposed to being tested in statistical terms (Ardiansyah and Sarwoko, 2020). The research is focused on the applications of the theory concepts in a definite organisational context. This allows critical thinking over the working of the branding theory in practice. A deductive approach is supportive of structured analysis with the freedom of interpretation.

Research Strategy

This research has taken the qualitative form of document analysis. The study reviews various organisational, scholarly, and industrial documents to discuss social media marketing and brand development. Document analysis allows the possibility to systematically analyse branding narratives, strategic communication and market positioning that are displayed on several sources (Khan *et al.*, 2019). This strategy is really well-suited to studies based on secondary data and which aim to understand the context as opposed to generalising. The concentration on Marks & Spencer provides us with the capacity to analyse in detail the practices of branding in an established UK retail organisation.

Research Choice

This is a qualitative approach to research. The study is concerned with understanding branding messages, strategic intent and patterns of communication. These elements are also best explored and understood through interpretation as opposed to quantification. (Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2019) Qualitative research allows acceptance of branding stories and engagement mechanisms that are put across secondary sources. This approach accommodates the focus on meaning and perception aspects in the development of brands.

Time Horizon

A cross-sectional time horizon is adopted. The research is based on the marketing of social media and brand development in a period in the recent past. What this gives is an insight into current branding practices rather than long-term change (Algharabat, 2017). The approach is actually appropriate in the vastness of work to be undertaken.

Data Collection Method

The sources of secondary data used in the study are These include company annual reports, industry and market analyses, academic journal articles and trade publications. Such sources are sources of informed views into the branding strategy as well as social media use. It is hence an appropriate usage of the second data due to its availability and credibility (Wibowo and Wiangin, 2021). It allows a researcher to use expert research analysis and interpretations already known. Using multiple sources is also helpful in order to have a balanced and well-rounded understanding of the case.

Data Analysis Technique

The data will be analysed through thematic analysis. This method is conducive to the systematic identification of recurrent ideas with relation to the development of the brand and social media marketing (Cheung *et al.*, 2021; Ebrahim, 2020). Data will be coded with reference to the research goals. Key themes here are predicted to have to do with brand identity, customer engagement, visibility, and brand perception. Thematic analysis allows for the development of patterns while not losing any analytical structure.

Ethical Considerations

The entire research is based on secondary data that has been taken from the available and credible sources that are open to the public. These are academic publications, company reports and publications of the industry. No primary data collection is involved, and no human subjects are involved. As such, the amount of ethical risk involved is minimal (Seyyedamiri and Tajrobehkar, 2021). The integrity of the study does not use any confidential and sensitive organisational information. All data being used is already in the public domain and not retrieved using illegal means. Academic integrity is maintained in the use of accurate referencing while adhering to the relevant standards of referencing. Care is taken to represent sources fairly and stay away from misrepresentation (Hafez, 2021; Jacobson, 2020). These measures serve to ensure that the research is conducted in a responsible manner in accordance with the ethical expectations for academic research.

Research Limitations

This study contains a number of limitations. The research was limited to the use of secondary data, with the disadvantage that on consumer opinion and lived experience, direct data can no longer be accessed. As a result, insights about customer perceptions are made on the basis of what is already interpreted and not on first-hand accounts (Jamil *et al.*, 2022). The study also fails to prove the cause-and-effect relationship between social media marketing activities and the end results of the development of the brand. The skills developed in the analysis are not measurement and rather are of association and interpretation. In addition, some sources, particularly those made by companies, could have a positive opinion on branding activities. While this is covered with the utilisation of multiple sources, there is a degree of bias which is possible.

Expected Contribution of the Study

As such, this study is expected to add to the academic understanding of various ways in which social media marketing helps in brand development in stores that are already established. It draws from the extant work on branding literature in terms of looking at a heritage UK retailer rather than digitally native brands (Tajvidi *et al.*, 2020). The research offers insight into how brand identity, engagement and perception are influenced by social media activity.

From a business angle, results can be of interest to marketing managers operating existing retail brands. The research brings out the importance of using social media as a strategy in the long-term development of a brand (Zollo *et al.*, 2020). In addition, it offers data on how to match digital branding strategies with the core brand values in competitive retail markets.

Proposed Timeline

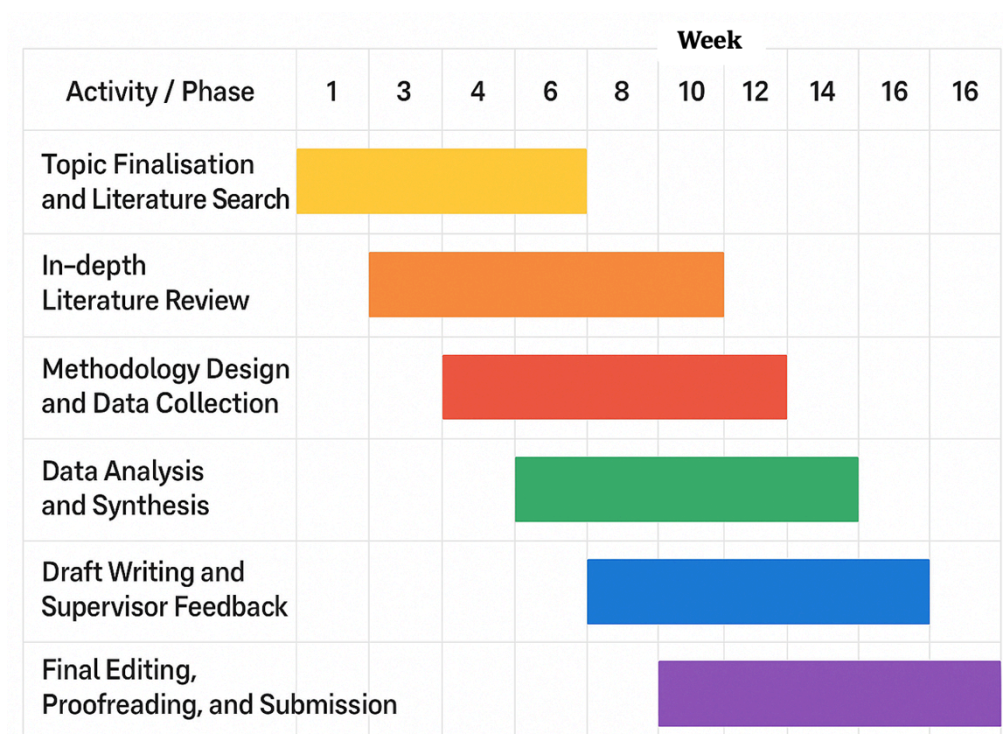


Figure 2: Gantt chart

Source: Self-Made

Conclusion

The research proposal is to develop a structured and theory-driven research on the role of social media marketing in the development of a brand. By targeting an existing UK retailer, the study aims to present academic and practical knowledge regarding modern practices of digital branding in a meaningful way (Jeswani, 2023).

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