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Do brands' social media marketing activities matter? A moderation analysis

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ABSTRACT

Considering the increased interest in the role that a brand's social media marketing activities (SMMA) play in providing better experiences, the current study examines associations among SMMA, brand experience, purchase intention, and attitude towards the brand. This study also assesses the customer generation (Millennials vs. Non-Millenials) and customer engagement level (high vs. low) as moderators in the SMMA-brand experience link. 413 responses were collected from individuals who follow a brand on social media and employed structural equation modelling for the analysis purpose. The results suggest an essential role of SMMA in driving brand experience, purchase intention, and attitude towards the brand. Results also establish that the SMMA-brand experience link varies across consumer generation (Millennials vs. Non-Millenials) and customer engagement level (high vs. low) with the brand's SMMA. These results aid marketers in realizing the role of consumers' generation and their engagement level relating to SMMA-brand experience relationship. The study concludes with implications, limitations, and future research avenues.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, a lot of optimism and excitement surround social media's pivotal importance as one of the leading virtual platforms to interact with consumers (Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2020; Nijssen and Ordanini, 2020). This radical advancement forces marketers to effectively maintain meaningful customer-brand relationships and convey value propositions in this platform (Carlson et al., 2019). Social media as a means of marketing offer an effective way to improve brand value by exchanging information and ideas among individuals/customers online (Kim and Ko, 2012). With this increased relevance of social media marketing, it has become indispensable to examine the role of brands' Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) in shaping consumer responses (Alalwan et al., 2017; Kim and Ko, 2012).

Social media has not only been considered crucial in the exchange of information and ideas but increasingly to deliver unique and valuable brand experiences (Zollo et al., 2020). This led academics and practitioners to re-think the role of social media activities in delivering brand experiences (Dwivedi et al., 2020). For this reason, recent studies discussed the relevance of SMMA in improving brand experience (Zollo et al., 2020). Scholars notify that consumers are attracted to SMMA to gratify sensory, behavioral, affective, and intellectual (problem-solving) experiences (Tafesse, 2016; Zollo et al., 2020). These experiences affect the way an individual uses and acts toward the brands and media; hence, an understanding of brand experience relates to SMMA is crucial (Gao and Feng, 2016; Tafesse, 2016). Existing studies found SMMA can improve customer intimacy, customer trust (Han and Kim, 2020; Kim and Ko, 2010), relationship equity, brand equity, and value equity (Kim and Ko, 2012), brand preference, willingness to pay a premium price, loyalty, and brand awareness (Kim and Lee, 2019). Nevertheless, very few attempts are made to explore the kind of relationships that exists between SMMA and brand experience.

Further, adding to existing SMMA literature and addressing the claim that social media marketing is highly apt for aiming the promising millennials generation (Gurău, 2012, p. 103), the study tested SMMA-brand experience link across Millenials vs. non-Millenials. Opposite to baby boomers and Generation X, Millenials have more regular, persistent contacts with brands and develop loyalty via social media (Stewart et al., 2017). They are more likely to start a conversation with brands and form long-term relationships using social media (Rissanen and Luoma-Aho, 2016). Nonetheless, scholars have made little effort to confirm the discussed argument by examining SMMA-brand experience link across consumer generations. Thus, this study addresses this gap by assessing consumer generation as a moderator in the SMMA-brand experience link, which offers marketers insights into generational effect (Fromm and Garton, 2013).

Social media scholars also argued the role of an engaged customer in a virtual customer environment as an active agent in various social media platforms (Gómez et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Nijssen and Ordanini, 2020). Engaged customers are like to interact more

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frequently, shared their opinions, adhere to brands, and likely to have more outstanding brand advocacy (Gómez et al., 2019; Thakur, 2019). For that reason, marketers should also need to know how customer's engagement towards social media activities can stimulate active mental states, which may result in more meaningful experiences (Alalwan et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2019). Besides the mediator, an investigation of customer engagement as a moderator variable is of utmost importance for academics and marketers (Thakur, 2019). Thus, we test SMMA-brand experience link across the customer engagement level (high vs. low).

In the importance of above-discussed gaps, the objectives are: (a) to study the effect of SMMA on brand experience; (b) to measure the impact of SMMA and brand experience on purchase intention, and attitude towards the brand; (c) to examine the moderating role of customer generation (Millenials/non-Millenials) and customer engagement in the SMMA-brand experience link. With these objectives, we contribute significantly to SMMA and brand experience literature. The study offers implications to marketers that assist their decision-making about brand management using social media, thus, adding value towards social media marketing goals.

The study is arranged as follows. We confer the SMMA and brand experience theory in Section 2. Section 3 portrays the conceptual model and interrelated set of hypotheses (Fig. 1). Next, in Section 4 we detail research methods used in the study, followed by results in Section 5. Lastly, we discuss the study's contribution to theory and practice, limitations, and further research possibilities in Section 6.

2. Literature review

2.1. SMMA

Social media have altered how brand content is designed, disseminated, and consumed (Appel et al., 2020) and transferred the power to consumers' online content from marketers in shaping the brand image (Nijssen and Ordanini, 2020). When used strategically for marketing activities, social media plays a vital role in accessing customers and establishing an individual relationship with them (Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2020). Kim and Ko (2012) defined SMMA as "a two-way communication seeking empathy with young users, and even enforcing the familiar emotions associated with existing luxury fashion brands to a higher age group" (p. 1480). Social media platforms that are largely utilized by marketers in the product promotion, and for interaction purposes with actual and potential customers are Twitter (a micro-blogging platform), Facebook (a social networking platform), Instagram (a photo-sharing platform) and YouTube (a video sharing platform) (Kim and Ko, 2012; Nijssen and Ordanini, 2020). These platforms are central in the making of online brand communities, which are mainly of two types (a) company-hosted and (b) consumer-initiated brand communities (Kim and Ko, 2012; Nambisan and Baron, 2009). Here, the study centers on online communities managed by firms (i.e., company-hosted brand communities).

SMMA offers opportunities to marketers to lessen prejudice and misunderstanding towards the brand and raise brand value with the exchange of information and ideas (Yadav and Rahman, 2017). Social media also has an advantage to easily recognize consumers who are paying more attention to the brand and engaging with them on a personal level (Appel et al., 2020; Bazi et al., 2020). Providing real-time information and knowing the consumers better due to the information marketers attain from consumers-to-brand and consumers-to-consumers interfaces are particularly beneficial for companies in creating brand value (Felix et al., 2017; Zollo et al., 2020). According to Kim and Ko (2012), SMMA comprises interaction, entertainment, trendiness, word-of-mouth (WOM) characteristics, and customization, which are accredited in other studies as well (Godey et al., 2016). In another study, SMMA in an e-commerce context are supposed to include interactivity, personalization, WOM, informativeness, and trendiness (Yadav and Rahman, 2017). SMMA are also examined as interaction, entertainment, trendiness, perceived risk, and customization components in airline study (Seo and Park, 2018). The present study examines the SMMA from Kim and Ko (2012) standpoint because of its right accreditation in the literature and suitability to the current study context (i.e., brand).

The entertainment component of SMMA views social media users as pleasure-seekers who are being amused and entertained, and who experience enjoyment (Kim and Ko, 2012). It is the play and fun outcome that arose from the social media encounter (Bazi et al., 2020). Entertainment drives participation and offers inspiration for consuming user-generated content in social media (Muntinga et al., 2011; Shao, 2009). As per Muntinga et al. (2011) social media users consume brand-related substance for pastime, enjoyment, and relaxation. Next, the interaction component of SMMA explain users who participate in brand's social media platforms to meet and chat with like-minded others on explicit products/brands (Kim and Ko, 2012; Muntinga et al., 2011). This component serves a crucial motivator in creating user-generated content (Bazi et al., 2020).

Trendiness, another component of SMMA, signifies discussion about the latest and hot news on social media (Kim and Ko, 2012). Consumers see social media platforms as a more reliable source to obtain info than traditional firm-sponsored promotions (Vollmer and Precourt, 2008). As per Godey et al. (2016), trendiness is disseminating the trendiest and latest information about brands on a social media platform. Customization, another component of SMMA, describes to the degree to which a brand can personalize and express individuality in their messages posted on social media for the intended audience (Seo and Park, 2018). Customization in social media denotes a way for firms to convey their brands' uniqueness by connecting with individual users and providing individually optimized information to them (Seo and Park, 2018). Customization is also outlined as the degree to which social media networks provide customized information search and service. Lastly, Word-of-mouth (WOM) in social media networks means online interactions among consumers about a brand (Seo and Park, 2018). WOM in social media has more relevance, empathy, and credibility for customers than information sources established by marketers on their websites (Gruen et al., 2007). Consumers generate and disseminate information related to brands, including branding opinions, sentiments, and comments to their friends, peers, and other associates without checks in social media channels. Suggesting WOM as an ideal tool, studies explain it as the degree to which users/customers upload content and pass alongside info on social media (Seo and Park, 2018).

2.2. Brand experience

The idea of brand experience emerged from the philosophy, cognitive science, and management subjects (Brakus et al., 2009). After being interpreted in the 'Experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and 'Experiential marketing' (Schmitt, 1999), it is understood as "subjective consumer responses that are evoked by specific brand-related experiential attributes" (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 65). Brand experience is an essential originator of customers' brand-related perceptions formed through sensorial, behavioral, intellectual experiences, and affective (Khan et al., 2019). Studies substantiate this multi-dimensional nature of brand experience by ascertaining its sensorial, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects during the customer's purchase decision journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Brand experience is interrelated but distinct from the evaluative, associative, and affective brand constructs such as brand attachment, brand involvement, brand personality, and brand attitudes (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 54).

Consumers experience a brand when they search, buy, receive, and consume products or services (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Experiences create long-lasting impressions on consumer memory than standard product features (Schmitt, 1999); however, its valence can differ (e.g., negative/positive) (Khan et al., 2019). Brand experience can also be evoked in an online environment during the product/service search and

is not only restricted to physical settings (Khan et al., 2019; Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013; Zollo et al., 2020). The advancement of internet-related technologies given birth to various online platforms such as brands' websites, brands' social media pages, where actual or potential customers can interact with the brand and have experience (Dwivedi et al., 2020). For instance, Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) explained the online brand experience as customer's "holistic response to the stimuli within the website environment" (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013, p. 22). Scholars reasoned that customers' experience with the brands in online context is a more immediate way to build a rapport with them (Khan et al., 2019).

Therefore, the supervision of the "numerous available channels and customer touchpoints, in such a way that the customer experience across channels and the performance over channels is optimized" is much needed (Verhoef et al., 2015, p. 176). To be specific, studies suggest to carefully consider and design experiences on various social media platforms unique to their brand and possibly offer customer value in exchange of customer's endorsement, attention, and time (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). Brands must exploit the growing power of available social media platforms. Recently, 'value in the experience' theory also indicates that social media-based brand experiences are particularly relevant as it includes ubiquitous, computer-mediated communication procedures that comprise various actors (e.g., the customer, the social networks and the brand) which together characterizes the "lifeworld" of the consumer (Helkkula et al., 2012). Therefore, an assessment towards social media-based brand experiences where customer determines and interpret value based on their assessments of direct interactions with the brand, other customers as well as combined interfaces with their social media platforms firm is critical (Carlson et al., 2019; Helkkula et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). Based on this viewpoint, the study attempts to understand how customers perceive brand experience embedded in SMMA. In fact, to date, little is known about how consumers perceive social media-based brand experiences, which may build a dynamic brand presence and improve the customer-brand relationship (Baird and Parasnis, 2011; Carlson et al., 2019).

3. Model and hypotheses of the study

3.1. SMMA and brand experience

The experiential marketing paradigm suggests an essential role of marketing communication in improving the customer's experience and brand value, which can combine the customer's sensory, affective, intellectual, and social experiences in a novel way (Khan and Fatma, 2017; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Schmitt, 1999; Tsai, 2005). In addition to traditional channels (i.e., TV advertising, publicity, personal selling, sales promotion), scholars acknowledged the importance of online channels (i.e., company website, social media platforms) in the company's marketing communication mix, and their crucial role in brand experience formation (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013; Zollo et al., 2020). For example, customized digital content on various online platforms can augment consumer–brand bonds (Chang et al., 2015). Relatedly, perceived SMMA might also stimulate customers' sensorial, behavioral, affective, and intellectual experiences resulting in their experience towards a brand (Brakus et al., 2009; Tsai, 2005). SMMA, such as entertainment, trendy marketing content, attractive product pictures, brand endorsers', sharing of brand-originated content, among others, stimulate brand experience (Hanna et al., 2011; Kim and Ko, 2010, 2012, 2012; Zollo et al., 2020). Thus, the study proposes that SMMA perceived by consumers can affect brand experience:

H1. *SMMA has a positive effect on brand experience.*

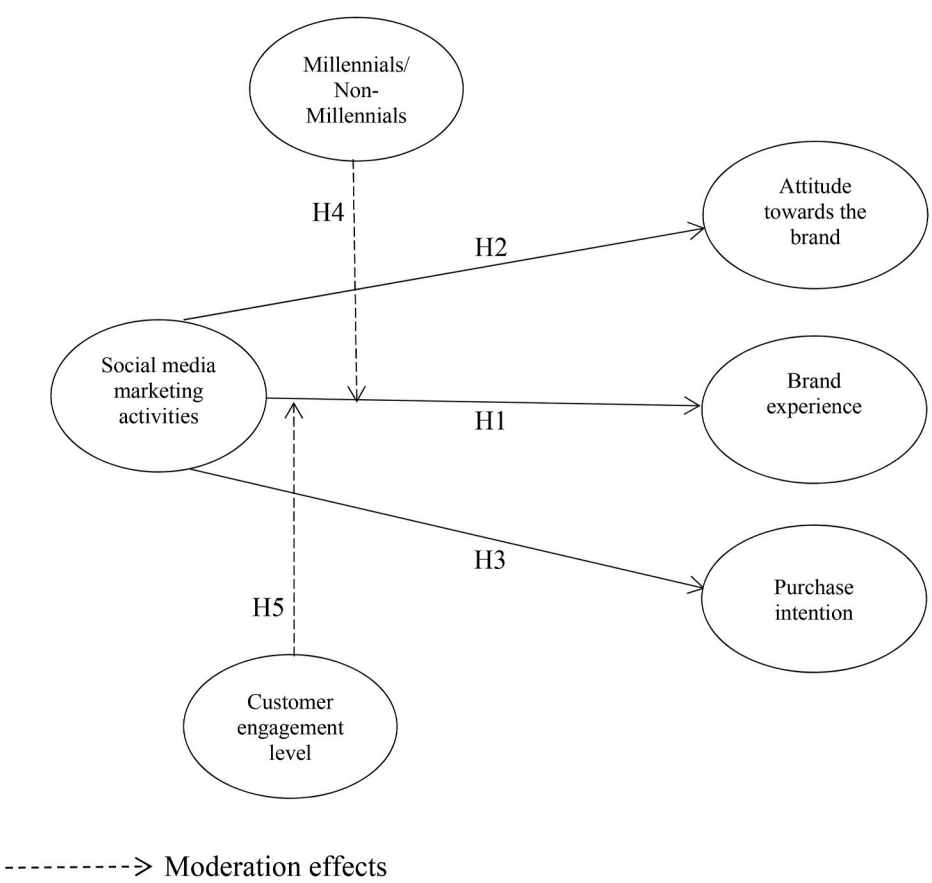

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

3.2. SMMA and attitude towards the brand

SMMA can shape customers' attitudes towards the brand (Akar and Topçu, 2011; Jin, 2012). Attitude is "a person's enduring favorable or unfavorable evaluation, emotional feeling, and action tendencies toward some object or idea" (Kotler and Keller, 2006, p. 194). Attitudes can make people adore or dislike an object, shaping their minds, moving them away, or towards the object (Fazio and Olson, 2007). The more positive the attitude an individual has towards a brand, the probability that they are to use up the product is high. Contrariwise, the less favorable the attitude, the probability of using the product is less (Chiou et al., 2008). Studies suggest that the more customers perceive SMMA relevant for them, the more they feel better for brands on those social networks (Akar and Topçu, 2011; Pace et al., 2017). Even few studies argued that social media is more useful than traditional media in determining consumers' attitudes towards a brand (Abzari et al., 2014; Kim and Ko, 2012). The interaction level between consumers and brands in social media is also considered to be positively related to attitude toward the brand (Kim and Lee, 2019; Sundar and Kim, 2005). Thus, we expect that:

H2. *SMMA has a positive influence on attitude towards the brand.*

3.3. SMMA and purchase intention

Purchase intention is viewed as another outcome of SMMA (Yadav and Rahman, 2017). Purchase intention implies the likelihood that the consumer is to buy in the future (Dodds et al., 1991). Purchase intention is firmly linked to brand/product preference (Kim and Lee, 2019). It is based on consumers' evaluation of products/brands combined with external stimulating factors such as brand's websites, and social networks (Dehghani and Tumer, 2015). Studies employed the purchase intention concept to approximate a brand's potential profits due to its nature of expressing the customer's willingness to promise specific activity associated to future consumption (Kim and Ko, 2010). In recent years, the increased active participation of brands on numerous social media platforms is anticipated to develop a relationship with customers, improve firms' profits, and have a positive impact on consumers' purchase intention towards the brand (Dehghani and Tumer, 2015; Godey et al., 2016). Thus, customers' perceived SMMA can influence their purchase intention (Kim and Ko, 2010). Accordingly, we propose that:

H3. *SMMA positively relate to purchase intention.*

3.4. Moderating effects of customer engagement

Both practitioners and academics embraced the idea of engaging customers as a crucial marketing strategy, with a particular focus in online settings (Hollebeek, 2019). The usefulness of an engaged customer can be explicated as a participant and a recipient of a company's communications (Liu et al., 2019). Customer engagement stimulates active psychological states that enrich meaningful, long-term, and deeper customer-brand relations (Liu et al., 2019; Wang and Kim, 2017; Zheng et al., 2015). While studying the customer engagement concept from various viewpoints such as customer-brand relationships, relationship marketing (Vivek et al., 2012), scholars showed consensus that engaged customers are presumably to exhibit repeat purchase behavior (Pansari and Kumar, 2017) especially in the online settings (Khan et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Wang and Kim, 2017). Despite this importance, customer engagement is less studied as a moderation construct (Thakur 2019).

Besides linear relationships, the importance of studying variables as moderators in the prediction of consumer behavior is well-conceded (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Khan et al., 2020). Markedly, studies suggest the possibility of customer engagement as a moderator variable in the online medium (Sawhney et al., 2005). For example, Thakur et al. (2019) explained customer engagement level (high/low) a crucial moderator in the satisfaction–loyalty relationship for the mobile-app usage domain. They also emphasized the need to assess customer engagement as a moderator variable in different relations and on varied digital platforms. Customers are presumably to hold positive intentions/attitudes toward a firm/brand if they are highly engaged (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Thakur et al., 2019). To be specific, brand experience appears to be more pertinent to consumers engaged with brands on numerous social media platforms (Khan et al., 2019; Tafesse, 2016). When customers visit a social media brand page to receive updated information, to pass along information, to interact, to have fun, to get customized service, and to share opinions with other users (Kim and Ko, 2012; Liu et al., 2019), it is quite possible that an engaged customer will have a stronger sense of experiencing that brand either positively or negatively (Tafesse, 2016; Thakur et al., 2019).

Customers' engagement level can influence the entire nature of their purchase decision process and is likely to shape their experiences that they have during interaction with the brand (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Thakur, 2019; Vivek et al., 2012). Customers are less likely to be interested in a particular brand's offering when they have low level of engagement with that brand, while customers who have greater engagement level show more interest (Thakur, 2019). Customers who have greater interest and engagement with the brand have an intensified degree of enjoyment feeling towards a brand (Carlson et al., 2019; Junaid et al., 2019). They may view themselves as an active firm member and enjoy feelings of passion, pride, and confidence. These feelings may affect the customer's expectations from the brand, and their way of experiencing that brand. Engaged customers probably interact with brand's social media frequently, and actively share and comment over brand's social media posts (Hollebeek, 2019; So et al., 2020). Customers with a high engagement level are also excited about brand offerings (Carlson et al., 2019; Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Sawhney et al., 2005; Vivek et al., 2012); consequently, they actively notice brand cues and have unique experiences. Higher degrees of engagement among customers are likely to result in strong connections, and such connections are likely to affect their way of experiencing that brand. The escalated level of engagement in social media with a particular brand is due to customer's commitment of maintaining stronger relationship with that brand (Hollebeek, 2019; So et al., 2020; Vivek et al., 2012). As the customer engagement with the brand deepens, it leads to a change in customers' way of experiencing that brand (Carlson et al., 2019; Thakur, 2019). Based on above theoretical rationale, for customers with higher engagement level, the SMMA-brand experience link is anticipated to be stronger. Thus, we propose that:

H4. *Customer engagement strengthens the association between SMMA and brand experience.*

3.5. Moderating effects of consumer generation (millennials/non-millennials)

Consumer generation is a prominent demographic variable in understating consumer behaviors (Gurău, 2012; Ye et al., 2019). Studies noticed that individuals tend to value objects differently at various stages of their life (Loureiro and Roschk, 2014; Pitta and Gurău, 2012). Consumers at different life-stages possess distinct psychological, cognitive, and behavioral state, which subsequently alter the way they view brand-related information and respond to marketing activities (Bolton et al., 2013; Ye et al., 2019). For instance, older people rely generally on schema-based or heuristic forms of processing (Yoon, 1997), and are less likely to strive for new information (Wells and Gubar, 1966). Older people possess more significant control over emotions and high maturity than younger people (Carstensen et al., 2011). Given the relevance of consumer generation as a moderator variable in marketing literature (Bolton et al., 2013; Fromm and Garton, 2013; Stewart et al., 2017), we attempt to study it as a moderator variable with two sub-groups: millennials (born between 1981 and 1996, i.e., 23–38 years old) and

non-millennials (other age groups).

Millennials are more brand-conscious and digital-friendly than other generations (Han and Kim, 2020; Rissanen and Luoma-Aho, 2016), suggesting the need to redesign marketing strategies towards millennials (Smith, 2012). Also, millennials grew up alongside mobile phones, internet, and online social networks (Florenthal, 2019; Luo et al., 2020). Given the facts, social media marketing activates are more appropriate for targeting this "techno-savvy" generation (Gurău, 2012, p. 103). Opposite to baby boomers and Generation X consumers, Millennials possess more persistent interactions with brands thru social media (Luo et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2017). Millennials like to set up a conversation with brands and establish an enduring relationship via social media platforms (Rissanen and Luoma-Aho, 2016). They also expect unique consumption experiences via social media brand communities that offer distinctive benefits and close connections with brands (Gao and Feng, 2016; Luo et al., 2020). The interest in SMMA aiming for Millennials is increasing due to their increasing strategic significance (Han and Kim, 2020; Luo et al., 2020). Despite this significance of knowing millennials' characteristics from the perspectives of growing social media usage in marketing activities, literature shows scant academic research with millennials/non-millennials as a moderator, especially in the SMMA context (Florenthal, 2019). Hence, the study expects that:

H5. *The relationship strength between SMMA and brand experience is higher for millennial users than non-millennial users.*

4. Methodology

4.1. Sample and data collection

The current study administered a survey for over ten weeks to assess the proposed model. The survey was related to social media brand pages. The sampling frame comprises participants who follow a brand on social media. The eligibility criteria for sample selection were: 1) follow a brand on social media, 2) be at least 18 years old, and 3) read English. The respondents were selected using snowball sampling method, which has the advantage of getting responses from most eligible and appropriate individuals Baltar and Brunet (2012); Malhotra (2019). Snowball sampling takes in some participants of the group of interest to find out other participants. Studies preferred this non-probability sampling method over other methods because this technique is related with the study of population which is hesitant and unwilling to participate in research studies (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). Also, referrals are quite helpful in getting reliable and hard to reach participants. The initial respondents were selected from the researchers' network who possessed the desired characteristics of the target population. Once data was collected from the initial respondents, they were requested to share contact details of other possible participants meeting the inclusion criteria. Thus, confirming a referral chain of potential participants and the use of snowball sampling.

A five-member panel (two marketing professors, two senior marketing doctoral students, and one industry expert) assessed the questionnaire. This scrutiny ensures the aptness of the questions about difficulty level, readability, clarity, and understandability. We further evaluated the questionnaire thru a pre-testing on a sample of 41 participants to eradicate any problem concerning questions' clarity. Next, to lessen social desirability bias and encourage honest disclosures (Larson, 2019; Podsakoff et al., 2003), we assured that participation would be kept anonymous and confidential. Social desirability bias results from the tendency of some individuals to answer in a socially acceptable manner (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We also emphasized that answers were neither correct nor incorrect, and the study would be voluntary. Following Podsakoff et al.'s (2003, p. 887) "separation of measurements" process, the study separated the predictors' measurement items from the criterion variables.

In line with prior studies, we targeted followers of brand communities on social media networks (Zollo et al., 2020). Participants were screened to reach the targeted segment (i.e., who follows a brand on social media). For this, we asked them about which brand they follow on social media. Next, we stated that the questions are meant to individuals' experience with the selected brand and the associated social media. Respondents were also asked to mention their preferred social media platform. Out of the total contacted 850 individuals, we received 479 responses. We discarded responses due to incompleteness, outliers, and remained with 413 useable responses. To assess non-response bias, the study embraced Armstrong and Overton's (1977) suggested procedure, which is applied in numerous prior studies (e.g., Christodoulides et al., 2006; Dwivedi and McDonald, 2018). This test presumes that late responders in a sample are like theoretical non-responders (Dwivedi and McDonald, 2018). Hence, we compared early and late responses to test for the likelihood of non-response bias. Results suggested no significant variations between the two groups ($p > 0.05$), implying that non-response bias is not a matter of concern. The respondents' socio-demographic profiles are: age (years)–212(51%): 23–38 (millennials), 201(49%): other than 23–38 (non-millennials); gender–238 (58%) male, 175(42%) female. Social media platforms selected by respondents are: Facebook (29%), Twitter (24%), Instagram (21%), Youtube (18%), others (8%).

4.2. Measures

The study measured SMMA using an 11-items scale (Godey et al., 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012). The brand experience was measured by 12-items (Brakus et al., 2009). Both attitude towards the brand and purchase intention were evaluated using 3 seven-point semantic differential scales (MacKenzie et al., 1986; Kim and Lee, 2019). Lastly, customer engagement was measured from a 10-item scale (Hollebeek et al., 2014). SMMA, brand experience, and customer engagement items were evaluated on a Likert-type scale, stretching from strongly disagree (1) to agree (7) strongly. All the scale items are stated in Table 1.

We administered the survey with the suggested process to lessen the potential risk from the common method (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For instance, the study divided the questionnaire into sections, ensured that items did not contain hidden cues to respondents, and avoided using negatively worded items. Though we administered the survey with the suggested process, a common method variance test was also conducted to identify the potential bias in the data (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We performed a single factor analysis using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess common method bias. The results showed that the single-factor model has an inadequate and unacceptable fit ($\chi 2/df = 4.96$, CFI = 0.82; NFI = 0.81; IFI = 0.83; TLI = 0.78 and RMSEA = 0.112], compared to multi-factor model. Hence, suggesting no issue of common method bias in the sample data.

5. Results and analysis

5.1. Measurement model

CFA results suggest the reliability and validity of the proposed model. Both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability statistics found greater than 0.70 (see Table 1), thereby suggesting that measurement items possess internal consistency and reliability (Nunnally, 1978). Convergent validity established based on suggested factor loading (>0.60) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (>0.50) values (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) (Tables 1 and 2). A comparison of correlations between each construct and AVE square root values ensures discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) (see Table 2). Content validity was already assessed at the pre-testing stage. Model fit indices suggested a reasonably model fit ($\chi^2 = 804.961$, df = 326, $\chi^2/df = 2.469$, CFI = 0.93; NFI = 0.91; IFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.92 and RMSEA = 0.06). In general, results certify the validity and reliability of the measurement model.

Table 1
Constructs and measurement items.

Construct/items	Factor loadings
Social media marketing activities (CR=0.83; α=0.81) (Kim and Ko, 2012; Zollo et al., 2020)	
• "Using X brand's social media is fun"	0.85
• "Content of X brand's social media seems interesting"	0.77
• "X brand's social media enable information-sharing with others"	0.76
• "Conversation or opinion exchange with others is possible through X brand's social media"	0.94
• "It is easy to provide my opinion through X brand's social media"	0.84
• "Content of X brand's social media is the newest information"	0.81
• "Using X brand's social media is very trendy"	0.85
• "X brand's social media offer a customized information search"	0.76
• "X brand's social media provide customized service"	0.87
• "I would like to pass information on brand, product, or services from X brand's social media to my friends"	0.73
• "I would like to upload content from X brand's social media on my blog or micro blog"	0.78
Brand experience (CR=0.83; α = 0.78) (Brakus et al., 2009)	
• "X brand makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses"	0.89
• "I find X brand interesting in a sensory way"	0.83
• "X brand appeals to my senses"	0.85
• "X brand induces my feelings and sentiments"	0.93
• "I have strong emotions for X brand"	0.91
• "X brand is an emotional brand"	0.90
• "I engage in physical actions and behaviors when I use X brand"	0.95
• "X brand results in bodily experiences"	0.89
• "X brand is action oriented"	0.86
• "I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter X brand"	0.88
• "X brand makes me think"	0.87
• "X brand stimulates my curiosity"	0.84
Attitude towards the brand (CR=0.88; α=0.89) (Kim and Lee, 2019; MacKenzie et al., 1986)	
• Attitude toward X brand: bad/good.	0.95
• Attitude toward X brand: unfavorable/favorable.	0.83
• Attitude toward X brand: negative/positive	0.77
Purchase intention (CR=0.87; α=0.86) (Kim and Lee, 2019; MacKenzie et al., 1986)	
• Likely/unlikely	0.91
• Probable/improbable	0.78
• Possible/impossible	0.82
Customer engagement (CR=0.82; α=0.77) (Hollebeek et al., 2014)	
• "Using X brand's social media gets me to think about this brand"	0.79
• "I think about X brand a lot when I'm using its social media"	0.84
• "Using X brand's social media stimulates my interest to learn more about this brand"	0.81
• "I feel very positive when I use X brand's social media"	0.87
• "Using X brand's social media makes me happy"	0.79
• "I feel good when I use X brand's social media"	0.88
• "I'm proud to use X brand's social media"	0.92
• "I spend a lot of time using X brand's social media, compared to the other brand's social media"	0.78
• "Whenever I'm using social media, I usually use X brand's social media"	0.89
• "X brand's social media is one of the brand's social media I usually use when I use social media"	0.90

5.2. Test of hypothesis: structural model

We examined the hypothesis in two phases: a) main effects (H1 to H3), and moderation effects (H4 and H5). Main hypothesis testing comprises four constructs: SMMA, brand experience, purchase intention, and attitude towards the brand. The study included two more constructs (i.e., millennials/non-millennials and customer engagement) to test the moderation hypothesis. Table 3 shows the empirical results.

5.2.1. Main effects

Results suggest a significant and positive impact of SMMA on brand experience ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H1. A positive association was observed between SMMA and attitude towards the brand ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.05$), thereby supporting H2. The analysis also supports H3, a significant and positive impact of SMMA on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.05$). The effect of brand experience on attitude towards the brand found significant and positive ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$), which supports H4. Eventually, supporting H5, results indicate a positive impact of brand experience on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2
Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social media marketing activities	4.13	1.08	*0.79*				
2. Brand experience	3.97	1.13	0.17*	*0.81*			
3. Attitude towards the brand	3.79	1.01	0.26*	0.39*	*0.76*		
4. Purchase intention	4.08	0.96	0.43*	0.08*	0.12*	*0.84*	
5. Customer engagement	4.10	1.12	0.37*	0.46*	0.54*	0.04*	*0.87*

Square root values of AVE are shown diagonally. SD=Standard deviation.
*Significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3
Structural model results.

Structural Relationships	β	t-value
Main effects (direct)		
H1: SMMA ⟶ Brand experience	0.63*	11.85
H2: SMMA ⟶ Attitude towards the brand	0.39*	5.27
H3: SMMA ⟶ Purchase intention	0.44*	10.92
Moderation effect		
H4: Millennials/Non-Millennials moderation effect		
-Millennials		
SMMA ⟶ Brand experience	0.56*	5.87
-Non-Millennials		
SMMA ⟶ Brand experience	0.17*	3.22
H5: Customer engagement moderation effect		
-Low		
SMMA ⟶ Brand experience	0.09*	2.81
-High		
SMMA ⟶ Brand experience	0.46*	7.04
Goodness-of-Fit Statistics:		
$\chi^2 = 770.626$, df = 363, $\chi^2/df = 2.123$, $p < 0.000$; CFI = .94; NFI = .91; IFI = .95; TLI = .94 and RMSEA = .052		
R^2 values: Brand experience = 0.54; Attitude towards the brand = 0.49; and Purchase intention = 0.40		

Significant at *$p < 0.05$.

5.2.2. Testing moderation effects

To test whether millennials and non-millennials sub-groups moderate the relationship between SMMA and brand experience, we assessed unconstrained and constrained models. A significant chi-square difference suggests a good fit for the unconstrained model [$\Delta\chi^2(1) = 28.7$, $p < 0.00$], thereby signifying the association between SMMA and brand experience is dissimilar in the two groups. The association between SMMA and brand experience is positive and significant in the millennial generation group ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.05$), whereas, in the non-millennial generation group, the same link is also significant and positive but

comparatively much weaker ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$). Overall, moderation of consumer generation (millennial/non-millennial) identified in the path from SMMA to brand experience, supporting H4.

To assess customer engagement's moderation role in the relationship that SMMA shared with the brand experience sample was separated into two sub-groups at the median level of customer engagement, and the structural model was re-examined (Baron and Kenny, 1986; So et al., 2020). We estimated constrained (one in which path coefficients to be equal across groups) and unconstrained (one in which path coefficients to vary freely) models. The chi-square difference test was found significant and indicated a better fit for the unconstrained model [$\Delta\chi^2(2) = 9.58$, $p < 0.00$], thus, the relationship between SMMA and brand experience is different in the two groups. The relationship between SMMA and brand experience is positive and significant for both the low-customer engagement group, ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$), and the high-customer engagement group ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.05$). Notably, in high-customer engagement group path coefficient is much stronger than the low-customer engagement group. Essentially, customer engagement moderates the path from SMMA to brand experience, supporting H5.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The study examines the role of SMMA in forming brand experience, developing an attitude towards the brand, and improving purchase intention. This study too considered the consumer generation (Millenials/non-Millenials) and customer engagement (high/low) as moderator variables. The findings suggest that SMMA influence the brand experience, attitude, and purchase intention towards the brand. Subsequently, results indicate the crucial role of brand experience in developing attitude and purchase intention. Besides, consumer generation (Millenials vs. Non-Millenials) and the level of customer engagement (high vs. low) moderated the relationship between SMMA and brand experience.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

The present study adds to the social media marketing literature in subsequent ways. First, the present study augments the existing SMMA literature by examining the model using a non-student sample in diverse contexts (Zollo et al., 2020). Importantly, determining whether generational effects (i.e., Millenials/non-Millenials) are relevant in the SMMA-brand experience link, the current study responds to an essential call for research in the growing SMMA literature (Zollo et al., 2010). Also, an insight about the role of consumer generations in social media marketing is pertinent (Moore, 2012). Findings suggest a crucial role of SMMA across generations i.e., SMMA-brand experience link is stronger in the millennial than non-millennial sub-group. This suggests that SMMA relatively more capable of influencing millennial consumers' experience with a brand. This result line up with the studies that argued the vital importance of social media marketing towards shaping perceptions and forming a basis for brand evaluation in the online environment (Zollo et al., 2020). Hence, the present study contributes to the growing literature on SMMA on consumer generation's roles as a moderator variable in the SMMA-brand experience link (Florenthal, 2019).

Second, the current study adds to the customer engagement research by assessing the degree to which the SMMA-brand experience link varies due to the low and high level of customer engagement with a brand's social media activity. This moderation analysis suggests that the higher the customer engagement level is, the more likely SMMA are becoming to influence the customer's brand experience. By contrast, SMMA found less relevant, comparatively, under conditions of low engagement level. This finding not only advances the existing literature, which argued customer engagement as a moderator variable (Thakur, 2019) but also respond towards the vital research calls in the social media marketing and engagement literature (Liu et al., 2019; Wang and Kim, 2017).

6.2. Practical implications

The present study has significant implications for the managers; primarily, those involved in managing its social media marketing campaigns. First, empirically assessing the SMMA crucial driver of brand experience, purchase intention, and attitude towards the brand. This study guides marketers to understand consumers' perceptions and evaluations of their brand activates on social media platforms. For instance, managers should create and maintain several stimuli such as texts, images, videos on their social media brand pages with a clear focus on brand experiences to create for their targeted customer segment. The content on a brand's social media page should be impeccably streamlined with its targeted customer group. By this, managers can provide meaningful and valuable brand experiences using social media platforms as their strategic tool. Besides, our empirical examination indicates that a well-managed social media marketing campaign can help to develop purchase intention and an attitude towards the brand. Thus, these outcomes intend to notify marketers to strategically plan and manage their SMMA due to their significant role in determining consumer responses.

Second, an understanding of the generational effect in planning and executing effective marketing strategies in social media is much useful and required (Florenthal, 2019; Zollo et al., 2020). For this purpose, the present research examined much-discussed consumer generation, i.e., Millenials/non-Millenials as a moderator variable (Khan et al., 2020), which has been considered highly relevant in social media context (Florenthal, 2019; Moore, 2012). The study observed differences between these two generation sub-groups in the SMMA-brand experience link. Differences indicate that social media managers need to be cautious in planning and designing social media marketing campaigns for the two different consumer generations. Though, in general, both the groups showed a positive and significant effect for the SMMA-brand experience link, but it is more robust for the millennial sub-group. Social media managers should apprehend this nature of the SMMA-brand experience relationship that varies with generation. Hence, to improve SMMA effectiveness (especially for millennial consumer groups), it is of great importance for managers to recognize Millenials' perception and evaluation of their brand's activities on social media platforms.

Third, to design and provide meaningful brand experience, brand managers often need to focus on their marketing efforts on social media platforms (Zollo et al., 2020). Nevertheless, findings indicate that the SMMA-brand experience link is non-monotonic and depends upon the customer engagement level. Specifically, moderation analysis suggests that the impact of SMMA on-brand experience is weaker when the customer's engagement is low, and it is more robust when their engagement level is high. This finding re-confirm that an engaged customer is more prospective to show an affirmative reaction towards a brand (Khan et al., 2019). Based on this, we suggest that social media managers put effort into planning and designing content capable of engaging customers at a higher level. Because when customers' engagement is high, the marketer's efforts toward SMMA may have higher congruence with meaningful and unique brand experience, which may subsequently improve consumer responses towards the brand.

6.3. Limitations and further research possibilities

This research has certain limitations. First, we exercised a non-probability sampling technique that may encompass the matter of generalizability. However, the application of non-probability sampling is predominant in SMMA literature (e.g., Kim and Ko, 2012). Further studies with a research design that minimizes the sampling limitation are, therefore, suggested. Second, the present study categorized customer generation into millennials and non-millennials sub-groups based on its relevance and usefulness (Han and Kim, 2020). It could be interesting to classify respondents into Generation X vs. Millennials or

Millenials vs. Centennials sub-groups to examine relationships discussed here. Third, the study assessed customer engagement as a moderator; further studies may consider some essential social-demographic variables such as education, gender, age, etc. At last, we advocate the use of longitudinal research design in testing the given relationships.

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