

Social Media as a Branding Tool

Defining the Customer Perspective

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Bachelor's thesis

May 2017

Social sciences, business and administration

Degree Programme in International Business

Author(s) Manninen, Pia	Type of publication Bachelor's thesis	Date May 2017
	Number of pages 80	Language of publication: English
		Permission for web publication: x
Title of publication Social Media as a Branding Tool Defining the Customer Perspective		
Degree programme Degree Programme in International Business		
Supervisor(s) Luck, Heidi		
Assigned by		
<p>Abstract</p> <p>As interaction between companies and customers increasingly takes place on social media, the channel becomes highly important for branding. The social media presence of a brand both reflects the brand identity and influences the brand associations made by consumers. Companies are currently faced with the crucial challenges of producing appealing content to attract the customers' attention and choosing the appropriate social media platforms for brand communications. For these reasons, understanding how customers perceive the role and value of social media is vital for brands striving for success in the online environment.</p> <p>The prevalent requirement of catering to the consumers' demands and preferences stressed the need to study their perceptions of the fundamental characteristics and purpose of social media in the context of branding. In particular, the customers' views on social media platforms and post types as a part of online interaction were examined.</p> <p>The qualitative research approach enabled the detailed analysis of subjective opinions and experiences, and the theoretical framework of branding and social media supported the data collection. The data were gathered in semi-structured theme interviews conducted with five interviewees of varied backgrounds representing the customer perspective. The results were obtained from the interviews using qualitative content analysis.</p> <p>The findings reflect upon the targets and tones of brand communications on social media. From the customer perspective, branding contributes to the perceptions of the benefits for the consumers, the conveyed corporate image and increased awareness of the company. The appealing content types provide solutions for attracting the audience, whereas the characterisations of platforms and post types assist in their proper utilisation. In conclusion, the consumers' views resulted in a deeper understanding of social media as a branding tool.</p>		
Keywords/tags (subjects) Social Media, Brand, Branding, Brand Communications, Customer Perspective, Interview Study		
Miscellaneous Appendices attached (10 pages)		

Tekijä(t) Manninen, Pia	Julkaisun laji Opinnäytetyö, AMK	Päivämäärä Toukokuu 2017
	Sivumäärä 80	Julkaisun kieli Englanti
		Verkkajulkaisulupa myönnetty: x
Työn nimi Sosiaalinen media brändäyksen työkaluna Asiakasnäkökulmaa etsimässä		
Tutkinto-ohjelma Degree Programme in International Business		
Työn ohjaaja(t) Heidi Luck		
Toimeksiantaja(t)		
<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Vuorovaikutus yritysten ja asiakkaiden välillä tapahtuu yhä enemmän sosiaalisessa medias- sa, joten kanavan merkitys brändäyksessä korostuu. Brändin sosiaalisen median presenssi sekä kuvastaa brändi-identiteettiä että vaikuttaa kuluttajien mielleyhtymiin. Yritysten täy- tyy nykyään tuottaa vetoavaa sisältöä asiakkaiden huomion kiinnittämiseksi ja valita sopi- vat sosiaalisen median kanavat brändiviestinnälle. Näistä syistä netissä menestystä tavoit- televien brändien on tärkeää ymmärtää, kuinka asiakkaat käsittävät sosiaalisen median roolin ja merkityksen.</p> <p>Kuluttajien toiveiden ja mieltyömysten hahmottamiseksi painottui tarve tutkia heidän käsi- tyksiään, jotka koskivat sosiaalisen median olennaisia ominaispiirteitä ja tarkoitusta liittyen brändäykseen. Erityisesti tarkasteltiin asiakkaiden näkemyksiä sosiaalisen median yhteisö- palveluista ja julkaisutyypeistä osana netissä tapahtuvaa vuorovaikutusta.</p> <p>Laadullinen tutkimusmenetelmä mahdollisti subjektiivisten kokemusten ja mielipiteiden yksityiskohtaisen analysoinnin. Brändäyksen ja sosiaalisen median teoreettinen viitekehy- s tuki aineistonkeruuta. Aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoiduilla teemahaastatteluilta viideltä erilaiset taustat omaavalta haastateltavalta, jotka edustivat asiakasnäkökulmaa. Tulokset saatiin haastatteluista sisällönanalyysimenetelmää hyödyntäen.</p> <p>Tulokset tarjoavat näkökulmia brändiviestinnän tavoitteiksi ja sävyiksi sosiaalisessa medi- assa. Asiakasnäkökulmasta kuluttajille suunnatut hyödyt, yrityskuvan välittäminen sekä lisääntynyt tietoisuus yrityksestä ovat keskeisiä brändäyksen päämääriä. Vetoavat sisältö- tyypit edustavat keinoja yleisön mielenkiinnon herättämiseen, kun taas yhteisöpalveluiden ja julkaisutyyppien kuvaukset auttavat niiden sopivassa käytössä. Kaiken kaikkiaan kulutta- jien näkemykset syvensivät ymmärrystä sosiaalisesta mediasta brändäyksen työkaluna.</p>		
<p>Avainsanat (asiasanat) Sosiaalinen media, Brändi, Brändäys, Brändiviestintä, Asiakasnäkökulma, Haastattelututkimus</p>		
<p>Muut tiedot Lisänä liitteet (10 sivua)</p>		

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1 The Crucial Role of Social Media in Online Branding

Social media have become an integral part of people's everyday lives and impact their perceptions, information seeking and engagement with others (Hinton & Hjorth 2013, 2; Ledford & Anderson 2013, 252). In the field of branding, however, social media represent the future of brand innovation with nearly limitless possibilities for greater brand performance (Melewar & Nguyen 2014, 763). Due to the potential which social media hold for brand communications, deciding which platforms to use and how becomes critical for businesses struggling to appeal to the online audience.

Underscoring the connection between social media and branding, Kananen and Pyykkönen (2012, 81) suggested that the most important objectives for digital marketing are to increase awareness and improve the brand image. In fact, improving the image of the company or marketing the products have been the paramount purposes for using social media among Finnish enterprises, along with receiving or responding to customers' opinions and questions (Official Statistics of Finland 2015). Hence, the utilisation of social media seems to be primarily targeted at promoting the business and interacting with an extremely important group of stakeholders. In order to appropriately integrate the channel into branding strategies, detailed knowledge and thorough understanding are required.

The relationship between social media and branding is prominent also for the customers. Among Finns in 2016, the purpose for using social media was mainly related to following companies' brands, products or services (Official Statistics of Finland 2016c). With the new customer-centric mindset, brands strive to reach the modern, educated and demanding audience continuously exposed to countless marketing messages. The solution lies in familiarising with the customers' online behaviour, how they regard social media and what appeals to them in terms of content created for branding purposes. Therefore, this research aims to deepen the understanding of social media from the customer perspective and describe the implicit structures and elements guiding the consumers' perceptions and attitudes. Such details are deemed vital for the planning of successful branding strategies on social media.

Previous research and motivation for the study

Given the significance of this topical phenomenon, social media have lately been a notable research topic in the field of marketing. Many studies have adopted a quantitative approach for comparing social media to traditional marketing communication (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schäfer 2012, 771, 777), examining consumer behaviour (Clark, Black, & Judson 2017, 40, 45), or analysing the effects of social media marketing on brand loyalty (Ismail 2017, 131, 133). Such viewpoints focus extensively on the effects and consequences, but to thoroughly comprehend the influential factors in consumers' perceptions, this research relies on a qualitative approach instead. More precisely, the qualitative research approach enables an elaborate and profound analysis of social media with fresh consumer insights.

While over half of Finnish enterprises used social networks in 2016, their recently increased popularity has not extended to multimedia content and blogs (Official Statistics of Finland 2016a). Possible reasons for this situation are uncertainty and the lack of knowledge. Still, the reliance on social networks also emphasises the need to accurately comprehend the platforms and the nuances leading to their successful utilisation. Triggered by the researcher's personal and professional interests, the familiarisation with the characteristics and essence of social media can considerably clarify the phenomenon and consequently shape brand communications.

To properly prepare for maximising the potential of social media for branding, businesses should familiarise with customers' attitudes and their relationship to the channel. The purpose of this research is derived from that principle. Deliberately conducting the study without an assignor allows for an exhaustive examination of the consumers' perceptions and the connected core components of those views. In addition, such discoveries produce concrete knowledge and direct value especially to business-to-consumer companies and to the marketing industry in general.

Research questions and an overview of the thesis

The objective of the thesis is to understand the customers' perceptions of social media as the channel for companies' branding strategies. In effect, the central goal is to deepen the meaning of the characterisations and underlying themes emerging

from consumers' perspectives. Since communication on social media occurs on platforms via posts, these two elements are instrumental in brand communications and worth examining. Thus, they are addressed in the two supporting research questions which aid in creating a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon:

1. What constitutes the customers' perceptions of social media as a branding tool?
 - 1.1. Which characteristics are fundamental to popular social media platforms and the value they offer to consumers?
 - 1.2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of social media post types for brand communications?

The main research question identifies the aims and tone for brand communications, whereas the supporting questions specify on the functions of platforms and posts. Semi-structured interviews will generate the answers to the research questions, with the support of the theoretical framework concentrating on the concepts of branding and social media. After presenting and discussing the results, concluding remarks will assess the credibility and significance of the research (see Figure 1).

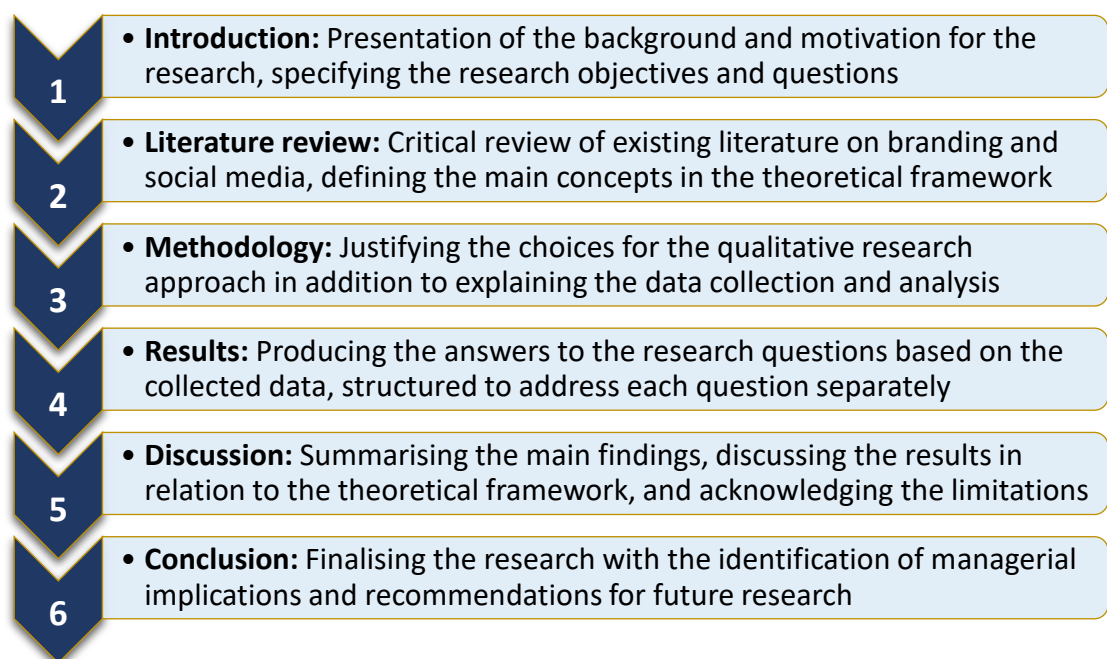


Figure 1. The structure of the thesis

2 Theoretical Framework of Branding and Social Media

The theoretical framework for this research comprises the main concepts of branding and social media. Since the former serves as a perspective on the phenomena related to the latter, the following review of literature will be structured accordingly. At first, the definition of a brand will be explored in detail along with the prominent elements belonging to branding. Subsequently, the examination of social media will consider both the background of the phenomenon and the attributes of platforms enabling their categorisation. In the end, the two topics will connect in the elaboration on the relevance of social media for businesses at large and especially for branding.

2.1 Brand and the Components of Branding

First of all, it is important to examine of the concept of a brand. Companies create intangible value propositions and physical offerings which include benefits to address and satisfy customer needs (Kotler & Keller 2012, 32). When a known source produces an offering, it becomes a brand which triggers associations in consumers' minds (ibid.). Keller (2013, 30) remarked that a brand may be a name, symbol or logo attached to a product to distinguish it from competition, but it is also a source of prominence, awareness and reputation in the market. Therefore, a brand is a product or service with differentiating dimensions distinguishing it from the competitors which are the other products or services catering to the same need (Kotler & Keller 2012, 263). These unique qualities can be related to either product performance or the abstract meanings the brand represents in general (ibid.).

In addition to the above-mentioned views, a range of definitions in fact exists for the term "brand". For instance, Edwards and Day (2007, 41) suggested a brand to be "a product plus values and associations." Adamson (2008, 20), on the other hand, alleged that a brand is a link connecting a consumer with a product or service through psychological associations from thinking about the brand. Wheeler (2013, 2) supported that notion but also suggested that brands create irreplaceable emotional connections with consumers to convince them of the brand's superiority in the market. Alternatively, Roper and Fill (2012, 109) proposed that a brand is in fact a

promise of difference and relevance represented by emotions and associations. In the end, the summary from Riezebos, Kist, and Kootstra (2003, 63) established that:

A brand is every sign that is capable of distinguishing the goods or services of a company and that can have a certain meaning for consumers both in material and in immaterial terms.

The review of the various definitions for the term “brand” demonstrated that while emphasis can be placed differently, the core essence of brands remained universal. Nowadays, brands have in effect shifted from being “product-plus”—complementary elements making the product meaningful—to being “a concept” which is developed to appeal to certain consumers (ibid., 14). More specifically, a brand is regarded to have both intrinsic and extrinsic attributes: the former can be non-distinguishing characteristic aspects or distinguishing differing features, whereas the latter noticeably help consumers identify products for instance with packaging and pricing (ibid., 32). Understanding these elements which ultimately build the brand is crucial because they all have unique purposes adding value to the concept. Being a promise of satisfaction, a brand leaves a lasting impression of the product attributes to the customer, which also underlines the role of branding in defining the brand promise and meaning (Healey 2008, 6).

Similarly as the definition of a brand has been explored, the components of branding must be reviewed. As brands live in consumers’ minds, branding can influence those associations by providing affirmation, quality and shared values along with inspiring loyalty through good reputation and perceived greater worth (ibid., 10). In detail, branding is identified to consist of positioning, storytelling, design, pricing and customer relationships (ibid., 8). All of these aspects contribute towards the customers’ perception of the brand and therefore should be carefully considered in the branding strategy. Wheeler (2013, 6) assessed the main objective of branding to be building awareness and growing customer loyalty by highlighting the difference in either value or suitability, as compared to other brands. At best, this goal creates brand loyalty among customers. The element of brand loyalty is remarkably valuable because it even creates barriers to entry for other companies and also provides the business with security and predictability for demand (Kotler & Keller 2012, 264).

Marketing is, in fact, an operational tool for branding (Sounio 2010, 63). According to Kotler and Keller (2012, 27), the American Marketing Association defined that:

Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.

This comprehensive identification of marketing facilitates the understanding of its role in relation to branding. Also, Pringle and Field (2008, 8) asserted that marketing is specifically responsible for “identifying, influencing, acquiring, serving, satisfying and retaining” customers for a company. Such a wide range of purposes stresses also the extent of branding in being present for the points of contact with the customer, for example in advertising. As part of marketing communications, advertising consists of paid nonpersonal promotion and presentation of ideas from an identified sponsor via print, broadcast, network, electronic or display media (Kotler & Keller 2012, 500). This definition received support from Riezebos and colleagues (2003, 18, 149) who considered advertising an instrument for marketing communication providing information and reminding consumers of the unique advantages of a brand. Indeed, advertising is effectively a branding application similar to packaging and signage (Adamson 2008, 21), though its power as a brand building tool is rather limited due to the difficulties in reaching modern consumers (Healey 2008, 26).

Building brand equity through influential brand associations

Having elaborated on the connection of branding to marketing and advertising, the aspects of the actual branding practice can be investigated further. Since branding creates differences between products and services with the influence of a brand, it also helps consumers to process knowledge and clarifies their decision-making (Kotler & Keller 2012, 265). This notion is essential as it emphasises the concrete worth of powerful branding for any company. Moreover, the added value attached to products or services ultimately benefits the business also in the form of brand equity (ibid.). Riezebos and others (2003, 267) debated brand equity to represent the value an organisation gets from a brand: strategic, managerial or financial benefits, for example. Of the important brand criteria—memorable, meaningful, likable, transferable, adaptable and protectable—the first three build brand equity and the latter three leverage and maintain it (Keller 2013, 142–143).

As for the asset categories of brand equity, Aaker (2010) regarded them as brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations. Firstly, brand awareness focuses on how strongly a brand is present in consumers' minds and consists of two components: recognition based on previous exposure to a brand, and recalling specific brands in a product class. Positive reactions originating from recognition are actually a psychological phenomenon. Consumers can also interpret brand exposure as an indication of the quality of the brand, since the company is eager to spend money on it. In practice, low recall means that while consumers are familiar with the brand, they will not think of it when making a purchase decision. The value of the second asset—a loyal customer base—lies in the ability to generate predictable sales, as retaining customers is noticeably less costly than attracting new buyers. The perceived quality, on the other hand, connects with and supports other brand perceptions while driving financial performance. Lastly, consumers make brand associations with product attributes and symbols, which companies can modify by developing their brand identity. (7–8, 10–11, 13, 17, 21, 25.)

These four categories of brand equity exemplify the creation and maintenance of this important asset. Additionally, Keller (2013) defined customer-based brand equity as “the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand.” Hence, positive customer-based brand equity is likely to trigger favourable reactions from identifying the brand, for example in the cases of accepting a brand extension or being less sensitive to price increases. In particular, brand knowledge generates the differential effect creating brand equity, and it consists of brand awareness and brand image. As briefly mentioned above, the elements of brand awareness are indeed brand recognition and brand recall. The former means a customer being able to confirm prior exposure from a cue, whereas the latter represents the ability to retrieve the brand from memory for a specific product category, need or purchase situation. In addition to awareness, familiarity and strong associations also contribute to customer-based brand equity. (69, 71–73.)

From the detailed description of brand equity and its pivotal elements, associations indeed emerged as a highly influential element. The definition of brand associations from Kotler and Keller (2012, 186) claimed that they include all brand-related perceptions, thoughts and experiences along with feelings, images, attitudes and

beliefs. Interestingly, Riezebos and colleagues (2003, 86) convinced that they can be connected to the name itself or to its use with the brand. Moreover, it appears that a memorable and recognisable visual identity supports the associations and facilitates brand recognition and awareness overall (Wheeler 2013, 50). These views underline the complexity of the sources and interpretations related to the brand associations to which customers are exposed. Thus, companies must carefully examine the messages their communication conveys. For instance, according to Roper and Fill (2012, 113), Keller and Aaker (1998) stressed expertise, competence, trustworthiness, honesty and likeability as crucial organisational associations.

Brand associations should be strong, favourable and unique. In effect, they consist of descriptive characterisations called brand attributes, and personal meanings and values referred to as brand benefits. Firstly, the personal relevance and consistency of information strengthen the brand associations a person has. The favourability of associations understandably varies between people and purchase situations, but it mainly depends on whether the brand's attributes and benefits are relevant to the customer's needs and wants. Lastly, the unique difference from the competition can be either performance-related or non-performance-related. (Keller 2013, 77–78.)

The connected components of brand identity, brand image and brand promise

The previous paragraphs explained and emphasised the importance of brand associations. However, the generation of these associations must be directed by a common idea which is present in all of them and represents the essence of the business: the brand identity. Aaker (2010, 68) debated that a brand identity guides the firm's strategic vision by providing purpose, meaning and direction through unique brand associations. Conversely, Wheeler (2013, 4) suggested that brand identity is a tangible combination of unrelated elements triggering recognition through sight, touch or hearing. Both of these arguments are valid as they bring up important but diverse perspectives due to differing approaches to the concept.

When it comes to building the brand identity, Roper and Fill (2012, 109) postulated that the consistent quality of a brand accompanied by promotional messages eventually develops into an identity. In contrast to the brand identity, a brand image

is simply a mental picture about the brand which is subjective for every consumer (Riezebos et al. 2003, 63). Also, Aaker (2010, 69–70) discussed that the brand image is a rather passive concept with a predominant focus on the past and the existing perceptions of the brand. Yet, the image and identity of a brand are undeniably connected because the former should essentially represent the latter. Edwards and Day (2007, 8) reasoned that the brand essence guides the brand image—along with brand attitude and personality—and consequently it must be present and actively expressed in all parts of the business.

As explained above, the brand image is in fact a reflection of the brand identity when communicated successfully. An integral element related to these concepts is the brand promise. Forming, conveying and keeping promises is essential in brand management (Pringle & Field 2008, 21). Communicating and carrying out the brand promise can take place in three dimensions: in the form of functional benefits from product performance, emotional benefits such as reinforced self-image or aspirational lifestyle, and ethical benefits related to an environmental cause, for example (ibid., 103–104, 106). With these ranging possibilities for implementation, Adamson (2008, 163) further clarified the brand promise to be an expression of the commitment that the performance of a product or service will match the consumer's expectations.

Having established the dimensions of the brand promise and its functional purpose, the actual components of the concept can be introduced. Light and Kiddon (2016, 99) argued the brand promise to include three elements: the brand claim containing social rewards from interaction and respect in addition to functional and emotional benefits, the brand character encompassing customer values and brand personality, and the brand support ultimately delivering the brand claim and producing the brand experience. Understandably, all of these components are valuable for generating and conveying a brand promise which is appreciated and attractive to the consumers.

The confidence that a brand will fulfil its promise is called brand trust (ibid., 156). Regarding the fulfilment of the promise, also brand belief represents and symbolises the commitment of the business. Brand belief communicates the brand's view on the world, what could be better and how to make it happen; unlike attitude, belief is

profoundly permanent (Edwards & Day 2007, 42, 44). In addition, brand values are the fundamental elements which a brand embodies (Healey 2008, 78). Riezebos and others (2003, 60) declared that a brand value is “a state of mind that is important to consumers and that is used to decide the mission of the brand” which should be visible and present in all operations of the business. Brand values can be conveyed for instance through a brand personality consisting of a relatable mix of human traits and characteristics attributed to a brand (Healey 2008, 82; Kotler & Keller 2012, 179).

Brand positioning in the minds of the customers

So far, the descriptions of brand promise, belief and values have drawn attention to the underlying intentions and motivations shaping and promoting the essence of the brand. Still, these messages must be appropriately communicated to the customers. Brand positioning aims to find the proper place for a product or service and locate the brand in the minds of consumers, in order to maximise the company’s potential benefits by encouraging the desired way of thinking (Keller 2013, 79; Kotler & Keller 2012, 298). Moreover, Aaker (2010, 71) emphasised the role of brand position in communicating the competitive advantage to the target audience.

Indeed, businesses can leverage the sensory atmosphere of the brand presence with appropriate emotional and visual cues when connecting with audiences (Gobé 2001, 185). Brand relevance, in contrast, refers to the brand being taken into consideration when a consumer experiences need or desire for that product category (Aaker 2004, 103). Therefore, it is vital for brands to be visible and possess performance credibility in order to be considered by the customer (ibid.). Light and Kiddon (2016, 224) established that brand preference represents the highest form of loyalty significantly guiding consumers’ decision-making processes, which can be seen in the hierarchy of the possible relationships between a brand and a consumer (see Figure 2).

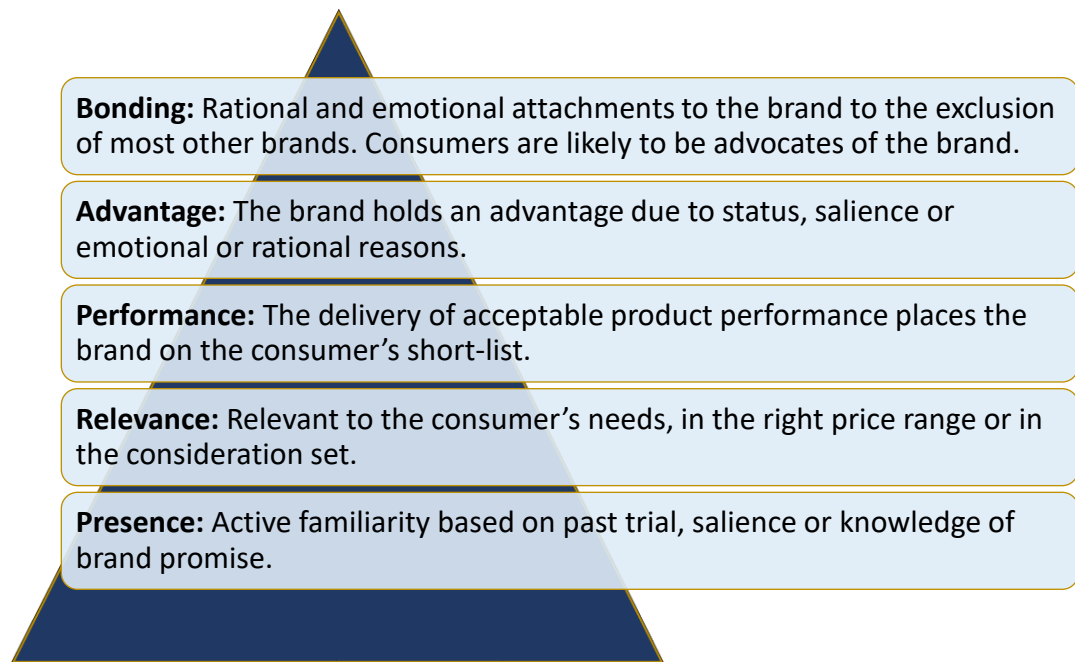


Figure 2. The levels of relationships between a brand and a consumer (adapted from Edwards & Day 2007, 23)

Branding actively strives for creating a loyal relationship with a consumer through the demonstration of value. All the components presented earlier—ranging from brand attributes and equity to brand associations and identity—require a proper strategic foundation. To efficiently implement a brand strategy, companies must approach the matter with precision and preparation. First of all, Riezebos and colleagues (2003, 17–18) affirmed that the strategy must be built on the elements of differentiation and added value. In detail, the former distinguishes the brand from competition by creating competitive advantage, whereas the latter makes the offering meaningful beyond the mere product with functional and non-functional benefits (*ibid.*). The differentiation achieved with brands and branding can create shortcuts for consumers' decision-making processes while effectively attracting attention (Adamson 2008, 165–166). Besides, Wheeler (2013, 12) articulated that the branding strategy must align with the overall business strategy in order to respond to customers' needs and perceptions according to the company's values and culture.

The comprehensive exploration of the core aspects related to branding in this subchapter identified the key issues for examining brands. In addition to defining the most important concepts, the contents illustrated the connections between relevant themes. In this research branding is the perspective on the phenomenon of social media, and hence the remainder of the theoretical framework focuses on the topics of social media and the prevalent platforms along with their relevance for branding.

2.2 The Concept of Social Media and its Development

In order to fully comprehend the concept of social media, it is essential to first consider the background and context of the phenomenon. Both digital and traditional media are fundamentally forms of communication. Guffey, Rhodes, and Rogin (2009) described the transmission of meaning and information between individuals or groups as the central objective of communication. The process starts from the sender who wants to convey an idea to the receiver. Firstly, the sender must predict how the message will affect its receiver and adapt the message accordingly. By encoding the idea with familiar words and concrete meanings, the sender can actually minimise the risk of misunderstandings. Such precautions are vital because the success of communication depends greatly on the receiver understanding the message as the sender originally meant it. (10–11.)

Next, the sender must choose a channel for transmitting the encoded message. Possible media range from letters to websites, all of which communicate nonverbal meanings in their appearance, tone and layout. These features influence the choice of the channel along with its suitability for the receiver, as an improper channel may annoy the receiver and interrupt the transmission. Other examples of the “noise” hindering communication include spelling errors and illegible words. After the message reaches the receiver, internal disruptions such as the receiver’s poor attention or highly emotional reaction pose additional threats to understanding the message correctly. By translating words into meanings, the receiver decodes the message and an accurate interpretation of the sender’s idea results in successful communication. The receiver’s verbal and nonverbal feedback tells the sender whether the idea was understood, and the sender may in turn reply with additional feedback initiating a new communication cycle (see Figure 3). (ibid., 11–12.)

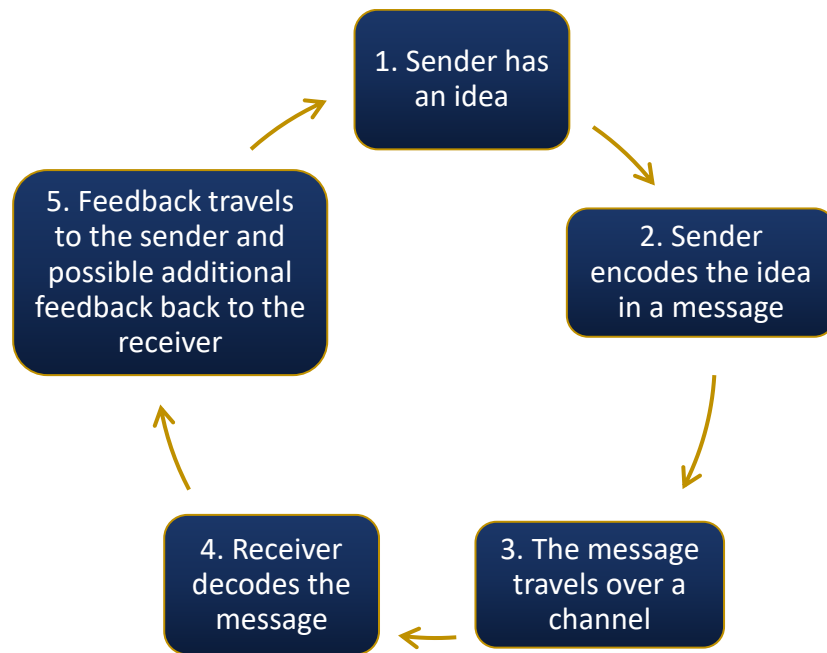


Figure 3. The cycle of communication (adapted from Guffey et al. 2009, 10)

The framework of the communication cycle can be applied also to marketing and how companies reach out to their customers. Safko and Brake (2009, 3) expressed that traditional marketing aims to influence consumers' behaviour via photographs, print, audio and video. Traditional communication channels were further specified by Scott (2010, 6, 8) to include radio, television, mail, newspapers and magazines which are often used for reaching the consumers with the objective of increasing sales. In addition, Juslén (2009, 16) remarked that these media also share the common aspect of one-way communication. In particular, product-based advertising through traditional media represents outbound marketing which relies on interruption to deliver its messages (ibid., 17, 131). The same feature was noted by Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 35) who used the term "push media" when referring to a company broadcasting the message to the consumers with limited interaction.

However, the nontargeted traditional media are often too broad to be efficient especially for niche products and local services (Scott 2010, 6). In addition, the interruptive approach can be a notable obstacle to successful communication. Juslén (2009, 132) emphasised that consumers are nowadays less willing to be exposed to

the excessive amount of outbound marketing targeted at them and are finding ways to avoid the advertisements. Kananen (2013, 11) supported the notion by explaining that when a medium delivers a message regardless of the audience's willingness to receive it, the subsequent attempts by consumers to avoid the advertising make communication more complicated. These views effectively underscored the inherent weaknesses of the traditional media in the contemporary world of marketing.

The emergence of digital media and Web 2.0

As a response to the challenges of traditional media and enabled by the fast technological developments, digital media have become prominent marketing tools. Digital marketing challenges the old concept of marketing "from top to bottom", from the company to the selected target group (Kananen & Pyykkönen 2012, 86). Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 29) considered digital media channels to include display advertising, online partnerships, online public relations, opt-in email marketing, search engine marketing and social media marketing. Although this study addresses social media in particular, the list of digital media channels demonstrates the true variety of these new media.

By definition, digital media cover the content and interaction on the digital technology platforms of the Internet. Digital marketing utilises these technologies alongside traditional channels to achieve the marketing objectives. Unlike in traditional marketing, the customer often initiates contact by seeking information online, which represents the "pull" mechanism favouring companies with good visibility in search engines. While both pull and push mechanisms can exist, this communication model via new media highlights interactivity and two-way feedback in the form of dialogue. Moreover, the online value proposition defines the delivery of the online brand experience through content, interactivity, visuals and sharing. The digital media strategies must be both integrated with and differentiated from the company's offline presence and also the competition. (ibid., 10, 14, 35–36.)

The above characterisation of digital media demonstrates the fundamental difference of the channels as compared to traditional media. One of the most crucial considerations in terms of marketing emerges from the range of possibilities

provided by new media for reaching the customers. Digital channels have generated unprecedented opportunities for the successful implementation of inbound marketing, on which the next paragraph will elaborate further.

In fact, Juslén (2009) debated that the Internet is not merely a media channel but a completely innovative environment for communication and action. The Internet caters to people's natural interactive needs of connecting with others, belonging to a community and expressing themselves. Furthermore, digital marketing has truly enabled inbound marketing which capitalises on the customer's willingness and activity to receive messages in order to discover a solution to a problem. The core difference between inbound and outbound marketing is that the former delivers the message when the customer indicates a need by taking the initiative and searching for information, whereas the latter relies on interruptive tactics. Website contents, blogs, social media presence and search engine optimisation are useful tools for inbound marketing, but most importantly the content must correspond with customers' needs and be available to them. As they choose to avoid pushing the marketing messages to the consumers, companies can also build brand value effectively by creating interaction and engagement. (16, 57, 71, 131, 133–134.)

Web 2.0 is a concept closely related to digital marketing and especially social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 60–61) stated it to be a new way of using the World Wide Web which has become a platform continuously edited by the collaborative and participatory effort of all users. In essence, Web 2.0 actually provided the technological and ideological foundation for the development of social media (ibid.). The view received support from Hinton and Hjorth (2013, 19) who underlined that users can mainly focus on producing content as a result of the Web 2.0 revolution, since computers are taking over the formatting. Thus, content creation becomes much less complicated and consequently the amount of content added online increases with the removal technical barriers (ibid.). Bozarth (2010, 54) mentioned Facebook as an example of the easy-to-use tools for customising a personal online presence, whereas the creation of such content would have required detailed technological know-how before Web 2.0. Hence, the concept was of paramount importance in the development of the phenomenon known as social media.

Defining social media and social media marketing

Social media are Internet-based applications building on the above-mentioned foundations of Web 2.0 which enable the exchange and creation of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 61). User-generated content, on the other hand, covers a wide range of materials created by consumers to be publicly available online (ibid.). Safko and Brake (2009, 6) offered another perspective on the definition by describing social media as “activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media.” In this case, conversational media refer to platforms for creating and delivering content containing words, audios, pictures or videos (ibid.). Moreover, Bozarth (2010, 11) distinguished social media from traditional channels due to the online material being created by the public, which is markedly distinct from the content mass media and professional publishers produce. In the end, Leino (2010, 251) summarised the core elements of social media as user-generated content, communities for consuming content and technologic platforms for producing, distributing and discussing content. They are undeniably crucial for the phenomenon as they represent the essence of social media concisely but accurately.

Fundamentally, social media transform broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues through the Internet as communication changes from one-to-many into many-to-many (Botha, Farshid, & Pitt 2011, 44). Hinton and Hjorth (2013, 55) had a similar perspective and claimed social media to be participative channels where people actively share what they are doing or thinking. Indeed, consumers use these interactive platforms to create, share, edit and discuss user-generated material instead of simply reading and watching online content or purchasing products (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre 2011, 241). Scott (2010, 38) provided further support to the notion by adding that anyone is free to generate, comment and share opinions or ideas online. Also, Solis (2010, 9) emphasised the human aspect by reminding that social media enable people to gather with others sharing similar passions and even trigger change together. Most importantly, however, social media serve to facilitate conversations by connecting people, encouraging collaborations, redistributing influence and humanising audiences with news, thoughts, insights and experiences (ibid., 36–37).

As the statements demonstrate, the functionalities of social media are diverse. Still, all the perspectives agreed on the pivotal role of the people—or in this context, the consumers—in the creation and consumption of online materials. Having explored how social media function, it is also vital to study the attributes of the phenomenon. Mayfield (2008, 5) claimed the typical characteristics of social media to include participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness. Another essential feature is the fast and easy process for discovering information, inspiration, communities, collaborators and like-minded people (ibid., 7). Hinton and Hjorth (2013, 2–3) also acknowledged the element of empowerment, but interestingly perceived the presence of control at least to some extent. As such, the term “user” has two interpretations: on one hand, the user is the controller in charge of the computer’s operation, but on the other hand the user is controlled by social media companies monitoring users’ personal information and creative content (ibid., 21).

In fact, Kananen (2013, 14) also addressed control—or rather the lack of it. Social media form an environment where content spreads rapidly without supervision or notice, the roles of producers and consumers mix, materials are openly accessible to others, and the entire setting is in continuous change (ibid., 14). Evans (2008, 34, 37) agreed on the inevitable changes in various online social channels, but offered a new characterisation of their contents as a collection of assessment processes consisting of people’s reviews, comments and ratings. This underscores the dynamics of the environment where interactive communication takes place in changing platforms.

The above description of social media is particularly valuable for companies engaging in marketing activities in the new media, as they must understand the nuances of the demanding channel. In social media marketing, businesses utilise these platforms as part of implementing their marketing strategy. Cvijikj, Spiegler, and Michahelles (2011, 810) defined social media marketing as “the intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications through professional marketing techniques.” However, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 30) alternatively depicted it as starting, encouraging and participating in customer communications on the company’s social media and publishing sites, with promotional objectives or aiming to learn. In detail, the company websites, blogs and social media form their online presence, which together with physical property are the company’s owned media

(ibid., 10–11). Other main types of media channels are paid media, such as print requiring an investment in exchange for reach, and earned media creating publicity and awareness from word-of-mouth, communities and partnerships (ibid., 11).

As established earlier, social media enable conversation while offering companies solutions for prompting, promoting and monetising it (Safko & Brake 2009, 4). Yet, Agresta and Bough (2011, 2–4) stressed that everyone creating, sharing and posting content without traditional communication barriers demands companies to rethink their communication strategies, as mass marketing becomes person-to-person communication. This, along with the other features introduced in this subchapter, represents the core aspects of social media from the perspective of businesses. Having examined the background in addition to the functionalities and characteristics of social media in detail, this exploration of the concept provides a comprehensive view on the phenomenon and allows for further elaboration on specific platforms.

2.3 Classifying and Characterising Social Media Platforms

The functions of social media range from communication and collaboration to communities, reviews and multimedia content (Bozarth 2010, 11). In order to accurately examine the phenomenon, it is important to determine the meanings of a few terms. First of all, social media as an entity are a channel: a digital media channel and also a marketing channel as mentioned earlier. Social media types, on the other hand, refer specifically to the classification of social media platforms. For instance, the categorisation by Mayfield (2008, 6) detailed that

- social networks consist of personal profiles connected for sharing,
- blogs are online journals,
- wikis offer databases available for editing,
- podcasts communicate through audio or video,
- forums form discussions around specific topics,
- content communities organise and share photos and links, and
- microblogs distribute small updates.

However, alternative views on social media types exist. For example, Scott (2010, 37) separated content communities distinctly into social bookmarking and video and photo sharing. On the contrary, Safko and Brake (2009, 23) identified up to 15 social media categories as they added livecasting, virtual worlds, gaming, interpersonal and

productivity applications to the list, among others. In fact, Evans (2008, 164) widened the classification even further by introducing three overarching groupings based on the contents and functions of social media types (see Figure 4).

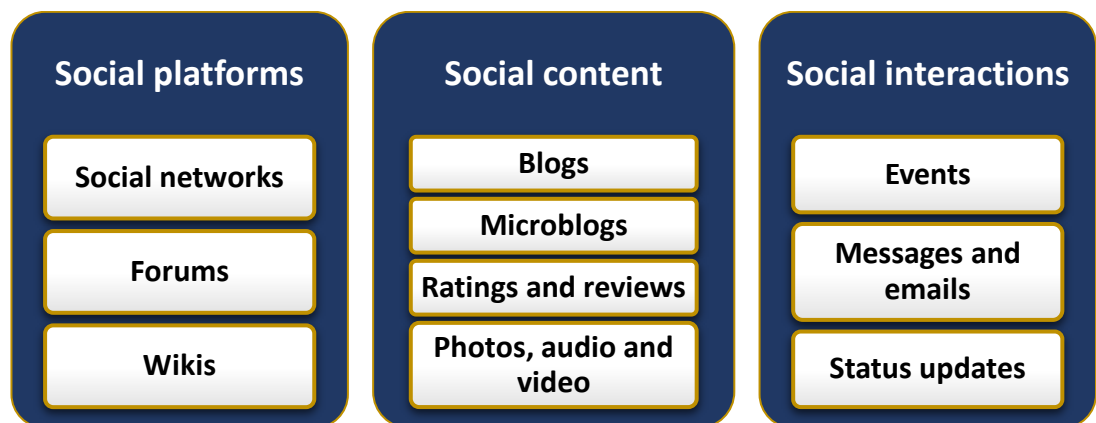


Figure 4. Groupings of social media platform types (adapted from Evans 2008, 164)

These differing approaches to categorising social media platforms demonstrate the undeniable versatility of their purposes. As Solis (2010, 13) alleged, interaction and communication are indeed vastly different between platforms, and Scott's (2010, 187) statement of each social media site appealing to a different set of users supported the view. Even though one classification of social media types does not appear superior to the others, all the perspectives contribute towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and even complement each other. Together they manage to comprehensively characterise the diverse social media platforms, some of which will be introduced in detail in the following sections due to their relevance, popularity and uniqueness.

Social networks and their variety of functions

Platforms belonging to social networks allow users to create, share, communicate and connect with others in addition to enabling empowering activities via creative production or activism (Hinton & Hjorth 2013, 53). People commonly use social

networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn for sharing information about themselves and their interests by creating a profile and posting content (Safko & Brake 2009, 26).

In practice, users can find and add contacts, send messages and update their profiles as notifications about themselves whereas organisations can create communities for users to join (Botha et al. 2011, 44). Facebook in particular is a notable platform for connecting and communicating with networks along with sharing and receiving updates for example about events and promotions (Safko & Brake 2009, 452–453). In social networks, companies must make their valuable content available to the users who seek information and want to access it whenever they wish (Scott 2010, 177).

In addition to interacting with “friends”, Facebook offers a range of other activities such as participating in groups, trying online games and quizzes, planning events, following pages by subscribing and posting pictures, videos or links (Bozarth 2010, 53). The platform has functions which have become common terms widely adopted as part of people’s everyday communication. In effect, Ledford and Anderson (2013) articulated that “posts” include both initiating and responding messages: the former refers to wall posts and the latter to comments to wall posts, which together form a message chain. However, responding to a wall post by inputting text is better known as “commenting”. “Liking” is the act of clicking the “like” button located at the end of a message, and it typically conveys appreciation or agreement. Also by clicking the “share” button, users can post the information to their own Facebook profiles. (254.)

The essential features of microblogs

Another popular social media platform is the microblogging service Twitter for exchanging quick messages of maximum 140 characters which keep followers updated with important and meaningful information in a concise and casual format (Safko & Brake 2009, 28; Scott 2010, 180). Mayfield (2008, 27) considered microblogging a combination of blogging, social networking and instant messaging. Regarding the terminology, Denskus and Esser (2013) elaborated that an individual sharing thoughts and interesting stories on Twitter is referred to as a “tweeter”. “Followers” have used the free subscription option and are receiving “tweets”—personal status updates—from the sender’s account. Users can label content with

“hashtags” by adding the # symbol in front of a keyword. Also, they can “retweet” interesting messages from others similarly as one would forward an email to spread the information or ideas to their own followers extremely quickly. (410.)

While individuals are sharing their daily activities with the Twitter community, companies are powering relationships via updates, news, feedback and marketing research (Safko & Brake 2009, 536). Indeed, microblogs are great examples of the real-time social engagement which mobile phones enabled as people started to share ideas and experiences instantly on the go (ibid., 398). On a daily basis, users can see countless messages, links and articles posted by the people they have chosen to follow (Bozarth 2010, 23). Therefore, it is imperative to consider how the content and format of the post will affect the response from the followers. This was noted by Enge (2014) who found in his study that tweets with images are roughly twice more likely to generate retweets and “favourites” than tweets with no images. Evans (2008, 217) also discussed the factors of success in microblogging and concluded that posting must be preceded by careful listening while targeting relationship-building.

Blogs as platforms for online communication

Blogs differ from Facebook and Twitter in the sense that the interaction is generally less casual because one-to-one communication is possible only in the comments section (Bozarth 2010, 83). Still, blogs are opportune platforms for post-and-comment discussions originating from reflection and information-sharing (ibid., 84). According to Denskus and Esser (2013, 405), these web log entries—“blogs”—have been a medium for posting commentary online since the late 1990s. They are similar to microblogs but without limitations to the length of the message: posts focusing on a specific topic are arranged in reverse chronological order, and they can be updated by an organisation or individual (ibid., 410). In addition, Botha and others (2011, 44) expressed that these regular commentaries may include text, graphics, links or video as they offer news and views on various interests, phenomena and even products or services. The essential features of blogs were reported by Mayfield (2008, 16) to be a conversational tone, a defined topic, a comments section, a subscription option and links connecting to other materials.

As to the technical aspects, Scott (2010, 59) noted that blogs are hosted on websites which enable people to write about their passions and share their expertise. “Tags” sort posts into categories, whereas “identifiers” are labels representing the content (ibid., 59–60). Moreover, Mayfield (2008, 26) stressed tags as one-word descriptions for organising content, while Evans (2008, 66) defined them as single words or short phrases attached to posted content which help people find and share it. Companies can use blogs for informing customers about activities and inviting them to share thoughts, but they cannot hope to control the discussion as customers express their likes and dislikes (ibid., 211). Nevertheless, comments are valuable since rewarding discussions stem from various views, and most significantly they are evidence of the readers’ passion to contribute (Scott 2010, 59–60). As Safko and Brake (2009, 26–27) reasoned, the published content always affects people’s perceptions of the company.

The distinctive attributes of photo and video sharing platforms

The examination of Facebook, Twitter and blogs as social media platforms described not only their unique characteristics but also the main features attributable to the social media type which they represent. As it was established in the beginning of this subchapter, a wide range of platforms exists where some are more popular than others. In addition to the three which have been already addressed, photo and video sharing platforms are also among the most typically used sites. After familiarising with them, a framework for studying the essence of different platforms will be introduced, followed by an evaluation of the platforms in terms of popularity.

For instance Flickr and Instagram are photo sharing platforms for archiving, managing and sharing pictures for communication and collaboration (Safko & Brake 2009, 27). Scott (2010, 165) asserted that companies especially should favour real and relatable photographs over generic ones which might seem too polished to trigger true interest. Video sharing sites such as YouTube share a similar function, as users can upload and share video clips of different qualities and various types (Safko & Brake 2009, 529–530). Botha and colleagues (2011, 45) remarked that while these platforms typically allow unregistered visitors to watch and share videos, only registered users can upload content. In effect, videos resemble podcasts in the sense

that their significance also stems from the subscription feature which is an efficient tool for ultimately building audiences and communities (Mayfield 2008, 21).

Videos appeal to a vast majority of people due to the familiarity of the format, from which companies can benefit when increasing exposure and promotion by producing entertaining content (Safko & Brake 2009, 28, 529–530). The ability to capture and share moments everywhere also increases the attractiveness of video as a medium (ibid., 28). Another characteristic of the modern audience is the preference to quickly scan through the digital content, as noted by Evans (2008). Since photo and video communicate meanings more effectively than text, they are very suitable media for encouraging engagement. Indeed, online content should involve the audience and generate a feeling of participation with the brand, instead of plainly pushing promotional messages to the consumers as traditional media commonly do. (223.)

Categorising social media platforms based on their characteristics

Having completed an overview of the platforms, this section will elaborate on how social media platforms can be examined and classified based on their characteristics. However, this categorisation does not depend on the social media types introduced earlier but instead takes into consideration the distinctive features of each platform separately. One example of such an approach was provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 62) who proposed a categorisation according to the platform's level of self-presentation and self-disclosure along with social presence and media richness. For instance, blogs and wikis both score low on the latter two criteria, but blogs exhibit high self-presentation and self-disclosure whereas wikis understandably do not (ibid.). Yet, Kietzmann and others (2011, 242) offered a more detailed framework by presenting the honeycomb model with seven building blocks of social media for understanding the social media platforms. These elements are not mutually exclusive nor required all to be present, as platforms tend to focus their functionality on specific blocks of the framework (see Figure 5) (ibid., 243).

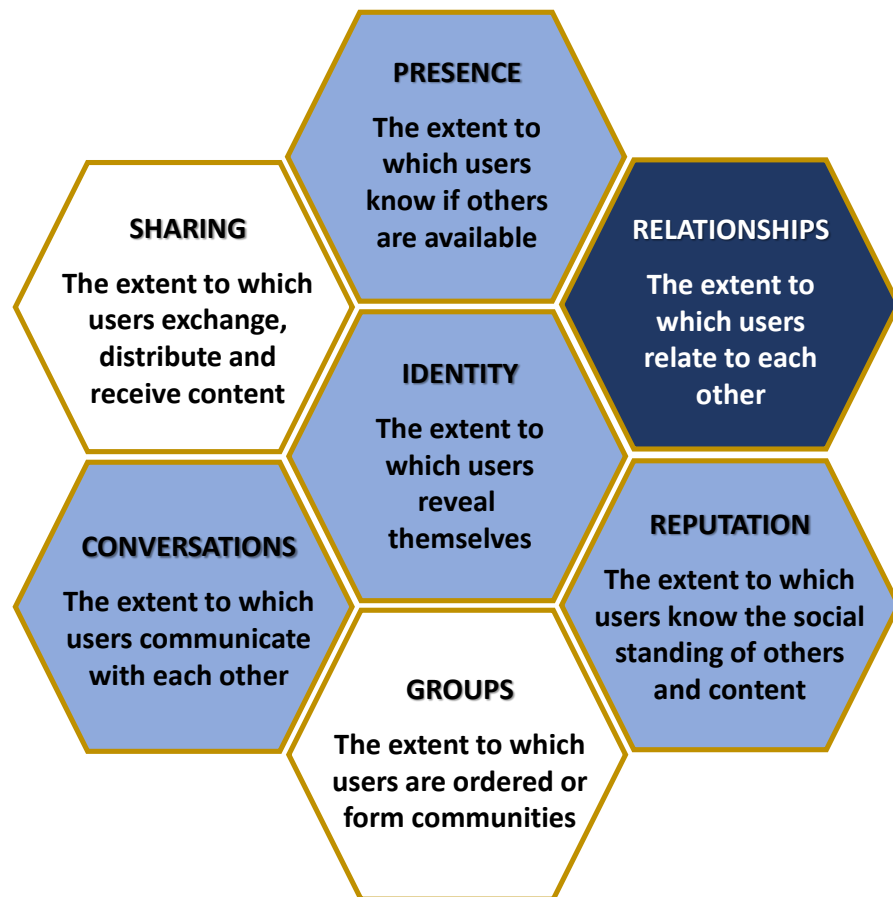


Figure 5. The honeycomb of social media with the functionalities of Facebook (adapted from Kietzmann et al. 2011, 243, 248)

As Figure 5 illustrates, Facebook focuses mainly on relationships while also including the features of presence, identity, conversations and reputation. On the other hand, YouTube's functionality consists of conversations, groups and reputation with the main area of sharing. Each block identifies vital considerations for analysing social media. First of all, identity refers to people making decisions on how much to reveal about themselves as they visit platforms to find like-minded people, build self-esteem or show knowledge and interest in a trending topic. In their conversations, which are another part of the framework, the rate and direction of change signify the emergence of new discussions over time and the continuity of how favourable the discussion is towards a company. (ibid., 244, 248.)

With regard to sharing, companies should examine which objects of sociality their customers share or what type of new objects would cater to their shared interests.

Next, the aspect of presence can be communicated through an online status or real geographical location. As to relationships, businesses must plan the channels, roles and activities according to their purpose. On one hand, the structural property of a relationship focuses on the user's number of connections and the user's position in the relationship network. A wide relationship portfolio and central position are likely indications of the person being an influential member within the network, an "influencer". On the other hand, the flow property of a relationship represents its strength: the types, utilisation, exchange and transformation of resources in individual relationships. The element of reputation is often visible on social media in the evaluations of content in the form of views, ratings and likes, and companies must bear in mind that trust is a core factor for reputation. Lastly, users can place their friends or followers into self-created groups which can be open, closed where approval is needed or secret where an invitation is required. (ibid., 245–247.)

The honeycomb framework is a comprehensive but compact tool for examining the attributes of social media platforms. The seven elements, on which the above section elaborated, embody essential aspects offering perspectives on the functionalities of specific platforms. Most crucially, the model enables researchers and companies alike to concretely analyse the fundamental characteristics which influence both the utilisation of the platform and the users' perceptions towards the purpose of the activities there. With a profound description of the most prominent social media platforms and the approaches for classifying them, this subchapter draws to a close with a summary of their popularity on the global scale and in the case of Finland.

The popularity and active use of social media platforms

Among all social media platforms, Facebook is the global market leader with 1.87 billion active users per month, whereas Instagram ranks seventh with 600 million and Twitter comes in ninth with 317 million monthly active accounts (Leading social networks worldwide as of January 2017, ranked by number of active users (in millions) 2017). According to online traffic, however, the most popular platforms are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn and Pinterest with Instagram placing eighth (Top 15 most popular social networking sites 2017). Regardless of high rankings, Twitter's minimal global growth has not managed to increase the number of users in

the past few years enough to keep up with its competitors (Richter 2016). As for the marketers, Stelzner (2015, 30–32) reported that in 2015 they planned to increase future activities on Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn the most with Facebook following close behind, though the latter was still regarded as the principal social network.

Needless to say, regional and national variances are common in the popularity of social media platforms and the example of Finland will be used here due to the context of the thesis. When it comes to the Finnish youth aged 13 to 29 years, they use WhatsApp, YouTube and Facebook the most. Even though Finnish teenagers favour WhatsApp and YouTube, Facebook is still the most popular platform among 23- to 29-year-old adults—even with a decline of roughly 10% from the massive popularity in 2013. In contrast, Instagram is not as widely used by young adults as compared to its strong status with teenagers. Still, it places fourth in the overall ranking as Twitter, Pinterest and Tumblr are further behind in the list. In fact, Twitter has not managed to attract a large following among the Finnish youth and its popularity actually decreased slightly in 2016. Other observations include Instagram being notably more popular among women (78%) than men (56%), whereas women use Twitter less than men and prefer Pinterest, for example. (Weissenfelt 2016a.)

The categorisations and descriptions of social media platforms in this subchapter defined the core characteristics necessary for the proper understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, the introduction of the honeycomb framework provided means for a detailed analysis of the platforms and their functionalities. Next, the focus will shift to the business perspective on social media as part of branding.

2.4 The Significance of Social Media for Branding

Before elaborating on the social media strategies for brands, the relevance of the phenomenon must be considered on a grander scale. Based on all the aspects addressed thus far in the theoretical framework, the revolutionary impact of social media on marketing and branding cannot be denied. Kietzmann and colleagues (2011, 242) declared that social media have in effect democratised corporate communication by empowering active individuals and communities; consequently brands are being talked about with or without their permission. But most crucially, if a brand is not present in conversations, it is also absent from consumers' decision-

making processes (Solis 2010, 15). New influencers and enthusiastic self-creators replacing traditional experts and leaders is a considerable transition, which has changed companies' interaction with customers and approach to the markets (ibid., 3). Since the resulting changes are evident, businesses must strive to comprehend this new engaging environment in which they operate.

More specifically, the engagement originates from meaningful interactions shared in a community which can strengthen relationships significantly. As marketing channels, social media are able to provide important information, raise awareness, spread interest in crowds, provide real stories from relatable people, and involve customers in consumer-centric product development. However, companies must refine all their content into a compact form due to the consumers' behavioural change of shorter attention spans. Overall, connections and discussions are replacing impressions and campaigns as brands capitalise on people's passions by providing real value through an emotional connection. (Agresta & Bough 2011, 5–8, 10–13, 32–34, 64.)

The above characterisation of social media in terms of marketing explains both the requirements and opportunities inherent to using the platforms. In practice, social media have potential to damage, improve or contribute to brand image and corporate reputation. Transparency and accountability are increasingly important as customers' online behaviour becomes highly demanding, more sophisticated and notably sceptical. The already established emphasis on consumer empowerment is prominent in the transformation of traditional broadcasting into "socialcasting" based on exchange, participation and collaboration. Similarly, the transactional model turns into a relational one highlighting involvement, reciprocity and co-ownership. Ultimately, customers' increased professionalism and transition from passivity to activity have generated the highly influential co-managerial role of the "consumanager". (Jones, Temperley, & Lima 2009, 927–928, 931, 934–935.)

Hence, the new media have not only offered alternative interactive platforms for communication but have in fact modified the relationship between companies and consumers. This development has profoundly altered the dynamics of business due to the elevated role and influence of the customer which the previous paragraph demonstrated. When approaching consumers who are becoming gradually more

aware of and accustomed to their new status, companies must plan proper strategies for reaching out to their influential audience and implement them appropriately.

When it comes to online marketing, Scott (2010) debated that delivering useful content when the customer requires it provides better results than getting attention through interruption. As people are seeking ideas online to find answers to whatever problems they are having, companies should offer the right product for the unique need. This premise becomes concrete especially in the modern buying process where the Web is the primary place for initial research, and companies must be able to provide information then and there to the people looking for content. (7, 18, 159.)

In fact, Evans (2008) discussed the effects of social media on the purchase process further. While traditional media rely on interruption to create awareness and increase demand and sales, the essential element on conversational media is trust. Trust influences significantly the consideration phase of the buying process where options are evaluated. Here, social media offer the social feedback cycle adding users' post-purchase experiences—which connect back to the consideration phase—to the traditional purchase funnel (see Figure 6). (29, 42, 79.)



Figure 6. The purchase process with the addition of the social feedback cycle (adapted from Evans 2008, 42)

Agresta and Bough (2011) also explored social media and buying behaviour with similar conclusions. Online research before the purchase studies ratings, while sharing experiences in reviews after the purchase communicates whether expectations were met, with negative comments understandably threatening the brand image. However, the phenomenon of sharing opinions is not entirely new. Buyers have always wanted to share their experiences, and social media have provided an influential public platform for that where many-to-many messages are sent between people interested in others' lives. (5–7, 32–34, 39–40.)

Therefore, the significance of social media is rather tangible in relation to the buying process. Apart from reviews, social media engagement can benefit companies also in other ways. According to Agresta and Bough (2011, 46–48), Dholakia and Durham (2010) suggested Facebook to have a positive effect on consumer behaviour by enabling people to declare and demonstrate brand loyalty. Their study reported Facebook fans visiting the store more frequently after liking the page, in addition to generating more positive word-of-mouth as compared to non-fans (*ibid.*). This example underscores the diversity of the impacts which social media can generate, along with the value for brands. The next section will examine the strategic principles for incorporating social media into the branding and marketing plans in depth.

Planning branding strategies on social media

The management of online corporate reputation is two-way communication while businesses can share information, follow consumer behaviour, study the target audience and influence their opinions. Still, instead of plainly promoting products, companies should provide solutions to people's problems. Co-creation, co-branding and collaboration should be the guiding principles along with creativity, transparency and honesty. Eventually through added value and competitive advantage, the online branding strategy can effectively differentiate the business from the competition and enhance the corporate image. (Jones et al. 2009, 928, 931–935.)

As the above description acknowledged, there are several vital themes to consider in the creation of an action strategy for social media. A more structured approach to validating online content and building a community is the ACCESS model. Firstly, the

element of “audience” stresses the analysis of the consumers’ demonstrated or self-reported behaviours, attitudes, values, beliefs, needs and preferences. After establishing a comprehensive understanding of the receivers of the content, the second component of the model, “concept”, highlights the value proposition for the target audience. Moreover, the third factor “competition” proves that there exists an audience for the concept, whereas examining the competition allows the recognition of advantages in the company’s own offering. The last three themes in the ACCESS model are “execution”, “social media” and “sales viability” placing the focus lastly on the implementation and conversion. (Safko & Brake 2009, 717, 719–721, 725, 727.)

While all separate elements are vital for building a successful strategy, their cohesion and uniformity are in the end equally or even more important. In order to ensure the consistency of the content and core message, online activities must conform not only with the marketing plan but also with the comprehensive business strategy, since uniform posts across different channels enhance trust (Kananen 2013, 17, 117). The integration of digital and traditional media can truly create a unified story to the customers (Scott 2010, 107), but both must complement each other even though they rely on differing tactics to reach their respective goals (Agresta & Bough 2011, 80–81). As for the objectives of communication, common guidelines exist applying to digital and traditional media alike. The communicative goals for an organisation to convey to the public were distinguished by Ledford and Anderson (2013, 253) in the CAUSE model to consist of creating confidence, generating awareness, enhancing understanding, gaining satisfaction and motivating action or enactment.

Although the differences between social media platforms and traditional channels are indeed substantial, the presence of these shared goals directs the focus and also underlines the unique purposes of the two media. In effect, the requirement of integrating digital and traditional media highlights that one cannot be replaced with the other. With regard to the costs of planning and implementing strategies on both channels, contradictory views emerge on the investments in digital media. On one hand, Kananen and Pyykkönen (2012, 86) proposed that digital marketing requires merely a reallocation of resources from the marketing strategy and budget, and costs may in fact decrease as customers and companies co-operate efficiently on product design, for instance. On the other hand, Agresta and Bough (2011, 25–27) argued

that earned media are expensive because earning and maintaining the place in consumer conversations costs more than simply paying for being there. Both statements have solid justifications which are important for companies to consider.

The preparation of a social media strategy culminates in the creation of a concrete plan for building a community on selected platforms. A community must produce value to its members either by creating satisfaction or answering a need: businesses can offer concrete products such as videos or newsletters but also value in the form of information, entertainment, answers, self-expression and community spirit (Kananen 2013, 116). The utilisation of a platform along with benefits provided there must suit the nature of that channel in order to maximise the fluency of the communication process. For example, blogs with an interesting and specific topic are good platforms for expressing knowledge, passion and expertise to the target audience (ibid., 150). The social media strategy for the purposes of branding should acknowledge these features and refine them into appropriate strategic purposes and engagement outcomes for each employed social media platform (see Table 1).

Table 1. A suggestion for planning a social media strategy (adapted from Safko & Brake 2009, 761)

Platform	Strategic Purpose	Engagement Outcomes
Blog	Create a community via a customer-facing blog	Increase communication and collaboration with customers
Facebook	Establish a company persona within a social networking environment	Increase awareness among customers and prospects
YouTube	Package and promote expertise and content with a company channel	Communicate, educate and entertain
Twitter	Build or enhance an external community through microblogging	Communicate and collaborate

Out of the diverse platforms and formats, companies must carefully select the most suitable ones as their success partially depends on making the right choice (Evans

2008, 44, 164). Besides, Agresta and Bough (2011, 166–167) commented that the brand presence in different platforms has to be consistent but at the same time suit the specific platform, the personality of the brand and fulfil its purpose such as offering engagement or customer service. Scott (2010, 32, 190) accentuated the role of the buyer personas in the selection of the platforms and proposed that the creation of a unique value proposition requires studying who belong to the target audience, how to reach them, what their motivations are, what problems the company can solve, how to inform or entertain the audience, and what type of content is likely to lead to a purchase.

With knowledge about online behaviour, popular networks, common keywords and preferred formats, the buyer persona profiles assist in planning a strategy for delivering answers to consumers' problems (ibid., 30, 32). Audience personas are particularly useful for identifying needs because they are based on behavioural or demographic characteristics such as age, location, education, income, hopes, worries and perception of entertainment (Safko & Brake 2009, 76–77). To exemplify useful features for creating audience personas, the rest of this subchapter will describe the social media behaviour in the case of Finland, the levels of commitment and participation among users online, and the motivations for reactions on social media. These details are treated as potential components contributing to the creation of audience profiles in preparing a social media strategy.

Examining the target audience of the brand on social media

As to the Finnish online behaviour, the most active users are 16- to 34-year-old Finns as over 80% of them follow social media at least weekly (see Figure 7). In addition, Figure 7 illustrates that almost all Finns who are registered to social media also follow them at least weekly, which over half of the most active users do even multiple times a day. This type of information about the consumers' activity is valuable for examining the behaviour of groups with particular demographics such as age, in this case. Additionally, businesses can analyse the development of the measured characteristics over time and predict future trends. For instance, according to Valtari (2016), studies by the Official Statistics of Finland have reported a steady increase in the use of social media over the past four years, and in 2016 they gained

popularity especially among the age groups of 35–44 years and 45–54 years.

Consequently, companies whose target audiences belong to these categories would likely be interested in this progress.

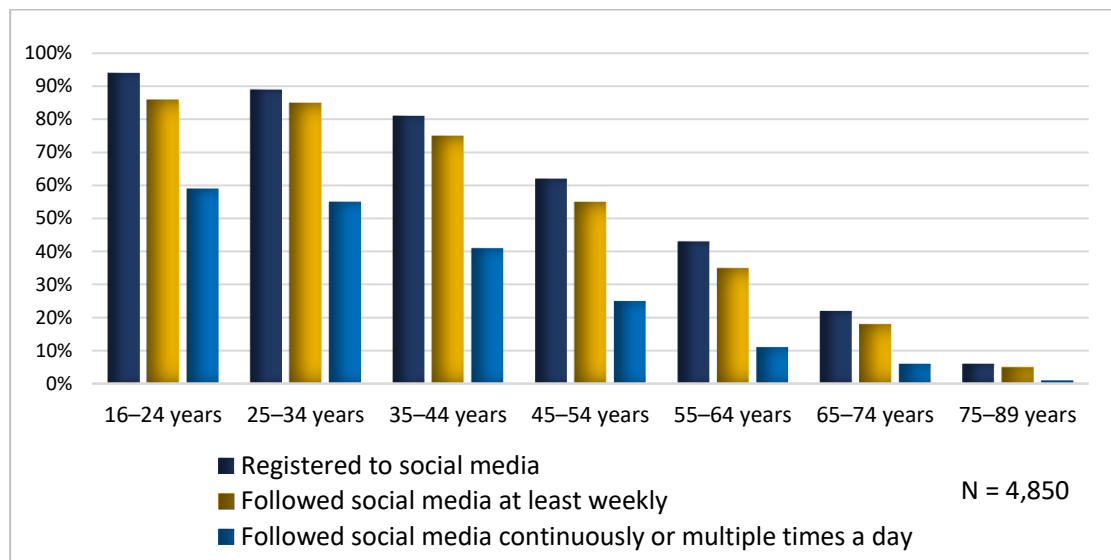


Figure 7. Social media activity in Finland by age group in 2016 (adapted from Official Statistics of Finland 2016b; Official Statistics of Finland 2016d)

Along with activity, other behavioural aspects should also be regarded in order to build an exhaustive base for audience personas. For instance, the intrusive and continuous advertising has created a negative attitude towards brands among consumers preferring content which is relevant, inspiring, easy to share and targeted to them (Suomessa jopa puolet kuluttajista välttelee aktiivisesti brändejä netissä—globaalisti neljäsosa [In Finland up to half of consumers actively avoid brands online—globally a quarter] 2016). This practical concern demands companies to discover which type of content appeals to their target audience. Moreover, it is vital to understand how consumers perceive social media and their purpose. According to the Finnish youth, the added value from social media mainly includes receiving knowledge about personally interesting topics, experiencing a feeling of joy or happiness, and the platforms offering a way to spend time (see Figure 8).

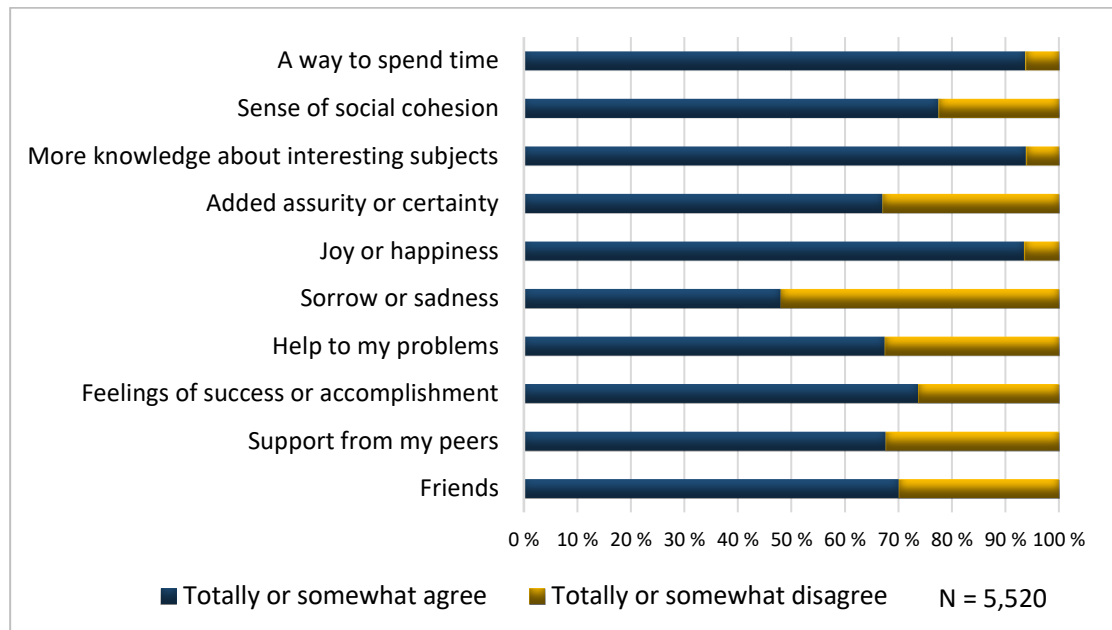


Figure 8. Added value from social media for 13- to 29-year-old Finns in 2016 (adapted from Weissenfelt 2016b; Weissenfelt 2016c)

The above examples from the case of Finnish customers presented valuable features for creating audience personas. Apart from the manners for using social media, various behavioural patterns inside the platforms are also prominent and worth studying. As such, the levels of commitment vary among a company's online follower base which includes infrequent visitors, loyal followers and devoted ambassadors (Kananen 2013, 115). Safko and Brake (2009) specified that every community has people in different stages of the membership life cycle which are categorised as lurkers, novices, insiders, leaders and elders. Lurkers visit the site to merely observe and view content based on friends' suggestions, whereas novices in contrast are starting to participate and provide a little content. Consistent interaction, discussion and comments are actively produced by insiders, from whom leaders in turn differentiate with their valued input and corrective actions if inappropriate behaviour occurs. At the end of the membership life cycle, elders leave due to changed interests, lack of time or disagreement with the new direction of the community. (47–48.)

Another perspective on grouping users was introduced by Solis (2010, 6) who divided them into innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards based on their receptiveness and eagerness to adopt new ideas. Out of these groups, innovators represent only 2.5% of the online population whereas both early and late majority cover 34% each (ibid.). Besides membership life cycle and level of adoption, people's online behaviour can be examined solely based on their activity. According to Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Mäläskä (2015, 763), Li and Bernoff (2008, 41–45) suggested the classification of social media users based on participation level into

- creators actively inventing and uploading new content,
- critics actively commenting or criticising content created by others,
- collectors actively sharing and organising content,
- joiners maintaining their profiles in social networks passively,
- spectators passively consuming what other users create, and
- inactives not participating in online communities.

Spectators form the largest group (ibid.), and in fact the 1–9–90 rule proposes that 1% of users create the content on social media, 9% participate and 90% are passive (Agresta & Bough 2011, 86–87). Thus, it is apparent that a majority of social media users can be characterised as passive consumers of existing content. This is another crucial attribute for building the buyer profiles and understanding the audience.

Lastly, businesses can analyse consumers' online behaviour by inspecting their reactions on social media. Safko and Brake (2009, 80) stated that people will react to posted content by becoming content contributors, commenting, sharing, reading or ignoring it. Understandably companies should motivate towards the first three and encourage engagement by offering communication, collaboration, education and entertainment to consumers and prospects (ibid., 7, 80). Furthermore, Hayes, Carr, and Wohn (2016) examined social media behaviour in detail and found that Facebook users often liked posts simply due to the identity of the poster, with less regard to the posted content. On the contrary, a post on Twitter had to be funny, ironic or thought-provoking to get favoured. All in all, the identified motivations for people to like on Facebook, favourite on Twitter or react similarly on other platforms included literal interpretation, acknowledgement of viewing, social support and grooming, and utilitarian purposes (see Table 2). (177–179.)

Table 2. Motivations for reacting on social media (adapted from Hayes et al. 2016, 178–179)

Sender's Motivation	Explanation
Literal interpretation	Favourable evaluation of the content itself
Acknowledgement of viewing	Communicating recognition or affirmation of having seen the content
Social support and grooming	Expressing acceptance or support: reciprocated relationship maintenance especially on Facebook
Utilitarian purposes	An archival tool: especially favourites on Twitter

The different meanings behind the reactions on social media demonstrate the diversity of the messages the platforms are able to communicate. Becoming familiar with how consumers perceive these opportunities to express themselves and actually use them is an essential objective for businesses extending their branding strategies to social media. Such knowledge and understanding of the underlying motivations for customers' online actions are invaluable components contributing towards the creation of profoundly meaningful audience personas. All in all, comprehending the complexity of the platforms as a branding environment underscores the need for examining their characteristics and the consumers' subjective perceptions of them.

To summarise, this subchapter explored the relevance of social media in order to provide a comprehensive representation of their role and importance for branding. As the concluding part of the theoretical framework, the section connected the concepts of branding and social media to create a coherent foundation for the research. The established knowledge base will serve as a supportive resource for obtaining the answers to the research questions, on which the following chapter will elaborate as it introduces the methodology and implementation of the study. Additionally, the eventual discussion of the results will also refer back to the literature review when reflecting on the significance and meaning of the discovered findings.

3 Methodology

This chapter will elaborate on the choice of the qualitative research approach for the implementation of the study, along with the data collection and analysis procedures. More specifically, the second subchapter will describe the method for gathering the required data for answering the research questions and will also present the sources of data. The third subchapter will then focus on the analytical methods utilised for refining the data to find the solutions. By introducing and justifying the methodology of the study, the decisions and processes for obtaining the results become explicit and support the understanding of the findings and the research overall.

3.1 Research Approach

The research questions influenced the choice of the methodology which Silverman (2013, 122) defined as “a general approach to studying research topics.” For this study, the qualitative research approach presented the most appropriate methods for analysing the customers’ perceptions regarding social media. Considering the objectives of the research, the qualitative methodology provided important value since it enables the identification of issues from the informant’s perspective (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey 2011, 9). Hence, the approach and its interpretive nature are able to generate a richer understanding of the meanings and interpretations the participants connected to certain experiences (ibid.). All these features underlined the value of the qualitative research approach for this study, given that the purpose of the research was to create a deeper view of reality and emphasise the human aspects in the perceptions of the phenomena on social media.

In this case, the qualitative methodology was indeed the proper choice because it could establish an in-depth understanding of complex issues with the informants’ opinions, views and emotions (ibid., 10). Unlike quantitative research producing generalisations representative of the entire population, qualitative research studies the patterns, meanings and contrasts in the interviewees’ subjective perspectives, feelings and experiences (Davies 2007, 135, 139, 148). Such an approach could generate new insights to complement existing knowledge and theories, which suited the premise of this study. More precisely, qualitative research is deemed particularly

suitable for generating a holistic view of the contributing factors and influential interrelationships (Kananen 2015, 21, 65). With this descriptive research, the qualitative approach supported the objectives the best since it could describe and document the phenomenon through the analysis of the informants' salient beliefs, attitudes and actions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 3; Marshall & Rossman 2011, 69).

3.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured theme interviews functioned as the data collection method for obtaining primary data from the elected participants. Kananen (2015, 87) reported theme interviews to be conversations focusing on one predetermined general discussion topic—a theme—at a time. The choice of the data collection method was influenced by its appropriateness. The less structured interview guide was exceptionally valuable because it allows the expression of the interviewee's own words, experiences and perspectives in a conversational setting while the researcher guides the discussion with a prepared set of questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 102). The method is predominantly appropriate when the aim is to collect views, opinions, attitudes, ideas and feelings which bring depth to the subject (Davies 2007, 152). Moreover, semi-structured interviews are less controlled by the researcher, which highlights their value in seeking fresh insights and new viewpoints. All of these features were considered prior to data collection, and the eventual judgement of their suitability to the research questions and objectives confirmed the decision.

Selecting the informants

Even though qualitative research does not include a proper sampling procedure due to discretion and certain criteria directing the selection of informants (Kananen 2015, 68), guidelines for the practice exist. While sampling procedures are not defined as clearly as in quantitative research, "strategic sampling" refers to the act of explicitly selecting people for exploring the research topics (Davies 2007, 144, 146), and such was the approach also in this study. Though it is fairly uncommon to address sampling in qualitative research, the decisions for choosing the interviewees must be justified and explained in order to enhance the credibility of the research. Hence, mentioning the sample in this subchapter should not be regarded as a deviation

away from the traditions of qualitative research, but instead as an informed and conscious effort to increase the validity and reliability of the data collection.

Since qualitative research targets the understanding of meanings and processes instead of making generalisations, a small sample is adequate (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 45). In this study, the researched unit consisted of five participants offering the customer perspective on social media as a branding tool. Due to the time and access constraints of the research, this could be considered a convenience sample which was available, willing to participate and possessed the general characteristics to suit the research objectives (ibid., 55). Data saturation served as an indication of when the data collection was complete because obtaining new answers would have little or nothing more to add to the gathered data (Davies 2007, 149).

The choice of the interviewees depended on the research questions: since the purpose of the study was to analyse the customers' perceptions, the desired outcomes would be achieved with the informants' personal opinions regardless of which educational or occupational status they held. However, obtaining various perspectives on the phenomenon required versatility and diversity to be the key criteria for selecting participants with dissimilar backgrounds and characteristics. In the end, the five interviewees included a female (F20) and male (M20) participant from the age group of 20–29 years, a female (F30) and male (M30) participant from the age group of 30–39 years, and a female participant (F40) from the age group of 40–49 years. Four of them were Finnish, whereas one informant was of another nationality in order to add to the variety also in the cultural sense. Since companies must appeal to different types of people with their branding, it was important that the research would be based on the thoughts of a versatile group of interviewees. Most crucially, the participants were qualified because they were familiar with the topic of the study but had differing approaches and customs to using social media.

Conducting the interviews

Initially, the interviewees were contacted personally via phone, email or social media while Skype ultimately served as a platform for hosting and recording the interviews. Conducting research online is particularly suitable for studying phenomena which

occur on the Internet and can be even easier than traditional interview situations for both the interviewer and interviewee (Kananen 2015, 21–22). Choosing Skype as a medium for the interviews was influenced by the convenience of the online tool because the participants' geographical dispersion and tight schedules made face-to-face interviews practically impossible. Moreover, online interviews offer more possibilities for creating the optimal setting which should be both comfortable and familiar while ensuring confidentiality and minimum disturbance (Davies 2007, 154). Though certain elements of interaction such as proxemics are absent from online interviews, visual and oral cues are still present in the form of gestures and reactions which support the communication. When preparing for the interviews, the researcher also took into consideration the physical setting, sound quality, lighting and eye contact to the camera in order to improve the interview experience.

The interviews took place between 1 March and 8 March 2017, and the length of the interviews varied from approximately 35 to 55 minutes. As such, the duration of the interview offered little evidence of the quality and value of its contents. The participants had different styles of expressing themselves, which consequently decreased the time required for the interview for fast speakers using few or no filler words and going straight to the point without coaxing. In such an interactive setting, it was equally important to establish rapport and trust, as it was to motivate the informants to share their personal experiences and perspectives with the help of both predetermined and spontaneous questions (Hennink et al. 2011, 109).

The above-mentioned predetermined questions were listed in the interview guide. An interview guide consists typically of an introduction to the research which addresses ethical issues such as permission for recording, opening questions for building rapport, key questions focused on the core issues of the research, and finally closing questions which offer a natural and pleasant ending to the interview (ibid., 112–113). The interview guide for this study followed a similar structure where the questions had been divided into three themes: the interviewee's social media behaviour, the functions and roles of social media platforms and posts, and the perceptions of branding on social media (see Appendix 1). The first theme was intended for understanding the participants as social media users by finding out when, how and why they use the platforms. This knowledge was then utilised in the

second theme as the informants were asked to describe different platforms and post types. Discovering where and how they wanted to receive and consume content on social media was an important step before elaborating on what in particular they wanted companies to post and why, which were the main topics in the third theme.

The contents of the literature review in fact provided inspiration and theoretical background for the interview questions, and whenever a question was based on a particular theory or idea the source was noted in Appendix 1. Since data were collected in semi-structured interviews, the interview guide also allowed for additional spontaneous questions which could specify on interesting remarks from the informants. All in all, the questions aimed to emphasise the participants' experiences and personal views as sources of valuable information instead of general descriptions of the phenomenon, which supported the objectives of the research.

The personal nature of the research based on human meaningful communication raised vital ethical considerations for data collection (Gibbs 2007, 8). In particular, fully informed consent was pivotal as the participants were made aware of the purpose and methods of the research along with the use of the data and guarantee of anonymity (ibid.). Thus, informed consent certified fully voluntary and informed participation with a clear understanding of the risks and benefits of the research in addition to the utilisation of results (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 85). Confidentiality especially protected the informants by guaranteeing unidentifiability as no names appear in the report and the interview recordings were inaccessible to others (ibid.).

3.3 Data Analysis

By definition, data analysis is a process of searching for patterns which emerge from detailed and deep descriptions from the participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 95). The analysis can effectively identify the true essence of the experience through a comparison of the informants' unique expressions (Marshall & Rossman 2011, 19–20). In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are merged (Gibbs 2007, 3) as the analysis essentially begins already during the transcription of the interviews where the initial review of data takes place (Silverman 2013, 233). Furthermore, Davies (2007, 149) reminded that data collection and analysis even coexist at the same time with sampling, whereas Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, 301) alleged that

data analysis is also interrelated with the interpretation phase due to the continuous revision of the analysis. Despite their versatility, these descriptions in fact accurately depicted the implementation of the data analysis as part of this research.

The phase preceding the data analysis is the transcription process. Transcription is “a change of medium” which adds accuracy and interpretation to the analysis as the format shifts from audio to text (Gibbs 2007, 11). The anonymisation of the materials takes place alongside the transcription and replaces all identifiable names with anonymous equivalents, while most importantly retaining the style of the language (Hennink et al. 2011, 218). In this study, the level of detail in the transcription was high. This attention to detail provided verbatim interview transcripts for the data analysis which accurately represented the informants’ use of language in the form of dialects or unique expressions. Whenever relevant for understanding the message and context, sounds such as laughter or silence from the audio recordings were also included in the transcript and given appropriate consideration later on in the analysis.

Emphasising people’s intentions, thoughts and experiences, qualitative content analysis seeks patterns to facilitate the understanding and analysis of the phenomenon with detailed explanations and justifications. Coding is the process of managing and organising the dense and complex data, which also adds theory and interpretation to the data set. In practice, coding defines the core of the analysed data by identifying and recording the text which exemplifies a common idea. The researcher then categorises the text to form a framework of thematic ideas for analysing relationships and making comparisons. Inductive coding in particular adds value because the examined codes emerged from the data by noting the core issues which the participants themselves brought up (Hennink et al. 2011, 218). This type of open data-driven coding does not use a predetermined list of codes and attempts to ignore the researcher’s own ideas and expectations. (Gibbs 2007, 4, 38–39, 45.)

In this research, the qualitative content analysis essentially consisted of two phases. At first, the coding of each interview underlined the common themes and issues related to the phenomenon and helped to organise and interpret the data (see Appendix 2). The process followed the above explanation of the inductive coding

practice. Data-driven codes were considered to add value to the research since the purpose was to understand and examine the customers' perceptions. Hence, the created codes truly represented the meanings and understandings originating from the recorded behaviours, relationships, consequences, constraints and conditions. On the contrary, theory-driven coding could have hindered the identification of new ideas and perspectives emerging from the informants' descriptions. As explained in the previous subchapter, the interview questions were already largely based on theoretical concepts, and therefore the open coding also provided opportunities for examining alternative viewpoints on the established issues from the literature.

Secondly, the analysis included the procedure of categorising the data, leading to the thematisation and conceptualisation of the core and overarching topics (see Appendix 3). Based on the assigned codes, the quotes from the interviewees were placed into categories with details for recognising the speaker and the question, such as "F20, Q1". The outcomes from this phase can be observed in the columns of the spreadsheet in Appendix 3, each of which was dedicated to a specific feature of the phenomenon. When many quotes connected by the same code were added to one category, it served as an indication of the potential importance of the issue. The comparison of the descriptions resulted in either linking certain categories under an overarching theme or separating the categories as individually important topics. Furthermore, the negative case analysis took into consideration the exceptions in the data set by examining the differing cases, some of which appear in Appendix 3 and are distinguishable due to their red font. Ultimately, the thematisation of the data occurred on three levels, moving from precise attributes to broader elements and general concepts which encompassed the essence of the phenomenon.

In the end, the qualitative content analysis succeeded in highlighting the prominent topics emerging from the data and connected them into clearly defined themes. Conducting the analysis with Microsoft Excel noticeably facilitated the organisation of the large amount of text, and selecting the proper tool also enabled the appropriate interpretation of the data. The identified themes from the interviews provided answers to the research questions, which the next chapter will explore.

4 Results

The answers to the research questions will be provided in the following subchapters by presenting the findings from the data. Firstly, the introduction of the customers' perspectives on social media as a branding tool will address the main research question. Subsequently, the second subchapter is dedicated to exploring the unique characteristics of social media platforms. And lastly, the descriptions of post types will complete the analysis of social media from the consumer's point of view. Direct quotations from the interviews will support the presentation of the results, and the quotes from Finnish participants have been translated into English (see Appendix 4).

4.1 Branding on Social Media from the Customer Perspective

When discussing the presence of brands on social media, the participants addressed similar themes related to the successful utilisation of the platforms. In fact, three topics emerged to represent the customers' most crucial views of utilising social media for branding strategies: the benefits the customer perceived to receive from the company, the corporate image reflected by the content and its delivery, and the increased awareness from promotional campaigns. Furthermore, the interviewees elaborated on the type of content which appealed to them on social media, enabling the identification of six main sources of appeal. Together with the three prominent elements of branding on social media, the examination of appealing content types produced an answer to the main research question.

The importance of perceived benefits for the customer

First of all, the interviewees noted that any company engaging in branding activities on social media should be able to generate additional value by offering either intangible or tangible benefits to the customers. M20 summarised the perception of receiving benefits by stating that "It is either mentally or physically like an actual thing they can get from the company that is advertising itself." The former should be able to offer meaningful value without physical items and inspire a demand for this content. The latter, on the other hand, could include a range of product-related offerings creating a concrete sensation of gaining for the customer.

Instead of unrelatable advertisements without perceived value for the customer, companies should aim at providing appreciated intangible benefits. This could be achieved for instance by posting relevant and inspiring content addressing an existing customer need and adding value to the experience. M20 described that this type of content “carries a message that is very valuable, that we can get from the company.” For example, customers may be seeking support to their purchase decision and a company could offer justification through promoting useful and important product attributes in addition to non-product-related, instructive or educating content. In addition, F30 commented that “I am really interested in a company being able to give other information about themselves, besides what they sell and how much it costs.”

The informants also pointed out that companies themselves could gain benefits by planning and implementing their branding strategies with consideration, versatility and reasonability. The suitable and targeted use of appropriate social media could boost the sales but as M30 mentioned, “You must first of course find the correct channels to kick off.” Therefore, providing benefits—either tangible or intangible—to the customers on social media must be preceded by careful planning and proper analysis of the audience. Such preparation would include familiarising with the target groups, communities, market segments, peer influence and interrelationships between members and opinion leaders promoting an aspirational lifestyle.

Communicating a consistent and caring corporate image

The second topic which the participants considered crucial for branding on social media was the corporate image. First and foremost, the image should remain consistent, suitable and professional while complementing the company and the brand. In detail, F40 specified that:

The most important thing is that it conveys the feeling of being in line with the image of the company and that there is no contradiction or unprofessionalism. I would say that the most crucial aspect is that there is no inconsistency. Whether it is just text and pictures or questions, the most important criterion is that I understand that it suits this particular company in this case.

Besides consistency, the interviewees emphasised that the image of the company should appear relatable and credible. The business must treat consumers as equals

and communicate on the same level with them, which F20 demonstrated: “For example that they have not used a lot of fancy words which regular people do not understand.” Yet, even when striving to create a relatable image, companies should bear in mind the purpose of their social media presence and avoid irrelevant content.

According to the participants, a vital part of the corporate image was the ability to communicate that the company cared for and valued customers and their opinions. An obvious way for conveying that sensation was to ask for consumers’ perspectives, which strengthened the relationship to the customer base through interaction and participation. Putting more input and thought into the creation of social media content would also show the appreciation towards consumers. Instead of simple and uninspiring advertisements, companies should produce interesting and engaging content where the effort to please the audience was evident. F30 pointed out, “Not necessarily just simply sharing the advertising—‘like and share, and you can win a woolly hat’—but instead they would give a little more in terms of content creativity.” Also, M30 suggested that “Instead of simply click and like, they could ask to write which of these three is your favourite and tell us why.” Such devotion would likely influence the customers’ perception of the corporate image positively.

The last element which the informants considered to influence their perception of the corporate image was the content and its delivery. The participants explained that creativity was crucial because content should be special, artistic, unusual or different to stand out. F20 explained that “Special is something that the others are not doing which stands out from the mass, one way or the other.” New approaches and purposes in creating content along with versatility in using them appeared as one of the main factors in becoming memorable, as F30 remarked: “Or they would come up with another way for marketing that would not necessarily put the product or the service first but would take an entirely different approach.” Still, being different could trigger both positive and negative reactions, and therefore businesses need skill in creating content to social media. In addition to the differentiating elements, the interviewees agreed that the content and its delivery must convey simplicity, clarity and focus which made the consumption of the material effortless and convenient. For instance, M30 commented that “Personally I prefer that everything stays simple enough and that there is a clear point and a clear message.”

Enabling discovery through increased awareness

The final consideration the informants addressed regarding brands on social media was focused on the promotional campaigns raising awareness and enabling discovery. Most importantly, the participants believed that the increased publicity and awareness, which companies could harness even for free on social media, can bring the company and customer closer together. At its simplest, advertising and promoting the offering could spread information to new audiences, which F30 also regarded as important: “Of course in the case of a relatively unknown company, it is naturally good to present what products or services they offer, otherwise they would not benefit from it.” Moreover, F40 separated the advertising in social media posts from traditional advertising by saying that “If it is my choice, then I would see it as a service.” Overall, the interviewees’ responses reflected positive reactions towards promotional awareness campaigns implemented in social media platforms.

The issue of standing out as memorable and different—as previously mentioned in connection with the corporate image—was relevant also for awareness campaigns. This time the participants emphasised the importance of relevant and meaningful content for capturing their attention and reaching new audiences. Still, the most essential component in raising awareness seemed to be triggering curiosity in people, as F30 explained: “This so-called mystery will surely make me google what store this actually is and what it offers.” Besides satisfying their need for information about the general purpose of a company, the informants expressed an interest towards the practical everyday functions through sneak peeks on social media. A personal connection or a local context would naturally bring the company and the customer closer together even further, but promotional awareness campaigns were deemed generally effective for enabling discovery among consumers.

So far, the findings have elaborated on the customers’ perceptions of branding on social media. The core issues of perceived benefits, conveyed corporate image, and increased awareness represented the topics which the participants viewed important enough to address when describing the phenomenon (see Figure 9). Having identified what consumers regarded branding to accomplish, the remainder of this subchapter will explore the discovered categories of appealing content.

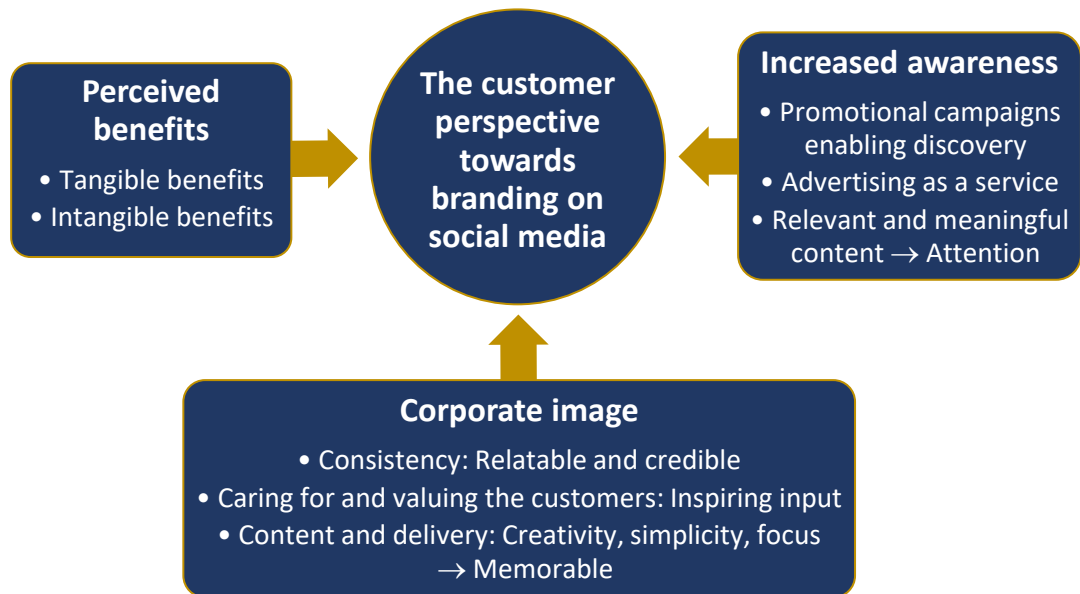


Figure 9. Summary of the interviewees' perceptions of branding on social media

Sources of appeal for attracting the attention of the customer

In connection with branding, the informants identified factors which contributed towards a higher perceived appeal of social media content. The concept of appeal was strongly linked to the memorable corporate image in the previous section. While the participants acknowledged that content should have variety and the preference of one type may depend largely on the current need, six common sources of appeal emerged. These content types to which the interviewees were as a whole the most attracted were insightful, interesting, entertaining, humour, moving, and beneficial.

Insightful content referred to discovering something unique with a feeling of novelty. M20 described that "It should be something very unique, something I have never seen; then of course I am going to be attracted by that right away seeing it." F40 mentioned that new information and perspectives were likely to provide important and respected value: "That is actually why I use social media, because often it might also be the case that one is searching for information." When discussing insightful content, F30 brought up the example of a memorable and one-of-a-kind learning experience which served as a source of appeal. She underlined the effectiveness of

providing insightful experiences for capturing the customer's attention: "If it can offer something new which I have not perhaps known or have not been able to consider or connect, then those are the things that capture my attention." Thus, offering the sensation of learning something new and enabling fresh insights was regarded as a considerable source of value and appeal for social media content.

Whereas the theme of providing something new connected the insightful and interesting content types, subtle differences also existed. The differentiating aspect was the latter focusing on catering for the basic human need of curiosity. M20 explained that "Maybe when there are things that challenge you, they kind of have you wondering what this is all about." The core issue was indeed the requirement for the audience to think, as the purpose of the content would be to inspire interest with mystery. F30 provided support for the notion by describing companies' social media content: "If it leaves a little room for pondering on what is happening here and what is this actually about, then personally I will be more interested in it." Therefore, appealing to customers by triggering interest in them connected strongly with the topics of raising awareness and enabling discovery which were addressed earlier.

Much like insightful and interesting content, entertainment and humour also shared similarities but the latter represented an entirely separate source of appeal for the participants. As a whole, entertainment covered relaxation, music and aesthetics, and M20 summarised the need for such content by saying that "People like to be amused or entertained." Still, the informants emphasised humour more than entertainment. Fun content seemed to bear a notable impact on creating a positive corporate image, as F30 explained: "Humour, when executed well, cheers me up and it of course associates with what made me laugh, which I will then remember as a positive thing." By appearing relatable through the use of humour in branding, the company also became more memorable as F20 mentioned: "It will stick in my mind much better and makes the company easier to approach." Yet, the interviewees considered humour a difficult art form as successful execution required good taste and a sense of appropriateness. F30 concluded that "It is important to consider the context when thinking how certain things can be marketed with humour."

Moving and beneficial content also appealed to the informants. As touching content triggered feelings, the message was relatable and close to personal life through a story, experience or situation which spoke to the person. When a company managed to connect a powerful emotion to their brand, the content had much more potential to become memorable and capture the customer's attention, as F30 elaborated:

For example in visual communication, if a strongly emotionally charged picture has been connected to the product or service on sale, then that is quite an effective way of at least getting attention; but of course it depends on what they are selling.

Beneficial content, on the other hand, could attract customers with either tangible or intangible benefits. According to the interviewees, the former should offer the possibility to gain something meaningful by completing an action, whereas the latter would comprise perceived personal benefits such as information, education or a step towards the aspirational lifestyle. However, the perception of what was beneficial varied, and therefore its appeal was not straightforward. Beneficial content would also often require a component of humour or interest to reach its full appeal.

All in all, the sources of appeal revealed how social media content was perceived. Although people are uniquely drawn to personally attractive features, the overview created a suggestion for common appealing factors. With an understanding of the content types and the crucial components of branding on social media, the main research question has been answered and next the focus will shift to the platforms.

4.2 Views on the Purposes of Social Media Platforms

Before examining specific platforms, the participants shared their general use of and approach towards social media. Regarding the role of social media, all participants described them as part of daily life and for instance F20 said that "I use Facebook all the time." The interviewees explained that the constant use was based on simplicity and availability which facilitated being always online and connected. Still, differing attitudes existed as F40 detailed that "I am an irregular user as sometimes I use social media every day, and sometimes I might not use them at all for an entire week." In addition to the ease and convenience, the participants appreciated the effortless feel of using social media due to the absence of restrictions. However, some considered this to create addictions as people could not stay away from the

platforms. The primary purpose for being constantly online was that it offered a way to pass time with the abundance of materials available. Passing time and boredom were closely linked, as M30 told that “If I am really bored, I tend to visit Facebook.”

As to the reasons for using social media, the interviewees’ descriptions revolved around two major topics: sociality and utility. The former answered to the need of social and personal connectivity with others, which created collective empowerment as people discovered others with shared interests and received peer support from the group. The latter, however, emphasised the functionality as a professional tool and a source of information or updates. Overall, social media served as a public diary providing information to satisfy people’s innate curiosity, on which F40 commented:

I would think that it is also meant for satisfying some sort of a basic human need of being aware of what is going on with other people. Still, it also caters to sociality as humans are fundamentally social animals, and this is one forum for being together and meeting each other.

The reasons for using social media were clearly visible in the activities the informants pursued. Sharing personal information about daily routines, important aspects of life or special occasions were closely related to sociality, along with contacting people on social media. For the interviewees, the new effortless communication possibilities had largely replaced traditional media and technologies. M20 explained that “I do not have to call my friend by using cell phones or text messages, I can just use this social media to see him live.” Besides, social media provided opportunities for active participation and consumption of various materials on an unlimited range of topics, to which F30 referred as “universal things in which I certainly would not participate without the social media platforms.” The participants also viewed that companies can benefit from social media by spreading information to increase awareness and encourage purchase decisions, along with studying their target groups more in detail.

When asked to elaborate on the purpose of using a particular social media platform or the benefits received from it, the informants often expressed hesitation or surprise. This was interpreted as uncertainty in providing such explanations, as it seemed that even though all the interviewees were certainly familiar with the topic, they had rarely thought of these aspects before. The rest of this subchapter is dedicated to exploring the characterisations of the three platforms which the

informants claimed to use the most: Facebook, YouTube and blogs. Most of the participants were also aware of other platforms such as Twitter and Instagram but were not frequent users or familiar enough with them. The results showed each platform to possess distinctive functions and attributes, whereas certain features were common to all of them as parts of the overarching category of social media.

The versatile combination of information and experiences on Facebook

Regarding Facebook, the participants viewed the platform as a source of information which helped in staying up-to-date by following interesting people or organisations. F30 explained that “For me personally, Facebook is about being up-to-date about people and things.” In effect, the core theme of being interested in others and their lives seemed to stem from curiosity: for example, M30 described Facebook with the words “curiosity, interest and information”. Another valuable benefit the informants perceived to receive from Facebook was the inspiration from seeing others’ ideas, experiences and perspectives. F40 also observed notable added value in relaxing and forgetting one’s own thoughts for a moment: “You can expand your own way of thinking by letting new ideas into your daily routines and thoughts.”

As for the content on Facebook, the informants regarded it mainly as a compact combination of all sorts of materials which they could access instantly. Perceived as a forum for spreading information and opinions, the communication on Facebook was still considered rather one-sided as F40 noted: “It is one-sided sharing of information or exchanging personal thoughts.” Sharing personally important aspects of life was an integral part of using Facebook which M20 even described as “a platform where you share everything with people.” Whether the content was information, news or commercials, it had to be short, interesting or funny to appeal to the customers. F30 elaborated that “If I post something to Facebook, then of course it has to be short, concise and preferably a little funny so that anybody will care about it.” The brief and compact size was indeed an essential requirement in the environment where customers consumed materials by quickly browsing through an abundance of versatile content. However, such one-off interactions in hectic fast-paced life could decrease the meaningfulness of the communication because the short focus and attention span would not allow for the creation of a cohesive experience.

The final element which the participants emphasised in connection with Facebook was collective empowerment. Firstly, Facebook provided opportunities for creating and maintaining communities and connections. Secondly, the platform was seen to expand relationships by making it easier to keep in touch with people who could not be contacted otherwise. For instance, M30 said that “The best part is that it is easy to approach people and find old acquaintances.” Thus, contacting has become evidently easier because people are able to discover as they are equipped with the power and the means to do so. Finally, according to the informants, the basis of collective empowerment was sociality and social connectivity. While all the interviewees acknowledged the socialising feature of Facebook, F40 also disputed that:

It can reduce regular face-to-face interaction since it is not really clever to be on social media and taking pictures when we are sitting together. It is as if we are together but really everybody at the table is actually updating social media.

The purpose-driven search for specific YouTube content

The above-mentioned collective empowerment was a relevant theme for YouTube as well. In fact, none of the interviewees listed YouTube among the platforms in which they were currently active. Yet, after the researcher mentioned the platform, all the informants indeed stated to be using it. This observation led to the conclusion that customers might not primarily regard YouTube as a social media platform due to infrequent use or specific purpose of consuming rather one-dimensional content.

Although considered impressive, videos offering music or entertainment appeared one-sided in terms of format versatility especially when compared to Facebook. F30 elaborated that she was missing “the versatile benefit which Facebook offered. When I go to YouTube I know what I am searching for and I seek those things actively.” Even with a range of possibilities for using the multimedia content and the unlimited choice of topics, YouTube presented limited value to the informants who mainly used the service for a purpose-driven search for fun, humour, interests or entertainment. For example, M20 described that “I can go to YouTube and start looking for funny videos or videos that I am interested in,” whereas F40 mentioned that “It can be entertaining but also factual and informative.”

Significantly, all the interviewees addressed the versatility of the content on YouTube which the varying quality and length of the videos also represented. Even with a complex mix of materials, YouTube was seen as a convenient tool on which M30 agreed: “For me, it is handy and easy to find music and other content on YouTube.” Although videos conveyed experiences, the platform was considered to provide only one-way communication due to the static consumption of the materials. M20 summarised that “It is basically just a platform you go to upload videos and watch videos and that is all you do on YouTube, according to my knowledge.” Yet, some of the informants did experience YouTube catering for their interest in others since they could follow interesting people who recorded and shared their passions. Also, M20 appreciated the possibility of staying up-to-date through personal real-time content: “I can see what is happening in their life or things happening in the society.” Availability and accessibility enabled the sharing of experiences between people better.

As detailed earlier, collective empowerment was a prominent theme with YouTube. Unlike with Facebook, however, many participants underlined the global community consisting of companies and individuals alike as the producers of video content. In particular, consumer-generated multimedia offered a channel for promoting personal interests as M20 noted that “You can show people what you like or what you are interested in making.” The informants highlighted that the content could have, for example, an instructional function because sharing tutorials encouraged learning and development while catering to people’s personal interests.

Blogs requiring an investment of time in exchange for meaningful experiences

As a matter of fact, collective empowerment emerged as a common theme for all the analysed social media platforms. Blogs also served to satisfy the interest in others by allowing the access to mostly consumer-generated content. While F40 stated that “There might be a commercial aspect that someone is writing a blog for a certain interior design business or a shop,” bloggers were mainly viewed as relatable consumers. As for the content, meaningful messages and a clear purpose were considered to leave a memorable impression. The informants pointed out that blogs should be built around a theme or at least have a specific topic or perspective. On the whole, blogs were strongly connected with experiences and sharing them with

the readers, which was also perceived as a way to influence their behaviour or purchase decisions. Having experienced this, F30 explained that “When I get a user experience from something, it is maybe easier for me to consider it since someone has really tested it.” Due to the defined focus and shared experiences, communication in blogs could be significantly more influential than on Facebook. Although creating blog texts was deemed to require more skill, they were still considered worth the effort as the more relatable and approachable channel.

As to accessing blogs, the interviewees interestingly remarked that they often discovered blogs by accident through another social media platform or a website since they did not actively search for blogs. This finding emphasised the requirement for blogs to be available and easily accessible since blog texts existed in a plethora of blog service platforms. Moreover, blogs were perceived to demand a more long-term investment in terms of time and interest due to their longer length and deeper purpose, on which F40 commented that “I would imagine that writing a blog is more goal-oriented than posting all sorts of short comments on Facebook.” In the end, the core element of blogs for the participants appeared to be relevant and personal information on a topic of interest. Personal connection to the topic along with an already shared interest inspired the informants to involve and immerse themselves in content with a profound meaning, as F30 detailed: “Blogs allow for a deeper elaboration on the topic because people who read it really are interested in it.”

The results presented in this subchapter provided insights on the role and purpose of social media from the interviewees’ perspectives in addition to the common activities available in the platforms. Furthermore, the three analysed social media platforms were identified with unique characteristics and features which illustrated both their similarities and differences. Ultimately, the findings created a depiction of these platforms as branding tools according to the customers’ perceptions.

4.3 Social Media Post Types for Brand Communications

In order to examine the characteristics of the most common post types in social media, the interviewees were asked to provide descriptions of six posts: a status update consisting only of text, a picture, a video, a question or a questionnaire, a

competition, and posts promoting news or events. This subchapter will report the discovered features of these post types which are relevant in brand communications.

Firstly, a status update containing only text received mixed reactions from the participants. It seemed that the appeal of text depended greatly on the personal preference or dislike for the format, M20 demonstrating the latter: "I can rate them and definitely text is at the very bottom, the very least thing that I want to read." In addition, the participants experienced text to be extensively present in other parts of life such as work or studies, which diminished its appeal. As for the features of text, it was seen as a basic format capable of communicating all kinds of messages but with a possibility of increased credibility or professionalism. Also, text included an element of anonymity which contributed towards an impersonal impression and difficulties in triggering feelings in the reader. Overall, all the interviewees agreed that an uninspiring use of the static text format could generate a negative reaction leading to decreased interest, as the content was regarded as boring and tedious.

In fact, the informants connected the unimaginative use of the format also to pictures. As a static medium, the impact of a photo was still considered to be limited. Yet, the combination and complementary use of both text and pictures added an interesting element as F20 noted: "The text connected to the picture should be somehow memorable, for example if there are interesting hashtags." Thus, creativity appeared as a major element for memorable photos. The attractiveness of the format was especially manifested in the powerful first impressions as F30 explained:

As a visual channel, the colours and shapes of pictures of course stand out and attract the gaze. One glance at a photo conveys what it wants to say, express, offer, sell or promote. It simply catches attention like this and I think that a picture does it faster and easier than text.

More than text, pictures also created a feeling of presence due to the personal connection the format triggered in the viewer. In terms of content, the primary requirement the interviewees expressed was simplicity. In order to suit the fast-paced life of the modern audience with a short attention span, photos should be effortless to consume. They should be effective in catching attention and render immediate understanding and impact, on which M20 commented by summarising the expectation with "For photos, it could be very simple display."

Concerning appeal and a memorable effect, the video format was widely preferred over pictures and text among the participants. However, a brief and compact size along with immediate accessibility was a prerequisite for any video. For instance, F40 underlined that “It is very important that it is not too long: even three minutes is long already. Especially if some important point has been left to the end, the video will be closed before that.” Therefore, effective videos should deliver the message straight away, while the message should be interesting and valuable in order to convince people to even open the video in the first place. Overall, the impressive format seemed to offer convenience to the consumers’ fact-paced life by being easier to understand and consume than text or pictures. The informants hoped the content of videos to be something out of the ordinary, funny or entertaining. The format itself was described as lively and capable of communicating experiences as F40 remarked:

It brings both sound and moving picture, which makes it more impressive. Also, videos stimulate senses more strongly, which is still more likely to influence attitudes, feelings and wishes. If I received a link from an unknown company, it would possibly be easier to take the first step and find out who they are if there was an interesting video.

Yet, the interviewees largely regarded the viewing of videos as passive continuous consumption. On the contrary, questions or questionnaires were seen as activating post types which enabled participation. When accompanied by a valuable end result or purpose, the questions became more meaningful and were likely to attract a higher number of responses. Most importantly, however, the participants had to feel that they had something to say about the topic which also had to be interesting to them. Although not all informants shared a liking for questions, they were nonetheless considered to provide important information while conveying a caring image of the company to the customers. F40 explained the sensation by saying that “When someone shows an interest in your opinions or habits, it is a positive starting point.”

Along with questions, competitions also inspired participation and involvement. These promotional tools were perceived to rely on concrete, valuable and relevant content which brought the company and the customer closer together by raising an interest. The possibility of gaining and winning was mentioned as the attractive element by F40: “Competing or waiting excitedly whether you won something

probably belongs to some fundamental human urge.” The exciting feeling of competing countered the sensation of being targeted by companies if the prize was seen to be worth the effort. Moreover, the perceived usefulness and appeal of competitions were apparently shaped by previous experiences such as actually winning a prize. Unfavourable reactions to competitions were largely connected to the required effort to complete a long or complex task, as M30 said: “If a competition goes too far and requires a lot of time to complete, then it will be left unfinished for sure.” Other substantial hindrances were regarded to be the issues with privacy.

Lastly, the participants experienced news as fact-based one-way communication revealing interesting information about the company, its products, operations or staff. Especially when adopting a storytelling approach, news appeared attractive as F30 described: “I like news and stories and I read a lot of them, perhaps the most when it comes to companies’ updates. Sharing that type of information to people sheds light on the company’s operations the best.” Events encouraged active participation but required more than answering a question or entering a competition would. Therefore, triggering interest in people is crucial as F40 elaborated: “Really getting people to go to events requires that the interest is raised, which demands more planning from the company on how to promote the event.” All in all, news and events appeared to offer a distinctly formal and informative format for brand communications.

To conclude, this subchapter examined six common post types for brand communications on social media. The characterisations from the interviewees’ descriptions led to the identification of the core attributes along with prominent strengths and weaknesses for each post. While a few formats shared certain general features, the highlighted unique aspects of the posts complemented the previously presented results and provided answers to the second supporting research question. The following chapter will next discuss and review all the findings in connection with the theoretical framework to create a profound view on their meaning and value.

5 Discussion

A summary of the results from the previous chapter will precede the discussion of the findings in connection with the concepts from the theoretical framework. Before conclusions, the limitations and credibility of the study will also be assessed critically in order to constructively evaluate the quality of the research and obtained results.

5.1 Summary of the Main Findings

The main research question was targeted at understanding the customers' perceptions of social media as a branding tool for companies. The research findings highlighted two important perspectives on the matter: the customers' perceptions of what branding should aim at communicating and accomplishing, and how branding could strive towards these goals and attract the customers. In other words, the former emphasised the impact which branding should establish among customers, whereas the latter provided possible sources of appeal for brand communications.

Firstly, the three influential components which brands should incorporate into their social media strategies in pivotal roles were benefits, corporate image and increased awareness. Benefits might be tangible or intangible by nature, but most importantly customers must experience and appreciate the added value from the brand. Next, corporate image should be consistent, credible and suitable to the company in addition to appearing relatable to the customers. While the content itself promoted significant aspects of the brand, also the commitment and effort to interact and produce materials of high quality conveyed crucial but more subtle messages influencing the customers' view of the corporate image. Moreover, branding should accomplish increased awareness among both existing and potential customers by catching attention and enabling discovery with relevant and meaningful content.

The other perspective on the main research question addressed the possible sources of appeal which could bring value in terms of the attractiveness of communication. The results suggested six categories for appealing types of content, each with unique engaging factors. Insightful content provided extraordinary materials offering the sensation of discovery, whereas interesting content relied on triggering people's

curiosity with mystery. Entertainment in general presented relaxation, but the particular category of humour contributed more significantly towards a positive and relatable image and personal connection. Being able to relate on a personal level was essential also for the moving content type generating powerful feelings and emotions. Lastly, beneficial materials appeared attractive due to either intangible or tangible advantages, but their appeal depended on the subjective evaluation of their value and often required an additional attractive factor from the other categories.

As for the first supporting question, the purpose was to comprehend the customers' perceptions of popular social media platforms and their core characteristics affecting branding on social media. At first, it was important to identify the role which the informants considered social media to possess in their lives, along with the reasons for using social media and the essential activities in the platforms. Social media appeared to be an integral part of daily life for the interviewees who saw the simple and available nature of the platforms as a pivotal factor for being constantly online. This effortless sensation of using social media accompanied by the nonexistent restrictions was even described as addictive, but most importantly the platforms offered a way to pass time and avoid boredom with an abundance of versatile online materials.

When analysing the reasons for using social media, the themes of sociality and utility emerged to represent the underlying motivations. Though the former was related to connectivity and empowerment and the latter to receiving information and updates, both shared the common aspect of catering for people's curiosity. These themes were also evident in the activities pursued in the platforms. Sharing information or important aspects of life was one of the most prominent activities on social media, in addition to contacting others, active participation and consuming materials on interesting topics. Overall, such activities aiming to increase awareness by sharing complemented the reasons for using social media which were rooted in curiosity.

In fact, the presence of curiosity was noticeable also in the analysis of social media platforms where it was manifested in the feature "interest in others". The analysis focused on the platforms with which the participants were familiar—Facebook, YouTube and blogs—and all of them shared this characteristic while also possessing

numerous distinctive attributes. The interviewees perceived Facebook as a platform for sharing and following as information and updates flow fluently between people. Immersing oneself in others' ideas and experiences could offer relaxation and inspiration, while communities and relationships further contributed to the strong sense of collective empowerment. The contents on Facebook were deemed to offer an instantly available combination of all sorts of materials, which demanded more from a post in order to catch people's attention. Whether the posts relied on funny content or a concise format to raise interest, Facebook overall appeared as a challenging platform for creating a cohesive brand experience for the customer.

YouTube, on the other hand, provided rather one-sided content due to the specific purpose for using the platform which was to seek funny, entertaining or interesting videos. Although the versatile materials certainly offered variety, the purpose-driven search noticeably limited the perceived value of the platform, along with the fairly restricted activities mainly consisting of static consumption. Yet, collective empowerment was prominent also in connection to YouTube because the global community could share their passions with instructive purposes, for instance.

Lastly, blogs stood out as the platform for sharing personal and relatable experiences which have notable potential to also influence others' opinions. Often equipped with a meaningful purpose, blogs were clearly focused on a theme or a topic to which the audience typically already had an existing connection or interest. This enabled the deeper elaboration on the issue in the blog, which consequently required more from the readers in terms of time and interest spent on the content. In order to reach the devoted audience members, blogs should strive to be available and easily accessible.

The second supporting question focused on the types of social media posts and their features which influenced the communication of branding messages. In order to understand each separate post type, the participants were asked to describe and explain their reactions towards six posts which a company could potentially publish on social media. Based on the answers, the main attributes along with strengths and weaknesses emerged for all the studied formats including text, picture, video, question, competition, and news and events (see Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of the main characteristics of social media post types

Post	Core Attributes	Strengths	Weaknesses
Text	Basic format, common everywhere	Credible and professional	Impersonal and boring
Picture	Effective when combined with text, relies on simplicity and creativity	Impressive visual format creating a personal connection	Static
Video	Stimulates senses with moving picture and audio, limited by brief length	Lively format for communicating experiences	Passive consumption
Question	Active participation, conveys a caring image while collecting information	Meaningful purpose adds value and appreciation	Requires effort and interest
Competition	Enables participation and involvement with concrete and relevant content	Chance to win, the exciting experience of competing	Time and effort, issues with privacy
News and events	Formal and informative one-way communication for staying up-to-date	Provides information and participation to the interested community	Demands planning and promotion to be attractive

In conclusion, this subchapter summarised the main findings from the research which deepened the understanding of how customers perceived social media when used for companies' branding purposes. Furthermore, the characterisations of platforms and post types illustrated the effect which these elements might have on the implementation of a branding strategy on social media. Next, the findings will be reviewed in connection with the concepts presented in the theoretical framework.

5.2 Reflecting on the Results

The established theoretical framework was valuable in the implementation of the study and will now be further utilised in the discussion of the obtained research results. The gathered knowledge will be evaluated in connection with the arguments from scientific sources addressed earlier, and the examination will follow the same structure of the discovered themes and topics as in the previous subchapter.

Reviewing the discovered targets and tones for branding on social media

Firstly, the elements found to be relevant for brand communications—benefits, corporate image and increased awareness—were closely related to other concepts and models in branding and marketing. For instance, they coincided with the asset categories of brand equity: brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations (Aaker 2010, 8). In addition to the common factor of awareness, benefits were directly connected to perceived quality whereas brand associations partly originated from corporate image. While the research did not offer an equivalent to brand loyalty, the successful execution of branding strategies in the identified three areas would likely generate such a reaction from the audience. This correspondence revealed that the answers to the main research question actually represented also the cornerstones of brand equity in the context of social media.

Moreover, the findings correlated with the three orientations which marketers have for using social media: “task” generating revenues, “interaction” strengthening customer engagement, and “self-orientation” increasing brand awareness (eMarketer 2013; MarketingSherpa 2011; as cited in Kim, Spiller, & Hettche 2015, 11). Again, the mention of awareness highlighted its importance whereas the influence of corporate image and the demand for appreciated benefits appeared fundamental for customer engagement and revenues, respectively. Since these themes emerged from customers’ descriptions, it was interesting that they bore such a noticeable resemblance to the marketers’ motivations. This observation served as a potential indication of how accurately the discovered elements embodied the essence of the phenomenon, given the support from these established objectives.

Along with the connections to brand equity and marketers’ orientations, the outcomes expanded their relevance to the relationships between companies and customers formed by differentiation, identification and interaction (Roper & Fill 2012, 109). In the case of social media, consumers’ willingness to interact with a brand could be argued to depend largely on the benefits they perceive to receive. Also, the differentiating aspects in the image of the company and the identification stemming from increased awareness underscored the value of these factors for relationship-building as part of branding. Lastly, the themes bore significance for the

hierarchical relationship levels of presence, relevance, performance, advantage and bonding (Edwards & Day 2007, 23). Noticeably, the former two relied on awareness whereas the perception of benefits was a prominent component in a relationship based on performance. The latter two, on the other hand, could be claimed to be attributable to a strongly positive and appealing corporate image.

These comparisons to theoretical models expanded the meaningfulness and relevance of the identified elements from customers' perceptions. Not only did they receive a certain degree of validation from the existence of similar themes in literature, but also the reflection revealed their significance in relation to brand equity, marketers' orientations and relationships between brands and consumers. Receiving such complementary results with inductive coding was a truly intriguing outcome, although the potential subconscious influences from having familiarised with the literature beforehand could not be entirely denied. All in all, the evaluation seemed to emphasise that the acknowledged components of benefits, image and awareness truly impact brand communications on social media significantly, in addition to other essential aspects related to the implementation of the strategies.

As for the sources of appeal, the identified categories of content produced examples for brands to utilise in attracting customers on social media. Scott (2010, 19, 98) discussed that online content should communicate something people did not realise to ask in the first place, while catering with raised interest and added value to the consumers' desire to solve problems and be entertained. The suggested appealing content types suited this description since as a whole they offered insights, benefits and entertainment. Significantly, the discovered attractive factors also provided knowledge and joy which were among the most highly ranked sources of added value from social media (Weissenfelt 2016b). The comparison was intriguing because it supported the connection between appeal and value for social media content. Brands could capitalise on such information and employ the appealing content categories to appropriately convey their brand identity and promise on social media.

Although classifying the sources of appeal was the primary goal in this part of the research, recognising relationships between the content types was a fascinating supplementary observation in the analysis. Insightful and interesting content were

starkly similar but still fundamentally different, whereas humour emerged as a noticeably attractive form of entertainment. Beneficial content was interestingly distinguished from the others because receiving benefits alone hardly sufficed for the informants who often needed another element of appeal. If customers indeed require more than plain benefits in exchange for their attention, brands are in a powerful position to supply such value through discoveries, delight and emotions.

Comparisons based on the collected perceptions of social media platforms

The answers to the first supporting research question explored the perceptions regarding particular platforms and social media in general. As regards the role of social media, the findings supported the notion that the constant use of the channel as part of daily life was notably based on finding a way to pass time (ibid.; Official Statistics of Finland 2016b). Furthermore, the characteristics of the phenomenon— participation, conversation, connectedness, openness and community (Mayfield 2008, 5)—were accurately represented in the revealed underlying need of sociality in using the platforms. Social connectivity included also the element of empowerment, which was consistent with the description that social media enable people sharing similar passions to gather together and trigger change (Solis 2010, 9). The other discovered reason, utility, was concerned with receiving information and updates instead. This seemed to confirm that social media are increasingly the main source of information, making it difficult to attract attention and focus from consumers collecting pieces of fragmented knowledge from various sources (Adamson 2008, 91; Agresta & Bough 2011, 86–87).

All the studied platforms exhibiting a feature of interest in others was in line with the view that the Internet caters to people's innate interactive needs of belonging to a community, expressing themselves and connecting with others (Juslén 2009, 16). More precisely, the specific attributes assigned in the results to Facebook and YouTube could be compared to the qualities from the honeycomb framework (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 243). In the case of Facebook, the most prominent functionality according to the research results was in fact sharing, which contradicted the suggestion from the model (ibid., 248). The findings deviated even further from the proposed characteristics with the discovered emphasis on communities. Groups

especially on the global scale were a considerable component also for YouTube in this research, which actually complemented the vision from the framework at least partly—due to subsequent contradictions on the relevance of conversations (*ibid.*).

The similarities and differences between the results of this study and the proposed framework were indeed interesting. Although social media included the element of continuous change, it was considered unlikely that the core characteristics would be exposed to such alterations. Instead, the subjective evaluations and purposes for using platforms appeared as a potential explanation to the observed contradictions. In detail, this suggestion underscored the highly personal nature of social media, albeit the publicity of the channel could not be denied. Still, this conception referred to each person utilising the platforms uniquely to satisfy their individual needs, even though the applications and features presented limitations to the activities and consequently provided the basis for the general description of the platform. Hence, as the inconsistencies between the results and the framework demonstrated, the objective truth regarding the essence of a specific platform could be hard to find given the personal influences on the interpretations especially in this research.

Though the honeycomb framework did not specify on the nature of blogs, the results promoted relationships, reputation and identity as potential elements fundamental for the platform. Otherwise, the outcomes agreed on blogs offering reflection and practical expertise from personal experiences with suitability for information-sharing and guidance, but with a required investment of time (Bozarth 2010, 84; Kananen 2013, 156–157). When regarding platforms overall as branding tools, the findings widely supported the suggested roles by Safko and Brake (2009, 761): Facebook could generate awareness, YouTube was targeted at education and entertainment, and blogs were convenient for deeper communication.

The above characterisation was also consistent with the observation that, in terms of planning the posted content, Facebook appeared to require minimum prior consideration as compared to blogs which demanded extensive preparation. Perhaps the most intriguing realisation originating from the participants' descriptions of the platforms was the lack of interactivity. Communication was nearly always depicted as one-sided sharing of content, especially when it came to companies. Indeed, the

interviewees hardly mentioned the aspect of interactivity or two-way conversations for any of the platforms, with only the element of sociality in the general portrayal of social media representing it. The finding was truly fascinating since two-sided participation was widely considered fundamental in literature. While the discovery could embody an emerging feature of social media, it is important to remember that a majority of users merely consume content created by others (Li & Bernoff 2008, 41–45; as cited in Huotari et al. 2015, 763). Therefore, the informants potentially representing this segment of the online audience would explain the observation.

Understanding the descriptions of the social media post types

Analysing post types for the second supporting research question was aimed at generating knowledge for choosing the proper channel for branding messages in the communication cycle (Guffey et al. 2009, 10). After identifying the essential features of each post, the theoretical framework enabled further reflection on the meaning of the descriptions. Safko and Brake (2009, 80) discussed reactions to online content, and based on the research results the threat of being ignored would mostly be connected to posts containing only text. Pictures and videos, on the contrary, were discovered to hold more potential for being viewed and shared. Hence, these formats would efficiently generate awareness which was one of the objectives for organisational communication (Ledford & Anderson 2013, 253). As to the goal of motivating action, questions and competitions appeared optimum for encouraging involvement. The findings from Cvijikj and colleagues (2011, 813) confirmed the participatory nature of questions since they were among the most commented posts, whereas a large number of likes for videos supported their popularity in this study.

Overall, the characterisations of the formats did not indicate any of the studied posts being clearly and undeniably superior to the others. Still, the general preference of pictures was in line with the claim that adding an image to a tweet affected its reception and popularity positively (Enge 2014). Stressing the brief and compact size of videos, on the other hand, was unmistakably related to the habit of the modern audience to quickly scan through online content (Evans 2008, 223). With a range of possible formats, variety in their use was deemed favourable but the selection of the post type should understandably depend primarily on the message. Even with an

appropriate choice of format, the success of brand communications would extensively be influenced by the implementation.

One crucial aspect of the results and their utilisation must be addressed. As Edwards and Day (2007, 19) commented, collecting consumers' opinions for brand building should be used for perspective instead of direction. While consumer-centric brands certainly attract the target audience, customers mostly reflect on their subjective short-term needs and interests which cannot be directly translated into a long-term branding strategy (*ibid.*). If all companies identify and respond blindly to the same customer needs, brands become increasingly similar and lack surprise and innovation (*ibid.*, 24, 31). Therefore, the purpose of the research was only to expand the understanding of the phenomenon, not to formulate strategic solutions for brands.

In the end, online actions, content and presence reflect the brand and affect how the world perceives the brand image (Scott 2010, 183). With the results from this study, the planning of branding strategies can begin with a comprehensive foundation built on the invaluable customer perspectives. Especially in the case of the supporting research questions, the objective was to contribute towards the success of brand communications. Creating a detailed understanding of the social media platforms and post types would help in reaching the target audience and increasing the likelihood of the audience interpreting the message as it was originally intended.

In practice, the value of the obtained outcomes lies in recognising the impacts on the brand image and brand associations from using certain platforms or posts. As these two factors shape the communication on social media, both their appropriate and improper utilisation could cause notable consequences. When brands are familiar with the purpose of each platform and to which customer need it caters, they can employ suitable post types based on the effects the format is likely to have on the audience. At this point, the results complement each other as the discovered sources of appeal offer suggestions for the tone of the posts whereas the content can be modified according to the identified targets of branding on social media. Powerful but simple consumer insights accompanied by surprising and story-worthy elements are at the core of strong brands (Adamson 2008, 14, 218–220), and these findings assist in harnessing social media as a communication tool for such brands.

5.3 Limitations of the Research

Analysing the credibility of the obtained results is an important consideration in any research. The precautions in qualitative research design strategically control the unintended bias to obtain valid answers with reliable methods, though the findings might not be generally representative (Davies 2007, 146). Common limitations to qualitative research emerge from the trust-based data collection where the type and formation of questions—along with the possible mistakes in interpreting the answers—impact the outcomes of the study (Kananen 2015, 67; Marshall & Rossman 2011, 145). To properly address the limitations of this thesis, this subchapter will comment on the issues regarding validity, reliability and objectivity in detail.

The validity of the results

Both internal and external validity offer means to evaluate the quality of the research. Validity represents the credibility of the interpretations and conclusions (Silverman 2013, 285), and consequently valid results are considered true and accurate explanations of the phenomenon (Gibbs 2007, 91). More specifically, validity urges the researcher to check, investigate and question the findings in order to be able to theorise based on the results (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011, 48). In terms of internal validity in this study, the analysis focused on checking whether correct answers had been obtained and also examining the alignment of the results in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework and methodology.

Firstly, the research questions generated the themes of the interview guide which were also prominent in data analysis. Supported by the focused but wide theoretical framework, the interview questions had a clear purpose and value for the results. The consistent presence of the themes throughout data collection and analysis facilitated the connecting of the findings to the research objectives. The qualitative methodology and semi-structured theme interviews complemented the goals of the study, as they are particularly suitable for gathering new ideas and perspectives.

Since the interviews were conducted both in Finnish and in English, the matter of language appeared as a crucial consideration. Indeed, the translation of questions and answers could threaten the validity of the results because translations involve

subtle matters of meanings and connotations (Marshall & Rossman 2011, 165). The issue was addressed by carrying out proper documentation. The appendices included both the translated and original interview questions and utilised quotes to support the correct presentation of the answers and the internal validity of the research.

In addition to language, threats to validity originated from possible errors in the interpretations during data collection. In the personal interview situation, both the researcher and interviewee could accidentally misunderstand each other, which was attempted to avoid by using clarifying questions and summaries for checking the meanings of any unclear messages from the informants. Also, the formation and presentation of the interview questions created possibilities for mistakes because they had to accurately study the phenomenon while being easily understandable for the participants. The inclusion of the interview guide to the appendices—containing the justification for each question—demonstrated the approach and the decisions.

All in all, finding the answers to the research questions was fairly straightforward and consistent with the support of relevant literature and appropriately implemented methods complementing the objectives of the study. Although the findings provided value to the studied topics, they cannot be generalised to other contexts or scenarios due to the small size of the studied unit. Moreover, the results are not claimed to be representative of any population besides the informants of this study, which is a common feature to the external validity of qualitative research. Even with this limitation, the methods and results suited the purpose of the thesis and achieved the research objectives by contributing to the understanding of the phenomenon.

Reliability regarding the methods

Reliability represents the consistency of the results (Silverman 2013, 298) as reliable findings are consistent regardless of the circumstances or the researcher (Gibbs 2007, 91). When examining whether the research could be reproduced by others, documentation was as essential for improving the reliability of the study. Hence, the descriptions of data collection and analysis accompanied by the appendices provided detailed information and justification on the processes of gathering and refining the data, in order to enable the reproduction of the research as accurately as possible.

Using the theoretical framework as a foundation for the interview questions aimed to strengthen the reliability of the data collection technique. With a limited access to primary data, the selection of the sources took into consideration the requirement for variety when choosing suitable interviewees with variable backgrounds and different demographics. Yet, the research could have included conducting more than five interviews also with longer durations, and the choice of participants could have been more strictly based on a particular characteristic. Although nationality, gender, age, occupation and social media usage directed the selection of informants, the versatility could have been even greater especially with a larger number of participants. Reliability was in a pivotal role also when searching for secondary data sources for the theoretical framework, which mainly comprised peer-reviewed scholarly articles in addition to books and statistics.

The reliable implementation of the methods largely depended on the researcher's actions and attention to detail, especially in the data analysis. Constantly checking for variations and differences in codes was crucial for the accuracy and consistency of coding, because other perspectives on the data are absent in the work of a single researcher (ibid., 96, 98). Examples of the coding and categorisation processes provided in the appendices served to exemplify and explain the analysis. The outcomes of the qualitative research were noticeably dependent on the researcher, given that data analysis was based on open coding. While achieving saturation enhanced the reliability of data collection, the confirmation either from the informants or other researchers on the interpretations was missing. But since the decisions and conclusions were based on the researcher's informed and justified judgement, the measures of documenting and reasoning were ultimately assessed to convincingly provide sufficient support for the reliability of the research.

The issue of objectivity in qualitative research

As mentioned above, objectivity is difficult to achieve in qualitative research due to the subjective interpretations of the data guiding the analysis. Similarly in this study, scientific or neutral objectivity could not be fully ensured in the subjective context of qualitative research (Davies 2007, 151). As the informants' answers reflected their own thoughts, the researcher's subjective views, emotions and background—which

are unavoidably present in data collection and analysis to a certain extent—also made the output not entirely objective (Gibbs 2007, 91; Hennink et al. 2011, 19). Lacking objectivity, the implementation of the study emphasised reflexivity instead. Reflexivity refers to conscious and continuous self-reflection from the researcher to recognise and address the potential influence of subjectivity on the research (Hennink et al. 2011, 19).

Since the significant role of the researcher in gathering and refining the data meant that objectivity could not be fully achieved, it was also impossible to define credibility as accurately as in quantitative research and the evaluation remained an estimate (Kananen 2015, 270, 272). Therefore, proper documentation and justification were invaluable for confirming and evaluating the results and the study overall (ibid., 282). Creating and following a justified interview guide strived to add objectivity to the data collection technique as each interview would have a similar structure which could be reproduced to a certain degree. However, enabling other researchers to make the same findings from the data set was a measure of objectivity which qualitative research could not fully guarantee, but examples and explanations substantiated the process nonetheless.

In the end, the research accomplished the set objectives and provided a description of social media as a branding tool. The focus and level of concreteness of the results could be argued, however, along with the creation of new information regarding the phenomenon. Even though the findings mainly highlighted the theoretical overarching themes, the deeper analysis of the widely explored topic of social media was deemed to contribute towards a more comprehensive understanding of the channel in terms of branding. Generating such a profound and wide-ranging portrayal of social media from the customer perspective was considered a goal worth pursuing, given the increasing inclusion of the platforms to marketing. Thus, the scope of the thesis was purposefully broad, which consequently could have influenced the concretisation of the outcomes. Having discussed the limitations of the research, the final chapter will next summarise the conclusions from the study while also covering the practical implications and suggestions for future research.

6 Conclusions and Future Suggestions

This thesis analysed social media in relation to branding, with the aim of elaborating on the essence of the phenomenon to support the appropriate utilisation of the channel. Focusing on consumers' perceptions, the research identified the targets and tones for branding on social media. The study also examined the quintessential features of popular platforms and common post types supporting such purposes.

After building the foundation of an appropriate theoretical framework, opinions and experiences were gathered in semi-structured theme interviews from informants representing the customer perspective. From the obtained data, the qualitative content analysis suggested the core components of branding on social media to be perceived benefits, corporate image and increased awareness. These factors which appeared the most notable in the consumers' perceptions were accompanied by the identification of appealing content categories. Moreover, the unique attributes of Facebook, YouTube and blogs as well as of six common post types were described.

The practical implications of the findings concentrated on the planning of branding strategies for social media. Future strategies can be built based on the three aspects of branding which appeared crucial from the customer perspective. The sources of appeal not only stressed the elements contributing to a favourable reaction, but also provided concrete examples for the creation of attractive content. Other managerial implications originated from the characterisations of platforms and posts. Being familiar with the consumers' perceptions, brands can choose the most appropriate post and platform to support the message of professionalism, participation or other brand promise. With these reflections on the essence of social media, companies can seek competitive advantage either by following or challenging the customers' views.

Yet, the research covered only one aspect of the phenomenon and in fact highlighted the need for further analysis. The recommendations for future research range from observing how businesses utilise social media in practice and with which outcomes, to testing the results obtained in this thesis among a large sample in a quantitative research. Furthermore, exploring the marketers' views on these same topics would interestingly reveal the similarities and contradictions to the customer perspective.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

The Interview Guide for Data Collection

<i>Before the interview: Explanation of the purpose and methods of the research, permission for recording and opportunity for the interviewees to pose questions</i>		
Question	Finnish Translation	Purpose (Based on)
THEME 1: THE INTERVIEWEE'S SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIOUR		
1. Which social media platforms are you currently using?	1. Mitä sosiaalisen median palveluita käytät tällä hetkellä?	Use of social media platforms: for Questions 5 and 6 (Leading social networks worldwide as of January 2017, ranked by number of active users (in millions) 2017; Top 15 most popular social networking sites 2017)
2. When or in what situation do you use social media?	2. Milloin tai missä tilanteessa käytät sosiaalista mediaa?	Social media usage and their role in daily life (Official Statistics of Finland 2016b)
3. What do you do on social media?	3. Mitä teet sosiaalisessa mediassa?	Behaviour and roles on social media (Li & Bernoff 2008, 41–45; as cited in Huotari et al. 2015, 763)
4. For what purpose do you use social media?	4. Mihin tarkoitukseen käytät sosiaalista mediaa?	Reasons and motivations for using social media (Mayfield 2008, 7; Weissenfelt 2016b)
THEME 2: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND POSTS		
5. For what purpose do you use social media platforms?	5. Mihin tarkoitukseen käytät sosiaalisen median palveluita?	Views on social media platforms' benefits (Bozarth 2010, 11; Mayfield 2008, 5)
6. How would you describe social media platforms?	6. Miten kuvailisit sosiaalisen median palveluita?	Social media platforms' attributes and purposes (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 243)
7. How do you react to post formats on social media? (status update (text), picture, video, question, competition, news and events)	7. Miten reagoit sosiaalisen median julkaisutyyppeihin? (statuspäivitys (teksti), kuva, video, kysymys, kilpailu, uutiset ja tapahtumat)	Behaviour towards social media post formats (Cvijikj et al. 2011, 812; Safko & Brake 2009, 80)

8. What are social media post types like? (see list from the previous question)	8. Minkälaisia sosiaalisen median julkaisutyyppit ovat? (ks. lista edellisestä kysymyksestä)	Perceptions of social media post formats' attributes in relation to companies' communicative goals (Ledford & Anderson 2013, 253)
THEME 3: PERCEPTIONS OF BRANDING ON SOCIAL MEDIA		
9. What would you like companies to publish on social media?	9. Mitä haluaisit yritysten julkaisevan sosiaalisessa mediassa?	Attitudes towards social media content published by companies (eMarketer 2013; MarketingSherpa 2011; as cited in Kim et al. 2015, 11, 14)
10. What type of content appeals to you the most and why?	10. Minkälainen sisältö vetoaa sinuun eniten ja miksi?	Perceptions of social media content and the sensations it triggers: for Question 11 (The researcher)
11. Which aspect makes content entertaining/useful/...?	11. Mikä piirre tekee sisällöstä viihdyttävää /hyödyllistä/...?	Insights on the factors of entertainment/usefulness/... (Question 10; Weissenfelt 2016b)

Appendix 2.

Example of the Data-Driven Coding in Data Analysis

Question	Text	Code: Level 1
5.	OK, first I'll go for Facebook. Uhh, a special function for that... Uniqueness of this one should be umm...	Hesitation
	It's a social media that connects you with all of your friends	Social connectivity
	or people you might not know or you might know.	Expanded relationships
	Maybe a friend that you knew for a long time ago but you lost contact,	Missing other contacts
	and... That's something, you can totally find him back.	Enables discovery
	It's, uhh, very popular among... most all of the generations and...	Popular regardless of age
	You share things happening in your life.	Sharing (personal)
	Maybe just a sentence	Brief, compact size
	to describe your mood or your day or to tell people what's going on in your life very simply, like that.	Sharing important aspects of life
	A platform where you share everything with people and	Sharing
	to see in your friend's life that they like to share about with you.	Interest in others
	And for YouTube, it's basically just all about videos.	Specific purpose
	If you're like... you're very addicted to this photography or film-making,	Motivation
	then you record things very often	Activity
	or you want to make cool videos	Impressivity of the format
	that you can show people what you like or what you're interested in making,	Promoting interests
	then that's where you share your interests	Sharing
	and to see what you're interested in and to see things that might interest you.	Exploring and achieving interests
	For example in Facebook, as I said, it has a function to allow you to use free video calls or just phone calls, and in YouTube you can't use them.	Different platforms and functions
	It's basically just a platform you go to upload videos and watch videos and that's all you do on YouTube, according to my knowledge.	Static creation and consumption
	OK, first I'll go for Facebook. Uhh, a special function for that... Uniqueness of this one should be umm...	Hesitation

Appendix 3.

Deriving the Results with Categorisation and Thematisation

Class: Level 3	The role of social media				Activities on social media			
Code: Level 2	<i>Part of daily life</i>		<i>Sociality</i>	<i>Utility</i>	<i>People</i>		<i>Content</i>	<i>Activate</i>
Code: Level 1	<i>Constant use</i>	<i>A way to pass time</i>	<i>Needs-based use</i>	<i>Functional purpose</i>	<i>Sharing</i>	<i>Contacts</i>	<i>Internet</i>	<i>Participate</i>
Text	F20, Q2: No s	F20, Q2: -- ih	F20, Q4: -- o	F20, Q2: Ja sit	F20, Q3: A	F20, Q4: Ky	M20, Q4: (I	F20, Q3: --
	F20, Q3: Just	F20, Q2: Tai j	F20, Q4: Mut	M20, Q2: Or t	F20, Q3: --	M20, Q3: --	M20, Q4: --	F30, Q3: No
	F20, Q6: Vois	M20, Q2: Wo	M20, Q2: Or	M20, Q4: Um	F20, Q3: S	F30, Q3: Eh	F30, Q3: Sii	M30, Q4: M
	M20, Q4: All	M20, Q6: Var	M20, Q4: An	M20, Q4: -- br	F20, Q3: O	F30, Q4: --	F30, Q4: Ta	
	M20, Q4: (Di	M30, Q2: Mu	M20, Q6: Soc	M20, Q6: Wel	M20, Q3: I	M30, Q3: S	F40, Q2: Vi	
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	F40, Q2: Mä		M30, Q4: Mu					
	F40, Q6: Mut		F40, Q4: Jote					
			F40, Q4: Et jo					
			F40, Q4: -- ja					

Appendix 4.

Translations of the Direct Quotes from the Interviews

I am really interested in a company being able to give other information about themselves, besides what they sell and how much it costs.

Mutta silti ite oon tosi kiinnostunu siitä, et jos se yritys pystyy antamaan itsestään myös jotain muuta tietoo, muuta ku se et mitä mä myyn ja mitä se maksaa. (F30)

You must first of course find the correct channels to kick off.

Pitää tietysti löytää oikeet kanavat mistä sitä lähetään. (M30)

The most important thing is that it conveys the feeling of being in line with the image of the company and that there is no contradiction or unprofessionalism. I would say that the most crucial aspect is that there is no inconsistency. Whether it is just text and pictures or questions, the most important criterion is that I understand that it suits this particular company in this case.

Kaikista tärkeintä jotenkin semmonen et se – siitä välittyy semmonen et se on linjassa sen yrityksen niin kun imagon kanssa. Et siinä ei tuu semmosta ristiriitaa tai et se on niin kun epäammattimaista. Et sillon oikeestaan mä sanoisin et se on varmaan niin kun kaikista tärkein et siinä ei oo ristiriitaa. Et on siinä sit pelkkää tekstiä ja kuvia tai kysymyksiä, niin kaikissa tärkein kriteeri on se että se on niin kun jotenkin... mä niin kun ymmärrän että joo tällä yrityksellä nyt tää sopii tähän. (F40)

For example that they have not used a lot of fancy words which regular people do not understand.

Et esimerkiksi ei oo älyttömästi mitään hienoja sanoja käytetty mitä tavallinen talliainen ei ymmärrä. (F20)

Not necessarily just simply sharing the advertising—“like and share, and you can win a woolly hat”—but instead they would give a little more in terms of content creativity.

Et ei pelkästään just ihan puhtaasti välttämät jaeta sitä mainoskuvaa—‘tykkää ja jaa, nii voit just voittaa sen pipon’—vaan että annettais pikkasen enemmän sieltä. (F30)

Instead of simply click and like, they could ask to write which of these three is your favourite and tell us why.

Et se ei oo vaan et klikkaa ja tykkää, vaan että kirjoita vaikka että mikä näistä kolmesta voisi olla paras ja perustele. (M30)

Special is something that the others are not doing which stands out from the mass, one way or the other.

Erikoinen vähän nii ku mitä muut ei käytä, jollain tavalla massasta erottuva. (F20)

Or they would come up with another way for marketing that would not necessarily put the product or the service first but would take an entirely different approach.

Tai keksittäis just joku toinen tapa markkinoida. Et ei välttämättä lähettäiskään tuote tai palvelu eellä vaan jollain ihan muulla tavalla. (F30)

Personally I prefer that everything stays simple enough and that there is a clear point and a clear message.

Mut itse tykkään et kaikki pysyy tarpeeks yksinkertaisena ja simppeleinä, et siinä ois just sillai et... selkeä pointti ja selkeä asia. (M30)

Of course in the case of a relatively unknown company, it is naturally good to present what products or services they offer, otherwise they would not benefit from it.

Tietysti jos on joku vielä suht tuntematon yritys esimerkiksi, niin on tietysti hyvä että käy ilmi se että mitä tuotteita tai palveluita he tarjoaa, totta kai, muutenhan se menee hukkaan. (F30)

If it is my choice, then I would see it as a service.

Jos se ois nii ku mun valinta, niin sillen mä kokisin et se on nii ku palvelu. (F40)

This so-called mystery will surely make me google what store this actually is and what it offers.

Just tämmönen ns. arvotus saa mut varmasti googlettamaan et mikäs puoti tämä nyt on ja mitä se tarjoaa. (F30)

That is actually why I use social media, because often it might also be the case that one is searching for information.

Et se on oikeestaan että mikä on nii ku se miks mä menen sosiaalisen median pariin, koska monesti myös voi olla että hakee jotain tietoo. (F40)

If it can offer something new which I have not perhaps known or have not been able to consider or connect, then those are the things that capture my attention.

Ja sit jos siinä vielä pystytään tarjoamaan jotain uutta mitä mä en ehkä ole tienny tai osannu ajatella tai yhdistää, niin ne on sit niitä juttuja mihin jää sitten kiinni. (F30)

If it leaves a little room for pondering on what is happening here and what is this actually about, then personally I will be more interested in it.

Et jos se jättääkin vaikka pikkasen arvailun varaa et mitä tässä on nii ku tapahtumassa ja mistä tässä on kysymys, niin mä varmemmin itse kiinnostun siitä. (F30)

Humour, when executed well, cheers me up and it of course associates with what made me laugh, which I will then remember as a positive thing.

Ja sitten tää huumori, sillen kun se on tehty hyvin, niin se saa mut hyvälle tuulelle ja sit se assosioituu siihen juttuun tietenkin, jos se on saanu mut nauramaan oikein kunnolla niin sitten mä muistan sen hyvänä juttuna. (F30)

It will stick in my mind much better and makes the company easier to approach.

Et kyl se nii ku jää paljon paremmin mieleen ja tekee helpommin lähetyttävän. (F20)

It is important to consider the context when thinking how certain things can be marketed with humour.

Tietysti nyt on vähän tää konteksti just tässä pitäis nii ku pitää että miten tiettyjä juttuja voit markkinoida sit esimerkiks huumorilla. (F30)

For example in visual communication, if a strongly emotionally charged picture has been connected to the product or service on sale, then that is quite an effective way of at least getting attention; but of course it depends on what they are selling.

Joku tämmönen esimerkiks kuvallisessa viestinnässä, joku tämmönen voimakkaasti tunteisiin vetoava kuva jos se on pystytty yhdistämään jotenkin tähän myytävään tuotteeseen tai palveluun, niin se on aika varma... varma tapa saada niin kun huomio ainakin kiinnittymään siihen juttuun. Tietysti vähän nyt riippuu mitä siinä ollaan kauppaamassa mutta... (F30)

I use Facebook all the time.

No siis Facebookiahan mä räplään koko ajan. (F20)

I am an irregular user as sometimes I use social media every day, and sometimes I might not use them at all for an entire week.

Mä oon semmonen satunnaiskäyttäjä et joskus käyn joka päivä, joskus voi mennä viikko etten käy ollenkaan. (F40)

If I am really bored, I tend to visit Facebook.

Tietysti Facebook on sillei et jos on tosi tylsää, nii tota noin, siel tulee käytyä. (M30)

I would think that it is also meant for satisfying some sort of a basic human need of being aware of what is going on with other people. Still, it also caters to sociality as humans are fundamentally social animals, and this is one forum for being together and meeting each other.

Et jotenkin tulee mieleen että se myös nii ku on tarkotettu tyydyttämään tämmöstä ihmisen jotain perustarvetta niin kun tietää muitten asioita mutta myöskin sosiaalisuutta, ihminen nii ku varmaan lähtökohtasesti on sosiaalinen eläin eli se on nii ku yks foorumi jossa sitten voidaan olla yhdessä ja tavata. (F40)

Universal things in which I certainly would not participate without the social media platforms.

Siis ihan yleismaailmallisistakin asioista mihin ei tulis kyllä varmasti osallistuttua jos ei ois somen kanavia. (F30)

Curiosity, interest and information.

Just Facebookiin uteliaisuus, kiinnostus ja ehkä nii ku tällane informaatio. (M30)

For me personally, Facebook is about being up-to-date about people and things.

Mun kohalla Facebookis on just se ajan hermolla oleminen ihmisistä ja asioista. (F30)

You can expand your own way of thinking by letting new ideas into your daily routines and thoughts.

Ja niin kun sitä kautta laajentaa omaa ajatusmaailmaa. Vähän tuulettaa niin kun omaa arkea, omaa ajattelua. (F40)

It is one-sided sharing of information or exchanging personal thoughts.

Mutta se on nii ku ehkä yksipuolisempaa nii ku semmosta tiedonjakoo tai omien nii ku ajatusten vaihtoa siellä. (F40)

If I post something to Facebook, then of course it has to be short, concise and preferably a little funny so that anybody will care about it.

Ja itekin jos Facebookiin jotain päivitän niin toki sen on oltava semmonen lyhyt, näpäkkä, mielellään vähän hauskakin juttu jotta ketään nyt yleensä kiinnostaa. (F30)

The best part is that it is easy to approach people and find old acquaintances.

Sehän siinä on mun mielestä se kaikkein paras että... helppo lähestyä ja tolle löytää vanhoja tuttuja. (M30)

It can reduce regular face-to-face interaction since it is not really clever to be on social media and taking pictures when we are sitting together. It is as if we are together but really everybody at the table is actually updating social media.

Se voi vähentää nii ku normaalin face timen määrää. Et jos tuolla nyt istutaan ja kaikki räplää vaan sitä ja ottaa kuvia niin ei se oo oikein fiksua kun ollaan yhdessä. Et ollaan nii ku muka yhdessä mut sit jokainen onkin pöydän ääressä kännykän kanssa päivittämässä. (F40)

The versatile benefit which Facebook offered. When I go to YouTube I know what I am searching for and I seek those things actively.

Sellasta mulle niin monipuolista hyötyä kun mitä siellä Facebookissa on. Et kun mä meen YouTubeen niin mä tiedän mitä mä meen hakemaan sinne ja mä etsin niitä juttuja sieltä aktiivisesti. (F30)

It can be entertaining but also factual and informative.

Niin, no oikeestaan YouTubesta voi sanoo et se voi olla viihdyttävä mut se voi olla myös nii ku asiapitoinen. (F40)

For me, it is handy and easy to find music and other content on YouTube.

Mulle taas just niin kun YouTubessa on se et kuinka kätevästi ja helposti löytää musiikkia ja tollasta. (M30)

There might be a commercial aspect that someone is writing a blog for a certain interior design business or a shop.

Ja siinähan voi olla se kaupallinen näkökulmakin et joku tekee blogia vaikka jollekin tietylle sisustusliikkeelle tai kaupalle. (F40)

When I get a user experience from something, it is maybe easier for me to consider it since someone has really tested it.

Että sitten kun mä saan sieltä jonkun tavallaan käyttäjäkokemuksen jostain, niin mä sitten helpommin ehkä sit tartun siihen kun se on jonkun oikeen ihmisen oikeesti testaama asia. (F30)

I would imagine that writing a blog is more goal-oriented than posting all sorts of short comments on Facebook.

Kuvittelisin et sil on nii kun kuitenkin tavoitteellisempaa se blogin kirjottaminen kuin sitten vaan että Facebookiin voi laittaa ihan mitä vaan lyhyitä kommentteja. (F40)

Blogs allow for a deeper elaboration on the topic because people who read it really are interested in it.

Mut sit siellä blogissa sä voit ehkä vähän syventää sitä, kun sitä lukee ne ihmiset ketkä oikeesti on kiinnostuneita asiasta. (F30)

The text connected to the picture should be somehow memorable, for example if there are interesting hashtags.

Et se kuvan teksti pitäis sit olla jotenkin mieleenpainuva. Et toki jos siinä on käytetty mielenkiintoisia esimerkiksi hashtageja niin sitten. (F20)

As a visual channel, the colours and shapes of pictures of course stand out and attract the gaze. One glance at a photo conveys what it wants to say, express, offer, sell or promote. It simply catches attention like this and I think that a picture does it faster and easier than text.

Sit taas kuva, tietysti visuaalisena kanavana niin sen värit, muodot, tulee sieltä esille, silmille, sitä jäät kattomaan. Siinä kuvassa yleensä yhdellä vilkasulla jo välittyy se mitä siinä halutaan sanoa tai esittää tai tarjota tai myydä tai kaupittaa. Et se vaan kiinnittää huomion ihan yksinkertaisesti näin. Mä luulen että se kuva, se kiinnittäis sen huomion kyllä nopeemmin ja helpommin kuin teksti. (F30)

It is very important that it is not too long: even three minutes is long already.

Especially if some important point has been left to the end, the video will be closed before that.

Ja sit siinä on tosi tärkeä se et se ei oo liian pitkä. Et kolme minuuttiakin on jo pitkä. Että tota, sitten jos siellä on varsinkin joku tärkeä kohta jätetty sen jälkeen nii se kyllä menee nii ku kiinni. (F40)

It brings both sound and moving picture, which makes it more impressive. Also, videos stimulate senses more strongly, which is still more likely to influence attitudes, feelings and wishes. If I received a link from an unknown company, it would possibly be easier to take the first step and find out who they are if there was an interesting video.

Se tuo niin kun sekä ääntä että kuvaa, liikkuvaa kuvaa, niin se vaikuttavuus on niin kun parempi. Ja tota videossa tulee niin kun aisteja... aisteja just stimuloidaan niin kun vahvemmin joka vaikuttaa sitten todennäköisemmin kuitenkin asenteisiin ja mieleen ja tunteisiin ja toiveisiin ja tämmösiin. Mut se et jos aattelee et ittelle niin kun tulis niitä sitten linkkinä, niin jos ei sitten olis mitään suhdetta just siihen yritykseen, niin se vois olla et se ensimmäinen kynnyksen sitten tutkia ja kattoo nii on sitten matalampi jos siin on joku semmonen kiinnostava... kiinnostava video. (F40)

When someone shows an interest in your opinions or habits, it is a positive starting point.

Joku on nii ku kiinnostunu sun mielipiteistä tai sun tottumuksista, nii se on sulle nii ku positiivinen lähtökohta. (F40)

Competing or waiting excitedly whether you won something probably belongs to some fundamental human urge.

Että varmaan se kuuluu johonkin ihmisen tämmöseen perusviettiin sitten tämmönen niin kun... sinäänsä kilpaileminen tai jännittäminen että voittaako jotain. (F40)

If a competition goes too far and requires a lot of time to complete, then it will be left unfinished for sure.

Kyl liika... jos kilpailu menee liian pitkälle ja menee oikeesti et sult menee hirvee aika sitä täyttämiseen, nii varmasti jää tekemättä tai muuta. (M30)

I like news and stories and I read a lot of them, perhaps the most when it comes to companies' updates. Sharing that type of information to people sheds light on the company's operations the best.

Tykkään uutisista, tykkään tarinoista, niitä luen paljon, ehkä enimmässä määrin jos puhutaan yritysten päivityksistä. Ne nii ku tavallaan avaa sitä toimintaa kaikista parhaiten jos sitä halutaan nii ku ihmisille jakaa sen tyyppistä tietoo. (F30)

Really getting people to go to events requires that the interest is raised, which demands more planning from the company on how to promote the event.

Mut vaatii niin kun jo sen että se pitää sitten niin kun se mielenkiinto herätä et sinne oikeesti sit mennään eli vaatii niin kun... siinä mielessä enemmän siltä toteuttajalta sitten miettiä miten tuo esille sen tapahtuman siellä. (F40)