

Research Article

The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Awareness, Brand Engagement and Purchase Intention in Emerging Economies

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on brand awareness, brand engagement, and purchase intention across five emerging European economies: Albania, Kosovo, Romania, Ukraine, and North Macedonia. Anchored in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) model, the research employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the complex interrelationships among these constructs. Findings reveal that SMM positively influences brand awareness and engagement, both of which significantly mediate the relationship between SMM and purchase intention. Importantly, the strength and nature of these effects vary by country, underscoring the role of cultural and contextual factors in shaping consumer responses to digital marketing stimuli. This cross-national analysis fills a critical gap in the literature by focusing on underrepresented, high growth markets and offers valuable implications for both theory and practice. Specifically, it advocates for localized, culturally sensitive SMM strategies that emphasize both visibility and interactive engagement. The study contributes to the broader marketing discourse by demonstrating how consumer behavior in digitally connected, developing economies diverges from that in mature markets, thereby reinforcing the necessity of context-aware digital marketing frameworks in global strategy formulation.

Keywords: Brand Awareness; Purchase Intention in Emerging Economies; Social Media Marketing

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have changed marketing, especially in developing countries where social media is vital for consumer-brand relationships. This research explores how SMM affects brand recognition, engagement, and purchase intent. The study employs the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to explain media engagement and the customer Brand Engagement (CBE) framework to describe online customer behavior. The research investigates how social media platforms impact people's attitudes and behaviors as strategic marketing and communication tools. This problem is critical in developing nations with increased internet penetration and shifting marketing strategies.

1.1. Key Strengths of the Study

This study compares consumer behavior in five emerging economies—Albania, Kosovo, Romania, Ukraine, and North Macedonia—across cultures and economies. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) is used to rigorously explore complex latent construct interrelationships, boosting robustness and generalizability. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) model underpin the study's analytical depth. Its focus on emerging countries, which are understudied in literature, fills a crucial gap and explains behavioral dynamics in high growth but ignored

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regions. The study's culturally attuned approach emphasizes contextual awareness in global marketing strategies and culturally reliant brand engagement methods by highlighting consumer variance in social media marketing responses.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This article aims to investigate the impact of social media marketing (SMM) activities on three critical outcomes:

The study focuses on emerging European markets, which have not been extensively researched in this context. The authors seek to determine whether the positive effects of SMM observed in developed economies are also held in these rapidly developing regions.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in:

- a. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT): Suggests that users actively choose media (like social media) to fulfill specific needs (e.g., information, entertainment, interaction).
- b. Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) Model: Explains how consumers emotionally and cognitively connect with brands via online interactions.

2. Comparative Review: Social Media Marketing's Influence on Consumer Behavior

The primary study by Zeqiri et al. (2024), published in *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, presents a cross-national empirical investigation into the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on brand awareness, brand engagement, and purchase intention within five emerging economies—North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Romania, and Ukraine. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) framework, the study establishes that SMM positively influences all three consumer behavior constructs, though with significant cross-country variation attributable to cultural and economic heterogeneity. Complementary research by Emini and Zeqiri (2021) narrows the geographic scope to Kosovo and affirms a full mediation effect of brand awareness and engagement between SMM and purchase intention, thereby reinforcing the theoretical robustness of the primary study while highlighting the pivotal role of intermediary cognitive variables in transition economies. Similarly, Faisal and Ekawanto (2021) in the Indonesian context demonstrate that SMM functions—such as entertainment and trendiness—drive both brand awareness and purchase intention, confirming the multidimensional influence of SMM tools. Meanwhile, Ullah et al. (2024) expand this discourse by integrating consumer belief as a moderating variable, suggesting that individual psychological dispositions critically influence engagement efficacy, particularly within the Pakistani market. Fernanda and Dwita (2024) further contextualize these relationships by isolating platform-specific dynamics—focusing on TikTok and Gen Z in Indonesia—thereby underscoring the importance of demographic and technological segmentation. Collectively,

these studies substantiate the central thesis of Zeqiri et al., while also revealing fertile ground for context-specific, culturally nuanced, and platform-oriented extensions of the behavioral SMM model.

2.1. Comparative Insights

- a. **Geographical Focus:** While the primary article spans multiple emerging European economies, the comparative studies focus on specific countries like Kosovo, Indonesia, Pakistan, and a city-level analysis in Padang, Indonesia.
- b. **Theoretical Frameworks:** The primary study employs UGT and CBE frameworks, similar to the Pakistani study, which also considers consumer belief as a moderating factor.
- c. **Platform Specificity:** The TikTok-focused study provides insights into platform-specific strategies, contrasting with the broader platform approach of the primary article.
- d. **Demographic Targeting:** The Gen Z-focused research underscores the importance of tailoring SMM strategies to specific age groups; a nuance less explored in the primary article.

2.2. Critical Evaluation

The study offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of SMM in different cultural contexts. Its robust methodological approach enhances the credibility of the findings. However, the research could benefit from a more diverse demographic representation, including older age groups and varying socioeconomic statuses. Additionally, while the study acknowledges the moderating role of country-specific factors, it could delve deeper into identifying which specific cultural elements influence consumer behavior in response to SMM.

3. Methodology

- a. **Countries surveyed:** Albania, Kosovo, Romania, Ukraine, and North Macedonia.
- b. **Sample size:** Over 1,000 social media users.
- c. **Tool used:** Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the relationships between SMM and the outcome variables.
- d. **The study tested direct and indirect effects of SMM on purchase intention, with brand awareness and engagement acting as mediating variables.**

4. Key Findings

- a. SMM positively influences brand awareness in all five countries.
- b. SMM also significantly enhances brand engagement, especially where social media use is high.
- c. Brand awareness and engagement both positively influence purchase intention, confirming their mediating roles.
- d. The strength of these relationships varies by country:

- e. Romania and Ukraine showed stronger paths between awareness and purchase intention.
- f. Albania and Kosovo had stronger engagement effects.

5. Discussion and Implications

- a. The findings confirm that social media marketing is an effective tool to influence customer behavior in emerging markets.
- b. The variation across countries suggests that localized SMM strategies are more effective than “one-size-fits-all” campaigns.
- c. Companies are encouraged to focus not only on visibility (awareness) but also on interactive, value-driven engagement, which strengthens the customer-brand relationship.

6. Conclusion

The main article gives a thorough look at how SMM affects consumer behavior in developing economies across several countries. It gives a wider view of geography than previous research, although it would be better if it went into more detail on platform-specific techniques and demographic differences. Putting together the results of this research may help us better understand how SMM affects diverse situations in many ways.

This post makes a big difference in our knowledge of how to adapt SMM methods to various new markets. It shows how important it is for marketers to think about cultural differences when they plan social media initiatives. Future studies might build on this one by looking at other demographic characteristics and doing longitudinal studies to see how things evolve over time.

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