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Relationship between Social Media Marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth, and Brand Identity: Evidence from Fashion Industry in Bangalore

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ABSTRACT:

In the current age of digital transformation, social media platforms have become vital instruments for marketing, building brand identity, and interacting with consumers, particularly within the fashion industry. This study explores the relationship between social media marketing (SMM), electronic word of mouth (eWOM), and brand identity, with a specific focus on the fashion retail sector in Bangalore, India. Utilizing social identity theory, the study proposes a conceptual framework to analyse how SMM activities affect eWOM and how eWOM. The research adopts a quantitative approach, gathering primary data through structured questionnaires from 210 consumers who have previously engaged with online fashion retail via social media. By employing structural equation modelling, the study examines the direct and mediating effects among the constructs. The findings indicate that SMM has a significant impact on eWOM, and eWOM strongly positively affects brand identity. Furthermore, eWOM mediates the relationship between SMM and brand identity, suggesting that consumer-generated content serves as a link between brand communication efforts and identity formation. These results have theoretical implications for expanding the literature on digital branding and consumer engagement, as well as practical significance for marketers seeking to enhance brand equity through interactive and trust-based communication strategies.

Keywords: electronic word of mouth (eWOM), Social media marketing, brand identity, fashion industry, Structural equation modelling (SEM)

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Introduction

In the context of the ongoing digital transformation, social media has emerged as an essential component of contemporary marketing strategies. Defined by its interactive and participatory characteristics, social media marketing (SMM) enables brands to engage in real-time interactions with consumers, thereby reshaping traditional consumer-brand relationship paradigms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In urban centers such as Bangalore, where high digital literacy intersects with increasing fashion awareness, social media significantly influences consumer behavior. Within the fashion industry, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have evolved beyond mere advertising spaces to become dynamic arenas where brand identity is continuously shaped, negotiated, and communicated through both brand-initiated and consumer-generated content.

The growing prevalence of user-generated content and peer-to-peer interactions has facilitated the rise of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), a digitally enhanced evolution of traditional word-of-mouth communication. Noted for its accessibility, speed, and multidirectional flow, eWOM substantially impacts consumer perceptions, brand evaluations, and purchasing decisions, particularly in visually oriented sectors such as fashion (Farzin et al., 2022). Social media marketing activities (SMMAs), which include personalization, entertainment, trendiness, and influencer collaborations, have been shown to significantly influence key consumer outcomes such as brand loyalty, relationship quality, and impulse purchasing behaviours (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021; Safeer, 2024). However, the impact of specific SMM components varies across demographic and psychographic contexts, with research highlighting both commonalities and differences in how various elements influence consumers' purchase intentions on digital platforms.

Consumers are more likely to make purchases based on practical benefits, enjoyment, and alignment with their self-image rather than social factors or collaborative content creation on Instagram. In contrast, other studies highlight the importance of social and interactive elements. For instance, "entertainment, customization, and eWOM are key predictors in driving consumers' value co-creation intention, which in turn strengthens consumer-brand engagement and perceived brand value" (Cheung et al., 2021).

Entertainment, aesthetic appeal, interactivity, and trendiness indeed play significant roles in affecting the advertising value of social media ads and influencing consumer behavior, as supported by multiple studies: Entertainment, interactivity, and trendiness are consistently identified as key factors influencing social media advertising effectiveness and consumer responses. Hussain et al. (2022) confirms that "these elements significantly affect the advertising value of social media ads, which in turn impacts consumers' intention for value co-creation" (Hussain et al., 2022).

Similarly, Kumaradeepan et al. (2023) highlights entertainment, interaction, and trendiness as important factors influencing brand loyalty through consumer perception and purchase intention. The discrepancies in findings may be attributed to differences in product categories, social media platforms, or cultural contexts. For example, the effectiveness of social media marketing elements may vary between wearable healthcare technology (Cheung et al., 2021) and cosmetics (as mentioned in the question). Additionally, the impact of eWOM on purchase intention is consistently emphasized across multiple studies (Kartika & Pandjaitan, 2023; Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Poulis et al., 2018; Seifert & Kwon, 2019), highlighting its importance in shaping consumer behavior on social media platforms.

SMM has increasingly emerged as a potent and strategic instrument for fashion brands seeking to engage with consumers and influence their purchasing decisions. Through its interactive and dynamic nature, SMM facilitates meaningful consumer-brand interactions, which, in turn, foster emotional connections, enhance brand loyalty, and generate favourable consumer responses (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019; Kumar et al., 2022). These interactions extend beyond transactional communication, allowing consumers to participate in co-creating brand narratives and experiences. However, the effectiveness of social media marketing is not universally consistent. Its impact is significantly influenced by variables such as cultural context, consumer preferences, digital literacy levels, and platform-specific

characteristics. This variation underscores the necessity for fashion brands to develop tailored strategies that align with the expectations and behaviors of distinct target segments, utilizing platform-specific content and engagement models to maximize influence.

Moreover, the integration of SMM with electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has proven particularly effective in enhancing brand identity and shaping consumer perceptions in the fashion industry. These digital marketing mechanisms not only help build awareness but also cultivate brand communities, emotional attachment, and long-term loyalty. Habib et al. (2021) emphasize that personalized engagement, value-driven incentives, and well-managed eWOM strategies can significantly boost consumer attachment, trust, and community engagement. Furthermore, social media serves as a critical medium for conveying brand values, including those related to sustainability and ethical consumption.

Studies have shown that both SMM and eWOM influence consumer attitudes toward eco-friendly fashion, encouraging greater awareness and willingness to purchase sustainable apparel (Kautish & Khare, 2022). Additionally, the interplay between social media usage, eWOM, and brand equity has been found to mediate consumer purchase intentions, highlighting the multi-layered and interdependent relationships among these constructs (Khan et al., 2024). Effective strategies that focus on producing compelling, trend-aligned content and facilitating positive eWOM can ultimately strengthen consumer-brand relationships, enhance perceived brand value, and drive sales in the highly competitive fashion market (Gautam & Sharma, 2017; Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013). Given these dynamics, the present study aims to analyse the interconnected roles of social media marketing and electronic word of mouth in shaping brand identity within Bangalore's vibrant and digitally active fashion industry.

Literature Review

1. Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing (SMM), broadly defined as the strategic utilization of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks for brand communication, consumer

engagement, and promotional activities, has emerged as a transformative force in the digital marketing landscape. Unlike traditional advertising channels, SMM facilitates bidirectional communication between brands and consumers, enabling real-time feedback, interaction, and co-creation of brand value (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This dialogue-based engagement fosters a sense of connection and loyalty, rendering consumers active participants in the branding process. Farzin et al. (2022) emphasize that SMM significantly enhances brand visibility and assists organizations in adapting and remaining competitive in rapidly evolving markets. Furthermore, the participatory nature of social media encourages user-generated content, wherein consumers amplify brand messages through likes, shares, comments, and testimonials, effectively becoming informal brand ambassadors.

In India, the role of social identity has also been highlighted, where online and offline group affiliations influence perceptions of sustainable fashion and drive behavioral intentions, including eWOM participation (Kautish & Khare, 2022). The effectiveness of social media marketing is increasingly linked to its emotional, experiential, and contextual elements. For instance, occasion-related microblogs by fashion micro-influencers have been found to generate more consumer interaction than brand-related posts, suggesting that authenticity and relatability are key drivers of engagement (Shen, 2021). While some studies argue for the impact of entertainment, customization, and exclusivity in enhancing consumer-brand engagement (Adeola et al., 2019), others present contradictory findings, indicating non-significant effects of these same factors in certain contexts (Cheung et al., 2020). These inconsistencies highlight the nuanced nature of SMM and reinforce the necessity for brands to align their strategies with specific audience preferences and campaign goals.

To harness the full potential of SMM for eWOM generation and consumer interaction, fashion brands should aim to produce emotionally resonant and story-driven content that elicits strong cognitive and affective responses. Collaborations with micro-influencers—especially those identified as market mavens—can be particularly effective, as their recommendations often carry higher credibility and influence (Shen, 2021). Moreover,

understanding the behavioural mechanisms behind eWOM, such as the distinction between cognitive-induced pass-on behavior and marketing-stimulated endorsement behavior, allows marketers to fine-tune their messaging and content formats (Ananda et al., 2019).

In the Indian market, where social media penetration is rapidly expanding and digital consumers are highly active, SMM plays a critical role in developing brand equity and nurturing long-term customer loyalty ("Modelling the impact of social media marketing for apparel brands: evidence from India", 2023). Beyond enhancing brand visibility, SMM also contributes meaningfully to brand experience. Through the use of curated visual content, personalized storytelling, interactive elements such as polls, live sessions, giveaways, and behind-the-scenes videos, fashion brands can create immersive experiences that resonate with consumers on an aspirational and emotional level (Seo & Park, 2018). These digital touchpoints help consumers feel integrated into the brand's narrative, fostering identity alignment and increasing their likelihood of engagement and advocacy. In a visually driven and trend-sensitive industry like fashion, leveraging these capabilities is not only beneficial but essential for maintaining competitive advantage in the digital era.

Moreover, SMM contributes significantly to customer-based brand equity and brand identity formation. It allows for brand storytelling, which helps consumers align their personal values and lifestyles with the brand image. Empirical studies have confirmed that strategic SMM activities positively influence consumer perceptions and behaviors (Godey et al., 2016).

2. Electronic Word of Mouth

eWOM is one of the most influential factors in modern purchasing behavior (Chu & Kim, 2011). According to Severi et al. (2014), eWOM increases brand awareness, perceived credibility, and influences key brand equity dimensions such as loyalty and association. The nature of eWOM allows consumers to engage in dialogue rather than passive reception, enhancing its persuasiveness.

Social media marketing significantly impacts eWOM by facilitating consumer interactions and discussions about fashion brands. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook allow users to share experiences and opinions, which can enhance or damage a brand's reputation (Bai, 2024). In India, the effectiveness of social media marketing in generating positive eWOM is linked to the use of engaging and trendy content that resonates with consumers ("Modelling the impact of social media marketing for apparel brands: evidence from India", 2023).

eWOM can take many forms—ratings, reviews, blog posts, social media comments, and influencer mentions. These communications are particularly critical in the fashion industry, where consumers often rely on peer experiences to make decisions (Farzin et al., 2022). Studies show that positive eWOM can significantly affect brand equity by enhancing brand association and perceived quality (Severi et al., 2014).

Furthermore, eWOM is found to be more trustworthy than traditional advertising due to its perceived authenticity (Wallace et al., 2009). It plays a vital role in shaping brand image and consumer trust, particularly when shared by peers or influencers within one's social network. The viral nature of eWOM ensures its wide reach, thereby influencing brand identity across diverse consumer segments.

3. Brand Identity

Brand identity is widely acknowledged as the psychological connection consumers establish with a brand, encompassing a range of perceptions, emotions, values, and associations that reflect how consumers internalize and relate to the brand (Lam et al., 2010). It transcends visual elements such as logos or taglines, extending into the emotional and cognitive domains where consumers develop a sense of alignment and belonging. In the contemporary digital marketplace, particularly within the fashion industry, brand identity has emerged as a crucial driver of long-term consumer engagement and loyalty. Research by Wallace et al. (2021) highlights that "brand love" serves as a mediating factor between online brand engagement and consumer brand identification, further influencing consumers' willingness to co-create value and pay a premium price. This finding underscores the critical need for brands to move beyond transactional interactions and cultivate deep emotional connections with their audience.

Similarly, Santos and Schlesinger (2021) found that in the context of streaming services,

while both brand experience and brand love significantly affect loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices, the influence of brand experience is partly mediated by brand love. This implies that even impactful brand experiences must be emotionally resonant to translate into stronger consumer commitment. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that neither online brand engagement nor consumer identification alone is sufficient to drive value co-creation or price premium willingness in the absence of brand love (Wallace et al., 2021). This highlights a strategic imperative for brand managers, especially in the fashion industry, to invest in fostering emotional attachment through personalized, immersive, and value-driven brand interactions.

Younger consumers on social media are particularly responsive to authentic and emotionally engaging brand content, making emotional resonance a competitive differentiator. Social media marketing strategies play a pivotal role in shaping these perceptions, influencing brand identity through consumer empowerment, perceived interactivity, and parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional bonds that consumers develop with brands or influencers (Zha et al., 2023). These interactions can significantly enhance brand loyalty and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices. Moreover, platforms that support community-building, such as Instagram and YouTube, offer fertile ground for cultivating these parasocial bonds by enabling brands to communicate openness, authenticity, and shared values.

In this context, brand identity constitutes a fundamental component in cultivating enduring and profitable relationships between fashion brands and consumers. Through the strategic application of social media marketing, brands can not only enhance awareness but also foster meaningful emotional connections that translate into trust, loyalty, and economic value. However, it is crucial to recognize that superficial engagement metrics—such as likes and comments—do not necessarily equate to strong brand loyalty or value co-creation. To optimize the advantages of social media marketing, brands must concentrate on producing content that inspires brand affinity, aligns with consumer values, and cultivates a sense of belonging. Online brand communities also play a pivotal role in this process by offering platforms

for dialogue, peer validation, and collective identity formation, which reinforce consumer perceptions and deepen the brand-consumer relationship (Helal, 2022). Ultimately, a well-developed brand identity anchored in emotional connection can become a powerful strategic asset for fashion brands seeking sustainable growth and differentiation in competitive digital markets.

Studies suggest that brand identity can be fostered through consistent and emotionally resonant messaging across digital channels (Dwivedi et al., 2018). Farzin et al. (2022) highlight that consumers are more likely to identify with brands that mirror their personal identity and social values, especially when such identity is reinforced through eWOM and engaging social media content. A well-articulated brand identity serves as a differentiator in the saturated fashion market. It builds long-term consumer relationships and brand loyalty, which are essential for sustainable competitive advantage. The interaction between brand identity and eWOM is particularly relevant, as consumer-generated content often reflects the extent to which consumers internalize brand values.

Theory and Hypotheses

This study is grounded in social identity theory, which posits that "individuals classify themselves and others into various social categories, including affiliations with brands" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of SMM and eWOM, this theory helps explain how consumers form brand identities through interactions in digital communities.

Social media marketing facilitates these brand-based identities by encouraging consumer engagement and content co-creation. It builds emotional connections that strengthen brand identity and inspire eWOM (Farzin et al., 2022). When consumers actively participate in brand communities, they tend to endorse the brand through eWOM, reinforcing their identification with it. Electronic word of mouth acts as both an outcome and a mediator. It mediates the relationship between SMM and brand identity by disseminating consumer opinions that shape brand perception. This cascading influence underlines the importance of managing eWOM as part of broader brand strategy.

Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical grounding, certain hypotheses are proposed as follows:

H1: SMM significantly impacts eWOM among customers of fashion products.

H2: Social media marketing significantly impacts brand identity of fashion products.

H3: eWOM significantly impacts brand identity of fashion products.

H4: eWOM mediates a relationship between SMM and brand identity of fashion products.

These hypotheses are tested through a conceptual model developed from prior empirical studies in e-commerce and branding domains.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model, illustrated below, integrates the hypothesized relationships:
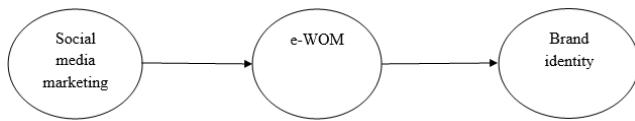
Methodology

Questionnaires survey method was used for data collection in this study. Respondents were customers of fashion products in Bangalore region of India. 210 responses were received from the respondents and used the same for data analysis. The initial section of the questionnaire solicits demographic information from respondents, while the subsequent section comprises items designed to assess the constructs of the research model. The questionnaire items were derived from previously published literature, as detailed below.

- **SMM:** Adapted from Seo & Park (2018) and Farzin et al. (2022)

- **eWOM:** Adapted from Park & Kim (2014), Severi et al. (2014)

- **Brand Identity:** Adapted from Wolter et al. (2016), Farzin et al. (2022)

Each variable is measured using multi-item constructs on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Data was collected from customers of fashion products in Bangalore using a structured questionnaire. A total of 300 respondents were targeted via purposive sampling, ensuring they had prior engagement with fashion brands on social media. Responses were received from 210 customers and this data was used for analysis.

Data Analysis

Among the 210 questionnaires completed by participants, 109 were from male respondents and 101 from female respondents. The majority of participants were aged between 21 and 24 years (n = 121). Most of the sample (n = 118) reported purchasing belts, followed in frequency by shoes, bags, and gloves, respectively. The three most common social networks among participants were Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp.

Structural Model

Table 1. Correlation between constructs with convergent, divergent, and composite measurement model validity.

Constructs	AVE	VIF	BI	EWOM	SMM
BI	0.722	1.235	0.815		
EWOM	0.716	3.852	0.511	0.862	
SMM	0.708	1.000	0.411	0.389	0.361

Source: The research data.

Table 2. Results of Direct Relationship and Path Coefficients.

Hypotheses	Path Coefficients	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values	Results
SMM -> EWOM	0.397	0.056	7.835	0.000	Supported
EWOM -> BI	0.421	0.049	8.879	0.000	Supported

Source: The research data.

Table 3. Analysis of the Indirect and General

Effects of the Research Model.

Mediation Roles	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
SMM -> EWOM -> BI	0.397	0.059	0.532

Source: The research data.

Table 4. Model Fit.

	R^2	F^2	Q^2
SMM	0.182	0.324	0.122
EWOM	0.167		0.11
BI	0.534	0.092	0.381

Source: The research data.

The hypotheses as suggested were assessed using PLS path modelling, with the results displayed in Table 2. This modelling is very much needed at the outset so as to ensure that a primary level check is carried out. The findings reveal that SMM has a positive and significant impact (t > 1.96, P < 0.01) on eWOM. This in turn help us proving the very first hypothesis of this study. Additionally, eWOM significantly affects brand identity (t > 1.96, P < 0.01) which in turn validates the hypothesis 2 of this study, proposed via conceptual model used in the current study. There could be the possibility of checking the interaction effects in connection with certain other significant variables those could influence. For example, the willingness to pay premium prices. However, in our study in the data analysis part, we evaluated effects of eWOM on brand identity first the direct effect, followed by the indirect, and at the last the total effect as well.

As shown in Table 3, there is an indirect influence of eWOM on the brand identity among the customers of fashion industries especially. This in turn validates the next research hypotheses which are to be tested in the current study among the customers of fashion products in the metropolitan city of a developing country. Further, in this section, we analysed the R^2 coefficients associated with the model's endogenous (dependent) variables in order to assess the goodness-of-fit of the structural model in the study. This in turn helped us to estimate the path coefficients as well as the effect size index (f^2). The R^2 values for social media marketing, eWOM, and brand identity are 0.182, 0.167, and 0.534, respectively (refer to Table 4). The effect size f^2 measures the impact of the specified variable

compared to a model excluding it (Hair et al., 2014), with the results detailed in Table 4. The statistical analysis of such aspects is generally determined by using a specific criterion which helps us determining the strength of the relationship between the model's latent variables (Cohen, 1988). The values ascertained with respect to the present study's data towards this test was 0.324 which indicates a significant effect and then 0.092 which depicts a moderate effect as well.

The model's explanatory power is clearly demonstrated by the relatively high magnitude of the effect size index (f^2), which indicates a significant contribution of the constructs within the proposed framework. To further assess the model's predictive capability, the Stone–Geisser index (Q^2) was utilized. As shown in Table 4, the Q^2 values reveal that the model has adequate predictive relevance, confirming its ability to effectively forecast the behavior of the endogenous variables. This predictive strength is essential for validating the model's practical utility in the context of social media marketing and brand identity research.

In addition to the predictive assessment, the overall fit of the structural model was evaluated using the Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) criterion. The obtained GOF value of 0.57 surpasses the recommended threshold, indicating a strong overall model fit. This result confirms that the structural model not only effectively explains the relationships among the constructs but also aligns well with the observed data. Together, the high Q^2 values and GOF score underscore the model's robustness and reliability, thereby enhancing confidence in the study's findings and their implications for theory and practice.

Discussion

The influence of social media on brand development has garnered increasing scholarly interest, with numerous researchers emphasizing its transformative potential within the digital marketing domain (e.g., Farzin & Fattahi, 2018). Social media platforms have fundamentally altered brand-consumer communication, offering unprecedented opportunities for engagement, personalization, and co-creation. Nevertheless, there remains a significant need for robust empirical evidence to substantiate the tangible effects of social media marketing (SMM) on brand

performance and consumer-brand relationships (Godey et al., 2016). A primary challenge in this field is the difficulty in accurately measuring the outcomes of SMM initiatives, given the dynamic, multi-channel, and user-driven nature of social media environments (Schultz & Peltier, 2013).

Addressing this research gap, the present study seeks to examine the influence of social media marketing on brand identity, with a particular focus on luxury fashion brands operating in digital spaces. This focus is especially pertinent, as previous studies have demonstrated that luxury brands excel in leveraging new media to create aspirational brand narratives, cultivate exclusivity, and engage affluent consumer segments in meaningful ways (Phan et al., 2011). The online retail context of luxury brands provides a fertile ground for investigating how SMM strategies drive brand engagement, loyalty, and perceived value in a digitally connected world. In addition to exploring the impact of SMM, this study also investigates the increasingly significant role of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in influencing consumer behavior and brand perception. While the majority of empirical research supports the view that eWOM positively affects consumer decision-making, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions, some studies introduce complexity by highlighting situational and contextual variations.

For instance, Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan (2020) found that while eWOM positively influenced consumer satisfaction for experience-based products, it did not significantly affect loyalty for either search or experience goods. This finding suggests that the persuasive power of eWOM may vary depending on the type of product being evaluated. Similarly, Tobon and García-Madariaga (2021) observed that opinion leaders' eWOM had a significant impact only when the product was experiential in nature and the message carried a positive tone. Moreover, when compared to a control group, the influence of opinion leaders' eWOM was not universally significant, further underscoring the nuanced nature of consumer response to digital word-of-mouth communication. These insights highlight the importance of considering variables such as product category, message valence, and source credibility when assessing the effectiveness of eWOM strategies. In conclusion, while the overarching body of literature affirms the value of eWOM and SMM in shaping brand identity and

consumer behavior, it is essential for marketers and scholars alike to account for contextual factors that may moderate these relationships, thereby enriching both theoretical understanding and practical application.

The present study's findings contribute to the ongoing debate by providing evidence for the direct influence of eWOM on consumer decisions, aligning with the broader consensus in the marketing literature (Abubakar et al., 2016; Farzin & Fattahi, 2018; Kartika & Pandjaitan, 2023). Since the results of the study showcase it clearly that eWOM is a very significant aspect in the field of marketing. However, studies also suggest that "Social media marketing elements, including eWOM, have been found to influence consumer-brand engagement and brand knowledge" (Cheung et al., 2020). These results show that eWOM has not only a direct relationship with consumer decisions but rather it is closely related to the concept of brand engagement. On the whole, various concepts associated with the marketing literature in a broader sense.

A substantial body of literature underscores the pivotal role of various social media dynamics—specifically interaction, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), and trendiness—in fostering consumer brand engagement (CBE). Cheung et al. (2020) highlight that these three factors are integral to stimulating CBE, which subsequently enhances brand awareness and brand knowledge. Their findings indicate that when consumers perceive brands as trendy, responsive, and engaged in peer communication, they are more inclined to form meaningful relationships with those brands. In a subsequent study, Cheung et al. (2021) further emphasize the importance of eWOM as a primary catalyst for consumers' value co-creation intentions. This process, wherein consumers actively participate in shaping brand experiences, fortifies their engagement with the brand and augments their perception of brand value. Additionally, the same authors underscore the impact of cognitive information-transfer interactions and the provision of current, pertinent information in cultivating CBE, asserting that consumers exhibit greater engagement with brands that offer intellectually stimulating and timely content (Cheung et al., 2020).

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the significance of these elements, certain

contradictions have surfaced in various studies, illustrating the complexity of digital consumer behavior. For example, Cheung et al. (2020) discovered that while specific forms of interactivity, such as information transfer, positively influenced consumer brand engagement (CBE), other aspects like interactivity ease of use and customization interactivity exhibited statistically insignificant effects. This finding diverges from earlier research that emphasized the importance of personalization and user-friendly interfaces in enhancing engagement. Similarly, Cheung et al. (2021) reported that trendiness and interactivity, although frequently highlighted as crucial, did not significantly affect consumers' intention to co-create value, which contradicts prevailing assumptions in the literature. These inconsistencies suggest that the effects of social media features on engagement and value co-creation are likely moderated by various factors, including product category, consumer demographics, and cultural context.

In conclusion, while the majority of empirical evidence supports the notion that interaction, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and trendiness play pivotal roles in fostering consumer brand engagement—ultimately enhancing brand awareness and perceived brand value—there remain gaps in understanding the full range of factors that mediate or moderate these effects. The contextual variations in findings underscore the importance of conducting further research across diverse industries, cultures, and digital platforms to uncover the nuanced dynamics that shape CBE.

Although many of the studies reviewed do not explicitly mention "brand identity" as an outcome, the evidence suggests that brand-related constructs, such as brand image, brand loyalty, and perceived value, are closely linked to the mechanisms of CBE and eWOM. Notably, eWOM has been identified as a powerful force in shaping consumers' brand perceptions and influencing purchase intentions (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018). This supports the broader notion that eWOM, as a form of peer-generated brand communication, can play a decisive role in constructing and reinforcing brand identity in the minds of consumers. Mishra and Satish (2016) further emphasize this point by asserting that eWOM should be regarded as a strategic marketing tool capable of building brand strength, enhancing customer loyalty, and ultimately driving sustainable competitive advantage in the digital age.

In summary, although the reviewed literature does not directly investigate the mediating role of brand identity in the relationship between social media marketing (SMM), electronic word of mouth (eWOM), and brand equity, it offers substantial evidence that both SMM and eWOM significantly influence various brand-related constructs, including brand awareness, consumer engagement, perceived brand value, and purchase intention. These findings imply that brand identity—defined as the set of associations and emotional connections that consumers develop with a brand—may serve as a crucial mediating variable in these relationships. However, its precise role remains underexplored in existing studies, presenting a valuable opportunity for future research. Examining how brand identity mediates the effects of SMM and eWOM on brand equity could provide more nuanced insights into how digital marketing strategies translate into long-term brand value.

Notably, the present study is among the few to examine the direct and indirect effects of SMM on eWOM and, subsequently, on brand identity within the context of the fashion industry. This is particularly significant given the visual, experiential, and trend-sensitive nature of fashion consumption. Based on these findings, fashion retailers are strongly encouraged to adopt strategies that stimulate positive eWOM through engaging social media marketing efforts. This not only reinforces brand identity but also aligns the brand with consumers' self-image and lifestyle preferences, thereby enhancing brand positioning—a factor that has been shown to directly impact sales performance (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018).

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the present study offers several practical implications for marketers and brand strategists. Firstly, the quality and design of social media marketing activities exert a direct influence on the generation of positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Marketing managers can capitalize on this by crafting immersive, enjoyable, and personalized social media experiences that capture consumer interest and encourage content sharing.

This strategy includes the use of high-quality visuals, emotionally compelling narratives, interactive features, and real-time engagement strategies. Secondly, ensuring that brand-related content is consistently available, up-to-date, and easily accessible on social platforms significantly enhances the likelihood of eWOM dissemination across digital networks. When consumers perceive value in brand content—whether through informative posts, behind-the-scenes insights, or user-generated stories—they are more inclined to engage with it, share it, and contribute their own perspectives.

Facilitating online discussions and encouraging consumer participation through polls, Q&A sessions, and comment-driven campaigns can further stimulate organic brand conversations. Moreover, recent literature has emphasized the growing importance of social influencers and market mavens, indicating a shift in marketing strategy towards influencer-driven brand communication (Xu, 2023; Zhang & Choi, 2022). These individuals possess the capacity to shape consumer attitudes and purchase behaviors due to their credibility, relatability, and extensive follower bases. As trusted figures within their online communities, influencers serve as powerful intermediaries who can translate brand messages into authentic endorsements. Collaborating with such influencers enables brands to amplify their reach, humanize their identity, and cultivate consumer trust. Research has demonstrated that the strategic use of influencers can increase brand awareness, boost consumer engagement, and positively impact sales (Chen et al., 2024; Xu, 2023). In light of these insights, marketers are advised to identify and engage with relevant social influencers whose values align with the brand, and who can act as advocates in disseminating positive eWOM to strengthen brand identity in the competitive digital marketplace.

Interestingly, the effectiveness of influencer marketing is not solely dependent on the size of an influencer's following. Valsesia et al. (2020) suggests that micro-influencers, who have thousands rather than millions of followers, can be highly effective. The study found that influencers who follow fewer others while having a substantial following are perceived as more influential, potentially due to a perception of greater autonomy (Valsesia et al., 2020). In conclusion, while the use of tools like Google Alerts to identify potential influencers is not explicitly mentioned in the provided papers, the overall strategy of identifying and incentivizing social influencers aligns with current marketing trends. The research suggests that effective influencer marketing can indeed lead to positive brand perceptions and potentially premium pricing. However, marketers should consider factors beyond just follower count, such as the influencer's credibility, professionalism, and perceived autonomy, to maximize the impact of their influencer marketing strategies (Chen et al., 2024; Valsesia et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the significant role of social media marketing in generating electronic word of mouth, which subsequently enhances brand identity within the fashion sector in Bangalore. The study confirms that well-crafted SMM strategies foster consumer engagement and interaction, resulting in the dissemination of favorable eWOM. This consumer-generated content not only reinforces existing brand narratives but also contributes to the construction of brand identity by aligning with consumer values and lifestyles. Importantly, the mediating role of eWOM emphasizes that consumer perception and advocacy play a critical role in translating marketing efforts into brand equity.

From a managerial perspective, fashion brands must prioritize content that is not only engaging and informative but also encourages user interaction and sharing. Marketers should strategically incorporate elements such as influencer partnerships, customer appreciation initiatives, and interactive campaigns to stimulate positive eWOM. Additionally, efforts should be made to sustain a consistent brand voice across platforms, aligning digital touchpoints with the aspirational identity of target consumers. Given the study's contextual limitations—being restricted to Bangalore and the fashion industry—future research could expand into cross-industry or cross-cultural contexts, incorporate longitudinal designs, or integrate moderating demographic variables for deeper insights into consumer-brand dynamics.

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