

# **DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES: INSIGHTS FROM AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INDUSTRY EXPERTS**

## **ABSTRACT**

As consumers are increasingly utilizing social network and media platforms for pre-purchase information, managers are confronted with producing effective social media messages that can favorably influence buyers' attitudes and behavioural intentions towards brands. A qualitative, in-depth, elite interview investigation with social media marketing experts was undertaken to develop awareness of the factors influencing the effectiveness of social media marketing. Adopting a thematic analysis approach, this study establishes the three overriding themes of interactivity, credibility and infotainment as being valuable in determining how social media marketing can enhance brand performance. Attitude theory and the hierarchy-of-effects model is utilized to support understanding and explain decision making of social media users in this context. Overall, this study provides managers with a thorough explanation of the effects of the identified core themes on social media attitudes and intentions. Implications for social media marketing theory and practice are presented based upon the depth and breadth of knowledge attained from the analysis of the expert interview data.

**Keywords** Social media, social media messages, social network and media platforms, elite expert interviews, attitude, hierarchy-of-effects.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From a marketing communications perspective, social media (SM) provides a vehicle for companies to share information relating to their brands, and a forum for consumers to interact with other users in their network (Rapp *et al.*, 2013; Kumar, Choi & Greene, 2017). SM has become a key area of research on brands as it offers the opportunity to use interactive platforms for the creation and exchange of information, and exploits its marketing potential (Ibrahim, Wang & Bourne 2017). In recent years, the popularity of SM for connecting and cooperating with customers has increased significantly. In 2017 around 2.5 billion individuals are expected to be using a social network at least once a month, an increase of 8.2% compared to 2016 (eMarketer, 2017). With Facebook alone generating \$27 billion in advertising revenue in 2016, an increase of 58% since 2015, SM is now considered the world's fastest growing advertising platform (Louisa, 2017). In the era of mass SM communication, the average consumer is consistently exposed to limitless, mostly unverified messages (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). Hence, the chances of a message favorably influencing users' attitudes and behavioral intentions is becoming increasingly more difficult to achieve. This has led to marketers placing a strong emphasis on the quality of the message content, its source characteristics, and interactivity etiquette (Pornpitakpan, 2004). As such, with the increasing popularity of SM platforms as a form of communication across all demographics and as a means of collecting information about pre- and post-purchasing decisions, SM managers are perpetually endeavouring to identify new and effective forms of SM messages that can favorably influence recipients' attitudes and behaviour. Yet thus far, there have been only a limited number of empirical studies that explore the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of social media marketing (SMM) communication (e.g. Godey *et al.*, 2016; Saboo, Kumar & Ramani, 2016) to influence users' attitudes and behavior. Therefore, this qualitative study sets out to mitigate this deficiency by enriching understanding of the development of effective SM messages. In particular, we seek to explore the factors that influence the creation of effective SM messages by combining knowledge from the extant literature with insights from an exploratory study with 25 SMM experts. Knowing how to use SM correctly can significantly enhance the company's productivity (Kumar *et al.*, 2017). Also, because its effectiveness on sales performance remains ambiguous, businesses want to know the level of commitment they should have when investing in SMM. Some marketers claim improved sales performance while others claim obscure and dubious

sales growth after adopting SM (Kumar *et al.*, 2017). The growth of SM compels managers to search for innovative and interactive approaches that can reach out and connect to as many customers as possible, and lead to positive outcomes for their brands (Gallaughier & Ransbotham, 2010; Godey *et al.*, 2016).

The contribution of this study is the identification of the key factors that influence the development of effective SM communication in relation to brands. These are developed from a conceptual platform based upon the consideration of attitude and behavioral intention toward brands from a modular hierarchy-of-effects perspective, which has not been previously considered in the context of SMM. Also, this study aims to fill in a gap by replying to Alves, Fernandes and Raposo's (2016) call for additional qualitative research to more-fully comprehend SM influences on attitudes and behaviours towards brands considering the viewpoints of companies that engage in SMM. Moreover, the use of data from experts across a broad range of industry backgrounds adds to the greater understanding as they are able to offer technical, process, and explanatory knowledge of SM effectiveness (Meuser & Nagel, 2009).

The remainder of this paper is outlined as follows. Initially, a thorough review of the literature relating to SMM effects on customers' attitudes and behavioral intentions towards brands is provided. This is followed by details of the qualitative methods adopted, and the results of the analysis undertaken are then presented. Subsequently, a discussion of the findings of the research is undertaken. Finally, the implications for theory and practice are considered together with the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Social Media Marketing**

SM is a new and innovative platform that is driving businesses to focus on customer engagement and business interactivity (Wollan, Smith, & Zhou, 2011). Direct interactivity in SM strengthens the relationship between the brand and its consumers and therefore increases rapport (Gao & Feng, 2016), which subsequently affects consumers' purchase intentions (Malär *et al.*, 2011). Being a follower of a brand on networks such as Facebook can lead to enhanced purchase intentions, and the use of SM messages to promote brands has, therefore, increased significantly. In a similar

vein, undertaking SMM promotes the automatic distribution of messages, and its synergistic nature makes it an influential communication tool. For example, a mere customer liking can influence users' attitudes and encourage exciting interactions, as liking can be viewed by an increasing circle of friends, potentially steering them to positive purchase intentions (Chang, Yu & Lu, 2015).

SM has altered consumers' behaviour by providing customers with new approaches to searching, selecting, evaluating and purchasing products and services (Alves *et al.*, 2016), so shifting the control to develop brand images from businesses to customer's online relationships (Tsai & Men, 2013; Godey *et al.*, 2016). These developments affect how advertisers work and influence their strategic and tactical practices, which has led to them facing new problems and difficult choices (Alves *et al.*, 2016).

While SM provides users with access to new information about interesting topics, it also simultaneously accomplishes publicity for brands (Gao & Feng, 2016). Via this platform, marketers are enabled to accomplish various important marketing aims such as customer relationship management, marketing intelligence, advertising, service, product and public relations, and marketing communications (Alves *et al.*, 2016; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). These approaches enable marketers to engage with target customers in their communities and to create more focused interactivity (Kelly, Kerr & Drennan, 2010; Godey *et al.*, 2016), and develop effective SM messages in an attempt to favorably influence customer's attitudes (Wollan *et al.*, 2011). As such, organizations can no longer afford to take the significance of SM lightly, as how a user perceives or communicates about a particular brand affects the current or potential customer's views towards that brand (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015; Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017). In addition, the growing popularity of SM amongst users has led to organizations of all sizes vying for customer attention. Such activity can lead to users being overwhelmed by the amount of information that they are faced with, diminishing their cognitive ability to process and evaluate the information with limited attempts in the desired timeframe, and subsequently compelling them to make inaccurate decisions (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014).

A SM message, such as that encountered in Facebook advertising (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015; Louisa, 2017), refers to a message posted through a SM platform by a

brand as a means of promoting its products and services (Jung, 2017; Louisa, 2017). Additionally, it is a means of encouraging interactions between the brand and its consumers (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Louisa, 2017). SM platforms enable consumers and users to become the followers of a particular brand wherein they can like, comment on, and/or share the promotional messages that appear on their SM platforms as well as seeing who else has already behaved similarly towards the advertised message (De Vries *et al.*, 2012). Correlative terms analogous to SM messages include brand messages (Rapp *et al.*, 2013), web advertising (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996), microblogging word of mouth messages (Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, & Feldhaus, 2015), SM advertising (Jung, 2017) and SMM (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chang *et al.*, 2015). In order to gain success, a brand's SMM approach needs to generate robust feelings among users (Chen, Kim, & Lin, 2015). Among other marketing methods, this requires producing bright and communicative promotional messages by placing them visibly on media platforms (Chang *et al.*, 2015). Subsequently, for the effective use of the internet, marketers will benefit from comprehending how users see this platform as a source of marketing, because opinions of the media influence attitudes concerning specific promotions (Bauer & Greyser, 1968; Ducoffe, 1996). In other words, a key measure of advertising effectiveness is the individuals' attitudes towards online advertising (Mehta, 2000; Russell, Staffaroni, & Fox, 1994; Ying Wang & Sun, 2010), as customer's cognitive capability towards advertising are mirrored in their feelings (affect), thoughts (beliefs) and, consequently, influencing their intentions (behaviour) to purchase (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989).

## **2.2. Attitude and Attitude Toward Advertising**

Attitude has been defined as the degree of favorable or unfavorable feeling of an individual towards an object (Thurstone, 1931). This is aligned with Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975, p. 6) work, which describes attitude as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object." Similarly, Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p.1) define attitude as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor." In essential conceptual terms, attitudes can be seen as evolving through what an individual thinks (cognitive), what an individual feels (affective), and what an individual does (conative) (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015).

In other words, an attitude is “an overall evaluation of an object that is based on the cognitive, affective and behavioral information” (Maio and Haddock, 2010, p.4). Per se, attitude can, therefore, be viewed as an individual’s private assessment of their emotional sentiment and predisposition towards particular substances or concepts (brands), emanating from different components in relation to their knowledge, feelings and actions (Kotler, 2000).

The modular ABC model of attitude comprises the components of cognition, affect and behavior (Maio & Haddock, 2010; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015; Solomon *et al.*, 2016). One main deficiency of the three-component perspective of attitudes is each component’s dependency on one another as they are all interrelated (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Also, while the components can form an attitude, the ABC model does not express how they come together; nor does it explain how vital one is relating to the others (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). Nonetheless, the three core components of attitudes presented in this model shape the foundation of various other, more structured, models of attitudes such as the hierarchy-of-effects adopted in this study (Barry & Howard, 1990). For example, more recent studies explain attitudes either alongside a two-component perspective (e.g. Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009), or a hierarchy-of-effects (ABC) sequence (e.g. Zinkhan & Fornell, 1989; Liska, 1984), which posits that affective and/or cognitive variables are antecedents of self-reported behaviors and stated intentions (Warner & DeFleur, 1969). Intentions are less abstract, in other words, and are thus closer to observable behavior as opposed to the cognitions and affective feelings on which they are based (Bagozzi & Burnkrant, 1979; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Equally, this study focuses on attitude from the two-component perspective of cognition and affect, in which the attitude identification does not cover a behavioral component. There are numerous situations wherein separate or combined results of affect and/or cognition on intention happen (Ajzen, 2001). Firstly, when beliefs and feelings concerning an object are of a conflicting nature, feelings are likely to rule (Lavine *et al.*, 1998). Whereas, when cognition and emotions are consistent with one another, both predictably contribute robustly and mutually to behavioral intentions (Simons & Carey, 1988). Secondly, the trend to form ones’ intentions on cognition, or affect, likewise relies on the particular individual. Lastly, behavioral intentions concerning hedonic objects depend more on affect than

cognition, while behavioral intentions concerning functional objects depend more on cognition than emotion (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

Relating to advertising, Bauer and Greyser (1968) explained attitude as the public's behavior concerning advertising. MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) postulated that such behavior is shown by customers' positive or negative reactions towards a specific advertisement. Similarly, Solomon *et al.*, (2016) defined attitude towards advertising as a predisposition to react in a positive or negative etiquette towards a specific advertising incentive, in a specific disclosure occurrence. The higher the favorability of an individual's attitudes towards an online advertising, the higher the probability of that individual responding positively towards the online advertisement (Wang & Sun, 2010). Studies advocating this claim found that customers with more positive attitudes concerning advertising were found to be highly likely to remember, and be convinced by, brand messages (Mehta, 2000). Thus, this notion has the capability to clarify favorable or unfavorable SM message evaluations.

### **2.3. Hierarchy-of-Effects**

Since research on SM platforms is still at an evolving phase (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Zhang & Mao, 2016), there is no established theory to understand the effectiveness of advertising through SM (Zhang & Mao, 2016). To identify, explore and explain the effective characteristics of advertising through SM to favorably influencing the user's attitudes and behavioral intentions, it is helpful to adopt the theory of hierarchy-of-effects in advertising (Olney, Holbrook, & Batra, 1991; Smith, Jiemiao, & Yang, 2008). The hierarchy-of-effects model (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) defines the phases that consumers go through while shaping, or modifying, their attitudes and intentions toward a brand (Smith *et al.*, 2008; Zhang & Mao, 2016). The model is predicated on a sequential development of attitude progressing from 'knowing to feeling to doing' where a fixed set of steps are followed on the way to attitude (Solomon *et al.*, 2016; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Indeed, it has been proposed that the approach regards attitude as being unidimensional in terms of being solely determined by affect - the degree of (un)favorability in regard to the attitude object - with the other two component beliefs and conation respectively seen as the antecedents and consequences (Lutz, 1981).

Commonly, research categorizes three forms of the hierarchy-of-effects model (Zanna & Rempel, 1988; Solomon *et al.*, 2016), namely the standard learning hierarchy, the low involvement hierarchy, and the experiential hierarchy (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009), all of which are relevant within the context of advertising and SMM (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). The standard learning hierarchy (cognition → affect → conation) is aligned with the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), which states that a user first shapes beliefs regarding a particular SM message through collecting knowledge concerning important aspects of the message such as its content relevancy and or product offerings. The user subsequently depends on these beliefs to create feelings regarding that SM message. For example, the user could find the message content and/or its product offerings valuable. Successively, the user engages in related behavior including liking, commenting on, sharing and or buying the product through that message. This hierarchy sequence proposes that a consumer is highly engaged in creating his/her decision, which means s/he is interested in obtaining as much information as possible including searching for alternatives, and then prudently reaches a reflective decision (Rossiter & Percy, 2017). Regarding the low involvement hierarchy sequence (cognition → conation → affect), a person does not first have a robust liking towards one object over another. The person subsequently responds based on the limited information (beliefs) available, and subsequently shapes an evaluation after s/he has made the purchase (Solomon *et al.*, 2016; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). An instance would be having to obtain information through SM about which brand to buy between two alternatives, where the user does not have a prior predisposition for one over the other, but shapes his/her feeling towards these alternatives after purchasing the two brands. After the purchase, the user can build an emotional relation with the brand purchased. This sequence is unique in that it is important for reasonably low involvement settings and familiar consumption circumstances, whereby the user depends highly on his/her own understanding and beliefs to modify their attitudes concerning the consumption object (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015). Lastly, the experiential hierarchy (affect → conation → cognition) is built on hedonic consumption wherein users are expected to respond merely on the grounds of their emotional associations (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Solomon *et al.*, 2016). In this sequence, feeling is initiated first, followed by consumption. After consumption, the user will think through and shape his/her attitude concerning the brand purchased including aspects such as, whether the price was reasonable, and



whether other emotional features and benefits were being delivered. In this case feelings control the attitude creation process, which may be conveyed through their use of SM messages.

Although some advertising practitioners and researchers have questioned either the existence, or sequence, of the hierarchy-of-effects (Goodrich, 2011; Kunda, 1990), its relevance to comprehending the influence of advertising (Smith *et al.*, 2008) and other promotional undertakings still endures (Balasubramanian, Karrh, & Patwardhan, 2006). Indeed, the discrete nature of each stage has also been examined, with some authors arguing that it is difficult to distinguish between the three components, particularly cognition and affect, and that the potential for confusion and conflation of the sequences exists (Barry & Howard, 1990). Yet, interest in its significance with regard to understanding its role in the impact of advertising and broader marketing communications remains (Rossiter & Percy, 2017). The research presented here, therefore, concentrates on the three stages of the hierarchy-of-effects and not the sequencing or distinctiveness of those components. Essentially it proposes that the effectiveness of a SM message relies on its capability to lead users into engaging in thinking and feeling about the brand in the message promotion, prior to their intended behavioral response to buy it or not (Zhang & Mao, 2016).

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Due to the relatively limited empirical evidence on the development of SM messages and their impact on users' attitudes and behavioral intentions, an exploratory research design was adopted. Qualitative data from industry expert interviews were obtained to contribute to an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the factors associated with SMM effectiveness.

#### **3.1. Data Collection**

In light of the nature of this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews. Specifically, we conducted 25 in-depth, elite interviews (Dexter, 1970; Fontana & Frey, 1998) with consultants and managers with expertise in SMM. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994); thus, the participants were selected based on their extensive knowledge and expertise with the social phenomenon under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) including SM

managers, bloggers, and consultants. To ensure that we selected the most knowledgeable informants, we used a snowball sampling technique and asked the initial participants to recommend other informants with expertise relevant to the research subject (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Table 1 shows the profile of informants, their positions and selected characteristics of their respective companies. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 56, and tenure at their respective firms ranged from 1.5 to 30 years with an average of 9.34 years. A broad range of respondents were included across a number of different industries, and from organizations of different sizes both in terms of turnover and number of employees, thus enabling comprehensive insights into the research area.

<Insert Table 1>

The interviews lasted 46 minutes on average, and were undertaken using different interactive techniques: internet (13), telephone (8) and face-to-face (4). The face-to-face interviews were conducted in the participants' office. We ensured confidentiality and voluntary participation (Huber & Power, 1985). All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim to ensure reliability (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). The introductory stages of the interviews included questions covering general topics (Creswell, 2003), which enabled participants to define their role in the company and its characteristics before focusing on the research area. We continued interviewing participants until theoretical saturation was accomplished (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990), i.e. when further new or relevant data did not emerge relating to the research area (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Data Analysis**

We followed an iterative and systematic process moving back and forth between the emerging categories, existing literature and the body of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We employed thematic analysis to code, identify and organize the emerging themes to develop theory relevant to companies seeking the creation of effective SM messages to favorably influence users' attitudes. Thematic analysis is defined as an approach for finding, examining, recording and reporting the frequently emerging themes (patterns) through iterative and thorough analysis of the data set under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Green, Davies, & Ng, 2017). It involves three

levels of themes, which entail basic themes, organizing themes and global themes. The basic themes were coded first and then flowed towards the global themes, moving from the more basic features of the data to final summary of the themes. The basic themes were combined into more common groups that form the organizing themes. Facilitated by the basic themes, the organizing themes were reviewed again and combined to form the global themes. To further interpret our findings, content analysis of the responses was used to quantify the frequency of the most commonly mentioned organizing themes within the data set following procedures suggested by Krippendorff (1980). We assessed the reliability of the generated themes by involving a second coder with significant qualitative research experience that examined all interviews. Then we compared themes, resulting in an intercoder agreement of  $k = 0.814$  (Cohen, 1960). In case of disagreements, there were extensive discussions between the coders until agreement was established.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

By investigating SMM from the experts' perspective across different business sectors within small and large firms, we aimed to identify core themes (patterns) that influence the effectiveness of SM messages as exemplified by the way that they affect brand attitudes and behavioral intentions. Participants were highly aware of the importance surrounding SMM among businesses. Thus, discussing the effects of various SM message factors is perceived as valuable, and vital for adapting to the rapid changes occurring in SM. Our results report the identification of three overarching themes revealed from the data: interactivity, credibility, and infotainment with their constituent sub-themes as depicted in Figure 1.

<Insert Figure 1>

##### **4.1. Interactivity**

Engaging in meaningful interactions with the existing and potential targets was expressed as an important factor to create favorable attitudes and intentions towards the brand. Four overarching sub-themes emerged as the key to strengthen interactivity in SM between the firm and its followers and potential targets: (1) community building; (2) storytelling; (3) social approval; and (4) SM influencers. Table 2 provides an

overview of the four interactivity sub-themes along with the strength of evidence and illustrative quotes.

<Insert Table 2>

The majority of informants identified **community building** as a method for increasing interactivity and thus, creating effective SM messages. They mentioned that companies want to become ‘social organizations’ that create crowdsourcing platforms on which followers can give feedback and suggest ideas towards a company’s product development and design. Experts acknowledged that through successfully established communities, companies could turn its members into product design contributors, brand representatives as well as increasing sales. As a CEO states:

*“There’s a lot of talk about brands becoming social organizations. Or companies becoming social organizations. Very few have done this and did it well. Companies like Lego and Patagonia have managed to. The Economist have managed to. And that’s where you truly enter into a two-way reciprocal relationship with your audience or public. And they become rooted in part of every area of your organization. And they’ve built some fantastic communities around the brand. Lego, its purpose is to encourage inspiration through play. And if you look at the brand, it’s created some fantastic crowd-sourcing sites to... Where people share ideas and product designs that they’ve built, and vote, and comment on those. That’s taking SM way beyond marketing into research and product development.”* (Expert 25, CEO).

**Storytelling** was identified as another technique leading to increasing customer interactivity with the company. The view was that message promotions that can convey meanings that resonate with the recipients’ needs and desires can favorably influence the receivers’ attitudes towards the company. The quote below illustrates the importance of storytelling to increase interactivity with its potential target.

*“We want to delight with interesting content, content that the people are engaged about, are interested in. Sometimes it’s just a refreshing drink made from water and how to get the recipe. Or how difficult it is – in some countries,*

*of course – to have clean/fresh water. We talk about the environment.”* (Expert 5, SM Manager).

Several informants also commented on the role that **social approval** plays to enhance interactivity. This phenomenon was described as people in SM responding to a message post because they want to be viewed as having associations with it, or they respond because many other people have already responded to it. For example, people like, comment on and/or share content not necessarily because they know much about it or have any background relations to it, but because they want to be viewed as having associations with it, as a CEO expressed:

*“Wanting to look smart. Being part of a crowd or community. Bragging, boasting, all these sorts of things. If you go and talk to the guys at The Economist, they will tell you that the main reason people retweet Economist articles is to look smart amongst their peers, not necessarily because they’ve read anything.”* (Expert 25, CEO)

People look for social approval in SM in several ways. This may include the number of likes, shares and comments a particular message promotion has received, as a digital marketing expert explains:

*“People are looking at social proof; they're looking at who's sharing it, who's liking it, the number of likes, the number of views.”* (Expert 14, Digital Marketer).

**Influence** by key individuals in SM is recognized as an additional means of increasing the interactivity effects between the brand, its followers and potential customers. Their participation can lead to favorably influencing the recipients’ attitudes and intentions. They were described as acutely interesting individuals that have established large communities in which they have compelling influence over its members, as one CEO stated:

*“Those are people that are highly interesting to brands because they’re influencers, you know...creating content across all sorts of different forms of media...And those are highly interesting individuals for brands to engage with*

*because they've built an audience, they've built a network, they've built community."* (Expert 25, CEO).

As such, SM influencers are growing in popularity because people perceive message promotions forwarded by them as more trustable than those directly communicated by the of the brand, as for instance expressed by a SMM manager.

#### **4.2. Credibility**

During the interviews, a number of experts displayed their disapproval towards businesses that tend to ignore, or place less emphasis on, the importance of credibility. Their views and experiences in working with SMM are that users want to know if an individual is a credible source to make a statement relating to a particular issue of interest, and whether s/he can be trusted to have expertise on the subject. The desire for effective use of SM as a marketing tool for reaching out to as many potential audiences as possible, turning them into potential buyers, followers, idea contributors and subsequently brand evangelists, was one of the key reasons behind the experts reasoning for placing high importance on the establishment of credibility in their message promotions. The data indicate that due to the increased incidence of consumers moving towards SM not only for communicating with friends and family, but also for communicating about brands, was seen as another reason for businesses wanting to build credibility. The experts revealed two source credibility sub-themes: (1) expertise; and (2) trustworthiness. Table 3 provides an overview of these factors including the strength of evidence and illustrative quotes.

<Insert Table 3>

Across the interviews, informants stressed that **expertise** knowledge of the brand that sends the SM messages increases credibility, as illustrated by an SM controller:

*"We need to be seen as experts; we need to be seen as good judges of what is content that people want to watch ..."* (Expert 20, SM Controller)

The quote above shows the need for expertise to ensure the recipient's confidence in the competency of the brand's message promotion claim. Source expertise emerged

within the data set as a major factor that influences consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions towards the brands.

Finally, informants argued that an additional component that increases credibility is the **trustworthiness** of the company. In the words of a CEO:

*“Ensuring that (...) you deliver on the promise that you say you’re going to... It’s human characteristics. That’s the thing about SM.”* (Expert 25, CEO)

### 4.3. Infotainment

The experts' views and experiences show that people in SM do value messages that present information that is relevant, useful, timely and valuable specifically to their needs, wants and desires. Moreover, if it is told in a fun, thoughtful and interesting manner, it can strengthen its effect on creating favorable user attitudes and intentions. Informants revealed two infotainment-related factors: (1) informativeness; and (2) entertainment. Table 4 provides an overview of the factors, including the strength of evidence and illustrative quotes.

<Insert Table 4>.

As illustrated below, SM users seek valuable **information**. They have less time for giving attention to the increasing number of mostly irrelevant message promotions published on their network timeline. This tendency has increased the desire for message promotions with information that is thorough, thoughtful, useful, relevant, timely, has the right length, and can be easily understood by the target customers. We find this in the following comment:

*“The content that I like is content that gives me valuable information. Valuable information in an interesting way that tells a story, the narrative that gives me enough value in the time that I can spend”.* (Expert 19, SM Marketer)

**Entertainment** emerged as another key facet within the data set that influences users' attitudes and intentions towards message promotions. The explanations were that in marketing, customers want to be connected emotionally rather than by facts. Thus,

creating message promotions that are perceived as entertaining, for example adding humor, being funny and amusing, were described as indispensable in creating positive customer emotions towards the message promotions, as a director explains:

*“Marketing is based on feeling, and your message has got to have something that makes people feel, rather than thinking facts. Funny, something that makes you laugh. It's all about the emotion. When you're scrolling through the feed it's something that just makes you stop and want to either click on it, so that might be the valuable thing, it might be something that makes you laugh which is funny.”* (Expert 19, SM Marketer).

## **5. DISCUSSION**

We now combine the aforementioned findings on interactive-related, credibility-related and infotainment-related themes derived from the qualitative analysis of the perceptions of the SM managers, with relevant extant literature to provide a synthesis that informs understanding of the factors influencing the effectiveness of SM messages. These are presented in line with the recognition that SM users' attitudes and intentions underlie the process that informs their decision making with regard to brands, which is further explained through the appropriate components of the staged hierarchy-of-effects model.

The findings indicate the importance of interactivity between the brand and SM users to develop positive attitudes and intentions towards the brand and, specifically, the role of community building to increase interactivity. Interactivity is defined in the literature as relational communication that takes place through SM platforms (Stromer-Galley, 2004). Interactivity enables users to co-create, consume and spread information with anyone without location and time boundaries (Kumar *et al.*, 2017). Online brand communities on SM platforms link users with shared interests and values (Fu, Ju, & Hsu, 2015) to share knowledge and information (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002; Wu, Chen, & Chung, 2010) thus increasing their interactivity. Furthermore, online communities are used by brands to collect relevant insights and knowledge relating to their business activities (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010). Thus interactivity through communities from shared information can lead to attitude change, cognitive involvement in the social media experience, and influence SM users' feelings (Ibrahim



*et al.*, 2017; Smith & Gallicano, 2015). SM experts also suggest that interactivity through convincing storytelling is an effective approach to influencing users' attitudes and intentions. Within the communication literature, studies posit that storytelling is important to labelling a product because stories communicate brand values and connectivity (Wachtman & Johnson, 2009). Rather than just presenting information in a plain message promotion, storytelling is focused on affecting the recipient's emotions and vitality (McKee, 2003; Woodside, 2010). This supports the findings of Delgado and Escalas, (2004) who identify that an advertisement that tells a story can strengthen positive feelings toward a brand and erase negative ones. Chang (2009) also identified that storytelling involving a brand has strong persuasive effects in informing consumer beliefs and brand attitudes. Additionally, results of our analysis of SM experts' thoughts, reveal that social approval can increase interactivity. Users seek social approval from their networks. Our findings concur with those of Smith and Gallicano (2015) who identify that users engage in SM, amongst other reasons, for approval purposes. Aligned with self-expression theory, individuals follow SM to spread information about who they are, and what they do and like, within their networks to convey and reaffirm their importance and values (Sedikides & Strube, 1995). Self-expressions also help individuals towards building an identity and consequently getting peer approval and reciprocating social care (Gao & Feng, 2016). This can relate in particular to brand consumption, where the brand is associated with status and fulfilment of self-expression and self-presentation, and supports them in fulfilling their own social status needs as well as conveying them to others (Shavitt, Lowrey & Han, 1992). In enabling them to portray a particular social image and achieve the required social status users are effecting a social-adjustive attitude toward a brand and intended behaviour around its purchase (Annie, 2012). Our analysis also revealed the impact of influencers on strengthening interactivity. Research on influencer marketing has shown that paid promotions prepared by influencers on Instagram exceeded engagement levels of those promotions prepared by the brands. For instance, JetBlue found that promotions made by influencers accumulated engagement by more than 100 times than those made by the brand itself. This is postulated to be the case for both for large and small brands. Likewise, a global survey of PR and marketing experts found influencer marketing to be effective in increasing their brand awareness with 87% showing influencer marketing leading to motivating sales (emarketing, 2017). Furthermore, message promotions forwarded through influencers can have a stronger

impact on users' attitudes and intentions than those communicated directly by brands (Iyengar, Bulte, & Valente, 2011).

Turning our attention to credibility-related factors, our findings highlight the role that source credibility plays in building effective SM messages and influencing users' attitudes towards the brand. Information provided by a credible source can influence consumers' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours (Wang, Kao, & Ngamsiriudom, 2017). Previous literature has found that a highly credible source is more effective at inducing persuasion, i.e., message acceptance, and or attitude change, than a low-credibility source (Powell, 1965), and credible sources are likely to create credible messages (Fragale & Heath, 2004). Credibility has been traditionally seen as the ability of speakers to persuade listeners (Rieh & Danielson, 2007). Within the persuasion and communication research domain, source credibility is defined as "judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator" (O'Keefe, 1990, p. 130-131). Source credibility is associated with enhancing positive consumer attitudes (Briñol, Petty, & Tormala, 2004), and a consequent increase in product purchase intentions (Harmon & Coney, 1982). SM managers identified expertise and trustworthiness as key aspects of source credibility. Previous research has seen these constructs as core dimensions of credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Expertise is conceptualised as the perceived ability of the source to know the truth and to make correct assertions, and SM users who are regarded as experts tend to be more persuasive (Aaker & Myers, 1987) and able to drive consumer behavioral intentions (Ohanian, 1990; 1991). Furthermore, Till and Busler (2000) identified that expertise has a positive influence on attitude and behavioral intentions, which is consistent with a further study by Bergkvist, Hjalmarson, and Mägi (2016) who reveal a positive association of source expertise and attitude toward the brand. Trustworthiness is conceptualized as the perceived motivation of the source to tell the truth (Kelman & Hovland, 1953; Metzger, 2003); to offer fair and sincere information (Berthon, Leyland, & Colin, 2008; Reinhard, Messner, & Sporer, 2006; Wang & Yang, 2010); and represents a SM user's believability, honesty, and dignity (Erdogan, 1999). It has been suggested that source trustworthiness depends on how the audience perceives the intention of the message communicator (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). Yet evidence indicates that perceived trustworthiness of SM users directly affects persuasive

processes that affect both attitudes and behaviour, and resultant insights can significantly influence brand SM communication strategies (Chu & Kamal, 2008).

Finally, focusing on the infotainment-related factors, findings revealed that if the message promotion is informative and entertaining, it is more likely to influence online users' attitudes towards the brands as they attract and keep the users' interest and attention. Previous literature has shown that SM users are more likely to read message promotions when they are informative and entertaining (Fu *et al.*, 2015), which in turn makes the messages more likely to influence online users. Informativeness refers to the capability of the message promotion to offer relevant and useful information with the aim to persuade consumers to accept the message promotion (Rotzoll, Haefner, & Sandage, 1989). Kuan-Yu and Hsi-Peng (2011) suggest that the need for information is one of the key factors steering customers to use and browse SM platform, which attracts consumers to contribute to SM platforms such as Facebook crowds. Further research by Taylor, Lewin, and Strutton (2011) and Taylor *et al.*, (2004) reveals that information that is perceived to be current and valuable, including that which offers advice, recommendations or knowledge, steers the users to create a positive attitude towards the message promotion. As a consequence, when users observe the informative value of a SM message, it suggests that they are going through the cognitive phase of processing the message content (Zhang & Mao, 2016). With regard to entertainment, researches have recognized that entertainment value influences consumer attitude towards advertisement (Jung, Min, & Kellaris, 2011) and SM messages (Fu *et al.*, 2015). For instance, academics frequently claim that products need to be entertaining to be communicated about (Hughes, 2005), as nobody talks about irksome products, irksome organizations or irksome messages (Sernovitz, 2006). In particular therefore the perceived entertainment value of the message will lead users into the affective step of message processing (Taylor *et al.*, 2011).

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

### **6.1. Theoretical Implications**

This study offers an in-depth understanding of the factors affecting the development of effective SM messages that can impact users' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward a brand. It contributes to the literature by identifying three core themes of influence on SM message effectiveness: interactivity, credibility, and infotainment. In

addition, the results revealed a number of interactivity-related sub-themes (community building, storytelling, social approval, and influencers); credibility-related sub-themes (expertise and trustworthiness); and infotainment-related sub-themes (informativeness and entertainment). This research adopted a qualitative research technique and conducted in-depth interviews to explore in detail the subject under investigation. To our knowledge, studies relating to SMM and the effectiveness of SM use have focused on quantitative surveys (Alves *et al.*, 2016; Godey *et al.*, 2016; Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas, 2014; Zhang & Mao, 2016), experiments (Adjei *et al.*, 2010; Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012; Rapp *et al.*, 2013), and/or collected and analysed (sales) data from an organisation's information documents (Kumar *et al.*, 2017). In order to comprehend customers' SM behaviors, this study is one of the very few studies to have undertaken in-depth interviews with SMM experts (Alves *et al.*, 2016). The insights provided contribute to a set of influences on SM as a marketing communications activity that cut across different market sectors and organizational type, thus providing a strong base for developing deep knowledge of its effectiveness. Further, the research presented here utilizes attitude and hierarchy-of-effects theory as a platform for understanding how the identified factors influence users in their behavioral intention/purchase decisions. The relationship between the determinants of SM message effectiveness at their different levels and the components of the hierarchy-of-effects model are illustrated in Figure 2.

<Insert Figure 2>

## **6. 2. Managerial Implications**

In order to develop effective SM messages, this study provides new and effective concepts, experiences and strategies that SM managers need to embrace, replicate and evaluate when constructing SM messages. The three identified themes of interactivity, infotainment and credibility are proposed to have a significant impact on marketing through SM. These are factors that SM managers can control and improve, and subsequently create effective SM messages that can favourably influence user's attitudes and behavioural intentions.

With the increasing popularity of SMM amongst business, it is important that managers avoid straining user's cognitive ability with having to digest abundant and mostly

irrelevant messages from all directions in the limited time available to them. In other words, as SM is becoming increasingly crowded with advertising messages, SM managers must invest resources in their current and potential customers, followers and users through building brand communities that help them enjoy and feel good about their membership, so that they do not perceive themselves as mere buyers. Therefore, managers need to invest in follower and user relationship development to retain a strong degree of experience and expertise to develop trust and to strengthen relationship gratification and value. This means managers need to take into consideration factors such as timing, length, frequency and simplicity of their messages in order to reach the target customers at an appropriate time. Furthermore, when interacting, various other factors involving storytelling, the use of influencer marketing, social approval, and entertainment techniques need to be taken into consideration to strengthen the effectiveness of the message. Likewise, users also need to be encouraged to share their product experiences and to participate in a company's product research and development discussions and to better understand how customer's attitudes and behaviours evolve towards SMM.

### **6. 3. Limitations and Future Research**

While this research enables us to gain a thorough understanding of the topic, it has some limitations. The purposive sampling technique used in this project is not representative of all SM experts and thus, limits the generalization of the results. Furthermore, this study is limited in its approach as it adopts the viewpoint of SM experts. Therefore, as an avenue for further research, the perspectives of other stakeholders, including SM users, could be investigated as it would further enhance the understanding of the subject. Future research could also empirically test the determinants of the effectiveness of SM messages against different companies and product industries through large-scale surveys with online users in different international markets. Moreover, quantitative research could more accurately assess the relative importance of the three core themes and their constituent sub-themes on user brand-related behaviour such as purchasing, information seeking, and recommendation. Such investigations could utilize the findings of this study regarding how attitudes and the attitudinal components of the hierarchy-of-effects model can facilitate behaviour amongst SM users.

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**Table 1: Profile of informants**

Informants	Informant's Role	Nature of Business	Experience	Year Founded	Industry	Annual Income of Organization (2016)	Number of Employees
1	Managing Director (Owner)	Management Consultancy	13 Years	2003	Advertising	\$263	2
2	Digital Marketing Manager	Research Institution	10 Years	1862	Education	\$309 million	2900
3	SM Manager	Research Institution	10 Years	1862	Education	\$309 million	2900
4	SM Producer	IT-Focused Content Distributor	12 Years	2008	IT	\$88,000	1
5	SM Manager	Faucet Design and Distribution	5 Years	1911	Plumbing	\$397 million	1420
6	Head of SM Manager	Hotels	12 Years	1991	Tourism	\$8.77 billions	1150
7	Digital Marketing Manager	Sanitary Fittings (Manufacturer)	5 Years	1945	Plumbing	\$352 million	1370
8	SM Consultant	SM Agency	8 Years	2009	Advertising	\$1521	2
9	SM Consultant (Director)	SM Agency	6 Years	2012	Advertising	\$500000	10+
10	Managing Director (Owner)	Marketing Agency	5 Years	2009	Advertising	\$42233	4
11	SM Manager	Marketing Agency	4 Years	2009	Advertising	\$42233	4
12	Digital Insight Manager	Market Research	7 Years	2009	Advertising	\$2.6 million	15
13	Community Manager	SM Agency	1.5 Years	2005	Advertising	\$37 million	300+
14	Digital Marketer	Digital Marketing	28 Years	2005	Education	\$50000	2
15	SM Manager	SM Agency	8 Years	2001	Advertising	\$207	2-10
16	SM Influencer	Service (Solution provider)	6 Years	1987	Technology	\$75 billions	180000
17	Deputy Head of Communication	Communications Department	7 Years	1948	Health	\$135 billion	1400000
18	SM Manager	Non-alcoholic Beverages	4.5 Years	1886	Beverage	\$42 billion	100300
19	SM Marketer	SM Agency	27 Years	2010	Advertising	Unpublished	2-10
20	SM Controller	Media Corporation (TV)	2 Years	1990	Media	\$16 billion	30000
21	Marketing Director	SM Agency	2 Years	2016	Advertising	\$13	2
22	Principal Channel Consultant	Inbound Marketing and Sales	3 Years	2005	Software	\$271 million	1777
23	Digital Marketing Manager	Aesthetic Dermatology	3.5 Years	1971	Health	\$51 million	51-200
24	Managing Director	SM & SEO Agency	30 Years	2008	Advertising	\$13	4
25	Chief Engagement Officer	SM & PR Agency	13 Years	1923	Advertising	\$500 million	978

**Table 2. Interactivity-Related Factors**

Interactivity sub-themes	Strength of evidence	Illustrative quotes
Community building	Strong (65%)	<i>“We’re trying to increase engagement, we’re trying to ensure that they’re leaving comments, that they’re asking us about the products and that’s a big part of what goes on behind the scenes for our community management”</i> (Expert 23, Digital Marketing Manager)
Storytelling	Moderate (36%)	<i>“We try to create stories that people can relate to, about the things that are related to our products, like, the hygiene factors or water saving topics. For example, if you are having a bad day at work, you can have a relaxing moment in the shower, we’re sharing in the company blog to our customers. These type of stories are not created from our heads. They are normally studies or test results that we can prove they are right.”</i> (Expert 7, Digital Marketing Manager)
Social approval	Strong (64%)	<i>“A lot of people have that sense of what picture am I forming of myself online by the sort of activities I then do. So certainly for perspective employers, if you are thinking, well if somebody would look me up what would they find on my profile on Twitter, LinkedIn and various things, would they get a good rounded picture of me from that. I think a lot of people have perhaps...like a sense of what picture do I want to portray of myself online that may affect how they respond or interact with different people.”</i> (Expert 2, Digital Marketing Manager)
Influence	Moderate (52%)	<i>“I work with lawyers, accountants, CEOs, executives, and teaching them how to lift their profile and build their influence online or become a thought leader in a specific industry. Working with small business, medium business and then with the bigger brands, that’s more on an influencer marketing level, that’s where I work as a brand ambassador or just spreading the word for them using, through my channels to my audience.”</i> (Expert 16, SM Influencer)

Note: Strong: indicated by the majority of informants; moderate: indicated by several informants.

**Table 3. Credibility-Related Factors**

Credibility sub-themes	Strength of evidence	Illustrative quotes
Expertise	Moderate (48%)	<p><i>“Credibility is what it's all about. I think you've got to show expertise, knowledge, experience and why should people trust you? Are you the best-selling product in Brisbane? Are you the best known on social media topics? And it's got to shine through in your work. People have got to be able to find you and look and see, okay, what has this person or what has this business done?”</i> (Expert 16, SM Influencer)</p>
Trustworthiness	Strong (64%)	<p><i>“If you get reach and awareness that again doesn't necessarily guarantee that you will build a genuine organic relationship with that person or that audience...Ultimately, that boils down to your message, your content, your trustworthiness...Those are things that I'd say still largely speaking today, you can't buy those things... Some core authenticity and trust to what you are doing that you will gain more value from social media.”</i> (Expert 24, Managing Director)</p>

Note: Strong: indicated by the majority of informants; moderate: indicated by several informants.

**Table 4. Infotainment-Related Factors**

Infotainment sub-themes	Strength of evidence	Illustrative quotes
Informativeness	Strong (72%)	<p><i>“I try to provide them information that would be valuable in their jobs and in doing so they would follow me and that way we create a community approach, so I get to provide a service to them through my insights and repurposing of other information I think is interesting and valuable and in doing so I develop a following. I cover enterprise information technology infrastructure subjects and people who follow me want to learn more and keep up to date on those topics. So it's really about sharing information that's timely and relevant.”</i> (Expert 4, SM Producer)</p>
Entertainment	Strong (64%)	<p><i>“The thing that people like most is a little bit of humor... If you can find a bit of a more personable touch for these messages and add in a little bit of humor, I think it makes it resonate much more with them, and they're far more likely to actually engage with you. So yes, humor is very important. I think if people know that an account is funny, they're going to tell their friends about it.”</i> (Expert 18, SM Manager)</p>

Note: Strong: indicated by the majority of informants; moderate: indicated by several informants



**Figure 1. Summary of Findings**



