

Investigating the Impact of the Social Media Branding on Purchase Intention in the African Context

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ABSTRACT

Start-ups play an important role in providing job opportunities and promoting economic development. Social media enables start-ups to reach customers at a more affordable cost than traditional channels. The present study aims to explore the possibility of using social media for African start-ups as a marketing and branding tool and to investigate the effects of social media branding on African consumers' purchase behaviours. Multiple studies were conducted. First, two case studies of African start-ups were made to obtain feasible business models of social media branding. Then, a qualitative pilot study was conducted to explore the consensus map of social media branding from the consumers' perspective. Finally, a model was established and verified by employing a quantitative approach. Six constructs of trust, interaction, social support, information sharing, brand relationship, and brand engagement are identified. Among them, trust plays a crucial role in the context of African markets. By using SEM testing, the present study reveals that brand relationship and brand engagement act as mediators between social media branding factors and consumers' purchase intentions. In Africa, the idea of branding via social media is appealing for start-ups due to the emergence and growth of various social media platforms. The present study provides an overall view of social media branding for African start-ups, including business models, consumer engagement, and consumer experience. The insights and suggestions will be beneficial for African start-ups and will contribute to the African business literature.

Keywords: Social media branding, African consumer, Trust, Social support, Interaction, Information sharing, Brand engagement, Brand relationship.

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Highlights of this paper:

- Social media enables African start-ups to reach customers at a more affordable cost.
- For African consumers, trust, interaction, social support, information sharing, brand relationship, and brand engagement are explored and verified to associated with their purchase intention.
- The findings will be beneficial for African start-ups to promote business opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has reshaped the lifestyle of consumers as well as the business activities of organisations over the past decades (Goel & Donaldson, 2021; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021). In the branding and marketing literature, there is a dichotomy in the view of the effect of social media branding (SMB). On the one hand, social media is supposed to be an efficient tool for brands to stimulate storytelling (Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2018), build a connection with users, foster a sense of belonging (Yan, 2011), and co-create values to increase the loyalty of users (Khajeheian & Ebrahimi, 2020; Pan, Ming, Kim, & Yang, 2022). Many studies have confirmed that social media has a great influence on consumers' purchase behaviours (Chung, Anaza, Park, & AdrienneHall-Phillips, 2016; Muhammad, Dey, Kamal, & Alwi, 2021). Social media's ability to create interaction and engagement is a powerful way to create long-term relationships with consumers and brands (Van Noort, Voorveld, & Van Reijmersdal, 2012; Yang, Tao, Tu, Liu, & Li, 2021). Furthermore, social media presence has been shown to increase brand recognition (McClure & Seock, 2020; Wood, 2009). But on the other hand, social media may have made brands less significant because of the crowdcultures. Holt (2016) explained that a brand sets itself apart by promoting a new ideology that springs from the crowd. Likely, Kohli, Suri, and Kapoor (2015) argued that social media can drastically alter consumers' behaviour and their brand preferences.

Start-ups are small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) linked with the development of innovative ideas and potential marketing capabilities, playing an important role in providing job opportunities, promoting economic development, and encouraging social relationships both in developed and developing countries (Carlino & Drautzburg, 2020; David-West, Umukoro, & Onuoha, 2018). Different from the traditional and famous brands, start-ups tend to promote their brands and products to more audience rather than make their brands distinctive personalities (Koster & van Stel, 2014; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Social media branding enables start-ups to acquire such capabilities at a more affordable cost and create awareness to remain competitive (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Du et al., 2022).

According to Harris and Rae (2011), a brand symbolizes all of the characteristics related to the products or services of a business. Social media is recognised as the key mechanism that allows for a broad reach of one's personal brand (Gómez, Lopez, & Molina, 2019; Jacobson, 2020). Individuals with a popular personal branding on Instagram improve the conventional hierarchy of popularity by using traditional celebrities to attract their audience (Marwick, 2013). However, controlling one's personal brand is a responsibility that each individual bears in his or her own way (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). Deckers and Lacy (2017) demonstrated five basic rules to create a personal brand: passion, telling a story, speaking about oneself, building relationships, and taking actions, including organising and acting on a daily basis for the purpose of enhancing the brand image. Tarnovskaya (2017) presented three major components of personal branding: brand image, brand strategy, and brand identity. Social commerce has been conceptualised to capture the nature of business activities via social media or social networking sites (SNSs) (Curty & Zhang, 2013). WeChat, one of the most popular social media platforms in China is known for chatting, calling, money transfer, as well as payment functionality. People in China use it to advertise items and services (Liu, Perry, & Gadzinski, 2019; Yan, Jin, & Liu, 2018). Globalization has aided development in Africa, assisting in the improvement of the economic factors in various African countries. Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Rwanda are

just a few examples of countries with emerging economies (Frick & Rodríguez-Pose, 2022). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become increasingly popular in Africa. The widespread use of the Internet and social media has significantly altered almost every aspect of life in African countries (Bianchi, Andrews, Wiese, & Fazal-E-Hasan, 2017). Although social media has been used to provide brands to conduct social commerce and transform traditional commerce into electronic commerce in the developed countries (Dinulescu & Prybutok, 2021), African companies face many difficulties, such as poor infrastructure, high regime taxes, and insufficient legal system support, to facilitate social media branding (Tengeh & Nkem, 2017). Meanwhile, African start-ups are generally faced with the challenges of lack of initial funds and resources (Atiku, Jeremiah, & Boateng, 2020; Coetzee, 2019). Although many studies in the literature address the significantly positive effect of social media branding on business and marketing applications (Dwivedi, Johnson, Wilkie, & De Araujo-Gil, 2019; Simon & Tossan, 2018), few empirical studies have been conducted in the context of African consumers. On the other hand, African start-ups also know little about how to promote their products and brands on social media. Furthermore, the traditionally African companies also need to know the principles of coping with a younger generation that is growing up with social media. Why do African consumers engage in social media branding? Is it different from that in the developed countries? The present study aims to explore the possibility of social media for African start-ups as a marketing and communication tool and investigate the effects of social media branding on African consumers' purchase behaviours. In order to achieve these objectives, three parts of studies were conducted. To achieve these objectives, some studies were conducted. First, two cases of African start-ups were investigated to obtain the feasible business models of social media branding. Then, a qualitative pilot study was conducted to explore the consensus map of social media branding from the consumers' perspective. Finally, a model was established and verified by employing a quantitative approach. The insights and suggestions from the analysis results will be beneficial for African start-ups.

2. TWO CASES

First of all, the present study surveyed two African start-ups growing small businesses via social media. B2M Mall is a drop-shipping retailer founded in 2016 by an African student resident in China. It doesn't stock and own inventory. Instead, it purchases inventory as needed from third-party manufacturers to fulfil orders. "Keeping inventory may be a bit risky if nobody buys it. So, many foreigners in China start drop-shipping on WeChat," the founder explained. The B2M business model Figure 1 may be useful for African start-ups who want to start a business on social media. (1) The supplier and B2M Mall make a business agreement on advertising, shipping and prices. (2) The B2M Mall advertises items on WeChat. (3) A customer can view item descriptions, images, and videos on B2M Mall's WeChat pages Figure 2. (4) A customer can place an order on WeChat with his or her delivery address. (5) The B2M Mall will accept the order and forward the delivery address to the supplier, if the supplier acknowledges that the item is available. (6) Finally, the supplier will fulfil the order and deliver the item to the customer.

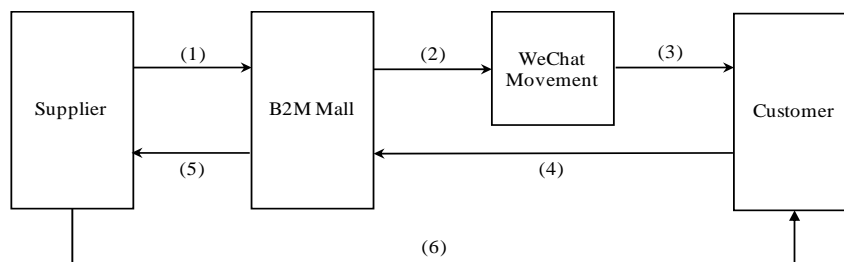


Figure 1. The business model of the B2M Mall start-up.

“When I started this business, it was not a very popular market, especially among foreigners. Foreigners living in China often used Taobao (one of the largest C2C e-commerce platforms in China). Some of them were worried about being cheated. Usually, a person buys an item online; when it arrives, it doesn’t look like it is displayed online,” the founder stated. “At the time, I saw the opportunity. Foreigners might feel better dealing with an intermediary they could relate to than with a supplier they didn’t know.”

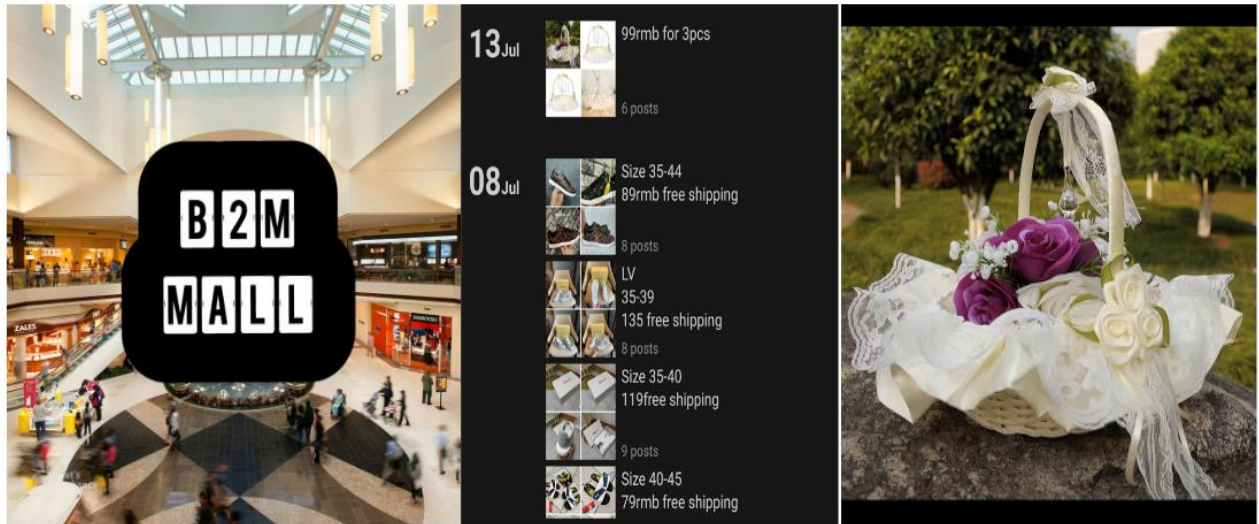


Figure 2. Pages of B2M Mall on WeChat.

For example, some suppliers may be too busy to ship the item on time. Some customers may feel cheated if they do not receive a tracking code after two or three days because of the supplier’s negligence. Sometimes, items are lost. The start-up has to confront and solve all these problems. It is both a challenge and an opportunity. The B2M Mall knows whether the supplier is reliable or not and can even find an alternative supplier that can offer the same item. In addition, the start-up keeps customers apprised of what is happening if there is an issue with delivery or quality, rather than just going quiet without explaining the problem to the customer.

The start-up designed its logo (shown in Figure 2) because the founder thought “the logo is a selling point, a way of getting known or creating awareness.” Many African start-ups face the challenge of insufficient capital. Drop-shipping is an excellent way to start a business without worrying about initial lay-out costs for inventory. “Using WeChat makes it easier for customers to browse item pages at any time, especially on the date advertised. WeChat enables customers to comment, like and share on the item pages, making it easier to promote them,” the founder added. WeChat is a powerful tool as well as a low-cost solution to operate a business with foreigners living in China as a customer base, including branding, communicating, problem-solving, socialising, and even handling payment.

Another case is a start-up named China-TZ Orders, founded by an international student in 2019. Although online shopping is very infrequent in his country, the founder saw an opportunity and started his business on WhatsApp, advertising items found on Alibaba, Taobao, and other platforms to people in his country who might be interested in them. The items were of good quality and quite affordable. Most African countries do not have online platforms or cross-border applications where people can order items from supplying countries such as China. However, African customers use Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook. The founder employed WhatsApp Groups for marketing. Figure 3 demonstrates the business model of the China-TZ Orders start-up.

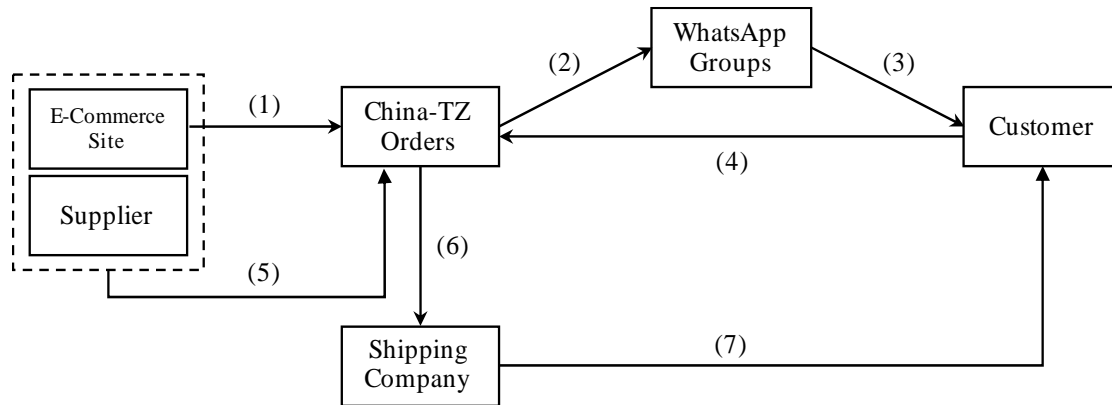


Figure 3. The business model of the China-TZ Orders start-up.

(1) The company finds items online from e-commerce platforms such as Taobao, Pingdoudou, or Alibaba. (2) The company advertises or posts the items’ descriptions and images on WhatsApp Groups (shown in Figure 4). (3) Customers can place an order by sending the item information to the company. (4) The company will process the order by purchasing the item from the supplier. (5) The supplier will process the order and send the item to the company. (6) After checking the quality of the item, the company will send the item to a shipping company. (7) Finally, the shipping company will deliver the item to customers living in African countries.



Figure 4. Pages of China-TZ Orders on WhatsApp.

“Most of the time, I use WhatsApp. I do most of my business on WhatsApp. I have my customers on WhatsApp. Since WhatsApp doesn’t have a payment method, customers usually use Momo Pay, a popular payment platform in Africa,” the founder stated. “Firstly, the challenge is trust because some customers may feel unsafe in a new purchasing experience. To build trust, I need to be honest with customers and tell them what is happening to make them feel safe.”

In summary, these two African start-ups take advantage of social media to promote their business. The B2M Mall targets foreigners in China, while the China-TZ Orders targets customers living in Africa. A start-up can establish a good business foundation and reputation by promoting other companies’ products. After becoming a famous influencer on social media, proprietors can create their own product line because they have many followers who trust them. African start-ups leverage social media branding in a practical way to start business.

3. THE PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted by employing in-depth interviews to explore the attitudinal and behavioural consensuses of African consumers on social media branding. Ten informants were recruited (coded with prefix SCBR-). The interviews occurred over approximately one week starting from 18 Dec, 2021 to 26 Dec, 2021. Approximately six informants were invited to face-to-face interviews, while four other informants were interviewed via phone calls due to the mobility restrictions of COVID-19. The informants come from several African countries, including Rwanda, Zambia, Tanzania, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Botswana. All the informants were once the customers of the two start-ups above. They are a younger generation in Africa who are used to social media. The top five social media platforms they use are Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, WeChat, and Twitter.

The cumulative duration of audio records was approximately 320 minutes, which was transcribed into more than 10,500 words. By employing a qualitative approach, seven constructs were identified, and a consensus map showed connections and links between the obtained constructs [Figure 5](#). The consensus map captured approximately 80% of the constructs.

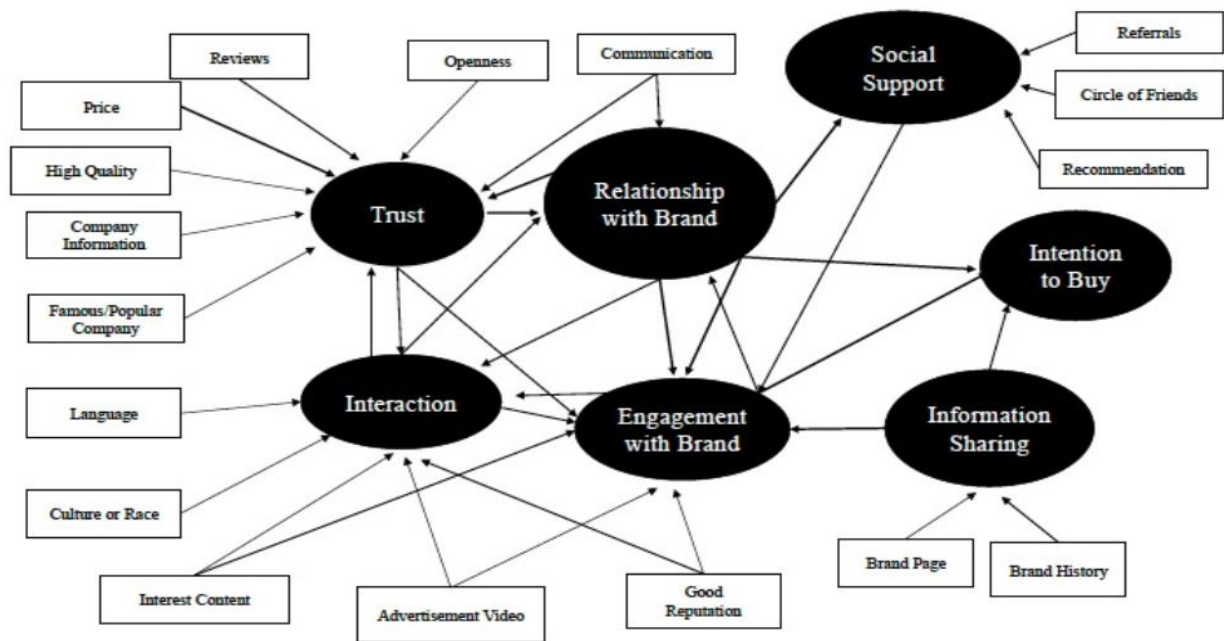


Figure 5. The consensus map.

3.1. Trust

Trust is the main factor influencing purchase intention. Trust cannot just happen but must be built early, developed, and consistently proven. One informant stated, “the best thing a company brand can do is prove they’re trustworthy before they approach someone” (SCBR-4). Another informant emphasised that, “the quality of the brand and the quality of the product are everything” (SCBR-2). Furthermore, “if a company homepage has information including email address, location, contact number, and services they’re providing or products they’re selling, all these factors can make me trust the brand and share my personal information with them” (SCBR-1). Another interviewee reported, “The company should give me a chance to refund a product. For example, if I order a shoe in the wrong size, will they be able to refund that shoe at no cost? There are some of the things I’m looking for a brand to improve on” (SCBR-7).

Consumer trust is necessary for self-branding start-ups, especially in Africa. Many African consumers are skeptical of online transactions and abandon their purchase plans. One informant stated, “in Tanzania, if people trust

you, they will share your social media account with their friends. But if you are not trustworthy, they will not share it with anyone” (SCBR-3). Finally, a brand should always keep its promises to customers during development, production, sales activity, service preparation, marketing activity, and even during product crises. One informant said, “they should give me the same thing I ordered, not a different product, because trust is everything in business, and brands should be honest and should keep their promise” (SCBR-7). Hence, the brand image leverages the ability of the company to maintain a long-term cooperative relationship with customers.

3.2. Interaction

Constant interactions on brand pages are deemed crucial for commercial success. For starters, regular involvement on a brand page promotes tighter consumer ties and may stimulate a more frequent sharing of product information and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). One informant stated, “A brand should post about the current trends on Twitter. Their post shouldn’t just associate with their business or what they sell. I think they should try a variety of things to increase their brand presence or awareness” (SCBR-9). In addition, the company feels that interacting with customers on company pages in a close, consistent, and continuous manner may result in more information about existing demand and allow them improve their business performance and brand.

3.3. Information Sharing

Social media encourages consumers to share their shopping experience and product information with their friends. “I like sharing the brands I’m interested in with my friends because it’s something that my friends like” (SCBR-9). Similarly, “I am more than happy to share because, in general, I believe in working with a recommendation. Therefore, if my friends work well with a specific brand, they can recommend it to me as well. If nobody complains about being scammed or that a particular brand is terrible, why not share a good brand?” (SCBR-7).

Forums and communities, comments and likes, ratings and reviews, and referrals and recommendations are all features of how social media supports information sharing and social support. One informant stated, “I usually prefer recommendations from someone who has used the brand before. I also read reviews, but I am more convinced about referrals” (SCBR-8). Similarly, “I often share my interest in brands like Adidas because it has high-quality sports clothes and is well-known worldwide. Everybody who likes sport like me is interested in Adidas” (SCBR-1). As a result, sharing information is a fundamental component of social media branding, assisting customers in purchase decision-making.

3.4. Relationship with Brand

Consumers with a high degree of commitment are more likely to devote themselves to a brand that creates long-term relationship stability. One informant said, “If the company I like is trying to keep in touch with me every day on my social media, I will be interested in their new products. And also, I will trust them because I am receiving new updates from them. The brands should use good advertisement videos which will help gain more awareness about the products” (SCBR-3). “If I experience bad service, I complain on the brand platform. If I got feedback, I would be happy with them. I will feel like one part of the brand because they considered me important even though I am a single consumer. I will be able to communicate with them and share my experience with others openly” (SCBR-5).

Furthermore, one informant stated, “feedback, fast response and interaction will create a good relationship with the customer” (SCBR-8). “They can improve their relationship with me if they are offering the right services. Some of their posts should not be misleading or overly ambitious” (SCBR-10). Hence, a successful social commerce business

model should include ways to improve relationship quality to encourage online consumers to participate in community branding.

3.5. Engagement with Brand

Consumer engagement with brands refers to how consumers use, share, and discuss content linked to a brand. Brands are currently attempting to manage various activities, ranging from identity building and establishing digital tools to customer service in social media marketing. One informant articulated, “the brand should improve in engaging with customers. For example, when a brand makes an advertisement, it should include the prices on the advertisement post. The customers’ feeling about the brand should be taken into consideration” (SCBR-10). “I like it more when the brands bring comfort to every race, advertise it, and respect every race” (SCBR-5).

3.6. Social Support

Social support can provide an individual with feelings of warmth and compassion. It can also be thought of as the ability to promptly respond to another’s emotional needs. Social support, which may be considered as a form of enthusiastic feedback, can make a person feel better even if the support does not directly assist the person in solving the problem. One informant argued, “in my country people are willing to support local brands if they’re satisfied with the product quality and services. I am very happy to support local home brands and to encourage other people to use that brand” (SCBR-7). “In Africa, people are still learning and adjusting how to solve the problems of e-commerce. People are still trying to build trust towards technological advancement” (SCBR-6). In addition, “for me, if I like a particular brand, I will try to share it with my friends. By doing so, I feel happy that I am helping the company to reach more customers and grow” (SCBR-9).

3.7. The Context of Africa

Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are widely used in most African countries, which is a huge benefit for start-ups that use social media in marketing. One informant reported, “I would not say I like WhatsApp for business. However, a large number of people in my country, Rwanda, approximately 90%, are using smartphones. This is an opportunity for SMEs to increase their brand awareness by using this most useful tool for social media” (SCBR-1). Another stated, “Language is the biggest barrier we have in my country, Uganda, because not everybody can understand the language used on social media apps” (SCBR-7).

After COVID-19, the social media business has been booming because people cannot travel or go out shopping. “In Tanzania, the use of social media for business purposes has just started recently because people have started to adopt innovative technology” (SCBR-3). “In Zimbabwe, start-ups have realised social media is less costly than TV advertisements” (SCBR-6). However, there are many infrastructure challenges, such as payment system and delivery system. To assist start-ups, the next section will establish and verify the social media branding model in the African context.

4. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The qualitative pilot study explored a basic and general summation of the model. To test and verify the constructs and causal relationships in the context of Africa, the structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed in the following sections.

4.1. Trust and Brand Relationship

Trust is described as a willingness to rely on a person you trust (Moorman & Deshpande, 1993). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) defined trust as customers' willingness to trust a brand's ability to fulfil what stated. However, commitment is defined as a consumer's intention to maintain a relationship with a retailer. Most business and social interactions increase trust, which is especially important in an online environment where there is a great deal of uncertainty.

In social media branding, there are two sorts of trust: benevolence and believability. This is in contrast to charity, which refers to the belief that the other party in a transaction is trustworthy and honest. Trust was the construct mentioned most often by informants from different African countries in the pilot study. Becerra and Korgaonkar (2011) discovered that trust is related to the quality of the Internet environment and that trust can increase a person's propensity to purchase online. People rely on one another to build and maintain their connections, especially African consumers. When people have faith in one another, they are more inclined to cooperate and share knowledge (Razak, Pangil, Zin, Yunus, & Asnawi, 2016). The ability to place trust in social media has been demonstrated to influence users' intentions to engage in online shopping activities (Singh & Srivastava, 2018). Consumers show trust by agreeing to be susceptible to the online seller and continuing the purchase process, which is reflected in an enhanced likelihood of making a purchase.

Furthermore, Guenzi and Pelloni (2004) suggested that trust is vital in online contexts for economic and interpersonal connections. Pavlou (2003) argued that trust is essential in most social and financial transactions. It has been examined in social commerce settings that trust influences various behavioural outcomes (Nadeem, Juntunen, & Juntunen, 2017). As a result, the hypothesis was assumed as follows:

H1. Trust will positively influence brand relationship.

4.2. Interaction and Brand Relationship

Social media interactivity is an essential factor in determining how customers will respond (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007). A type of interaction is the extent to which social media facilitates an environment for consumers to share information and engage with other consumers in real time. Furthermore, interactivity has been defined as the qualities of two-way communication that never ceases to exist between two parties, namely, the buyer and the seller.

France, Merrilees, and Miller (2016) distinguished two types of brand interactivity on social media: the facilitation of consumer-brand relationships and the technological facilitation of consumer-brand interactions. The former is concerned with consumers' overall assessment of whether brands are prepared to listen to what they have to say. About the latter, it is determined whether the brand's online interactive elements provide an effective and straightforward means for direct, bilateral communications between the brand and customers.

When brands provide consumers with useful information and services that are tailored to their preferences, this has a favourable impact on consumers' views of their benefits, hence increasing their affection for the brand (Schulze, Scho'ler, & Skiera, 2015). Harrigan, Evers, Miles, and Daly (2017) identified that if a brand strengthens the cognitive experience and love of its customers, consumers are more ready to choose the focal brand as their first choice.

In recent years, studies on relationship marketing have concentrated on establishing true partnerships between customers and service suppliers. The higher the quality of a relationship built, the more favourable the interaction with the consumer will be, which can help develop brand loyalty (Frasquet-Deltoro, Del-Carmen Alarcon-del Amo, & Lorenzo-Romero, 2019; Khamitov, Wang, & Thomson, 2019). Consumer familiarity with brand-related interactive content on social media platforms increases consumer-brand relationships, resulting in improved cognitive awareness of product attributes and brand privileges (Nairn & Spotswood, 2015). As a result, customers are more likely to

engage or interact in information sharing with their favourite companies and other like-minded users on social media platforms when they perceive the ease of using the brand's interactive features (Frasquet-Deltoro et al., 2019). Hence, we hypothesise the following:

H2. Interaction will positively influence brand relationship.

4.3. Social Support and Brand Engagement

Social support refers to consumers' experience of being cared for, receiving responses, and receiving assistance from people in their social network (Hajli, 2014). It is possible to receive informational and emotional support, and consumers can influence and assist one another in product evaluation and purchase decision-making (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). As long as a platform has built-in social support, it will be natural for members to exchange information and recommendations with others who need assistance (Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011).

Previous research has demonstrated that social support facilitates the development of intimate relationships among users and enhances users' well-being in organisations (Obst & Stafurik, 2010). On social media, when consumers receive useful product information, they regard others as helpful, leading to a positive perception of those who share it. In turn, the consumer being cared for will be more willing to share valuable shopping information with others in the future (Fan, Qian, & Huang, 2012). Friendship and trust between consumers can be strengthened by the regular exchange of helpful information, which may, in turn, improve the likelihood that they will engage in commercial activities (Liang et al., 2011).

Additionally, consumers' interactions with others are influenced by social support, including informational and emotional assistance (Phang, Kankanhalli, & Sabherwal, 2009). Consumer participation in social commerce sites is boosted by social support, making it easier to maintain strong relationships with others (Liang et al., 2011). Social support serves as a foundation upon which improved credibility can be achieved and higher rates of consumer participation can be expected (Hajli, 2018). Thus, we hypothesise the following:

H3. Social support will positively influence brand engagement.

4.4. Information Sharing and Brand Engagement

Social media makes it easier to share information among companies and consumers. Customer engagement has increased due to the function of information sharing on social media (Osatuyi, 2013). Using their social networking presence, many online businesses can deliver interactive information to their consumers (Phelan, Chen, & Haney, 2013). Social media platforms encourage users to share their positive experiences, resulting in consumers' purchase intention (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Information sharing can take several forms in regard to product, service, or the platform itself (Ma, Lee, & Goh, 2014). A study indicated that brand-related information sharing was associated with positive consumer experiences. Collectivist customers were more likely to engage in information-sharing activities. For example, if someone feels good about themselves after assisting another, they are more likely to give information online without expecting any immediate incentives in return (Lyu & Zhang, 2017). According to Wasko and Faraj (2005), individuals are organically motivated to share information with others because it is something they intrinsically like doing.

Osatuyi (2013) studied information sharing and discovered that information sharing could increase user engagement. According to the findings of Grace, Ross, and Shao (2015), users are more likely to utilise social networking sites since they allow them to share their information with other users. Consequently, considering the strong association between information sharing and engagement on the social media and in the social commerce context, we hypothesise the following:

H4. Information sharing will positively influence brand engagement.

4.5. Brand Relationship and Purchase Intention

According to the definition of brand relationship, only when consumers have been pleasant during they encounter with the brand previously, they will be anticipated to be a high-quality consumer-seller connection during their future interactions with the brand (Jaiswal, Niraj, Park, & Agarwal, 2018). A healthy relationship can only be established when buyers are satisfied with their purchase and have faith in the brand's ability to fulfil their obligations. To better understand the importance of brand relationships in social media, Liang et al. (2011) used a relationship marketing lens to examine the brand relationships of online consumers. They discovered that good consumer-brand relationships had a favourable impact on consumer purchase intention. In a similar vein, Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang, and Mallin (2013) revealed the positive effects of brand relationships on consumers' intention to continue advocating for a brand on social media. In forums and communities, people are eager to engage and contribute by sharing their own experiences and information and offering advice and recommendations to other members. The trust, satisfaction, and dedication they perceive in the community will be strong (Hajli, 2014). Brand-related marketing theories have demonstrated the impact of brand relationships in the social media context (Carlson, Wyllie, Rahman, & Voola, 2019; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). These findings have shown that brand relationships have an impact on the likelihood of consumers recommending brands to others and that they intend to continue using SNSs and brands in the future (Swani & Labrecque, 2020). Alternatively, it may be said that any successful business strategy built on social commerce should consider how best to improve the quality of relationships with online consumers, so that they are encouraged to participate in community branding, which supports the following hypothesis:

H5. Brand relationship will positively influence purchase intention.

4.6. Brand Engagement and Purchase Intention

Customers' interactive, co-creative contacts with a specific entity, such as a brand, product, or organisation, are described as developing a psychological framework known as brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011). Engaged consumers exhibit certain cognitive and affective behaviours when they interact with a brand. Cognitive brand activities include consumers' concentration on a product or service. Affective brand activities include consumers' feelings of inspiration or pride associated with a product or service (De Vries, Peluso, Romani, Leeflang, & Marcati, 2017).

Social media interaction has emerged as a critical component of both marketing and sales efforts. The primary assumption of brands that use social media is that users adapt and contribute to the material and engage with the brand regularly (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014), which, as a result, leads to the expectation that the more social media interaction there is with a brand, the greater the likelihood of an ensuing purchase (Smith, Fischer, & Chen, 2012).

The extant literature demonstrates that brand engagement has a favourable impact on both purchase intention and purchase behaviour (Clark, Black, & Judson, 2017). Specifically, Hassan (2014) asserts that quick sales-related communication works well on Instagram, particularly with women perceived to be more deal-oriented. Discounts and coupons are frequently offered as part of the campaigns. Brands must even be entertaining, engaging, and rewarding. Incentives such as promotions and contests improve the interaction between brands and consumers, which leads to better connections and trust, resulting in the possibility of a favourable impact on purchase intention (Shukla, 2010). The following hypothesis is made in light of the prior findings:

H6. Brand engagement will positively influence purchase intention.

In summary, the entire SEM model is presented in [Figure 6](#).

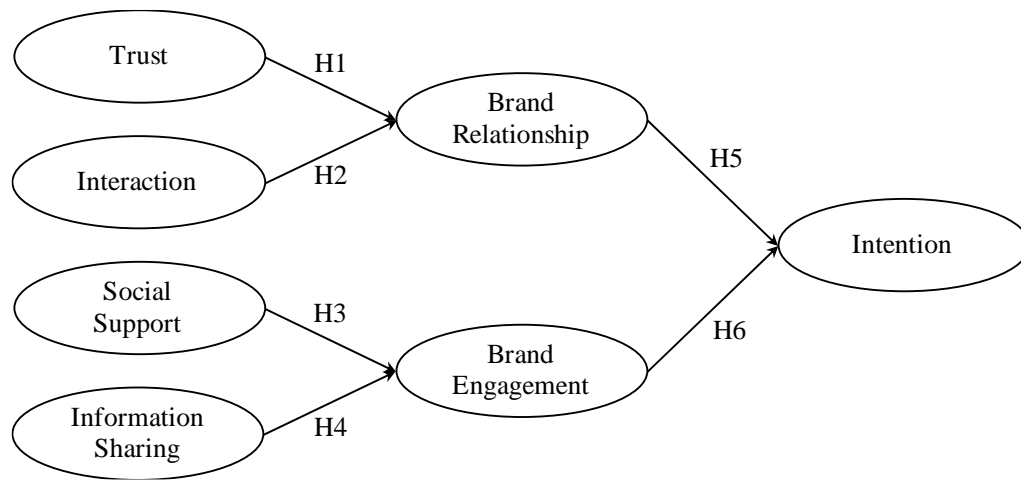


Figure 6. The research SEM model.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1. Data Collection

Data have been conveniently sampled from different countries in Africa. An online questionnaire was developed to collect data. We posted the link on various social media sites and within social media communities in Africa. Data were collected via an electronic questionnaire using a Google form, and the primary survey started in January 2022 and lasted approximately one month. We had 363 valid respondents in total.

5.2. Measurement and Instrument

The five-item measurement of the construct trust was adapted from Liang et al. (2011); Hajli (2014) and Lim (2015). The five-item measurement of construct interaction was adapted from Kim and Park (2013). The five-item measurement of construct brand relationship was adapted from Liang et al. (2011). The five-item measurement of construct social support was adapted from Liang et al. (2011). The five-item measurement of construct information sharing was adapted from Hajli, Sims, Zadeh, and Richard (2017) and Liang et al. (2011). The measurement of construct brand engagement contains six measures that were adapted from Hollebeek (2011) and Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014). Finally, the measurement of the construct purchase intention also contains six measures that were adapted from Hong, Yin, and Chen (2016). The constructs’ measurements are attached in the Appendix section.

6. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

6.1. Demographics

The demographic information is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of respondents (N=363).

Variables	Categories	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	187	51.5
	Female	176	48.5
Age	Less than 18	7	1.9
	18-25	15	4.1
	26-30	196	54.0
	31-40	111	30.6
	41-50	21	5.8
	Larger than 50	13	3.6
Educational Level	Below Senior High School	8	2.2
	Senior High School	8	2.2

Variables	Categories	Frequency	%
Occupation	Bachelor Degree	265	73.0
	Master's Degree	67	18.5
	PhD	15	4.7
	Student	22	6.1
	Unemployed	11	3.0
Which social media platform do you use most frequently?	Employed	330	90.9
	Facebook	162	44.6
	Instagram	116	32.0
	WhatsApp	51	14.0
	WeChat	7	1.9
Are there your friends who are selling items via social media?	Twitter	27	7.4
	Yes	355	97.8
	No	8	2.2
Have you purchased items promoted by social media sellers?	Yes	350	96.4
	No	13	3.6

6.2. Structural Model Assessment

We applied SmartPLS (Version 3) to test the measurement model. The internal consistency reliability and the convergent validity of the constructs were analysed by performing Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Table 2. For convergent validity, individual measurement items must have loadings greater than 0.708 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) greater than or equal to 0.50 according to Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2011). As shown in Table 2, all the items have statistically significant loadings on their respective constructs. Conversely, we found that, the Cronbach's Alpha values for all the factors were acceptable, and the Composite Reliability (CR) values were between 0.923 and 0.941, which is above the threshold of 0.70, indicating an adequate level of reliability (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Gudergan, 2017). Additionally, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each of the factors were more than the ideal value of 0.50, signifying that all the constructs under study accounted for more than 50% of the variance explained by their respective indicators, suggesting acceptable convergence (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. Results of convergent validity.

Construct	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Trust		0.908	0.932	0.732
TT1	0.854			
TT2	0.876			
TT3	0.846			
TT4	0.860			
TT5	0.841			
Interaction		0.907	0.931	0.728
IT1	0.862			
IT2	0.867			
IT3	0.842			
IT4	0.836			
IT5	0.859			
Social Support		0.900	0.926	0.715
SS1	0.848			
SS2	0.840			
SS3	0.825			
SS4	0.860			
SS5	0.854			
Information Sharing		0.903	0.928	0.721
IS1	0.817			
IS2	0.871			
IS3	0.833			

Construct	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
IS4	0.869			
IS5	0.855			
Brand Relationship		0.896	0.923	0.706
RQ1	0.831			
RQ2	0.837			
RQ3	0.843			
RQ4	0.835			
RQ5	0.855			
Brand Engagement		0.910	0.931	0.691
BE1	0.815			
BE2	0.843			
BE3	0.846			
BE4	0.794			
BE5	0.844			
BE6	0.845			
Purchase Intention		0.925	0.941	0.727
PI1	0.845			
PI2	0.860			
PI3	0.853			
PI4	0.849			
PI5	0.857			
PI6	0.852			

In addition, we employed the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlation to also test the discriminant validity among the variables (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). According to Henseler et al. (2015), the HTMT ratio values should be less than the maximum threshold value of 0.90 for a better discriminant validity to be attained. As shown in Table 3, the HTMT ratios were smaller than the maximum restrictive threshold value of 0.90, suggesting a good discriminant validity.

Table 3. Results of discriminant validity.

Construct	Mean	St. Dev.	TT	IT	SS	IS	RQ	BE	PI
TT	4.061	0.874	1						
IT	4.123	0.885	0.555	1					
SS	4.108	0.872	0.423	0.604	1				
IS	4.126	0.900	0.441	0.664	0.503	1			
RQ	4.165	0.839	0.623	0.488	0.325	0.511	1		
BE	4.173	0.852	0.657	0.661	0.599	0.552	0.436	1	
PI	4.150	0.875	0.588	0.359	0.690	0.538	0.611	0.561	1

6.3. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

In assessing and testing the hypothesised relationship among the constructs, the study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS (Version 3) proposed by Ringle, Da Silva, and Bido (2015). Table 4 demonstrates the results of the hypothesised relationship among each construct. Table 4 shows the result of the path coefficient of the constructs with standardised values ranging from negative 1.0 to positive 1.0. From the standardised values, the closer the path coefficients are to 1.0 and 0.0, the more robust and weaker the estimated relationship, respectively. From the results, we found that all the coefficients of each construct show a positive association among the constructs, although the degree of the effects differs.

As shown in Table 4, we found that all the six hypotheses tested were significant and accepted. Thus, brand engagement has proven to have a directly and positively significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.601$, t -value = 9.938, p -value = 0.001), and brand relationship ($\beta = 0.306$, t -value = 7.593, p -value = 0.006) has a directly and

positively significant effect on purchase intention. Additionally, information sharing ($\beta = 0.489$, t -value = 8.119, p -value = 0.001), and social support ($\beta = 0.463$, t -value = 8.329, p -value = 0.003) have directly and positively significant effects on brand engagement, while interaction ($\beta = 0.593$, t -value = 8.642, p -value = 0.009) and trust ($\beta = 0.333$, t -value = 5.652, p -value = 0.001) have directly and positively significant effects on brand relationship.

Table 4. Path coefficients of structural model constructs.

Hypothesis	Estimated Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)
Brand Engagement → Purchase Intention	0.601	0.055	9.938***
Brand Relationship → Purchase Intention	0.306	0.044	7.593***
Information Sharing → Brand Engagement	0.489	0.058	8.119***
Interaction → Brand Relationship	0.593	0.036	8.642***
Social Support → Brand Engagement	0.463	0.098	8.329***
Trust → Brand Relationship	0.333	0.066	5.652***

Note: *** p -value<0.01.

6.4. Testing Mediation

The mediating role of brand relationship and brand engagement is displayed in Table 5. The results indicated that brand relationship and brand engagement mediated the relationship between the four independent variables (trust, interaction, social support and information sharing) and the dependent variable (purchase intention). Thus, brand engagement mediated the relationship between information sharing and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.420$, t -value = 6.561, p -value = 0.001) as well as social support and purchase intention support ($\beta = 0.290$, t -value = 5.533, p -value = 0.001). Similarly, brand relationship mediated the relationship between interaction and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.233$, t -value = 6.760, p -value = 0.001) as well as trust and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.203$, t -value = 4.463, p -value = 0.001).

Table 5. Mediation effects of brand relationship and brand engagement.

Constructs	Coefficient	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)
IS – BE – PI	0.420	0.040	6.561***
SS – BE – PI	0.290	0.024	5.533***
IT – RQ – PI	0.233	0.060	6.760***
TT – RQ – PI	0.203	0.036	4.463***

Note: *** p -value<0.01.

The coefficient of determination known as the adjusted R-square was assessed to check for the amount of variation in the dependent construct that was explained by the independent constructs Table 6. As the results shown in Table 6, the adjusted R-square of 0.857 suggested that social support and information sharing jointly explained 85.7% of the variability in the dependent variable of brand engagement. Meanwhile, the adjusted R-square value of 0.842 indicated that trust and interaction together explained 84.2% of the variability in the dependent variable of brand relationship. At the same time, the adjusted R-square value of 0.880 revealed that brand engagement and brand relationship jointly explained 88.0% of the variance in the dependent variable of purchase intention.

Table 6. Adjusted R-square.

Constructs Effect	Coefficient	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)
Brand Engagement	0.857	0.020	43.405
Brand Relationship	0.842	0.022	37.529
Purchase Intention	0.880	0.017	51.875

The predictive power of the structural model is also assessed using the effect size known as the *F*-square Table 7. We employed (Cohen, 1992) guideline to evaluate the effect size. According to Cohen (1992), the *F*-square values below 0.02 are considered to represent no effect, between 0.02 and 0.14 are considered small or weak, between 0.15 and 0.34 are considered medium effect, and 0.35 or above are considered large effect. The results from Table 7 show that brand engagement has a significantly large effect on purchase intention, while brand relationship has a significantly medium effect on purchase intention. Information sharing and social support have a significant medium effect on brand engagement. Interaction has a significantly large effect on brand relationships, while trust has a significantly small or weak effect on brand relationship.

Table 7. *F*-square.

Construct Effect	Effect Size (<i>F</i> ²)
Brand Engagement -> Purchase Intention	0.552***
Brand Relationship-> Purchase Intention	0.344***
Information Sharing -> Brand Engagement	0.294***
Interaction -> Brand Relationship	0.364***
Social Support -> Brand Engagement	0.323***
Trust -> Brand Relationship	0.144**

Note: ***p-value<0.01; **p-value<0.05.

In summary, Table 8 displays the summary and the status of the tested research hypotheses of the research findings for better understanding.

Table 8. Status of the hypotheses based on the research findings.

No.	Hypothesis	Status
H1	Trust will significantly influence brand relationship.	Significant and accepted
H2	Interaction will significantly influence brand relationship.	Significant and accepted
H3	Social support will significantly influence brand engagement.	Significant and accepted
H4	Information sharing will significantly influence brand engagement.	Significant and accepted
H5	Brand relationship will significantly influence purchase intention.	Significant and accepted
H6	Brand engagement will significantly influence purchase intention.	Significant and accepted

7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The main objective of the present study is to examine the role of social media branding in African start-ups and how social media branding influences African consumers' purchase intention. There are several conclusions that we draw from the results. A significant advantage of social media is that it is a free platform that anybody may use for marketing and advertising. Although using social media for business purposes in Africa has not yet become popular, our study suggests it as an option for African start-ups. Most African consumers admire and are willing to adopt the lifestyles of online shopping and payment used in developed countries. However, a lack of resources is the greatest challenge. The chance of consumers buying products online is low due to lack of brand exposure and a concomitant lack of trust during the transactions. Two African start-ups targeting African consumers were studied to demonstrate two types of business models of branding via social media. The success and experience of the two African start-ups demonstrated good prospects for social media branding in Africa. By employing a qualitative approach, ten African informants were interviewed to explore the effects of social media branding on consumers' purchase intention. Six constructs of trust, interaction, social support, information sharing, brand relationship, and brand engagement were identified from the transcribed text of interviews. Most frequently, informants mentioned that trust plays a crucial role in the context of Africa. African consumers expect the brand to be trustworthy when they have a good communication channel. They care about being cared for. They expect to be informed with complete and actual

product information. They need to keep a close and credible connection with the brand. The high-quality relationship with the brand and brand engagement is positively associated with African consumers' purchase intention and even further behaviours such as recommendation and positive eWOM. Then, the model of social media branding was tested in the context of Africa. A total of 363 valid African respondents contributed their attitudes and opinions on this theme. Social media is a vast platform for everybody to use. The present study encourages African start-ups to use social media to improve their brand images and develop their business models.

As a continent with a large population and a promised market, Africa has not attracted adequate attention from either academia or industry. The present study revealed that brand relationship and brand engagement act as mediators between social media branding factors and consumers' purchase intention in the context of Africa, which is believed to contribute to the brand literature. Additionally, the findings of the present study have importantly practical suggestions for start-ups in Africa. In the early stages, a start-up can promote other companies' products to increase its presence on the market if there are insufficiently initial funds. However, it should focus on interacting with customers, providing enough information, e.g., contact number, location, and email address, to create trust. Sharing content containing images, videos, or even Q&As can help consumers interact with the brand. Encouraging feedback is an excellent step to improve engagement. A start-up should try to post specific content about daily topics (e.g., football) to retain followers. A start-up should develop communication skills and be patient when dealing with customers. A start-up can also use social media to promote its unique brand by presenting its strong characteristics. Building a brand is similar to building a family in that a start-up may share with its customers to make them feel like they are members of the brand. Not everyone can read and understand the languages on the social media platforms in Africa. Some people may find it challenging to navigate the system at times. It is critical to assist customers who need brand assistance rather than ignore them. Another crucial point is that the start-up should avoid asking for personal information from customers, such as credit card numbers, and passwords. Many consumers may feel unsafe, especially in Africa, where consumers have associated social media with low trustworthiness. Finally, a start-up should not always focus on profit in the early stages. Instead, it should concentrate on developing a positive brand image and reputation.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations that may be improved in the future studies. The two cases in the present study were both associated with Chinese suppliers. Although China has developed very quickly in recent decades, many other countries influence Africa due to historical and cultural reasons. In the future studies, more start-ups may be taken into consideration. Furthermore, Africa is a diverse continent. The present study did not distinguish between countries because of a lack of respondents. Future studies may focus more on some particular African countries. Finally, future studies may provide better contributions to how to develop the African economy by utilising the Internet and social media.

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Appendix. The Questionnaire

Please select the value that represents your current feeling towards the statements below. The values use a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1, representing “strongly disagree”, to 5, representing “strongly agree”, and only one value is chosen per response.

Trust:

- (1) I am confident in buying what I want from secured social media sites.
- (2) I feel safe in purchasing at a social media site that protects my privacy.

- (3) I believe a secured social media site will safeguard my private information.
- (4) The performance of my favourite social media site always meets my expectations.
- (5) My favourite social networking site is a reliable social networking site.

Interaction:

- (1) The brand page keeps me informed of new developments.
- (2) The brand page listens to my feedback on its service.
- (3) The brand page provides me with meaningful information.
- (4) The brand page provides me with timely information.
- (5) The brand often responds in a timely manner to inquiries or comments from its followers on the brand page.

Brand Relationship:

- (1) I feel a sense of belonging to my favourite brand page.
- (2) I am satisfied with using my favourite brand page.
- (3) My favourite brand page is a reliable social networking site.
- (4) I care about the long-term success of my favourite brand site.
- (5) The performance of my favourite social networking site always meets my expectations.

Social Support:

- (1) When faced with difficulties, I was comforted and encouraged by people on the brand pages.
- (2) When I was faced with difficulties, some people on my favourite social commerce site expressed interest and concern for my well-being.
- (3) When I encountered a problem, some people on the brand pages would give me information to help me overcome the problem.
- (4) When I was faced with difficulties, some people on the brand pages would help me discover the cause and provide me with suggestions.
- (5) On my favourite social commerce site, some people would offer suggestions when I needed help.

Information Sharing:

- (1) I will ask my friends on forums and communities to provide me with their suggestions before I go shopping for a brand.
- (2) I am willing to recommend a product or a brand that is worth buying for my friends on my favourite social networking site.
- (3) I am willing to share my own shopping experience with a brand with my friends on forums and communities or through ratings and reviews.
- (4) I would like to use people's online recommendations and reviews to buy a product from a brand.
- (5) I get recommendations about the product from friends.

Brand Engagement:

- (1) I would like to talk about this brand with others.
- (2) I am interested in learning more about this brand.
- (3) I would be interested in other products offered by this brand.

- (4) I would be proud to have others know that I use this brand.
- (5) I like to visit the website for this brand.
- (6) I would closely follow news about this brand.

Purchase Intentions:

- (1) I will keep using social commerce.
- (2) I will speak positively about social commerce to people around me.
- (3) I will recommend people around me to use social commerce.
- (4) I am interested in social commerce products.
- (5) I connect to social commerce sites even though I do not buy anything from them.
- (6) I am planning to buy products from social commerce if I find them interesting.

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