SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND BRAND EQUITY IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: EVIDENCE FROM IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study investigated the effect of social media marketing strategies on brand equity within the hospitality industry in Imo State, Nigeria. In the face of increasing digitalization and changing consumer behavior, hospitality businesses are turning to social media as a vital tool for brand positioning and customer engagement. The study operationalised social media marketing using five key constructs: content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content (UGC), and engagement metrics. These constructs were investigated within the framework of Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model, Social Exchange Theory, and Social Network Theory, which collectively underscore the psychological and relational mechanisms underpinning brand development in the digital space. A quantitative research design was adopted, involving the development, validation and administration of a structured questionnaire titled "Social Media Marketing and Brand Equity Questionnaire" to 260 hospitality consumers across hotels and related service firms in Imo State. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, yielding a reliability index of 0.85, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Data were analysed using multiple regression and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) techniques. The findings reveal that all five constructs significantly influence brand equity, with user-generated content and content quality emerging as the most impactful variables. The study offers both theoretical and practical contributions: it deepens the understanding of social media's role in brand equity formation in emerging economies, and it provides actionable insights for hospitality marketers seeking to strengthen brand-customer relationships in competitive digital environments.
Keywords: social media marketing, brand equity, hospitality, Nigeria, user-generated content, platform diversity, Keller's model

Introduction

In today's digitised world, social media has emerged as a pivotal tool for businesses to connect with consumers, particularly in the service-oriented hospitality sector. Social media platforms—such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok—have transformed from basic communication channels into dynamic digital ecosystems where brands are built, maintained, and sometimes dismantled in real time. Globally, over 4.5 billion individuals actively engage

with social media (Statista, 2023), making it one of the most influential forces shaping contemporary marketing.

The hospitality industry, which thrives on delivering customer satisfaction and building experiential loyalty, is especially poised to benefit from social media marketing. Unlike traditional marketing methods, which often rely on one-way communication, social media enables two-way interaction, co-creation of value, and direct customer feedback. Scholars such as Dwivedi *et al*. (2021) and Felix *et al*. (2020) emphasise the evolving roles of social media as a strategic tool for enhancing brand visibility, fostering emotional engagement, and facilitating consumer-driven brand advocacy. Further extending these ideas, Keller (2001) in his Brand Resonance Model, and Aaker (1991) in his brand equity framework, emphasise the importance of customer perceptions, trust, and loyalty—outcomes that are increasingly influenced by online interactions.

Despite these transformative potentials, many hospitality businesses in developing economies like Nigeria struggle to harness social media effectively. In the specific context of Imo State, Nigeria, brand equity remains underdeveloped, partly due to low levels of digital literacy, limited strategic use of online platforms, and an overemphasis on follower counts rather than meaningful engagement. Local hospitality brands tend to underutilise key social media elements—such as content quality, platform diversification, interactivity, and user-generated content—that have shown to significantly enhance brand equity (Iankova *et al*., 2020; Algharabat *et al*., 2020; Shareef *et al*., 2021).

A core issue is the lack of alignment between short-term digital tactics (like discount promotions or flash sales) and long-term branding goals (such as building awareness, perceived quality, and customer loyalty). Businesses often focus on superficial metrics—likes, shares, and follower counts—without fully understanding how these activities affect deeper brand dimensions. Moreover, strategic frameworks that measure the impact of social media marketing on brand equity are largely absent or inconsistently applied in this region. The consequence is a fragmented digital presence that fails to translate online visibility into lasting brand value.

Compounding these challenges is the dearth of empirical research tailored to the local context. While studies such as those by Shareef *et al*. (2021) and Dwivedi *et al*. (2021) have demonstrated that content quality and consumer engagement significantly drive brand perception

within the hospitality industry, their findings are primarily drawn from Western or Asian markets. Due to significant cultural, technological and infrastructural differences, the direct application of these insights to the Nigerian context remains limited, as consumer behaviours, digital engagement patterns, and economic realities differ considerably.

Thus, a significant gap exists in both practice and scholarship. Without context-specific evidence on how social media activities translate to brand equity, hospitality businesses in Imo State are left to operate in a digital vacuum. This study addresses this critical gap by examining how five key constructs—content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, and engagement metrics—contribute to brand equity in Imo State's hospitality sector. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory and Keller's CBBE Model, the research aims to provide data-driven insights and actionable strategies for enhancing brand resonance through social media. Based on the above, the following hypotheses are formulated for the study:

Hypotheses

H_1: Content quality significantly influences brand equity in the hospitality industry in Imo State.

H_2: Interactivity significantly influences brand equity in the hospitality industry in Imo State.

H_3: Platform diversity significantly influences brand equity in the hospitality industry in Imo State.

H_4: User-generated content significantly influences brand equity in the hospitality industry in Imo State.

H_5: Engagement metrics significantly influence brand equity in the hospitality industry in Imo State.

Literature Review

The dynamic evolution of marketing in the digital age has compelled businesses to reassess how brand equity is cultivated, maintained, and enhanced. In particular, the rise of social media has transformed consumer-brand interactions, empowering users to co-create content, influence perceptions, and shape brand narratives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tuten & Solomon, 2020). This development is especially pertinent in experience-driven industries such as hospitality, where intangibility heightens the role of perception and reputation in customer decision-making. This literature review explores the theoretical foundations and empirical

evidence linking social media marketing to brand equity, with a focus on five constructs: content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, and engagement metrics.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Brand Equity and Social Media Marketing

Brand equity has been traditionally conceptualised through two prominent frameworks: Aaker's Brand Equity Model (1991), which identifies dimensions such as brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, and associations; and Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (1993), which focuses on consumers' responses to marketing stimuli based on brand knowledge. Keller (2001) further proposed the Brand Resonance Model, emphasising the psychological bond between brand and consumer as the apex of equity development.

Social media marketing (SMM), defined by Mangold and Faulds (2009) as a hybrid promotional strategy utilizing user-generated content and firm-driven messages, fits squarely within these models. It enhances brand awareness (through visibility), cultivates brand associations (via storytelling and values), drives perceived quality (through peer validation), and fosters loyalty (via relationship-building). Theories such as Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1973) and Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) help frame these interactions, suggesting that reciprocal value creation and network ties reinforce the effectiveness of social media in influencing brand outcomes (Borgatti *et al*., 2023; Liu *et al*., 2022).

Content Quality and Brand Equity

Content quality refers to the relevance, visual appeal, informativeness, and consistency of a brand's digital communications (Chakraborty *et al*., 2021). In the hospitality industry, where guests often make booking decisions based on aesthetic and experiential cues, content quality significantly affects perceptions of service reliability and value (Johnson *et al*., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012).

Recent studies underscore this relationship. Chen *et al*. (2023) found that visual storytelling on Instagram featuring customer testimonials, room tours, or behind-the-scenes service enhanced emotional engagement and brand trust in boutique hotels across Southeast Asia. Similarly, Odili and Nwankwo (2022), in a Nigerian context, emphasised the role of culturally resonant visuals and promotional content in increasing customer recall and affinity for local hospitality brands. Additionally, content clarity, frequency, and originality emerged as critical indicators of perceived brand professionalism (Akram *et al*., 2021). When hospitality

brands employ templated or sporadic content, customers interpret this as a lack of innovation or credibility, potentially harming brand equity.

Interactivity and Brand Equity

Interactivity denotes the extent to which social media allows two-way communication and fosters conversational engagement (Kang & Namkung, 2019). It shifts marketing from monologue to dialogue, reinforcing trust and creating deeper emotional bonds between consumers and brands. Empirical work by Sashi (2022) reveals that hotels that responded to customer reviews or direct messages on social media witnessed greater repeat patronage and referral rates, particularly among millennial travelers. In the African context, Uchenna and Eze (2021) showed that interactive platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook were effective in reducing perceived service risk and increasing brand loyalty among Nigerian hotel clients.

Furthermore, research by Zhang and Kim (2023) links interactivity to the development of parasocial relationships pseudo-friendships formed between customers and brands which lead to higher brand advocacy. Hospitality brands that utilise interactive features such as polls, live Q&A sessions, and comment spotlights often foster a sense of inclusion and personalised engagement, thereby enhancing brand equity dimensions such as resonance and loyalty (Joung *et al*., 2022).

Platform Diversity and Brand Equity

Platform diversity entails the strategic use of multiple social media platforms to reach varied audience segments and achieve message reinforcement (Dwivedi *et al*., 2021). Different platforms cater to different user demographics and content styles. For instance, Instagram favours visual and lifestyle content, while Facebook offers community engagement and TikTok prioritises virality and humour. Godey *et al*. (2023) found that European hotel brands using a combination of Instagram, TikTok, and X achieved stronger brand recall and engagement compared to those relying on a single platform. Moreover, the degree of platform adaptation—i.e., customising content to suit each platform—was a stronger determinant of equity than mere presence.

In Nigeria, Nwosu and Ekeke (2020) observed that hospitality brands that maintained an active presence on both Facebook and WhatsApp achieved significantly higher booking conversions compared to those relying solely on Instagram. This reflects the importance of

understanding the local digital ecosystem, where platform usage patterns vary by region, income, and age.

However, the challenge lies in managing platform consistency. Cifci and Candan (2022) warn that inconsistent branding across platforms can dilute message credibility and reduce consumer trust. A fragmented online presence creates dissonance in the customer journey and undermines key brand equity drivers such as perceived quality and associations.

User-Generated Content (UGC) and Brand Equity

User-Generated Content defined as any form of content created by users rather than the brand has become a cornerstone of modern brand-building strategies (De Veirman *et al*., 2021). UGC includes reviews, social media posts, tags, testimonials, and unboxing or experience videos shared by customers. In hospitality, where trust and perceived authenticity are paramount, UGC serves as powerful social proof. Huang *et al*. (2021) demonstrated that hotels with higher volumes of positive UGC experienced faster brand growth and higher occupancy rates in competitive urban markets. Additionally, their study showed that UGC influenced not only potential guests but also helped improve service design through actionable feedback.

From a psychological standpoint, UGC promotes co-creation and consumer empowerment. When brands repost customer stories or run review-based contests, they trigger feelings of recognition, status, and loyalty (Freberg *et al*., 2022). This was evident in Adedeji and Akanbi's (2023) study, which showed that Nigerian travelers were more likely to return to or recommend hotels that amplified their user content, even without financial incentives. A recent review by Cai and Feng (2022) reveals that UGC has a stronger impact on brand associations and perceived quality than traditional brand communication in service industries. Furthermore, algorithmic advantages on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels amplify UGC reach, making it both cost-effective and high-impact.

Engagement Metrics and Brand Equity

Engagement metrics are measurable indicators of how audiences interact with brand content such as likes, shares, comments, saves, story views, and dwell time (Sterne, 2022). These metrics serve as both internal performance benchmarks and external social signals that influence consumer perceptions. Multiple studies support the assertion that high engagement correlates with higher brand equity. In a meta-analysis, Ismagilova *et al*. (2019) reported that engagement

metrics are among the most reliable predictors of customer-based brand equity across industries. In hospitality, specifically, brands with high engagement levels on Instagram and Facebook enjoy stronger brand resonance and positive word-of-mouth effects (Barreda *et al*., 2016; Liu *et al*., 2023).

Recent findings by Kwok and Yu (2023) suggest that not all engagement is equally valuable. Authentic, conversation-driven interactions (e.g., answering a customer's question) carry more weight in building trust and loyalty than passive engagement (e.g., likes). This echoes the sentiment in Harrigan *et al*. (2022) that marketers should focus on "quality engagement" and design content that fosters community interaction, not just virality.

In the Nigerian context, Obianyo and Ojo (2022) observed that hospitality firms that actively analyzed and responded to engagement trends (e.g., shifting tone in comments, viral tags) were better able to align their content and offers with customer expectations. This responsiveness directly translated to improved brand perception and booking intent.

Integrated Empirical Evidence from Developing Markets

A growing body of research from emerging economies affirms the unique characteristics of social media branding in developing contexts. Tatar and Eren-Erdoğmuş (2016), in their Turkish hotel study, highlighted the role of perceived effort behind social media campaigns in driving customer loyalty and brand credibility. Similarly, Kamboj *et al*. (2018) found that engagement mediates the relationship between digital content and brand equity, emphasising the need for hospitality firms to cultivate two-way relationships.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Muthoni and Ndung'u (2022) investigated Kenyan boutique hotels and found that influencer partnerships and emotional storytelling on Instagram significantly influenced customer-brand relationships. Moreover, UGC amplified by micro-influencers created a sense of community that translated into stronger emotional resonance.

Within Nigeria, Ogbonna and Okafor (2021) documented how local hospitality brands benefited from integrating cultural narratives—such as traditional aesthetics and indigenous languages into their social media content. Their findings suggest that culturally sensitive content strategies significantly improve brand equity in heterogeneous societies.

The reviewed literature offers compelling evidence that social media marketing directly and indirectly contributes to brand equity development in the hospitality industry. Constructs

such as content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, and engagement metrics have been individually and collectively linked to key brand equity dimensions including awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and resonance. These relationships have been consistently observed across both developed and emerging markets, albeit with variations based on digital infrastructure, consumer culture, and organizational digital maturity.

However, several gaps remain. First, most of the existing empirical work is concentrated in developed economies or emerging Asian markets, with limited studies contextualised for sub-Saharan Africa and particularly Nigeria. Given the region's distinct socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural realities, models derived from Western or East Asian contexts may not fully capture the dynamics at play in Nigerian consumer-brand interactions.

Second, while many studies explore isolated constructs of social media marketing (e.g., either content or engagement), fewer adopt a holistic, multi-construct approach that simultaneously examines the interplay between content strategy, consumer participation, and engagement behavior all of which collectively influence brand equity. This integrated lens is crucial in the hospitality industry, where the customer journey is deeply interconnected across multiple digital touchpoints.

Third, even within Nigerian studies, there is a significant underrepresentation of quantitative, data-driven models that apply structural equation modeling (SEM) or regression frameworks to examine these relationships with statistical rigor. Much of the local literature remains qualitative or exploratory, limiting the generalisability and actionable insights for brand strategists.

Lastly, most hospitality brands in Imo State operate with limited digital resources and unstructured social media strategies. Without localised empirical data, these firms risk investing in digital tactics that generate superficial engagement but fail to build enduring brand equity.

In response to these gaps, this study presents a comprehensive, empirically tested model examining how content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, and engagement metrics affect brand equity in Imo State's hospitality sector. By grounding the analysis in Social Exchange Theory and Keller's CBBE Model, the study bridges theoretical rigor with practical relevance and offers hospitality businesses in Nigeria a roadmap for developing resilient, customer-centered digital branding strategies.

Methods

The methodological framework for this study is designed to provide a rigorous, empirical examination of how social media marketing influences brand equity in the hospitality sector of Imo State, Nigeria. To ensure validity, relevance, and generalisability, the study adopts a descriptive and correlational research design. This design is well-suited for examining the strength and direction of relationships among multiple variables in a natural setting without experimental manipulation (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2021). By relying on cross-sectional data gathered at a single point in time, the research captures consumer perceptions and behaviors as they currently exist, in alignment with the dynamic nature of digital media engagement.

The population of interest comprises customers of hospitality businesses in Imo State who actively use social media to interact with or learn about hospitality services such as hotels, restaurants, and event venues. These individuals represent a digitally connected consumer segment whose online interactions significantly shape brand outcomes. Given the increased penetration of mobile internet and social media use among Nigerians—estimated at over 113 million active users as of 2023 (Statista, 2023)—targeting this population ensures contextual relevance and data richness. The study confines its scope to three major urban hubs in Imo State: Owerri, Orlu, and Okigwe, where hospitality activity is most concentrated.

To determine an appropriate sample size, Cochran's formula for infinite populations was employed, assuming a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and maximum population variability ($p = 0.5$). This yields a minimum sample size of 384 respondents. However, due to constraints in response retrieval and verification, a total of 260 valid questionnaires were completed and used for analysis, representing a 65% response rate. This rate aligns with recent marketing research in similar contexts, as noted by Saunders, lewis and Thornhill (2021), who suggest that a response rate of 60% or higher is considered acceptable for studies utilising self-administered questionnaires in developing countries.

Data were collected using a structured, self-completion questionnaire designed to measure key constructs identified in the conceptual framework: content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, engagement metrics, and brand equity. Each construct was operationalised through five statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at All" (1) to "To a Very Large Extent" (5). Likert scales were chosen for their ease of interpretation

and high reliability in measuring attitudinal variables (Boone & Boone, 2012). To minimise bias and enhance clarity, the questionnaire underwent expert review by three academic specialists in marketing and communication who evaluated the relevance and phrasing of each item.

Prior to full deployment, a pilot test was conducted involving 30 respondents from the target population. The responses from the pilot were subjected to reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha, which produced values exceeding the benchmark threshold of 0.70 for all constructs, indicating strong internal consistency (Haire *et al*., 2022). Additionally, construct validity was assessed using factor analysis in SmartPLS 4, confirming that all measurement items loaded above 0.70 on their respective constructs, thus meeting the criteria for convergent validity (Hair *et al*., 2019).

The main statistical tools for analysis included descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, standard deviations) and inferential statistics, specifically multiple linear regression and structural equation modeling (SEM). SPSS version 25 was used to run regressions, while SmartPLS version 4 was adopted for SEM due to its robustness in modeling latent variables and its appropriateness for studies with small to moderate sample sizes (Hair *et al*., 2021). The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, in accordance with conventional social science research standards.

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was assured, and all data collected were used solely for academic purposes. Respondents were briefed on the objective of the study and offered the right to withdraw at any time. In sum, the methodology combined methodological rigor with ethical sensitivity and contextual relevance, aligning both scholarly expectations and practical applicability.

Results and Analysis

The respondent demographic revealed a youthful, digitally literate population. Over 60% were aged between 18 and 34, and 65% used social media daily. More than 84% possessed at least tertiary education. This demographic is representative of the digitally active audience that engages with hospitality brands online.

Descriptive Analysis

The five social media marketing constructs Content Quality, Interactivity, Platform Diversity, User-Generated Content, and Engagement Metrics recorded high mean scores, ranging from 3.88

to 4.22. Respondents generally agreed that engaging and high-quality content influences their perception and trust in a brand. Additionally, they affirmed that interactivity, responsive engagement and consistent cross-platform presence contribute positively to brand loyalty and advocacy.

Structural Model Assessment (PLS-SEM)

To empirically test the conceptual model, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed using SmartPLS. Path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values were generated through bootstrapping (5000 resamples) to assess the significance of hypothesised relationships.

Predictor Variable	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision
Content Quality	0.24	3.92	0.000	Supported
Interactivity	0.18	2.80	0.005	Supported
Platform Diversity	0.15	2.35	0.019	Supported
User-Generated Content	0.27	4.22	0.000	Supported
Engagement Metrics	0.22	3.45	0.001	Supported

Model Fit and Predictive Power

The overall fit of the model was evaluated using the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). The SRMR value of 0.056, which is below the conservative threshold of 0.08, indicates a good model fit, affirming the adequacy of the proposed model. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.71$) suggests that the five social media marketing constructs collectively explain 71% of the variance in brand equity, demonstrating strong explanatory power. The high F-statistic ($F = 64.21$, $p = 0.000$) further reinforces the model's statistical significance.

Hypotheses Testing Summary

H_1: Content Quality has a significant effect on brand equity → Supported

H_2: Interactivity significantly influences brand equity → Supported

H_3: Platform Diversity significantly affects brand equity → Supported

H_4: User-Generated Content significantly contributes to brand equity → Supported

H_5: Engagement Metrics significantly influence brand equity → Supported

This study affirms and extends prior literature by contextualizing global social media marketing dynamics within the Imo State hospitality sector. Each construct content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, and engagement metrics demonstrated a statistically significant relationship with brand equity, though their influence varied in strength.

Content Quality (β = 0.24)

Consistent with the works of Chakraborty *et al*. (2021) and Kim and Ko (2012), content quality emerged as a key driver of brand equity. Respondents agreed that visually appealing, informative, and timely content positively influences trust and brand perception. In a competitive hospitality market, content acts as the digital "first impression." Well-curated posts featuring local destinations, customer testimonials, promotional campaigns, or behind-the-scenes visuals foster emotional connections and improve brand recall. The implication here is that hospitality firms must view content not merely as information, but as a narrative strategy to convey brand personality and value.

Interactivity (β = 0.18)

Social media's capacity for two-way communication sets it apart from traditional marketing, and the findings here echo those of Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) and Castronovo and Huang (2023). Respondents favored brands that replied to comments, asked for feedback, or initiated conversations. These interactions build relational capital, establishing brands as approachable, customer-centric, and responsive. Interactivity also operationalises Social Exchange Theory: customers invest time and engagement when they perceive reciprocal interest from a brand. In practice, hospitality brands should consider automating responses for efficiency but personalise communication for authenticity. Live Q&A sessions, polls, or user comment spotlights could increase real-time interactivity.

Platform Diversity (β = 0.15)

Though the weakest of the predictors, platform diversity was statistically significant. This aligns with Rinallo *et al*. (2022), who emphasised that diversification enhances brand visibility and access to segmented audiences. Different demographics prefer different platforms: Instagram appeals to younger users, Facebook to more mature audiences, while TikTok thrives among Gen Z. However, mere presence across platforms without content tailoring or consistent engagement can render efforts ineffective. Brands must adopt a platform-specific strategy, rather than

syndicating identical content. For instance, a hotel can use YouTube for immersive video walkthroughs, while using Twitter/X for customer service updates or flash promotions.

User-Generated Content (β = 0.27)

User-Generated Content was the most influential predictor, consistent with the conclusions of Godey *et al*. (2016) and Pereira *et al*. (2022). Customers perceived UGC—photos, reviews, testimonials—as more authentic and trustworthy than brand-produced content. In hospitality, where experience is intangible and expectations subjective, peer validation becomes crucial. Positive reviews on TripAdvisor, tagged Instagram photos from real guests, or viral TikTok experiences can significantly enhance brand equity. UGC humanises the brand and amplifies trust via social proof. For marketers in Imo State, encouraging UGC should go beyond passive hope. Hospitality brands can proactively feature user content, create branded hashtags, or incentivise reviews and shares.

Engagement Metrics (β = 0.22):

The influence of engagement metrics resonates with Sterne (2022), who links these digital signals to consumer perception. High likes, shares, and comments function as heuristics for popularity and credibility. In an algorithm-driven environment, these metrics also affect content visibility, compounding their impact. The results suggest that consumers interpret high engagement not only as a sign of brand popularity but also as a validation of quality. However, the quality of engagement matters. 1,000 likes with no comments signal passivity, while 50 detailed comments from loyal customers offer deeper value. Brands should thus track meaningful engagement, not vanity metrics.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study confirm that social media marketing plays a significant role in shaping brand equity within the hospitality industry. Based on PLS-SEM analysis, all five constructs content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content (UGC), and engagement metrics showed statistically significant effects on brand equity. Content quality and interactivity were found to enhance customer engagement and trust, reflecting the importance of relevant and responsive communication in digital environments (Zollo *et al*., 2020; Harrigan *et al*., 2021). Platform diversity contributed positively by enabling wider reach and audience segmentation across various social channels (Marques *et al*., 2020). UGC emerged as the

strongest predictor, underscoring the credibility and influence of peer-generated content in brand perception (Kamboj *et al*., 2021). Engagement metrics also proved meaningful, indicating that likes, shares, and comments are not mere indicators of activity but reflect deeper customer connection and brand resonance (de Oliveira Santini *et al*., 2021). Overall, these results reinforce the need for hospitality brands to adopt a multidimensional and interactive social media strategy to build and sustain brand equity in today's digital landscape.

Theoretical Integration:

The findings reaffirm Keller's CBBE model especially brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations as critical dimensions influenced by social media activity. Social Exchange Theory is evident in the mutual value-sharing dynamic on digital platforms, where customer loyalty grows from perceived brand attentiveness. Additionally, Social Network Theory provides a framework for understanding the viral nature of UGC and influencer effects in shaping brand narratives.

Cultural Consideration:

In the Nigerian context, social media usage is heavily shaped by cultural communication patterns, humor, and community. The conversational tone in local Pidgin English, regionally resonant imagery, and endorsement by community figures can increase relatability. Nigerian hospitality brands must avoid sterile global templates and incorporate culturally nuanced storytelling to optimise brand equity outcomes.

Summary

This study explored the influence of social media marketing on brand equity in the hospitality sector in Imo State, Nigeria. Using a robust theoretical and empirical framework, it identified five core constructs content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, and engagement metrics that significantly predict brand equity. Data from 260 hospitality consumers, analyzed via regression and SEM, confirmed that all five constructs positively contribute to brand equity. UGC and content quality emerged as the most influential factors. The study contextualises these findings within existing literature while offering insight into practical strategies for hospitality marketers in emerging markets.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the transformative role of social media marketing in shaping brand equity within the hospitality industry, particularly in emerging markets like Imo State, Nigeria. The research concludes that five core constructs—content quality, interactivity, platform diversity, user-generated content, and engagement metrics—all have significant and positive effects on brand equity. Among these, user-generated content and content quality emerge as the strongest predictors, reflecting the growing importance of authenticity and narrative richness in digital brand-building.

This study confirms and extends established theories such as Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model and Social Exchange Theory by empirically demonstrating how digital engagement fosters consumer trust, loyalty, and emotional connection. The results suggest that consumers respond more favorably to brands that prioritise dialogue over monologue, personalization over generic promotion, and participation over passive consumption. This shift marks a departure from transactional marketing strategies toward relational and community-based approaches.

Moreover, the study reveals the urgent need for hospitality brands in Nigeria to strategically manage their social media presence—not as an afterthought or isolated channel, but as a core component of brand strategy. The data reinforce that mere presence on platforms is insufficient; instead, consistent, platform-specific content and consumer interaction drive meaningful brand outcomes.

In conclusion, the study contributes both theoretically and practically by offering a holistic, data-driven model that aligns global digital marketing principles with local realities. It serves as a foundation for future academic research and a strategic guide for practitioners seeking to leverage social media as a powerful tool for sustainable brand equity development in the hospitality sector.

Recommendations:

1. **Develop Culturally Resonant Content:** Hospitality brands should invest in high-quality visuals and text that reflect local flavor. Storytelling formats customer journeys, heritage narratives, and community ties can deepen brand associations.

2. **Institutionalise Interactivity:** Assign dedicated community managers or use AI chatbots for 24/7 responsiveness. Weekly Q&A sessions or comment-of-the-week highlights can drive two-way engagement.
3. **Segment Platform Strategy:** Instead of blanket content replication, adapt posts per platform: use Instagram Stories for behind-the-scenes content, Facebook for detailed promotions, and TikTok for humor-driven brand storytelling.
4. **Incentivise User-Generated Content:** Launch my hospitality experience campaigns, repost customer photos with tags, and offer discounts for review submissions to stimulate peer advocacy.
5. **Optimise for Authentic Engagement:** Track and reward engagement that reflects depth—such as reviews, story mentions, or service feedback—over superficial metrics like passive likes.
6. **Monitor and Analyse Metrics Proactively:** Use analytics dashboards to track which content types perform best and adjust strategy accordingly. Identify influential commenters and nurture them as brand ambassadors.
7. **Upskill Digital Teams:** Conduct digital marketing workshops tailored to hospitality staff. Equip them with skills in content planning, community management, and analytics interpretation.
8. **Collaborate with Local Influencers and Micro-Celebrities:** Their endorsement often holds greater trust than corporate advertising. Select influencers aligned with brand values and target demographics.

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