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**THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT
IN THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING ON BRAND
AWARENESS.**

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ABSTRACT

Increasing brand awareness and loyalty, driving sales and profitability, and maintaining successful existence in today's competitive business environment are the main goals of every company. Digital content marketing, a new era term with its wide opportunities and big potentials allows company to achieve its different goals and build long-term relationships with its target customers by offering a valuable, attractive, informative, and engaging content which satisfies customers' needs and interests, and earns their appreciation and trust.

This study aims to examine the role of social media and customer engagement as mediating variables in the impact of digital content marketing on brand awareness.

In order to achieve this objective, research reviewed theoretical and empirical studies about the topic variables. Besides that, researches also applied online questionnaire and 398 customers of Starbucks in Istanbul, Turkey, shared their opinions in relation with the studied topic. SPSS was used to analyze collected data.

Although the results of the study showed a significant effect of both social media and customer engagement, their total indirect effect as mediators in relationship between digital content marketing and brand awareness was weaker than direct effect that digital content marketing has on brand awareness. So, researchers recommend future studies for exploring and deeper understanding of different integral parts of digital content marketing which can impact and increase more brand awareness as a starting base in business success.

INTRODUCTION

Businesses with their various and unlimited strategies, unique ideas, and different techniques are trying to increase the base of current and potential customers. Technological innovations changed the company's way of marketing and dealing with customers from traditional marketing advertisement strategies to a modern digital communication channels. Digital content marketing appeared as a new inbound marketing strategy for creating, distributing, and sharing a valuable, relevant, inspirational content in order to attract existing target audience, capture new once and engage them through different digital platforms.

Digital content marketing became one of the most searching and attractive topic, both for the customers and content developers as a concept with incredible importance and as a major contributor in company's success and expansion. Content developers and marketers should focus on customers-centric perspective, customers' interests, preferences and needs when producing brand digital content that will increase customers awareness of a brand and drive profitable customer action. (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Pullizzi, 2014).

Digital content marketing has been defined as a managerial process characterized by identifying customers' requirements and expectations, and satisfying them by providing relevant, great content, and valuable information about the company, its products and services that will ultimately lead to increase customers' appreciation toward company. Digital content marketing is the art of communicating with a target customer, and company's promoting without selling its products or services for them. It's a process that is focusing on long-run sales through earning customers' trust and loyalty (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

Promoting the digital content to the customers through social media sites, platforms and apps is an indicator of the rapid improvement of a social media as a basic key for communicating and building close relationships with potential customers. The dynamic marketing power has been moved from traditional ways to today's social media technologies that enable the brand to reach the huge numbers of customers, providing them with useful information about products and services, and effectively taking their feedback into consideration.

Social media can be defined as a space for connection, communication, and interaction between individuals and communities of people. It is a broad category and online way that also enable collaboration between company and its current and potential customers, at every steps of customers' journey with the company. This shifts the customers to a powerful position as never before involving them in active participation, content generation, and value creation, so it becomes even more challengeable for the company to impress its customers, offering them products and services with high quality and standards (Alfreðsdóttir & Steinþórsson, 2018).

Today's competitive and dynamic business environment with endless choices of products, encompasses the customers in the brand's decision-making process and makes them a nucleus in producing a digital content, that can be achieved through customer engagement as a concept of a deep emotional connection, and beneficial relation between customers and company.

Customer engagement is a multidimensional concept and a set of different customers' actions regarding brand-related content as reacting on firm-generated content, commenting on, sharing

it, and also posting user-generated content through different social media platforms (Barger & Pektier, 2016). Customer engagement is about the customers' value addition to the company, in direct or indirect way. Direct way is through purchase that directly affects the company's performance, while the indirect way is by customers' influence and knowledge value that provides the company with feedback, opinions, and suggestions about its products and services (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

New communication technologies and particularly social media platforms open a space for customer engaging, communicating, and exchanging ideas and experiences between customers and the brand. Engaged customers are more familiar with the brand and become advocates who effectively promote the brand and attract new customers, driving on this way brand awareness, loyalty, and future sales.

Brand awareness is a first point in creating brand equity. It refers to the capacity of a customer to recognize or recall the brand from a particular product category under different market conditions (Romaniuk et al., 2017; O'Guinn et al., 2009). It is an ability of customer to connect the brand with its name, logo, symbol, regardless the decision to buy the product and service or not. Brand awareness can be divided into three levels, first is brand recognition, then brand recall, and top of mind as a last level.

Brand recognition refers to customers' ability to identify the brand when exposed to the external stimuli as logo, colors, packaging, etc. in other words customer saw the given brand or heard about it before.

Brand recall is more difficult and associated with brand image and personality. Customer identifies the brand depending on information that is stored in his/her mind.

Top of mind is the highest level of brand awareness related to the customers' ability to recall the brand without any aid because it is the first option and priority of a customer in a given product category (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1996).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dabbous and Barakat (2020), in their study explore how content quality that brand offers on social media, and the brand-customers interactions on social media, impact purchase intentions. Their study contains multiple mediators: hedonic motivation related to the entertainment and pleasure while using social media, utilitarian motivation that is rational and goal oriented, customer engagement, and brand awareness.

To investigate all these relations, survey questionnaire was developed and target group was chosen among Millennials, individuals born between 1981 and 1999 as generations who have been exposed to technological communication and especially usage of social media from the early stages of their lives. After the questionnaire was conducted, researchers used different analytical techniques to evaluate the results. The results showed that content quality and brand interactions, but especially content quality have significant positive impact on brand awareness. Results also showed that increase in customer engagement not necessarily increases brand awareness, but both, brand awareness and customer engagement on social media have positive impact on consumers purchase intention where the effect of brand awareness is stronger. Based on the results of their study Dabbous and Barakat concluded that hedonic motive has significant

impact in increasing consumer engagement in social media and also in mediating the relation between content quality, brand interactivity and consumer engagement.

The research of Koljonen (2016), aimed to understand more the concept of content marketing, its techniques and benefits and its effect on increasing brand awareness, engagement, and loyalty. Another goal of the research was to determine the types of content that should be created, distributed, and promoted by case company through social media channels in order to increase customer engagement and attract new customers. Researcher used both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection, by questionnaire and through interview and observation. The results showed that content marketing through effective and appropriate actions and strategy can be meaningful tool for company's branding and business. The findings also indicate that good, valuable digital content can pull customers to the company's websites and have positive influence on increasing the sales.

The study of Georgieva and Djoukanova (2014), included three research topics: content marketing process, online branding, and online brand equity. The authors explained the opportunities of content marketing in straightening online branding, and digital content phenomenon as a core tool of the process of building customer- brand equity and its elements, namely brand awareness, brand associations, brand trust, and brand loyalty. To achieve research goals, authors used a combination of semi-structure interviews with representatives of case company, and virtual observation of the digital content published by the company.

Empirical findings highlighted the importance of content marketing process and identified three phases of it, and objectives and activities of each phase starting with content planning phase that include identifying target audience, their demands and interests, after that content creation and content distribution. Other results were related to the role of digital content in creating brand equity.

Delivering of relevant, valuable content that fits customers' needs increases brand visibility online and enhances brand message, can positively impact and improve brand awareness and create positive brand associations.

Cizmeci and Ercan (2015), conducted study to determine the impact of digital marketing tools on creating brand awareness among large housing companies in their effort of achieving competitive advantage in the market. Researchers also compared between marketing communicating tools that create paid digital content as corporate websites, search engine, email communications and est., and marketing tools that create proactive digital content as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

Researchers applied the "Delphi Analysis Technique" based on collecting and organizing opinions of experts about some complex problem. Interviews were made with experts, and then results and conclusion evaluated based on consensus reached by experts. All group members without exception agreed that websites have significant impact in creating brand awareness. The experts argued that the impact of marketing communication tools that create paid digital content are greater than of the tools that create proactive content. Another interesting finding was that housing companies use digital marketing communication tools mainly for creating

brand awareness, not for purpose of sales and that digital marketing communication tools enable customers to be active participants in creating brand awareness.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is a system of rules with particular techniques and procedures used to identify, explain, examine, and analyze the collected data about specific topic. Researchers chose a number of statistical methods appropriate to the topics in order to achieve the objectives and aims of their study.

In this research, beside reviewing the theoretical frameworks and related studies, questionnaire was developed and used to collect data from Starbucks' customers who are living in Istanbul-Turkey to examine the mediating role of each of social media and customer engagement in strengthening the relation between digital content marketing and brand awareness. After retrieving 398 surveys that was distributed through online platform, researchers analyzed the data using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The researchers used several statistical tools to evaluate the collected data. To test the validity of the questionnaire and the relationships between variable Pearson correlation coefficient was used. The reliability of the questionnaire was examined through Cronbach's coefficient alpha.

Parallel multiple mediation model proposed by Hayes (2013) was applied in which digital content marketing is independent variable, brand awareness is dependent variable and both social media and customer engagement are mediator variables. After that regression based bootstrap approach was used to estimate indirect, direct, and total effects.

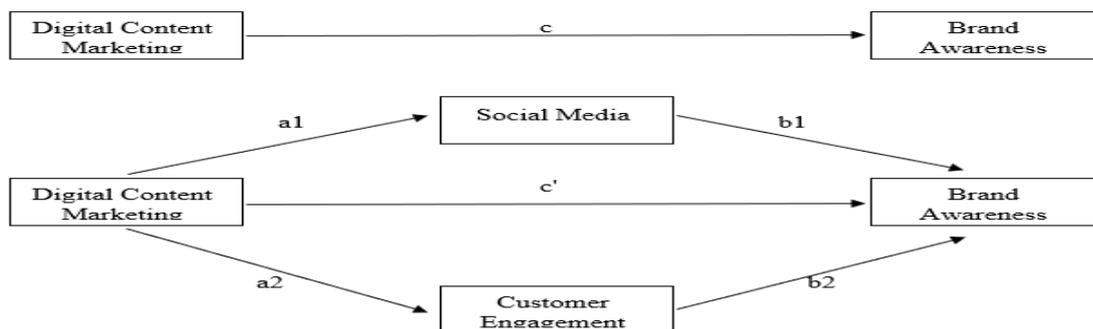


Figure 1: Mediation model

In the model path-a estimates the effect of digital content marketing on both of social media and customer engagement, path-b estimates the effect of both social media and customer engagement on brand awareness variable controlling for digital content marketing which is the independent variable. C' estimates the effect of digital content marketing on brand awareness holding all the mediator variables constant.

According to Hayes (2013), the establishing of indirect and direct effects are the keys in mediation analysis so regression based bootstrap approach was used to estimate each of specific indirect effects of the mediators, total indirect effect and the total effect of digital content marketing on brand awareness.

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

Validity of the Questionnaire

Validity indicates the accuracy of the used measurement, in other words the extent to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. Statistical validity is used to evaluate instrument validity, which is representing in criterion-related validity, construct or structured validity, and content validity.

Table 1: Correlation coefficient of each field and the whole of questionnaire

No.	Field	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	P-Value (Sig.)
1.	Digital Content Marketing	.797*	0.000
2.	Social Media	.746*	0.000
3.	Customer Engagement	.773*	0.000
4.	Brand Awareness	.699*	0.000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The table shows the Pearson correlation coefficient for the four variables of the study, their values and p-value significance. The correlation coefficient for "digital content marketing" is (0.797) with p-value less than 0.05; the correlation coefficient for "social media" is (0.746) with p-value less than 0.05; the correlation coefficient for the third variable "customer engagement" is (0.773) with p-value less than 0.05, and the last variable "brand awareness" has a correlation coefficient value (0.699) and also p-value (sig) less than 0.05. The results show high correlation coefficients for all variables, so the researchers conclude a strong positive association between each field and the entire questionnaire, and the questionnaire is considered as valid to measure what it sits for.

Reliability of the Questionnaire

Reliability is equaled with consistency, stability, and dependability of the measurement tool across time, items, and researchers. To ensure that the questionnaire is reliable, Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha that is designed for examining the internal consistency should be used. The range of Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha values between +1 to -1, and as much as the value is near to one, the reliability of the questionnaire is higher.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha for each field of the questionnaire

No.	Field	Cronbach's Alpha
1.	Digital Content Marketing	0.867
2.	Social Media	0.827
3.	Customer Engagement	0.720
4.	Brand Awareness	0.753
	All items of the questionnaire	0.881

The Cronbach's Alpha values range between (0.720) for brand awareness, and (0.867) for digital content marketing. These results are higher than 0.5 which ensure the reliability for each field of the questionnaire. The total Cronbach's Alpha for all items of the questionnaire is (0.881). It indicates an excellent and reliable questionnaire that can be distributed to the sample population.

Correlation Coefficient between Variables

The table below is representing the regressions and relationships between variables of the study.

Table 3: Correlation Coefficient Matrix

		Digital Content Marketing	Social Media	Customer Engagement	Brand Awareness
Digital Content Marketing	Pearson Correlation	1	.583*	.451*	.602*
	P-Value		.000	.000	.000
Social Media	Pearson Correlation		1	.634*	.526*
	P-Value			.000	.000
Customer Engagement	Pearson Correlation			1	.476*
	P-Value				.000

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The table shows that there is a positive relationship between all variables of the study that is confirmed with p-value which is smaller than 0.05 in all relationships.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis tests whether third intermediate variable intervenes the relationship between independent and dependent variables or not. Therefore, the estimating of indirect effect is a key for establishing mediation, it answers the question whether mediation exists, whereas the direct effect is important as an assessment to what extent the mediator explains the relationship between independent and dependent variable.

In this study parallel multiple mediation is examined through regression-based bootstrap approach and using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013).

Table 4: Regression of the variable "Digital Content Marketing" on "Social Media"

Variable	B	T	Sig.	LLCI	ULCI	R	R-sq	F	Sig.
Constant	1.3984	9.1556	.0000	1.0981	1.6987				
Digital Content Marketing	.5919	14.2676	.0000	.5103	.6734	.5827	.3395	203.5641	.0000

The above table is showing the unstandardized regression coefficient for "Social Media" variable that equals (0.5919) with p-value 0.0000 which is smaller than significance level 0.05. This represents path-a1.

Table 5: Regression of the variable "Digital Content Marketing" on Customer Engagement"

Variable	B	T	Sig.	LLCI	ULCI	R	R-sq	F	Sig.
Constant	1.7073	9.6107	.0000	1.3581	2.0566				
Digital Content Marketing	.4858	10.0691	.0000	.3910	.5807	.4515	.2038	101.3866	.0000

The above table is showing the unstandardized regression coefficient for "Customer Engagement" variable that equals (0.4858) with p-value 0.0000 which is smaller than significance level 0.05. This represents path-a2.

Table 6: Regression of direct and indirect effect of the variables "Digital Content Marketing", "Social Media", and "Customer Engagement" on "Brand Awareness" variable

Variable	B	T	Sig.	LLCI	ULCI	R	R-sq	F	Sig.
Constant	.4355	2.2297	.0263	.0515	.8195	.6544	.4283	98.3926	.0000
Digital Content Marketing	.5210	9.0039	.0000	.4072	.6347				
Social Media	0.1985	3.0207	0.0027	.0693	.3276				
Customer Engagement	0.2036	3.6048	0.0004	.0926	.3147				

After estimating the regressions of path-b1 (0.1985) and path-b2 (0.2036) between each mediator and brand awareness with controlling for digital content marketing, the specific indirect effects of social media and customer engagement were calculated as a products a1b1 (0.1175) and a2b2 (0.0989), respectively. The total indirect effect (0.2164) is calculated as a sum of two specific indirect effects.

Table (7): Indirect effect(s) of Digital Content Marketing on Brand Awareness

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	.2164	.0442	.1297	.3022
Med1	.1175	.0443	.0272	.2043
Med2	.0989	.0355	.0324	.1706

The bootstrap confidence intervals for better accuracy was also estimated. The results of specific indirect effects (0.1175, 95% CI 0.0272-0.2043) for social media, and (0.0989, 95% CI 0.0324-0.1706) for customer engagement showed that social media and customer engagement are significant mediators.

Table (8): Direct effect of Digital Content Marketing on Brand Awareness

Effect	SE	T	P	LLCI	ULCI	C'_PS	C'_CS
.5210	.0279	9.0039	.0000	.4072	.6347	.7115	.4257

As we discussed, the estimation of direct effect is also important in mediation analysis and in this study, it was equal to (0.5210), 95% CI (0.4072-0.6347), so it can be considered significant too.

Table (9): Total effect of Digital Content Marketing on Brand Awareness

Effect	Se	T	P	LLCI	ULCI	C_PS	C_CS
.7374	.0491	15.0221	.0000	.6409	.8339	1.0070	.6025

The total effect of digital content marketing on brand awareness is the sum of direct effect (.5210) and total indirect effect (.2164) that are equal to (.7374).

CONCLUSION/ DISCUSSION

In today's business environment, there is a new scope called digital marketing with unlimited strategies and opportunities for capturing customers by creating attractive and unique content that fits customers' need and expectations.

After creating the proper content that covers all valuable and meaningful information for target audience, the company distributes this content through different digital channels especially social media as a powerful tool in promoting a content. In this way, digital content marketing through its meaningful two-way conversations between company and customers, increases brand awareness, loyalty, and profitability in long-term.

After analyzing the data collected from Starbucks' customers who are living in Istanbul, and depending on the results, researchers conclude that there is significant relation between digital content marketing and each of social media, customer engagement, and brand awareness. There is also positive relation between each of social media and customer engagement with the dependent variable brand awareness.

Taken together, the findings of analyses show that the direct effect is greater than total indirect effect which can be an indicator that some others, more powerful mediators have been abandoned.

Current study confirmed the positive relations between digital content marketing, customer engagement, social media and brand awareness and these results are consistent with the findings of Dabbous and Barakat (2020) which focused on the significant impact that quality of content provided on social media has on brand awareness, as a mediator in purchase intention of the customers. But their study did not find significant effect of customer engagement on brand awareness. Koljonen (2016), also investigating the role of content marketing through social media channels revealed the positive influence of different content marketing techniques in building brand awareness, loyalty and increasing of customer engagement. Koljonen' findings were similar to the results of this study. The study found that there is positive significant effect of digital content marketing on brand awareness, and these results match the findings if Georgieva and Djoukanova (2014) who pointed on the importance and opportunities of content marketing process in building brand equity, and namely brand awareness. The results are also in line with those of Çizmeci and Ercan (2015) who found that digital marketing communication tools, particularly paid digital content has impact on creating brand awareness and enables customers to be active participants in that process.

Digital content marketing is a potential that offers big opportunities and challenging for doing business nowadays, so authors recommend future research about this topic and its impact on brand awareness, and also about social media and customer engagement as an integral parts of digital content marketing.

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