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**Social Media's Role in Branding: A Study of Social Media Use and the  
Cultivation of Brand Affect, Trust, and Loyalty**

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**Social Media's Role in Branding: A Study of Social Media Use and the  
Cultivation of Brand Affect, Trust, and Loyalty**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

I would like to show appreciation to three very important women in my life, my grandmother, mother, and sister. I am truly grateful to them for sticking by me through the tough times. It has been a long journey, and they were there through every step.

I would also like to thank my friends because I could not have completed this effort without their assistance, tolerance, and enthusiasm. You all kept me going with your encouragement. Thank you all.

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Lastly, this thesis is dedicated to my brother, who taught me that life is too short to not chase your dreams. Thank you.

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## **Abstract**

### **Social Media's Role in Branding: A Study of Social Media Use and the Cultivation of Brand Affect, Trust, and Loyalty**

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Social media is a newer emerging media outlet that could serve as a good communication tool for companies, marketers, and advertisers alike; yet, studies into the effects that social media may have on people's perceptions is more limited. The goal of this research study is to investigate whether or not social media has the ability to influence people's perceptions of brands. It applies cultivation theory to social media and specifically looks at whether or not social media can cultivate brand affect, trust, and loyalty. As a result, this study will allow for potential understanding of how to use social media effectively to communicate messages and where additional research can be done to better understand this newer media outlet.

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## **Introduction**

With the rise of the Internet and the World Wide Web in the 1990's, advertisers began to take interest in the possibility of using the medium for advertising (Berthon, Pitt, & Watson, 1996). Over the years, additional aspects of the Internet have been added that enhance its potential as an advertising tool, including social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For example, Facebook, a social media tool prominently used for communicating with friends, family, and co-workers, was established in 2004 and now has approximately 800 million active users (Facebook, 2011). Twitter, another social media tool prominently used for sharing information and connecting individuals to relevant information, was established in 2006 and now has approximately 300 million users (Twitter, 2011). These and other social media tools have seen substantial growth since establishment and, as a result, the advertising industry and businesses have taken interest in the potential of these tools for aiding in marketing (Mashable, 2011).

Mashable, an independent news source that focuses on social media, was established in 2005 to help keep up with the shift in communication in the digital world (Mashable, 2011). Articles such as "Following Brands on Twitter Increases Purchase Intent" have been published to give insight into social media and its functions (Swallow, 2011). In that article, it is stated that people who follow brands on Twitter tend to be more prone to buy and recommend those brands' products (Swallow, 2011). This and a number of other articles lean to showing a relationship between social media use and



interaction with brands; yet, there is little to no theoretical backing to those studies nor rigorous research to confirm these are statistically significant relationships.

Considering such, this study will attempt to test the viability of one particular theory, cultivation theory, as a potential framework for better understanding the relationship between this social media use and advertising outcomes (Gerbner 1998). Specifically, a few cultivation effects that may be of interest to companies, marketers, and advertisers are brand affect, trust, and loyalty. As a result, this study examines whether social media use impacts these advertising outcomes. The study focuses on social media outlets with stronger characteristics for building relationships (an important component of brand affect, trust, and loyalty as explained below) and those with narrower slices of content for mainstreaming effects (a important component of cultivation as explained below).

Below, each of the key concepts of this thesis, social media, brand loyalty, brand trust and brand affect, and cultivation theory, will be described. Then, the proposed hypotheses will be presented, as well as the methods used for testing these hypotheses. Finally, the results will be discussed as well as the limitations of this study.

## **Literature Review**

### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

An important component to define for the purpose of this study is social media, including how the various outlets of social media are classified, and what factors influence the classification. First, “social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Moreover, social media has been defined broadly as a media for social interaction (Agichtein, et al., 2008). Social media has come to include items such as blogs, web forums, photo and video sharing communities, and social networking platforms such as Facebook (Agichtein, et al., 2008).

Social media sites launched as far back as 1997 with the launch of SixDegrees.com (Ellison, 2008). Overtime, more and more social media site have become prevalent with a large surge of social media in the 2000’s (Ellison, 2008). Ellison (2008) states, “Since their introduction, social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices” (p. 210).

Considering the shift in individuals to use social media on a daily basis, more studies have been done to investigate social media and what that means for advertisers and companies, such as a study done by Mangold & Faulds (2009). In the study by Mangold & Faulds (2009), it is argued that social media made it possible for a single individual to communicate with many people about products and companies. As a result,

it is contended that social media should be used in company's integrated marketing communications (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Yet, not all social media are thought to be alike. Each different social media outlet offers different features and components for the users supporting a wide range of individual interest and practices (Ellison, 2008). As a result, a classification system was been put in place to distinguish one social media outlet from another based on two components of social media outlined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). Those components were the media-related component, which drew from the concepts of social presence and media richness, and the social-related component, which drew from the concepts of self-presentation and self-disclosure (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). For a better understanding of how different social media outlets function and are classified, it is important to first understand the media-related components and then the social-related components.

There are two media related dimensions used to classify social media: the elements of social presence and media richness. Social presence theory essentially states that media differ on levels of social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence is broadly the auditory, visual, and physical contact allowed between communication partners (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Most importantly, the higher the social presence, the greater impact communication partners have on one another's behavior (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

The second media related dimension used to classify social media is media richness theory which essentially states that media differ on their level of media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Media richness is looked at as the amount of information that is

allowed to be transmitted through a media at a given time (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The assumption is that one goal of communication is to reduce ambiguity, which is the existence of conflicting views, and uncertainty, which is the absence of information, and the richer the media the greater the reduction (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Basically, some media are more effective than others in reducing ambiguity and uncertainty and providing better information (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

With the media related components of social media in mind, the outlets can vary tremendously. Social media outlets integrate different communication tools and new information (Ellison, 2008). For example, various social media outlets may use photo posting, mobile connectivity, or video sharing; yet, other sites may be mostly text based (Ellison, 2008). Each of those features changes how individuals use the sites, present themselves, and disclose information, hence the social component of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

In addition to the media related component, there is a social related component, which also has two dimensions: self-presentation and self-disclosure. The concept of self-presentation basically states that in social interactions people desire to control the impressions other people form of them (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Self-presentation occurs to help create an image that aligns with one's identity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). When connecting this with social media, people may join a social network to present themselves on the Internet. Then, that self-presentation occurs through self-disclosure, where self-disclosure is the act of revealing certain personal information to other

individuals (Joinson, 2001). Therefore, self-disclosure helps develop relationships whether with close family, friends, or a stranger (Joinson, 2001).

Considering each of the above elements: social presence, media richness, self-presentation, and self-disclosure, social media is further classified by outlet. Blogs, social networking sites (i.e. Facebook), and virtual social worlds (i.e. Second Life) are all higher self-presentation and self-disclosure with social presence and media richness increasing with the latter (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). On the other hand, collaborative projects (i.e. Wikipedia), content communities (i.e. YouTube), and virtual game worlds (i.e. World of Warcraft) are all lower self-presentation and self-disclosure with social presence and media richness increasing with the latter (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

On the whole, each of the different outlets provides different benefits to the users and producers of the content, and become important when defining the social media outlets to be used in this study. Furthermore, there are existing studies that support social media to be incorporated into integrated marketing. As a result, the next section examines branding and will be important for defining for this study.

### **BRAND LOYALTY, AFFECT, & TRUST**

There are many ways to define brand loyalty, so it is important to clarify for the purpose of this study. Jacoby and Kyner (1973) stated,

The definition is expressed by a set of six necessary and collectively sufficient conditions. These are that brand loyalty is (1) the biased (i.e., nonrandom), (2) behavioral response (i.e., purchase), (3) expressed over time, (4) by some decision-making unit, (5) with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a

set of such brands, and (6) is a function of psychological (decision-making, evaluative) processes (p. 2).

Each of the conditions should be met in order for brand loyalty to be developed, and it is important to understand that brand loyalty is a deliberate decision and not a random event.

Furthermore, the general definition of brand loyalty generally emphasizes two key aspects: behavioral and attitudinal loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Behavioral loyalty is also known as purchase loyalty and consists of the repeat purchase of a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Attitudinal loyalty includes an element of commitment based on some disposition to a brand due to a unique value associated with that brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Furthermore, simple verbal reports of bias are not sufficient for fully defining brand loyalty as it must be accompanied by a purchasing bias (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973). In addition, one instance of verbal or behavioral bias does not constitute loyalty as the term loyalty notes a condition over time and therefore the act must occur at two or more points in time (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973).

Lastly, there are a couple of influencing factors when it comes to increasing brand loyalty: brand affect and brand trust, which need to be defined for this study. Brand affect is essentially a consumer's favorable or unfavorable response to a brand (Matzler, Grabner-Krauter, & Bidmon, 2008). Brand affect is furthered explained as the ability to generate an emotional response in an individual as a result of the brand's use (Matzler, Grabner-Krauter, & Bidmon, 2008). Brands can make people feel a number of emotions and that creates affect toward a brand (Matzler, Grabner-Krauter, & Bidmon, 2008).

On the other hand, brand trust is “the confident expectations of the brand's reliability and intentions in situations entailing risk to the consumer” (Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, & Yagiie-Guillent, 2003, p. 37). Brand trust then is how willing a consumer is to rely on a brand’s ability to function. Brand trust helps to reduce uncertainty in consumers because it allows them to rely on an certain level of expected performance (Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, & Yagiie-Guillent, 2003). Overall, the greater the brand affect and trust, the greater potential for brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

#### **CULTIVATION THEORY**

The purpose of this study is to draw a connection between social media use and brand affect, trust, and loyalty through cultivation theory, and as such, it is vital to understand what cultivation is and its key factors. Cultivation theory was developed in 1969 by George Gerbner, and since then, television’s effects on people have been studied for several decades now (Potter, 1993). Cultivation theory in its initial form is essentially a communication theory implying that repeated exposure to television, over time, will alter a viewer’s perceptions of reality (Gerbner, 1998). Gerbner et al. (1980) stated, “We have found that the amount of exposure to television is an important indicator of the strength of its contributions to the ways of thinking and acting” (p. 14).

Cultivation theory developed from the Cultural Indicators project in 1967 done by George Gerbner (Potter, 1993). From the Cultural Indicators project, it was concluded that television was a medium that could be used to socialize people into roles and behaviors (Gerbner, 1976). Gerbner’s overall deduction was that the social roles on

television factored into the social roles assumed in reality. What was seen on television became the “facts of life and standards of judgment on which conclusions are based” (Gerbner, 1976, p. 175). Currently, the most common use of cultivation theory in the United States can be seen through observations of perceived violence (Gerbner, 1976), gender-roles (Morgan, 1983), marriage (Signorielli, 1991), sexuality (Brown, 2002), materialism (Shrum et al., 2005), and other topics all in relation to television.

One of the key principles behind cultivation theory is repeated exposure. It is suggested that the more time an individual spends in the television world, then the more likely that individual is going to report having social realities that are congruent with the social realities seen on television (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). More specifically, “cultivation theory is concerned with the aggregate effects of “massive, long-term and common exposure of large and heterogeneous publics to centrally produced, mass-distributed, and repetitive systems of stories” (Williams, 2006, p. 74).

Additionally, emphasis is placed on how media can have a pull on one’s perceptions with increased exposure to content, and the level and variation of exposure affects the strength of the cultivating effects (Williams, 2006). Essentially, if the content is more limited, cultivation theory then predicts that the cultivated effects should follow accordingly, such that if content were more limited then that narrow content would play a larger role in developing perceptions (Williams, 2006). The notion of such is predominately related to “mainstreaming,” another key principle of cultivation (Gerbner, 1998).



“Mainstreaming” is the comparative consistency of views that begin to develop due to heavy, long-term exposure to the social media world (Gerbner, 1998). It denotes that heavy exposure may displace typical variations in perspectives that would ordinarily develop from other factors (Gerbner, 1998). Recurrent or repetitive features are important for cultivation to occur. Only repetitive, consistent exposure to persistent, common patterns can be expected to cultivate stable and widely shared perceptions of reality (Gerbner, 1998). With heavy exposure to these consistent messages, people begin to align their views to the reality they are exposed to and mainstreaming occurs (Gerbner, 1998).

Yet, sometimes messages relate or resonate with one individual more than another, and this becomes another key principle behind cultivation. “Resonance” occurs when cultivation is stronger in one individual compared to another (Potter, 1993). When what people see on television aligns with their everyday lives, that combination creates a “double dose” of the messaging and can increase cultivation (Gerbner et al., 1980).

Finally, the last key to understanding cultivation is by understanding the relationship underlying cultivation effects and media exposure. The relation between media and cultivation is rather complex because the “pull” on viewers’ perceptions relies on where the viewers’ lifestyles are in relation to the “norm” of the world of media (Gerbner, 1998). Cultivation is not another word for effects nor is the process considered to be one way; instead, cultivation is viewed as subtle yet complex intermingling of influences assuming that the medium and its publics interact in a dynamic process (Gerbner, 1998). Essentially, viewers fuse their reality with the “social reality” seen in media and then begin aligning their own perceptions.

To test whether cultivation occurs, theorists see if a “cultivation differential” is developed. “The “cultivation differential” is a “margin of difference in the conceptions of reality between light and heavy viewers in the same demographic subgroups” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 180). If heavy exposure creates a difference in the perceptions of reality, then cultivation has occurred.

### **HYPOTHESES**

The cultivation theory was developed “when ‘television’ in the U.S. meant three national broadcast networks, plus a small handful of independent and public/educational stations. The three networks attracted well over 90% of the viewing audience, night after night” (Bryant & Zillmann, 2008, p. 45). Since then, the media has increasingly changed. More and more individuals are gravitating to digital media from traditional media (Williams, 2006). Considering such, this study is testing the cultivating ability of social media, a newer non-traditional media, and specifically the cultivated effects of brand affect, trust, and loyalty. This study will try to show how social media can create that biased preference through reported exposure to consistent messages from brands on social media. This study will be looking for a cultivating relationship between exposure to social media and brand affect, trust, and loyalty. As such, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1: Social media use has a significant impact on brand affect.**

**H2: Social media use has a significant impact on brand trust.**

**H3: Social media use has a significant impact on brand loyalty.**

## **Method**

### **PROCEDURE**

For the purpose of this study, the social media outlets studied were those of higher self-presentation and self-disclosure considering the importance of such when developing relationships (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), and the fact that brand loyalty essentially is a relationship between a brand and its consumers, as noted above. Even more precisely, a micro-blog (Twitter) and a social networking (Facebook) were examined. Blogs and social networks score low to medium on the social presence and media richness scale (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), which allows a moderate level of uncertainty that the brand and community may be able to fill and the opportunity to communicate without being too immersive, as mentioned above. Furthermore, the content on these sites may be narrower and allow more mainstreaming to occur.

Data was collected using an electronic survey administered through the above two social media sites, Facebook and Twitter, using a convenience sampling technique. A convenience sampling technique was used due to limited funding for this study and also for the ability to directly recruit people who were using Facebook and Twitter by administering the survey through those sites. A total of 232 people responded to the survey with 96 people being Facebook and Twitter users, 110 being Facebook only users, 16 being Twitter only users, and 10 not using either social media (these categories were not mutually exclusive). Then, the participants were asked if they followed a retail brand through these social media sites; 40 individuals reported that they did through Facebook and Twitter, 70 individuals did through Facebook only, and 14 individuals did through

Twitter only. This study focuses on those individuals who self-reported as Facebook users who follow a retail brand. The sample size was 110.

### **SAMPLE**

The data reported below came from the sample of 110 Facebook users who follow retail brands through social media. Nearly 60 percent of those Facebook users were female and the mean age within the sample was 30 years (range = 19-67, SD = 8.7). In addition, 85 percent of the sample reported using Internet Social Media on a daily basis. Television and other Internet Websites were the second two most common sources of media used daily. Of the type of retail brands followed, soft goods (i.e. clothing and cosmetics) were most common with 54 people reporting that they followed that type of product; 36 people reported that they followed food products and 20 reported that they followed hard goods (i.e. appliances and electronics).

### **MEASURE**

First, qualifying questions were used to see if an individual did in fact use the social media of interest to this study. These questions were, “Do you use Facebook?” and “Do you use Twitter?” (yes or no). As a follow-up to those questions, level of social media use was reported with the item, “On average, how much time a day do you use Facebook for non-work related reasons?” Response options ranged from 0.25 hours to 9+ hours. Facebook users reported spending an average time of 2.68 hours on Facebook (SD = 2.20). Time spent using twitter was likewise measured. These two items were summed to create a composite social media use variable. Respondents were also asked another

more general social media use question, “How often do you used the following media?-Internet Social Media.” Response options ranged from never (1) to daily (6). The average score reported was 5.75 (SD = .65), with the majority reporting daily use. This created the general social media use variable.

These questions were then followed up with a set of statements set to measure brand affect, trust, and loyalty. These were likert scale items (1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree). Respondents were instructed, “Now, think of a retail brand you follow on Facebook. Consider that brand and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.” The statements, which were pulled from a scale by Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), were as follows, with each dimension (trust, affect and loyalty) listed separately.

Brand affect was measured as a two-item index with the following two statements: “I feel good when I use this brand” and “This brand makes me happy.” Coefficient alpha for this two-item index of brand affect was .92. Brand trust was measured as a three-item index with the following three statements: “I trust this brand,” “I view this as a dishonest brand,” and “I feel this brand is unsafe.” The latter two items were recoded. Coefficient alpha for this three-item index of brand trust was .74. Lastly, brand loyalty was measured as a two-item index with the following two statements: “I will buy this brand the next time I buy that type of product” and “I am committed to this brand.” For brand loyalty, the first statement measured purchase loyalty and the second statement measured attitudinal loyalty, as both are need for brand loyalty to occur. Coefficient alpha for this two-item index of brand loyalty was .87.

## **ANALYSIS**

All analyses were conducted using the statistical package of SPSS Version 20. In addition to the descriptive statistics reported above, a correlation was run to test the relationship between the general social media use variable, the composite social media use variable, as a combined index of how much time people reported spending on Facebook and Twitter, and brand trust, affect, and loyalty. Also, a regression was run to see the impact on brand affect, trust, and loyalty by these variables: age, sex, general social media use, retail brand classification, and composite social media use. Results are reported below. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

## Results

### HYPOTHESES TESTS

The correlation for Facebook users who followed a retail brand was run to see the relationship between general social media use, composite social media use, and individuals' level of brand trust, affect, and loyalty. Results revealed a few significant relationships. First, general social media use correlated significantly with brand trust,  $r(110) = .26, p < .05$ . General social media use also correlated significantly with brand loyalty,  $r(110) = .18, p < .05$ . Finally, the composite social media use and brand trust were significantly correlated,  $r(110) = -.342, p < .05$ .

Next, three regressions models were run to test the hypotheses. A regression was ran because it allowed the simultaneously analysis of the impact of multiple independent variables (age, sex, general social media use, retail brand classification, and composite social media use) on the continuous dependent variables (brand affect, trust, and loyalty). By running this form of analysis, it allowed a better picture of how multiple variables were affecting and interacting the dependent variables.

The first regression was run to see the impact on brand affect by these variables: age, sex, general social media use, retail brand classification, and composite social media use. The model was significant in accounting for variance in brand affect with an Adjusted  $R^2 = .08$ . Within the regression model, age (Beta = .23,  $p < .05$ ) surfaced as a significant predictor. Sex (Beta = .19,  $p > .05$ ), composite social media use (Beta = -.04,  $p > .05$ ), general social media use (Beta = .12,  $p > .05$ ), and retail brand classification (Beta = .10,  $p > .05$ ) were not significant predictors. Thus, H1 was not supported.

The second regression was run to see the impact on brand trust by these variables: age, sex, general social media use, retail brand classification, and composite social media

use. The model was significant in accounting for variance in brand trust with an Adjusted  $R^2 = .23$ . Within the regression model the following surfaced as significant predictors of brand trust: composite social media use (Beta =  $-.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ), general social media use (Beta =  $.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and retail brand classification (Beta =  $.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Age (Beta =  $.10$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and Sex (Beta =  $.10$ ,  $p > .05$ ) were not significant predictors. Consistent with the second hypothesis, composite social media use significantly predicted brand trust (H2; Beta =  $-.37$ ,  $t(110) = -4.116$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, H2 was supported (see Table 1 below) and the relationship was negative.

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	14.882	2.792		5.331	.000
	What year were you born?–Year	.012	.043	.027	.275	.784
	Sex:	1.307	.762	.167	1.714	.089
2	(Constant)	5.448	3.806		1.431	.155
	What year were you born?–Year	.057	.040	.131	1.449	.150
	Sex:	.509	.708	.065	.719	.474
	SMTIME_Min How often do you use the following media?–Internet Social Media	-.009	.002	-.402	-4.464	.000
3	(Constant)	4.042	3.789		1.067	.289
	What year were you born?–Year	.043	.039	.098	1.095	.276
	Sex:	.782	.706	.100	1.109	.270
	SMTIME_Min How often do you use the following media?–Internet Social Media	-.008	.002	-.369	-4.116	.000
	Thinking about the same retail brand as you did above, how would you classify that retail brand?	1.066	.480	.194	2.220	.029

a. Dependent Variable: Trust

Table 1: Regression Test: Impact on brand trust by: age, sex, composite social media use, general social media use, and retail brand classification



Finally, the last regression was run to see the impact on brand loyalty by these variables: age, sex, general social media use, retail brand classification, and composite social media use. The model was significant in accounting for variance in brand loyalty with an Adjusted  $R^2 = .06$ . When brand loyalty was predicted it was found that age (Beta = .19,  $p < .05$ ), was a significant predictor. Sex (Beta = .15,  $p > .05$ ), composite social media use (Beta = -.08,  $p > .05$ ), general social media use (Beta = .16,  $p > .05$ ), and retail brand classification (Beta = .06,  $p > .05$ ) were not significant predictors. Thus, H3 was not supported.

## **Discussion**

### **FINDINGS**

This study attempted to apply cultivation theory to social media use specifically focusing on two outlets, Facebook and Twitter, and the cultivated effects of brand affect, trust, and loyalty. The findings presented here are original in a couple of ways. First, this study approached cultivation from a branding perspective and applies the theory to social media. In doing so, social media was recognized as potential means for cultivating brand perceptions, specifically brand trust.

When first examining the correlation analysis, a correlation was noticed between composite social media use and brand trust. In addition, a correlation was noticed between general social media use and brand trust and loyalty. With these relationships present, there is room for future studies into what is impacting and creating those relationships.

Secondly, as seen through the regression analysis, the study showed that age could be a contributing factor to brand affect and loyalty, which allows for more research to be done into what is creating those effects. Furthermore, the study supports the suggestion that time spent using social media (composite social media use) is related significantly to brand trust as seen through the regression analysis. This study accounted for a portion of the variance in brand trust as a result of composite social media use; yet, the relationship seen was a negative relationship.

There are many ways to possibly account for and interpret the negative relationship between brand trust and composite social media use. First, with social media,

there is the chance that both negative and positive comments are made about a brand given that social media allows for two-way communication, as mentioned above. In addition, if an individual is being exposed more to messaging through higher levels of social media use, they may also be exposed more to negative comments, where people who use social media less may only see the brands positive comments. Lastly, people interacting on social media may be more prone to seek out or express negative comments about brands. This study did not account for the reasons behind the effect, but further research can be done to better understand the potential negative effects of composite social media use on brand trust.

In conclusion, similar to previous cultivation research, this study found small cultivation effects for social media when it came to brand trust. That said, this study moved beyond the traditional cultivating media, television, to social media. This study also moved beyond the traditional cultivation studies of violence, gender-roles, and materialism as stated above. While this study does have some limitations as presented below, it present a reason for further investigation into social media and potential cultivation effects as well as social media and its relation to branding.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There were a number of limitations for this study. First, the sample size was rather small for both Facebook users who followed a retail brand, with 110 being the final sample size. As a result, the strength of these findings is limited. In addition, since a convenience sampling technique was used, there is a limited ability to make generalizations about the whole population. Furthermore, the brand outcome scales used

were only two or three items, and therefore may not have completely captured the effects desired.

In addition, as with most surveys, there is always the chance for self-reporting biases. There is no guarantee that individuals reported their level of social media use properly. Moreover, a large limitation of the cultivation theory tends to be how levels of media are defined (Potter, 1993). As in most other cultivation studies, there is the potential for levels of media use to differ making studies vary widely.

Furthermore, no specific retail brand was chosen for this study. With that in mind, there is a chance that different brands are better or worse at generating consistent messages that would allow for heavy exposure and mainstreaming to occur. If the brands are not producing enough content to allow for heavier levels of exposure, then cultivation cannot occur.

Finally, the correlation showed that there was not a significant relationship between social media use and brand affect and loyalty. The correlation also showed that the relationship between social media use and brand trust was negative. As a result, there is the chance that heavier levels of social media use have the opposing effect on brand affect, trust, and loyalty. With that in mind, further research can be done to better investigate potential effects.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the media landscape has changed greatly in the past couple of decades with the Internet and a shift to the use of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Considering such and the nature of social media, there is the potential that centrally produced, mass-distributed, and repetitive messages to be delivered to individuals, which may allow for cultivation of perceptions to occur. As a result, social media has the

potential to be a good communication tool for marketers and advertisers; yet, little research has been done to see what outlets are useful and in what manner they are useful.

This study attempted to see if cultivation occurred on specific social media outlets, which had stronger characteristics for building relationships. The cultivation effects that were studied were brand affect, trust, and loyalty. This study tested for the level of use and attempted to discover a cultivation differential; yet, the results showed that social media may have an effect on cultivating brand trust. With there being a stronger relationship between social media use and brand trust, there is room for further research by communication theorists to see why and how the relationship occurs. Furthermore, there is still the potential for other studies into social media use and other cultivating effects.

On the whole, considering the change in media use and the possibility for social media to be a good cultivating media, it seems worth more research to investigate. It is recommended that future studies look to develop a connection between social media and cultivation theory. Additionally, for the purpose of this research study, it is recommended that the study be repeated with a larger sample size and a more defined retail brand to reinforce these findings and see if there is a chance for relationships between social media use and brand affect and loyalty.

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