

## IMPACT OF FIRM CREATED, AND USER GENERATED SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS ON CONSUMER-BRAND METRICS OF SMARTPHONES DURING COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

This study employs S-O-R approach to analyze the impact social media communications exerts on consumer-brand metrics of smartphones during COVID-19. A survey of 513 millennials from India through a well-structured questionnaire reveal that user generated content on social media positively influences purchase intent of consumers whereas firm created social media content doesn't directly influence the purchase intention. In addition to it, social media content generated by the firm significantly and positively influences user created communication on social media. Besides being insightful to the marketers on how they can target the millennials in a better way during COVID-19, this research bestows to the subsisting literature on how the communication on social media influence the brand metrics of a high involvement purchase when incremented hours are being spent on social media due to lockdowns and home stay restrictions.

**Keywords:** Perceived usefulness, Communication; Brand awareness, Purchase intention, Smartphones, Brand attitude

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of marketing from Marketing 4.0 to Marketing 5.0 (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2021) is now being catalysed by the COVID-19 epidemic, and social media is playing a very predominant role in it (Samet, 2020). Stay home regulations across the globe have incremented the daily hours spent by users on social media. For example, thirty percent users in the USA are spending one to two additional hours (Tankovska, 2021), while forty six percent users in India are spending more than two additional hours (Morgan Stanley Research, 2020). This overspending of time on social media is resulting in a spike in all three activities of online engagement - creating, sharing, and consuming of content (see Shao, 2009), especially through smartphones. Smartphones have become instrumental nowadays in providing users an access to social media platforms like Zoom, Microsoft team, Facebook, WhatsApp, Edmodo, Telegram etc. (Sharma et al., 2022a; Susanto et al., 2021; Vithayathil et al., 2020). In these

conditions, it becomes quite evident to see how the incremented engagement with online content will influence purchase intention of smartphone in an emerging market like India wherein the inception of contact tracing (Fahey, & Hino, 2020) and vaccine registration through smartphone-based app Aarogya Setu (Basu, 2021; Nagori, 2021) is pushing the smartphone demand to all new levels. During the first quarter of 2021, smartphone demand in India has increased 23 percent YoY to surpass the 38 million marks. Thus, it becomes discernible to examine how social media communications (hereafter SMCs) are influencing the purchase intentions of Indians, especially millennials, a generational group possessing the highest buying capacity (Moreno et al., 2017; Bolton et al., 2013) and using social media the most (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

Through the espousal of SOR approach (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this study evaluates the impact the SMCs exercises on consumer-brand metrics of smartphones.

Specifically, it studies the effect of user generated and smartphone brand created content on the purchase intention of millennials, the generation me, me, me (see Stein, 2013). Millennials are tech savvy, habitual of using internet heavily (Ivanova et al., 2019; Duffett, 2015), and their buying approach is really different from other cohorts (Anshari et al., 2021). Now when the economic slowdown and tough competition has made it difficult for the brands to earn an incremental dollar in sale, this study assists the smartphone brands in how they can target and promote their products to this cohort in a better way.

Besides being of significant importance to scholars and practitioners in enhancing their discernment regarding the influence social media has on willingness to purchase during the present scenario of Covid-19, this study also contributes to the pertinent literature in many ways. First, this research extends the literature on how the increased online hours spent on social media can affect the brand awareness. Second, this study dilates the existent literature on how the brand awareness influences the purchase intention of a high involvement purchase during a pandemic. Third, when economic slowdown has caused job losses and pay cuts, this research enhances the literature on how the utility to be drawn from each single penny during a pressing purchase can act upon the employment of social media in recommendations, reviews and price deals, etc.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 S-O-R Approach

The conceptual framework of this research is grounded at the S-O-R approach (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) which feigns that one's perception and explication of the surroundings (stimulus) influences how s(h)e experiences(organism) that situation and then renders some outputs (response). The outputs may be either cognitive, or affective, or behavioural, or concurrent occurrence of some or all of these. The present research conceptualizes SMCs as a stimulus (Carlson, Rahman, Voola & De, 2018), one's attitude towards a smartphone brand as an organism (Sahoo & Pillai, 2017; Kunja, Kumar, & Rao, 2022) and then purchase intention (Hu et al., 2016; Goyal, S., Chauhan, & Gupta, 2021; Sharma et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b) as a response

to it. Existing literature (see Carlson *et al.*, 2018) depicts that existing customers of brands on online platforms, interactions among the customers, socialization through reciprocal interactions etc. play as surrounding cues which are alike the user generated information on social media, the stimulus. The settings of S-O-R purports that the effect of stimuli on the behavior of an individual is intermediated by an affective (feeling) or a cognitive state (learning) which then constitutes the state of organism (Sharma et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b). The stimuli guide the development of a brand specific favourable or unfavourable feelings, the brand attitude, the organism. One's own evaluation of a brand then lead to brand specific behavior, especially willingness to buy (Hu et al., 2016). When the existing literature (see Hu et al., 2016; Carlson *et al.*, 2018) largely seems centripetal to study only the influence of brand created stimuli, the present research examines the influence of user specific stimuli along with which it re-examines the effect brand specific stimuli exerts on the purchase intentions in present scenario of COVID-19.

### 2.2 Brand-created content

Brand-created content is dispersed to attract customers towards their brand. To this end, the organizations put various efforts in taking advantage of social media platforms to achieve their goals (Dwivedi et al., 2021). There are certain dimensions of social media marketing that may influence brand performance. The first one is how brands communicate with their customers through social media. Secondly, how brands can demand and distribute the competitive environment and evaluate it through social media. Finally, the brands should be able to forecast the future and respond to the current market expectation(s) by managing social media. Therefore, it becomes very essential for marketers to update themselves by developing knowledge, which can pay off and can influence the brand-related constructs as well (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

#### 2.2.1 Brand-created content and user generated content

Contrary to the brands' traditional communication with customers, SMC gets attention with wide demographic appeal (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), with many benefits such as brands get an additional platform to interact with customers, with low-cost media

of communication when compared to other options available to enhance brand image, increase profits, and customer satisfaction (Sharma et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2002). The communication initiated by the brand on social media raise communication generated by the user on social media (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). The brands indulged in user-generated content leaves a permanent impression on customers minds (Mangold & Faulds 2009), and the brand-initiated content has a positive impact on user-generated content (Ceballos et al., 2016). To test it in Indian context, the proposed hypothesis is-

*H1: The communication created by a smartphone brand on social media positively influences the user-generated communication.*

#### *2.2.2 Brand-created content and brand awareness*

As a perfect platform for interaction, social media is now employed by the marketers for engaging the existing customers (Wirtz et al., 2015), attracting new customers (Karimi & Naghibi 2015), building awareness about brand(s) (Hutter et al., 2013), enhancing brand loyalty (Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012) and brand image (Barreda et al., 2015). Doing so, results in generating more sales (Marshall et al., 2012). Realizing the need to manage a brand on social media platforms marketers put more emphasis on communication on social media through user (Smith et. al., 2012). The brand initiated content has a positive impingement at awareness about brand (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015; Godes & Mayzlin, 2009), wherein one's ability to identify and recognize a brand element is known as brand awareness (see Rossiter & Percy, 1987). To test the findings in the context of smartphone purchases by millennials in India during Covid-19, following hypothesis is proposed.

*H2: The communication created by a smartphone brand on social media regarding smartphone positively influences the brand awareness.*

#### *2.2.3 Brand-created content and brand attitude*

Brand attitude is a predisposition that can possibly be viewed as a customer's degree of interest in a particular brand that again is a resultant of his/her emotional evaluations and rational of the brand (Chaudhuri, 2006). It is the appraising facet of image of a brand and is a resultant of feeling(s) and belief(s) of a consumer(s) towards the attribute(s) of a

brand (Keller, 2003; Arya, Paul, & Sethi, 2018, 2019, 2021). Communication research has found that recurring exposure to the brand communication positively reinforces brand specific memories, creating a better feel of familiarity linked with notion of closeness and affection for brand resulting in positive brand attitude (Janiszewski, 1993; Hoyer and Brown 1990). Therefore, it is hypothesized that -

*H3: The communication created by a smartphone brand on social media regarding smartphone positively influences the brand attitude.*

#### *2.2.4 Brand created content and purchase intention*

Besides the content marketing, brand created content in communication literature is also referred as sponsored content, which is the intentional in-corporation of products, brand elements, or any compelling message into any non-commercial, or editorial content (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2014).

Product placement through movies influences how well the spectators recognize the brand and what sort of their attitudinal intention towards the brand are (Dens, Pelsmacker, Wouters, & Purnawirawan, 2012). Brand created content in the research spanning to 60 brands have been found influence the brand attitude of Facebook users and the brand attitude is again found to influence their purchase intention (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Therefore, the proposed hypothesis in the present context is -

*H4: Communication by smartphone brand on social media significantly and positively influences purchase intention for Smartphone brand.*

#### *2.3 User-generated content*

The content which a consumer creates and is publicly available, not generated by a professional content creator having 24/7 access to different social media platforms for instance SNSs, video or photo sharing applications, etc. is known as user-generated content (Harris & Rae, 2009).

##### *2.3.1 User-generated content and brand awareness.*

Social media has resulted in shifting of electronic commerce into social commerce (Zeng et al., 2009). This has given rise to a platform where people not only have personal

communication with each other, but also they rate, write review, comment, share their experiences, etc., leading to co-creation for the brand (Wang & Hajli, 2014). How social interactions are influencing the buying behaviour of people is the biggest vantage of social media (Hajli, 2014). Positive SMCs by the user increases the brand awareness (Burmam & Arnhold, 2008) because social media is considered as a trust worthier and more dependable basis of knowledge than conventional marketing practices (Foux, 2006). To test this mechanism for smartphone purchases in India during Covid-19, following hypothesis is formulated.

*H5: The communication generated by users on social media regarding smartphone positively affects brand awareness.*

### 2.3.2 User-generated content and brand attitude

The revolution brought by Web 2.0 has instituted a drastic alteration in the espousal of different SNSs by customers and has impacted how the customers interacted with them through the creation and sharing of content over various SNSs, thereby turning in to one of the most effective channel of (marketing) communications (Kietzmann et al., 2011). User created content in a research spanning to the purchase decisions of 60 brands in Poland have been found to influence the brand attitude of Facebook users (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). To test the findings in the context of smartphone purchase during COVID-19, the proposed hypothesis is-

*H6: The effect of communication generated by users on social media regarding smartphone positively influences the brand attitude.*

### 2.3.3 User-generated content and purchase intention

Social media engagements result in three types of activities, namely consuming of content, creating the content and contributing to the content (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). In a study examining the impacts of user-generated content, it is reported that negative reviews have potential to harm the success of a video game while online reviews have been found influential for even not so popular video games (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). In the studies on travel industry, it is found that positive reviews affects the count of booking

done on a booking webpage (Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011) and travelers use the reviews more certainly if the reviews are found to have come from a highly credible source (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013). To test these mechanisms in the context of smartphone purchases by millennials during Covid-19, the proposed hypothesis is -

*H7: The effect of communication generated by users on social media regarding smartphone positively influences the purchase intention.*

### 2.4 Brand awareness, brand attitude and purchase intention

The aptness of potential customers to discern a brand in a specific category of products is known as brand awareness. The review of literature confronted to brand awareness and other facets is reported here as follows -

#### 2.4.1 Brand awareness & purchase intention

With the passage of time, social media is attaining momentum and attention especially by the marketers as its capability of directly communicating with the customers (Hays et al., 2013; Hanaysha et al., 2021; Rashid et al., 2022; Jain et al., 2021; Jhamb et al., 2021). It is mainly because social media is having a substantial influence on organizations brand equity by generating brand awareness (Bruhn et al., 2012). Brand awareness affects a customer's purchase intentions directly (Dabbous, & Barakat, 2020). Thus, brands using platforms of social media can for sure promote their entities to first create awareness and then to turn this awareness in to purchase intentions (Evans, 2008). To evaluate the direct impact of brand awareness on willingness to buy of smartphone in the context of millennials from India during Covid-19, the proposed hypothesis is as follows.

*H8: Awareness about smartphone brand positively influence the purchase intention of smartphone brand.*

#### 2.4.2 Brand awareness and brand attitude

Marketing on social media is a new buzz for the organization as they are concentrating more on social networking sites Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. (Brennan & Croft, 2012). While building a new brand, brand awareness is the foremost stride to be taken (Kapferer, 2012) as it is a significant factor in brand equity. Brand recall along with brand

recognition are the two parts which brand awareness can be divided into (Percy & Rossiter, 1992). The aspect of brand recognition appears when consumers are presented with a visual or a verbal cue to test their aptness to discern a brand whereas brand recall allude to the capability to memorize name of the brand when thinking about the category it is linked to (Percy & Rossiter, 1992).

Brand awareness influences the brand attitude (Bruhn et al., 2012). Brand attitude is developed by various encounters, which a customer has while making a purchase. To examine the impact brand awareness exert on brand attitude with reference to smartphone purchases by millennials during Covid-19, the proposed hypothesis is as follows.

*H9: Awareness about Smartphone brand positively and significantly influence the brand attitude of smartphone brand.*

#### 2.4.3 Brand attitude and purchase intention

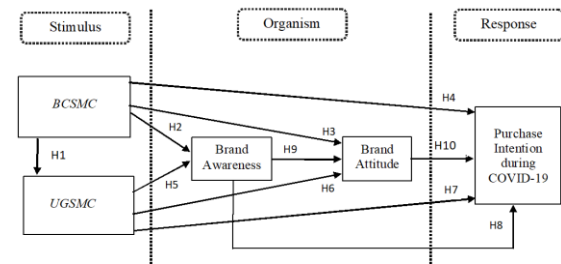
Brand attitude leads to shape behaviours (Spears & Singh 2004), thus leading to intention to purchase (Bagozzi 1981; Spears & Singh 2004). Various research studies relate it to attitude and customer possibility to prefer a brand (Kim & Johnson 2016), so purchase intention predicts the customer future behaviour which depends on their attitudes. As predicting future purchase behaviour of the consumer is very important for marketers as it can become one of the competing factors for the brand, so it is of great significance to estimate purchase intention punctually (Park et al., 2012).

The intention to purchase is the resultant of brand attitude (Spears & Singh 2004), since the behavioural intent is influenced by brand attitude (Wang et al., 2009; Bruhn et al., 2012; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). On considering the above literature, following hypotheses are proposed:

*H10: The brand attitude of Smartphone brand positively influences the purchase intention for smartphone brand.*

Thus, in order to examine the associations that are abovementioned, the authors proposed an S-O-R Approach based model. The hypothetical model is exhibited in figure 1.

Figure 1: Research Model Hypothesized through S-O-R approach



### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Instrument

The present study utilizes the information gathered through a well-structured questionnaire. Out of total 550 filled in questionnaires, a few incomplete questionnaires were rejected to result in 513 valid ones. The questionnaire was drafted in the wake of an extensive literature survey and leading unstructured interviews with a few respondents. Six academics and five practitioners from marketing domain filled in as specialists for assessing the content and wording of items. Based on their suggestions, some items were rephrased.

The final questionnaire was consisted of three parts wherein the first one incorporated the items measuring brand created and user-created brand communication on social media, purchase intention, brand awareness, and brand attitude. All measures were on a 7-level Likert Scale (7 was Very Strongly Agree while 1 was just opposite of that). Table 1 presents a detailed description of the various measures adopted for the present study. Part II detailed the general information from the respondents about social media usage (see Table 2) whereas the Part III reported the demographics of the interviewees (see Table 3). These questions included information consisting of gender, age, educational qualification and family income.

Table 1: Measures used for the Study

Construct	Adapted from
Communication on social media initiated by the brand and generated by the user	Bruhn et al. (2012), Tsiros et al. (2004), Schivinski and Dabrowski (2013)
Brand Awareness	Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco (2005), Low & Lamb (2000), Yoo, Donthu and Lee (2000)

Brand Attitude	Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco (2005)
Purchase Intention During COVID-19	Shukla (2011) Yoo, Donthu and Lee (2000)

Table 2: Respondents' Social Media Usage

Usage of social media		Frequency
How do you access social media	PC	118
	Laptop	276
	Smartphone	440
	Smart TV	33
	Tablet	47
	Smartwatch	02
Type of social media you use the most	Facebook	322
	Twitter	56
	LinkedIn	70
	YouTube	345
	Instagram	178
	WhatsApp	404
	Pinterest	23
Number of hours a day you spend on social media	1 to 3 hrs	434
	3 to 6 hrs	65
	More than 6 hrs	14

Table 3: Respondents Demographic Profile (N=513)

Demographic Variables		Number of Respondents
Gender	Male	238
	Female	275
Age (Years)	22 - 26 years	194
	27 - 30 years	186
	31 - 34 years	127
	35 - 40 years	6
Education	Up to 10+2	71
	Graduate	160
	Postgraduate	232
	Doctorate	48
	Any Other	2
Family Income (Monthly)	Below 50,000	407
	50,001 to 1,00,000	49
	1,00,001 to 1,50,000	21
	Above 1,50,000	36

Initially, EFA and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  scores were espoused to measure items' reliability. For each scale the  $\alpha$  score was above 0.70 (see Table 4). The constructs' dimensionality was examined through EFA (varimax rotation). All items were laden on one factor, and it showed that communication on social media initiated

by the brand, communication on social media generated by the user, brand awareness, brand attitude, purchase intention are unidimensional. No evidence of cross loading was reported.

Table 4: Reliability Coefficients of Dimensions

Construct	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Communication on social media initiated by the firm	4	.891
Communication on social media generated by the user	4	.850
Brand awareness	4	.912
Brand attitude	3	.915
Purchase intention During COVID-19	3	.892

Furthermore, the CMB was examined through Harman's test as well as by common latent factor method. For Harman's test, all scale items were laden on an individual factor for extraction using EFA. As the explained variance of 31.32% was less than threshold of 50 percent, CMB was not a matter of concern. In the common latent factor method, the regression weights of both the models, i.e. with and without latent factor, were revealed to have a difference of less than 0.20 (see Gaskin, 2012) and it again proved that CMB was not an issue herein.

### 3.2 Sample Design

For the determination of minimum size of sample, version 3.1.9 of G\*power was used (Sharma et al 2021, 2022c). The power figure of 0.95 and an effect size of 0.05 was achieved with a minimum sample of 269 (Faul et al., 2009). Therefore, a sample of 513 respondents in the current study satisfies the minimum sample size requirements.

Further, in present study, the sampling unit was a millennial, the person born between 1980 and 2000 (Galdames & Guihen, 2020). Both marketers and academics are interested in millennials, as they are computerized locals (Prensky, 2001). They are the one who has spent their whole lives in the advanced condition and there is a significant influence of data innovation on their lifestyle (Bennett et al., 2008). Moreover, millennials

effectively contribute, shares, content via web-based networking media stages.

The primary reason for the selection of millennials is that top organizations are targeting millennials because of the fact that students have an irrefutable hold on social media. Moreover, the research teams of various companies monitoring online movement to best penetrate customer

arraying in-between 0.872 to 0.915, which were well above the 0.70 threshold number (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). AVE counts ranged in-between 0.633 to 0.783 surpassed the threshold count of 0.50 (see Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All AVE values were lower than CR values (Byrne, 2010). AVE counts were higher than the MSV values (see Table 5), thus affirming the discriminant validity (see Hair et al. 2010).

**Table 5: Validity & Reliability**

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	MSV	AVE	FCSMC	BAWA	BAT	PI	UGSMC
FCSMC	0.915	0.915	0.404	0.783	<b>0.885</b>				
BAWA	0.891	0.892	0.161	0.675	0.089	<b>0.821</b>			
BAT	0.850	0.872	0.161	0.633	0.122	0.401	<b>0.795</b>		
PIDC	0.912	0.913	0.404	0.725	0.636	0.263	0.219	<b>0.852</b>	
UGSMC	0.892	0.892	0.278	0.735	0.527	0.113	0.214	0.526	<b>0.857</b>

[Source: Authors' own. Note: CR- Composite Reliability, MSV-Maximum shared variance, AVE- Average Variance Extracted, FCSMC-Communication on social media initiated by the firm, BAWA-Brand awareness, BAT-Brand attitude, PI-Purchase Intention During COVID-19, UGSMC- Communication on social media generated by the user]

interaction posit that millennials are more active on social media as compared to other generation. The data was collected from various cities of Punjab, namely Chandigarh, Ludhiana, Amritsar, and Jalandhar. These cities were selected after giving a due consideration to the aspects of urbanization and contribution to the economy of the state (Punjab Economic Survey, 2021). With an objective to understand the social media usance, respondents active on social media were only asked to fill in the questionnaire.

#### 4. RESULTS

The descriptive and inferential analysis for the study was carried out mainly through percentages and chi square test respectively. The statistical tools employed for the analysis of data were SPSS 20.0 and AMOS18.0.

##### 4.1 Measurement Model

The model comprising of all the constructs, namely brand awareness, communication at social media initiated by the brand and rendered by user, brand attitude, and purchase intention, was tested. AVE, average shared squared variance, composite reliability, and maximum shared squared variance were used to establish convergent and discriminant validities (Hair et al., 2010). CR values were

Using the covariance matrix, the model fit compared the theory to data (Hair et al., 2010), and the proposed theory was revealed to have met the threshold values required for the model fit. All the indices of model fit were reported as Chi-square/df= 3.138, TLI=0.949, RMSEA=0.065, NFI=0.940, IFI=0.958, CFI=0.958, and RFI=0.926. Based on threshold criteria, the model was found to be a good fit.

##### 4.2 Structural Model

The model fit indices were recorded as - Chi-square/df = 3.273, CFI = 0.947, RFI = 0.912, NFI = 0.926, IFI = 0.947, TLI = 0.937, GFI = 0.902, AGFI = 0.873, and RMSEA = 0.065. Overall, SEM model of the study came out to be the good fit as goodness and badness of fit indices were within threshold limit (Baumgartner & Homburg 1996). The findings pertained to the parameter indices show that, except for UGSMC→BAT and FCSMC→PI, the magnitude of critical ratios for all the associations was bigger than 1.96. Further, the standardized estimates for all but UGSMC→BAT and FCSMC→PI were not significant. Accordingly, excepting H4 and H6, all hypotheses are supported (see Table 6). Discussion on this is reported in Section 5 of this manuscript.

**Table 6: Research Hypotheses Testing**

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Estimate	Critical Ratio	p-Value	Hypothesis Supported
H1	FCSMC→UGSMC	0.052	8.076	***	Supported
H2	FCSMC→BAWA	0.054	3.927	***	Supported
H3	FCSMC→BAT	0.042	-1.986	***	Supported
H4	FCSMC→PIDC	0.054	-0.972	0.331	Not supported
H5	UGSMC→BAWA	0.051	2.573	***	Supported
H6	UGSMC→BAT	0.039	0.330	0.741	Not Supported
H7	UGSMC→PIDC	0.050	2.702	0.007**	supported
H8	BAWA→PIDC	0.066	5.169	***	Supported
H9	BAWA→BAT	0.043	13.624	***	Supported
H10	BAT→PIDC	0.070	5.636	***	Supported

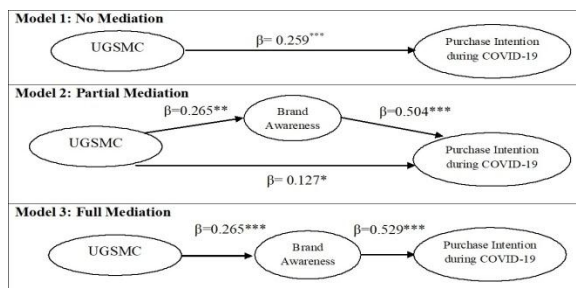
[Source: Authors’ own. Note:-FCSMC-Firm Created Communication on social media, BAWA-Brand awareness, BAT-Brand attitude, PI-Purchase Intention During COVID-19; UGSMC- Communication on social media generated by the user, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $< 0.05$ ]

**4.3 Mediation Effect**

Three competing models were formed to test the relationship between purchase intention and SMC generated by user through the brand awareness’s mediation.

The findings in this regard reveal that user generated SMC exerts a positive impact on the purchase intention in the absence of brand awareness ( $\beta = 0.259$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (see Model 1) and SMC generated by user has a positive impact on the brand awareness ( $\beta = 0.265$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (see Model 2). Furthermore, it also reveals that the impact of user generated SMC on purchase intention was substantially reduced from 0.259 to 0.127 in the compartment of brand awareness.

**Figure 2: Competing Models in Examining the Mediating Effect**



[Source: Authors’ own. Note: UGSMC-Communication on social media generated by the user,\*\*\*  $< .001$ , \* $< .05$ ]

It reveals that the Model 3, which assumed complete mediation, exhibited better model fit

as compared to Model 2, which assumed partial mediation. Hence, it is concluded that the relationship in between user generated communication on social media platform and purchase intention is completely mediated by brand awareness.

**Table 7: Competing Models**

Direct Effect	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
UGSMC→PIDC	0.259***	0.127*	
UGSMC→ Brand Awareness		0.265***	0.265***
Brand Awareness→PIDC		0.504***	0.529***

Source: Authors’ own. Note:-UGSMC-Communication on social media generated by the user; PI-Purchase Intention During COVID-19, \*\*\*  $< .001$ , \* $< .05$ .

**5. DISCUSSION**

When the pre-existing research (see Bruhn et al., 2012; Hajli, 2013) has largely been confined to check the influence social media brand communication exerts on brand equity across different industries, this study, in its own unique way, investigates the influence of social media conversations of smartphone brand on consumer brand metrics during COVID-19. The findings pertained to the effect of SMC of a smartphone brand on the user generated communication during COVID-19 go well with Godes & Mayzlin (2009) who remarked that communication initiated by the brand on social media rouse the



communication generated by the user on social media. It is so because the brands indulged in user-generated content engages with the customers, leaves a long lasting impression on customers minds (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), and leads to have a positive impact on user-generated content (Ceballos et al., 2016).

The findings regarding the impact of brand initiated and user generated communication on the brand awareness commensurate with Schivinski & Dabrowski (2015), Godes & Mayzlin (2009), Burmann & Arnhold (2008) in the present context of Covid-19. It might be that incremental hours being spent on social media by users during COVID-19 allow them to indulge in creating, sharing and consuming of content regarding smartphone brands, which then causes their awareness level regarding smartphone brand to rise. Further, brand awareness of smartphone brand is revealed to have a significant influence on the brand attitude, which is in agreements with Bruhn et al., (2012); and Fishbein & Ajzen (1975).

The findings that brand awareness and brand attitude influence the purchase intention of the smartphone brand is in line with Hutter et al., (2013); Lu et al., (2014); Bruhn et al., (2012); Balakrishnan et al., (2014); and Eagly & Chaiken, (1993). As the contact tracing and vaccine registration through smartphone based app Aarogya Setu in India (Basu, 2021; Nagori, 2021) has pressed for smartphone requirements, the purchase intention of users are being influenced positively and brand awareness, along with brand attitude, is playing its due role in it. It is surprising to note that the study finds that the communication initiated by smartphone brand on social media does not influence the purchase intention. This result of the study is in disagreement with the research work of Schivinski & Dabrowski (2016). It might be that most of the users are facing job loss and salary reductions during Covid-19 (Islam, et al., 2020), and they find users generated posts, reviews and mentions more trustworthy for saving on purchases.

### *5.1. Theoretical Implications*

During the COVID-19, it is quite surprising that the consumers are experiencing two contradicting phenomena of abundance and

scarcity concurrently. On abundance, the scenarios like stay home regulations (Bates et al. 2021; Chakraborty, Kumar, Upadhyay, & Dwivedi, 2020), online classes (Kundu & Bej, 2021), retrenchments (Shulga & Busser, 2021), and work from home (Jenkins & Smith, 2021) culture across the globe have left the consumer with ample spare time, which has again incremented the hours spent by them on social media by a few hours on a day-to-day basis (Tankovska, 2021; Morgan Stanley Research, 2020). It has left the consumers with abundance of content, which they either create, or share, or consume online. On scarcities, the source scarcity is being experienced through job losses, salary cuts, non-availability of product, manpower, and services etc., while social comparison is being dealt with self-regulation (Cannon et al. 2019) etc.. The choice restriction is being faced through evaluation, selection, and consumption of products and services available to them as per the restrictions, whereas the environmental uncertainty is being experienced through panic purchase (Omar, Nazri, Ali, & Alam, 2021), postponing the purchases (Sheth, 2020), stocking (Bandyopadhyaya & Bandyopadhyaya, 2021), etc. Thus, consumers nowadays are dealing with all the four scarcities, namely resource scarcity; social comparison; choice restriction; and environmental uncertainty, (see Hamilton et al., 2019) in unique way with the due assistance of social media. Therefore, whether it is scarcity or it is abundance, consumers are nowadays on social media with incremented hours while creating, sharing, and consuming the content. In this scenario, it becomes evident to examine how the incremented creation, sharing, and consumption of online content will influence purchase intention of smartphone in the context of an emerging country India wherein the inception of contact tracing and vaccine registration through smartphone-based app AarogyaSetu (see Basu, 2021; Nagori, 2021) has pushed the smartphone demand to all new levels. This research attempts to it and accumulates the theory by revealing that stimuli increment significantly entices the organism, which then further moulds the response. Besides it, by unravelling the disagreement and intricacies between the brand initiated and user generated communication on the social media platform, this study adds to the theory by suggesting that brand initiated

communication does affect purchase intention of consumers, but in a different way, specifically through user generated brand communication (Sonnier et al., 2011). Thus, the contrasting impact of both form of communication on social media indicates that customers not only react to the information, but also take into consideration the sources of online content.

### *5.2. Managerial Implications*

Besides being theoretical insightful, this study renders managerial propositions of import as well. The finding suggests that the smartphone brands should re-evaluate their current social media content to qualify for positive user generated content. By doing so, they can better deal with the selective attention; selective distortion; and selective retention (Sen, & Sengupta, 2021) of the prospective customers during the current phase of information overload (Xie, & Tsai, 2021). While developing customer-to-customer SMC brands should be very careful as it can sometimes backfire. Brand managers should focus on building social media emotional attachment of customers towards the brand, which has multiple benefits of providing credibility, and enhancing satisfaction towards the brand. Marketers should provide with an opportunity of co-creation to the consumers by building synchronous and non-synchronous capacity within social media. Along with the monitoring of what is being written and who is writing, no negative customer feedback should go unnoticed and unanswered as it can really be a setback for the brand. The collective efforts of communication initiated by the brand and user on social media offer abundant opportunities for enhancing brand equity. Additionally, brand managers while targeting the customers on social media can keep the audience attracted by informing them about discounts, special offers, etc. as customers are becoming more deal prone during COVID-19 because the aspects of job losses, pay cuts and losing the breadwinner have incremented the utility to be drawn from each single penny manifolds. Furthermore, organizations could come up with an idea of providing extra discounts to the customers who would present a discount code that could be downloaded from the organization's social media platform.

### *5.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

Though present research is insightful for practitioners and researchers, it has some limitations too. First, the data was gathered from Punjab cities i.e. Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Amritsar and union territory Chandigarh, therefore, a generalization of the findings is limited to Punjab region only. Future studies can explore other cities of India and analyse sub-groups, which, in turn, could provide a more precise picture. Second, this study was of quantitative nature wherein survey questionnaire method was used for collecting the data. Future studies can also espouse interviews and focus group discussions to acquire more comprehensive consumer insights and responses. Third, this study only considered SMC done by smartphone brand. Future studies can investigate some other industries to display an appropriate picture of the different mechanisms that operates with brands from diverse industries. Last, the present study mainly focused on millennials, a generational group possessing the highest purchasing power (Moreno et al., 2017; Bolton et al., 2013) and using social media the most (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Future studies can analyse other generational groups as well.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Marketing is now getting transformed from Marketing 4.0 to Marketing 5.0 and the spin-offs of COVID-19, like stay home restrictions, online classes, work from home etc., are playing the role of catalysts in this. Consumers are experiencing two contradicting phenomena of abundance and scarcity concurrently where in H2H marketing (Kotler, Pfoertsch, & Sponholz, 2021) of information through social media is playing a predominant role. The numbers of hours spent on social media are getting incremented (Tankovska, 2021; Morgan Stanley Research, 2020) and so are the creation, consumption and sharing of content. In these circumstances, it becomes quite evident to examine how the incremented engagement with online content will influence purchase intention of smartphone in the context of an emerging market of India wherein the inception of contact tracing (Fahey, & Hino, 2020) and vaccine registration through smartphone-based app AarogyaSetu (Basu, 2021; Nagori, 2021) has pushed the smartphone demand to new highs. Through the SOR approach (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this study facilitates a detailed analysis

of the social media impact on consumer brand metrics of smartphones during COVID-19 for Indian millennials.

Our findings highlight that communication initiated by the brand has no direct effect on intention to purchase smartphone brand, but indirectly it was found to influence the purchase intention of smartphone brand through brand awareness. Whereas SMC generated by the user for smartphone brand positively influences purchase intention and brand awareness of smartphone brand. Besides it, the findings also revealed that the communication initiated by the brand on social media for smartphone brand during COVID-19 has a considerable positive impact on communication generated by the users on social media for smartphone brand. These findings provide adequate support to recognize the proposed framework as a valuable tool while future prospects and gauging the validity of current approaches. Thus, besides being insightful to the marketers on how they can target this cohort in a better way, this research bestows to existent literature on how the communication on social media influence the brand metrics of a high involvement purchase when incremented hours are being spent on social media due to lockdowns and home stay restrictions.

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