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Brand Disengagement from Social Media

Consumer's Perception of Brands Leaving Social Media Platforms

by

Tereza Holsanova and Lina Radilovic

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Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya
Examiner: Ulf Johansson
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Abstract

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Authors: Tereza Holsanova and Lina Radilovic

Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya

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Research questions: How do consumers perceive a brand's disengagement from social media?; How does a brand's disengagement from social media shape the consumer-brand relationship?

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to investigate how consumers perceive a brand that disengages itself from social media and how it shapes the consumer-brand relationship.

Theoretical perspective: The thesis applies the conceptual framework of Keller's (2001) Brand Equity Pyramid which serves as a building block for consumer perception analysis. The framework connects consumer engagement, relationship with the brand, and overall perception.

Methodology: The research takes the standpoint of ontological relativism and the epistemological approach of social constructivism. According to this, the qualitative method was chosen in the form of semi-structured interviews. The empirical data was collected from 8 respondents who indicated themselves as Lush consumers.

Conclusion: This thesis sheds light on how consumers perceive brand disengagement from social media and how brand disengagement shapes consumer-brand relationship. Both consumer perceptions and brand disengagement are complex phenomena, and this thesis tackles many factors that influence their outcomes. Those factors are concluded in this chapter. The conceptual framework provides theoretical insights, and based on the empirical findings, a roadmap could be helpful for practical implementation.

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Tereza Holsanova



Lina Radilovic

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1 Introduction

In today's digital age, social media platforms have become omnipresent channels for brands to interact with consumers, exhibit their offerings, or shape their brand image. Social media platforms serve as crucial tools for brands to engage with their consumers effectively. According to Cheung et al. (2021), this is because consumers actively seek information about brands and their products on these platforms. Concurrently, brands utilize social media to understand their consumers better, foster brand-building activities, and cultivate relationships with their audience. Branding helps connections and communities around their identities, bolstering brand awareness.

Social media platforms facilitate consumer-brand interactions and connections among consumers, enabling brands to gain deeper insights into their customers' needs (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The phenomenon of Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) on social media has emerged as a significant trend, reshaping the landscape of consumer-brand interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Consumer Brand Engagement refers to the active participation and interaction between consumers and brands on social media platforms (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019). It encompasses various activities such as liking, sharing, commenting, and creating user-generated content, all of which contribute to fostering a sense of connection and establishing meaningful relationships with consumers (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Among the main trends, we can also find user-generated content (UGC) or cooperation with influencers (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019). UGC is content produced by users on social media. (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014). User-generated content, customization and co-creation cherish stronger brand-consumer relationships, fostering a sense of belongingness among consumers toward the brand (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014).

To go against the normal flow, brand disengagement arises, as Kruse and Schultz (2022) point out, through the deliberate withdrawal or reduction of brand presence on social media. This decision may stem from various reasons, which can include concerns about privacy, ethical considerations, or a perception that the social media environment does not align with the brand's values (Stokel-Walker, 2024). Instances of brand disengagement have garnered

attention as companies reevaluate the effectiveness and impact of their online presence (Reddit, 2022). While social media offers unparalleled reach and engagement opportunities, it also poses challenges such as algorithmic biases, content moderation issues, and concerns about its impact on mental health (Baj-Rogowska, 2023).

A real example of a brand disengaging from social media is the cosmetics brand Lush (Stokel-Walker, 2024). The brand disengaged itself from social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as TikTok and Snapchat (Lush, n.d.). The whole process with the company and digital space originally started in 2018 (Lush, n.d.) and this step to go against the flow of social media marketing was something that had not been done before (Stokel-Walker, 2024). According to Lush's statement, they do not feel safe on these platforms and they are not going to be back until social media creates a better environment for their users.

It transpired that the environment of social media (Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok) does not align with the values of the company, so Lush became antisocial for the second time in November 2021. To uphold their beliefs, they have decided not to be active on all their social media accounts except for YouTube and Twitter (Lush, n.d.). Moreover, based on research from Statista (2019), YouTube is regarded as the social media platform with the most positive impact on mental health across various factors such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, and self-image. Following closely behind is Twitter, now named X, which is the only other platform Lush has chosen to maintain (Ivanova, 2023). Their Instagram and Facebook accounts now solely feature posts encouraging others to take breaks from social media.

1.1 Problematization

In the contemporary digital landscape, technology and the online realm have seamlessly integrated into people's daily lives. By 2020, the number of active users on social media platforms had surpassed 4 billion, making it a ubiquitous tool for global connectivity (Kemp, 2020). Over the past decade, consumer behavior has significantly changed due to advancements in online and digital technologies (Cheng et al., 2021). This has increased the

importance of social media for organizations, providing opportunities to engage with customers, enhance brand equity, and manage relationships (Kirtiř & Karahan, 2011).

Incorporating social media into marketing strategies can stimulate sales, increase brand awareness, and foster customer engagement. Social media serves as a valuable tool for customer relationship management (CRM), enabling organizations to build deeper connections with their customers and adapt to their evolving preferences (Kirtiř & Karahan, 2011). Moreover, understanding and leveraging social media dynamics is essential for businesses seeking to thrive in the post-pandemic consumer landscape (Mason et al., 2021).

Despite the pervasive influence of social media in modern marketing, there is a notable research gap in understanding the impact of brand disengagement on consumer-brand relationships. Few studies have examined how consumers react when a brand chooses to disengage from these platforms. This lack of research limits our comprehension of contemporary consumer behavior and poses challenges for developing effective marketing strategies. Businesses are left uncertain about the dynamics of digital consumer-brand interactions.

Existing literature, such as the works of Brodie et al. (2011) and Hollebeek et al. (2014), has extensively explored consumer and brand engagement and value co-creation. However, there is insufficient focus on brand disengagement. Recent studies (Villanova & Matherly, 2024; Lim et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019) have addressed consumer disengagement from social media and its drivers, as well as strategies companies should adopt when consumers leave their social media channels. Nonetheless, the impact of brand disengagement on consumer-brand relationships remains largely unexplored, leaving businesses without clear guidance on the strategic implications and overlooking the complex dynamics within digital spaces.

The prominence of social media marketing (SMM) underscores the urgency of addressing these questions. As companies increasingly invest in social media strategies to engage with their audiences, understanding the dynamics of brand disengagement becomes imperative (Hanna et al., 2011). Therefore, exploring the implications of brand disengagement within social media is a pivotal area for research and strategic consideration.

1.2 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how consumers perceive a brand's disengagement from social media channels and its impact on consumer-brand relationships. There appears to be a gap in recent research on this topic, and exploring consumer perceptions can provide valuable insights into this aspect of marketing strategy (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019).

This research aims to uncover the significance of brand disengagement in fostering strong consumer-brand relationships. By bridging the gap in the current literature, we hope to discover new ways of connecting with consumers without relying on social media platforms.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do consumers perceive a brand's disengagement from social media?

RQ2: How does a brand's disengagement from social media shape the consumer-brand relationship?

By examining these questions, we aim to understand the value consumers place on a brand's disengagement from social media and its effect on consumer-brand relationships.

1.3 Lush as an example

Lush is a cosmetics company that was founded in 1995 by six cofounders (Lush, n.d.). The team previously worked in a business called Cosmetics To Go and was inspired to create a new venture called Lush. Since then the company managed to create a name that stands behind natural, fresh and affordable packaging (of their products). The company wanted to be different from its competitors, who were selling products with many chemicals, high prices and were overall more artificial. (Lush, n.d.)

According to Lush (n.d.) throughout the years, the company has been inspired to be increasingly more natural. In 2018 their products were 65 % natural and 35 % safe synthetic materials, but also stated that they wish to come even higher. One of their strong points, as well as their customers' favorite, is that their products are not tested on animals. With the

phrase “Lush can do it, why can’t everybody else?” (Lush, n.d.), they never stop promoting the importance of safe and natural products, as well as encouraging competitors to join them. Throughout their 25 years of experience, they kept their determination to keep making products that are of good quality and safe.

1.3.1 Social Media Exit

Lush stopped posting on all Meta platforms in November 2021. At that time, a whistleblower from Facebook leaked documents to the press that contained shocking information about the social media platforms' algorithms harming teens and other adults (Hao, 2024). The leaked documents contained information about the company being aware of the harm the platforms were doing but choosing to downplay the effects and ignore them.

As a response to the leaked documents, Lush has decided to speak out regarding the negative consequences the internet and social media have on consumers and resist their presence on Instagram and Facebook. With this action, they decided to stand by their consumers and not oblige to toxic social media algorithms. Their ‘boycott’ (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021) sparked many opinions and appeared on the pages of magazines and marketing channels (The Drum, Forbes, Vogue Business, The Guardian, etc.).

In order to stand by what they believe in, they decided to exit all social media platforms except for Twitter and YouTube. The reason why they decided to exit some and remain on others is that the side effects of social media platforms vary from one another. According to Statista (2019), YouTube is considered as the social media platform with the most positivity on mental health regarding 14 factors such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, self-image, etc. Right after YouTube is the second social media Twitter where Lush stayed, now named X (Ivanova, 2023).

In November 2023, Lush came back for only one day to upload a series of 9 posts with each post showing the data of how harmful the algorithm is for its users. Ever since then, the only posts remaining on their other channels Instagram and Facebook are those promoting staying off social media. The company is not active on social media and their comments are turned off.

One of the core interest points in this study is consumer perception of brand disengagement from social media, thus this case is of great importance for interview participants to better understand a practical example of such a phenomenon. As participants can better understand the topic of brand disengagement, the results of the research can be of a higher quality.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is composed of 6 chapters which will provide the reader with a better understanding and gradually become oriented within the topic. The selected structure will help to answer the research question.

Chapter 2: Literature Review- This chapter initiates the exploration of the brand disengagement of social media. It also provides existing literature concerning the primary concepts underpinning this thesis: social media, consumer engagement, consumer perception, and consumer-brand relationship. Secondly, a conceptual framework is introduced, drawing from the fundamental concepts outlined in previous literature: identity, image, performance, judgments, feelings, and relationships.

Chapter 3: Methodology- Based on the ontological standpoint of relativism and the epistemological stance of social constructionism, a qualitative approach is used. The empirical data were collected by eight semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 4: Empirical Findings- This chapter presents the results and main findings from empirical data on how consumers perceive brand disengagement from social media and how it affects their relationship with a brand. Seven themes were found and according to that subheadings were named.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion- This part provides an analysis and discussion of empirical findings together with the used literature. The subheadings are named in the same way as in the empirical findings chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion- The last chapter concludes the main findings in order to answer the research question. After that theoretical and practical implication are presented. Lastly, limitations and future implications are determined.

2 Literature/Theoretical Review

This chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the latest research that is relevant to the thesis as well as focuses on classic theoretical models. Four key theories have been carefully chosen to address the research question of the thesis: consumer engagement, consumer disengagement, consumer brand perceptions, and consumer-brand relationship. The literature review first mentions social media then the engagement of customers and brands, followed by disengagement dynamics. Furthermore, it delves into consumer's perceptions, to better understand how their relationship with the brand is shaped. Lastly, to understand why consumers choose a certain brand, brand relationships are undertaken.

2.1 Social Media

In recent years social media's reach and popularity have grown along with the global digital population. By the year 2027, the number of social media users is expected to reach 6 billion people (Dixon, 2024). Online platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube, and more, allow users to come in contact with all sorts of information. Currently, in 2024, the most popular social media platform is Facebook followed closely by Instagram. (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024). According to Dixon (2024) at the beginning of social media, most users were younger generations, however throughout the years people of all ages have joined online communities to discuss all areas of life, from business, politics, and socializing to dating and sharing what is happening in their life daily. People from all across the globe share information about their lives daily. The leading worldwide market for social media marketing and advertising is the United States (Dixon, 2024). Dixon (2024) stated that the US is home to many TikTok trends, Instagram influencers, and Firms that use social media as a part of their marketing strategy.

According to Dixon (2024), more than 86 % of industry professionals said that the leading benefit of using social media as a marketing tool is increased expenditure and 76 % stated that increased traffic. Despite there being many benefits to social media, such as increased

expenditure and traffic (Dixon, 2024), and the ability to communicate in real/time, large/scale, and ubiquitously between brands and consumers (Dolan et al. 2019), there has been a recent debate on the negative sides effects of social media (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024). According to Dhir et al. (2021), the so-called ‘dark side’ of social media has become a recurring topic, especially its effect on mental health (Mirabito et al., 2022) and individuals well-being (Wang and Deng, 2022). Dhir et al. (2021) identified those negative effects as feelings of stress, fatigue, and increased anxiety.

Zheng and Ling (2021) defined those negative effects as ‘social media fatigue’ or SMF. SMF are mental health problems that arise due to too much social media use, triggering negative emotional responses when interacting on social media platforms. These consequences of SMF can be applicable to both brands and individuals (Baj-Rogowska, 2023). Brands associate SMF with a decrease in social media engagement, the disengagement being caused by consumers being selective about their exposure to social media platforms and thus paying less attention to brand messages (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024). This is also supported by the data, demonstrated by Dixon (2024), as brand engagement has decreased between years 2020 and 2021, especially on social media platforms Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, Dessart et al. (2019) report that only a small percentage of social media users are interacting with brands and that the majority of users nowadays are lurkers (passively browsing brand-related content) or inactive followers. Dessart et al. (2019) point out that the next biggest challenge social media is going to incur is inactivity. Hollebeek and Macky (2019) argue that brands themselves may be at least to a degree accountable for passive engagement or brand disengagement. According to Fernandes and Oliveira (2024) the extensive brand use of social media, meaning constantly posting and promoting content and products can lead to people feeling overwhelmed and consequently avoiding contact with the brand.

Although nowadays people of all ages are present on social media platforms, generation Z and millennials still account for most time spent on social media and most active demographics (Zote, 2024). Due to younger generations being most present on social media platforms, they may be more vulnerable to these negative effects, consequently leading to exhaustion due to “over scrolling” and not posting anything resulting in decreased time spent on platforms, engagement and exposure to brands (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024). Nevertheless, social media remains a place where consumers and brands can engage in conversations and continue to express themselves.

2.2 Consumer Engagement (CE)

The term ‘engagement’, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2024), is closely related to interest and denotes the state of being actively involved with something or the process of stimulating interest in an organization's activities. According to Brodie et al. (2011), the term ‘engage’ is intricately connected to various aspects such as relationships, emotions, creativity, learning, and experiences with a brand or consumer. Its emergence coincided with the advent of new digital technologies and the rise of Web 2.0, particularly with the proliferation of social media platforms like Twitter, blogs, and discussion forums (Sashi, 2012). In the context of this study, one of the primary focuses lies on the interactions and involvement between brands/companies and their consumers, in the case of this thesis, the cosmetics company Lush and its customers (B2C). This multifaceted nature of engagement extends across both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) relationships within the realm of marketing (Brodie et al., 2011). Understanding the interplay between engagement and associated elements provides valuable perspectives for advancing marketing strategies and creating deeper relationships between brands and customers in today’s markets.

Given the broad scope of ‘Consumer Engagement’, Bilro and Loureiro (2020) proposed five main concepts, however, this research primarily focuses on these three: Consumer Engagement (CE), Consumer-Brand Engagement (CBE) and Media Engagement. The concept of ‘Media Engagement’ is connected to the media environment which includes various types of media such as television, radio, newspapers, websites and social media, which will be the main focus of this paper. According to Calder and Malthouse (2009), websites and social media are perceived as ‘learning forward’ media and play a pivotal role in understanding how consumers experience media consumption, particularly in the realm of social media. Concepts of Consumer Engagement and Consumer-Brand Engagement are important for interpreting and analyzing consumer perception, as they provide insights into the dynamics of consumer-brand relationships (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020).

Consumers now play a central and strategic role for brands, offering recommendations, reviews, and feedback on products and services. According to Lee et al. (2014), the role of the consumer has transitioned from being a passive recipient of goods and services to being actively involved in the co-creation of value. Skålén et al. (2015) describe value co-creation

as a close collaborative process between a brand and its consumers, where value is generated through the involvement and engagement of both parties. This active engagement shapes product development and enhances the overall experience for other consumers. Engaged consumers effectively serve as ambassadors for the company, reflecting its trajectory and potential for growth (Brodie et al., 2011). This shift underscores the importance of fostering meaningful and collaborative relationships with consumers to drive innovation, enhance brand loyalty, and ultimately achieve sustainable business success.

Moreover, engagement varies in terms of extent, ranging from simple actions like liking an Instagram post to more involved activities such as posting reviews on various sites (Malthouse et al., 2013; Muntinga et al., 2011). Consumer behavior is seen as interaction with brands, organizations, or their stakeholders through value co-creation. Typical engaged behaviors include word-of-mouth (WOM), interacting with other consumers, blogging, or common actions like commenting, liking, and sharing brand-related content on social media. In order to determine how much engaged behaviors influence the brand, the engagement rate serves as a metric. The metric assesses the level of interaction and participation that an audience exhibits with content, commonly found on social media platforms or websites. It indicates the extent to which users actively engage with the content through actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, or other forms of interaction. Marketers utilize systems and programs like Meta Business Suite to track the engagement rates of their campaigns, enabling them to better evaluate their strategies (Lee et al., 2014). A higher engagement rate suggests that the content effectively captures the audience's interest and encourages interaction. Total engagements include likes, comments, shares, clicks, and other interactions with the content. To calculate the engagement rate, divide the total engagements by the total reach or impressions, then multiply by 100 to express it as a percentage (Wadhwa et al., 2017).

Additionally, Patterson, Yu, and de Ruyter (Brodie et al., 2011) came up with four CE components: absorption, dedication, vigor, and interaction. Absorption expresses the degree of concentration on the object. Dedication means the consumer's sense of belonging. By vigor, the level of energy and flexibility of the consumer towards the engagement object is represented. The last one is an interaction where communication takes place between two parties- subject and object (Brodie et al., 2011).

2.2.1 Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)

Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) focuses specifically on the relationship between consumers and a particular brand, exploring the emotional connection, loyalty, and attachment that consumers develop toward that brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014). CBE investigates how consumers interact with and perceive the brand, their level of commitment and loyalty, and the extent to which they actively support or engage with the brand beyond transactions (Hollebeek et al., 2014). As this interaction is inherently relational, CBE is grounded in Consumer Culture Theory, which highlights the cultural context shaping consumer-brand engagements and their impact on consumer behavior and perceptions (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

According to Hollebeek et al. (2014), the CBE framework distinguishes it into 3 dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Cognitive processing refers to the extent of a consumer's relationship with a brand through consumer/brand interaction; affection signifies a positive emotional connection with a brand; and behavioral element denotes the level of energy, effort, and consumers' engagement with the brand or product. This conceptualization explores how customers engage with brands beyond traditional purchasing behaviors. It emphasizes the emotional and psychological connections that customers develop with brands through various touchpoints and interactions. The framework provides a structured approach to understanding and measuring the multidimensional nature of customer-brand relationships which is explained in detail in the last part of the literature review (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Engaging with consumers brings several benefits and plays an important role in building brand loyalty, attachment, satisfaction, or brand relationship quality (Gómez et al., 2019). Moreover, the framework provides a structured approach to understanding and measuring the multidimensional nature of customer-brand relationships which is explained in detail in the last part of the literature review (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

According to the Marketing Science Institute (Hollebeek et al., 2014), escalating levels of consumer brand engagement (CBE) are expected to yield a range of benefits for organizations. These benefits include enhanced sales growth, cost reductions, increased brand referrals, greater consumer involvement in collaborative product development processes, enriched co-creative experiences, and improved profitability. Consequently, CBE emerges as a crucial and innovative metric for evaluating brand performance, reflecting the evolving dynamics of consumer-brand relationships and their impact on organizational success.

Furthermore, a high level of consumer brand engagement indicates that consumers are not only satisfied with the brand's products or services but also feel a strong connection to the brand's values, identity, and overall experience. This emotional attachment solidifies the brand's position in the market and contributes to its long-term success (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019).

Moreover, the two main reasons for driving brand consumer engagement are: engaged consumers are buying more than unengaged consumers and engaged consumers have more favor towards the brand (Obilo et al., 2021). According to Hollebeek et al. (2014), the number of active users on social media is growing and is expected to increase. The same is expected for user engagement. In recent years, consumer engagement via social media has garnered growing interest from both industry professionals and scholars (Hollebeek et al., 2014). This heightened attention stems from various factors, including its potential impact on consumer behavior (Gómez et al., 2019). Moreover, according to Lee et al. (2014), social media not only connects consumers and brands most easily but also consumers become active in creating brand information and brand value. The power of having full control over the content on social media has shifted to consumers and brands are no longer the main facilitators (Lee et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Consumer Disengagement

The term 'Disengagement', defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2024) as "the fact of stopping being involved in something," has been examined by various individuals from different perspectives. Initially, Kressel et al. (1980) discuss disengagement in the context of society and personal relationships. They view disengagement as a consequence of interpersonal conflict, reduced interaction, or lack of interest. Building upon this, Kahn (1990) focuses on workplace disengagement, which is understood as a withdrawal, either cognitive, emotional, or physical (Nguyen et al., 2019). Additionally, Wrosch et al. (2003) refer to disengagement in education, in this work disengagement is seen as a result of limited resources that are available to support a relationship (Wrosch et al., 2003). O'Brien et al. (2022) presented disengagement in terms of information systems and as a result of difficulties tainting a relationship. (Nguyen et al., 2019). All these works perceive disengagement with a negative connotation and as a result of too little effort or resources invested.

In the realm of social media and beyond, disengagement takes on various forms. Bowden et al. (2015) view disengagement as a process rather than a static state. On the other hand, Dutot and Mosconi (2016) describe it as a trigger event leading to consumers losing interest in virtual community interaction. Although much of the literature on consumer disengagement remains conceptual, instances of social media disengagement include ceasing to follow a brand, refraining from liking its posts, distancing oneself from the brand, or ignoring its messages (Dutot & Mosconi, 2016).

Bowden et al. (2015) define ‘Customer Disengagement’ as a process wherein a customer-brand relationship undergoes a disturbance or trauma, potentially leading to relationship termination. This process involves trigger-based events of varying intensity and trajectory, occurring within specific category conditions and dependent on prior levels of customer engagement. According to Bowden et al. (2015), disengagement and engagement are interconnected, with prior engagement significantly influencing customers' tendencies to disengage. Building upon this understanding, Brodie et al. (2013) conducted a study on consumer participation, shedding light on the various forms disengagement can take. They observed that some individuals experience temporary disengagement, where they cease activity for a while, while others undergo permanent disengagement. Moreover, Maslowska et al. (2016) further delineated disengagement as an absence of behaviors related to a brand, such as consumers spending time and money, or interacting with the brand itself. However, despite these insights, neither the study by Brodie et al. (2013) nor that by Maslowska et al. (2016) delved deeply into the underlying reasons driving consumer disengagement. This gap in understanding highlights the need for further research to elucidate the motivations and mechanisms behind brand disengagement in the context of social media interactions.

2.2.3 Brand Disengagement

Nowadays, brands allocate substantial resources to engage with their customers on social media platforms (Villanova & Matherly, 2024). Despite these efforts, customers sometimes choose to disengage from these brands. While there has been considerable emphasis on literature addressing strategies for ‘Consumer Brand Engagement’ on social media platforms, there remains a scarcity of data regarding ‘Brand Disengagement’ from social media. The rapidly evolving landscape necessitates brands to continually adapt their social media

strategies, not only by maintaining a presence on established platforms but also by adjusting to emerging trends and platforms (Kruse & Schultz, 2022). This dynamic environment underscores the importance of brands remaining flexible and responsive to evolving consumer preferences and digital landscapes in order to sustain meaningful connections with their audience.

In recent years, authors have shown interest in concepts such as ‘Customer Disengagement’ and ‘Social Media Disengagement’ (Bowden et al., 2015; Dutot & Mosconi, 2016; Maslowska et al., 2016; Brodie et al., 2013). However, there is a limited amount of literature found in the marketing sphere regarding ‘Brand Disengagement’. Due to this gap, this research will address ‘disengagement’ from the brand side, aiming to fill a void in the existing literature.

2.2.4 Brands’ Moral Disengagement

This study finds ‘Moral Disengagement’ relevant because it pertains to how brands intentionally distance themselves from the negative effects of social media. Beckmann et al. (2018) define Moral Disengagement as the psychological mechanisms through which individuals rationalize and detach themselves from unethical conduct, despite their awareness of its immorality. Therefore, the parallel between the concept of Moral Disengagement and Brand Disengagement from social media represents a connection that is relevant to this study.

As outlined by Tillman et al. (2018), moral disengagement is not a one-step process but requires individuals to go through a series of emotions before disengaging. According to Bandura (1999), moral disengagement consists of four practices individuals use when justifying unethical behavior. These practices include reconstructing the conduct, minimizing personal involvement, misrepresenting or discounting consequences, and blaming or devaluing recipients.

Firstly, individuals may reconstruct their conduct to justify it as not unethical (Bandura, 2002). Secondly, they may minimize personal involvement by downplaying their role and diffusing responsibility among others to evade accountability, as confirmed by Bandura (2002). Thirdly, individuals may misrepresent or discount consequences, engaging in unethical acts when consequences are abstract or distant or minimizing negative outcomes.

Lastly, individuals may blame or devalue the recipient, shifting responsibility to external sources or even dehumanizing impacts to justify their actions (Tillman et al., 2018).

These disengagement practices work together to reduce guilt and responsibility, allowing individuals to behave unethically while maintaining a positive self-image (Bandura, 2002).

2.3 Consumer Brand Perceptions

‘Perception’ refers to how consumers interpret and make sense of various stimuli encountered, including brand communications, experiences, and associations (Kotler et al., 2012). This process involves cognitive processes such as attention, interpretation, and evaluation, as well as emotional reactions triggered by brand-related stimuli (Keller, 1993). Consumer perception of a brand is crucial for shaping their attitudes, behaviors, and overall relationship with the brand. Consumer behavior is influenced by both their individual needs and the circumstances surrounding them. In other words, consumer behavior is shaped by a combination of their needs and the available options to fulfill those needs. Consequently, behavior is mostly influenced by their perception (Troy & Kerry, 2010).

Brand perception is distinguished into six components: Brand Associations, Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness, Brand Fondness, Brand Image, and Product Country Image. According to Foroudi et al. (2018), these Perceptual Components, along with Behavioral components, create Brand Equity. Consumer perceptions play a central role in shaping brand equity, as they influence consumers' willingness to pay a price premium, recommend the brand to others, and remain loyal over time (Keller, 1993).

2.3.1 Brand Equity

The Oxford Dictionary (2024) defines brand equity as “The total value that the brand brings to a company over and above its net book value” and “presumed to be a leading indicator of a business's future success”. Definitions of the concept of brand equity may vary from different authors and there is no universally accepted definition or method for conceptualizing and measuring brand equity. According to Aaker (1992), it represents the overall value and

strength of a brand in the minds of consumers. Ambler defines brand equity as goodwill or “the sum of brand relationships with those in the market, weighted by their importance that will enhance future profits and cash flow” (Steenkamp, 2019, p.2).

Brand equity can be viewed from two perspectives: financially and strategically based. The financially based perspective focuses on quantifying the financial impact of the brand on factors such as price premium, customer preference, replacement value, stock price movements, and future earnings. According to Ambler (Steenkamp, 2019), consumer perceptions are closely linked to brand equity from a strategy-based perspective because they directly shape consumers' attitudes, preferences, and behaviors toward the brand. This perspective utilizes nonfinancial measures of brand equity, such as brand awareness and attitude, to assess the brand's significance to consumers. The strategy-based perspective aims to maximize the return on marketing investment by fostering strong connections between the brand and consumers, thereby enhancing brand equity from the consumer's viewpoint. It encompasses both tangible and intangible assets that contribute to the brand's financial performance and competitive advantage (Steenkamp, 2019).

While various models of brand equity, like Aaker's (1992), offer comprehensive breakdowns of brand equity components such as loyalty, awareness, and associations, they may not explicitly prioritize consumer engagement and relationship-building. This is where Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid Model shines, as it places significant emphasis on fostering strong connections with consumers and building meaningful relationships. As highlighted by Steenkamp (2019), Aaker's model provides a detailed breakdown of brand equity components, but it lacks the explicit focus on consumer engagement and relationship-building found in Keller's model, which aligns closely with the objectives of this research. Therefore, for this study, Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid Model will serve as the primary framework for understanding and analyzing the dynamics of consumer engagement and relationship-building in the context of brand equity.

2.3.2 Brand Equity Pyramid

Keller's model also emphasizes the importance of building and managing brand equity, but he introduces a slightly different framework. Brand Equity Pyramid or Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) is a framework commonly used to understand consumer perception of a

brand. The brand pyramid illustrates the hierarchical structure of consumer perceptions, starting from basic awareness and culminating in a deep, emotional connection with the brand (Kapferer, 2012). The connection between consumer perception and the brand pyramid lies in how consumer perceptions shape the various dimensions of the brand pyramid seen in *Figure 1*, and vice versa.

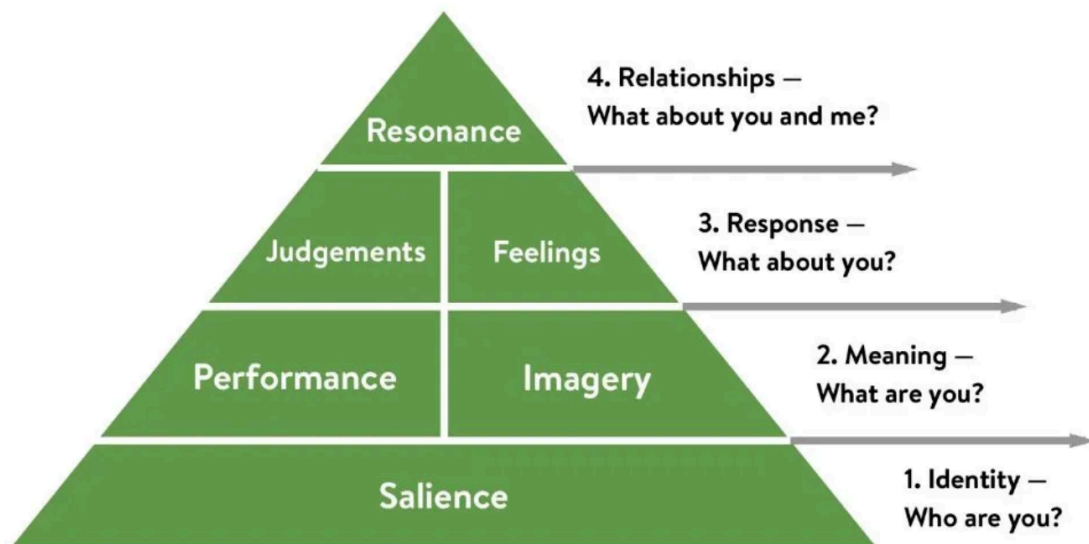


Figure 1: Brand Equity Pyramid (Keller, 2001)

Keller's model is often represented as a pyramid, with four levels:

- Brand Identity: The foundational level, which includes brand elements, brand meaning, and brand performance.
- Brand Meaning: The unique associations and perceptions are linked to the brand, including attributes, benefits, and values.
- Brand Response: Consumers' reactions and responses to the brand, including brand judgments and brand feelings.
- Brand Resonance: The highest level of brand equity, characterized by intense, active engagement and loyalty among consumers (Keller, 2001).

Brand Identity serves as a foundational element in building brand equity within Keller's pyramid model. Brand Meaning is deeply connected with the perception of value. Value is the

pivotal element in marketing. The value of the company is representative of how the company is performing (Morar, 2013). These first two components of the pyramid are essential for establishing a strong brand presence and are crucial for achieving brand equity. Brand Response and Brand Resonance are particularly the most relevant areas for this research because, in the third level, brand disengagement comes into the process (Keller, 2001).

To create Brand Salience, achieving brand identity is needed. This component included consumers' top-of-mind, what comes to their mind if they recognize the brand. Brand Awareness can be recognition of logo, symbol, brand name, etc. The second component Brand Meaning is divided into Image and Performance. Brand Imagery means what people think about the brand, Brand Performance refers to how well a brand meets the functional needs and expectations of its customers (Keller, 2001).

Furthermore, Brand Response involves examining how consumers think and feel about the brand. This aspect can be further broken down into two main categories: Brand Judgments and Brand Feelings. Brand Judgments can be broken into four distinct types. Firstly, there's Brand Quality, which pertains to consumers' perceptions of the brand's value and satisfaction. Secondly, in Brand Credibility, consumers evaluate the company's products or services based on dimensions like expertise, trustworthiness, and likability. Thirdly, Brand Consideration is important, as it reflects consumers' willingness to consider the brand as a potential option in their purchase decisions, significantly impacting brand equity (Keller, 2001).

Finally, Brand Superiority focuses on what sets the brand apart from its competitors and makes it uniquely appealing. On the other hand, Brand Feelings delve into consumers' emotional responses and reactions toward the brand. This category encompasses six different types of emotional responses: Warmth, Fun, Excitement, Security, Social Approval, and Self-respect. These feelings are integral to shaping consumers' overall perceptions and attitudes toward the brand, contributing significantly to brand equity (Keller, 2001).

At the top of Keller's CBEE lies Brand Resonance, which serves as a measure of the brand's relationship with its consumers and the depth of connection established. This aspect of brand equity delves into the synchronized nature of the relationship and the level of emotional bonding experienced by consumers. Within the realm of Brand Resonance, several key categories further clarify the nature of this relationship. The first category within Brand Resonance is Behavioral Loyalty, which encompasses how frequently consumers engage with

the brand and the volume of their purchases. This aspect sheds light on the level of loyalty demonstrated by consumers through their shopping habits, indicating the extent to which they rely on the brand for their needs. Attitudinal Attachment represents another facet of Brand Resonance, emphasizing the emotional significance of the brand to consumers. For a brand to achieve attitudinal attachment, it must hold a special place in consumers' hearts, going beyond being just another option and becoming a cherished choice even when alternatives exist (Keller, 2001).

Sense of Community is yet another dimension of Brand Resonance, highlighting the importance of consumers feeling a sense of belonging with the brand. This aspect emphasizes the creation of a community where consumers feel connected to one another through their shared affinity for the brand. Lastly, Active Engagement underscores the transformation of consumers into brand ambassadors who actively promote the brand through word-of-mouth (WOM) and other forms of advocacy. This level of engagement transcends mere customer status, as consumers become active advocates who contribute to the brand's reputation and success. Brand Relationships, as a whole, encompass two key dimensions: intensity and activity. Intensity refers to the depth of connection between consumers and the brand, while activity pertains to the frequency and level of interaction and purchase involvement (Keller, 2001).

Capturing how consumers perceive brands can be employed by both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative techniques, such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic studies, offer rich insights into consumers' beliefs, attitudes, and emotions toward the brand (Silverman, 2015). These methods delve into the underlying meanings and motivations driving consumer perceptions, revealing nuanced insights that quantitative measures may overlook. On the other hand, quantitative approaches, utilizing surveys, experiments, and observational studies, systematically measure and quantify consumer perceptions (Bolaños-Valencia et al., 2019). These methods employ scales and metrics to assess consumers' attitudes, preferences, and behavioral intentions toward the brand, allowing researchers to identify patterns and trends across different demographic segments or market contexts. This research focuses exclusively on the qualitative research method, which will be discussed in more detail later.

2.4 Consumer Brand Relationship (CBR)

The concept of 'Consumer Brand Relationship' (CBR) represents a symbolic connection between individuals and brands, akin to the dynamics of human relationships (Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008). Moreover, Breivik and Thorbjørnsen (2008) linked CBR to the institution of marriage, emphasizing the depth of emotional attachment and loyalty consumers can develop toward brands through a profound understanding of their needs and preferences. One of the most significant studies on CBR by Fournier (1998) explores this phenomenon by analyzing narratives from over 100 consumers about their brand relationships.

These consumer-brand relationships are impactful, as consumers tend to gravitate towards brands that best fulfill their desires and needs (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017). Maintaining such relationships requires a sense of autonomy between the parties, where both consumers and brands collectively shape and redefine their interactions (Hinde, 1995). While consumers play a pivotal role in influencing these relationships (Fournier, 2012), it is equally crucial to recognize the reciprocal influence of brands. This mutual interplay underscores the symbiotic nature of brand-consumer relationships, where both parties contribute to the evolving narrative.

At the core of any relationship lies the establishment of purpose and structure in individuals' lives (Hinde, 1995). Brand-consumer relationships extend beyond mere transactions; they infuse consumers' experiences with meaning and coherence, profoundly affecting their perceptions and behaviors (Fournier, 1998). Consequently, these relationships help individuals navigate and find significance in the consumption landscape, enriching their lives in multiple ways.

Consumers tend to form deeper relationships with brands, extending beyond mere products (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Consumer Engagement (CE) involves the collaborative creation of value and experiences between two parties. Glomb et al. (2011) and Martínez-Cañas et al. (2016) argue that a brand must position itself as more than just a brand, offering emotional benefits to customers (Suárez et al., 2016) to be accepted by consumers. Ethical brands can positively influence consumers and evoke a stronger brand effect, though achieving such

brand positioning requires significant time and resources (Glomb et al., 2011; Martínez-Cañas et al., 2016).

Research on brand-consumer relationships initially focused on exploring connections between consumers and brands. Indicators like word-of-mouth advocacy, positive attitudes, willingness to make sacrifices, and resilience against negative information reveal the strength of these relationships (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Park et al., 2010). Early studies emphasized loyalty and commitment but later shifted to concepts like ‘brand attachment’, reflecting the alignment between a brand and a consumer’s self-identity, including self-brand connection and brand prominence (Park et al., 2010). This aligns with Edson Escalas' (2004) idea of brands as reflections of the consumer.

Another key concept is ‘Brand Love’, defined by passion-driven behaviors, emotional connection, and self-brand integration, encompassing dimensions of passion, intimacy, and commitment (Batra et al., 2012). Customer attachment styles can vary, from fears of abandonment to feelings of safety (Mende et al., 2013).

The quality of brand-consumer relationships is based on depth, strength, and quality, including interdependence, love/commitment, self-connection, nostalgic attachment, intimacy, and partner quality (Fournier, 2012). These dimensions highlight the brand's role in meeting customer needs and fostering loyalty. However, strong brand-consumer relationships can have downsides, such as limiting identity-related goals and causing feelings of betrayal if the brand fails (Thomson et al., 2005; Chernev et al., 2011; Gregoire et al., 2009).

Furthermore, according to Keller (2001), brand relationships are a fundamental component of brand equity. Brand equity encompasses the overall value that a brand holds in the minds of consumers, including both tangible and intangible aspects such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations. Within this framework, brand relationships play a crucial role in shaping consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards a brand. These relationships are built over time through repeated interactions and experiences with the brand, leading to a sense of familiarity, trust, and emotional connection (Keller, 2001).

2.5 Conceptual Framework

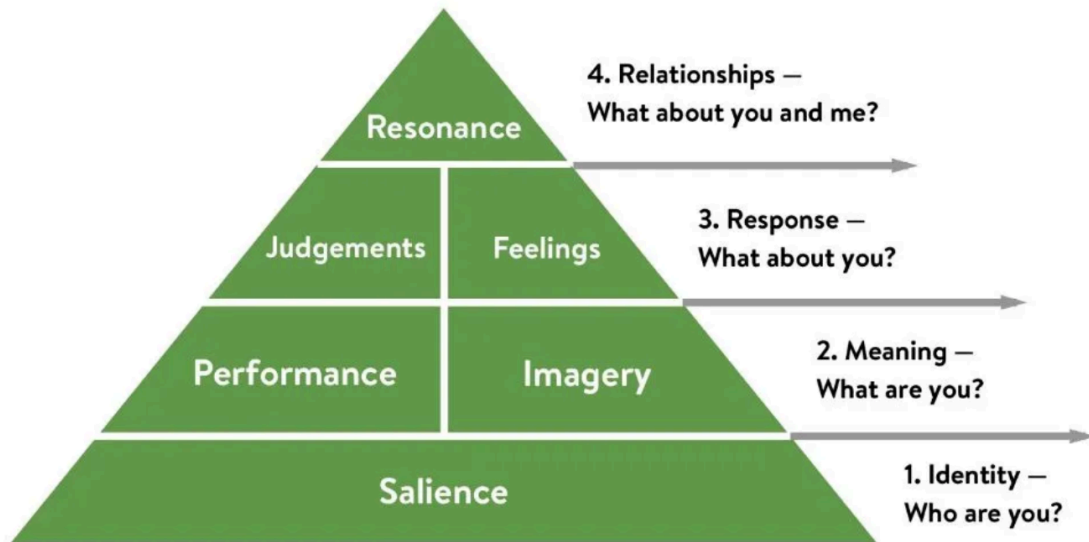


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework: Brand Equity Pyramid (Keller, 2001)

This research utilizes Keller's (2001) Brand Equity Pyramid to understand consumer perceptions of brands that have opted out of social media. The model not only elucidates the structure of these perceptions but also explains how consumers' judgments and feelings influence the consumer-brand relationship. It was chosen for its comprehensive connection between consumer perception, engagement, and the consumer-brand relationship, which are pivotal to this study. While other models address these theories, Keller's model offers a hierarchical and straightforward approach to these topics.

Previously considered models, such as Aaker's Brand Equity Model and Fournier's Brand Relationship Model (1998), were found unsatisfactory for this research. Fournier's model primarily focuses on relationships without considering perception, whereas Aaker's model, although similar to Keller's, lacks explicit emphasis on consumer engagement and relationship-building, which are central to this study.

This thesis uses Keller's framework in a unique manner, viewing each part of the model as a predisposition for the next, thereby fitting perfectly into this research. The thesis posits that

each part of the model strengthens the consumer-brand relationship and creates a positive consumer perception of the brand.

The model can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. One perspective is the pyramid itself. If a consumer's identity does not align with the brand's performance and imagery, negative feelings and judgments toward the brand arise, leading to unmet consumer needs and a weak consumer-brand relationship. Conversely, if there is alignment, positive judgments emerge, enabling the highest level of the pyramid—resonance—and fostering a closer consumer-brand relationship.

Another perspective involves the four sections on the sides of the pyramid: identity, meaning, response, and relationships. These sections are integral to why this model was chosen. The model bridges both perceptions and relationships, linking who the company is (identity) with how it is perceived (response), significantly influencing the consumer-brand relationship. The first two levels are connected to the brand itself, while response and relationships pertain to the brand's decision to disengage from social media. Therefore, it is crucial for a company to embody its values and ensure its actions reflect them, leading to a positive perception and a strong brand relationship.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the thesis, starting with the selected research approach that underpins the entire chapter. It then details the research design and data collection methods, describing the interview process, participant selection, and question organization. Additionally, the background of the Lush case is presented. The chapter further discusses the validity and reliability of the study, explains how the data will be analyzed, and concludes with the research limitations.

3.1 Research Approach

To achieve high-quality research, identifying the right philosophical standpoint is crucial for the thesis's success. This thesis combines both inductive and deductive approaches, resulting in an abductive approach. According to Streefkerk (2019), the deductive approach aims to test an existing theory, while the inductive approach seeks to develop a new theory. As this study focuses on both the existing Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid Model (2001) and other theories discussed in the previous chapter, as well as aims to contribute to a new theory on brand disengagement from social media, we, as authors, argue that this thesis adopts an abductive research approach.

3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology is a branch of philosophy, a philosophical discipline that revolves around nature and the organization of being (Maedche, 2002). The research's views can reflect an ontological standpoint, which focuses on the nature of reality and influences whether the existence of a social phenomenon is independent or dependent on its actors (Easterby-Smith, 2021).

The current study revolves around the perceptions of consumers and we decided that the most suitable ontological standpoint is relativism. As researchers we perceive and believe that the topic of this study has many truths, which are dependent on the viewpoint the observer takes (Easterby-Smith, 2021). Furthermore, this relativist ontology is based on the belief that reality itself is a subjective and finite experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Additionally, considering the limited literature on brands' disengagement from social media, a relativist ontology is deemed highly relevant for the theoretical and practical implications of this thesis.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is defined as “a general set of assumptions about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world” (Easterby-Smith, 2021, p. 71) and “a way of understanding and explaining how I know what I know” (Crotty, 1998, p.3), revolves around the understanding of knowledge acquisition. Given our prior establishment of a relativist ontological standpoint, social constructionism emerges as the sole feasible epistemological perspective for this thesis.

A socially constructed perspective sees reality as subjective and multiple, as well as influenced by different social actors (Saunders et al., 2012). Consequently, the researchers need to be aware of the social actors to deliver high-quality research results. Saunders et al. (2012) state that this approach is focused on individuals' perception of their surroundings and experiences, based on focusing on their social motivations, understandings, and motivations. Furthermore, as the purpose of this study is focused on consumer perspectives, such an epistemological stance is most suitable. With a social constructionism stance, many truths can be uncovered, thus properly understanding consumer perspectives can lead to high-quality research.

3.2 Research Design

The specific strategy for carrying out a research study is called the research design (Collis & Hussey, 2021). The research methodology should be described in detail in the research design, to ensure that it is consistent with the research question and with the objectives of the research. This research uses interviews as a way to collect data, to examine how consumers

perceive a brand's disengagement from social media and how it alters the consumer-brand relationship. In the case of this study, the context lies within the social media disengagement, more specifically of the cosmetics brand Lush.

3.3 Data Collection Method

To address the research questions on how consumers perceive a brand's disengagement from social media and how this disengagement influences consumer-brand relationships, this study employed qualitative semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. We chose semi-structured interviews to better understand consumer perceptions. Given that perceptions may vary from individual to individual, we believed that using interviews with both structured and unstructured elements would give us data that is both comparable and diverse.

In a previous pilot study, we utilized netnography, which provided some initial insights. However, while the data from netnography was useful, we felt that semi-structured interviews would allow for a deeper exploration of consumer perceptions. We focused solely on interviews to open a direct dialog with Lush customers, enabling us to ask specific questions rather than just observing online interactions (netnography). Although our netnography study highlighted the potential of our chosen topic, it was not suitable for inclusion in the master thesis for several reasons.

One significant limitation of netnography was the lack of information about the individuals posting online. Since our study required participants to be previous customers of Lush, we could not ensure this criterion was met with netnography. Additionally, netnography poses ethical concerns regarding research ethics (Kozinets, 2002), particularly around whether online forums are private or public spaces and what constitutes 'informed consent' in cyberspace. As the individuals posting online did not explicitly consent to their data being used for market research, we decided against using netnography.

Given that this is a qualitative study, the strategy for participant selection needed to be aligned with the overall logic of the study (Punch, 2004). Therefore, we concluded that combining netnography and interviews would not be suitable, based on our criteria for interview participants.

Although the company Lush is mentioned throughout the thesis, it is not referred to as a case study. During our discussions, we decided that Lush would serve as an illustrative example to help interview participants understand the real-world context of brand disengagement from social media. The purpose was not to focus solely on Lush, but to use it as a concrete example to elucidate the broader phenomenon of brand disengagement from social media. Consequently, the interview questions were designed to address both Lush-specific situations and general scenarios.

3.3.1 Interviews

A total of 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. The interviews lasted from 14 to 27 minutes. 6 out of 8 interviews were conducted in person and 2 online via Zoom, which can be seen in *Table 1* below. This is due to some participants being in a different county than the researchers. The interviews were held in English and it was made sure, before the interviews, that participants' knowledge of English was sufficient so that everyone understood the content. Additionally, all the interviews were semi-structured, with the majority of the questions being open-ended.

According to Lutz and Knox (2014), interview types vary, from free-ranging to highly structured interviews. The unstructured type focuses on a changing protocol based on the participant's response. Consequently, the flow of the interviews varies from one participant to another. The more structured type, inquires more standardized questions, leaving less room for interpretation. Lastly, there is a hybrid version of the two, a semi-structured interview type. This method has some predetermined questions, however the participant can be asked some additional ones (ed. Lutz & Knox, 2014). A semi-structured interview is used within qualitative research in social sciences (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The interview generally follows some sort of protocol that is decided upon prior to the interview, it allows for discovery and focuses on a main topic to provide structure (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). According to Hill et al. (2005), an important characteristic of semi-structured interviews is the ability the interviewer has to ask and follow different directions, as the responses of participants unfold.

Table 1: Participants of Interviews and Their Key Demographics

Participants:	Age:	Gender:	Nationality:	Occupation:	Interview time:
Participant 1	22	Female	Poland	Student/Part-time work (PT)	27 min
Participant 2	22	Female	Slovene	Student	14 min
Participant 3	22	Male	Slovene	Student	15 min
Participant 4	22	Male	Slovene	Work	18 min
Participant 5	27	Male	Czech	Student	18 min
Participant 6	23	Female	Czech	Work	26 min
Participant 7	26	Female	Spain	Work	25 min
Participant 8	25	Female	Sweden	Student / PT work	22 min

3.3.2 Question Design

The interview questions, as seen in Appendix A, were selected based on the case about Lush, and four key theories of the thesis (social media, perceptions, relationships, engagement). When compiling the questions, we used Keller's (2001) model as a basis. The main goal was to compile questions that would help us answer important areas linked to the theory from the Literature Review chapter.

All the questions investigated participants' perceptions. Engagement is mostly covered in the first and second steps of Keller's Equity Pyramid (2001), and relationship building is crucial in the last part of the pyramid. Therefore, we ensured that all parts of Keller's model were covered through our interview questions. This way of question formulation and division was to ensure that the flow of the interview was smooth, the case study to increase the participants' understanding of brands' disengagement from social media, and overall to try to make the research provide robust and high-quality data.

The interview started with some general questions to ease the participants, create a safe environment for expressing opinions, and establish a friendly relationship. Based on these short introductions, we continued to the next part, only when we sensed that the participants were relaxed and ready. After that, the rest of the open-ended questions were asked. As this was a semi-structured interview, the main questions were similar throughout the interviews, however, the additional ones did vary depending on the participants' responses. Furthermore, for a participant to be eligible to be in this research, they had to be a Lush customer before.

Through the interview process, the participants were asked questions that related to theory. We separated the interview questions into six different parts: Overall perceptions about the brand, General questions about social media, Engagement on social media, Disengagement on social media, and Perceptions and Relationships. All these six themes included questions that were created based on theories covered in the Literature Review chapter. When creating the questions, we both collaborated and sought to connect theory in a way that both complemented it as well as found out the question to our two research questions. add here

After writing the questions in connection to theory, as well as the conceptual framework used, we discovered we had some questions that were repetitive or very similar. Thus we scanned the interview questions, removed the unnecessary ones, and conducted a test interview to ensure the interview process would go smoothly. After this, we decided to start with the interview process.

3.3.3 Sampling

The sampling process selected for this thesis was both convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling is a sampling method where the researcher takes a sample of

participants that is convenient (Edgar et al., 2017). In our case, this is due to the participants that were selected being in our close circle, such as colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. According to Kelly (2010), purposive sampling is “used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information” and it helps to identify and select cases that make the best use of the limited research resources (Campbell et al., 2020). Furthermore, as seen in *Table 1*, we conducted 8 interviews in total. The reason for having only 8 interviews was due to a high saturation of interview answers we got from the interviews. This is mentioned by Knott et al. (2022), as they state that researchers often stop conducting interviews after new interviews confirm findings from the previous interviews, with no new surprising insights, which is saturation. Thus, we as researchers decided to stop with the interview process after we reached a high saturation of interview answers. This argument can be further strengthened if looked at the findings part. Through all the themes identified, all 8 participants are mentioned in almost every theme (Knott et al., 2022). Moreover, in the case of this study, interviews are used as the qualitative data collection method and the overall logic of the study is based on realism and social constructionism.

The thesis aims to investigate how a brand’s disengagement from social media changes consumers' perceptions and how this affects brand-consumer relationships. The participants were selected based on their knowledge of the situation of the Lush company. We decided to select this sample as a criteria because Lush is one of the very few companies that decided to disengage from social media platforms (Lush, n.d.) and can also be used as a practical example for participants' better understanding. Consequently, the participants were selected on the convenience and purposive sampling strategy, based on the criteria that they were people we had known and had to be previous or current customers of the company Lush. This decision was made, to achieve high-quality data collection and research results. As the phenomenon of a brand’s social media disengagement can be hard to understand, participants had to have prior knowledge of the company, to answer the interview questions as accurately as possible. Additionally, due to Lush being a rather famous cosmetics company, it was not hard to find suitable candidates for the research.

3.3.4 The Case

In order to better understand the phenomenon of brand disengagement from social media, this research focused on the cosmetics company Lush. In this thesis, we are going to refer to the company LUSH COSMETICS LIMITED as the company Lush. The company is widely recognized among both younger and older audiences. They especially gained some attention in 2021, when they decided to exit many social media platforms. As we are trying to find out consumer perceptions of brands disengaging from social media, Lush only seems to be the perfect example. Not only did we as authors better understand the phenomenon, but we used it as a practical example throughout the interviews we conducted. The respondents could thus have an example of a company that exited social media and consequently, their answers could be more accurate. Additionally, by focusing on only one single brand, we were able to investigate the phenomenon of disengagement from social media in depth consequently making this research greater in-depth and feasible. Having the brand disengagement from social media being such a new phenomenon, the Lush company example was crucial for the respondents to truly understand what is happening and form opinions about it.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Reliability and validity interpretation and representation of participants' perspectives is one of the key aspects of qualitative research and there is no statistical test to measure it (Sutton & Austin, 2015). However, due to researchers needing a way to determine the reliability and validity of a study, there is a work by Lincoln and Guba (1986), focused on determining confidence in the 'truth' of the findings which is referred to as "trustworthiness". Trustworthiness consists of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Despite our efforts as researchers to mitigate biases and errors, certain limitations remain unavoidable and are applied to the four criteria of trustworthiness.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), credibility is confidence in the truth of the findings. Credibility was tested through many steps of the thesis. Firstly, the sample size of this thesis is rather small. Although many of the comments provided by the participants were insightful, thus supporting credibility, the number of respondents (8) and the time of the interviews could have been longer, consequently not making this thesis credible. Despite this limitation,

participants' responses were very similar, indicating very clear themes and this influenced our decision to stop the interviewing process at 8 interviews.

Moreover, the study focuses on consumer perception of the brand Lush and is limited to individuals who consider themselves consumers of Lush. Participants in the qualitative semi-structured interviews were required to be regular buyers of Lush products before the brand decided to leave social media. There were no requirements regarding age, nationality, or social status to ensure diverse experiences and insights. However, the study primarily included female participants, which limits the diversity of perspectives but strengthens the knowledge about the female perspective on brand disengagement from social media. Future research should aim to include a more diverse participant pool. Additionally, the participants were from different nationalities, resulting in more extensive information from the sample. The participants were also acquainted with the company Lush, which only strengthened their understanding of the interview questions.

To enhance credibility, we employed a coding process. We as researchers collaboratively reviewed the text, selecting only those codes on which they agreed for subsequent theming. However, despite our efforts, limitations related to the coding process can emerge. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), transcribing and coding may introduce memory bias, influenced by nonverbal cues and contextual factors during data interpretation. Despite efforts to analyze data promptly after interviews, researchers might remember things differently than they occurred. Additionally, we previously conducted a netnography on this topic for a separate assignment. Our prior knowledge positively contributed to the credibility of this study.

Moreover, the interviews were conducted in English, which is not the first language of any of the participants. While participants were generally fluent in English, certain terms and contexts may have influenced their responses. We believe this contributed to the relatively brief nature of some interviews, as participants may have been less verbose in their non-native language. Some participants may have also withheld thoughts due to limitations in their English vocabulary. In such cases, we utilized additional unstructured questions to encourage further elaboration, although some responses remained concise. Nonetheless, we found their insights to be valuable.

Furthermore, the chosen method has its limitations. Although semi-structured interviews are effective for data collection, they can introduce research biases. Participants may have

provided socially desirable responses or altered their answers due to the awareness of being observed. To mitigate this, participants were assured of anonymity, and their names were not used

As defined by Lincoln and Guba (1986), dependability is crucial to ensure the reliability and consistency of research findings. It involves demonstrating that the results of a study could be repeated under similar conditions. This concept is closely linked to the credibility of the research, which focuses on whether future researchers conducting the same study can achieve the same results. In our study, we conducted 8 semi-structured interviews, which allowed us to gather data about consumer wants and needs and their perspectives. As this is a rather complex topic, and we only conducted 8 interviews, we cannot argue that we covered all the possible results. However, we can argue that the participants' answers were very similar and coherent with each other, clearly indicating the themes identified in the next chapter.

Furthermore, according to Lincoln and Guba (1986), transferability demonstrates that the findings can apply to different contexts. Although this study uses the company Lush as a practical example, the brand's disengagement from social media can be applicable to any brand. This study is primarily focused on understanding how consumers perceive a brand that disengages from social media, consequently, any brand can use this research as a tool. Moreover, as the selected method for this thesis is qualitative, each person's perspectives and opinions vary from one another leading to a less generalizable context (Kvale, 1994). This perhaps makes it seem less transferable, however, if we dive into understanding the context and valuable insights into consumer perspectives it can help us explain how the study results could apply to similar situations.

Lastly, Lincoln and Guba (1986) define confirmability as the degree to which respondents' opinions, rather than the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest, impact the study's conclusions. This last criterion focuses on the researcher's ability to stay objective throughout the research. We, as researchers, tried to ensure that by constantly working together, questioning each other, and sharing our opinions we would be as objective as possible. Despite this, there were limitations, one of them being based on the interview process. The reason for participants' responses being short, could lie in our inability to sense whether the participants were struggling with certain questions, and consequently, we were not delving deeper into those. Nevertheless, only by constantly communicating, and reviewing each

other's work, we tried to achieve being as neutral as possible. As our method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, we made notes before, during as well and after the interviews. We discussed prior to the interviews what to avoid, and what to say in order to make them as objective as possible.

As mentioned throughout this part, one of the biggest limitations of this thesis is the number of interviews conducted and how much time they lasted. This can influence many layers of trustworthiness. Not only does it influence credibility, due to answers being short, but also transferability. Although at first glance, having so few respondents can be seen as a con, there is also a pro. We as authors believe that if 8 respondents could provide us with seven different themes, there must be something in this topic that can be built upon. Due to the pattern that 8 respondents formed, being so noticeable so quickly, we argue that the results of this study are credible. Furthermore, as this study is focused on social constructionism, which employs many truths, the argument of transferability is already in question. Perhaps we identified some themes that would not arise in a similar study, however this could be possible in any case. The dependability aspect is perhaps influenced the most, as there is a high chance we did not identify some themes in the process. Despite this, we still believe that due to the 8 participants' answers being so coherent with each other, there is a clear indication that the themes we did identify would also be identified if the study was conducted again. Furthermore, as this thesis is not only focused on the brand disengagement phenomena but also on how participants perceive this with the help of a practical example, we believe this further strengthens the trustworthiness of this thesis. As researchers, we aimed to be as objective and open as possible, to ensure participants would feel they can express their opinions.

Moreover, using Lush as a case presents its own set of challenges. Lush had already faced backlash before its social media disengagement, which might have affected participants' responses. If participants were to have a negative opinion of the company Lush due to the backlash, the responses might have been different. Nonetheless, Lush was chosen because it is a unique example of a brand disengaging from social media.

In conclusion, we remained professional and objective throughout the research study. We discussed any potential issues as well as communicate with each other about the thesis as a whole. Furthermore, we are aware that due to this study being focused on 8 interviews that are

rather short (14-27 min), this can to an extent influence the trustworthiness of this study. Due to the research having an ontological relativism view as well as social constructionism epistemology, we believe that some of the criteria of trustworthiness of the study are to an extent limited. The reason is the stance that there are many truths, thus resulting in a possibility that if the study was conducted yet again it would demonstrate a different kind of truth. Regardless of the limitations, we believe the degree of saturation we achieved in our interviews meant that we captured a wide enough range of responses, indicating a pattern and thus having reliable results.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data Analysis refers to “the processing of data by conventional theories, technologies, and tools for extracting useful information for practical purposes” (Sarker, 2019, p.3). This research follows a data analysis process by Sutton and Austin (2015) which comprises five different phases; interpretation of data, transcribing and checking, reading between the lines, coding, and theming. We would like to note that prior to stopping conducting interviews, we discussed the contents of each interview with each other. Thus landing on the number of the interviews conducted in total. Due to our discussion regarding the interviews, we soon realized the similarity in participants' responses and decided to conclude the interview process.

The first phase was the interpretation of data. During this phase, the interpretation of data depended on the theoretical standpoint adopted by the researchers (Sutton & Austin, 2015). This study primarily focused on various perspectives, particularly emphasizing the consumer's viewpoint. Other perspectives explored included consumer engagement, disengagement, perceptions, and brand relationships. Additionally, this research considered broader perspectives such as relativism and social constructionism when analyzing the interview data.

Secondly, the transcribing and checking phase focused on the audio recordings of the conducted interviews. The research emphasized the importance of accurately transcribing spoken words. Initially, each of us transcribed four interviews using Microsoft Word, and

subsequently, both of us reviewed all eight transcripts. Following Sutton and Austin's (2015) guidelines, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. After completing the transcripts, we meticulously checked them for misspellings and errors to ensure readability. Though there were some minor corrections needed, we addressed them promptly. After several rounds of review, we finalized eight transcripts with similar structures, varying in length due to differences in interview duration, participants' responses, and the semi-structured interview format.

The third phase involved reading between the lines. During this part of the research, we, as researchers, analyzed the transcriptions to understand how participants experienced the thesis topic. Both of us independently reviewed the eight transcripts and then discussed our interpretations of the participants' responses. Our goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the direction indicated by participants' answers. The accuracy of the transcribed text was crucial as it faithfully captured the interview settings and participants' remarks, aiding our analysis.

Fourthly, the coding phase focused on integrating all interview texts. According to Sutton and Austin (2015, p. 228), “coding refers to the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants’ narratives and interpreted by the researcher”. During this phase of analysis, we aimed to grasp each participant's perspective. Coding was manually conducted on each transcript copy, making this phase the most time-consuming. To minimize biases in the coding process, we jointly coded the interviews. Similar codes were grouped together using color coding, and we meticulously compared these across all interviews. Our approach was thorough to ensure no crucial codes were overlooked, thus enhancing our understanding of the topic.

The theming phase was the final step. As researchers, we utilized theming to integrate codes from different transcripts into overarching themes. During this phase, we meticulously reviewed the codes multiple times, resulting in the identification of 7 distinct themes. Initially, these themes had descriptive names focusing on their content. However, during our discussions on thematic coherence, we opted for a more creative approach. As a result, the themes presented in the next chapter are creatively crafted to enhance the intrigue of our findings. The theming process enabled us to present the results of our qualitative research in a cohesive and meaningful manner.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial for researchers to discuss in order to draw attention to any ethical problems that might arise throughout the thesis.

Firstly, the term ‘disengagement’ itself has a generally negative connotation, which might have influenced participants' perceptions. Participants might have heard the word ‘disengagement’ and reacted to it badly (either consciously or unconsciously). Regardless, there is nothing we could have done to prevent this because, by warning participants, we could have triggered their negative reaction to the word. In addition, the phrase ‘brand disengagement from social media’ could also be viewed negatively, suggesting disinterest or poor usability (O’Brien et al., 2022) and consequently triggering a negative participant reaction.

One of the important parts of ethical considerations was the participants' consent to the interviews being conducted. All of the participants gave consent and allowed us to use the data gathered in this thesis. We ensured them that their identities would remain anonymous and could not be tracked back to them. Additionally, this topic is not a sensitive topic, so we did not have to take any special precautions. Participants were aware, that they could stop the interview process at any time if they wished to without having to provide us with the reason. Furthermore, participants were told that if at any time they do not understand some contexts, words, or questions, they can ask us any additional questions.

4 Empirical Findings

In the following section, the empirical results as well as the main findings from the thesis are presented. The findings are based on the Brand Equity Pyramid (Keller, 2001). The first 2 levels Identity and Meaning are connected to the brand Lush, from the third level brand's disengagement comes to the pyramid. After thorough research and conducting interviews, there were seven different themes discovered:

4.1 Lush and 'Good' Go Hand-in-Hand

The empirical findings of the thesis, in the section Lush and 'good' go hand-in-hand are based on the bottom two levels of the Keller Equity Pyramid (2001), Identity and Meaning. The findings reveal that consumers have a positive look at the company Lush and see it as a company that strives to make natural and good quality products that smell good. Additionally, Lush was perceived as a company with a long tradition and sustainability efforts.

In this section, participants revealed that they think Lush's products smell good and they both made a connection to the store. They both mention that they see Lush as a natural cosmetics company, further confirming that Lush is perceived for their use of natural ingredients.

"I think of the good smell whenever I come into the store or just past. I would say natural products, natural ingredients....I would say I like the company in general."

- Participant 1

"I think of natural cosmetics and a very nice smell when I come to shops...I don't know a lot about the company, but I liked all the products that I either bought there and that I received as a gift."

Participant 2

According to participants' answers, they identified Lush as a trustworthy company with sustainability efforts. Their innovative intentions have been known for years and respondents appraise sustainable products. The company has been known by participants for years.

“Good fragrance, trustworthy company that's been around for some time. A company that even our parents know about. And it's meant to make this good look and feel good...I know they're organic and good for our skin.”- Participant 4

“I see Lush as quite innovative, particularly in their approach to skincare and cosmetics. Their products often feel quite luxurious, and I like their efforts towards sustainability.”- “I like is that it's handmade that you can also when you buy something you can see who made it in the past, that connects you to the product.”- Participant 7

Additionally, participants expressed their opinion that the company is both traditional and open at the same time. The participants also acknowledged that the quality of the products is good.

“I think they're a very traditional company and their products are of good quality, and they've made a good company for themselves.” - Participant 3

“I think it's one of the companies that actually stands for the LGBT community and the products I think are good quality, vegan, and not tested on animals.” - Participant 6

When asked about anything negative about the company, almost all participants responded with minor comments. Some mentioned high prices, but overall their perception of the company's performance was positive.

“No, not really. I just think sometimes their prices are out of proportion.”- Participant 3

“I don't think so. I think everything I bought was perfect. One thing maybe is the price. Because their products are kind of pricey.”- Participant 6

The findings above reveal that consumers' perceptions of the company Lush are overall positive. The participants mentioned that both the products as well as the company itself are very good, with the only remark being high prices. Additionally, this finding is the base for all

the other findings, it is important to have that in mind, because if a company is not perceived as well as Lush, all the other findings might not be applicable to a different company.

4.2 Mixed Feelings About Social Media

The empirical findings of the thesis, in the section Mixed Feelings About Social Media, are based on the Response and Resonance levels of the Keller Equity Pyramid (2001), more specifically, Emotions, Judgments, and Relationships. The findings are based on the idea of brands leaving social media. Moreover, the participants of this study expressed that their overall perception of social media is negative, however still want the brand to have social media.

Below are two examples of participants expressing how they feel about spending time on social media. Both expressed that they feel stressed and anxious while comparing their lives to the ones presented on social media by other people.

“So maybe stressed about seeing, I don't know how other people live their lives or maybe how they look, how their skin looks or. How is their career going? So, then I just felt stressed and kind of felt bad about spending my time on social media and not spending my time worrying about my future or worrying about my just physical appearance or something like that. “ - Participant 1

“There have been times when seeing unrealistic posts on social media made me feel anxious...”
- Participant 5

Respondents usually compare themselves with others and due to this they sometimes feel bad after being on social media. From their statements, social media is not anything productive and they feel that they are not learning or achieving anything.

“Yes, because it makes me feel like I'm not disciplined enough to have control over myself because I'm if I'm just scrolling and looking for that shorthand dopamine rush, and I do that for some hours, I'm like” What I've been I've been doing” It's nothing productive and I didn't even learn something new.”-
Participant 3

“Yes, definitely. I think that just you know, pursuing the low dopamine we get even though we don't achieve anything is the worst thing our brain can get.” - Participant 4

Few respondents, as mentioned below, social media can be bad but it depends on many factors. Users can not allow social media to take over their life and they have to be aware that not everything that can be seen online is real.

“It depends because. Yes, social media is part of our lives but if you are still living offline then online then you are aware of the bad effects of social media. But if you are like, “I don't know, social media is my life”, I would say that people can be affected by social media.” - Participant 6

“I would say that it definitely influences people. I think it depends on how you use it and I guess it's really easy to use it in the wrong way to follow stuff that you maybe don't really want to follow or just get a lot of pictures. It's very easy to compare yourself to others when you see them on social media.”-

Participant 8

Some participants mentioned that social media, even though it is harmful, also has a useful and positive side. Social media can be a perfect source of inspiration and to get new ideas. According to one participant, social media can be a great tool for companies to share what is happening within the company.

“I would say it's bad in a way because it's addicting. If you compare yourself, and you have expectations, that you wouldn't have if you would not watch social media. But I also think that social media is good in a way to draw some inspiration from. Maybe develop new ideas. So, like overall I would say for me personally. It does not have a very bad effect, but for sure I notice some anxiety or some kind of addiction and not a good sign for my mental health if I use it too much.” - Participant 1

“...However, when used mindfully, social media can also be a source of inspiration, connection, and community.” - Participant 5

Participants acknowledged that social media is in the hands of the one using it and that brands should focus on their marketing and not on what consumers do in their free time. She also believes that if a company has a good reason to stay off social media, then the act is good:

“I think that the best is what the company thinks is better for them. I think that brands should stay on social media and ignore its negative effects because people should decide on their own how much time they are spending on it. Social media and marketing should be the brand’s responsibility.” - Participant

2

In this part, the empirical findings reveal participants' perceptions of the company that decides on a social media disengagement strategy. All the participants in this section expressed that they believe, that leaving social media is a good step for the future.

“I would say it's a good choice.” - Participant 1

“I would say it's a good step for the future, I think. Even though the future is more and more digitized, I think it's a good step to still have some brands that decide to not just follow the trends and kind of do it their way. And I believe that every brand will find its customers. And the customers will like the way the brand operates. So yeah, I support it.” - Participant 1

“...I think it depends on how they are using their social media it's if they're like good at actually communicating other things than just their product something more and if they're engaging with their consumers of course.” - Participant 8

It is evident that in the empirical findings of the thesis, consumers perceive social media as harmful, however, they want the brand to have a social media presence. The consumer's overall perceptions of social media are negative, they are aware that it is addictive and that they spend too much time on it. However, many also mention that social media has its positive side. It enables the brands to connect with their consumers more easily. Regardless of that, many participants expressed that they believe a brand's decision to leave social media is a good decision.

4.3 Established Brands Have It Easier

The empirical findings of the thesis, in the section Established Brands Have It Easier are based on the Response level of the Keller pyramid model (2001), more specifically, Judgements and Feelings. The empirical findings of this thesis reveal that participants see the strategy of social media disengagement as more suitable for established brands with an already strong customer pool.

Participants stated that if the brand has many customers and is well established, social media is not that important. The brand can think about leaving social media because of its negative effects and according to respondents, those companies care more about their customers.

“I would say that if I know the brand from before, social media is not as important, but if I don't know the brand, I would like to check out their social media, their comments and reviews.”- Participant 1

“I think it's a good step, especially for such a well-established company...Definitely exit social media, because the first option just sounds like the company wants to be the most profitable and doesn't really care about their users.” - Participant 4

Attracting new customers can be hard, especially for new brands. Without social media, it is challenging to make yourself known. For loyal customers not much will change if the well-established brand leaves social media as stated below:

“Existing customers who are loyal to the brand may continue to support them regardless. However, attracting new customers could become more challenging without a presence on social media.”-Participant 5

“But I would say that new brands have it harder. I can't imagine building a new brand and not being on social media. I think it's such a big part of reaching a wider audience.”-Participant 1

In the section below, participants acknowledge the difficulties of promoting a new product. Many of the participants argued that reaching the target audience and promoting new products can become a big issue, especially for a brand that already doesn't have a wide audience.

“It could pose a challenge in terms of reaching a wide audience with new products or updates. Especially for smaller or newer brands, social media provides a platform for quick and widespread communication.”-Participant 5

“I think it would be hard for them to communicate new products. It would be really hard for them, especially for brand startups that not many people know.”- Participant 6

The respondent below also highlighted that it not only depends on how big and established the company is but also if they have just an online presence or a physical store.

“But like if it's a company that's more well known I could also just visit their store in person. That wouldn't make such a difference to me, then I wouldn't care as much. But if it's a company that's online, I would say it's more important to kind of get a feel of the company and then to see if you kind

of resonate with the company, if you want to buy from them. I think social media is a kind of a reflection of who they are.”- Participant 1

The findings above are based on consumer perceptions of established brands versus those that are not as well established and their participation in the social media disengagement strategy. Participants state that those brands that have an established customer base, can afford to leave social media more, than those that are just entering the market. It is evident that brand disengagement from social media can make it hard for new, unknown brands to promote their products or services as well as attract new consumers. Respondents’ answers matched in the way that for big or well-established brands it would be easier to find another way to connect with consumers.

4.4 Brands on Social Media Are More Trustworthy

The empirical findings of the thesis, in the section Brands on Social Media Are More Trustworthy are based on the Response level of the Keller pyramid model (2001), more specifically, Feelings and Judgments of consumers. The empirical findings show that consumers perceive brands that are on social media as more trustworthy and relevant, compared to those that aren’t.

Participants trust those brands that are on social media and actively post what is happening within the company more than those that are not on social media. The participants below also state that the brand is more relevant to them if they are on social media.

“I trust brands that are on social media more, I would say so yes.”

- Participant 1

“...Seeing a brand active on social media often makes them feel more relevant and trustworthy...”-

Participant 5

One of the participants mentioned that it is important for the brand to have a physical store and if not, social media is necessary. Without a social media presence and a physical store, the brand seems untrustworthy. Additionally, the participant also states that those brands that have

their own values, which make them stand out, can afford to leave social media, compared to those that just sell for profit.

“If the brand has a physical store, I trust them more without social media. But I think that brands that maybe have different values, like not testing on animals, have more chances than maybe brands that just kind of want to sell as much as possible.” -Participant 1

To question if they perceive a brand as more trustworthy participants were clear and responded with short answers:

“Yes, definitely.” - Participant 3

“Yes, probably.” Participant 4

“Yes, yeah, yeah, 100%.” - Participant 6

It is evident from the empirical findings above that consumers perceive brands that are on social media as more trustworthy and relevant. The reasons for those perceptions may vary but all respondents trust brands that have social media. If a company does not have social media and is not active and does not have any reviews, respondents are more likely to not safely order something from the brand.

4.5 Missed Engagement Is Inevitable

The empirical findings of the thesis, in the section, Missed Engagement is Inevitable are based on the Response and Relationship levels of the Keller pyramid model (2001), more specifically, Emotions, Judgments, and Resonance the consumers have with the brand. The participants' interviews reveal findings that if a brand disengages from social media, the perception of the company is as if they are losing a connection with their customers, consequently weakening the brand-consumer relationship.

Respondents below stated that the main drawback is that because of brand disengagement from social media, the company is missing out on the connection and contact with its customers. It is hard for the brand to create a close connection and build a community around them.

“Yeah, maybe they're missing out on, like, building a community of people, but I think with this bold decision of not being on social media, they're also kind of building a community that doesn't like social media, so I think the real engagement happens in the store. Maybe they just switched to the traditional engagement,...” - Participant 1

“...on the other hand, the drawbacks can be that yeah, they are not engaging with their audience and are not building relationships with consumers.” - Participant 6

“So maybe they are missing this kind of connection with the consumer like either a reply or something.” - Participant 7

As seen from the participants' comments below, participants believe that a big challenge of a brand that is not on social media is promoting new products and promotions. They state that promoting products without social media is not impossible, but it is challenging. Brands need to turn to other alternatives, to still reach the customers with their new offers.

“I think that it would be harder for them to promote new products. But it's not impossible, they can still post physical ads and posters. If it's a well populated city, I think that posting posters on the wall of the shop of the new products would be a good thing to do.” - Participant 4

“I mean the drawback would be that the brand wouldn't be able to promote their new products as much.” - Participant 4

When participants were asked if they agreed with the statement that Lush is missing out on engaging with its customers, they responded:

“Yeah, I think so.” - Participant 3

“Yes, definitely.” - Participant 4

The empirical findings in this section above reveal that participants view a brand that disengagement from social media as losing connection with their customers. Participants see it as hard to build a community or catch the interest of the younger generation without the use of social media, yet they do not think it is impossible. One of the main drawbacks remains the company's inability to attract new customers and promote products without social media.

4.6 The Consequences of the Backlash

The empirical findings of the thesis, in the section The Consequences of the Backlash are based on the Resonance part and Response part of Keller's Pyramid Model (2001), here more specifically Feelings. The participants' answers formed this finding, based on their perception of brands' disengagement from social media, in the case the brand has been in a backlash in the past. The opinions varied, some participants expressed that in the case that the brand follows its values by leaving social media, backlash is not seen as a factor influencing their perception.

For two participants it would be hard to believe that brand ever again. Both of them feel that the brand does not care about its consumers. It would be easier for them to believe the backlash.

"No, I wouldn't see this as authentic and true, because I feel like they just lost the battle and gave up and it just made me believe the backlash more, you know?"

- Participant 3

"I feel like. They let me down as a customer because they didn't fight the battle to gain my trust back."

- Participant 4

Other respondents see leaving social media after backlash as authentic. They stated that brands should stand for their values and it is even more authentic to go against everything. If the company has the reason they agree with their decision.

"I think if they have a reason to do that, that is right for them so it's also alright with me." -

Participant 2

"Absolutely, if a brand sticks to its values despite facing backlash, it demonstrates authenticity and integrity." - Participant 5

"Yeah, for sure see it as authentic. Like, if they actually go against everything, but stay with their values." - Participant 6

Based on the results of the data collected from the interviews it is evident that if a brand experiences a backlash in the past it can either negatively or positively influence consumer relationships with the brand. In the case that the brand follows its values by leaving social media, the backlash is not seen as a factor influencing their perception. Here it is seen that consumers feel that a brand that does business in line with their values is perceived more positively. On the other hand, if the brand is involved in a backlash, its exit from social media is perceived as avoidance and an overall negative act.

4.7 Social Media Is Not Everything

The empirical findings of the thesis, in the section *Social Media is Not Everything* are based on the Response and Relationship part of the Keller pyramid model (2001), more specifically, Feelings and Resonance. When consumers were asked if they would buy less if they did not see the brand engaging on social media, participants agreed that yes, they are too much influenced by social media:

"I think that maybe yes, because I wouldn't think about their brands or their product. For example, if they have a new product, maybe I wouldn't even know that it exists. If I didn't see it on social media." -

Participant 2

"Maybe I would buy less, maybe it wouldn't be in the back of my mind. Because if I keep seeing the product, it reminds me of its availability." - Participant 3

Definitely. I feel I'm too much influenced by social media, so yeah. "- Participant 6

All the respondents are influenced by social media but two of them also stated that if they are truly fans/ loyal customers of a specific brand, they would buy their products regardless of their social media strategy.

"Existing customers who are loyal to the brand may continue to support them regardless."

- Participant 5

“OK for example if I know the brand before for example I'm not following Zara but I always buy clothes on Zara so if they don't have social media I don't mind but because I trust the brand before.” -

Participant 7

Additionally, from the participants' responses below, it can be seen that consumers believe that alternative forms of marketing are crucial for a social media disengagement strategy and the way how to stay connected with consumers. Participants stated that having a website with a contact form is pivotal for them if the brand does not have social media.

“I mean a proper website. I think that's very important and just making the stores feel more pleasant...I mean, it's okay if it's not on social media but they still have a proper website, where I can contact people and write them an e-mail and they'll send me mail in return. Then I think it's completely fine if they're not on social media.”

- Participant 3

“ Yeah, I think that it's very important that they have a good website on the Internet. So, if we can't check them on social media, we can at least check their website and maybe the good traditional marketing, especially in the consumer's home countries, such as billboards.” - Participant 2

Other respondents proposed many different ways of offline marketing such as in-store experiences, billboards, or events which can replace social media:

“I think that social media can be a powerful tool for marketing, but there are plenty of other ways for brands to reach their audience as email newsletters, collaborations, and in-store experiences.” -

Participant 5

“There are various avenues for marketing outside of social media. Influencer collaborations, traditional advertising like billboards, and hosting events are all effective ways to stay connected with customers.” - Participant 5

Often, respondents mentioned influencer marketing as a replacement for social media:

“There are many ways to do marketing. I would say influencer marketing, then you can have campaigns and billboards or organize events.” - Participant 6

“I would say that influencer marketing would be the solution if we do not count influencer marketing as the brand's social media presence.” - Participant 8

The empirical findings of this section reveal several insights into consumers' perceptions. Firstly, consumers think they would buy less from a brand that is not on social media. The majority state the reason as the brand not being constantly in their reach, promoting products and offers. Secondly, some expressed the role of loyalty. If a customer is a loyal customer, they will support the brand regardless of their social media presence. Lastly, participants state that a brand can still connect with the customers in other ways, in order to get their message across. Many suggest that brands turn to more traditional marketing strategies.

5 Analysis and Discussion

This chapter is focused on the analysis and discussion of the findings of this thesis and is consequently structured similarly. The chapter combines both findings and the existing literature relevant to this thesis. All findings are built on the Brand Equity Pyramid by Keller (2001).

5.1 Lush and ‘Good’ Go Hand-in-Hand

In the empirical findings, the first important theme discovered is based on the cosmetics company Lush. Before any information is shared regarding what is happening with the company and how disengagement from social media is perceived, it is important to understand how the consumers perceive the company, Lush. By understanding consumer associations with Lush we can build our understanding of how they perceive the company before knowing more about their disengagement actions. This perception is then used throughout the findings.

The findings revealed that the overall consumer perception of Lush is positive. The brand is seen as a company with products made from natural ingredients, open (LGBT+), animal friendly, sustainable and overall a well-established company. Additionally, Park et al. (2010) defined that brand attachment is based on how much the brand is aligned with the consumer’s self. In this case, the company Lush aligns with its customers and their values resulting in consumers perceiving the company positively. Furthermore, as Troy and Kerry (2010) stated, consumer behavior is shaped by a combination of their needs and the available options to fulfill those needs. In the case of Lush, consumers' needs are met and due to consumer behavior reflecting consumer perceptions (Troy & Kerry, 2010) the findings of this thesis reflected that.

Moreover, by Lush's exit from social media being seen as something that goes well with their identity, the foundation of the Brand Equity Pyramid by Keller (2001) is stable, leaving the potential for the company to achieve true brand resonance. Based on the model selected, the focus of this finding is on brand identity and brand meaning (performance and imagery). To create Brand Salience, achieving brand identity is needed. In this finding, consumers acknowledge many different associations they have with the company Lush, as well as share what they think about the brand, which is based on the imagery section of the pyramid.

Moreover, participants stated that Lush is a good company with high-quality products, their needs are met and the company's performance is perceived as favorable. This finding supports what Keller (2001) acknowledges regarding brand meaning and identity. As consumers recognized the company name, this indicates high brand awareness, which further supports the use of the Brand Equity Model in this thesis.

5.2 Mixed Feelings About Social Media

The empirical findings revealed that several participants who use social media have an overall perception of social media being harmful. Despite almost all participants' opinions being that social media is to an extent harmful, some still want the brand to have a social media presence.

The perception of social media as harmful was mentioned by Dhir et al. (2021) and named as the "dark side" of social media. Mirabito et al (2022) made a connection between social media on mental health and Wang and Deng (2022) on well-being. Participants in the interviews we conducted expressed that social media makes them feel stressed and anxious, also discussed by Dhir et al. (2021). By participants expressing how they feel about the brand, they complemented the theory by Keller (2001), specifically the Feelings part of the Response level of the pyramid.

Focusing on how brands experience SMF, Baj-Rogowska (2023) defined this as consumers being selective about how they spend their time on social media platforms and paying less attention to brands on social media. This was also confirmed by interview participants, as they

expressed they have to be the ones to discipline themselves not to spend too much time on social media and consequently compare themselves to others.

Despite participants' belief that social media can negatively affect them, they see social media as a part of marketing and a way for a company to present itself to the world. This goes well in line with the “bright side” of social media, which is mentioned both by Dixon (2024) and Dolan et al. (2019). Furthermore, some participants expressed that what the company does on social media is separate from how social media affects consumers. This is to an extent supported by Dixon (2024), as he highlights that many industry professionals see social media as a beneficial marketing tool. This goes in line with what Lee et al. (2014) state, that social media connects consumers and brands most easily.

Furthermore, we could argue that most companies “morally disengage” (Beckmann et al., 2018, Tillman et al., 2018) to distance themselves from negative effects from social media. Lush did the opposite, we could say they were “morally engaged” in the consequences of social media. Generally, brands do not go into the topic of how social media influences its users, and by not focusing on this they do not invest enough in consumer-brand relationships.

Furthermore, participants' positive response to Lush’s disengagement from social media could also be explained in greater depth within the brand Resonance (Keller, 2001). One of the categories of brand resonance is attitude attachment which emphasizes the emotional significance of the brand to consumers. For a brand to achieve attitudinal attachment, it must hold a special place in consumers' hearts, going beyond being just another option and becoming a cherished choice even when alternatives exist. In this thesis, this can be explained based on participants' positive responses to Lush disengaging from social media. We could argue that due to Lush going beyond just products and being another cosmetics company, participants hold Lush to a higher standard, consequently fostering a stronger emotional significance and relationship.

Additionally, a positive consumer perspective on Lush’s disengagement from social media goes in line with what Glomb et al. (2011) and Martínez-Cañas et al. (2016) state that a brand must position itself as more than just a brand, offering emotional benefits to customers (Suárez et al., 2016) to be accepted by consumers. In this case, Lush is doing more for consumers, than other brands that do not consider the mental health downside of social media on consumers.

5.3 Established Brands Have It Easier

The empirical findings of the thesis revealed that participants see the strategy of social media disengagement as more suitable for established brands rather than new brands entering the market. In this thesis, we take into account that established brands are those brands that have high brand equity (Steenkamp, 2019). This consequently proposes that the established brands are those that are strategically and financially based and well off (Steenkamp, 2019).

Participants of the interview expressed that they believe that a firm like Lush, could afford to go off social media because of their strong connection with the brand. This aligns with the strategy-based perspective (Steenkamp, 2019), which aims to maximize the return on marketing investment by fostering strong connections between the brand and consumers, thereby enhancing brand equity from the consumer's viewpoint. According to Keller (2001) the Brand Equity Pyramid model places significant emphasis on fostering strong connections with consumers and building meaningful relationships. Due to interview participants expressing that established brands are those that could “pull off” a social media disengagement strategy, we could say that it means that brands that have a strong relationship with the brand could afford to be off social media.

Due to interview participants expressing that established brands are those that could “pull off” a social media disengagement strategy, we infer that brands with strong consumer relationships can afford to be off social media. As consumers tend to gravitate toward brands that best fulfill their desires and requirements (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017), it can be argued that a brand like Lush can exit social media platforms while still meeting their consumers' needs.

Furthermore, Glomb et al., (2011) and Martínez-Cañas et al., (2016) stated that a brand has to position itself not just as a brand, but as a brand with emotional benefits for the customer (Campo et al., 2016). Those brands that are seen as ethical can positively influence consumers as well as evoke a stronger brand effect. In the case of this thesis, Lush's actions were ethical, trying to stand up for their customers.

The customers see Lush as a strong brand that could afford to position itself as a brand without a social media presence. The fact that Lush is a well-established brand confirms that

consumers still engage with the brand even though it is disengaged from social media. As all participants confirmed that they would still recommend Lush to their friends and relatives. This is in line with Keller's (2001) Brand Equity Pyramid, word-of-mouth is one of the forms of Active Engagement within Brand Resonance.

5.4 Brands on Social Media Are More Trustworthy

The empirical findings illustrate that consumers perceive brands that are on social media with feelings of trust. Although answers to why they feel trust towards brands that are on social media vary, the overall finding remains that brands on social media are perceived as more trustworthy.

Firstly, consumer perceptions are a reflection of how consumers react, refer, and interpret the encountered stimuli (Kotler et al., 2012). In this thesis interview participants reacted to stimulus and experienced feelings of brands towards the cosmetics brand Lush. According to Keller (1993), this involves attention, interpretation, evaluation, and emotional reactions triggered by brand-related stimuli. In this thesis, the participants' emotional reaction to a brand that is on social media versus the one that is not was higher in terms of trustworthiness.

Due to this finding being focused on consumer perceptions and their overall "feeling of trust" towards the brands that are on social media, we will focus on this section accordingly. Brand Response is a reflection of consumer perceptions, specifically how they feel and think about a brand. Within the Brand Equity Pyramid, we have Brand Response, then Brand Judgements and Feelings. Brand Judgements are further broken down into Brand Quality, Brand Credibility, Brand Considerations, and Brand Superiority (Keller, 2001).

Many of the participants argued that they feel that brands on social media are more trustworthy. The reasons varied from being able to see what the brand offers to reading reviews, and comments, and overall ensuring the credibility of the brand. 'Brand Credibility' revolves around consumer evaluation of a company, based on dimensions such as expertise, trustworthiness, and likability. In this thesis, consumers mainly expressed higher levels of trustworthiness with brands on social media versus those that aren't.

Focusing on ‘Brand Quality’, which pertains to consumers' perceptions of the brand's value and satisfaction (Keller, 2001). We could argue that participants are more satisfied if a brand (Lush) has social media because it can communicate their products and promotions as well as reviews about the brand’s performance. Furthermore, ‘Brand Considerations’ are reflected by participants expressing that they would be more likely to trust a brand that is on social media (Keller, 2001). They like to check how the brand is performing before buying things from them. However, they also mention that if a company has a physical store, their need for social media slightly decreases.

Moreover, ‘Brand Superiority’ focuses on what sets the brand apart from its competitors and makes it uniquely appealing (Keller, 2001). In the case of this thesis, we argue that “competitors” are brands that are not on social media. Participants see brands that are on social media as superior and higher in terms of trust.

Furthermore, by participants expressing that they want a brand to be on social media, they are in a way also signaling that by a brand going off social media, they lose the closeness to constantly know what is happening with the brand. This means that participants are longing for a closer relationship rather than something that might be better for them. Delving into Keller’s CBEE, brand resonance serves as a measure of the brand's relationship with its consumers and the depth of connection established. A category of brand resonance that is important for the context of this study is Sense of Community. When participants expressed that they would rather have a brand with a social media presence, they wanted the presence and community to stay the same. Keller (2001) states that in this category, consumers want to feel connected, and by the brand disengaging from social media, this connection can be broken.

5.5 Missed Engagement Is Inevitable

According to themes in empirical findings, the most mentioned drawback was that Lush due to their disengagement from social media is missing out on the engagement with their consumers on social media. As highlighted by Brodie et al. (2011) by disengagement they are missing experience emotions and strong bonds with their consumers. Due to disengagement,

respondents feel that they do not belong to the brand, which can be a problem in achieving Brand Equity (Keller, 2001). The main problem lies in the fact that consumers are becoming more passive and according to Lee et al. (2018) their role switched back. Based on responses, Lush is unable to reply to their consumers or help them solve any problem and because of that it is hard to involve their consumers in value co-creation as described by Skálén et al. (2015) where involvement and engagement are not carried out by both parties. For consumers, it is hard to create an emotional connection with the brand. Not only that Lush is according to participants missing new consumers but also expected benefits such as co-creation experiences or long-term emotional attachment to customers that lead to success as highlighted by Fernandes and Moreira (2019).

Another thing connected to the drawback mentioned by all participants is that due to missed engagement, they cannot promote their new products that well. According to that, Obilo et al. (2021) stated that unengaged consumers buy less than engaged and because of that Lush may lack in sales growth. However, social media is not only for making sales but primarily a tool where brands can engage with their customers (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024). Participants consider social media as a pivotal tool for brands to have as Dixon (2023) confirms that the number of social media users is still growing and 86% of marketers benefit from that. As a result of brand disengagement from social media, some participants are more likely to lose interest in the brand and disengage as well because of no activity from the brand side on social media (Dutot & Mosconi, 2016). Due to this, brands can lose credibility with their consumers (Keller, 2001). Missed engagement is the main drawback that sets Lush and its competitors apart in a negative way and according to Keller (2001) falls into the category Brands Judgements in third part of the Brand Equity Pyramid.

Even though participants see Lush's disengagement from social media as a downside, due to their strong attitudinal attachment to the brand (Keller, 2001), consumers think that the brand can succeed in the market even by not being on social media.

5.6 The Consequences of the Backlash

Empirical findings revealed mixed feelings about the backlash of the company which would decide to leave social media right after (Keller, 2001). Two participants negatively reacted to the company's backlash in the past because they believed that those companies should stand with their values and fight for their customers. They do not feel that in this case the company's behavior is authentic and for them, there is no reason to believe the company ever again. They would feel disrespected if the company just gave up the battle.

Other participants appraised the brave step and considered it as authentic which goes in line with Lush's values which leads as Keller (2001) stated to a closer connection between the brand and its customers. Lush's authenticity is one of the pillars that leads to long-term success (Gregoire et al., 2009). Those respondents are resistant to negative information which is highlighted by Park et al. (2010) as Brand Consumer Bond. Attachment is one of the indicators that express Brand Resonance which emphasizes the emotional significance of the brand to consumers (Keller, 2001). The respondents who would react negatively to the backlash do not have a self-brand connection and do not emphasize the brand as a reflection of themselves (Edson Escalas, 2004).

As stated by participants if the brand decides to leave social media after backlash, the step should be authentic and transparent. Those indicators shape interactions between brand and consumer and contribute to the increased brand equity and success of the company (Keller, 2001). Two participants mentioned that the decision to leave social media should align with the values of the company. Perception of the brand's value is part of Keller's (2001) Brand Equity Pyramid and if the interviewee's values match with the company's values, it leads to a positive reaction of brand disengagement.

5.7 Social Media Is Not Everything

According to empirical findings, this theme related to social media influence arose. All participants admitted that they are influenced by social media and if they did not see products there they would maybe never buy them. In this case, social media fulfills its goal of

increasing purchases. That is in accordance with Dixon (2024), that social media increased traffic for 76% of professionals. All participants are classified as Generation Z and this generation together with millennials are the most active demographics on social media (Zote, 2024). As stated by participants, sometimes they do not buy anything on purpose which is also one of the negative effects of social media which leads to increased screen time and negative emotions described by Fernandes and Oliveira (2024). Participants have a positive feeling of brand presence and engagement on social media which leads to more awareness of the brand and its products and they are more likely to make a purchase.

Some of the respondents do not follow their favorite brands on social media but are still loyal to them and regularly make purchases without social media. According to Keller (2001), those participants have a high level of commitment and loyalty toward the brand that shapes consumer-brand engagement. Loyalty is one of the components of Aaker's (1992) model of brand equity which influences overall perception of the brand.

Through interviews, many alternative strategies that brands should employ were conducted. Those strategies can make Lush unique and set the brand apart from its competitors (Keller, 2001). Two participants mentioned that social media is not crucial for them but they really care about the brand's website which is another important type of Media Engagement (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020). Functional websites by Calder and Malthouse (2009) are perceived as "learning forward" media. As one of the participants stated, a proper website with a contact form is crucial. Although all participants were young, findings revealed an interesting thing that many of them suggested: billboards, posters, and other forms of offline marketing, as an alternative strategy.

6 Conclusion

The last chapter outlines the conclusion of empirical findings and analysis. The aim is to answer the research questions of this thesis: How do consumers perceive a brand's disengagement from social media? and How does a brand's disengagement from social media shape consumer-brand relationship? Firstly the research questions will be answered, followed by implications to theory and practice. Lastly, the future suggestions will be stated.

6.1 Research Aims

This research aimed to explore how consumers perceive a brand's disengagement from social media channels and how this decision affects the relationship between the brand and its consumers.

Based on the thesis, there are several layers to how consumers perceive a brand that left social media. Consumers see a brand's exit from social media as true and authentic if the brand is doing so and still staying true to its values. In the case that a brand has values, that are not in line with a social media disengagement strategy, consumers will reject it. People might then see this as “disengagement washing” and not as something positive. Complementing that, consumers also feel that a brand's past backlash or mistake can influence whether they trust a social media disengagement strategy. Some argue that just by existing social media, a company is trying to better itself, and consequently they feel as if a brand is doing good. This is because, by a brand leaving social media, they are doing a selfless act and ‘walking away’ from profit. Others argue that if a brand experienced something negative in the past, exiting social media could be perceived as avoidance and an overall negative act.

Moreover, this study revealed that consumers perceive social media as harmful to its users, however, it can also be a quite useful marketing tool. The overall opinions regarding social media were that consumers spent too much time on the various platforms as well as

experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety. Regardless of that, consumers still perceive social media as one of the most important marketing channels for brands to reach consumers and build their relationships. Participants expressed that time on social media should be decided by themselves and that brands should focus on marketing and connecting with their audience. These perceptions of social media disengagement strategy only further confirmed that this strategy is more complex and unresearched. Additionally, consumers perceive a brand that is established, as more suitable for a social media disengagement strategy. Consumers expressed that they perceive a well-established brand, as a brand with an already strong customer brand relationship and it can more easily attract new customers by investing in other forms of (traditional) marketing.

Furthermore, consumers perceive brands on social media as more trustworthy. Those brands that are on social media, can more easily portray brand identity to a wide range of consumers. By having a social media presence, consumers often perceive brands as more credible than those that cannot be found online. Furthermore, by participants expressing that they want a brand to be on social media, they are in a way also signaling that if a brand goes off social media, they lose the closeness to constantly know what is happening with the brand. This means that participants are longing for a closer relationship rather than something that might be better for them. In connection to this, consumers believe that if a brand has a physical store, the downside to not having social media is not as severe. This is because they can visit the store in person and still see what the company has to offer. Not only is it harder for the brand to promote its products, but many consumers also expressed that the brand is not engaging with the consumers online, consequently not fully investing in their relationship. This was one of the key consumer insights as it shed light on consumer perspective on engagement. Consumers perceive a brand that is not on social media as a brand that is missing engagement.

In conclusion, the findings of this thesis demonstrate the importance of strong brand equity, in the context of a social media disengagement strategy. Consumers perceive that such a strategy is possible, however, a company has to be transparent and true to their values. Such a strategy is most suitable for brands that have not been in a backlash before, or have effectively communicated the events in question and are trying to do better. In addition, no matter the obstacle, if a company is considering a social media disengagement strategy, customers must

value a brand that is true to what they are doing as well as wish to form a relationship with their customers.

6.2 Practical Implications

This thesis contributes to a practical context. The reader is provided with a deep understanding of consumer perceptions of a brand that disengages from social media and how this influences consumer-brand relationships.

The findings from this thesis can be valuable for all brands that are unsure whether to disengage from social media and to find out what consumers think about such a brand. As this study is focused on a rather undiscovered phenomenon, we have developed a road map that can work as a tool for brands to decide whether they should or should not disengage from social media. The roadmap works based on steps a brand should figure out, before disengaging from social media. The steps in *Figure 3* are based on both Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid model (2001) and the findings of this thesis. By combining both, the Social Media Disengagement (SMD) Roadmap was created.

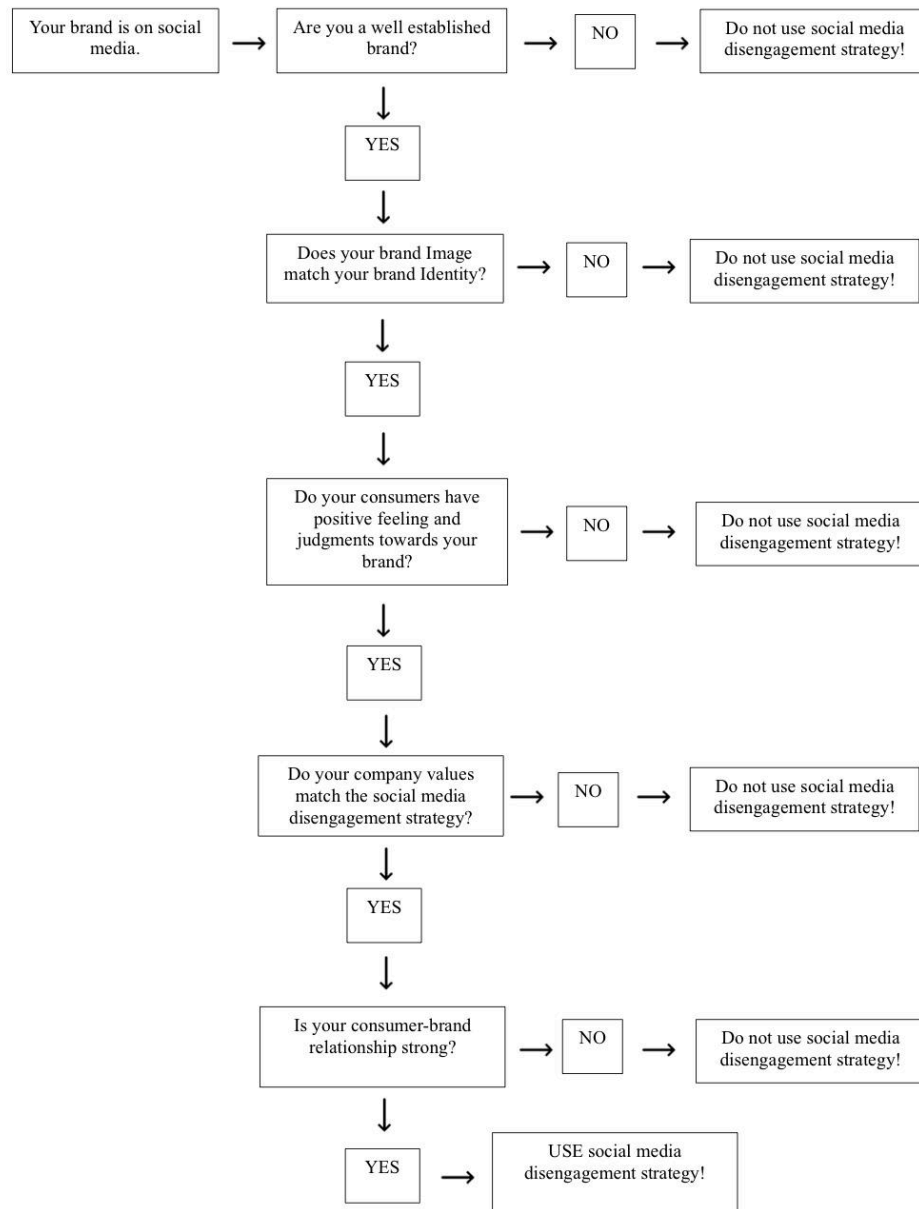


Figure 3: SMD Roadmap

This roadmap can be used for both educational purposes, to better understand the brand's social media disengagement strategy phenomena, as well as managers of brands that wish to see whether this strategy is suitable for their company. To illustrate the practical contributions, we need to explain the roadmap steps.

The first step that is necessary for a brand that wants to disengage from social media is to be on social media. Secondly, if the brand is not a well-established brand, for the prosperity of the company, we do not suggest exiting social media. This is due to a brand's already small

customer pool, which in the case of leaving social media platforms could result in the brand reaching even fewer customers. Thirdly, if a brand is well established, but the brand image does not match the brand identity, it should first do so, before continuing to the next step of the SMD Roadmap. Those brands that do have their brand image match their brand identity can proceed to the next step, which is based on how consumers feel about the brand. If the consumers have positive feelings and judgments about the brand, the brand can continue to follow the roadmap, where the question of company values and social media disengagement strategy arises. If their company values match their exit the brand can continue to the final step of the roadmap. Lastly, if the relationship between the consumer and the brand is strong, the brand can disengage from social media.

In the case that the brand's answers to SMD Roadmap are all a 'yes', we propose that a brand proceeds with a social media disengagement strategy. However, it is also important to note that this Roadmap should only be used as a guideline, and at this stage, it is still impossible to know how exactly it performs in practice.

One of the things that is missing from the SMD Roadmap is the backlash aspect. This decision was taken, due to backlash, in our opinion, being too of a complex aspect. The participants' opinions varied too much on how they perceived a company that had a backlash in the past, thus we decided it was best to exclude it from this theoretical model. We however still believe backlash can have an impact on some companies, however have not yet found a clear connection into what factors influence how consumers perceive it and whether there even is a "rule" or a clear strategy they can follow.

Furthermore, not only does this model complement practical implications, but so does the whole thesis. As brand disengagement from social media is such a new phenomenon, there is limited literature about the topic. This thesis itself can provide marketers with a better understanding of consumers' mindsets and perceptions about brand disengagement from social media. It focuses on a predisposition that a company is overall perceived positively, before disengaging from social media. It identifies important areas a company has to be aware of if they do exit social media. For example, a very important aspect mentioned by all participants is that a company must invest in more traditional marketing channels. Marketers can thus prepare a 'traditional marketing strategy' before the company leaves social media, minimizing the loss and making the transition much smoother.

Moreover, this thesis sheds light on the customers' mixed feelings about social media. Consequently, brands that are deciding whether to exit social media or not, can still gain deeper insights into consumer perceptions of social media and at least open a dialog with their customers on how they perceive their brand's presence on social media (important or not). Here it is also important to note that the findings of this thesis reveal that generally, consumers perceive brands that are on social media more, than those that are not. This finding demonstrates a practical implication for marketers who are unsure if social media is influencing the trustworthiness of their brand. Despite this, many of the participants acknowledge that social media is not everything, further complementing the findings about traditional marketing. This can be useful for marketers who are unsure if a company can succeed outside the social media world.

Additionally, one of the key findings of this thesis was that established brands are those that can afford to exit social media. This is also the reason why in the SMD Roadmap, we put established brands at the beginning. It is evident from the finding that brands that are established can afford such a step. Consequently, this is a big practical implication for brands, marketers, and managers to truly see if their company can take a step out of the social media world.

Lastly, the practical implication that is evident from the findings is when a company leaves social media, some missed engagement is inevitable. Marketers can use this finding as a reminder that social media is an important marketing channel to attract and attain new customers, however, this thesis clearly states that if a brand has a strong relationship with its current customers, such missed engagement can be significantly decreased.

In conclusion, this thesis offers many practical insights that can benefit marketers, brands, people in the social media industry, educational purposes, and those who want to understand brands' disengagement from social media better. It delves into consumer perceptions of a company that would disengage from social media and provides an SMD Roadmap as well as separate practical implications that are uncovered in the Empirical Findings and Analysis and Discussion.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

This research advances the existing literature by examining consumer disengagement from a brand perspective, particularly within the rapid technological advancements and the pervasive influence of social media. Building on Keller's (2001) work on consumer perception, the study introduces new phenomena related to brand disengagement and contributes significantly to the limited research in this area.

The findings provide a basis for future work, highlighting the need for quantitative studies to validate the qualitative findings and to explore the impact of social media disengagement across different industries and brand types. Future research could also investigate the long-term effects of social media disengagement on brand equity and consumer loyalty, as well as explore perspectives from B2C (business-to-consumer) relationships. These directions will help deepen the theoretical understanding of social media's role in modern marketing strategies and consumer behavior.

By bridging this gap, the research enhances the understanding of building consumer-brand relationships without a social media presence. The findings highlight the importance of social media in fostering strong consumer-brand connections and explore alternative ways to maintain these relationships without it.

This thesis expands the theoretical understanding of consumer-brand relationships by examining the implications of social media disengagement. Traditional models emphasize the role of continuous interaction facilitated by social media. However, this research suggests that strong brand equity can mitigate the negative effects of social media absence, indicating that the quality of the pre-existing brand-consumer relationship is crucial for maintaining consumer loyalty and engagement without social media. This finding encourages a re-evaluation of consumer-brand relationship theories to account for scenarios where brands operate successfully without a social media presence.

The research introduces the idea that brand transparency and authenticity are crucial for successful social media disengagement. Consumers value brands that are true to their values and transparent about their decisions. This introduces a new dimension to theories of brand authenticity, suggesting that disengagement from social media can be a strategic move to

reinforce a brand's authenticity, provided the brand communicates its reasons effectively and aligns its actions with its core values.

This study contributes to the understanding of how social media shapes consumer perceptions of brands. It reveals mixed consumer feelings about social media, where it is seen both as a vital marketing tool and a source of stress and anxiety. This dual perception calls for a nuanced understanding of social media's role in consumer-brand relationships and suggests that theories of consumer behavior need to consider the psychological impacts of social media on consumers.

Introducing a new consumer perspective allows researchers to deepen their understanding and raise awareness of the topic. Insights into consumer perceptions provide valuable information on the potential use and implications of social media disengagement in marketing strategies, offering a fresh understanding of its impact on consumer-brand relationships.

Additionally, the Social Media Disengagement (SMD) Roadmap provides a theoretical framework for brands considering social media disengagement. Based on qualitative insights and the Brand Equity Model, this framework outlines the conditions under which social media disengagement can be strategically beneficial. It contributes to strategic marketing theory by offering a structured approach to evaluating the feasibility and potential outcomes of disengaging from social media.

Building on Keller's Brand Equity Model (2001), this study highlights the resilience of well-established brands in maintaining their brand equity despite social media disengagement. This suggests a need to revisit and potentially revise brand equity models to incorporate the dynamics of social media presence and absence. The finding that established brands can afford to disengage from social media without significantly harming their equity challenges the traditional view that continuous online engagement is necessary for maintaining brand strength and consumer trust.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this thesis is that the social media disengagement strategy is focused on the company Lush. The study explored Lush's customers and how they perceive a brand's decision to exit social media platforms. Future research could focus on a variety of different companies to truly understand how consumers perceive such a phenomenon and not just how Lush consumers perceive it. Furthermore, this research is focused on the consumer perspectives of a brand that disengages from social media and not the brand's perspective. Future research could explore both consumer as well as a brand's perspective of such a strategy, to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena and how it influences all actors of the buying process. In addition, this study does not contribute to relationships between brands (B2B), but to consumer brand relationships (B2C). Future research could shed light on different forms of relationships, further strengthening the social media disengagement strategy phenomena.

Moreover, as this research was focused on qualitative data collection methods, future research could focus on quantitative methods. Additionally, in terms of data collection, this study conducted interviews with 8 participants, who were all in the ages between 22-27. Future research could focus on more participants as well as different age groups because different age groups could have different perspectives on social media. As social media (is for some) a rather new thing, older generations might react differently than those that participated in this study. One of the limitations of this study is also the number of interviews as well as the time they lasted. Future research should try to avoid this, consequently creating more trustworthy findings or complementing this thesis. Moreover, future research could combine both qualitative as well as quantitative data collection to achieve even more credible results.

Furthermore, this thesis proposes a SMD Roadmap, for brands and individuals to better understand if a particular brand should or should not exit social media. One of the limitations of the roadmap is that it was developed purely based on the results of this study and was not yet tested on other brands. Future research could delve into the model more, perhaps test it on some brands in real life, and modify it accordingly.

Even though this thesis has some limitations, the findings of this study still shed light on a currently not researched topic, a brand's disengagement from social media, and provide valuable insights into consumer perspectives and consumer-brand relationships. This study highlights the importance of a strong relationship between the consumer and the brand, contributes to brand equity theory, and opens a discussion about social media platforms and whether brands should be on them.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Perception about the brand overall

- What comes to mind when you hear Lush?
- What do you think about Lush as a company and what do you think about the products?
- Have you ever not been satisfied with something about the company? If yes, what was that?
- Do you agree with their values? (not testing products on animals?) Are you familiar with Lush's values?

General questions about social media

- Are you following your favorite brands on social media? Why/ Why not is it important to you? Are you following Lush on SM?
- Is it important for you that the brand is on social media? Why/ Why not?
- Do you trust brands that are on social media more than those that aren't?
- Do you think the brand can survive without not being on social media?
- Do you think that social media is bad for mental health?
- Have you ever felt bad after being on social media? Why? What was the reason that you felt like that?

Engagement on social media

- Do you see a brand's absence from social media as a positive or negative signal about its commitment to customer engagement and communication?
- Do you think that you would buy less if you did not see the brand engaging on social media?

Disengagement from social media

- Do you know that Lush is not active on social media?

- What do you think was the reason that Lush is not active on social media?
 - Do you think your behavior as a buyer changed with Lush not being on social media?
 - What do you think about the step out of the social media world?
- If a brand leaves social media, due to social media being unfair to its users, how do you feel about this?
 - Are you more or less likely to buy from them? (Buying behaviors)
- Would you rather have a brand stay on social media and ignore its negative effects, consequently cater to your needs, or exit social media and promote consumer well-being?
- Have you ever stopped following or lost interest in a brand due to their decreased activity or disengagement from social media? If so, could you share an example?

Perceptions

- In your opinion, what alternative strategies could a brand employ to maintain its visibility and engagement with customers if it decides to leave social media?
- Do you believe that a brand's presence on social media impacts your perception of its relevance and trustworthiness?
- Can you envision any potential benefits or drawbacks for a brand that chooses to disengage from social media?
- How do you think a brand's decision to leave social media might affect its ability to communicate new products, promotions, or updates to its audience?
- If you share and tag a brand on social media, the brand reposts your story. Do you feel happy/ more valued? Is Lush missing out on engaging with its customers?
- How do you perceive a brand that decided to quit social media, if you know that they incurred a backlash in the past? Do you still perceive this action as authentic?

Relationships

- How do you think that a brand's departure from social media influences its customers as well as potential customers?

- Do you now like Lush as a brand more or less? How does this affect your relationship with the brand?