



Outbound Community Engagement: Consumer Evaluations of Brand Participation in Viral Comment Threads

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Dissertation written under the supervision

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the MSc in Management with specialization in Strategic Marketing at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, January 3, 2026.

Abstract

This dissertation examines Outbound Community Engagement (OCE) as an emerging form of real-time marketing where brands proactively participate in public social media comment sections on viral or trending content. The study addresses a gap in existing research, which has primarily focused on brand activity within owned media channels, by investigating how OCE shapes consumer perceptions of cultural awareness, relatability, and overall brand favorability, and whether it's perceived as intrusive. A mixed-methods research design was employed with 12 semi-structured expert interviews and a quantitative online experiment (n = 103).

The findings showed that exposure to a brand comment significantly increases perceived cultural awareness and relatability. Both constructs are positively associated with brand favorability, with relatability emerging as the strongest predictor. Brand comments were not perceived as intrusive on average; however, higher perceived intrusiveness was associated with lower brand favorability. When evaluated jointly, perceptions of acceptance and contextual fit outweighed intrusiveness as drivers of brand evaluation. General platform usage habits did not significantly affect brand favorability.

In summary, the results demonstrated that OCE enhances brand favorability when participation feels culturally fluent, relatable, and contextually appropriate, but harms evaluations when perceived as opportunistic or misaligned. The study advances the literature on real-time marketing and cultural branding by conceptualizing OCE as a distinct, community-driven practice.

Title: Outbound Community Engagement: Consumer Evaluations of Brand Participation in Viral Comment Threads

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Keywords: Outbound Community Engagement, Social Media Marketing, Cultural Awareness, Brand Relatability, Brand Favorability, Digital Branding, Comment Sections, Real-Time Marketing, Proactive Community Management

Resumo

Esta dissertação analisa o Outbound Community Engagement (OCE) como uma forma emergente de marketing em tempo real, na qual as marcas participam proactivamente nas secções de comentários públicos nas redes sociais associadas a conteúdos virais. O estudo aborda uma lacuna na literatura ao examinar como o OCE influencia as perceções dos consumidores sobre a consciência cultural, a identificação, a intrusão e a favorabilidade da marca. Foi adotado um método de investigação misto, integrando 12 entrevistas semiestruturadas com especialistas e uma experiência quantitativa online (n = 103).

Os resultados indicam que a exposição a comentários sobre a marca aumenta significativamente a perceção de consciência cultural e identificação, sendo que ambos os constructos estão positivamente associados à favorabilidade da marca, sendo a identificação o preditor mais forte. Embora os comentários não tenham sido percecionados como intrusivos, níveis mais elevados de intrusão estiveram associados a avaliações menos favoráveis, enquanto a adequação contextual e a aceitação se revelaram mais determinantes.

Em síntese, a OCE reforça a preferência pela marca quando a participação é culturalmente apropriada, relevante e contextualizada, mas prejudica as avaliações quando é percebida como oportunista. Este estudo contribui para a literatura sobre marketing em tempo real ao conceptualizar a OCE como uma prática distinta e integrada dentro das comunidades digitais.

Título: Outbound Community Engagement: Avaliações dos Consumidores sobre a Participação das Marcas em Threads de Comentários Virais

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Palavras-chave: Outbound Community Engagement, Marketing em Redes Sociais, Consciência Cultural, Relatabilidade da Marca, Favorabilidade da Marca, Branding Digital, Secções de Comentários, Marketing em Tempo Real, Gestão Proativa de Comunidades

Acknowledgements

As I close out this dissertation and period of my life, I could not be more filled with love and gratitude. This last year and a half has taught me so much about myself and the world, and for that, I will be forever thankful. This work coexisted alongside many friendships, both new and old, moves from Lisbon to Cape Town and back home to Annapolis, and a great deal of growth and change. While I wish I could say this time was a breeze, this work happened alongside much confusion, pressure, and moments of impostor syndrome, so I am especially grateful to Gabby Ream and Thomas Gimbel, who were always willing to listen and let me talk through my many different ideas, some of which I could not yet articulate. Their endless support means the world to me. I also thank Peter Rajsingh for shaping this thesis into what it became and for bringing an unexpected level of humor and entertainment to the seminars throughout the year.

As someone with a passion for community and connection, it only made sense that this theme ultimately defined my research. I hope that, as you read this, you see a genuine belief in the power of connection, even within digital spaces. I could not think of anything more fitting to have captivated my final four months, and I am so proud of this work and the research question that guided it.

With every new challenge comes an even greater reward, and I feel incredibly lucky to have completed my master's degree in Portugal alongside my best friend and to have spent three months writing this thesis in Cape Town, South Africa. I would not be who I am without the support and encouragement of my father and close friends, who push me every day to follow my dreams. I have endless admiration for everyone I met at Católica and throughout my time abroad, and I will always value the role they played in this chapter of my life. Obrigada.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	7
2. Literature Review	9
2.1 Outbound Community Engagement as a Form of Real-Time Marketing	9
2.1.1 Conceptualizing Outbound Community Engagement.....	9
2.1.2 Evolution of Real-Time Marketing and the Emergence of Outbound Community Engagement.....	10
2.1.3 Outbound Community Engagement as a Strategic Communication Practice..	11
2.2 Cultural Awareness and Social Meaning	12
2.2.1 Cultural Awareness as a Marketing Capability	12
2.2.2 Cultural Value Creation through Branding and Meaning Transfer.....	13
2.2.3 Crowdcultures	13
2.2.4 Shared Identity through Social Identity Theory	14
2.3 Relatability and Consumer Connection.....	15
2.3.1 Relatability Through Conversational Human Voice	15
2.3.2 Parasocial Brand Interaction	16
2.4 Brand Favorability.....	17
2.4.1 Understanding Brand Favorability and Building Brand Equity	17
2.4.2 How Cultural Awareness and Relatability Drive Favorability	18
2.4.3 Intrusiveness, Inappropriateness, and Their Impact on Favorability	19
2.5 Managerial Relevance of Real-Time Commenting.....	20
2.5.1 Resource-Based Theory	20
2.5.2 Dynamic Capabilities	21
3. Methodology	22
3.1 Hypotheses	22
3.2 Research Design.....	22
3.3 Qualitative Data Collection: Expert Interviews	23
3.4 Quantitative Data Collection: Consumer Survey	24
4. Analysis and Results	26
4.1 Qualitative Findings: Expert Interviews	26
4.1.1 Motivation and Strategy of OCE.....	26
4.1.2 Cultural Awareness and Contextual Judgment	27
4.1.3 Relatable Communication	27
4.1.4 Qualitative Link to the Quantitative Study	28
4.2 Quantitative Findings: Consumer Survey	29
4.2.1 Overview of Respondent Demographics and Usage Behaviors.....	29
4.2.2 Reliability and Validity of Measurement Scales.....	30

4.2.3	Comment Section Realism Check.....	31
4.2.4	Perceived Cultural Awareness	32
4.2.5	Perceived Relatability	32
4.2.6	Effects of Cultural Awareness and Relatability on Brand Favorability	32
4.2.7	Acceptance and Intrusiveness of Brands in Comment Sections	34
4.3	Summary of Results	36
5.	Discussion.....	38
5.1	Interpretation of Findings.....	38
5.2	Theoretical Contributions.....	39
5.3	Managerial Implications.....	40
5.4	Limitations and Future Research Directions	41
6.	Conclusion.....	42
7.	References	43
8.	Appendix	48
8.1	Appendix A: Expert Interviews.....	48
8.2	Appendix B: Survey Materials	55
8.3	Appendix C: Statistical Analyses	60

Abbreviations:

OCE	Outbound Community Engagement
RTM	Real-Time Marketing
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CBBE	Customer-Based Brand Equity

1. Introduction

In today's digital environment, social media consumption has shifted away from content shared by friends and family toward algorithmically curated and entertainment-driven posts. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram now prioritize trending and viral content through features like TikTok's "For You Page" and Instagram "Reels," where users are exposed to a constant stream of content. As a result, users increasingly experience social media as a shared cultural feed rather than their personal network.

Within this environment, trending and viral content spreads with unprecedented speed and scale. Globally, over 200 billion Reels are played per day on Facebook and Instagram (Meta, 2023), and more than 16,000 TikTok's are uploaded every minute (Statista, 2025). This shift toward algorithm-driven discovery has intensified competition for audience attention and reduced the visibility of traditional branded posts. Over time, platforms are becoming more saturated, and brands are finding it harder to stand out through their owned media alone. In response, brands have begun seeking new ways to gain awareness and relevance by inserting themselves into trending conversations as part of the audience in real time. There, the brand acts as a commentator like everyone else, rather than a marketer or advertiser.

This practice is referred to as Outbound Community Engagement (OCE) in this dissertation. In general, OCE is closely aligned to Real-Time Marketing (RTM), which is the creation and distribution of timely, contextually relevant content in response to unfolding events (Willemsen et al., 2018). OCE takes RTM a step further by describing a brand's proactive participation in public social media spaces, such as comment sections under trending or viral content, regardless of whether the content relates to the brand. OCE has been described in industry contexts as proactive community management, comment marketing, and outbound engagement, but the lack of a consistent term creates confusion that limits both academic research and marketing practice. The term "Outbound Community Engagement" was selected because it captures the core characteristics of the practice: "outbound" reflects the brand-initiated move beyond owned channels, "community" emphasizes participation within socially driven spaces, and "engagement" highlights interaction rather than control or management. This paper uses OCE as a unifying term to capture this emerging form of engagement.

Over the years, this practice has become a mainstream marketing tactic with 41% of brands currently experimenting with this approach to increase visibility and engage audiences in real time (Hootsuite, 2024). By commenting on trending content, brands aim to insert themselves into active conversations and appear culturally present. This practice is particularly impactful

in creator-led communities because their audiences are highly engaged and tend to be more responsive to brand interactions (Hootsuite, 2024).

Despite its growing adoption, academic research has focused mainly on brand activity within owned social media channels or on planned RTM campaigns. This leaves a gap in understanding how consumers interpret brand participation inside public comment threads. This dissertation addresses this gap by investigating how OCE influences consumer perceptions of brand favorability. From a managerial perspective, the study also seeks to uncover effective OCE strategies for brands and how marketing professionals should approach this practice.

Accordingly, this study interrogates the following Research Question:

How does Outbound Community Engagement (OCE) influence consumer perceptions of a brand's overall favorability?

To answer this question, the study is structured as follows: first, it reviews the relevant literature on OCE, real-time marketing, cultural awareness, relatability, brand favorability, and intrusiveness and develops the theoretical foundation for the hypotheses. It then presents a mixed-methods research design, beginning with expert interviews that examine how marketing professionals decide when and how to engage in comment sections, what they consider effective, and which risks they manage. Next, a quantitative online experiment (final sample $N = 103$) measures consumer responses to brand participation in these interactions. Finally, the findings from both phases are integrated to offer theoretical insight and practical guidance for brands seeking to use OCE to drive firm value.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines how OCE has evolved into a modern form of RTM and how it operates in today's social media environments. It then explores the consumer-level processes that shape reactions to OCE, including cultural awareness, social meaning, identity fit, relatability, parasocial interaction, brand favorability, and perceived intrusiveness. Finally, it connects these dynamics to management theory by outlining how organizational capabilities explain brands' varying success in executing OCE effectively.

2.1 Outbound Community Engagement as a Form of Real-Time Marketing

This section introduces OCE and positions it within the broader literature on Real-Time Marketing. It defines the practice and explains why OCE represents a strategic shift in how brands participate in digital culture.

2.1.1 Conceptualizing Outbound Community Engagement

OCE is a brand's proactive participation in public social media spaces to increase their visibility and interact with others by joining conversations already taking place within communities (Interviews B4 & B6). Instead of relying on audiences to visit brand-controlled pages, OCE involves entering community environments, such as the comment sections of trending posts, and contributing in ways that feel natural and culturally attuned. These engagements take place in consumer-controlled environments where conversations develop organically, and brands must adapt to norms that they do not set. The central purpose of OCE is to be present at moments when attention and conversation are concentrated.

While OCE remains a relatively new strategic practice with limited academic research, industry practitioners increasingly identify it as a distinct and rapidly growing form of brand participation. As recently as November 2024, Hootsuite, one of the leading social media management platforms, released their annual Social Trends Report (2024) where they explicitly highlighted OCE as an emerging trend shaping brand communication. The report included a dedicated section titled "The Outbound Engagement Trend," which outlined how brands should approach and manage this form of participation (Hootsuite, 2024). This differs from traditional comment moderation or customer service because OCE involves proactive participation in conversations that are not directed toward the brand. Furthermore, to be effective, it requires a certain degree of cultural sensitivity, tone matching, and awareness of rapidly shifting platform norms. These skills involve tacit knowledge of brand voice and cultural environments, which makes it difficult for competitors to imitate (Magnusson et al., 2013).

2.1.2 Evolution of Real-Time Marketing and the Emergence of Outbound Community Engagement

Conceptually, OCE aligns closely with Real-Time Marketing (RTM), defined as the creation and distribution of timely, contextually relevant content in response to unfolding events (Willemsen et al., 2018). The first RTM capabilities emerged in the mid-1990s as the internet became universally accessible to the public and enabled brands to engage with audiences more quickly and directly (McKenna, 1995; Dhingra & Mudgal, 2019). As social media platforms grew, RTM evolved into a recognizable strategic practice that focused on rapid, reactive content to unfolding public events. Well-known examples of RTM, like Oreo's "Dunk in the Dark" post during the 2013 Super Bowl blackout, have shown how speed and cultural fluency can generate high levels of attention and positive brand outcomes (Chae et al., 2025). These moments have been widely studied and consistently emphasize that speed, relevance, and contextual alignment are crucial for RTM effectiveness (Appel et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2022; Willemsen et al., 2018).

Since then, platforms like TikTok and Instagram have shifted toward algorithm-driven feeds that prioritize discovery-based content over users' personal networks and promote posts based on engagement and virality (Lee et al., 2022). This exposes users to an endless stream of posts from creators they may not even be following (Lee et al., 2022). As a result, comment sections have become prominent cultural spaces where users interact with trends, jokes, and other cultural references (Holt, 2016), that have created new opportunities for brands to participate in real time.

Within this context, OCE represents a natural evolution of RTM. While traditional RTM focused on producing reactive posts on brand-owned channels, often in response to planned events (e.g., holidays, sporting events) or unexpected moments (Holt, 2016; Willemsen et al., 2018), OCE applies real-time responsiveness to public conversations that are already happening. Instead of investing significant time and resources into creating content for a single event on their own channels, brands can now participate directly in conversations through comment sections. This shift allows brands to engage with large audiences more efficiently and reduces the need for high-budget campaigns. However, brands must recognize and locate emerging cultural moments and determine when participation is appropriate and relevant to their brand, as discussed in the following section.

2.1.3 Outbound Community Engagement as a Strategic Communication Practice

OCE functions as a strategic RTM practice because it requires brands to act quickly and participate while conversations are still active and culturally relevant. Similar to RTM, the effectiveness of OCE depends on timing and contextual fit. The more closely a brand aligns with the pace and tone of a trending moment, the more positively its participation is received (Chae et al., 2025; Santos et al., 2022). However, unlike traditional RTM posts, OCE unfolds within community spaces that the brand does not control, which adds to the complexity and requires judgment about when and how to join a conversation.

Industry evidence further reinforces the strategic nature of OCE. Hootsuite's 2025 Social Trends Report examined more than 25,000 outbound engagements and found that brand comments posted within 24 hours of a trend's peak received substantially more engagement, while delayed responses lost traction. Additionally, they found that mid-length comments (between 10 and 99 characters) performed best overall, indicating the effectiveness of concise engagements. These findings reinforce earlier academic work that emphasizes the importance of timeliness and contextual fit as key drivers of RTM effectiveness (Mazerant et al., 2021; Willemsen et al., 2018).

Industry platforms further suggest that OCE is becoming a normalized part of brand communication. Hootsuite (2024) further reports that comment sections have evolved into "community hubs" where cultural exchange happens in real time, and brands that participate effectively benefit from increased visibility. TikTok Business (2024) similarly reports that 68% of users expect brands to participate in comment sections to show awareness and approachability. These findings indicate that a new social norm has developed, and brands are now expected to engage outside their owned media channels by participating in public comment threads.

Overall, OCE combines the real-time responsiveness of RTM with the relational, community-focused nature of social media engagement. It relies on a company's internal communication skills and the ability to exercise flexible judgment in fast-paced settings. It is crucial to understand this strategic intersection to explain how consumers interpret brand participation in comment sections and how these interactions shape perceptions of cultural awareness, relatability, intrusiveness, and brand favorability.

2.2 Cultural Awareness and Social Meaning

This section explores how brands are evaluated through the lens of cultural awareness and meaning-making. It draws on established theories to explain how cultural fluency shapes how brand comments are interpreted within online communities and how these interactions contribute to positive perceptions of the brand.

2.2.1 Cultural Awareness as a Marketing Capability

Cultural awareness refers to a brand's ability to interpret the norms, values, and communication styles that shape how audiences make sense of content in a given cultural environment (Eckroth, 2025; Magnusson et al., 2013). In social media contexts, this capability is reflected in how well a brand aligns its language, humor, and tone with the expectations of a particular community or platform. Research shows that when a brand conveys fluency in local cultural cues, including platform-specific humor or shared references, audiences are more likely to interpret the brand as authentic, relevant, and socially aware (Schau et al., 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

From an internal perspective, cultural awareness is shaped by deeper organizational processes that go beyond surface-level communication. Magnusson et al. (2013) conceptualize cultural intelligence as a manager's cognitive and motivational ability to detect, understand, and respond to cultural cues. Their findings demonstrate that metacognitive cultural intelligence, which involves reflecting on cultural assumptions, and motivational cultural intelligence, which indicates a willingness to engage with cultural differences, both play important roles in culturally informed decision-making. Although this framework was developed in the context of international marketing, the same logic can be applied to social media communication. These underlying levels of cultural intelligence enable cultural awareness in social media contexts and shape how brands interpret cultural signals and adapt their behavior.

This distinction is particularly relevant in OCE because brands must not only recognize community norms but also act on them in real time within unpredictable, user-driven environments. Brands with stronger cultural intelligence are better able to recognize community norms and adjust their communication so that it feels appropriate to users (Magnusson et al., 2013). In this way, cultural awareness becomes both an interpretive skill and a marketing capability that shapes how audiences receive and evaluate a brand's presence in public comment sections.

2.2.2 Cultural Value Creation through Branding and Meaning Transfer

While cultural awareness focuses on the brand's ability to interpret community norms, Cultural Branding Theory and the Meaning Transfer Model explain how brands gain value by participating in shared cultural conversations.

Holt's (2004) Cultural Branding Theory views iconic brands as symbols of shared values, beliefs, and stories within a culture. According to this view, brands become powerful when they engage with and reflect widely resonant cultural tensions and aspirations. In digital environments, OCE allows brands to embed themselves directly into everyday cultural exchanges. Brands can position themselves within the ongoing stories that communities use to interpret the world by aligning themselves with culturally meaningful symbols or expressions.

The Meaning Transfer Model extends this theory by explaining how cultural meaning moves from the broader cultural world into consumer perceptions through specific channels and interactions (McCracken, 1986). On social media, comment sections act as these channels. When a brand comments within a creator's community, it enters a meaning system shaped by shared humor, norms, and symbolic cues. A brand's comment can incorporate elements of that community's style and influence how consumers view it. By aligning with the thread's tone, references, or cultural codes, the brand can translate socially embedded meaning into associations that feel emotionally or symbolically relevant (McCracken, 1986).

Collectively, these frameworks show how brands gain value when they participate in culturally meaningful conversations in ways that align with audience expectations and support a coherent brand identity.

2.2.3 Crowdcultures

Crowdcultures help explain why comment sections have become influential cultural environments in today's day and age. Holt (2016) argues that digital platforms allow large communities to form around shared interests and values, and that these communities generate their own norms, jokes, references, and interpretations that guide collective meaning-making. These crowdcultures help shape emerging trends and influence how users interpret brand behavior. Because these communities rapidly produce and reinforce shared meanings, brands often find it difficult to shape their own identity within these spaces unless they demonstrate a high level of cultural fluency.

Within these environments, participation becomes effective only when the brand understands the group's expressive style. Research shows that when brands display fluency in a

community's humor or language, consumers interpret this as evidence that the brand understands the community's culture, thereby strengthening perceptions of authenticity and relevance (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Schau et al., 2009). Moreover, when brand behavior aligns with community norms, users are more likely to view the brand as an acceptable participant and respond more positively to its actions. Conversely, contributions that misread the community's tone or norms tend to be viewed as out of place or inappropriate.

Therefore, crowdcultures define the expectations that influence how audiences judge a brand's presence during OCE. These judgments create the foundation for determining whether the brand appears to "belong" in the group as discussed in the next section.

2.2.4 Shared Identity through Social Identity Theory

Building on the above frameworks, Social Identity Theory explains how individuals categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups based on shared norms and behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In digital environments, community members apply the same categorization processes to brands and individually evaluate whether the brand demonstrates an understanding of the group's norms. When a brand participates in a comment thread or creator community, users assess whether its tone, humor, and timing align with the group's expectations (Holt, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Brands that mirror the community's communicative style can be perceived as part of the in-group rather than as corporate outsiders or advertisers, thereby strengthening connection and improving brand evaluations (Hudson et al., 2016).

Research on online communities shows that users respond more positively to brands that align with group practices and less favorably when brands appear out of place or are unfamiliar with the community's norms (Hudson et al., 2016; Schau et al., 2009). Moreover, brands that violate group norms may be judged as intrusive or inappropriate and reinforce perceptions that the brand does not belong in that space (Hollebeek et al., 2014). These identity-based evaluations shape the psychological distance consumers feel toward the brand and influence how they interpret the interaction.

In this way, OCE serves as a moment where brands signal whether they belong to the community or not. The brand's voice, timing, and manner of participation all indicate whether it fits the group's identity. When alignment occurs, the interaction feels natural to users and boosts perceptions of cultural awareness and relatability. These shared identity judgments help explain why a sense of belonging is so important in shaping consumer responses to OCE.

2.3 Relatability and Consumer Connection

This section examines the role of relatability in building stronger connections between brands and consumers. It discusses how conversational tone and human-like communication styles help reduce social distance and create a sense of familiarity and trust in comment-based interactions.

2.3.1 Relatability Through Conversational Human Voice

Relatability describes the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as connected to their audience by reflecting shared values and experiences. In the context of OCE, relatability becomes especially important because brands are entering conversations that users already consider their own. These audiences judge whether the brand's presence feels human, approachable, and consistent with the tone of the community.

Early work on digital communication introduced the concept of the conversational human voice, whereby brands communicate in a personal and natural manner rather than in traditional formal or corporate language (Kelleher, 2009). This style conveys transparency and reduces the psychological distance between the brand and their audience to make the interaction feel more like a genuine exchange. As a result, consumers tend to see the brand as more approachable and trustworthy (Jeong et al., 2022; Kelleher, 2009).

More recent research reinforces the importance of tone by showing that audiences respond more positively when a brand's communication style mirrors how users speak to one another (Jeong et al., 2022). This peer-like style fosters perceived social presence, which in turn increases openness to brand interaction. In particular, Jeong et al. (2022) find that conversational and humanized language enhances approachability and strengthens relational perceptions. In OCE, a brand using a familiar tone of voice demonstrates a willingness to meet consumers where they already are, which can enhance its perceived presence and connection. This aligns with earlier research by Willemsen (2018), and Ang et al. (2007) show that warm, personalized responses yield higher satisfaction than standardized corporate messaging.

Given that OCE typically unfolds in fast-paced, informal environments like comment sections, linguistic alignment becomes a visible cue that shapes how users interpret a brand's intent. While the studies do not address OCE directly, these findings collectively suggest that relatable conversational language helps brand participation feel welcome and contextually appropriate.

This use of relatable language also contributes to how authentic a brand is perceived to be. Morhart et al. (2015) argue that consumers judge authenticity based on how well brand

communication aligns with the norms of the surrounding environment. In comment sections, where users expect quick, informal exchanges, brief conversational responses often appear more sincere. When brands adopt this communication style, users are more likely to view the interaction as genuine and reflective of shared social norms. In this way, relatability becomes an important factor in OCE that helps consumers form a more positive opinion of the brand.

2.3.2 Parasocial Brand Interaction

Relatability not only supports authenticity but also lays the groundwork for deeper emotional connections. One key outcome of repeated, human-like interaction in OCE is the development of parasocial relationships between consumers and brands. Parasocial interaction refers to one-sided yet emotionally meaningful bonds that individuals form with media figures or entities (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014). This concept originally applied to television personalities, but it can also be used to explain how consumers form bonds with brands through repeated interactions online (Labrecque, 2014). On social media, when brands engage with users, they often perceive them as human-like companions capable of real emotional exchange and presence (Labrecque, 2014).

In the context of OCE, this dynamic becomes especially relevant. Relatability functions as the foundation of these interactions by helping the brand feel socially present and emotionally accessible. When brands repeatedly appear in comment threads using a consistent voice, they can build a sense of belonging. These micro-interactions, such as witty replies, acknowledgments, or culturally relevant comments, accumulate over time and help reduce the psychological distance between the brand and the audience (Labrecque, 2014). This builds a sense of familiarity, and consumers begin to perceive the brand as recognizable and emotionally present (Labrecque, 2014).

Labrecque (2014) further argues that continued interaction helps establish intimacy through elements such as tone, humor, and personality, much like they would with their friends or family. When done effectively, they make the brand feel more embedded in users' daily experiences.

By establishing familiarity and emotional resonance, parasocial interaction becomes a mechanism through which OCE strengthens consumer connection. These human-like relationships can differentiate the brand and reinforce long-term attachment in ways that are difficult for competitors to replicate. The following section extends this discussion by examining how cultural awareness and relatability translate into overall brand evaluations.

2.4 Brand Favorability

This section connects cultural awareness and relatability to overall brand evaluations. It explains how OCE influences brand favorability while also addressing the role of intrusiveness and the risks associated with poorly aligned participation.

2.4.1 Understanding Brand Favorability and Building Brand Equity

Brand favorability reflects a consumer's overall evaluation of a brand that is formed through cumulative judgments about the brand's attributes, behavior, and meaning (Keller, 2003). In academic literature, scholars use terms such as attitude toward the brand, brand attitude, brand evaluation, and brand preference to describe a positive (or negative) stance toward a brand, with minor differences in emphasis (Alreck & Settle, 1999; Keller, 2003; Marieke de Mooij, 2021). However, many marketing practitioners often use the term brand favorability because it reflects the overall brand health and consumer sentiment towards the brand.

Both Keller's (2001) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework and Aaker's (1991) model of brand equity help explain how consumer evaluations contribute to brand strength. In Keller's CBBE model, favorable brand responses emerge when consumers hold positive brand judgments and feelings, which are shaped by brand meaning and imagery. Aaker's framework similarly emphasizes the role of brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty in driving overall equity. Across both models, brand favorability develops when consumers form positive, distinctive, and emotionally resonant associations with a brand.

OCE maps directly onto these elements by shaping how brand meaning and associations are constructed in public digital spaces. Through OCE, brands communicate symbolic cues about their personality, cultural awareness, and relational orientation in highly visible social contexts. When a brand participates in comment sections in a culturally fluent and relatable way, it contributes to brand imagery by signaling warmth, social awareness, and approachability. Within Keller's framework, these cues strengthen brand meaning and brand feelings, which in turn support favorable brand judgments (Keller, 2001; Keller, 2003).

From Aaker's (1991) perspective, OCE can contribute to brand equity primarily by shaping brand associations. When brands join culturally relevant conversations and align with community norms, they build strong associations of personality and cultural fluency. When these interactions are consistently positive and well aligned, consumers may also incorporate these signals into broader judgments about the brand. Over time, repeated exposure to

appropriate participation can support favorable attitudes toward the brand, which represent early precursors to brand loyalty.

2.4.2 How Cultural Awareness and Relatability Drive Favorability

Cultural awareness and relatability play central roles in shaping favorable brand evaluations. Cultural awareness provides the cognitive foundation for positive evaluation by signaling that the brand understands the norms, humor, and shared references of a given community (Hollebeek et al., 2014; McCracken, 1986; Schau et al., 2009). When a brand demonstrates this form of cultural fluency, consumers are more likely to perceive its participation as appropriate and socially attuned rather than intrusive or opportunistic. However, cultural awareness alone does not guarantee favorable responses.

Relatability determines whether cultural fluency resonates emotionally with consumers and is interpreted as genuine. Even when a brand understands the cultural context, consumers respond more positively when the brand's communication feels personally meaningful and aligned with their own experiences (Jeong et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015). Consumer-Brand Identification Theory adds further support by suggesting that people respond most positively to brands they perceive as reflecting aspects of their own identity or values (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

The link between relatability and brand favorability is further reinforced through perceptions of authenticity. Authentic communication reduces skepticism and fosters trust, which strengthens overall brand evaluations (Morhart et al., 2015). In OCE contexts, authenticity emerges through tone, humor, timing, and the brand's ability to match the community's communication style. This signals to the audience that the brand is socially embedded within the interaction (Holt, 2016; Labrecque, 2014). As a result, consumers are more likely to interpret the interaction as sincere and to develop favorable impressions of the brand (Morhart et al., 2015).

Together, cultural awareness and relatability support the formation of identification and emotional closeness, which reinforce positive brand attitudes and engagement (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In this case, cultural awareness establishes legitimacy within the space, while relatability enables emotional resonance. When consumers see aspects of themselves in the brand's communication, they are more inclined to evaluate the brand favorably and maintain long-term engagement (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). As the audience develops these perceptions and attachments to the brand, it makes it more difficult for competitors to imitate.

Despite these insights, existing research has not examined how these processes unfold when brands participate directly in public comment sections. Prior research provides useful insight into communication with a human-like tone of voice and consumer-brand relationships, but it does not account for how these processes unfold in comment sections where community norms are highly contextual and rapidly shifting. This gap highlights the need to examine how cultural awareness and relatability jointly influence brand favorability in OCE contexts, where consumer judgments are immediate and shaped by surrounding social cues.

2.4.3 Intrusiveness, Inappropriateness, and Their Impact on Favorability

Although cultural awareness and relatability often enhance favorability, poorly aligned communication can have the opposite effect. Intrusiveness occurs when a brand enters a conversation in a way that feels irrelevant, opportunistic, or disruptive to the audience (Li et al., 2002). Research shows that intrusive brand behavior can elicit psychological reactance and lead consumers to view the brand less favorably (Li et al., 2002). In environments where norms shift rapidly, like on social media, interactions are highly contextual and the brand's credibility can quickly be damaged (Lieb et al., 2013). Within the CBBE model, these moments can generate negative brand judgments and weaken the strength and favorability of brand associations (Keller, 2001).

Intrusiveness also interferes with identity processes that influence brand evaluations. As discussed in the previous sections, consumers are more likely to form positive impressions of brands that align with their social identity or community membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, when a brand intrudes into a conversation without demonstrating cultural fit, consumers may classify the brand as an out-group member. Social identity research shows that out-group members are judged more harshly and receive more negative affective responses, particularly when they appear to impose on the in-group's interactions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Intrusive comments can intensify negative reactions and lead consumers to distance themselves from the brand as it reduces the social fit that is required for consumers to view the brand positively.

Overall, the research indicates that OCE has the potential to strengthen brand favorability but faces considerable downside risk when misapplied. This highlights the importance of careful strategic judgment in managing public conversations.

2.5 Managerial Relevance of Real-Time Commenting

This section situates OCE within management theory to explain why some brands are more successful than others in executing this practice. It draws on Resource-Based Theory and Dynamic Capabilities to highlight the organizational skills and capabilities required to engage effectively in fast-moving cultural environments.

2.5.1 Resource-Based Theory

Management theory explains why some brands are more effective than others in executing OCE. Resource-Based Theory views firms as bundles of resources and capabilities that create competitive advantage when they are valuable and difficult to replicate (Barney, 1991). While OCE itself is becoming more common, the underlying capabilities that make these interactions successful remain unevenly distributed across firms. Many of the dimensions that shape successful OCE are intangible, such as cultural awareness, contextual judgment, tone adaptation, and the ability to communicate in a relatable humanlike manner. A firm's ability to leverage these factors stems from its internal culture, accumulated experience, and an in-depth understanding of the brand's voice.

From a Resource-Based perspective, a brand's personality, expressed through its tone of voice and communication style, is an important strategic resource. These elements develop gradually and become embedded in the brand through repeated interaction with audiences and cultural contexts. While competitors can copy visible engagement tactics, the specific wording, humor, timing, and style a brand uses are harder to imitate because they are shaped by the firm's history and shared internal understanding. As such, these capabilities reflect socially complex and historically embedded resources that rely on firm-specific processes and accumulated experience (Barney et al., 2021).

This logic is particularly relevant in the context of OCE as it is a relatively new form of digital engagement. The organization's team must be able to understand the brand deeply while accurately reading emerging cultural cues and making quick decisions in uncertain situations. These capabilities rely on internalized brand knowledge and cultural fluency that are firm-specific and not easily transferable across firms (Barney, 1991). As a result, many brands may try OCE, but only those with well-developed relational and interpretive capabilities will consistently produce comments that feel natural and aligned with consumer expectations.

2.5.2 Dynamic Capabilities

The Dynamic Capabilities framework explains how firms sense, interpret, and respond to rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). Barreto (2010) further defines dynamic capabilities as a firm's capacity to systematically solve problems, by sensing opportunities and threats, to make timely and market-oriented decisions, and to change its resource base. OCE requires continuous monitoring of cultural conversations, quick evaluation of whether participation is appropriate, and rapid production of comments that align with the community's expectations to be effective. The ability to quickly adapt style and messaging is a higher-level capability that helps brands navigate constantly shifting cultural expectations (Teece et al., 1997). When these capabilities are strong, brands can turn cultural awareness into comments that feel appropriate and build positive consumer impressions. However, poorly executed attempts can highlight the risks of misapplied judgment and become visible signs of poor understanding or values. In short, management theory helps to understand how OCE results from organizational capacities that support culturally fluent, contextually appropriate communications that support the brand.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research approach and methods used to investigate how OCE influences consumer perceptions and brand evaluations. It describes the development of hypotheses, the mixed-methods research design, and the procedures for qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis.

3.1 Hypotheses

Drawing from the secondary research on OCE and the theories outlined above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Exposure to a brand comment on a viral post raises perceived brand cultural awareness.

H2: Exposure to a brand comment on a viral post increases perceived brand relatability.

H3: Perceived cultural awareness and perceived relatability raise brand favorability.

H4: Perceived intrusiveness lowers brand favorability.

These hypotheses reflect the expected relationships between brand participation in comment threads and consumer evaluations. Cultural awareness and relatability are proposed to enhance brand favorability based on research indicating that consumers respond more positively to brands that communicate in ways that feel culturally aligned and personally meaningful. Intrusiveness is expected to reduce brand favorability, as studies and interviews suggested that norm violations trigger reactance and negative perceptions. Overall, the hypotheses create a framework that connects OCE to broader dimensions of brand meaning and consumer evaluation. The dependent variable is favorable brand perception, which the hypotheses seek to interrogate, while the independent variables being investigated are factors associated with OCE.

3.2 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that combined qualitative expert interviews with a quantitative consumer survey (Creswell & Clark, 2018). First, the qualitative phase was conducted to uncover the strategic motivations and decision-making processes that shape how brands engage in OCE. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with marketing professionals, brand strategists, social media managers, and marketing technology firms who specialize in digital communication and real-time marketing. Expert semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide the depth and contextual insight needed to understand an emerging form of engagement that has not yet been fully examined in academic research (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Nunan et al., 2020).

The insights from these interviews then informed the development of the quantitative stage, which used an online survey to examine how social media users perceive brand comments on viral or trending content. The survey measured key constructs identified in the literature review and reinforced by the qualitative interview findings, including perceived cultural awareness, relatability, intrusiveness, and overall brand favorability. By combining in-depth managerial perspectives with consumer-level evaluations, the mixed-methods approach enabled the study to capture both the strategic reasoning behind OCE and the consumer responses to it. This structure supports a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon than either method could achieve on its own (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

3.3 Qualitative Data Collection: Expert Interviews

A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with marketing professionals to gather detailed insights into the motivations, strategies, and risks that shape brand participation in public comment sections. Interviews were necessary because OCE is an emerging practice with limited academic documentation (Nunan et al., 2020). This method allowed participants to explain how they interpreted cultural cues, adapted the brand voice, and evaluated appropriateness within social media platforms.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevant expertise as the research required specialized knowledge (Nunan et al., 2020). The experts were deemed eligible based on their profession, including marketing managers, brand strategists, social media leads, community managers, agency professionals, consultants, and specialists working in marketing technology companies. Many had direct experience with OCE itself or experience with real-time or culturally responsive digital marketing. The potential participants were identified through a mix of LinkedIn searches, personal observation of brand activity on trending posts, and professional networks as well as referrals. LinkedIn was used to verify professional backgrounds. The sample represented a range of perspectives, including individuals from global consumer brands such as Delta Airlines, Anthropologie, and Hilton Hotels, as well as agencies and consultancies, which provided both strategic and operational insights into how organizations approach this trend. The full list of experts is listed in Appendix A1.

The interviews were conducted online via Google Meet and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview guide included 12 questions (Appendix A2); however, it is important to note that questions were selected and omitted based on the interviewee's expertise, with the overarching theme still addressed. No interviewee had fewer than 10 questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The final sample of 12 interviews

was sufficient to reach data saturation, as no new themes emerged in the final conversations (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Each transcript was individually reviewed in detail and examined to identify recurring insights and patterns to help explore how marketing professionals understand and approach OCE. These qualitative insights played a critical role in shaping the design of the consumer survey and ensured that the quantitative measures reflected realistic communication practices and the strategic considerations identified by practitioners (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

3.4 Quantitative Data Collection: Consumer Survey

A quantitative survey was conducted to gain insight into how consumers interpret brand participation in public comment sections under viral social media posts and to assess perceptions of cultural awareness, relatability, favorability, and the perceived appropriateness of a brand joining these conversations.

The survey (Appendix B) included 35 items and 16 total questions (including six multipart scales) and used multiple-choice, 5-point Likert scales, 5-point semantic differentials, and behavior-based frequency measures. These scale formats are widely used in marketing research to capture attitudes, perceptions, and evaluative judgments (Nunan et al., 2020).

The survey opened with general questions on social media usage, then presented a short TikTok-style video that served as the stimulus for all participants. The video (Appendix B2 - Block 3) depicted an adult male playing with a transformer toy and expressing childlike excitement when it transformed. It was selected from a real viral TikTok post from September 2025 with over 4.1 million likes that did not feature any branded content. The video was intentionally neutral in tone and subject matter to allow the comment section to function as the primary site of social interaction and interpretation. The use of an authentic viral video helped ensure the study reflected how users commonly experience content and notice brand comments on social media.

After the video, each respondent viewed two comment-section blocks in random order: one thread with only user comments and one thread with a single brand comment from a fictional beverage brand, Polar Cola, with a verified check mark next to it (shown in Appendix B2). The use of a fictional brand was used as a control to help eliminate prior knowledge and pre-existing attitudes (Nunan et al., 2020). All user comments were real, but names and profile images were altered to protect privacy. The brand comment used a popular yet natural tone that fit the thread. Chapter 5 further discusses the limits of this approach.

Following the no-brand thread, participants completed three items that captured general perceptions of the comment section. After the brand-present thread, participants completed four multi-item scales: cultural awareness (four Likert items), relatability (four Likert items), brand favorability (four semantic differential pairs: bad–good, unfavorable–favorable, dislike–like, unappealing–appealing), and comment fit/intrusiveness (six Likert items: appropriate, natural, intrusive, out of place, added value, did not mind the brand’s participation). A single exposure check verified whether the respondent noticed the brand comment in the brand-present block. This item also served as the attention check. Responses that failed this check or were incomplete were removed prior to analysis. The survey also captured platform habits, including daily time spent on Instagram and TikTok, frequency of reading comment sections, frequency of leaving comments, and whether respondents tend to comment when they agree or disagree with content (V Kumar & Aaker, 2018). These factors serve as controls for analysis. The final block collected demographics (age, gender, country of residence).

Qualtrics was used to host the survey and enabled random order of the comment-section blocks and item randomization within scales. Pre-survey testing was conducted to refine wording and eliminate potential misinterpretations.

The survey was administered in November 2025, in English, and targeted active social media users in the United States and Europe. Distribution occurred through the researcher’s personal network, LinkedIn, and other social channels. Data was collected anonymously to reduce bias, and questions were designed to minimize respondent fatigue and maximize clarity. The survey received $n = 161$ total starts, and the removal of incomplete cases and failed checks produced a final dataset of $n = 103$. The complete survey instrument, including all measures and stimuli, is provided in Appendix B.

4. Analysis and Results

This chapter presents the findings from both phases of the mixed-method research design. The qualitative results are reported first in Chapter 4.1, where insights from expert interviews are analyzed to show how marketing professionals navigate OCE. Chapter 4.2 then examines the outcomes of the consumer survey, which tested the hypotheses developed in the literature review. Together, these findings drew on both the primary data collected for this study and the theoretical foundations outlined in Chapter 2 to evaluate whether brand comments under viral posts influenced overall brand favorability.

4.1 Qualitative Findings: Expert Interviews

This section presents insights from 12 semi-structured interviews with marketing professionals from global consumer brands, agencies, consultancies, and marketing-technology firms. The interviews provided an in-depth view of how teams decide when and where to comment on trending posts, why they do so, how they manage tone and risk, and how they judge success. While individual perspectives varied based on role and organizational context, several consistent themes emerged across interviews. A full list of experts and interview summaries is provided in Appendix A1 and Appendix A2.

4.1.1 Motivation and Strategy of OCE

Across all interviews, OCE was consistently framed as an emerging brand-building and communication practice intended to increase brand visibility, cultural relevance, consideration, and memorability. Many participants emphasized that brand awareness was the most important goal and that they were not there to sell but to uplift and entertain through positivity or humor. As one expert explained, “When brand awareness becomes a priority, that’s when commenting really makes sense... especially for brands that rely on retail channels” (Interview A1).

While participants used a range of metrics to track performance, most acknowledged they were less conversion-oriented. Instead, its effects were viewed as cumulative. Experts described how repeated exposure in the comment sections of trending content gradually shapes audiences’ perceptions about the brand and contributes to long-term brand preference. Furthermore, several experts compared OCE to earned media and noted that its value accumulates over time rather than producing an immediate return on investment. One expert noted that comments posted months earlier continued to receive likes and engagement long after the initial post went viral.

Timing was also described as a critical factor for effectiveness. The experts emphasized that commenting early, before a thread became overcrowded, substantially increases visibility and perceived relevance. They noted that late or repetitive comments received fewer engagements and were more likely to be ignored. At the same time, experts stressed that speed should not come at the expense of response or judgment quality, and that effective OCE requires rapid yet intentional decision-making.

4.1.2 Cultural Awareness and Contextual Judgment

A dominant theme across the interviews was the importance of cultural awareness in determining whether OCE is perceived positively. The experts consistently highlighted the need to accurately interpret the cultural context of a conversation, including its tone, humor, and implicit norms. Interviewees described OCE decision-making as highly situational with no universal rule for when engagement is appropriate.

Many experts explained that they rely heavily on their personal social media feeds as a primary source for discovering trending content. They described themselves as “chronically online” and stated that, to thrive in their roles, they must constantly monitor the conversations being had.

Furthermore, many participants stressed that knowing when not to engage was as critical as knowing when to comment. Brands that enter conversations without understanding emotional or social cues would receive negative reactions from the audience. As a result, brands that use OCE require continuous social listening tools and the ability to assess relevance in real time.

These findings aligned closely with the literature on cultural awareness and cultural intelligence discussed in Chapter 2. In particular, they reflected Magnusson et al.’s (2013) view of cultural awareness as an interpretive capability that shapes how actors perceive and respond to cultural cues. The emphasis on judgment and contextual fit also supported the framing of cultural awareness as a firm-level capability.

4.1.3 Relatable Communication

The interviewees consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining a consistent and human brand voice when participating in comment sections. They asserted that responding in an authentic, conversational manner allows the audience to connect with the people behind the brand and reinforces the sense that there are real people behind the account. Relatable brand comments were described as those that resemble how an ordinary user might react, whether that is expressive, humorous, or emotionally aligned with the moment.

Participants noted that comments that mirror shared reactions or collective sentiments signal that the brand understands the community. A few brands even mentioned having a list of popular pop culture “inside jokes” on hand that fit in a variety of settings. In contrast, overly polished or corporate language undermined relatability and weakened engagement. Many interviewees described successful OCE as informal but still clearly “on-brand,” requiring a balance between flexibility and strategic consistency.

Several experts also discussed the growing role of AI-based tools in supporting OCE, particularly for content discovery and early trend identification. For example, one interviewee described using AI software to identify high-performing, early-stage posts that were aligned with specific brand attributes, such as dog travel content. In the case of Best Western, a pet-friendly hotel, this allowed the brand to engage with relevant content in a timely and contextually appropriate manner. Experts consistently stressed that AI could support scale and speed but should not replace human oversight, especially given the importance of conversational human voice as previously described by Kelleher (2009). They further asserted that audiences are highly sensitive to a brand’s intent and tone, and they can quickly detect when a brand is leveraging a moment purely for exposure or sounds inauthentic.

Furthermore, promotional cues, such as explicit brand mentions, calls to action, or attempts to redirect attention, were described as breaking the social contract of the comment section. Even when comments were timely or humorous, the audience may still suspect an ulterior motive.

These insights align with the literature on conversational human voice and relatability, which suggests that humanized communication enhances approachability and trust (Jeong et al., 2022; Kelleher, 2000). They also reinforce the role of relatability as a central mechanism through which OCE shapes consumer perceptions.

4.1.4 Qualitative Link to the Quantitative Study

Overall, the qualitative findings indicate that experts view OCE as a strategic, culturally embedded communication practice that shapes brand perceptions. It does this through visibility, contextual fit, and relational cues to the audience. Additionally, cultural awareness and relatability emerged as key drivers of positive brand evaluation, while intrusiveness was identified as a risk factor.

These insights directly informed the design of the quantitative survey by confirming which concepts from the literature were most relevant in practice. Strong expert emphasis on cultural

awareness and relatability guided the survey design and shaped hypotheses tested in the following section.

4.2 Quantitative Findings: Consumer Survey

This section presents the results of the quantitative consumer survey designed to test the hypotheses developed in Chapter 3. It includes an overview of respondent characteristics and social media usage patterns, followed by assessments of scale reliability and stimulus realism. The section then reports hypothesis tests examining the effects of brand comments on perceived cultural awareness, relatability, acceptance, intrusiveness, and overall brand favorability, including both individual and joint effects.

4.2.1 Overview of Respondent Demographics and Usage Behaviors

A total of 103 participants completed the full survey and passed the attention check to create the final dataset for analysis. Instagram use was extremely high among respondents: 89.3% reported using the platform every day, and only 1% reported never using it. TikTok usage showed more variation, with 45.6% using it daily and 26.2% reporting that they never use the platform. The daily time spent on Instagram and/or TikTok was generally substantial: 41.7% spent 1–2 hours per day, 29.1% spent 2–3 hours, and 9.7% reported more than 3 hours. Only 1% spent less than 30 minutes per day.

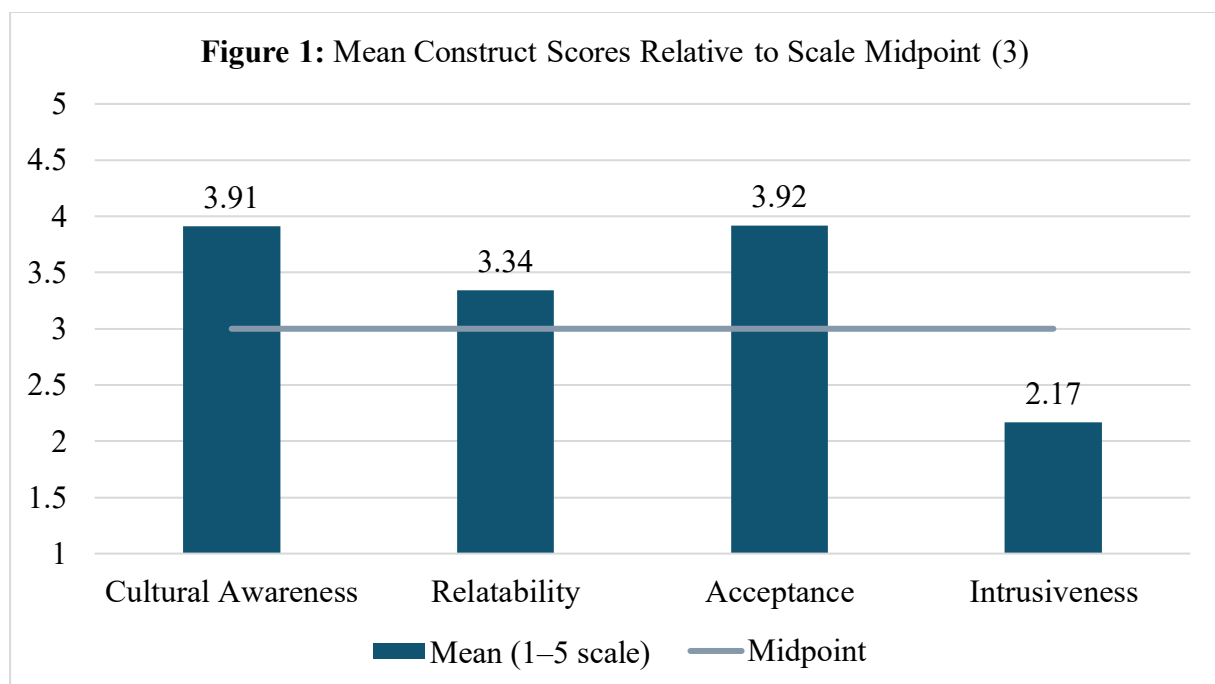
The results further indicated that most participants regularly engage with social media comment sections. Nearly half (46.6%) reported reading comments daily or almost daily, and an additional 27.2% read them several times per week. Active commenting, however, was far less common: 48.5% never comment, and 36.9% comment only 1–2 times per month. When participants do comment, the survey found that most tend to post when they agree with the content (27.2%), while 61.2% indicated that the question does not apply because they rarely comment.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 54, with the largest groups being 25-year-olds (27.2%) and 26-year-olds (19.4%). The sample was predominantly female (70.9%). In terms of nationality, most respondents were from the United States (59.2%), followed by Portugal (17.5%) and Germany (15.5%), with smaller numbers from other European countries.

Overall, participants evaluated Polar Cola moderately positively on a 5-point Likert scale. However, first, it is essential to note that the midpoint of the scale (3) served as the reference point for evaluating whether the brand comment generated perceptions above a neutral level.

This approach was necessary because the no-brand condition did not include any brand exposure, so brand-related questions could therefore not be asked in that condition.

Perceived cultural awareness was relatively high ($M = 3.91$), and brand favorability was also above the scale midpoint ($M = 3.66$). Relatability was somewhat lower but still slightly positive ($M = 3.34$). This suggested that while the brand was seen as culturally aware, it did not feel equally personal or close to all respondents. The perceptions of comment acceptance were positive ($M = 3.92$). In contrast, perceived intrusiveness was below the midpoint of 3 ($M = 2.17$), indicating that the brand's comment was not generally experienced as intrusive or out of place. All mean construct scores can be compared in Figure 1 below.



4.2.2 Reliability and Validity of Measurement Scales

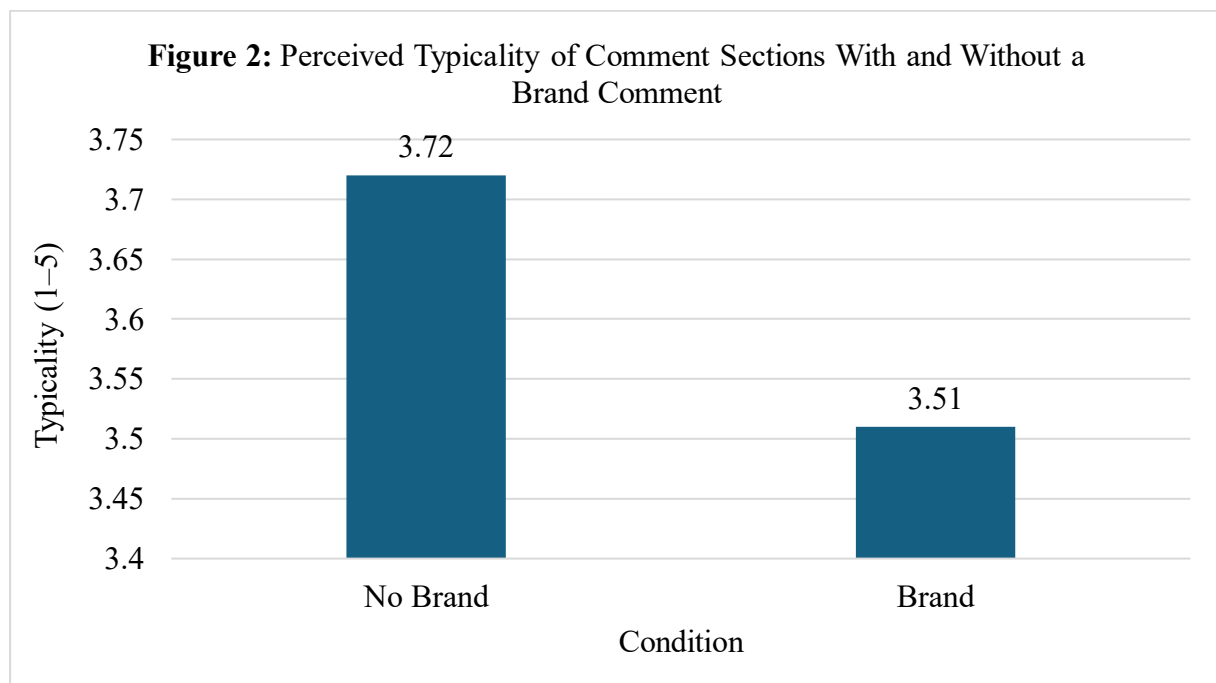
Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of all multi-item constructs in the survey, based on the final sample of 103 participants (Nunan et al., 2020). All multi-item scales showed good internal consistency. The four-item cultural awareness scale demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .902$), as did the brand favorability index ($\alpha = .934$). The four-item relatability scale also showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .882$). The four-item acceptance scale, which captured how appropriate and welcome the brand's comment felt, reached an acceptable reliability level ($\alpha = .800$). The two-item intrusiveness scale (intrusive and out of place) yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .699, which is slightly below the conventional .70 threshold but acceptable for a very short scale (Nunan et al., 2020). The last two scales were all asked within the same block but were separated for analysis purposes as one tested acceptance

of brands in comments and the other tested intrusiveness. Together, these results indicated that the constructs are measured reliably and that the brand and its comment were, on average, viewed as culturally aware, moderately relatable, generally favorable, and not strongly intrusive. They also confirmed that the constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency and were suitable for hypothesis testing.

4.2.3 Comment Section Realism Check

Three items were included to verify that the two comment sections used as stimuli felt normal for TikTok/Instagram (Appendix B). The goal was to confirm that the two versions of the comment section were realistic and that the only meaningful difference between them was whether a verified brand comment appeared.

All participants viewed two versions of the comment sections, one with a brand comment and one without. This allowed a paired-samples t-test to compare how typical the comments were perceived between the two comment sections. Participants rated the no-brand comment section (Appendix B - Block 4A) as slightly more typical ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.87$) than the brand-present (Appendix B - Block 4B) version ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.90$). Figure 2 visually compares the typicality of the two conditions. This difference was statistically significant at the 1% level ($p = .005$).



Overall, both comment sections were viewed as reasonably typical for the platform, but the brand comment made the section feel a bit less natural. This is important to keep in mind when

interpreting later results, as it showed the stimuli worked, but the brand comment slightly reduced the sense of typicality.

4.2.4 Perceived Cultural Awareness

Perceived cultural awareness was measured using a four-item scale to capture whether the brand (Polar Cola) appeared in touch with current online and popular culture. Participants rated the brand as relatively culturally aware, with a mean score of $M = 3.91$ (Figure 1) on a 1-5 point Likert scale. This indicated that after exposure to the brand comment, respondents viewed the brand as more culturally aware than a neutral (midpoint of 3) evaluation would suggest, supporting hypothesis 1. To confirm this, a one-sided, one-sample t-test was conducted. The results further showed that this evaluation was above neutrality (midpoint of 3) and showed that the brand's presence meaningfully shifted perceptions in a positive direction. The finding was statistically significant at the 1% level. Therefore, the analysis supports hypothesis 1.

4.2.5 Perceived Relatability

Perceived relatability was measured using a four-item scale to assess the extent to which the brand felt approachable and personally relevant to participants. Participants rated the brand as moderately relatable above the midpoint of 3. However, with a mean score of $M = 3.34$ (Figure 1) on a 1-5 point scale, it was weaker than cultural awareness. As with hypothesis 1, a one-sided, one-sample t-test was conducted to test whether the mean score of 3.34 is statistically significantly larger than the midpoint of 3. The results indicated that relatability was above neutral. The finding was statistically significant at the 1% level, finding support for hypothesis 2, although the magnitude of the shift was smaller than for cultural awareness.

4.2.6 Effects of Cultural Awareness and Relatability on Brand Favorability

Based on the literature review and the expert interviews, cultural awareness and relatability emerged as the most influential factors shaping the effectiveness of OCE. Therefore, the joint effect of the two on brand favorability becomes of interest, resulting in the development of hypothesis 3.

Before examining the joint effects, they were analyzed individually to establish their independent relationships with brand favorability and to assess the strength of each construct on its own. These individual effects were examined using separate simple linear regression analyses with brand favorability as the dependent variable. Cultural awareness was statistically significantly associated at the 1% level with participants' overall brand evaluations. More specifically, a one-point increase in perceived cultural awareness, on average, was associated

with an increase of approximately three-quarters of a point in brand favorability ($B = .748$, $p < .001$). Cultural awareness accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in brand favorability ($R^2 = .465$), indicating that perceptions of cultural awareness played a meaningful role in shaping overall brand evaluations.

Moreover, relatability was also statistically significantly associated with participants' overall brand evaluations at the 1% level. A one-point increase in perceived reliability, on average, was associated with an increase of approximately three-quarters of a point in brand favorability ($B = .742$, $p < .001$). Relatability accounted for a large proportion of the variance in brand favorability ($R^2 = .657$), which indicates that perceptions of relatability meaningfully shaped overall brand evaluations.

While these results were very similar in their direction and magnitude, joint analysis revealed a slightly different pattern. Here, a multiple linear regression was conducted with brand favorability as the dependent variable and perceived cultural awareness and perceived relatability as simultaneous predictors. Both variables remained statistically significant in the joint model at the 1% level. Just like in the individual regressions, both showed a positive association with brand favorability: holding perceived relatability constant, a one-unit increase in perceived cultural awareness, on average, is associated with a .280-unit increase in brand favorability. Simultaneously, when holding perceived cultural awareness constant, a one-unit increase in perceived relatability, on average, is associated with a .586-unit increase in brand favorability. The regression coefficients and model fit statistics for all models are reported in Table 1. Together, cultural awareness and relatability explained nearly 70% of the variance in brand favorability ($R^2 = .693$). As both coefficients had a positive sign and were statistically significant, the analysis supports hypothesis 3.

However, to assess the robustness of these results, a hierarchical regression was conducted to verify that perceived cultural awareness and relatability are not driven by general platform usage habits. In the first step, social media usage variables, including time spent on platforms, frequency of reading comment sections, commenting frequency, and commenting style, were entered as controls. This baseline model without the two variables of interest did not significantly explain brand favorability ($R^2 = .043$, $p = .363$), suggesting that brand favorability is not driven by general platform usage. When including the two variables of interest, namely perceived relatability and perceived cultural awareness, the explained variance and the overall significance increase substantially ($\Delta R^2 = .661$, $p < .001$), thereby indicating a central role in explaining brand favorability. In the full model, both predictors remained statistically

significant, with reliability showing a stronger association ($B = .597, p < .001$) than cultural awareness ($B = .271, p = .002$). Although the magnitude of the cultural awareness coefficient decreased relative to the simple regression model, the direction and significance of both effects remained consistent. Taken together, these results confirmed that perceived cultural awareness and, in particular, perceived reliability are positively associated with brand favorability, providing robust support for Hypothesis 3.

4.2.7 Acceptance and Intrusiveness of Brands in Comment Sections

Intrusiveness was tested based on insights from the expert interviews, which highlighted that brand comments perceived as overly promotional or misaligned with the conversational context risk being interpreted as intrusive and may trigger negative reactions. Based on this, hypothesis 4 was developed, which posits that perceived intrusiveness lowers brand favorability. Intrusiveness was measured using a six-item, five-point Likert scale to assess the brand's appropriateness in the comment section. To reduce acquiescence bias, the scale included both positively and negatively worded items (Nunan et al., 2020).

On average, participants did not find the brand's comment intrusive, and intrusiveness scores fell below the midpoint of the scale ($M = 2.17$). As with perceived cultural awareness and reliability, a one-sided one-sample t-test was conducted to test whether this mean is statistically significantly lower than the scale midpoint of 3. The results confirmed that this mean was below the midpoint, showing that participants did not perceive the brand's presence as intrusive. This finding was statistically significant at the 1% level.

However, this only indicated that participants did not perceive the comment as intrusive. To further examine the relationship between intrusiveness and brand favorability, a regression analysis was conducted. The regression results showed that intrusiveness was, in fact, negatively associated with brand favorability: a one-point increase in intrusiveness, on average, was associated with a .40-point decrease in favorability ($B = -.402, p < .001$). As this result was statistically significant at the 1% level, it provides empirical support for hypothesis 4.

To capture the positive side of audience evaluation and reduce acquiescence bias, acceptance was measured alongside intrusiveness as a complementary construct. On average, acceptance was above the midpoint ($M = 3.92$), suggesting the opposite pattern. In a simple regression model, this was confirmed. While acceptance explained 55.0% of the variance in brand favorability ($R^2 = .550, p < .001$), it also had a positive coefficient. A one-point increase in acceptance, on average, was associated with an .80-point increase in favorability ($B = .798, p$

< .001). This result was significant at the 1% level. This further strengthened the previous inference for hypothesis 4 by demonstrating that perceptions of appropriateness strongly enhance brand favorability.

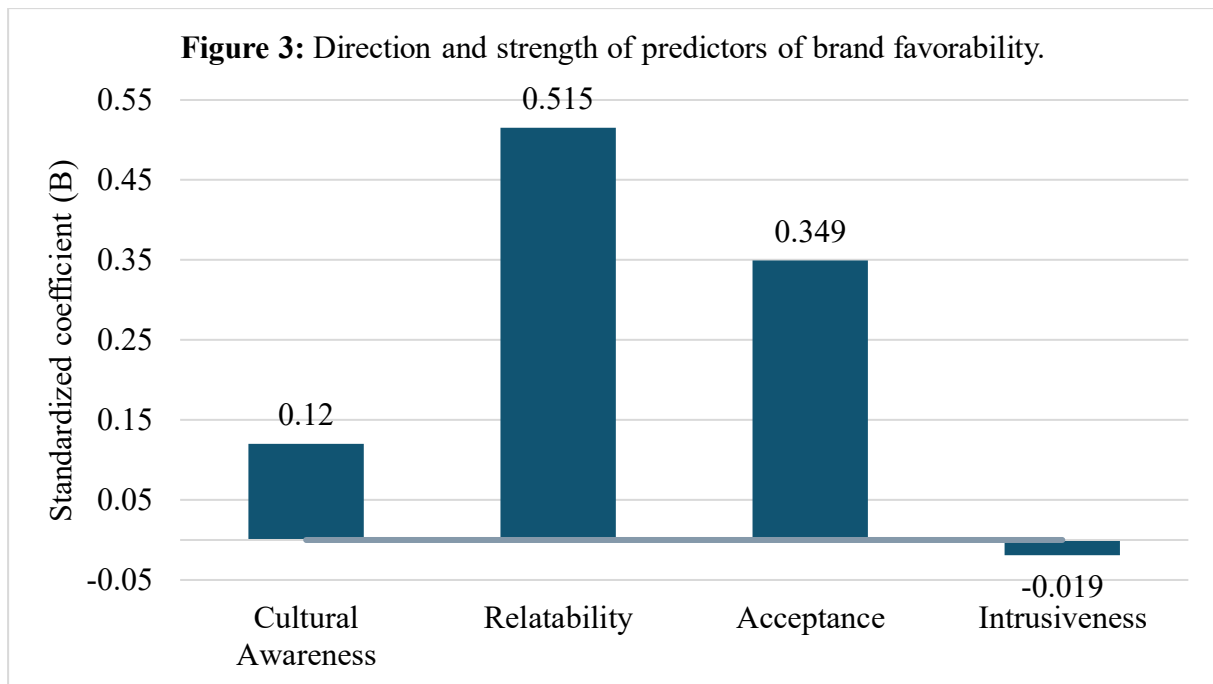
When intrusiveness was tested alongside acceptance, cultural awareness, and relatability, it did not explain additional variance in favorability. This likely reflected shared variance between acceptance and intrusiveness. Both constructs captured opposite sides of the same judgment about whether the brand’s participation felt appropriate in that space. As a result, acceptance dominated the combined model as the more direct predictor of brand favorability, while intrusiveness no longer had a unique contribution.

Table 1 reports the regression coefficients and model fit statistics for all models predicting brand favorability, while Figure 3 provides a visual summary of the direction and relative strength of predictors in the full model using standardized coefficients. As shown in Figure 3, relatability emerged as the strongest positive predictor of brand favorability, followed by acceptance. Cultural awareness retained a smaller but positive effect once other perceptions were taken into account. Intrusiveness did not contribute uniquely in the full model, consistent with its shared variance with acceptance.

Taken together, these results indicated that while brand comments were not perceived as intrusive on average, perceptions of appropriateness played a critical role in shaping brand favorability. Brand participation was most positively evaluated when it felt culturally aware, relatable, and appropriate to the surrounding conversation, and negatively evaluated when it violated contextual expectations. This reinforced the importance of strategic judgment when brands engage in public comment sections.

Table 1: Regression Results Predicting Brand Favorability						
Predictor	Cultural Awareness	Relatability	CA + Relatability	Acceptance	Intrusive-ness	Full Model
Cultural Awareness	B = .748***		B = .280***			B = .131
Relatability		B = .742***	B = .586***			B = .472***
Acceptance				B = .798***		B = .376***
Intrusive					B = -.402***	B = -.016
R²	.465	.657	.693	.550	.219	.767

Note. B represents the unstandardized regression coefficient and indicates the expected change in brand favorability associated with a one-unit increase in the predictor, holding the other variables in the model constant. *** p < .001.



4.3 Summary of Results

This study combined qualitative expert interviews and a quantitative experimental survey to examine how OCE influenced consumer perceptions and brand evaluations. Across both phases, the results pointed to a consistent set of factors that shaped responses to brand comments in public comment sections.

The qualitative findings showed that marketing professionals viewed OCE as a strategic brand-building practice that drives brand awareness and consideration. The experts emphasized the importance of cultural awareness, contextual judgment, and a relatable human tone when participating in comment sections. They also consistently identified inauthenticity and entering the comment section for the purpose of selling as risky and potentially harmful to brand perception. They also highlighted risks related to creators and their content and noted that it is important to conduct prior checks before commenting on posts. These insights directly informed the development of the hypotheses and measurement approach used in the quantitative study.

The quantitative results showed that exposure to a brand comment under a viral post led participants to evaluate the brand as more culturally aware and moderately relatable. This confirmed H1 and H2. Furthermore, both cultural awareness and relatability were positively associated with brand favorability, supporting H3. Overall relatability emerged as the strongest individual predictor against all other predictors, and these effects remained statistically

significant after controlling for social media usage variables. This indicated that respondents' general platform habits did not drive brand evaluations.

For H4, perceived intrusiveness was not high on average. However, higher levels of intrusiveness were associated with lower brand favorability, supporting H4. When tested jointly with cultural awareness, relatability, and acceptance, intrusiveness did not contribute uniquely to brand favorability, reflecting shared variance with acceptance. Acceptance and intrusiveness, therefore, captured opposing evaluations of the same judgment regarding the appropriateness of brand participation.

Overall, the qualitative and quantitative findings showed that brand comments were evaluated more positively when perceived as culturally aware, relatable, and appropriate to the surrounding conversation, and more negatively when perceived as intrusive or out of place. All in all, these findings highlight OCE's role in a brand's social participation.

For clarity, Table 2 summarizes the outcomes of the hypothesis test.

Table 2: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results		
Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Exposure to a brand comment on a viral post raises perceived brand cultural awareness.	Supported
H2	Exposure to a brand comment on a viral post increases perceived brand relatability.	Supported
H3	Perceived cultural awareness and perceived relatability raise brand favorability.	Supported
H4	Perceived intrusiveness lowers brand favorability.	Supported

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

Overall, the findings provide a clear answer to the research question: OCE influences brand favorability indirectly through consumer interpretations of cultural awareness, relatability, and contextual appropriateness. However, brand participation in comment sections does not affect favorability simply by increasing visibility. Instead, favorability emerges from how consumers interpret the brand's presence within a community-owned cultural space.

First, the results indicated that OCE functions as a signal of cultural fluency and real-time relevance as exposure to a brand comment increases perceived cultural awareness. This further supports the positioning of OCE as an evolution of RTM because in both cases, effectiveness depends on timely and contextually aligned participation (Willemsen et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2022). From a theoretical perspective, this aligned with cultural branding and meaning transfer frameworks discussed in the following section but suggest that brands gain value by embedding themselves within shared cultural conversations. However, the findings also indicated that cultural awareness alone does not fully explain why OCE improves brand favorability.

Relatability emerged as the strongest predictor of brand favorability, even when cultural awareness and other perceptions were considered simultaneously. This finding is critical for answering the research question, as it indicates that OCE shapes brand favorability primarily through relational and identity-based mechanisms, rather than through awareness alone. This result directly supports theories of conversational human voice, parasocial interaction, and Consumer-Brand Identification, which argue that consumers respond most positively to brands that feel human, socially present, and aligned with their own identity (Kelleher, 2009; Labrecque, 2014; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In the context of OCE, relatability reflects whether the brand's comment feels like it could come from a fellow community member rather than a corporate player. When this condition is met, psychological distance is decreased, and favorability increases accordingly.

The findings also clarify the role of intrusiveness and appropriateness in shaping brand evaluations. Although intrusiveness was not high on average, higher perceived intrusiveness was associated with lower brand favorability, consistent with research on advertising intrusiveness and psychological reactance (Li et al., 2002). However, intrusiveness did not explain unique variance in brand favorability once acceptance was included in the model. This suggests that consumers form a single overarching judgment about whether the brand's

participation belongs in the comment section. This aligns with Social Identity Theory's prediction that actors perceived as violating group norms are treated as out-group members and evaluated more negatively (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As previously established, acceptance and intrusiveness represent opposite ends of the same spectrum, and each has different effects based on how the brand presents itself.

It is also interesting to note that brand favorability was shaped by consumers' interpretations of the brand's comment, and not by differences in social media usage or commenting behavior. Furthermore, these findings suggest that OCE is most effective when a brand prioritizes fit over exposure. For brands, appearing culturally aware establishes legitimacy, but appearing relatable determines whether that legitimacy translates into positive brand evaluations. These insights underscore that OCE should be treated as a relational brand-building tool, rather than a tactic to maximize reach. The organizational capabilities required to execute this effectively, such as cultural interpretation, tone adaptation, and contextual judgment, are discussed further in the theoretical and managerial implications sections.

In sum, this study demonstrated that OCE influences brand favorability through culturally and socially grounded perceptual pathways. Brands can enhance consumer evaluations by participating in public comment sections in ways that feel culturally fluent, relatable, and appropriate. However, when these conditions are not met, the same visibility can undermine favorability. This dual potential highlights both the strategic value and the inherent risk of OCE, which will be explored further in the following sections.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature on real-time marketing and social media brand engagement by advancing the understanding of outbound community engagement (OCE) as a distinct form of brand communication. While prior research has examined brand activity on owned social media channels or influencer-driven engagement, this study focused on brand participation within external, community-owned comment spaces, where brands operate with limited control and heightened cultural sensitivity. This extends existing real-time marketing research into a less examined but increasingly relevant context.

In addition, this study contributes to consumer behavior research by clarifying how perceived cultural awareness, relatability, and intrusiveness shape brand favorability in response to OCE. As previously mentioned, the results show that cultural awareness and relatability are positively associated with brand favorability, while perceived intrusiveness is negatively associated. This

helps explain why some brand comments are well received and generate engagement, whereas others are ignored or trigger adverse reactions.

Furthermore, the study offers a theoretical contribution by linking consumer perceptions to established strategic management frameworks. When interpreted through a resource-based and dynamic capabilities lens, the findings suggest that differences in OCE effectiveness can be explained by firm-specific intangible resources, such as cultural awareness and tone judgment, and by firms' abilities to adapt their engagement behavior to the social context. While the study did not directly measure organizational processes, it provides a theoretically grounded basis for future research examining how internal capabilities shape external consumer responses to real-time brand engagement.

Taken together, these contributions deepen theoretical understanding of how and why OCE influences brand favorability and offer a foundation for future research on brand participation in public digital spaces.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer several implications for managers responsible for social media and brand communication. Overall, the results indicate that OCE can enhance brand favorability when it is perceived as culturally aware and relatable, but that these benefits depend on how and when brands choose to engage. Managers should therefore prioritize entering comment sections only when the brand can credibly align with the cultural context of the conversation and avoid treating them as promotional spaces. Instead, they should approach them as shared social environments and factor in relevance, timing, and tone to shape audience evaluations. Moreover, having a deep understanding of platform-specific norms, humor, and language can contribute to well-crafted comments and overall effectiveness.

Second, the positive relationship between relatability and brand favorability highlights the importance of a brand voice that feels natural and human rather than corporate or promotional to the audience. From a managerial standpoint, this implies the need for clear tone-of-voice principles and sufficient autonomy for social media teams to respond in ways that reflect the surrounding discourse. Excessively scripted or sales-oriented comments may reduce the perceived relatability that drives favorable responses.

Third, the results indicate that higher perceptions of intrusiveness are associated with lower brand favorability. This suggests that OCE should be applied selectively and with restraint. Managers should view comment sections as shared social spaces and engage only when the

brand's presence adds value to the interaction, such as humor, positivity, or cultural alignment. Brands should avoid aiming for frequent visibility or reach at the expense of contextual fit.

From a resource-based perspective, these findings suggest that effective OCE depends on intangible, firm-specific resources such as cultural awareness, contextual understanding, and tone judgment. These resources shape how brand comments are interpreted and help explain why some brands achieve favorable outcomes while others do not. Consequently, managers should prioritize developing and protecting these internal capabilities, as successful OCE relies on adaptive, context-sensitive decision-making rather than standardized or volume-driven engagement strategies.

Altogether, the findings emphasize the strategic role of organizational capabilities in successful OCE execution. From a managerial standpoint, investment in social listening tools, cross-functional coordination, and ongoing training is essential to identify relevant moments and assess contextual risk for the brand.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

There were several limitations to the research that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the experiment used a single brand comment within one social media setting. Comment sections differ widely depending on the platform, brand category, occurring cultural moments, and audience. As a result, the observed effects may or may not generalize to all forms of OCE or to platforms beyond the one used in this study. Future research should test multiple brands, platforms, and commenting styles to assess whether the findings hold across different environments. Even the use of observational data drawn from real comment sections could also strengthen external validity.

Second, the quantitative phase relied on self-reported Likert-scale measures to assess cultural awareness, relatability, intrusiveness, and brand favorability. While these measures showed strong relatability, self-reported data are subject to response biases, such as respondents agreeing with statements more easily or providing socially desirable answers. Future studies could include behavioral measures, such as engagement intentions or actual interaction data, to complement perceptual evaluations.

In addition, the sample was primarily composed of young, digitally active users, with a strong presence of Gen Z participants. While this group is highly relevant to OCE practices, the findings may not apply to older or less digitally engaged audiences. Future research could compare responses across age groups or cultural contexts.

Finally, the study captures immediate reactions to a single brand comment. It does not measure longer-term effects on brand perceptions or behavior. Longitudinal research could examine whether repeated exposure to OCE leads to sustained changes in brand favorability, trust, or engagement over time.

Overall, these limitations offer opportunities to research and test broader samples, multiple platforms, behavioral outcomes, and longer timeframes to better understand effective brand participation in public comment sections.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Outbound Community Engagement represents an increasingly important response to algorithm-driven social media environments where brands can no longer rely on owned content alone to remain visible or relevant. As attention continues to concentrate within creator-led and community-owned conversations, OCE has become one of the few ways brands can participate directly with an audience. It is likely to become more formally integrated into social media teams as an ongoing organizational capability.

This dissertation showed that OCE shapes consumer evaluations by signaling a brand's cultural awareness and, more critically, its relatability, while misaligned participation risks intrusiveness and negative brand judgments. Rather than driving value through exposure alone, OCE influences brand favorability through how consumers interpret a brand's role within shared social spaces. All in all, these findings point to a broader shift in digital branding, where relevance and connection are earned through culturally fluent and human participation in real time. Finally, OCE functions as a relational brand-building practice within community-owned spaces where cultural fluency and a human tone determine whether participation strengthens or harms brand favorability.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix A: Expert Interviews

Appendix A1: Interviewee Table

#	ID	Name	Role / Position	Company	Type of Company	Revenue Band / Size	Industry Segment	Reason for Selection
1	B1	Madison Myers	Digital Content Manager	American Eagle Outfitters	Brand – AEO (Retail/Apparel)	Large enterprise; multi-billion revenue	Fashion retail	brand-side insight into daily content execution and trend alignment
2	B2	Alexandra Landazuri	Social Media Manager	Kangaroo Hanger	Brand – DTC Product	Small startup	Consumer goods, DTC	hands-on experience managing community strategy and social media; proactively observed brand engaging in TikTok comments
3	B3	Emily Huffer	Social Media Manager	Best Western Hotels & Resorts	Brand – Hospitality	Large enterprise; global hotel chain	Hospitality & travel	hands-on experience managing a social media presence for a large enterprise brand
4	B4	Melissa Wong	Social Media Manager – Community	Anthropologie	Brand – Retail/Lifestyle	Large enterprise; multi-brand retail group	Lifestyle retail	hands-on experience managing community strategy and social media
5	B5	Jaz Daley	Social Media Community Manager	Delta Air Lines	Brand – Airline / Travel	Large enterprise; Fortune 100	Airline / Travel	hands-on experience managing a social media presence for a major global brand
6	B6	Danni Ceniceros	Social Media Manager – Community	Hilton	Brand – Hospitality	Large enterprise; global hotel chain	Hospitality & travel	hands-on experience managing a social media presence for a large enterprise brand
7	C1	Nycole Hampton	Fractional Marketing Executive; Adjunct Professor	Nycole Hampton Consulting / WVU	Consultant + Academic	Small consultancy; university-level academic role	Influencer marketing, brand strategy, social media	senior strategic perspective on social, influencer, and content ecosystems
8	C2	Lyndsay Vella Handlos	Fractional CMO & AI/Omnichannel Consultant	Vella Handlos Consulting / Pfizer	Consultant + Brand	Consultancy (medium) + Pfizer (large global pharma)	Healthcare, omnichannel marketing, AI integration	senior leadership expertise in omnichannel strategy and brand decision-making
9	C3	Teddy Giard	Brand Director / CEO	Giard & Co.	Creator-led Brand / Consultancy	Small company; creator-driven	Brand strategy	experience building creator-led brands and advising on marketing strategy
10	A1	Lilly Kemper	Digital Manager	Legacy Digital	Agency	Medium sized digital agency	Digital marketing, creative services	hands-on experience managing social content creation, execution, and trend responsiveness for many brands
11	T1	Thomas (Sung)	Founder & CEO	Sociable AI	Marketing Technology	Early-stage startup	AI, social media technology,	expert insight into AI-driven trend detection and

		Hyun) Noh			Platform / AI Startup		trend detection	outbound comment strategy for brands
12	T2	Noah Fennell	Founder & Product Builder in Influencer & Data Platforms	Steer / DataEarn	Marketing Technology Platform / Startup	Early-stage startup	Influencer and community marketing technology	expert insight into influencer and community marketing infrastructure, platform design, and data-driven brand-creator engagement

Appendix A2: Semi-Structured Expert Interview Questionnaire

Introductory Statement: Participants were informed that the interview formed part of an academic master’s dissertation on brand participation in trending social media conversations. The purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and permission to record were explained prior to the interview.

Core Interview Questions

1. From your perspective, how has social and digital marketing evolved in terms of speed and responsiveness in recent years?
2. Have you observed examples of brands engaging with trends or comment sections that you considered particularly effective? What factors contributed to their success?
3. What motivates brands to engage with content outside their owned channels, such as responding to creators or joining trending topics?
4. How do brands typically decide whether to participate in a trending conversation? Who is involved, and how much autonomy do social teams have?
5. What differentiates authentic brand participation from interactions that feel forced or opportunistic? Is this engagement usually planned or spontaneous?
6. How important is a clearly defined brand voice in OCE, and how does it guide tone, humor, and risk-taking?
7. How do these interactions contribute to broader brand goals such as awareness, engagement, or loyalty? / In your view, can this form of engagement influence brand favorability in the long term?
8. How do brands assess the effectiveness of OCE when impressions, attribution, and revenue impact are difficult to measure?
9. How do tools, data, or AI influence a brand’s ability to identify opportunities, scale engagement, and maintain consistency?
10. Expertise-specific question – Influencer, technology, consultant, surprise and delight, etc.

11. What are the primary risks or challenges brands face when engaging in real-time conversations, particularly at scale?
12. What would be your primary recommendation for brands beginning to experiment with real-time commenting or trend participation?

Closing Prompt: Participants were invited to share any additional insights they considered relevant to how brands should engage in trending social media conversations.

Appendix A3: Individual Interview Summaries

B1 — American Eagle Outfitters	
Key Insights:	OCE reflects a broader shift away from promo-heavy messaging toward community-led brand building. Commenting and trend participation help brands signal personality, relevance, and cultural awareness, which supports loyalty beyond short-term sales. Participation depends on relevance, business priorities, and internal capacity, with peak retail periods (e.g., Black Friday) reducing bandwidth for reactive engagement. Authenticity comes from originality and brand fit, while opportunism emerges when brands copy others or comment without full context.
Notable Quote:	“Being super promo-heavy isn’t the way to connect with people.” / “If you can’t come up with something original, it looks fake.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Reinforces consensus across interviews on the importance of human tone, selective trend participation, and contextual awareness. Adds stronger emphasis on internal coordination and competing commercial priorities within large retail organizations.
Unique Perspective:	Emphasizes a perception advantage in OCE: audiences often attribute comments to a single relatable individual rather than a corporate system, which reduces perceived corporateness. Also frames OCE as a long-term brand-building tool that strengthens top-of-mind awareness when brands consistently “commit to the bit” rather than chasing every trend.
B2 — Kangaroo Hanger	
Key Insights:	Commenting is viewed as a low-cost, high-intimacy way to build community and humanize a small brand. Emphasized that comments matter because users actively read them to validate opinions and form trust. Trend participation relies heavily on personal judgment, early-stage trend recognition, and cultural intuition rather than formal tools or processes. For smaller brands, comment visibility often drives curiosity clicks and passive brand discovery.
Notable Quote:	“People like when brands sound like people.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Strongly aligned with others on authenticity coming from adding to the conversation rather than advertising. Less concerned than large-

	enterprise brands about formal vetting, approvals, or brand safety processes.
Unique Perspective:	Framed comment sections as the most “engaged layer” of social platforms, where brands can reach users already primed to interact. Also highlighted competitive behavior among brands—when other brands comment, the goal becomes outperforming them creatively rather than avoiding the space.
B3 — Best Western Hotels & Resorts	
Key Insights:	Trend participation requires balancing visibility with brand safety, franchise considerations, and hospitality norms. Emphasized that while speed still signals responsiveness, trend-hopping increasingly fails to communicate brand meaning unless relevance is clear. Influencer and creator content often acts as a cultural signal for engagement, but broad comment-section pile-ons now feel repetitive and low-value to consumers. She cautioned that formats such as “fake apologies” or pity-marketing may drive short-term attention while eroding trust.
Notable Quote:	“We had to ask whether the trend added value or just attention.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Strongly aligned with others on relevance as the core rule for participation. More skeptical than most about indiscriminate influencer comment engagement and emotional bait formats.
Unique Perspective:	Framed the current moment as consumer fatigue—trend participation has become a baseline expectation rather than a differentiator. Also highlighted internal risk: comment sections often allow more creative freedom than posts, which can create tension when leadership later evaluates brand voice.
B4 — Anthropologie	
Key Insights:	Outbound commenting became a formal strategy when the community team started, with “speed is everything” and a practical rule of engaging posts within ~2 days. They use an “outbound power hour” to source posts (personal feeds + brand FYP), vet comment-section safety, and aim to add something new rather than echoing existing comments. Cultural alignment and aesthetic fit are prioritized overreach or speed. The brand avoids trends that conflict with identity or tone. Very light risk checks – mentioned should do more.
Notable Quote:	“Just because something is trending doesn’t mean it’s right for us.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Matches other experts on the importance of fast timing, clear tone-of-voice guardrails, and avoiding opportunistic selling. Adds a stronger emphasis on not forcing product plugs in outbound comments, even when it would be easy to do so.
Unique Perspective:	Positions comment sections as curated extensions of brand storytelling rather than reactive engagement spaces. Treats outbound engagement as a <i>cross-functional campaign engine</i> (community + creative + design + exec approval) that can move from a single viral seed into multi-week

	activation, plus a clear operational routine (power hour + 2-day freshness rule + tool-based tracking with Plot AI).
B5 — Delta Air Lines	
Key Insights:	Delta treats proactive engagement as brand-building, not “being everywhere.” Comment targets stay close to customer experience, “Delta difference” moments, and travel-adjacent culture, with a deliberate effort to connect the video context back to Delta. Discovery is largely native (personal FYP + account browsing), and selection uses quick cues (clear Delta presence, positive tone, humor fit, comment activity), but she still “spreads the love” even when a creator is small. Key risk area is employee-made content on the job (permissions, safety, policy), so the team avoids amplifying questionable employee videos.
Notable Quote:	“Proactive engagement.” / “Make sure your tone is not a replica of someone else’s.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Aligns with other enterprise brands on being intentional, avoiding forced trend-jacking, and staying within brand tone. Differs from “virality-first” approaches by valuing smaller creators and everyday moments, not only high-reach posts.
Unique Perspective:	Positions comment engagement as <i>customer closeness</i> and brand warmth (“we see you”), with structured team lanes (brand vs commercial vs SkyMiles vs Moments That Delight) and success judged by the <i>quality of replies under Delta’s comment</i> (people sharing love, stories, and preference), not just likes.
B6 — Hilton	
Key Insights:	Community engagement operates as “rapid response,” separate from outbound publishing, and covers surprise-and-delight, crisis monitoring, and brand protection. Outbound commenting works best when it ties back to a real brand benefit (e.g., valet parking, suites), but occasional “just for fun” comments can still fit if tone-of-voice stays consistent. Trend discovery is a mix of native feeds plus social listening/management tools; speed matters, with an internal goal to comment within ~24 hours, unless the post shows renewed activity.
Notable Quote:	“We call it rapid response engagement.” / “Brand awareness and consideration is always the goal.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Strongly aligns with other enterprise brand experts on the need for guardrails, tone-of-voice, and risk mitigation; more open than some to commenting even when the tie to the business is light, as long as it stays on-brand.
Unique Perspective:	Treats outbound engagement as <i>white-glove</i> brand experience and risk-managed brand protection, supported by formal infrastructure (vetting thresholds, moderation playbooks, escalation paths), not just “being funny in comments.”
C1 — Consultant / Academic	

Key Insights:	OCE has shifted from relationship-building toward visibility-driven “quick wins,” often at the expense of relevance and long-term value. When brands enter conversations outside their natural domain, engagement risks feeling intrusive, lazy, or opportunistic. The core issue is the lack of a foundational strategy, a clear role definition for social, and relevance to actual customers. Social listening, sentiment awareness, and guardrails are essential to avoid brand dilution and cultural backlash.
Notable Quote:	“What is the value of being seen if it’s not by anyone relevant to you?” / “Brands are not influencers and treating them like one breaks the relationship.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Aligns with other experts on the importance of relevance and authenticity but is more critical of trend-chasing behavior. Strongly challenges the assumption that visibility alone equals success, emphasizing strategic discipline over experimentation for its own sake.
Unique Perspective:	Frames excessive brand commenting as a symptom of weak strategic foundations and under-resourced social teams. Introduces the idea that brands can actively “kill” cultural moments by overcrowding them, and argues that strategy is freeing, not restrictive, because it clarifies when <i>not</i> to participate.
C2 — Consultant / Brand (Healthcare)	
Key Insights:	Comment-section participation can extend reach cheaply in a fragmented media environment, but only creates value when tied to clear strategy, brand identity, and measurable outcomes. Many brands copy trends without tracking impact, which turns the behavior into noise and increases brand-safety risk. Social listening and governance are essential due to fast-moving cultural and reputational shifts.
Notable Quote:	“If they’re not tracking back to those metrics, there is no value.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Aligns with others on relevance and risk, but takes a stronger executive view by questioning ROI, resourcing, and accountability.
Unique Perspective:	Frames OCE as a “low-cost guerrilla marketing” tactic that only works when embedded in a coherent brand system (e.g., Duolingo’s owl persona), supported by fast approvals and controls rather than ad-hoc trend chasing.
C3 — Creator-Led Brand / Consultancy	
Key Insights:	OCE creates value only when it reinforces a brand’s mission and long-term storytelling, rather than chasing short-term visibility. Brands win by investing in community, lifestyle, and habit formation, not by inserting themselves into trends for attention. Short attribution windows systematically undervalue brand equity and cultural relevance.
Notable Quote:	“If your strategy is to follow trends, you can never become one.”

Agreement / Disagreement:	Agrees that opportunistic engagement weakens authenticity but goes further by arguing that outbound community engagement should never be a core tactic unless it directly supports mission-led storytelling.
Unique Perspective:	Frames OCE as secondary to a <i>brand-as-stage</i> model, where creators and communities carry the narrative, and brands succeed by amplifying human stories, building habits, and shaping culture over time rather than competing for algorithmic attention.
A1 — Agency	
Key Insights:	OCE works best as a visibility and brand-humanization tool, not a direct conversion driver. It helps brands signal cultural awareness and personality, especially when there is no founder or face, but only adds value when tightly aligned with brand voice, target avatars, and context. Oversaturation and generic participation quickly reduce impact.
Notable Quote:	“Consumers don’t really connect with just a brand. They connect more with people... so brands try to personify themselves through comments.”/ “If it feels forced, people scroll past instantly.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Agrees that OCE can build awareness and loyalty when done selectively and on the right posts but is skeptical of its value for smaller brands with limited resources or for organizations that lack a clear brand voice.
Unique Perspective:	Frames OCE as a deliberate personification strategy, where even the perception of a “social media intern” becomes an asset by creating a relatable human link to the brand. Emphasizes that effectiveness depends less on scale and more on fast approvals, Gen-Z-fluent tone, and strict adherence to brand guidelines.
T1 — Outbound Marketing Technology Platform (AI)	
Key Insights:	OCE becomes more valuable when brands treat it as a repeatable channel with clearer rules: right place, right time, right message. The strongest use case is brand awareness (especially for CPG/retail brands) rather than short-term e-commerce conversion. For smaller brands, OCE can drive profile visits, but follower growth and sales depend on the strength of the profile and content, not the comment itself. Comment performance relies on early placement (ideally before ~25 comments), comment “value” (funny, educational, or an interesting take), and basic attention cues (verified badge, distinct brand profile image). Platform algorithms and measurement limits (impressions are estimates) shape the scalability of OCE.
Notable Quote:	“Commenting only works if people like it.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Agrees that OCE can feel intrusive for some users but frames that as an outlier, since the tactic only persists when audiences reward it with engagement. Disagrees with the idea that OCE is a reliable direct-response lever for small e-commerce brands and warns against treating it as a next-day sales tactic.

Unique Perspective:	Treats OCE as an engineering + workflow problem: predict posts that will go viral, match them to audience fit, draft brand-voice comments via LLM training, and keep human approval to avoid spam behavior. Emphasizes “audience adjacency” (what the audience watches in free time, not what the brand sells) as the key to choosing where to engage, plus structured testing (hypotheses by week) and content-format fit (skits drive comment behavior more than aesthetic videos).
T2 — Marketing Technology Platform	
Key Insights:	OCE effectiveness depends on technical infrastructure, data pipelines, and platform design rather than creative instinct alone. Humor is the primary driver of engagement, but its value lies in scalable exposure, earned media, and long-term revenue impact rather than immediate sales. Commenting works best when brands target tightly defined ICPs across adjacent niches and treat OCE as an awareness and traffic layer within a longer sales cycle.
Notable Quote:	“Infrastructure determines what’s possible.”
Agreement / Disagreement:	Agrees systems matter as much as creativity + humor plays a major role; less focused on cultural aspect. Strong focus on speed and how quickly teams can respond more so than others.
Unique Perspective:	Interprets OCE through technical scalability and data architecture rather than messaging. Acknowledges that gaps in the market exist for such software.

8.2 Appendix B: Survey Materials

Appendix B1: Survey Flow

Block: Welcome & Consent (1 Question)

Standard: Social Media Usage (2 Questions)

Standard: TikTok Video (1 Question)

BlockRandomizer: 2 - Evenly Present Elements

Block: Comment Section A (NO brand comment) (2 Questions)

Block: Comment Section B (WITH brand comment) (8 Questions)

Standard: Platform Habits (5 Questions)

Standard: Demographics (4 Questions)

Appendix B2: Survey Questions

Block 1 — Welcome & Consent *blocks titles are not visible to users*

Welcome, and thank you for taking part in this academic study on social media behaviors. Your participation is anonymous, confidential, and completely voluntary. The survey takes about 5–7 minutes to complete. By continuing to the next page, you confirm that you agree to take part in this research. Thank you for your time and contribution!!

Block 2 — Social Media Usage

1. How often do you use Instagram?
 - Never (1); Less than once a week (2); 1–2 days per week (3); 3–4 days per week (4); 5–6 days per week (5); Every day (6)
2. How often do you use TikTok?
 - Never (1); Less than once a week (2); 1–2 days per week (3); 3–4 days per week (4); 5–6 days per week (5); Every day (6)

Block 3 — Video Stimulus

You will now see a short video, similar to something you might come across while scrolling your feed. Please watch the video as you normally would.

Next, you'll see the comment section for this video.

Participants viewed a short TikTok-style video.

URL to Video: <https://appendix-b1-1-video-stimulus.my.canva.site/>

Block 4A — Comment Section A (No Brand Comment)

Now take a look at this comment section for the video. Please view the comments as you normally would.



Based on the comment section just shown, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

3. 5-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree):

- The comments under this post felt typical for TikTok/Instagram.
- This comment section feels similar to what I usually see online.
- I might interact with content like this on my own feed.

Block 4B — Comment Section B (Brand Comment Present)

Now take a look at this comment section for the video. Please view the comments as you normally would.



4. Attention Check: A brand named Polar Cola commented in this comment section.

- Yes / No

Based on the comment section just shown, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

5. 5-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree):

- The comments under this post felt typical for TikTok/Instagram.
- This comment section feels similar to what I usually see online.
- I might interact with content like this on my own feed.

The following questions are about the brand, Polar Cola, shown in this comment section.

6. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the brand?

5-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree):

- This brand seems in touch with current online culture.
- This brand understands what people are talking about these days.
- This brand knows how to join trending conversations.
- This brand keeps up with what’s happening in popular culture.

7. 5-point Likert scale:

- This brand feels approachable.
- This brand feels like it could be part of my online community.
- I could see myself engaging with this brand.
- This brand understands people like me.

8. Overall, how do you feel about this brand right now?

	Strongly	Somewhat	In the Middle	Somewhat	Strongly	
	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Good
Unfavorable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Favorable
Dislike	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Like
Unappealing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Appealing

9. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Polar Cola? 5-point Likert scale:

- The brand’s comment felt appropriate for this post.
- The brand’s comment felt natural in this context.
- The brand’s comment felt intrusive.
- The brand’s comment felt out of place.
- The brand added value to the comment section.
- I didn’t mind seeing the brand participate in this comment thread.

Block 5 — Platform Habits

10. On a typical day, how much time do you spend on Instagram and/or TikTok?
- Less than 30 minutes (1); 30–59 minutes (2); 1–2 hours (3); 2–3 hours (4); More than 3 hours (5)
11. How often do you read comment sections on social media?
- Never – I don't read comment sections (1); Rarely – About 1–2 times per month (2); Sometimes – About 1–2 times per week (3); Often – About 3–5 times per week (4); Very often – Daily or almost daily (5)
12. How often do you personally comment on social media posts (TikTok, Instagram, etc.)
- Never (1); About 1–2 times per month (2); About 1–2 times per week (3); About 3–5 times per week (4); Daily or almost daily (5)
13. When you do comment on posts, which best describes your behavior?
- Mostly comment when I agree with the post (1); Mostly comment when I disagree (2); Comment both ways equally (3); I rarely comment, so this doesn't apply (4)

Block 6 — Demographics

14. Age (open entry)
15. Gender (Male / Female / Non-binary / Prefer not to say)
16. Country of residence (Drop-down list)

End Survey

Appendix B3: Reliability statistics for multi-item constructs

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Cultural Awareness	4	.902
Relatability	4	.882
Brand Favorability	4	.934
Acceptance	4	.800
Intrusiveness	2	.699

8.3 Appendix C: Statistical Analyses

This section contains additional SPSS outputs and figures that complement the analyses presented in the Results section and are provided for reference.

Appendix C: Descriptive Statistics Tables

- Demographics and social media usage patterns (n = 103)

Characteristic	Category	%
Gender	Female	70.9
	Male	29.1
Age	Range	18–54
	Most common ages	25 (27.2%)
		26 (19.4%)
Country of residence	United States	59.2
	Portugal	17.5
	Germany	15.5
	Other	7.8
Instagram usage	Daily use	89.3
TikTok usage	Daily use	45.6
	Never use	26.2
Daily time on Instagram/TikTok	1–2 hours	41.7
	2–3 hours	29.1
	More than 3 hours	9.7
Comment section behavior	Read comments daily or almost daily	46.6
	Rarely or never comment	48.5

Appendix C2. Regression Outputs

1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Constructs

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
CulturalAwareness	103	1.00	5.00	3.9126	.84650
Relatability	103	1.00	5.00	3.3374	1.01321
BrandFavorability	103	1.00	5.00	3.6626	.92799
Acceptance	103	1.25	5.00	3.9223	.86179
Intrusiveness	103	1.00	5.00	2.1650	1.08100

2. Correlation Matrix

		Cultural-Awareness	Relatability	Brand-Favorability	Acceptance	Intrusiveness
Cultural Awareness	Pearson Correlation	1	.666**	.682**	.609**	-.354**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	103	103	103	103	103
Relatability	Pearson Correlation	.666**	1	.810**	.598**	-.370**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	103	103	103	103	103
Brand Favorability	Pearson Correlation	.682**	.810**	1	.742**	-.468**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	103	103	103	103	103
Acceptance	Pearson Correlation	.609**	.598**	.742**	1	-.619**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	103	103	103	103	103
Intrusiveness	Pearson Correlation	-.354**	-.370**	-.468**	-.619**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	103	103	103	103	103

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3. One-Sample t-Tests Against Scale Midpoint (3)

One-sample t-tests were conducted to examine whether perceived cultural awareness and relatability differed from the neutral midpoint of the scale.

Construct	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Cultural Awareness	103	3.91	0.85	10.94	102	< .001	1.08
Relatability	103	3.34	1.01	3.38	102	.001	0.33

** . Test value = 3 (scale midpoint). Cohen's d is based on the sample standard deviation.

4. Simple Regression Models Predicting Brand Favorability

	B	SE	β	R ²	p
Cultural Awareness	.748	.080	.682	.465	< .001
Relatability	.742	.053	.810	.657	< .001
Acceptance	.798	.072	.742	.550	< .001
Intrusiveness	-.402	.075	-.468	.219	< .001

5. Joint Regression Model (H3)

Predictors: Cultural Awareness, Relatability

Dependent Variable: Brand Favorability

	B	SE	β	R ²	p
Cultural Awareness	.280	.081	.256	3.44	< .001
Relatability	.586	.068	.640	8.62	< .001

- R² = .693
- Adjusted R² = .687
- F(2, 100) = 112.92, p < .001
-

6. Full Regression Model Including Acceptance and Intrusiveness (H4)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Cultural Awareness	.131	.077	.120	1.71	.090
Relatability	.472	.063	.515	7.44	< .001
Acceptance	.376	.082	.349	4.59	< .001
Intrusiveness	-.016	.053	-.019	-0.31	.759

- R² = .767
- Adjusted R² = .757
- F(4, 98) = 80.49, p < .001

7. Hierarchical Regression with Social Media Usage Controls

Step	Predictors Included
1	When you do comment on posts, which best describes your behavior?, On a typical day, how much time do you spend on Instagram and/or TikTok?, How often do you

	read comment sections on social media?, How often do you personally comment on social media posts (TikTok, Instagram, etc.) ^b
2	Cultural Awareness, Relatability ^b

Step 1: Social Media Usage Variables Only

- $R^2 = .043$
- $F(4, 98) = 1.10, p = .363$

Step 2: Adding Cultural Awareness and Relatability

- $R^2 = .704$
- $\Delta R^2 = .661, p < .001$