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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Challenges of Social and Digital Media Engagement for Established Brands: A Rise of Crowd Culture

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this article is to take a closer look into the current brand management practices of leading MNCs around the world in a holistic way, specifically in digital and social media. There has been a massive interest from all marketing and advertising agencies to utilize the strength of social media in a conventional manner where the approach was to develop rich content by high-end media professionals and promote those content in the digital media with heavy budgets. But the conventional brand building strategies may not work as expected. The way people used to express their brand preferences has changed with the emergence of social and digital media. It is far easier now for customers to be united under any certain subject matter within a very short period of time by using many established communities. Their opinions and thoughts are well circulated and have a major effect on that specific subject or brand. Thus, the significance of branded content is on the decline. The inception of these crowd-based communities is pretty large, and they are doing a better job attracting followers much more efficiently than bigger brands do. The areas where brands are spending their promotional budget also need to be looked into. The conventional practice of spending only in the awareness stage and buy stage is not helping the brand like it used to do. More emphasis should be put on the stages after the actual purchase has been made, how the customers react, how they advocate for others and so forth. There is a need for a sustainable brand building strategy that will help established brands reap the benefits of digital and social media.

**KEYWORDS**

Brand Management, Crowd Culture, Digital Media, Marketing, Sustainable Strategy.

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### 1. Introduction

Brands have been around the world for thousands of years, and they have been evolving since inception. The concept of branding and its importance have been phenomenal in developing and implementing new products and services for any given market. The emergence of marketing orientation has even solidified the need for proper branding and brand based marketing engagements for long term customer stickiness. It has also given rise to much higher complexities and competition among brands. In this competitive and complex world, customers are facing too many choices with less time to select products or services (Keller et al., 2011).

The forceful involvement of social media in the whole brand-marketing ecosystem has changed the rule of the game in the last two decades. Social media are online applications, platforms and media which aim to facilitate interactions, collaborations and content (Richter et al., 2007). This platform or application can have different forms, including social blogs, rich content, weblogs, microblogging, wikis and so on. This emergence, noted by many scholars, has been inevitable as the advancements in

communication technology, both in hardware and software, paving the way for a smooth transition into a whole new world of social media where these phenomena dictate many aspects of consumers' decision making as well.

The introduction of social media has upended how customers interact and engage with brands. It is constantly changing the various economics of marketing and making obsolete many traditional strategies and structures (Edelman, 2010). Many marketers, traditionally doing business and lose sustainability. For instance, we can take the example of a consumer who is looking for a car for his use. In the traditional set up, we would have found that the buyer meets a few dealers who do his calculation regarding the purchase and, of course, regarding the available brands and what they have to offer. And ultimately makes the final purchase. The forces of conventional marketing and brand promises are still there, but the relationship between the buyer and the seller tends to dissipate over a while. Today, the scenario has changed dramatically. Customers are more engaged with their preferred brand, and they like to be associated with the brand as well in the long run. After purchase, these consumers may be actively and sometimes aggressively engaged with the brand that they have just purchased, and they continuously promote or demote it, collaborate in the brand's development and challenge and shape its meaning (Edelman, 2010).

Building a brand has become a vexing challenge in the social media era. Even ten years ago, it was considered the golden age of branding for most companies. They started to hire high end agencies and teamed up with techy marketers to insert their brand elements in the universe of digital media. Memes, viral, buzz, and stickiness became the lingua franca of branding. But despite all attention and excitement, all these efforts had very little to pay off.

There are two basic objectives of this study. Firstly, this article will try to understand the current brand building strategies practised around the world by different leading companies in social and digital media. The practices followed by the leading brands need to be evaluated and compared with other emerging crowd-based communities. Secondly, it is critical to understand what type of content is creating major engagements in social media.

### **1.1. New Challenge in Content Branding**

It's no secret that the advent of social media has had a significant impact on advertising strategies. Traditional, well-established methods of advertising are becoming less effective and may even hurt businesses (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013). As a result, there is a growing need to adapt one's grasp of social media and expand one's expertise to meet the demands of marketing in online communities (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013). Understanding the impact of their social media initiatives on key brand metrics has been a major problem for marketers (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

In order to examine this problem, this essay primarily uses the theoretical framework presented in the brand community literature. There is an important intersection between the ideas of brand community and social media. According to the literature (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz et al., n.d.), brand communities are gatherings of brand-loyal consumers in a setting shaped at least in part by the brand itself. Researchers and practitioners in the field of marketing began paying more and more attention to brand community behaviours over time. Simultaneously, the Internet's technologies matured into their present social manifestations. The communal and networked nature of social media provides strong support for the social aspects of brand communities, making them an ideal fit for today's digital sites. In addition to being a logical fit for brand communities, social media has recently been the subject of empirical research demonstrating the presence (Zaglia, 2013), quality, and distinctive features of brand communities inside social media platforms (Habibi et al., 2014).

Faced with a new kind of challenge as well as opportunity, the companies have heavily focused on digital and social media. One of the central concepts of this brand building strategy around social media was to generate branded content. The thinking behind this was to use social media and leapfrog conventional media by creating a direct relationship with the customers. If the companies could tell interesting stories backed up by quality content- the brand had to fly. Companies have also invested billions of dollars in this pursuit, but a real and meaningful outcome is yet to be achieved. However, only a few companies have successfully sparked the interest of online customers. In reality, it seems that the importance of brand is becoming threatened by these social platforms (Douglas Holt, "*Branding in the Age of Social Media*", Harvard Business Review March 2016 - Google Search, n.d.).

Brands have been looking for ways to infiltrate the social media network where there has been presumed to have a more engaging consumer base. Brands have made it their objective to gain a fair share of consumer attention and engagement (Habibi et al., 2014; Hanna et al., 2011).

Brand experts have insisted that content is the hot new thing in the digital world, but in a true sense, it is the relic of the mass media age which has been repackaged in the new digital concept. In the earlier approach, marketers used to use famous and popular themes to make their brands famous and win over the audience. This approach used to work great as the entertainment media were oligopolies. There were only three entertainment networks in the USA that made television programs for 30 weeks in

a year, and then they went for reruns. Films were distributed through local cinemas; magazine competitions were restricted to what fit on the shelves of the drugstores. All kinds of consumer goods companies relied on their ability to buy their places for their brands in a tightly controlled cultural arena.

Brands used to successfully infiltrate into popular entertainment shows and events and engage with their customers. Customers, on the other hand, had no other option but to rely on the big brands sponsoring mega events, popular TV shows or youth festivals.

The rise of new technologies that allow the audience to bypass advertisements and still could access their favourite programs have dramatically lessened the influence of the big brands. It has become very difficult for big brands to buy fame through conventional marketing practices. Now the companies had to fight with real entertainment. So, the big companies upped their ante. They started to hire top of the class film directors like Michael Bay, Spike Jonze, Michael Gondry and more to produce content with Hollywood-style special effects and quality. This early, pre-social-media period made the companies believe that if they could offer top quality content and feed into the media, they would rack up new and incremental customer engagement. This was the time when we saw a big push towards branded content. Big and established brands were not expecting new competition, and the new threat did not come from other media, but it came from within the society, from the very culture where we live in.

### **1.2. The upsurge of "crowd based culture" phenomena**

There has always been the influence of culture, but these influences flowed from the margins of society. Fringe groups and cultural movements have all challenged the mainstream conventions and norms in the past. But the big companies, with their rather better reach and monetary prowess, have diffused such movements. But the rise of social media has changed everything. Social media has the inherent feature of binding geographically remote cultures and crowds together, which were otherwise used to be widely dispersed and un-united. Social media has made these crowd based cultures densely networked, and their influence on culture has been substantial and direct. This new phenomenon has two features; subcultures, which nurture new ideologies and practices, and art worlds, which break new ground in entertainment (*Douglas Holt, "Branding in the Age of Social Media", Harvard Business Review March 2016 - Google Search, n.d.*). Now subcultures can be found over any topic that we can think of, from farming, pre-schooling, home décor, fishing, cricket, furniture, cooking, and fashion to scuba diving. In the pre social media age, these groups had to gather physically on a limited scale. But now, anyone interested in any topic can jump into the center of the conversation and make himself heard from any point of the world. This is a major shift in the process of consumer behaviour and attitude formation and the way consumers show their pre and post purchase behaviours. Secondly, producing innovative entertainment requires a new and distinctive type of organization, which the sociologists call the Art World. Now, the art world has also evolved to a greater extent. Musicians, film-makers, artists, and designers are now gathering in collaborative competition. They work together, help each other, learn from each other, share ideas and push one another. Funding is also no longer a problem when people have to work very hard for proper financing to get their work publicized. Now there are thousands of enthusiastic entrepreneurs who are eagerly waiting to work together online and compete to make hits.

### **1.3. The diminishing importance of Branded Content**

Companies used to put enormous importance on developing branded content that would stand out in the digital market place, but a new trend is seemingly taking shape. The rankings of the channels on YouTube and Instagram have shown that only a few big brands have ranked on the top 500 list. The list is overwhelmingly reigned by channels that are never heard of. PewDiePie, you tube's greatest success story, is all about a Swede who posts almost unedited video clips on the internet with a snarky voice about the video games that he plays. His channel has racked up an unprecedented 102 million subscribers on YouTube channel as of July 2017. But how could such a channel be a big hit is the biggest question. The answer lies in the fact that there has always been a subculture rooted in the genre of video games. When social media came into force, this subculture goes united with massive force. PewDiePie is just one example of such a channel; while there are numerous other channels on different topics and people with very limited resources are making much bigger buzz and more important engagements with specific target groups. If we look into recent data, we shall see similar gamers and others like VanosGaming (youtube rank # 19, 24.8 million subscribers, HolaSoyGerman (40.2 million subscribers), ElrubiusOMG (24.8 million), Smosh (25million), DudePerfect (47.8 million) and the list goes on. It is only the top that has been picked here; thousands of different channels are engaging far too successfully with their subscribers than many of the established brands. Gaming comedy is just one of the genres out there, and there we shall find channels that fill every imaginable entertainment gap that could exist, from fashion advice, education, fanboy sports criticism and so on. Brands are just unable to compete with these crowd based subcultures despite their heavy investment capabilities. McDonald's, which is one of the biggest spenders in social media, have only 2.5 million subscribers. PewDiePie is more than 200 times more popular for a minuscule fraction of the cost. Red Bull, one of the most successful sports brands that invest billions of dollars in extreme sports and rich content, has merely 6.1 million subscribers and is ranked at around #184. There are dozens of crowd-culture based YouTube channel which has more fan base with just around 100,000 USD equivalent of budget.

So, in social media, it is a tricky situation for the big brands as their conventional marketing efforts have failed to leverage the advantages of social media, which entities from different subcultures are enjoying.

## 2. Literature Review

Both academics and professionals are paying attention to the notion of engagement, as seen by the abundance of studies on the topic in marketing and social media journals (Hollebeek et al., 2019). Scholars are dedicated to extending the notion to new topics and situations, such as online communities, brands, communication messages, and the communication medium (Baldus et al., 2014; Calder et al., 2009; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Paruthi & Kaur, 2017). Professionals in this field are tasked with developing plans that will increase customer involvement with a company's products, services, or communities (Bowden et al., 2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

It has been observed that companies now have greater interests in fostering brand communities. There are a variety of crucial jobs that brand communities carry out on the company's behalf. Members of a brand community, for instance, may function much like a company's customer service department by resolving issues that other members of the community have had with the brand and helping one other out (Schau et al., 2009). They might be defenders of the brand's territory (Habibi et al., 2014) or evangelists who aim to create a good impression on newcomers to the brand (Schau et al., 2009). For this reason, and because they care about the brand's future, members of a brand community may be a great resource for new ideas and ways to enhance the product (Füller et al., 2008; von Hippel, 2005).

The term "social media" refers to "a set of Internet-based applications that expand upon the philosophical and technical tenets of Web 2.0 to facilitate the production and dissemination of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). User-generated content (UGC) is developed by consumers, is publicly accessible and distributable, contains some degree of inventiveness, and is not manufactured using professional content development techniques. By this definition, media like blogs, microblogs, video/photo sharing services, and social networks are available to customers around the clock (Harris, 2009).

The marketing industry was radically altered by Web 2.0 and user-generated content. Social media has become an integral part of how many businesses communicate with their clients, workers, and other interested parties, and these businesses consistently beat their competitors (Corstjens et al., 2012). Further, the rise of social media has altered consumer habits. Social media's most significant impact has been to give customers a louder voice in the marketplace by giving them a platform from which to directly engage with businesses (Fournier & Avery, 2011). What this means for marketers is that they should value every customer and every interaction with that consumer.

In a study done by Kim and Ko (2010), social media has a dramatic effect on a brand's reputation (Kim & Ko, 2010). One third of the survey participants posted their opinions regarding the product and service in the brand's blog, and 36% of them thought positively about the brand which has a blog. In a study by DEI Worldwide (2008), 70% of the customers visited social media sites to get product information, and 49% made a purchase decision based on the information they had on social media. The study also revealed that the companies that are not using social media as part of their marketing campaign are missing an opportunity to reach customers.

Another Info-graphics study reveals that at least 50% of Facebook and Twitter users say most of their conversations are related to the purchase or recommend a product after they have connected with the company on the digital platform. Businesses can promote their product and services online and create online communities of brand enthusiasts through various social networking sites, content communities, blogs, online gaming sites, news sites, forums and many more (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; "The New Community Rules: Marketing on the Social Web," 2011).

According to David Aaker and Joachimsthaler, in their article "The lure of global branding", most companies in the world are approaching the world as one global market and brand builders want to globalize their products in the world dimension (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999). They are enthusiastic about the success of different brands, but they are not aware of many inherent risks. According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler, making a global brand requires global leadership (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999). Global leadership will not come instantaneously; rather, it requires structures, processes and cultures to allocate brand building resources on a global scale. Four strategies can be undertaken to achieve global leadership. Firstly, companies need to stimulate and share insights and learnings from the best practices around the globe. They need to embrace change rather than staying away from it, saying, "it won't work here". Secondly, companies should take up a common brand planning process and consistency across markets and products. Thirdly, global managerial brand responsibilities should be aligned to fight local bias, and finally, companies need to build and execute excellent brand building strategies before entering the global market; otherwise, branding will just happen on its own, and it may easily fail or succeed without any control over it (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999).

According to Kornberger (2011), brands have made a meteoric rise in the recent past, and it wants to connect the organization with people (Kornberger, 2011). Nowadays, brands try to seduce us through consumerism and at the same time, they are also cultural forms which help us to express ourselves. H. Douglas says customers want to become the protagonist of their own lives, but at the same time, they want that the story should be written out for them. In that instance, as brands represent value rather than functionalities, they can support the phenomenon by supplying the stories they live (Douglas, 2002). So, they can turn products into social meanings and consumption into a social phenomenon (Kornberger, 2011).

As indicated by Zyman (1999), "Traditional marketing is not dying- it is dead" (Zyman 1999). And the ability to move the mass segment has been lost due to the engagement of technology. Technology has made it easy for consumers to be liberated in a way as they have many options to choose from. In order to find consumers' attention, the brands need to find ways to talk/relate to them in smaller groups rather than trying to engage a much bigger audience. A proper way of doing this could be to follow social networks (Zyman, 1999). A brand is now the image of what the consumers are saying about it, not what the advertisements agencies say it is. Now customers' viewpoints are shared and archived far and wide; it also helps to make informed decision making for future users. Branded content is no longer where the customers are getting information; rather, they have many other informal but reliable sources from where they can get objective opinions.

Branding has come to a point where it is almost impossible to convey all the customers' habits and expectations. So, we need to innovate. According to Conley (2009), true innovation is hard work. Now, customer feedback and suggestions are readily available. Instead of doing Branding, the companies should focus on *Brand Stewardship*. Brand stewardship can be defined as a continuous awareness of what the customers are saying about their products and services and what they need. With this information in hand, marketers are empowered to make innovations in their products and services and to substantiate their promises so that their reputation can be built over time.

In an article by David Court and three other colleagues published in the McKinsey Quarterly of June 2009 issue, they have developed a rather nuanced view of how consumers engage with brands (Edelman, 2010). They have developed a Customer Decision Journey (CDJ) by studying 20,000 customers in five different industries; mobile telecom, consumer electronics, skincare, automobile and insurance. The study revealed that customers were far from systematically narrowing down their choices; rather, they have taken a much more iterative and less reductive journey of four stages; consider, evaluate, buy and enjoy-advocate-bond. In the funnel metaphor model where there were many brands in the upper part of the funnel for consideration, but today, customers are driven by media and awash in choices, many times a reduced number of choices at the outset. The study also suggests that while doing media planning, marketers should focus on the stages in the decision journey instead of TV, radio, outdoor, digital and so forth. The analysis shows that a significant portion of the budget goes into consider and but stages, amounting to around 70% to 90% of the total marketing budget in advertising and retail promotions. It is deemed that more focus should be given to the **Evaluate** and **enjoy-advocate-bond** stages. In many instances, it has been found that a customer buys a product entirely on someone else's advocacy.

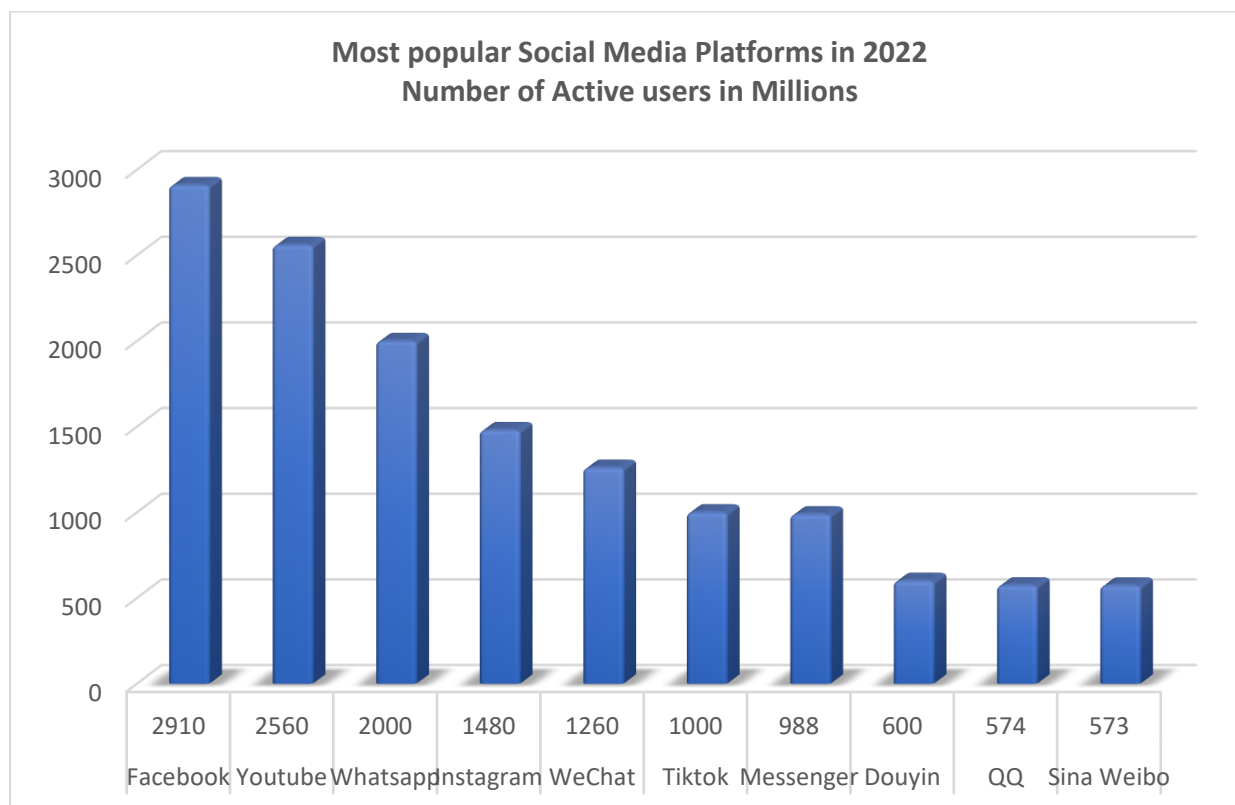
### **3. Data and Methodology**

Since the topic of discussion is hugely focused on the digital community, it is imperative we make our analysis based on secondary data. We went through data catered by various online research farms that analyzed data from various social media platforms in multiple categories.

#### **3.1. Analysis of Social Media Engagement: Brand, Artists and Influencers**

In the current context, subscription and viewer-wise leading social media are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.

**Figure 1:** Most popular Social Media Platforms in 2022



Since the context of this discussion is more focused on branded and non-branded content, more focus should be put on category wise customer/viewer engagements. The following table contains the top youtube channels as per subscribers.

**Table 1: Top YouTube channels as per subscribers**

	YouTube channel name	Subscriptions	Category
1.	T-Series	122,414,934	Music
2.	PewDiePie	102,923,230	Gaming
3.	Cocomelon	68,274,207	Kids Songs
4.	5-Minute Craft	63,015,289	DIY
5.	SET India	61,639,398	TV
6.	Canal KondZilla	54,21,803	Song writer/Music
7.	WWE	52,435,080	Wrestling/Entertainment
8.	Zee Music Company	48,010,913	Music/TV
9.	Dude Perfect	47,794,136	Game/Fun
10.	Justin Bieber	47,653,380	Artist/Singer
11.	Ed Shereen	43,050,909	Artist/Singer
12.	Like Nastya Vlog	42,839,808	Video Blogger

13.	Badabun	42,015,083	Spanish Channel	Entertainment
14.	Marshmello	41,801,843	Artist/Singer	
15.	Kids Diana Show	41,677,993	Young Youtuber	
16.	HolaSoyGerman	40,198,826	Comedian	
17.	Eminem Music	40,105,418	Artist/Singer	
18.	Ariana Grande	39,206,139	Artist/Singer	
19.	Zee TV	39,153,670	TV	
20.	Whinderssonnunes	37,903,671	Comedian	

**\*As of December 2019 (cross platform)**

The table is a depiction of only the top 20 YouTube channels. It is important to note here that the top positions are mostly taken by individual performers and channels that are similarly related to music and entertainment. We also analyzed the top 50 YouTube channels in December 2019, and the trend remains the same. No consumer brands have made it to the top 50 positions in the list.

We have analyzed the relative view and engagement of some top Brands with individual Youtubers on the YouTube channel. The finding is given below:

**Table 2: View and engagement of some top Brands with individual YouTubers.**

<b>Brands</b>	<b>YouTube view/month</b>	<b>Influencer/Individuals</b>	<b>YouTube view/month</b>
<b>YouTube Music</b>	505,938,210	<b>Like Nastya Vlog</b>	2,050,520,386
<b>Google India</b>	262,606,039	<b>Kids Diana Show</b>	1,487,500,928
<b>Red Bull</b>	20,564,713	<b>Vlad and Nikita</b>	963,144,911
<b>Coca-Cola</b>	159,580,718	<b>Ryan’s World</b>	915,969,781

\*November 2019, Source: [www.tubularlabs.com](http://www.tubularlabs.com)

The above chart is a depiction of an obvious triumph of non-branded contents over branded contents. Engagement of Branded contents is far lower than that of the YouTubers in their separate categories.

**4. Findings of the Study**

The study shows an overwhelming advantage of the non-branded contents that have secured a position in social media in attracting and engaging target audiences. Analyzing the content of these non-branded channels provided an important category of choice for customers. The categories that are hitting the top line are mostly entertainment. If analyzed further, we can conclude entertainment has various sections like fun, comedy, prank, gaming demonstration, toy reviews, etc. Another part of the entertainment that has branded contents comes from different artists and superstars, predominantly from the Music industry, and relatively the leading TV channels are also somewhat connected to music and popular TV shows. So, to conclude, current social and digital media engagements are highly led by crowd cultures and their respective interest categories, not based on established brands.

**5. Limitations of the Study**

Social media engagement calculation is highly technology dependent. The relative comparison of branded and non-branded content in this literature is prepared based on simple observation. Some web-based analysis sites have been consulted. The authenticity of their analysis can be questioned as primary data could not be gathered due to tech limitations. However, the data was presented in line with the overall content leadership of the respective YouTube channels.

## 6. Conclusion

The study tried to reflect on the current brand management practices followed by the different established brands and their outcomes. It has been evident that conventional brand building activities have not been up to the mark compared to the evolution of the current marketplace. With the inception of digital technology coupled with social media applications, the paradigm of marketing has changed significantly. We have seen how relatively unknown or lesser known individuals have used social media much more efficiently than many established brands in accumulating formidable followers. Furthermore, consumers are more united than ever before as they have created different communities that evolve around their chosen brands. These communities have a significant role to play in brand building and brand advocacy. The study has identified major online content makers on youtube and pointed to the fact that how these types of communities are dwarfing the efforts of established brands in terms of engagement. Due to technological reasons, in-depth engagement-related data on these communities could not be established. More studies can be done on the content creators and the influencers who are engaging millions of fans on social media. More research can be done to understand the mechanism by which these content creators make positive consumer engagements.

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