

# ***Leveraging Social Media Marketing: A Case Study of Starbucks' Digital Success***

**Yixuan Zhu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>School of Sociology, University of Bristol, Bristol, The United Kingdom, BS8 1TH*

*a. ar21112@bristol.ac.uk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** With the development of communication technologies like social media, consumption has fundamentally changed. This study examines the impact of the digital and social environment on consumer behavior and business practices by analyzing Starbucks' successful practices in social media marketing. The study finds that Starbucks has effectively increased brand awareness and customer engagement on major social platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook through high-quality content marketing, collaborations with online celebrities and active user engagement strategies. Starbucks communicates brand values through visual storytelling and builds a strong customer community with user-generated content and interactive activities. The findings suggest that companies in the retail and restaurant industries can learn from Starbucks' experience to enhance emotional connections with customers and brand loyalty by maintaining transparency, building communities, collaborating with web admins, and creating visual content. This study is an important reference for industry practices, emphasizing the importance of continuous innovation in the rapidly changing social media landscape.

**Keywords:** Social Media Marketing, Brand Engagement, Digital Strategy

## **1. Introduction**

The emergence of new communication technologies, particularly the Internet and social media, has fundamentally changed how individuals communicate, interact, and consume [1]. Social media is a platform where user-generated content (UGC) and Web 2.0 technologies are combined [2]. Traditional media, such as television and radio, all present technology in one direction, whereas social media provides a different perspective. It is easy for anyone to produce and publish different content that can be viewed in large numbers across multiple social media platforms. Social media marketing enables two-way communication between businesses and their customers, which contributes to building loyalty beyond traditional branding [2]. Moreover, companies benefit from increased brand awareness, recognition, and customer engagement through social media marketing [3, 4]. It can be stated that social media has completely transformed the business marketing landscape, offering unprecedented prospects for businesses to engage with their target customers [5]. An increasing number of companies are integrating it into their strategy for development. Starbucks, the largest coffee shop company in the world, is well-known for its creative strategy for social media marketing and maintains an extensive digital presence across Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

Therefore, this study contributes to the development of marketing theory by analyzing social media marketing through the successful case study of Starbucks, explaining how the digital and social environment influences consumer behavior and business practices and providing valuable insights into how businesses optimize online images and marketing efforts. Firstly, this study will introduce specific information about Starbucks. The second aim will be to analyze the reasons for the success of Starbucks' social media marketing, which includes content marketing, influencer partnerships and engagement strategies. Finally, based on the analysis results, this study will focus on management recommendations from which the retail or restaurant industry can learn. This study is highly relevant to understanding how to use social marketing to build a successful company brand.

## 2. Case Description

Starbucks has become one of the world's largest and best-known coffee chains, with tens of thousands of shops in over 80 countries. Starbucks had evolved into a global cultural phenomenon by the late 1990s and early 2000s [6]. Starbucks maintains a strong social media influence through its activities on various social platforms and attractive social media profiles. Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook are the three main social media platforms on which Starbucks is mostly active. Starbucks distinguishes itself from rivals such as Costa and Cafe Coffee Day by knowing its target market sufficiently that all of its social media operations are directed toward particular demographics.

Starbucks began engaging in social media in 2008, launching official Facebook and Twitter accounts. Starbucks shares longer material, including blog posts, videos, and event announcements, on its 35 million-fan Facebook fan page. Starbucks has more than 10 million followers on Twitter, which has a slightly older user base than Instagram, consisting of a mix of Millennials, Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. Their Twitter audience is mostly interested in promotions, information about new products and social media campaigns, and updates on trending topics and current events. Starbucks' Instagram account reaches 17 million followers, and the majority of the platform's users are young adults and millennials, they utilize Generation Z. Instagram to present a variety of updates that highlight their products, promotions, and community engagement program. Starbucks' social media relationships are instrumental in achieving its marketing goals by fostering brand awareness, driving engagement, promoting products, enhancing the customer experience, and supporting its corporate social responsibility initiatives.

## 3. Case Analysis

### 3.1. Content Marketing

Starbucks uses social media content marketing to interact with its target demographic, foster brand loyalty, and enhance sales. Content marketing is a strategic approach that produces beneficial, relevant material to attract and retain a particular target group and eventually encourage profitable consumer behavior [7]. This strategy involves various content types and topics tailored to each platform's unique characteristics and audience preferences.

Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing social media application launched in 2010, and it has 2 billion active users monthly. The age group of 18 to 34 constitutes roughly 64% of these active users. Companies need to ensure that every Instagram post reflects their personality authentically to attract younger customers [8]. Starbucks leverages the highly visual nature of Instagram to share high-quality images and videos about its food, ingredients, and in-store experience. As a result, aesthetic appeal is critical on Instagram, a platform that requires carefully composed shots to highlight Starbucks's seasonal themes, new product launches, and customer moments. Starbucks updates more dynamic material, such as behind-the-scenes videos, tutorials, and user-generated content, on Instagram using additional functions, including Stories and Reels.

Secondly, Twitter is a convenient channel for customer service because of its interactive characteristics and 550 million monthly active users. Starbucks responds to customer requests and shares real-time updates and promotions with its Twitter followers. The conversational nature of the platform allows Starbucks to engage in trending topics and interact directly with customers, fostering a sense of community and immediacy. On average, they tweet 155 times daily, with 99 percent being customer replies. Starbucks consistently engages its fans with comments every hour, which could significantly humanize the brand [9]. An example is the Tweet-a-Coffee campaign. The campaign encourages users to send \$5 gift cards to friends via Twitter by tagging @tweetacoffee and their friend's ID. The campaign produced \$180,000 in sales in only one month. Nearly 37,000 gift cards were bought by more than 27,000 distinct individuals. Of those who bought gift cards, 34% bought several, and 32% purchased on the first day. Starbucks was satisfied with the large amount of data it learned about its consumers during the process and the rise in revenue - 54,000 people's Twitter accounts were connected to their accounts. It enables the business to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of its clientele's demographics and spending patterns.

Finally, Starbucks prioritizes fostering a sense of community and posts longer content on Facebook, such as articles on their involvement in the community, sustainability initiatives, and employee highlights. Posts about events, blogs, and videos are frequent and enable more in-depth interaction with a larger audience. Customers are encouraged to share their images and stories about their interactions with Starbucks products on all its social media pages, and the company frequently reposts these postings on its main page. UGC provides authenticity since customers post it with real thoughts and experiences. Customers are highly motivated to buy a product when they witness others using and recommending it. This increases the message of the Starbucks brand's influence and popularity. In addition, consumers form emotional connections when they perceive themselves as valued, heard, and a part of a greater community.

### 3.2. Influencer Partnership

By collaborating with influencers, Starbucks efficiently raises brand awareness and engagement on several social media platforms. By partnering with influencers, Starbucks extends its reach to new audiences and benefits from the influencer's credibility and influence over its online audience. These partners not only create Starbucks-related content, but they also build a sense of community and support the company's overall branding. Starbucks' #RedCupArt campaign featured a limited edition red cup decorated with 13 paintings created by customers worldwide in 2016. They invite customers to enter the store, select a simple red Christmas mug, and create artwork. Starbucks' widely followed social media accounts may show the artwork when it is posted on Instagram and Twitter with the hashtag #RedCupArt.

Starbucks contacts a few influencers and asks them to express themselves on a holiday cup to assist in launching the social campaign. Self-taught illustrator Heather Rooney is a well-known YouTuber with over a million subscribers. 64% of her audience is highly involved in drawing, art, and design. Portland-born artist Sam Larson is a fascinating artist. His passion for painting coffee cups is evident from his early social media posts; over one-third of his viewers are artists. Pinot Ichwandardi is a famous animator. The vast majority of his audience enjoys animation, sketching, and painting. Lettering artist Kelly Klapstein receives tens of millions of views on her Instagram feed with lettering videos.

It is argued that Starbucks made a wise decision when choosing its influencers. They are mindful of influencers with pertinent knowledge, particularly those with vibrant networks for illustration, painting, and graphic design [10]. These influencers' posts generated 90K engagements and 3.1 million views. Furthermore, Starbucks collaborates with micro-influencers to market its well-known pumpkin spice latte. At Pumpkin Spice Latte events, influencers share their tales and experiences,

frequently incorporating them into their regular routines or seasonal celebrations. With a smaller but highly engaged following, micro-influencers are valued for their authenticity and strong connection to their audience, which helps Starbucks cultivate a sense of authenticity and trust with its customers. Impactful campaigns can spark consumer interest and increase sales, especially during product launches or special events. Meanwhile, Starbucks collaborated with celebrities to take advantage of their massive followings to promote new product launches and brand messaging to run a comprehensive campaign and reach a wider audience. For example, Starbucks and Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation partnered to create the Cups of Kindness campaign in 2017. For every drink purchased during the campaign, Starbucks will donate 25 cents.

### 3.3. Engagement Strategy

Starbucks encourages community and customer loyalty by actively interacting with its customers on social media. The notion of marketing engagement is a familiar one. Wang et al. believe that in a dynamic and interactive company setting, engaging customers is crucial for enhancing corporate performance, leading to higher sales and a competitive edge. Companies with engaged consumers jointly generate value and experiences [11]. Starbucks actively engages with its followers through two-way conversations via social media, answering questions, resolving issues, and praising favorable comments. Within Starbucks' online community, this personalized approach cultivates a sense of value and belonging. It also allows the brand to collect insightful feedback and enhance its products based on consumer preferences. For instance, Starbucks invited patrons to vote for their preferred beverages during its "Vote for Joy" contest (#VoteForJoy) 2014. On a given date, the drink garnered the most votes would be eligible for a 50% discount. The Starbucks account promptly responded to a user's inquiry on voting for their preferred beverage by providing a link to the survey. Polls, surveys, and interactive posts are applied to engage followers and encourage participation and feedback. This not only engages consumers but also provides valuable suggestions for their companies. "My Starbucks Idea" is a campaign promoted by Starbucks using Twitter to encourage fans to submit and vote on new product and service ideas.

Moreover, Starbucks recognizes the value of establishing a sense of community among its virtual customers. In 2019, Starbucks launched Starbucks Stories, a content platform that tells stories about the brand's social impact. For example, the "Being Human" series included the personal stories and video pictures of Starbucks employees. This emphasizes the company's human side and strengthens its bond with customers. During Pride Month, Starbucks launches the #ExtraShotOfPride campaign. It features reusable cups in a rainbow of colors and partners with the Born This Way Foundation. The campaign shares positive stories and offers services for charity donations to encourage widespread participation while showcasing Starbucks' authentic support for the LGBTQ+ community.

## 4. Suggestions

Starbucks is a master at maintaining transparency and authenticity on social media. They share various content on their social media platforms, emphasizing their commitment to social responsibility and engaging in authentic dialogue with their customers. This authenticity resonates with customers and helps build trust in the brand. Other brands can follow this approach by demonstrating their brand values, sharing stories about their products or services, and being transparent about their business practices.

Starbucks actively engages with its followers on social media to create a sense of community among its customers. They have cultivated a loyal community by quickly responding to comments, solving customer problems, and encouraging user-generated content with interactive activities. Other

businesses can similarly create communities around their products by focusing on online activities and brand promotions, conducting polls, and promoting follower interaction.

Starbucks works with influencers and celebrities to engage new audiences and expand its social media reach. They have successfully increased their credibility and reach by collaborating with influencers who share the brand's ideals. Retail and food brands identify influencers in their niche and explore strategic partnerships to expand their online visibility and attract new customers.

Starbucks engages customers on social media using visual storytelling. Starbucks produces visually appealing content, from appealing product imagery to movies demonstrating barista talents. Other businesses can create visual content to highlight their goods, tell a distinctive brand story, and engage their audience emotionally.

## 5. Conclusion

For most social media users, Starbucks is one of the most well-known and successful coffee brands worldwide. Starbucks effectively communicates with customers by utilizing the distinct functions of each platform. Starbucks maintains a visually consistent and engaging brand image and behind-the-scenes storytelling on Instagram. It also prioritizes customer satisfaction on Twitter by responding to complaints promptly and delivering a positive experience. Facebook was used as a platform for sharing user-generated content to guide customers to participate in discussions and demonstrate dedication to customer service. Collaborating with influencers is another successful factor for Starbucks, with a diverse range of influencer types (celebrities and micro-influencers), platform diversity, and the planning of high-engagement campaigns designed to strengthen the brand's reach and create a sincere bond with customers. Starbucks' social media followers exhibit high brand loyalty and a sense of community because of the company's engagement strategy. Marketers in retail and food industries can learn from Starbucks' effective social marketing approach that prioritizes authenticity, develops community engagement, and explores impactful partnerships to build meaningful connections with consumers and drive brand growth. It will be vital for even successful companies such as Starbucks to continue to innovate and adapt to the constantly changing landscape of social media marketing in the future.

## References

- [1] Mahoney, L. M., & Tang, T. (2024). *Strategic social media: From marketing to social change*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [2] Alves, H., Fernandes, C., & Raposo, M. (2016). *Social Media Marketing: A Literature Review and Implications*. *Psychology & Marketing*, 33(12), 1029-1038.
- [3] Jaitly, R. C., & Gautam, O. (2021). *Impact of social media influencers on customer engagement and brand perception*. *International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising*, 15(2), 220-242.
- [4] Bilgin, Y. (2018). *The effect of social media marketing activities on brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty*. *Business & management studies: an international journal*, 6(1), 128-148.
- [5] Lupo, C., & Stroman, J. R. (2020). *Social media marketing adoption strategies: An exploratory multiple case study of landscape industry small businesses*. *Journal of Social, Behavioral, and Health Sciences*, 14(1), 211-220.
- [6] Sam, C., & Cai, Y. (2015). *A Study on the Use of Social Media to Understand Consumer Preference: The Case of Starbucks*. *Int. J. Manag. Bus. Res*, 5(3), 207-214.
- [7] Lou, C., & Xie, Q. (2020). *Something social, something entertaining? How digital content marketing augments consumer experience and brand loyalty*. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(3), 1-27.
- [8] Plessis, C. (2017). *The role of content marketing in social media content communities*. *SA Journal of Information Management*, 19(1).
- [9] Taecharungroj, V. (2016). *Starbucks' marketing communications strategy on Twitter*. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 23(6), 552-571.
- [10] Ye, G., Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). *The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business: A Bibliometric Analysis and Managerial Implications*. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(2), 160-178.

- [11] Wang, Y., Qiao, F., & Peng, W. (2015). *Is the Size or the Valence of Proactive Engagement Associated with Purchase Intention? A Case Study of Branded Blogs of Starbucks*. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(3), 197–216.