

Received: May 2023 Accepted: June 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58262/ks.v11i02.207>

The Impact of Communication via Social Networks on Brand Value: A Case Study of Ecotourism Destinations in the Mekong Delta Region

Hong Minh Ngoc Tran¹, Anh Nguyen Thi Van², Yen Vu Hai³

Abstract

This research aims to investigate the relationship between social media communication and brand value in ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region. The research model integrates Smith's (2007) Beehive Model and the framework proposed by Bruno Godey et al. (2016), focusing on five independent variables: entertainment, interaction, trends, relationships, and sharing. The model evaluates their impact on brand value and has been tested on a substantial sample of 300 participants engaged in an online survey. The research methodology involves assessing the reliability of the measurement scale using Cronbach's alpha, conducting exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for variable extraction, and testing hypotheses through a multiple linear regression model. The carefully selected sample size of 300 respondents yielded 167 valid responses. The model fit assessment revealed an adjusted R-squared value of 0.572, indicating a robust relationship between independent variables and brand value. Each independent variable exhibited a positive effect, with interaction being the most influential factor. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of social media communication on brand value in the context of eco-tourism. The chosen research model and methodology provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing these dynamics. The findings emphasize the significant role of social networks in shaping brand perceptions in eco-tourism destinations, offering valuable insights for practitioners and researchers in the field.

Keywords: Social media, brand value, ecotourism, mekong delta, vietnam

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, the landscape of global tourism has undergone a profound transformation, largely attributable to the pervasive influence of social media. As platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become integral aspects of daily life, they have concurrently emerged as powerful tools shaping perceptions, preferences, and decision-making processes across various domains. In the context of the tourism industry, social media's impact is particularly pronounced, with travelers increasingly relying on digital platforms to discover, evaluate, and share their experiences. This paradigm shift is especially pertinent in the realm of ecotourism, a sector that places a premium on sustainable practices and immersive natural experiences. Against this backdrop, the Mekong Delta region stands as an intriguing case study, known for its unique ecological

¹ Faculty of Business Administration, FPT University, Can Tho Campus, Vietnam. Email: NgocTHM@fe.edu.vn

² Faculty of Business Administration, FPT University, Can Tho Campus, Vietnam. Email: AnhNTV1111@fe.edu.vn

³ Faculty of Business Administration, FPT University, Can Tho Campus, Vietnam. Email: Yenvhcs150794@fpt.edu.vn

landscapes and commitment to fostering ecotourism initiatives.

The significance of brand value, representing the overall value and perception of a brand, is accentuated in the tourism sector where intangible factors such as destination image and reputation play a pivotal role in attracting visitors. As social media facilitates real-time sharing of experiences, opinions, and recommendations, it becomes imperative to understand its implications on brand value, specifically in the context of ecotourism destinations. This study seeks to delve into the intricate dynamics between social media and brand value, examining how digital platforms contribute to the construction and dissemination of brand images for ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region. As the scholarly discourse on the subject is evolving, it is essential to build upon existing research and contribute nuanced insights. Previous studies have explored the impact of social media on tourism, emphasizing the role of user-generated content and online reviews in influencing travelers' perceptions. For instance, Smith and Johnson (2020) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between online reviews and destination image, highlighting the significance of authenticity and experiential narratives in shaping tourists' expectations. Drawing on this foundation, our research aims to extend these insights into the specific domain of ecotourism destinations within the Mekong Delta region.

In addition to academic endeavors, industry reports and case studies provide valuable practical insights into the intersection of social media and brand value in the tourism sector. Notably, a report by the World Tourism Organization (2021) underscores the increasing importance of digital marketing and social media strategies for destination management organizations, emphasizing the need for a cohesive online presence to enhance brand visibility and competitiveness. Our study aligns with these perspectives but adopts a focused lens on ecotourism destinations, recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting sustainable and nature-based travel experiences. By adopting a case study approach centered on the ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region, this research aspires to offer a nuanced understanding of how social media dynamics influence brand value in the context of sustainable tourism. Through empirical investigation and analysis, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse on digital communication, tourism management, and sustainable practices, ultimately providing actionable insights for both academics and practitioners in the field.

2. Theoretical Background

Social media

Social media refers to online applications, platforms, and communication channels designed to facilitate interactions, collaboration, and information sharing (Richter & Koch, 2007). According to Kim and Ko (2010a), social media can significantly impact the reputation of a brand. Therefore, corporations and brands now must consider both customer value and the influence of social media on their operations.

Social networking

When defining social networking sites (SNS), Ellison and Boyd (2007) describe them as web-based services enabling individuals to create profiles, connect with others, search, and share information within the system. The term "social network site" is commonly used to describe this phenomenon, and the term "social networking sites" is also prevalent. However,

"networking" is less emphasized as it focuses solely on establishing relationships between strangers. Networking is one of the activities on SNS but is not the primary goal. The distinctive feature of SNS is the ability for users to maintain their social networks, connecting individuals who might not interact offline.

Brand value

Brand value is a widely studied concept globally, with various perspectives and evaluations from the consumer's standpoint. Aaker's definition (1996) is commonly used and accepted, emphasizing that brand value encompasses all assets associated with the brand name and symbol, adding value to a product or service for the business or its customers. Customer-based brand equity (CBE) is the value customers receive from a branded product or service beyond what they would get from an unbranded one. This value may surpass the price difference between a branded and unbranded product, as customers may be willing to pay more for a branded product.

Customer assets go beyond individual transaction profits to the overall profitability a customer can provide throughout their relationship with the company (Kumar & George, 2007). Customers are considered intangible assets that need acquiring, maintaining, and maximizing, similar to other financial assets (Blattberg et al., 2001). Customer assets, often identified as the total existing value of a customer, are deemed the most decisive factor in a company's long-term value (Kim et al., 2010; Lemon et al., 2001). Lemon et al. (2001) identified three factors of customer assets: value, relationship, and brand.

Value assets represent the customer's objective assessment of the brand's benefits, based on their perceptions of what is received compared to what is given (Vogel et al., 2008). The three primary points about value assets are quality, price, and convenience (Lemon et al., 2001). Relationship assets indicate a customer's inclination to maintain a relationship with a brand beyond objective and subjective evaluations. Brand assets reflect the subjective and non-material assessment of the brand exceeding its perceived value (Kim et al., 2008; Lemon et al., 2001). A strong brand creates a positive image and helps customers differentiate it from competitors (Keller, 1998).

The relationship between social media and brand value

The relationship between social media and brand value is a well-researched area worldwide, yet it remains relatively unexplored, especially in Vietnam. Notable studies in this field include Godey et al. (2016), which analyzed pioneering brands in the luxury industry through surveys of 845 customers following these brands on social media in China, France, India, and Italy. The study established a linear structural model of brand value through social media, revealing positive and significant relationships between promotional efforts, social media communication, and brand outcomes (brand preferences, pricing, and loyalty). Karamian (2015) demonstrated the positive impact of marketing communication through social media on brand value and perceived quality. Kim (2012) identified social media attributes and examined their relationship with brand value through a linear structural model, finding positive effects of social media on brand value, relationship assets, and customer value. Hanaysha (2016) evaluated the effectiveness of advertising on social media on brand value in the fast-food restaurant industry, showing a significant positive impact on all aspects of brand value. Le Thuy Huong et al. (2017) studied the influence of social media activities on brand value from the consumer's perspective, confirming significant impacts on brand perception, brand recognition, and brand loyalty.

In conclusion, while social media is a relatively recent phenomenon, its tremendous and continuous growth has garnered significant attention. However, research on the influence of social media on brand value is still limited, particularly in the Vietnamese context. Various studies have shown positive and substantial impacts, emphasizing the need for businesses to leverage social media to enhance their brand value.

The beehive model by Smith (2007)

The Smith (2007) beehive model serves as the foundational framework in this study to analyze the use of social media communication and its functions on brand assets, with David A. Aaker's (1996) brand asset model employed as the dependent variables (Aaker, D. A., 1996, Smith, G., 2007). The beehive model, encompassing seven blocks, is employed to dissect the operations of social media software: Identity, Presence, Relationships, Reputation, Groups, Conversations, and Sharing.

The first block, Identity, gauges the extent to which social media users disclose their identity or personal information, such as name, age, gender, and profession on the platform. Additionally, users tend to express emotions, personal opinions, likes, or dislikes (Kietzmann, J. H. et al., 2013).

The second block, Presence, reveals users' ability to recognize others' online activities. In the context of social media, presence can be observed through status updates and/or location updates using the "check-in" feature. Platforms like Instagram allow users to showcase their location after posting a photo on their timeline, utilizing the "check-in" feature, indicating their specific location (Babac, R., 2011).

The third block, Relationships, illustrates the degree to which social media users can connect with others. On Instagram, relationships can be formed through mutual following. A user can follow a specific account to receive updates, as well as accept follow requests from others to connect with them. Additionally, maintaining relationships can be achieved through tagging and regramming other users (Babac, R., 2011, Liuski, E., 2012).

The fourth block, Reputation, demonstrates social media users' ability to assess others' behavior through their history. Reputation is built based on electronic word-of-mouth through the internet. Positive electronic word-of-mouth enhances a business's reputation. Electronic word-of-mouth is expressed through comments, endorsements from other social media users, followers, and opinions from influencers. Reputation can also be observed through the number of likes, followers on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as the thumbs-up or thumbs-down and view count on YouTube (Kietzmann, J. H. et al., 2013).

The fifth block, Groups, signifies the extent to which social media users can form communities on the platform. Social media platforms have developed features to manage members. Groups can take two forms: Self-created groups and Private groups. Self-created groups are formed by users, such as lists of family members, fans, and friends on their accounts. On the other hand, private groups are typically associated with the real world, requiring approval or invitation by a group administrator. Through this feature, social media users can share specific content only with members of a selected group (Kietzmann, J. H. et al., 2013).

The sixth block, Conversations, reflects social media users' tendency to engage in two-way communication with other users on the platform. Users participate in conversations for various purposes. In this study, the authors aim to measure the use of conversations and their functions on Instagram, including comments, mentions, and direct messaging. Conversations can occur

through user comments and the use of Instagram Direct to communicate directly with selected users (Babac, R., 2011).

The seventh block, Sharing, indicates social media users' inclination to share, receive, and exchange content online on the platform. Essentially, using social media and its functions involves sharing, with specific shared content including text, links, images, audio, and videos (Keller, L.K., 2013). In essence, all activities on this platform are related to sharing various types of content.

From an overview of existing studies, the author combines the research models of Bruno Godey et al. (2016) and The Beehive Model by Smith (2007) to construct a research model that can complement each other. Consequently, the author develops a proposed research model consisting of five independent variables representing five aspects of social media communication: entertainment, interaction, trends, relationships, and sharing. The author proposes the following research hypotheses:

H1: Entertainment has a positive impact on consumers' perception of the brand value of eco-tourism destinations in the Mekong Delta Region.

H2: Interaction has a positive impact on consumers' perception of the brand value of eco-tourism destinations in the Mekong Delta Region.

H3: Trends has a positive impact on consumers' perception of the brand value of eco-tourism destinations in the Mekong Delta Region.

H4: Relationships has a positive impact on consumers' perception of the brand value of eco-tourism destinations in the Mekong Delta Region.

H5: Sharing has a positive impact on consumers' perception of the brand value of eco-tourism destinations in the Mekong Delta Region.

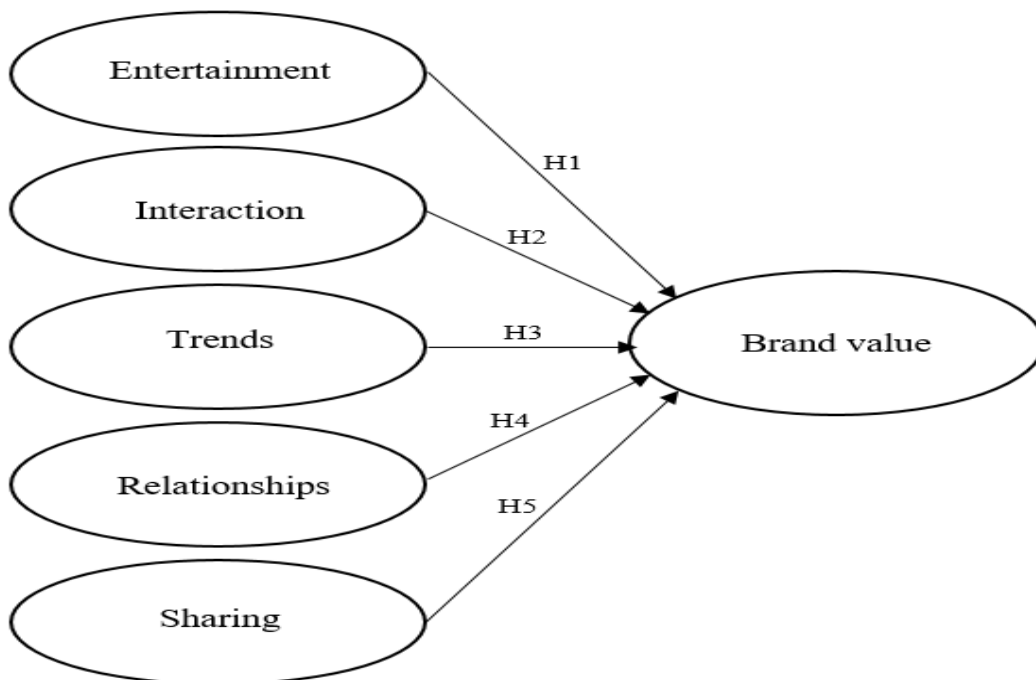


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Research Method

The research team employed a causal research method to analyze the impact of communication via social networks on brand value, aiming to examine the relationship between independent and dependent variables. Primary data was collected through an online survey questionnaire distributed to tourists who were aware of and had booked tours to eco-tourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region, with the assistance of several travel companies in Can Tho City and Kien Giang. A total of 300 survey samples were conducted, and 167 valid responses were collected and utilized. The reliability of the measurement scale was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and hypotheses were tested using a multiple linear regression model.

4. Research Results

The measurement of Cronbach's alpha values for the observed variables comprising each variable indicated that all observed variables met the standards, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.75 or higher. Additionally, within each group, the variable-to-total correlation coefficients all achieved values of 0.3 or higher. This confirms that the measurement scale of the extracted factors from the observed variables is appropriate and reliable. Therefore, these variable groups can be used in the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) steps.

Table 1: Results of Reliability Analysis

Factor	Cronbach's alpha Coefficient	Minimum Total correlation coefficient
Entertainment	0.757	0.496
Interaction	0.764	0.521
Trends	0.883	0.674
Relationships	0.835	0.518
Sharing	0.827	0.567
Brand value	0.816	0.682

The study conducted the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's tests to assess whether the research sample is large and conditions are sufficient for factor analysis. The test results yielded a KMO value of 0.928 (> 0.5) and a p-value of Bartlett's test = 0.00 (< 0.05), indicating that the observed variables in the overall sample are correlated with each other. Thus, it can be concluded that the survey data meets the conditions for conducting exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Based on the results, all factors had factor loading coefficients > 0.5 , demonstrating a close relationship between the factors and variables. The rotated factor results for the five groups showed no variable changes within the groups and were named as follows:

Factor Group 1: Relationships (REL: REL1 – REL4).

Factor Group 2: Trends (TRE: TRE1 – TRE5).

Factor Group 3: Interaction (INT: INT1 – INT5).

Factor Group 4: Entertainment (ENT: ENT1 – ENT4).

Factor Group 5: Sharing (SHA: SHA1 – SHA4).

Table 2: Exploratory factor analysis results

Variables	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
ENT1				0.657	
ENT2				0.758	
ENT3				0.72	
ENT4				0.559	
INT1			0.707		
INT2			0.638		
INT3			0.637		
INT4			0.652		
INT5			0.708		
TRE1		0.514			
TRE2		0.655			
TRE3		0.718			
TRE4		0.586			
TRE5		0.565			
REL1	0.728				
REL2	0.763				
REL3	0.641				
REL4	0.552				
SHA1					0.732
SHA2					0.548
SHA3					0.667
SHA4					0.741
	KMO			0.928	
	Total Variance Explained			68.84%	

The results of the model fit assessment (Table 3) show an adjusted R-squared value of 0.572. Therefore, the independent variables included in the model explain 57.21% of the variation in the dependent variable, brand value. The F-test result indicates a P-value of 0.000, ensuring the reliability of this relationship with a significance level of 5%. Thus, it can be concluded that the independent variables influence brand value, and the multiple linear regression model fits the dataset and is usable. The results of the multicollinearity test, examining the variance inflation factor (VIF) for the independent variables in the model, all have values less than 2. Therefore, the multicollinearity of the independent variables is negligible, and the variables in the model are acceptable. The regression analysis results (Table 3) show that all five independent variables significantly impact brand value, with P-values less than 0.05, and all five independent variables have a positive effect. Among them, interaction is the factor with the most significant impact on the brand value of ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region. Following in order are entertainment, sharing, relationships, and trends.

Table 3: The results of the linear regression model

Factor	Standardized coefficient	P-value	VIF	Result
Entertainment	0.229	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Interaction	0.273	0.028	1.000	Accepted
Trends	0.134	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Relationships	0.177	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Sharing	0.185	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Adjusted R square		57.21		

P-value	0.000
Durbin - Watson	1.881

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of this study provide valuable insights into the intricate relationship between communication via social networks and brand value, specifically within the unique context of ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region. The findings, as evidenced by the model fit assessment, emphasize the significant impact of Interaction, Entertainment, Sharing, Relationships, and Trends on brand value, collectively explaining 57.21% of its variation. However, these revelations also come with their own set of challenges and limitations that should be considered for a more nuanced interpretation.

One of the key takeaways from this research is the paramount importance of Interaction in shaping the brand value of ecotourism destinations. As the most influential factor identified, stakeholders in the tourism industry should leverage this insight to devise strategies that foster meaningful and interactive experiences on social media platforms. Encouraging user-generated content, facilitating online conversations, and creating immersive digital campaigns can contribute to enhancing brand value. Moreover, capitalizing on the positive effects of Entertainment, Sharing, Relationships, and Trends can further strengthen destination branding efforts. Implementing targeted initiatives that align with these factors can create a more holistic and engaging brand narrative.

However, as with any study, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations that may impact the generalizability and applicability of the findings. One notable limitation is the reliance on self-reported data obtained through an online survey. This method introduces the potential for response bias, as participants may provide answers that align with perceived social norms. To mitigate this limitation in future research, employing diverse data collection methods, such as interviews or observational studies, could offer a more comprehensive and objective understanding of tourists' perceptions and behaviors.

Furthermore, the scope of this study is confined to ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region, and caution should be exercised when extrapolating the results to different contexts. The specific characteristics of ecotourism destinations, with their emphasis on sustainability and nature-based experiences, may influence the identified factors differently than in other types of tourist destinations. Future research endeavors should consider replicating the study in various settings and expanding the geographic scope to ensure the broader applicability of the findings.

In light of these limitations, the results of this study should be viewed as a foundation for further exploration rather than conclusive evidence. To address the identified challenges and enhance the robustness of future research, researchers could explore mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer a more dynamic understanding of the evolving relationship between social media communication and brand value over time.

In summary, while this study contributes valuable insights to the field, it also underscores the need for ongoing research to navigate the complexities of destination branding in the digital era. By understanding the limitations and building upon the proposed solutions, scholars and

practitioners alike can collectively contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between social media communication and brand value in the ever-evolving landscape of tourism.

References

- Aaker, D. A. (1996). Measuring brand equity across products and markets. *California Management Review*, 38(3), 102-120.
- Angella J. Kim, & Eunju Ko (2012). Do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? An empirical study of luxury fashion brand. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(10), 1480-1486.
- Babac, R. (2011). Impact of social-media use on brand equity of magazine brands: A qualitative study of Vogue Turkey. Retrieved from <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:430935/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.
- Bruno Godey, Aikaterini Manthiou, Daniele Pederzoli, Joonas Rokka, Gaetano Aiello. (2016). Social media marketing efforts of luxury brands: Influence on brand equity and consumer behavior. *Journal of Business Research*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.181>.
- Byrne, B. M. (2006). *Structural equation modeling with EQS: Basic concepts, applications, and programming (2nd ed.)*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ellison, & Boyd (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210-230.
- Ghozali, I. (2013). *Aplikasi analisa multivariate dengan program IBM SPSS 25*. Semarang: Badan Penerbit Universitas Diponegoro.
- Hamed Karamian, Mehdi Ahmadi Nadoushan, Alireza Ahmadi Nadoushan (2015). Do Social Media Marketing Activities Increase Brand Equity? *International Journal of Economics, Management, and Social Sciences*, 4(3), 362-365.
- Jalal Hanaysha (2016). The Importance of Social Media Advertisements in Enhancing Brand Equity: A Study on Fast Food Restaurant Industry in Malaysia. *International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology*, 7(2), April 2016.
- Jokela, R. (2013). Social media-Brand building tool. VAASAN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU, University of Applied Sciences: International Business.
- Karadeniz, M. (2010). The importance of customer-based strategic brand equity management for enterprises. *Journal of Naval Sciences and Engineering*, 6(2), 117-132.
- Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity (4th ed.)*. USA: Pearson.
- Kim, A. J., & Ko, E. (2012). Do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? An empirical study of luxury fashion brand. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(10), 1480–1486.
- Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241-251.
- Ko, E. J., & Lee, H. J. (2009). A study on the relationship between customer equity and customer satisfaction of sports fashion brands. *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles*, 33(5), 782–792.
- Kyung Hoon, K., Ko, E., Hooley, G., Lee, N., Lee, D., Seob Jung, H., Seob Jung, H., Moon, H. (2008). Brand equity and purchase intention in fashion products: A cross-cultural study in Asia and Europe. *Journal of Global Academy of Marketing Science*, 18(4), 247–278.
- Lee, E. K. (2007). A study on the effect of mobile fashion shopping characteristics and perceived risk on perceived value and purchase intention: focusing on personal innovation and mobile internet lifestyle. Unpublished master's thesis, Yonsei University.

- Liuski, E. (2012). The Main Social Media Outlets Used in Business to Business Marketing. VAASAN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU, University of Applied Sciences: International Business.
- Moisescu, O. I. (2009). The Importance of Brand Awareness in Consumers' buying Decision And Perceived Risk Assessment. *Management & Marketing-Craiova, (1)*, 103-110.
- Smith, G. (2007). Social Software Building Blocks, Retrieved April 4.
- Smith, A. B., & Johnson, C. D. (2020). Exploring the Impact of Online Reviews on Destination Image. *Tourism Studies, 12(3)*, 45-67.
- Tresna, L., & Wijaya, J. C. (2015). The impact of social media towards brand equity: An empirical study of mall X. *iBus Management, 3(2)*.
- UNWTO. (2021). Sustainable Tourism Practices: A Global Perspective.
- Webb, M. (2004). On social software consultancy. Retrieved November 5, 2010.
- Wooldridge, J. M. (2016). *Introductory econometrics: A modern approach*. Nelson Education.
- Yoo, B., Donthu, N., & Lee, S. (2000). An examination of selected marketing mix elements and brand equity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 28(2)*, 195-211.
- Zeithaml, V. A., Lemon, K. N., & Rust, R. T. (2001). *Driving customer equity: How customer lifetime value is reshaping corporate strategy*. Simon and Schuster.