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Discord 對品牌參與度影響要素調查

Investigating the Factors that Influence customer
engagement on Discord: A Uses and Gratifications Study

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the factors shaping customer engagement on Discord, an interactive online social media platform. Through the lens of Uses and Gratifications theory, the study explores the impact of social factors, user-based aspects, firm-generated information, co-creation values, and brand relationships on users' engagement with brands on Discord and its subsequent influence on brand equity. Using a quantitative approach, the research surveyed 184 active Discord users aged 18 to 44 who have encountered branded content. Utilizing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS 4.0, the analysis demonstrated significant links between user-based factors, firm-generated information, co-creation values, and brand relationships with customer engagement. However, social-based factors were not found to significantly affect engagement motivations. Notably, customer engagement was revealed to positively impact brand perceptions, thereby enhancing brand equity. The implications of these findings extend to both academia and industry, offering insights for marketing and brand managers. The study underscores the importance of cultivating user motivations and fostering strong customer-brand relationships on Discord to enhance brand equity.

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List of Abbreviations

SM   Social Media

U&G   Uses and Gratifications

CE   Customer Engagement

BE   Brand Equity

SF   Social Factors

UBF   User-Based Factors

FGI   Firm-Generated Information

CCV   Co-Creation Value

BR   Brand Relationship

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in customer engagement within the realms of branding and marketing, as it has been associated with stronger consumer relationships, increased profitability, and overall growth (Brodie, Juric, Ilic & Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). This trend has extended to social media (SM) platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, where brands have sought to engage customers in various ways, leveraging the unique communication properties of social media (Yan, 2011; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Brodie et al., 2013; Hutter et al., 2013).

Among these SM platforms, Discord gained significant popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic when people moved to digital spaces for interaction (Lacher & Biehl, 2019). Initially designed as a communication platform for gamers, Discord has expanded its user base to include a diverse range of communities beyond gaming, offering private and public servers for users to engage through voice, video, and text chat channels (Jiang, Kiene, Middler, Brubaker & Fiesler, 2019).

The appeal of Discord to brand managers is heightened by its user statistics, which count with 1.1 billion daily visits, and 150 million active monthly users, where 4 billion messages are sent each day (Similarweb, 2023; InfluencerHub, 2023; HeadphonesAddict,

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2023). Projections also suggest that the global community engagement platform market growth is set to reach USD 463.7 million by 2029 (MarketWatch, 2023).

Many scholars have explored how SM platforms enable organizations to create online brand communities (De Vries & Carlson, 2012; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Labrecque et al., 2013), wherein users can follow and interact with brand content through actions like liking, commenting, and sharing, signaling their preferences to their online circles (De Vries et al., 2012; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Labrecque et al., 2013). Such interactions between consumers and brands provide valuable first-hand information for brand development, enabling tailored products that cater to their followers' needs and ultimately enhancing brand equity (BE) (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Gensler et al., 2013; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Sawhney et al., 2005; Kozinets et al., 2010). Consequently, researchers have studied the drivers of customer engagement on various SM platforms, such as Facebook (Menon & Meghana, 2021), Instagram (Madan & Kapoor, 2021), Snapchat (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017), Weibo (Gao & Feng, 2016), and Twitter (Read et al., 2019).

However, as a communication platform, Discord remains relatively unexplored within the context of marketing and branding. While previous studies have primarily focused on Discord as an e-learning platform (Dewantara et al., 2020; Kruglyk et al., 2020; Wulanjani, 2018), little attention has been given to its potential as a marketing channel for businesses. As Discord serves as a gathering place and interactive hub for the younger generation, a significant future target market (Wulanjani, 2018), understanding how people

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engage with the platform becomes crucial for marketers. Researching Discord's impact and role can provide insights into young consumers' preferences and behaviors, enabling marketers to tailor strategies, create relevant content, and establish strong brand relationships. With the younger demographic being early adopters of new technologies, staying ahead in understanding Discord's influence will enable marketers to adapt their strategies and connect with this valuable audience effectively.

Discord offers a virtual meeting place for diverse communities and individuals, called "servers". It has become increasingly popular as a platform for non-gaming communities to connect and interact (Jannah & Hentasmaka, 2021). This rise in popularity has led to a growing number of small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) adopting Discord to engage with their customers (Zaucha, 2022). However, there is still limited research on the factors influencing customer engagement on Discord. The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory provides a valuable framework for understanding why users engage with a given medium or platform. Using a quantitative approach utilizing survey-based research, this study aims to investigate the factors that influence customer engagement on Discord for SMBs using the U&G model. The findings of this study will contribute to the knowledge of how SMBs can effectively leverage Discord as a marketing channel to increase customer engagement and consequently, brand equity.

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1.2 Research Problem and Importance and Significance of the Study

The relevance of this study is underscored by the significant value that online communities hold in today's digital landscape. Nearly 80% of all Internet users are part of an online community, and these communities have a notable impact, with research showing 19% of an organization's revenue is influenced by its branded online community (Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2011). This growing demand for online communities is attributed to a strong desire for connection, as evidenced by 64% of online community visitors who state that their participation arises from shifting customer expectations and dissatisfaction with conventional social media platforms (Troiano, 2022).

Engagement is a vital aspect of online communities (Mander & Koch, 2020). An 81% increase in online community engagement has been observed in response to the pandemic, highlighting the growing importance of these platforms (Troiano, 2022). Moreover, community site users are willing to engage in authentic interactions with brands and participate collectively within the community environment (Baldus, Voorhees & Calantone, 2015).

Users trust online communities for decision-making and as their sources of information (Mander & Koch, 2020). Approximately 27.3% of customers rely on online communities when making purchase decisions (The Media Insight Project, 2022), and in

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the United States, the trust placed in community sites by Generation Z is comparable to that of traditional news sources and surpasses trust in social media sites (Troiano, 2022).

The need for more accurate and tailored marketing strategies grows. Traditional advertising methods are often viewed as intrusive and generate negative sentiments, resulting in user desire for a more genuine and targeted marketing content experience (Niu, Wang, & Liu, 2021). In response to the evolving marketing landscape, various brands, including NFT projects, have emerged on Discord, actively engaging in the creation of brand communities (Cork et al., 2023). Discord itself has undergone a rebranding and repositioning effort, expanding beyond its gaming origins to focus more on community building in general (Wright, 2020).

While several studies have explored Discord, most have focused on its viability as an e-learning platform (Kruglyk et al., 2020) rather than from a brand perspective. Although there have been some investigations into community engagement on Discord, many of these studies were focused on particular niches (Zaucha & Agur, 2022; Van der Sanden, Wilkins, Rychert & Barratt, 2022). Additionally, some studies have explored user engagement on the platform without studying its impact on businesses or brands (Moschogianni, 2022). Thus, there remains a gap in the literature examining Discord from a marketing perspective and its implications for business and brand interactions.

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1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

This study aims to fill the research gap of customer engagement on Discord by identifying key factors influencing Discord's adoption as a marketing channel and assessing its potential as an alternative to traditional advertising. Using the U&G theory as a framework, this study explores how Discord users engage with brands, their motivations, and expected gratifications from such engagements.

The study's results will shed light on factors influencing customer engagement on Discord, enabling brands to customize their marketing strategies accordingly. Ultimately, it will contribute to a deeper understanding of how businesses can effectively leverage Discord to enhance customer engagement and bolster brand equity.

The study aims to examine the factors influencing customer engagement on Discord for businesses using the U&G model. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1. What are the key drivers of customer engagement on Discord?

RQ2. How does customer engagement on Discord impact customer perceptions of the brand, and to what extent does it influence brand equity and foster brand loyalty?

1.4 Research Methodology

This study uses a quantitative approach to investigate the factors influencing customer engagement on Discord, utilizing the U&G model as the theoretical framework. A survey was employed to collect data from active Discord users between 18 to 44 years old (Similarweb, 2023) that have made a purchase decision or clicked an external product link and made a purchase originating from Discord. Using a convenience sampling method, participants were recruited through Discord communities, forums, and SM platforms. Given the absence of an available sampling frame for this target population, the survey aimed at a younger demographic, representing the average user group on Discord. For this purpose, convenience sampling was selected as the method of choice. A snowball sampling procedure was used to expand the sample size by encouraging participants to share the survey link through SM.

The survey questionnaire consisted of eight sections that included: demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, annual income level, education level, Discord purchase decision, product category interest on Discord), U&G-based Discord engagement drivers (social factors, user-based factors, firm-generated information, co-creation value, and brand relationship), and the dependent variables (Discord customer engagement and brand equity). These items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and collected data was analyzed with PLS-SEM using SmartPLS

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4.0. To ensure ethical considerations were addressed, informed consent was obtained from

all participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Discord

Discord, introduced in 2015, originally catered to the gaming community but has expanded its user base to include professionals, hobbyists, and enthusiasts from various fields. It offers text and voice chat channels, private messaging, and multimedia sharing, enabling real-time interaction and collaboration (Jiang et al., 2019). Discord fosters the formation of online communities called servers that revolve around shared interests, which users can join through invitation links. As a SM platform without built-in e-commerce features, Discord relies on external links and community messages to redirect users outside the platform to make purchases from promoted brands (Joseph et al., 2022).

Online communities are spaces that emphasize the social nature of their users and the emergent community-building process. Facebook Groups, Reddit subreddits, and Twitch channels are considered online communities (Hamilton, Garretson & Kerne, 2014), whereas network structures such as Twitter followers or Facebook friends aren't (Seering et al., 2019). In this study, we use the definition by Hamilton et al. (2014) to categorize Discord as a platform that promotes online communities.

Discord operates on a decentralized model, diverging from the conventional centralized community structure. It is structured into distinct smaller communities known as servers that can only be accessed through unique invite links, each having the potential

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to be public or private (Wylie, 2023). Discord is a communication platform that allows users to share voice, video, and text chat with others. The server and its content are overseen and moderated by server moderators that assign different roles to each server, introducing the possibility of a hierarchy among the members (Discord, 2022).
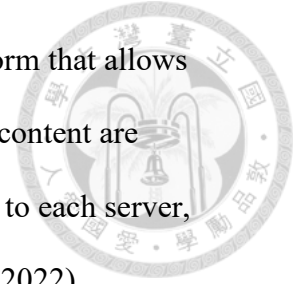
Each user can join multiple servers, where each server can have a different purpose and cover different themes and categories with a different set of moderators. Servers can be created and moderated by the users themselves, inviting their friends to join and chat in a private online space (Wylie, 2023).

While some studies have applied the U&G framework to examine user engagement on Discord (Zaucha & Agur, 2022), limitations in sample sizes or qualitative approaches have constrained the thorough investigation of these methodologies (Vedeikytė & Lechmanová, 2022). To address this, the present study employs a quantitative approach with a larger sample size to explore the factors influencing customer engagement on Discord using the U&G theory.
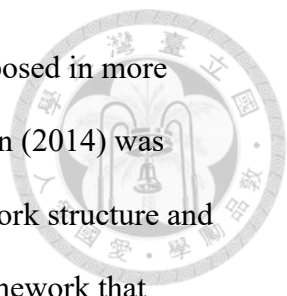
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2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The U&G theory is a framework researchers use to understand the motivations behind users' conscious choice to use certain media to satisfy their needs (Severin & Tankard, 1997). This framework originated in 1944 and has been extensively utilized to investigate the fundamental factors influencing user media preferences.

This study adopts the U&G framework, which identifies five key gratifications driving user adoption of a new medium: social integrative needs, cognitive needs, escape, and diversion needs, affective needs, and personal identity needs (Katz et al., 1974).

The U&G posits that individuals actively select and utilize media to fulfill their needs and desires (Katz et al., 1973). This theory has been extensively employed in SM research to comprehend user motivations for engaging with content (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Ducoffe, 1996; Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011; Taylor, Lewin & Strutton, 2011).

U&G has also proven valuable in studying technology adoption in various contexts, such as Internet use (Dhir & Tsai, 2016), online photo sharing (Malik, Dhir & Nieminen, 2016), and SM platforms (Bui, 2014; Liu et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2016). U&G has also been used to understand the reasons behind teenagers' continued SM usage (Mäntymäki and Riemer, 2014). However, due to the limited research conducted on Discord and its relationship with brands, there have been limits to developing a comprehensive conceptual model to understand user behavior on this platform (Chuang & Ratan, 2022).

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To address this gap, a cross-comparison of the gratifications proposed in more recent models by Chahal, Wirtz & Verma (2019) and De Vries & Carlson (2014) was performed, which were also based on U&G and shared a similar framework structure and dimensions. For this study, these models were merged into a unified framework that integrated the considerations and constructs presented by previous research, and the employed dimensions will be presented in the following paragraphs. These studies have come close to understanding the link between gratification effects, customer engagement, and brand equity. However, their frameworks did not relate all the variables to make this relationship. To address this gap, this research conducts cross-comparisons of existing models and conceptualizes a more comprehensive model.

The selection of these variables was according to their relevance to the studies on Customer Engagement (CE). While prior Uses and Gratifications (U&G) research primarily focused on identifying motivators for users adopting specific media, our study shifted the emphasis to the gratifications associated with engaging with brand content. Discord's nature as a community-oriented interaction platform amplifies the importance of selected gratifications like co-creation and brand relationship, which explore customer engagement in relation to brand content. As a result, not all original U&G variables were applicable in this context.

While information factors have been investigated for gratifications in various research contexts, our study redefined it as firm-generated information (Menon &

Meghana, 2021). This adjustment offers a brand-centric perspective on why users interact with brand content rather than a perspective centered on why users interact with Discord servers as a whole.
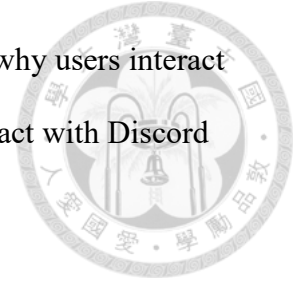
Although social and user-based factors have been significant in previous studies, their significance was relatively diminished in our brand content-focused study. Therefore, we merged affective factors with social factors as their relevance was less pronounced within brand content interaction.

2.3 Customer Engagement

Scholars have defined customer engagement in various, with its conceptualization in marketing literature starting around 2005 (Brodie et al., 2011). Research has emphasized the strategic importance of customer engagement in enhancing corporate performance, including sales growth, competitive advantage, and profitability (Neff, 2007; Sedley, 2008; Voyles, 2007). Thus, engaged customers are seen to play a vital role in product development and are more likely to recommend products through word of mouth and referrals.

Customer engagement has been extensively studied from a SM perspective, considering its collaborative nature (Phua et al., 2017). SM platform engagement influences brand-related outcomes, such as brand awareness, perception, decision-making, purchasing behavior, brand loyalty, and brand equity (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012). However,

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there is an ongoing debate among researchers about the conceptualization and dimensions of customer engagement (CE) in SM (Dessart, Veloustou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015), leading to the proposal of various frameworks to address this gap.
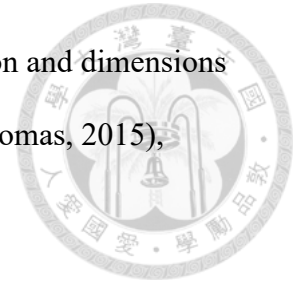
Several studies have further examined the dimensions driving SM engagement. These dimensions include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, utilitarian and hedonic benefits (Dessart et al., 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2013; Calder, Malthouse & Schaedel, 2009). Other studies have expanded the dimensions to include social aspects and functional, social, and community dimensions (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde & Marshall, 2018; Chan et al., 2017).

When consumers join brand pages on SM, their engagement is focused on brand content (Halaszovich & Nel, 2017; Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski, 2016). Tsai and Men (2014) identify different ways consumers engage with brand content, ranging from passive activities like viewing images and reading product reviews to active actions like responding to comments, posting reviews, and sharing user-generated content.

In this thesis, we adopt the definition of Social Media Engagement Behavior (SMEB) proposed by Dolan et al. (2015), where brand content is the focal object. Their typology provides a broader perspective of customer engagement compared to other conceptualizations (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Tsai & Men, 2014). Dolan et al. (2015) emphasize the role of motivational drivers as antecedents of SMEB, and their definition

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aligns with Van Doorn et al. 's (2010). According to Van Doorn et al. (2010), customer engagement behavior refers to the actions and behaviors of customers on social media platforms that go beyond making purchases, driven by their motivations and interests.

Brand page users are motivated by seeking information and enjoying promotional deals (Muk & Chung, 2014; Park & Kim, 2014), while brand community engagement involves intrinsic motivators related to assistance and validation (Baldus, Voorhees & Calantone, 2015). Understanding these motivations is crucial for companies to develop effective strategies that engage stakeholders (Alalwan et al., 2017; Phua et al., 2017).

2.4 Brand equity

Brand equity refers to the intangible value that a brand brings to organizations, resulting in unique marketing effects attributable to the brand, such as improved product perceptions, greater customer loyalty, reduced vulnerability to competition and crises, larger margins, more effective marketing communication, and various opportunities for licensing and brand extension (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003).

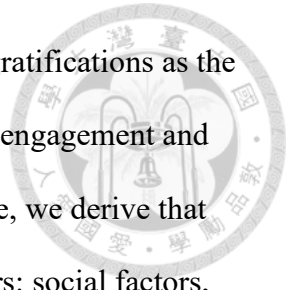In the context of emerging SM research, brand equity and brand loyalty have been explored in relation to consumer engagement with brand pages on platforms like Facebook (De Vries et al., 2012). Studies have shown that consumers who become more psychologically engaged with brand pages tend to exhibit higher commitment and loyalty to the brand (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). These engaged consumers also demonstrate increased

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visitation to physical retail stores, generate more positive word-of-mouth, and experience stronger emotional attachment to the brand compared to non-brand fans (Hutter et al., 2013; Dholakia and Durham, 2010).

Recognizing the significance of brand equity, companies are increasingly focusing on CE to enhance brand identity and equity (Doorn et al., 2010; Calder and Malthouse, 2005). Research shows that higher levels of CE lead to increased brand satisfaction, involvement, awareness, image, and loyalty, thus reinforcing brand equity (Brodie et al., 2011). Understanding and fostering CE can play a crucial role in the growth and development of companies (Keller, 2009).

However, the relationship between SM engagement and brand equity remains relatively unexplored, despite scholars acknowledging the growing importance of SM engagement in building brand equity (Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Zailskaite-Jakste and Kuvykaite, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). Bickart and Schindler (2001) state that interaction with a brand through SM platforms can influence consumer brand preferences and purchase behaviors. Positive responses to brand-related communication by the company and other consumers on SM platforms can enhance brand equity (Gummerus et al., 2012). For instance, user-generated content on SM platforms has been found to impact brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived quality, which are key dimensions of brand equity (Schivinski et al., 2016).

The theoretical framework adopted for this study identifies five gratifications as the independent variables that drive user engagement on Discord. Customer engagement and brand equity are the dependent variables of this study. From the literature, we derive that the motivating drivers of user engagement can be divided into five factors: social factors, user-based factors, firm-generated information, co-creation value and brand relationship.

The research framework for this study draws upon the literature by Katz et al. (1973), Chahal et al.'s (2019), De Vries (2014), and Florenthal (2019) and the frameworks they present to study user engagement on a specific medium and the gratifications drawing them to use certain SMs.

While previous studies have focused on specific SM platform brand pages, conducting a study on a specific brand server on Discord would be challenging due to the nature of invite-based servers, which makes their discovery more complicated (Chuang & Ratan, 2022), limiting entry, and the prevalence of fan-operated brand servers. Florenthal's model synthesizes U&G and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to examine motivational drivers of customer engagement among young consumers and is thus referenced in this study to develop a framework suitable for studying Discord as a whole.

Existing studies have overlapping factors in their models for primary gratifications users derive from engaging with a platform, shown below in Table 1. Katz et al. (1973) propose five user gratifications in the U&G: social integrative needs, cognitive needs,

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escape, and diversion needs, affective needs and personal identity needs. Chahal et al.'s (2019) model focuses on customer engagement on SM platforms, incorporating utilitarian, hedonic, and social dimensions. De Vries (2014) proposes a conceptual model including functional, hedonic, social and co-creation values on top of brand relationship characteristics. Menon's study (2021), which utilizes the U&G theory, classifies factors driving Facebook engagement as social interaction, escapism, affection seeking, and information seeking.
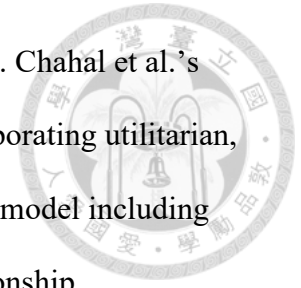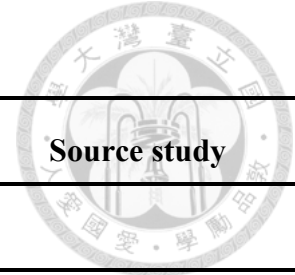
Table 1 List of Survey Items for Latent Constructs and Item Source Study

Components and manifest variables	Source study
User-based factors	
I engage with Discord brand mentions to kill time	Menon & Meghana, (2021)
I engage with Discord brand mentions to relieve my stress	Menon & Meghana, (2021)
I engage with Discord brand mentions to derive fun or pleasure	Menon & Meghana (2021)
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to find new means of entertainment	Menon & Meghana (2021)
Social factors	
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to make new friends	Menon & Meghana (2021)
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to find people with similar interests	Menon & Meghana (2021)
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to receive appreciation or social validation	Menon & Meghana (2021)
Firm generated information	
I seek new information to keep myself updated with latest trends or news	Menon & Meghana (2021)
I am presented with brands that are compatible with my liking	Menon & Meghana (2021)
The brand provides updated and frequent information	Menon & Meghana (2021)
The brand's offers are reliable and competitive	Menon & Meghana (2021)

Components and manifest variables	Source study
The brand mention on Discord is helpful for me	De Vries et al. (2012)
The brand mention on Discord is practical	De Vries et al. (2012)

Co-creation value

The Discord server interacts with me to serve me better	De Vries et al. (2012)
The Discord server works together with me to produce offerings that better suit me	De Vries et al. (2012)
The Discord server interacts with me to design offerings that meet my needs	De Vries et al. (2012)
The Discord server provides services in conjunction with me	De Vries et al. (2012)
The Discord server allows my involvement in providing services to get the experience that I want	De Vries et al. (2012)
The Discord server provides me with services that I help create	De Vries et al. (2012)

Customer Engagement

I engage with brand mentions on Discord to follow regular updates of the products or services	Chahal et al., (2019)
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to express myself freely about the brand	Chahal et al., (2019)
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to participate in the community and explore	Chahal et al. (2019)

Components and manifest variables	Source study
I consider myself an integrated member of the Discord server community	De Vries et al. (2012)

Brand relationship

I consider myself an active member of the Discord server community	De Vries et al. (2012)
I consider the brand to be a relevant part of my life	De Vries et al. (2012)
I am interested in the brand	De Vries et al. (2012)
The brand is a lot like me	De Vries et al. (2012)
The brand reflects what I am	De Vries et al. (2012)
Through the brand, I can express what I find important in life	De Vries et al. (2012)

Brand equity

|	
I easily recall the logo of the brand	Menon & Meghana (2021)
The brand has a good image among customers	Menon & Meghana (2021)
The brand provides more products and services than its competitors	Menon & Meghana (2021)
The quality of its product or service is extremely high	Menon & Meghana (2021)
The likelihood that its products or services would be functional is very high	Menon & Meghana (2021)
I will continue to buy the products or use the services of the brand	Menon & Meghana (2021)

3.1 Research Model and Hypotheses Development

In the upcoming paragraphs, we will delve into the specific hypotheses proposed for this study, which explore the influence of various factors on customer engagement. These hypotheses include examining social factors, user-based factors, firm-generated information, co-creation value (CCV), and brand relationship as potential drivers of customer engagement (CE) on Discord.

3.1.1 Social Factors

In this study, social factors (SF) refer to the gratifications derived from social integrative needs, involving the desire to stay connected and engaged with others, as well as affective needs, which involve seeking emotional experiences for pleasure and satisfaction (Katz, º & Gurevitch, 1973). Chahal et al. (2019) further expand by saying that these social factors encompass shared interests, preferences, social identity, regular interactions, and peer group identification within social networks and communities, influencing CE with brands on SM platforms.

Scholars have highlighted the pivotal role of the similarity of characteristics among the group members in cultivating robust consumer associations and communities, which results from social identity and tie-strength (Kwon & Wen, 2010 Zailskaite & Kuvykaite,

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2012; Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012). Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) argued the significance of social identity in customers' SM engagement, advancing that peer group identification motivates participation in online interaction by enhancing 'we-intentions'.
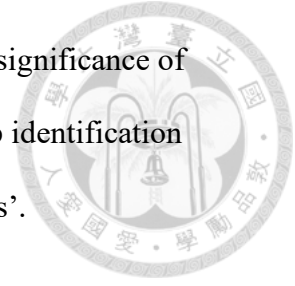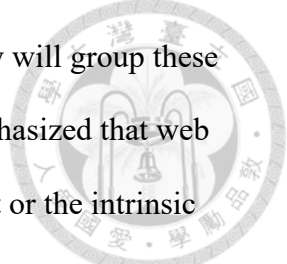
Drawing from this contextual background on SM engagement and its connection to brand communities, we present the following hypothesis:

H1. Social interaction factors have a positive relationship with Discord customer engagement.

3.1.2 User-based factors

In the proposed framework, we also include user-based factors encompassing escape and diversion needs, involving the desire to escape, alleviate tension, and transition from unpleasant to enjoyable experiences (Katz et al., 1973). Chahal et al. (2019) elaborate that user-based factors encompass motivations such as entertainment, brand affiliation, timeliness of information, product information, incentives, promotion, information search, convenience, conversation, trend discovery, adventure, and prior experience.

The significance of user-based factors in triggering CE with brands on SM platforms has been extensively explored in the literature. Mikalef, Giannakos & Pateli (2013) examined utilitarian and hedonic motivators and found that convenience and ease of product selection, namely utilitarian drivers, and browsing for new information and ideas,

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namely hedonic drivers, significantly influence SM browsing. This study will group these motivators into the user-based factors category. Calder et al. (2009) emphasized that web consumers engage with brands due to the utilitarian nature of the content or the intrinsic enjoyment derived from the experience. Additionally, other scholars, such as Gummerus et al., (2012) and Rohm, Kaltcheva & Milne (2013), have identified various user-based variables that drive engagement, highlighting the importance of entertainment, social and economic benefits and other factors as significant drivers of CE with brands on SM platforms. Enginkaya & Yilmaz (2014) and Mikalef et al. (2013) explored additional user-based factors, including information search and opportunity seeking, convenience and product selection, conversation, entertainment, trend discovery, and adventure.

Furthermore, Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, Komarova & David (2013) noted that an individual's knowledge and prior experience significantly influence their future customer behavior. Thamizhvanan & Xavier (2012) also highlighted the importance of prior experience as a significant driver of CE in online activity.

Hence, we hypothesize:

H2. User-based factors are positively related to Discord customer engagement.

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3.1.3 Firm-generated information

Firm-generated information is defined as cognitive needs involving the pursuit of knowledge and acquiring new information (Katz et al., 1973). Firm-generated information encompasses personalized advertising, mass advertising, promotional offers, and price information, all of which play a significant role in influencing customer interactions (Chahal et al., 2019). By providing customers with brand-related details, including product features, pricing, and special offers, and encouraging them to share their brand experiences, firms can effectively motivate customers to engage with SM platforms (Chahal et al., 2019).

Tsimonis & Dimitriadis (2014) noted that customers are particularly interested in product information, such as pricing, advertisements, gift offers, discounts, and details about the company itself. In SM engagement, the presentation of personalized and customized advertising to users is equally important in influencing their engagement (Mikalef et al., 2013).

Menon's model (2021) is based on the U&G theory and identified information seeking as a principal driver of engagement on Facebook, where it was positively correlated with users' intention to engage on the platform.

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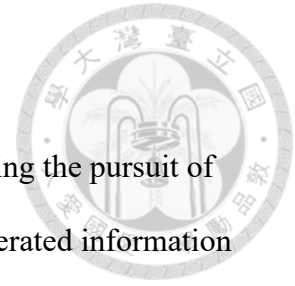
This study proposes that when brands provide relevant and compelling information to users on SM platforms like Discord, it stimulates their interest and engagement with the brand.
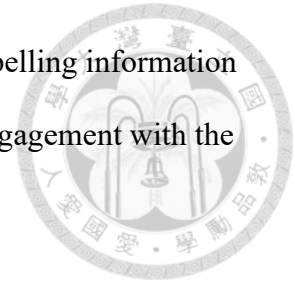
Thus, the following hypothesis is derived for this study:

H3. Firm-generated information is positively related to Discord customer engagement.

3.1.4 Co-creation Value

The concept of co-creation value, introduced by Sawhney, Verona & Prandelli (2005), emphasizes the interactive nature of customer-brand interactions, enabling customers to contribute to and receive personalized experiences, services, and offerings. On SM, customers actively seek co-creation value through real-time interactions, feedback exchange, and engagement on social networking platforms. Prior research has demonstrated that co-creation positively influences customer cooperation with branded pages (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012).

De Vries (2014) incorporates co-creation value into their framework underpinned by the Uses and Gratification theory, branding theory, and consumer engagement theory. This framework includes drivers used to study the relationship between customers' usage

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intensity and engagement with a brand, showing that co-creation value on the brand's social media page leads to higher levels of CE.

Hence, we posit:

H4. Co-creation value is positively related to Discord customer engagement.

3.1.5 Brand Relationship Characteristics

Brand relationship characteristics have been recognized as significant determinants of CE, as they reflect the consumer's relationship with the brand (Loureiro, Ruediger, & Demetris, 2012; Vivek et al., 2012). This study proposes that a strong perceived relationship and brand strength contribute to higher CE with SM brand pages. This proposition aligns with involvement theory, which suggests that involved consumers demonstrate greater interest, engage in information-seeking behavior, and exhibit online purchase behavior (Balabanis & Reynolds, 2001; Richard & Chandra, 2005).

Following the U&G principles, users also seek gratifications to fulfill their personal identity needs, which encompass the desire for social status, self-confidence, and self-respect (Katz et al., 1973).

Brand strength, a multi-dimensional construct comprising factors such as brand involvement and self-brand image congruency, influences brand preference, loyalty, and pre-consumption evaluations (Jamal & Goode, 2001; Kressman et al., 2006).

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This study proposes users' engagement with brand pages on Discord can be motivated by the desire to shape and communicate their identity through interactions with the brand, thus:
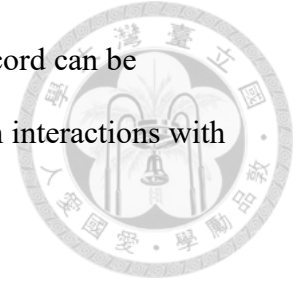
H5. Brand relationship characteristics are positively related to Discord customer engagement.

3.1.6 Brand Equity

Participating and interacting with brands through brand pages or brand communities can positively impact brand equity (Morra et al., 2018). Consumer-based brand equity, associated with brand image, is reinforced when companies and consumers contribute content on SM platforms, with company-focused communication influencing the functional brand image and consumer-generated content shaping the hedonic brand image (Bruhn et al., 2012).

Brand communities offer an alternative means of engagement, allowing consumers to establish connections with a brand, individual community members, and the community itself (Dessart et al., 2015). These connections can influence consumer behavior, including loyalty toward the brand (Dessart et al., 2015). Compared to brand pages, brand communities attract highly engaged consumers, such as enthusiasts and admirers, who actively communicate with like-minded participants, exchanging positive feedback and brand-related visuals like photos and videos (Zahoor & Qureshi, 2017; Zheng et al., 2015;

Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019). These specialized online spaces allow brand enthusiasts to share their experiences and sentiments regarding specific brands (Islam et al., 2018). Hence, this study proposes the following hypothesis related to SM customer engagement and brand equity:

H6. There is a positive relationship between customers' engagement with a brand on Discord and brand equity.

In summary, this study expands upon the existing U&G theory framework by integrating the dimensions of co-creation value, brand relationship, and brand equity constructs. The framework model is shown in Figure 1 below.
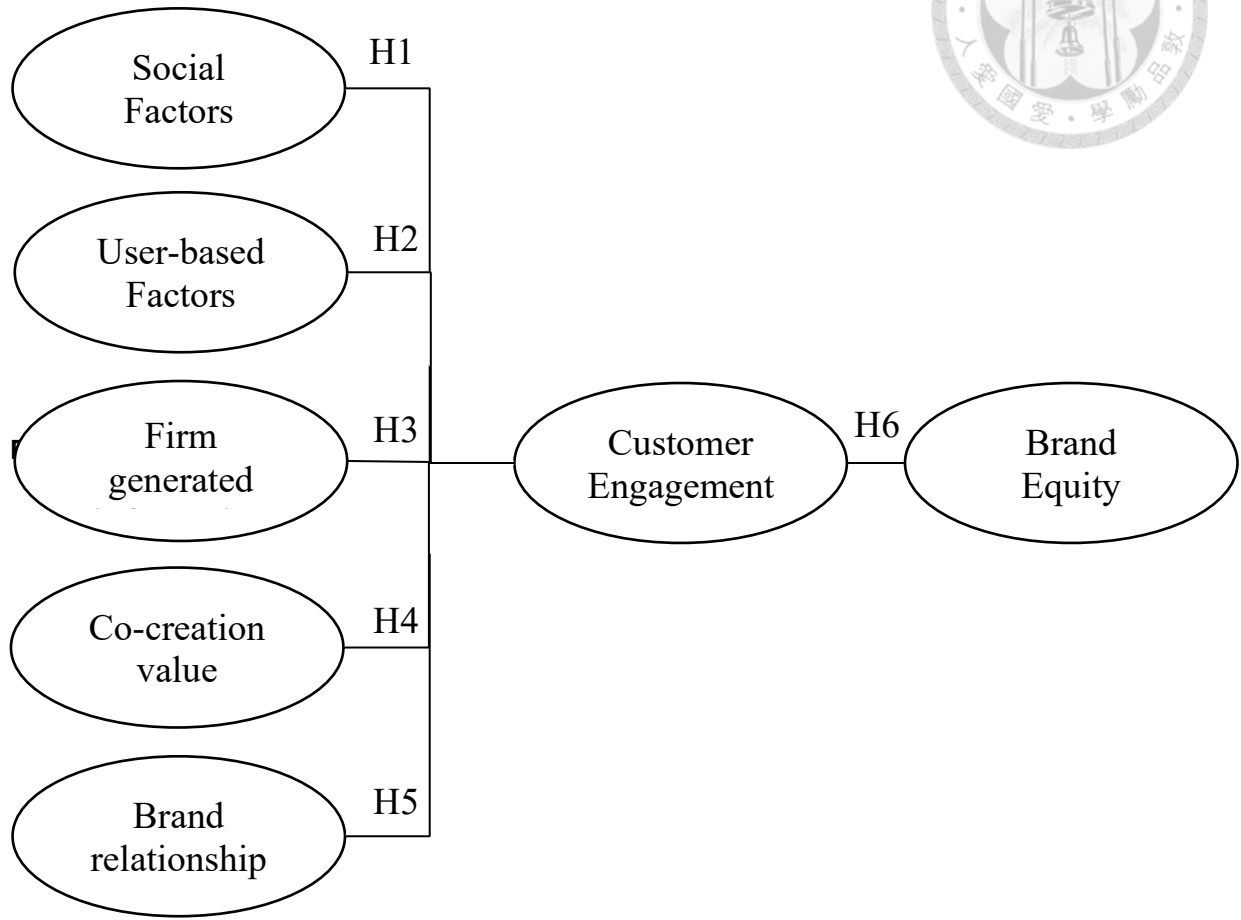
Figure 1 Research Model

3.2 Research Demographics

Young consumers, often referred to as "digital natives," engage with social media platforms in various ways, including contributing, sharing, consuming, searching, participating, and playing (Bolton et al., 2013). Baccarella et al. (2018) further categorized the functionalities of SMs for young generations, highlighting aspects such as sharing, presence, conversations, identity, relationships, groups, and reputation. These functionalities provide a digital environment where young consumers can connect and engage with individuals and organizations.

Generation Y and Generation Z both display a strong interest in engaging with content on SMs. Generation Y focuses on curating and sharing information, while Generation Z prefers creating content and collaborating. Additionally, Generation Z tends to communicate through images, while Generation Y relies more on text-based communication (Yadav & Rai, 2017).

As young consumers have a significant influence on companies' marketing strategies on SMs (Ansari & Mela, 2003; Burnasheva et al., 2018; Salleh et al., 2017), customized communication and offerings tailored to their needs are essential. Companies target young consumers to enhance engagement, increase loyalty, and monitor communication to mitigate reputational risks. SMSs provide marketers with a platform for
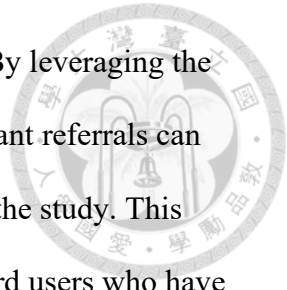
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easy, direct, quick, and cost-effective dissemination of information to younger generations (Hanan et al., 2018). This study aims to shed light on the factors that drive young users to interact and engage with branded content on Discord, building upon existing research on their interaction with SMs.

The demographics for this study consisted of Discord users within the age range of 18 to 44. This age range was selected to target a specific segment of the Discord user base that is more likely to engage with brands online and make purchase decisions since 84% of the current active base of Discord is aged between 18-44 (Similarweb, 2023). To further refine the population, the inclusion criteria required participants to have seen branded content on Discord before. This criterion aimed to ensure that the participants had a direct experience with branded content and were actively involved in the decision-making process related to engaging with the platform. Focusing on this specific population, the study aimed to gather insights into the factors influencing customer engagement on Discord among individuals who have demonstrated a propensity for engaging with branded content through the platform.

3.3 Research Design

An online survey experiment was conducted to test the hypotheses proposed in this study (Figure 1). Convenience sampling was employed for this survey and further expanded using a snowball sampling technique. This involves participants recommending

the survey to other potential participants who meet the defined criteria. By leveraging the network of Discord users, the random sampling method through participant referrals can help reach a wider audience and increase the diversity of participants in the study. This approach aims to capture a more comprehensive representation of Discord users who have engaged with brands, while still maintaining some level of randomness in the selection process.

An additional qualifier included in the survey is the product category in which the participant is more interested in and engaged more often with on Discord to make further investigations related to industry interest trends among Discord users, including the default options: gaming, technology and gadgets, entertainment (movies, TV shows, music), sports and fitness, fashion and beauty, food and beverages, home and lifestyle. If their option is not listed, they are asked to specify the category.

The survey included 40 items that were divided into sections to measure different constructs. All items in the survey were measured using the Likert scale anchored in 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree". Prior to the official rollout of the survey, a pilot test run was sent out for 6 test participants to validate the constructs and the experiment structure. Based on the feedback, the questionnaire was further refined. Specifically, examples and definitions for terms like "brand content on Discord" and "product" to clarify any confusion for participants about the statements. The constructs were further elaborated upon, and definitions were reiterated in each relevant section to

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enhance participant understanding. Initially, the questionnaire had a randomized order to prevent response predictability, but it was later revised to ensure a consistent order for all participants, thereby providing greater clarity.

3.4 Data Collection

The survey was conducted using Google Forms and divided into 8 sections, each designed to fulfill a specific purpose in collecting comprehensive data related to different constructs. The survey included items that gathered relevant information about participants, such as their frequency of Discord usage, gender, education level, and income. It also incorporated two qualifying criteria: participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 44 and have had exposure to brand mentions on Discord. If participants did not meet these criteria, the survey would be terminated. Additionally, participants were asked about their preferred product categories for engagement on Discord, with predefined options and an opportunity to specify others. The factor items in the questionnaire were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The survey also included items to assess participants' engagement with Discord brands, the strength of their brand relationships, and brand equity.

Following the implementation of changes based on the pilot study, the conclusive survey was conducted from June 1st to July 1st, 2023. The survey was distributed online on SM sites like Instagram, Twitter and Discord servers of the researcher and 184 responses were received. It was also further distributed through snowball sampling. The collected data

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was cleaned, removing responses that claimed not having used Discord before and not having seen branded content on the platform before. Respondents with an age outside the range of 18 to 44 were removed. Finally, after removing unengaged responses, 138 were left. The sample size was enough according to the suggested minimum sample size for partial least squares structural equation model (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt & Ringle, 2021). The answers to categorical variables such as preferred product category were converted into ordinal data.

3.5 Data analysis

In this study, we conducted a partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis using SmartPLS 4.0 software to analyze the survey data and understand the cause-effect paths that occur between latent variables. PLS-SEM two-staged analysis was chosen due to its suitability for smaller sample sizes (Hair et al., 2021), suitability for path models including various formatively measured constructs and the predictive nature of the investigation, predicting the relationships between user gratification indicators, customer engagement and brand equity (Fornell and Bookstein, 1982). The first stage involved validating the measurement model, while the second stage examined the structural relationships between latent variables (Hair et al., 2021).

The measurement model is generally denoted as the outer model. The measurement model represents the relationship between latent variables and their indicators (Hair et al.,

2021). The measurement model assessment evaluates how well the indicators are linked to the latent constructs. To assess the measurement model, the following assessments are required, firstly assessing the indicator reliability and the construct reliability internal consistency (Cronbach alpha and Composite reliability), Convergent and Discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2021).

Cronbach alpha measure reliability by examining the inter-correlations among the observed indicator constructs and Composite Reliability determines the extent to which the items consistently reflect the latent construct. If Cronbach alpha and Composite Reliability are above 0.7 respectively, then internal consistency is established (Hair et al., 2021).

Next, we assess the construct validity through convergent and discriminant validity tests. Convergent validity is established when items in a particular measure converge to represent the underlying construct or in other words, the indicators show a high level of inter-correlation. To establish convergent validity, factor loading should be above a recommended threshold of 0.708 and average-variance extract (AVE) should be above 0.5. Factor loading is a correlation coefficient indicating the relationship between a variable and a factor. A loading above 0.708 is recommended as it suggests that a construct explains more than 50% of the indicator's variance (Hair et al., 2021). Average-variance extract or AVE measures the amount of variance captured by latent variables relative to measurement error. AVE is calculated by dividing the sum of square loadings by the number of indicators. According to Hair et al. (2021), AVE should be 0.50 or greater, indicating that

the construct explains at least 50% of its components. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is calculated as the mean of the squared loadings of each indicator associated with a construct.
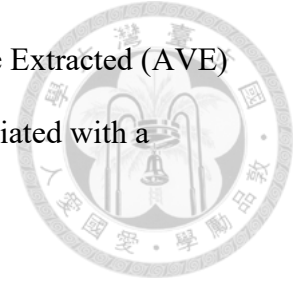
Discriminant validity ensures that constructs in the study have their distinct identity and are not highly correlated with other constructs. It is assessed using the Fornell and Larcker Criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio. The Fornell-Larcker Criterion states that a latent construct should have more variance shared with its indicators than with any other indicator in the model. This criterion states that the correlation between a construct and any other construct must be bigger than the square root of the average variance retrieved by the construct (Hair et al., 2021). On the other hand, HTMT calculates a validity ratio by comparing the averaged correlations of indicators across constructs with the averaged correlations of indicators within its construct (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015) suggesting an HTMT threshold value of 0.90 if the path model includes constructs that are conceptually very similar (e.g., affective satisfaction, cognitive satisfaction, and loyalty); that is, an HTMT value above 0.90 depicts a lack of discriminant validity. However, when the constructs in the path model are conceptually more distinct, researchers should consider 0.85 as the threshold for HTMT (Henseler et al., 2015).

The structural assessment model is generally denoted as the inner model and measures the path coefficient between latent variables. This assessment is employed to determine the relationship between latent variables and the predictive capability of the

research model. In this process, bootstrapping with 5,000 samples is applied, a resampling technique that estimates the significance of model parameters. The coefficient of determination, denoted as R^2, is a statistical measure indicating the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables in a regression model. R^2 explains the variance in the endogenous variable explained by the exogenous variables. R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are often regarded as significant, moderate, and weak, respectively (Hair et al., 2021).
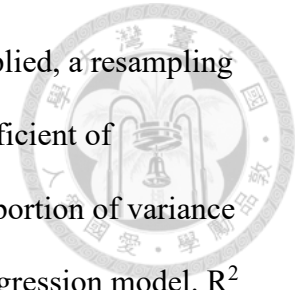
Chapter 4. Research Findings

4.1 Data Descriptives

 Table 2 describes the primary demographic information of the sample. In terms of gender, out of the total sample, 78% were male. The largest group was in the 28-32 and 23-27 age ranges, accounting for 37% and 32% respectively of the sample. In terms of education, the highest representation was from those with a graduate/college degree, at 52% of the sample. Regarding yearly income, the largest portion fell under the $25,000-$75,000 range at 35%. Notably, gaming was the most preferred product category, attracting 69% of respondents, followed by technology with 13% of respondents. Other categories, such as entertainment, sports and fitness, fashion and beauty, and food, also garnered interest from a smaller number of participants. The group with the highest Discord usage frequency was active for over 5 hours per week, accounting for 59% of the respondents, followed by 28% of the respondents spending around 1 to 5 hours per week on the platform.

Table 2 Demographics from the sample

Variable	Responses	Percentage
Gender		
Female	22	15.94%

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Male	108	78.26%
Gender variant/Non-conforming	4	2.90%
Prefer not to disclose	4	2.90%
Total	138	100.00%

Age (years)

18-22	12	8.70%
23-27	44	31.88%
28-32	51	36.96%
33-40	31	22.46%

Education

Less than high school	1	0.72%
High school	41	29.71%
Graduate/College	71	51.45%
Masters	21	15.22%
Doctoral	4	2.90%

Yearly income		
Under $25,000	40	28.99%
$25,000-$75,000	48	34.78%
$75,001-$150,000	16	11.59%
$150,001-$200,000	3	2.17%
Over $200,000	1	0.72%
Prefer not to disclose	30	21.74%
Usage frequency		
Under 1 hour per week	19	13.77%
1-5 hours per week	38	27.54%
Over 5 hours per week	81	58.70%
Preferred product category		
Gaming	95	68.84%
Technology	18	13.04%
Entertainment	13	9.42%

Sports and fitness	3	2.17%
Fashion and beauty	1	0.72%
Food	2	1.45%
Other	6	4.35%

Note: Survey Primary Demographic Information, including gender, age, education, yearly income, usage frequency and preferred product category.

4.2 Measurement Model Evaluation

Firstly, we assessed the reliability and validity of the individual indicators and latent constructs from the measurement model using Cronbach alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), Convergent Validity (AVE) and Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker, HTMT) (Hair et al., 2021). As seen in Table 3, the loadings of most items on their respective latent constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021) indicating a satisfactory association between the observed variables and the constructs ranging from 0.514 - 0.883. Age and gender were included as control variables to mitigate their potential influence on the overall loading of the latent variables, thereby ensuring the robustness of the model's estimation and interpretation of the relationships between the constructs of interest. Items with high cross-loadings were removed from the model to establish discriminant validity.

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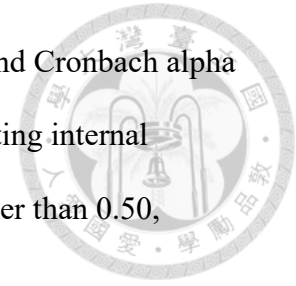
The composite reliability (CR) scores for each latent construct and Cronbach alpha values were all higher than the acceptance threshold of 0.70, demonstrating internal consistency. The average variance extracted (AVE) scores were all higher than 0.50, indicating a high level of convergent validity (Table 4).

Table 3 Item Loadings with t-statistics for each construct

Components and manifest variables	AVE	CR	Loading	T-statistics
User-based factors	0.551	0.738		
I engage with Discord brand mentions to kill time			0.723	12.749
I engage with Discord brand mentions to relieve my stress			0.791	20.268
I engage with Discord brand mentions to derive fun or pleasure			0.741	12.987
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to find new means of entertainment			0.713	11.179
Social factors	0.644	0.728		
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to make new friends			0.810	17.164
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to find people with similar interests			0.850	28.528
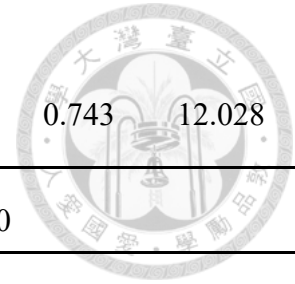
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I engage with brand mentions on Discord to receive appreciation or social validation		0.743	12.028
Firm generated information	0.553 0.870		
I seek new information to keep myself updated with latest trends or news		0.514	6.216
I am presented with brands that are compatible with my liking		0.689	11.730
The brand provides updated and frequent information		0.781	15.485
The brand's offers are reliable and competitive		0.783	15.864
The brand mention on Discord is helpful for me		0.825	29.799
The brand mention on Discord is practical		0.823	20.775
Co-creation value	0.630 0.892		
The Discord server interacts with me to serve me better		0.748	16.452
The Discord server works together with me to produce offerings that better suit me		0.883	32.657
The Discord server interacts with me to design offerings that meet my needs		0.871	36.942
The Discord server provides services in conjunction with me		0.859	35.919
The Discord server allows my involvement in providing services to get the experience that I want		0.749	16.068

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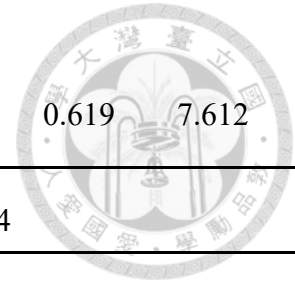
The Discord server provides me with services that I help create		0.619	7.612
Customer Engagement	0.647	0.824	
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to follow regular updates of the products or services		0.799	17.401
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to express myself freely about the brand		0.864	36.006
I engage with brand mentions on Discord to participate in the community and explore		0.805	19.728
I consider myself an integrated member of the Discord server community		0.746	15.528
Brand relationship	0.679	0.904	
I consider myself an active member of the Discord server community		0.663	11.782
I consider the brand to be a relevant part of my life		0.861	38.449
I am interested in the brand		0.830	31.131
The brand is a lot like me		0.847	26.689
The brand reflects what I am		0.847	28.566
Through the brand, I can express what I find important in life		0.875	38.509
Brand equity	0.572	0.851	

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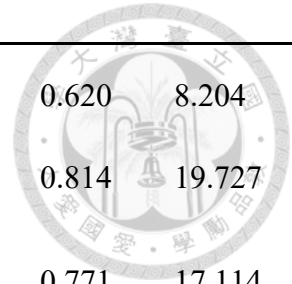
I easily recall the logo of the brand	0.620	8.204
The brand has a good image among customers	0.814	19.727
The brand provides more products and services than its competitors	0.771	17.114
The quality of its product or service is extremely high	0.825	23.585
The likelihood that its products or services would be functional is very high	0.790	21.253
I will continue to buy the products or use the services of the brand	0.700	12.814

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait HTMT ratio (Table 5, 6). No issues were observed with the Fornell-Larcker test nor with the HTMT test, indicating discriminant validity for the constructs. The inner variance inflation factor (VIF) for all latent variables was under 5, ranging from 1.000 to 3.485, indicating the absence of any multicollinearity concern

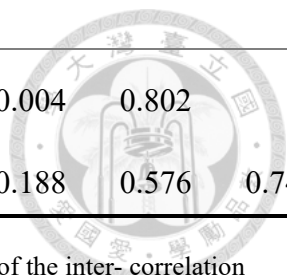**Table 4 Measurement Model Results: Cronbach Alpha, Composite Reliability (rho_a, rho_c) and AVE**

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)

CE	0.817	0.823	0.880	0.647
Brand equity	0.848	0.851	0.888	0.573
Brand relationship	0.915	0.916	0.937	0.747
Co creation value	0.879	0.892	0.910	0.630
Firm generated	0.835	0.870	0.879	0.553
Social	0.722	0.728	0.844	0.644
User Based Factors	0.730	0.738	0.831	0.552

Table 5 Discriminant validity using Fornell Larcker

	Age	CE	BE	BR	CCV	FGI	Gender	SF	UBF
Age	1.000								
CE	0.076	0.805							
BE	0.115	0.526	0.757						
BR	0.053	0.711	0.607	0.865					
CCV	0.051	0.658	0.486	0.630	0.794				
FGI	0.065	0.675	0.510	0.721	0.611	0.744			
Gender	0.015	-0.040	-0.237	-0.219	-0.077	-0.126	1.000		

SF	0.076	0.547	0.354	0.547	0.575	0.495	-0.004	0.802
UBF	0.020	0.572	0.518	0.574	0.480	0.496	-0.188	0.576	0.743

Note: Diagonal values are squared roots of AVE; off-diagonal values are the estimates of the inter- correlation between the latent constructs.

Table 6 Discriminant Validity Using Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Method

	Age	**CE**	**BE**	**BR**	**CCV**	**FGI**	**Gender**	**Social**	**UBF**
CE	0.151								
BE	0.151	0.625							
BR	0.095	0.822	0.683						
CCV	0.064	0.771	0.563	0.703					
FGI	0.083	0.788	0.592	0.798	0.699				
Gender	0.015	0.055	0.247	0.228	0.086	0.151			
Social	0.127	0.705	0.455	0.671	0.729	0.615	0.065		
UBF	0.032	0.727	0.647	0.689	0.579	0.600	0.218	0.779	

Note: CE= consumer engagement, UBF= user-based factors, FGI= firm-generated information, CCV= co-creation value, BR= brand relationship, BE= brand equity.

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4.3 Structural Model Evaluation

Next, a path-weighing approach with bootstrapping involving 5,000 samples was utilized to conduct the PLS-SEM structural model analysis (Hair et al., 2018).
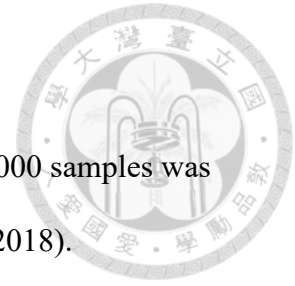
The hypotheses were tested using path coefficients and R^2 values (table 7). The path coefficient showed that customer engagement significantly influenced brand equity (b = 0.520, p = 0.000), and brand relationship had the most substantial impact on customer engagement (b = 0.272, p = 0.003), followed by co-creation value (b = 0237, p = 0.002), firm generated information (b = 0.226, p = 0.012), user-based factors (b = 0.163, p = 0.042). As a result of our analysis, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H2 were deemed statistically significant and supported. Furthermore, H1 was rejected, showing that SF had no significant impact on customer engagement (b = 0.059, p = 0.493).

The beta coefficient for gender in relation to brand equity was found to be statistically significant (b=-0.217, p=0.016), indicating that participant gender influenced brand equity as one of the control variables. The analysis further revealed that the gender effect on brand equity was higher for males compared to females. However, the observed skew in the gender effect on brand equity may be attributed to the fact that males constituted 78% of the survey participants.

The R^2 values for customer engagement and brand equity were 0.650 and 0.331, respectively. These values indicate that the exogenous constructs explain 65% and 33.1%

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of the variation in customer engagement and brand equity, respectively, exceeding the

recommended criterion benchmark. Hence, the research model explains a meaningful

amount of variation in the endogenous variables.

Table 7 Structural Model Results: Path Coefficients, P-values, R-square

Hypotheses	Paths	Path coefficients	Sample mean	Std-dev	T-statistics	Significance (p values)
H1	SF→ CE	0.056	0.059	0.081	0.685	0.493
H2	UBF → CE	0.154	0.163	0.076	2.034	0.042
H3	FGI → CE	0.221	0.226	0.088	2.499	0.012
H4	CCV → CE	0.240	0.237	0.077	3.119	0.002
H5	BR → CE	0.282	0.272	0.094	2.985	0.003
H6	CE → BE	0.513	0.520	0.064	7.982	0.000
	Age → BE	0.078	0.079	0.071	1.099	0.272
	Gender → BE	-0.218	-0.217	0.091	2.406	0.016

|		R-square values	R-square adjusted			
	CE	0.626	0.624			
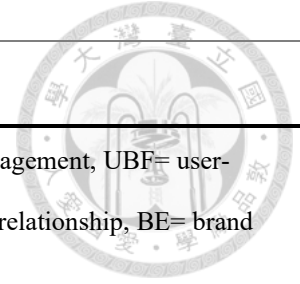
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	BE	0.332	0.33

4.4 Results Analysis

We initially anticipated that social factors (SF) would serve as a motivation for users to engage with branded content. However, the rejection of this hypothesis may be attributed to the demographic composition of the sample. Survey participants are inherently engaged in social interactions on Discord, rendering social factors less influential as a motivator for engaging with branded content. Ambiguity or overlap in item interpretation might have also contributed to inaccurate responses, complicating the establishment of a clear relationship between these factors and customer engagement.

Social factors did not exhibit significance in our findings, aligning with outcomes from prior studies. Similar to research on Facebook Brand Pages (De Vries & Carlson, 2012), social factors showed a limited impact on influencing customer engagement. To further comprehend this, a qualitative exploration utilizing netnography could be valuable. Such an approach could delve into the distinctive attributes and tools of Discord, such as its

various server channels. These channels may satisfy users' social needs, diverting their interactions away from channels where brand-related discussions typically occur.

Moreover, it's plausible that users have already fulfilled their social needs within other servers they are part of, presenting alternative avenues for establishing social connections with fellow server users.

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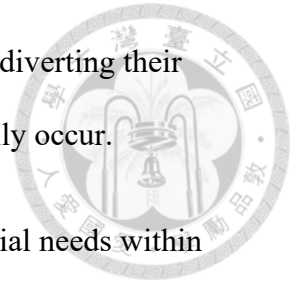
Chapter 5. Interpretation & Conclusion

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study was done with the primary objective of enhancing our understanding of the drivers of customer engagement on Discord and its influence on brand equity. Our findings highlight that customer engagement is shaped by co-creation, user-based needs, firm-generated information needs, and brand relationship, which significantly impacts brand equity, manifested in improved product perceptions and brand loyalty. Notably, this study makes significant contributions to the academic literature in various ways.
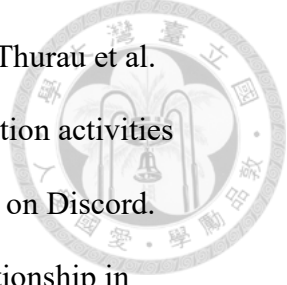
Firstly, it introduces an extended framework model for studying customer engagement on Discord, a relatively understudied channel. Unlike previous studies that focused on specific servers, this research adopts a general perspective, integrating social factors, user-based needs, co-creation values, firm-generated information, and brand relationship. This comprehensive model provides valuable insights into the dynamics of customer engagement specific to the Discord platform, bridging a crucial gap in the literature.

Secondly, the study extends the investigation of the positive effects of customer engagement on brand equity, focusing specifically on the context of Discord. While previous research has explored customer engagement on various SM platforms like Facebook (Jahn and Kunz, 2012), this study delves into non-purchase engagement

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behaviors within Discord, offering novel insights into their influence on brand equity. The findings highlight the crucial role of customer engagement in fostering brand equity on Discord channels, emphasizing the significance of branded interactive content in creating meaningful interactions with consumers. The results of this study not only confirm but also extend existing research on other SM platforms (De Vries et al., 2012), reinforcing the idea that customer engagement is a key driver of brand equity across various digital channels. This research thus advances the branding and marketing literature by examining the direct impact of customer engagement on Discord as a predictor of brand equity within a comprehensive framework.

Furthermore, this research contributes new insights into the realm of consumer engagement, specifically within the context of Discord. While previous studies have explored Discord using the U&G theory (Tumewu & Kurniasari, 2022), this study takes a unique brand perspective on engagement. Furthermore, prior research on Discord engagement has predominantly focused on specific servers, neglecting an overall platform analysis that links customer engagement to brand equity (Zaucha & Agur, 2022; Chuang & Ratan, 2022). By examining Discord through a customer engagement lens, this study highlights the significance of brand relationship factors, user-based needs, and co-creation values in driving customer engagement. It extends the current understanding of customer engagement on online SM platforms, like Discord, by introducing co-creation value and brand strength as pivotal drivers of customer engagement on this platform. Empirical
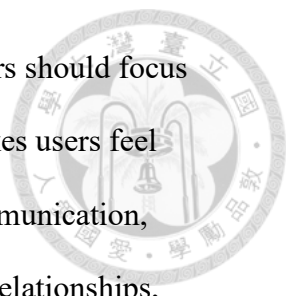
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findings in this study extend theoretical arguments proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010), Sashi (2012), and others, underscoring the importance of co-creation activities between brands and consumers as a valuable outcome of brand exposure on Discord. Additionally, the research demonstrates the influential role of brand relationship in fostering customer engagement in the unique context of Discord, extending previous studies primarily focused on websites and social networking sites (Carlson & O'Cass, 2012). These insights not only enrich the understanding of customer engagement on virtual platforms but also have practical implications for marketers seeking to connect with younger generations, who are prominently represented on Discord.

Overall, this study's theoretical implications extend the research realm of Discord and contribute to a broader understanding of consumer customer engagement and brand equity. By identifying key drivers of customer engagement and exploring their effects on brand equity on Discord, this research advances our knowledge of consumer behavior in the digital age, offering a framework model and valuable insights for scholars aiming to build further research on consumer-brand relationships and novel SM platforms in an ever-evolving landscape.
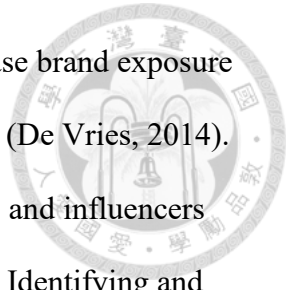
5.2 Managerial implications

Based on the study's findings, several managerial recommendations can enhance Discord users' customer engagement and brand equity. Brand relationship emerges as the

most influential factor in customer engagement, suggesting that marketers should focus their strategies on building meaningful and long-lasting content that makes users feel related and connected to the brand. This could include personalized communication, targeted marketing campaigns, and loyalty programs that nurture brand relationships, ultimately increasing engagement and fostering brand loyalty. Co-creation ranks as the second most influential factor in customer engagement, indicating that brands should actively involve users in brand-building. Encouraging user-generated content, feedback, and brand collaboration activities can deepen their relationship with customers, creating a sense of ownership and loyalty among users. Additionally, to account for the effects of firm-generated information and user-based factors, brands must invest in high-quality and relevant content creation that retains users' interest in the brand. Customer and market research should be performed often to identify users' topics of interest, delivering valuable and informative content through various channels like SM, websites, and newsletters.

While the study lacks sufficient data to prove social factors as direct motivators for customer engagement, brands should remain attentive to user behavior on social platforms, as they can be valuable sources of information to gather feedback and develop marketing strategies.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the effect of customer engagement on brand equity specifically in the context of Discord. To increase brand equity, managers can improve customer relationships through brand-related communication dialogue and

promote positive social proof and word-of-mouth interactions that increase brand exposure on other digital platforms through users liking and sharing brand content (De Vries, 2014). Marketers can further harness the positive sentiments of brand advocates and influencers within Discord communities to amplify the brand's reach and credibility. Identifying and nurturing these brand advocates can turn them into influential ambassadors, sparking authentic conversations about the brand and reinforcing its position as a trusted entity among Discord users.

Understanding and leveraging platforms where younger generations congregate and interact is paramount for marketers seeking to connect with their target audience. Discord, a popular platform among the younger demographic, holds significant potential as a channel for customer engagement and marketing efforts (Lendel et al., 2017). The younger generation represents a key target market for marketers due to their immense purchasing power, influence on trends, and potential long-term customer loyalty. Discord's community-oriented and interactive nature offers marketers a valuable opportunity to engage with this audience authentically and meaningfully. As the younger generation continues to be early adopters of new technologies and platforms, understanding Discord's impact allows marketers to stay ahead of trends and adapt their marketing strategies accordingly.

In conclusion, given that Discord is a platform where younger generations congregate and interact, conducting more research to understand how people engage with it

becomes crucial for marketers. It enables them to tap into this valuable target market, create impactful marketing strategies, and foster lasting brand connections with the future generation of consumers. Continuously monitoring and adapting strategies based on user feedback and behavior will ensure sustained success in engaging Discord users and building a strong brand presence on the platform. By implementing these recommendations, brands can enhance their customer engagement efforts on Discord, fostering deeper connections with users and driving brand equity growth.

Chapter 6. Conclusion, limitations and suggestions for future research

6.1 Conclusion

This thesis delved into the factors driving customer engagement on Discord, an interactive online SM platform known for its community-oriented nature. By applying the U&G theory, the study explored how social factors, user-based factors, firm-generated information, co-creation values, and brand relationship influence users' engagement with brands on Discord, and its subsequent impact on brand equity. Utilizing a quantitative approach, data was gathered through survey-based research of 184 participants, selected through convenience sampling. The target demographic consisted of active Discord users aged 18 to 44, exposed to branded content on the platform. The survey data was then analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0.

The results revealed significant relationships between brand relationship, co-creation values, firm-generated information and user-based factors with customer engagement on Discord, in order of most significant to least significant. There was also high significance in positively linking customer engagement to brand equity, meaning that users engaged with brand content in Discord were likely to change their perception of that brand. However, social-based factors did not significantly affect customer engagement motivations. The implications of this research extend to academia and industry, offering

valuable insights for marketers seeking to leverage customer engagement strategies on Discord to positively affect brand equity.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of customer engagement on Discord, contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding customer engagement on SM platforms. Understanding the factors driving customer engagement and its impact on brand equity is crucial for marketers aiming to connect with the younger generation, which constitutes a significant target market. Discord's interactive and community-oriented nature presents a unique opportunity for brands to engage with users authentically. By implementing tailored strategies based on the study's findings, marketers can enhance customer engagement efforts on Discord, fostering lasting connections with users and driving brand equity growth. Staying attuned to platforms where younger generations congregate and interact allows marketers to remain ahead of trends and adapt their strategies effectively to connect with the future generation of consumers. By continuously monitoring user feedback and behavior, brands can ensure sustained success in engaging Discord users and establishing a strong brand presence on the platform.

6.2 Limitations

This research study encountered four limitations that are acknowledged for a comprehensive interpretation of the findings. Firstly, the sample size was limited, which

may not accurately represent the broader population from which the sample is drawn, leading to a potential generalization of the findings.
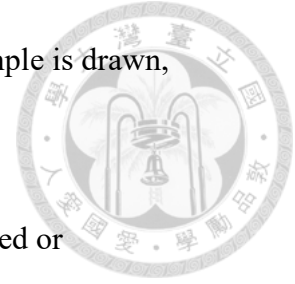
Secondly, the availability of the sample was not entirely controlled or predetermined through convenience sampling, a data collection method that may not have fully represented the broader Discord population. Specifically, the control variable gender emerged as a significant variable, whereby males were more likely to change their perception of a brand, leading to an increase in brand equity. This skewed gender distribution could be explained by the survey pool having a majority proportion of male respondents (78%) compared to females. Additionally, the general nature of the sample overlooks potential regional, cultural, industry, and product category variations in consumer behaviors on Discord.

Thirdly, this study employed PLS-SEM to establish connections between five variables and their impact on customer engagement, and the subsequent influence of customer engagement on brand equity. However, there is an absence of a direct test examining the effects of these five variables on brand equity. In other words, the study did not assess whether the results and loadings obtained could also be consistent when directly assessing the mediating impact of customer engagement using PLS-SEM.

Furthermore, the existing research on customer engagement on Discord was somewhat limited, with prior studies often focused on specific branded Discord servers

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(Zaucha & Agur, 2022). While some relevant studies exist, a broader, generalized perspective on customer engagement on the platform remains relatively unexplored in the literature, creating an opportunity for this study to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, which limited the prior research scope for this study.
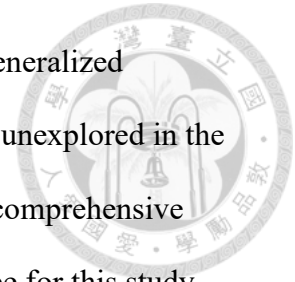
6.3 Suggestions for future research

Despite these limitations, several promising avenues for future research have emerged. Incorporating gender as a moderating variable could offer deeper insights into its potential impact on each path within the structural model. Future research should aim to address the gender imbalance in the sample by gathering a more balanced representation of both male and female participants. Probability sampling would further enhance the study's accuracy and align the sample with the global Discord user base. Expanding the sample size would also strengthen the study's statistical power and contribute to a more robust understanding of the relationship between gender and brand equity on the Discord platform.

Additionally, future investigations could explore the same model across diverse industries or product categories, providing a deeper understanding of the drivers of customer engagement within specific contexts. Comparisons between different industries may reveal unique drivers or varying levels of significance for customer engagement, enriching the study area.

A mixed-methods approach could also strengthen the research. Incorporating qualitative content analysis techniques like netnography (Brodie et al., 2011) to study actual online activities of customers, such as reactions, replies, and messages on Discord servers, may offer valuable behavioral insights (Cvijkj & Michahelles, 2013).
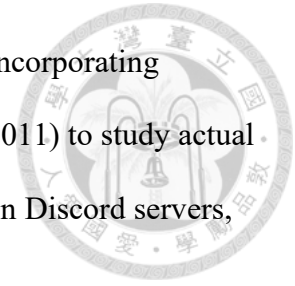
Furthermore, future research could omit customer engagement as a moderating variable and directly evaluate the individual effects of the five variables on brand equity. Subsequent studies could reveal that the influence of customer engagement is marginal and that the loadings of variables on the effect of brand equity are comparable.

By addressing these research gaps and utilizing diverse methodologies, future studies can deepen our comprehension of customer engagement dynamics on Discord and its implications across different contexts and industries.

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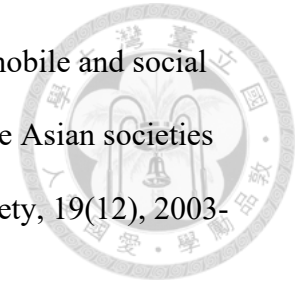
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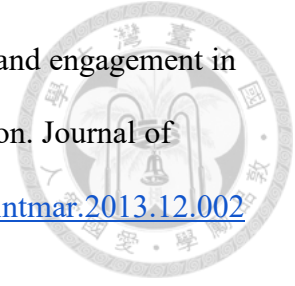
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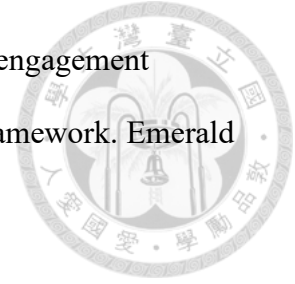
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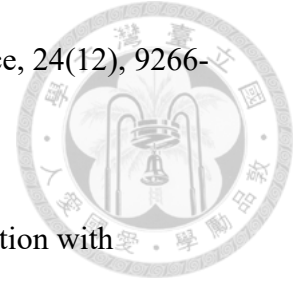
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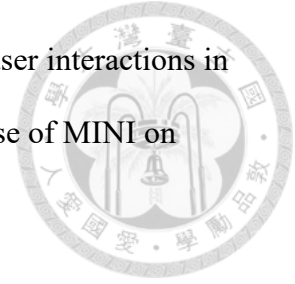
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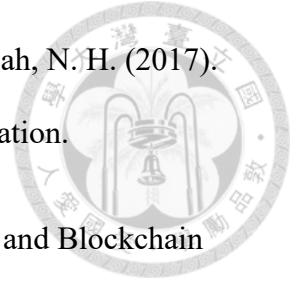
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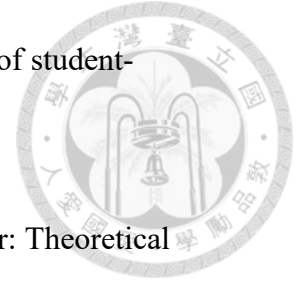
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Appendix 1: Research Survey

Exploring User Perspectives on Discord Engagement: An Survey Study

<u>Section 1:</u>

This survey is part of a master's thesis study that aims to explore user perspectives on Discord engagement, specifically focusing on the factors that influence customer engagement on this popular online communication platform. The survey consists of a series of questions about your experiences and preferences when using Discord and takes around 8 minutes.

Data protection: Your responses will remain confidential and used solely for research purposes. Rest assured that all data will be analyzed anonymously.

Your input is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact R09749007@ntu.edu.tw.

Have you used Discord before?

Yes

No

If yes, please select the time range option that best represents your experience:

I don't use Discord often (Less than 1 hour per week)

I often use the Discord (1-5 hours per week)

I regularly use Discord (More than 5 hours per week)

I haven't used Discord before

Have you ever been exposed to brand mentions or seen users engage in conversations about brands on Discord? Not exclusive to advertisements, mentions include discussions about a new product or service, commenting about a product launch video, etc.

For example, a user mentions a videogame title.

Yes

No

If yes, which of the following product category are you most exposed to on Discord?

I haven't been exposed to brand mentions on Discord

Gaming (game titles, gaming gear, gameplay tips)

Technology and gadgets (PC parts, screens, phone recommendations)

Entertainment (movies, TV shows, music)

Sports and fitness (fitness influencer, sports gear, sports venue)

Fashion and beauty (store name, beauty influencer)

Food and beverages (location, grocery recommendations)

Home and lifestyle (lifestyle influencers, recommended tools)

Other

Section 2: Participant Demographics

Please answer the following demographic questions:

1. Please select your gender:

Female

Male

Gender variant/Non-conforming

Prefer not to disclose

2. What's your age? Note: If your age is not between 18 and 70 years, you do not meet

the age requirements to complete the survey.

3. What is your highest level of education completed?

Less than high school

High school or equivalent

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Doctorate or professional degree

4. What is your annual income level? Please select the range that best represents your

income:

Less than $25,000

$25,000 - $50,000

$50,001 - $75,000

$75,001 - $100,000

$100,001 - $150,000

$150,001 - $200,000

More than $200,000

Prefer not to disclose

Section 3: Discord Server Usage and Engagement:

Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements related to your behavior when interacting with brand mentions on Discord.

"Brand mentions" in this survey refers to any content in a Discord server that mentions a company's brand. Such content includes product updates, announcements, promotions, and insights aimed at informing and engaging users. For instance, when a user mentions they used browser based services

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like Chat GPT or a videogame they enjoyed.

I engage with Discord brand mentions to relieve my stress

I engage with Discord brand mentions to derive fun or pleasure

I engage with Discord brand mentions to find new means of entertainment

I engage with Discord brand mentions to make new friends

I engage with Discord brand mentions to find people with similar interests

I engage with Discord brand mentions to connect with friends and family

I engage with Discord brand mentions to receive appreciation or social validation

I engage with Discord brand mentions to show solidarity to issues that matter to me

I engage with Discord brand mentions to share my problems

Section 4: Discord Server Brand Mention Interaction

Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements related to your behavior when

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interacting with brand mentions on Discord.

Note: Brand mentions on Discord server includes exclusive updates, announcements, promotions, and insights shared within a Discord server to engage and inform users.
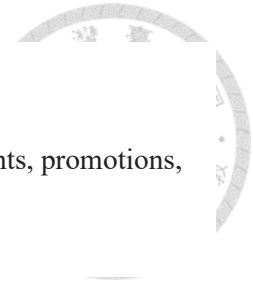
I seek new information to keep myself updated with latest trends or news

I seek information that might teach or hone some skills

Products presented on Discord are customized to my needs

I am presented with brands that are compatible with my liking

The brand provides updated and frequent information

The company's offers are reliable and competitive

The brand mention on Discord is helpful for me

The brand mention on Discord is practical

Section 5: Discord Server Active Participation

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Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements related to your participation on Discord servers, i.e., creating your own content, such as commenting on threads, sending messages, or adding reactions?

The Discord server interacts with me to serve me better

The Discord server works together with me to produce offerings that better suit me

The Discord server interacts with me to design offerings that meet my needs

The Discord server provides services in conjunction with me

The Discord server allows my involvement in providing services to get the experience that I want

The Discord server provides me with services that I help create

Section 6: Discord Server Brand Mention Engagement

Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements related to your engagement with brand mentions on Discord servers. For example, clicking external links, viewing media, commenting on threads, sending messages, or adding reactions.

I engage with brand mentions on Discord to follow regular updates of the products or services

I engage with brand mentions on Discord to express myself freely about the brand

I engage with brand mentions on Discord to participate in the community and explore

I consider myself an integrated member of the Discord server community

I consider myself an active member of the Discord server community

I consider the brand to be a relevant part of my life

I am interested in the brand

The brand is a lot like me

The brand reflects what I am

Through the brand, I can express what I find important in life

Section 7: Discord Server Brand Impression

When a brand is promoted or discussed in a Discord server you're part of, indicate how much you agree with the following statements regarding your impression of that brand:

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I easily recall the logo of the brand

The brand has a good image among customers

The brand provides more products and services than its competitors

The quality of its product or service is extremely high

The likelihood that its products or services would be functional is very high

I will continue to buy the products or use the services of the brand