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# Service quality in social media communication of NPOs: The moderating effect of channel choice

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ABSTRACT

Social media communication is attractive for non-profit organizations (NPOs); however, the channels of social media are not homogeneous; a factor not sufficiently considered by empirical research. We address this gap by looking into the moderating effect of social media channel choice on the impact of brand trust on process and outcome quality. By surveying 174 customers of an Austrian NPO, we analyze different social media channels to investigate whether (1) the established wisdom of service marketing regarding the positive impact of brand trust on service quality holds in the social-media context and (2) whether the choice of social media channel moderates these relationships. The results confirm the established model of service quality. Knowledge from traditional marketing can still be applied in a digital environment. However, the moderation analysis highlights the relevance of social media channel choice and illustrates different effects on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. We discuss the implications.

## 1. Introduction

Non-profit organizations (NPOs) that receive funding from government agencies and private donors must use their resources strategically to achieve their mission-related goals (Richter, Fink, Lang, & Maresch, 2019). Such organizations can generally improve the efficient delivery of services by using information and communication technology (Felício, Gonçalves, & da Conceição Gonçalves, 2013; Michaelidou, Micevski, & Cadogan, 2015; Waters, 2007; Zorn, Flanagin, & Shoham, 2011) and particularly by using social media (SM) (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). To this end, SM channels are especially attractive for NPOs, because delivering the service via communication channels such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook offers enormous efficiency, reach, and intimacy (Fink, Koller, Gartner, Floh, & Harms, 2020; Ihm, 2015; Levine & Zahradnik, 2012; Milla, Mataruna-Dos-Santos, & Ristic, 2018). Consequently, SM is expected to be the main communication tool for NPOs in the future (Milla et al., 2018). However, delivering services via SM brings both opportunities and challenges for NPOs, with SM impacting several marketing dimensions. Positive impacts were found for example, on stakeholder engagement (Ihm, 2015) and financial viability (Levine & Zahradnik, 2012), while institutional policies, concerns about the inappropriateness for target audiences, and client confidentiality were identified as problematic (Campbell, Lambright, & Wells, 2014).

Starting in the 1970s with the insight that classical marketing axioms do not provide sufficient understanding of services (Grönroos, 1994), the service marketing theory that considers service a collaborative process between service provider and customer (Mohr & Bitner, 1995) was later extended to tangible goods (Grönroos, 2006, 2007; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo, Lusch, Akaka, & He, 2010). In the current socio-technical transition (Gartner, Maresch, & Fink, 2015), outcome quality, that is, what the customer receives during the exchange (Mohr & Bitner, 1995, p. 239) and process quality "the manner in which the outcome is transferred to the customer" (Mohr & Bitner, 1995, p. 239) might have altered with the use of SM in customer communication as well (Hu, Lu, & Tang, 2019). However, SM as a potentially disruptive

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form of communication technology is not homogeneous since different communication channels, for example, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook leverage very different forms of communication such as videos, chat texts, photographs, or a combination thereof (Roma & Aloini, 2019). Earlier research stresses that different SM channels have different effects on brand satisfaction (Clark, Black, & Judson, 2017) and service-quality perceptions after complaint handling (Sugathan, Rossmann, & Ranjan, 2018). We argue that the differences between the SM channels should be more rigorously accounted for to extend the understanding of the role of SM usage in the service-quality perceptions of customers. For example, brand trust is enforced by firm-created content communicated via SM (Sadek, Elwy, & Eldallal, 2018; Moro, Fink, & Maresch, 2015). However, a perspective that explicitly accounts for the different communication channels on SM has not yet featured in empirical research.

Our study aims to address this gap by looking into the moderating effect of SM channel choice and usage on the impact of brand trust on process and outcome quality. As a precondition, we test whether the traditional understanding of service quality still holds in the digital age. Outcome quality and process quality are generally seen as the two components of service quality (Brown & Swartz, 1989; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Grönroos, 1984) and are conceptually different but statistically interrelated. In other words, we propose that process quality directly influences outcome quality. We also account for the effects of trust on the components of service quality. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 82) define trust as "the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence." Trust has been shown to have a positive impact on the quality of experience goods in general and service quality in particular (Chiou & Droge, 2006; Setó-Pamies, 2012). We complement the established model by distinguishing between four different SM channels: YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. Specifically, we find that service delivery via SM enhances trust in the brand.

Based on a partial least square analysis of 174 cases collected from an Austrian NPO that operates a national helpline, we find support for the notion that brand trust affects both outcome and process quality. Mixed results are found for the moderating effect of the different SM channels, with YouTube showing the strongest effect on the relationships in the basic model.

The findings of this study contribute to research and practice in several ways. First, we contribute to marketing research by showing that the established model of service marketing regarding the positive impact of brand trust on service quality is also valid in the novel context of SM. Trust in a brand is an important factor in the perception of the quality of services provided through SM channels. An even more relevant contribution flows from the identified contingencies. Our results highlight that the choice of SM channel moderates the relationship of brand trust with service quality. We also uncover substitution effects linked to the different SM channels. For example, a firm that scores lower on brand trust can compensate for that deficit by improving its performance in Facebook and YouTube activities. This insight contributes to research and practice. This contingency should encourage researchers to analyze different SM channels separately, instead of considering them as one monolithic medium. For practitioners, our findings indicate that selecting SM channels should be done cautiously, as the strength of the moderation effects for the different SM channels varies. For example, firms that score lower on brand trust can compensate for that deficit by improving their performance in their Facebook and YouTube activities. We also contribute to marketing practice by demonstrating that the tool kit of marketers does not have to be defined anew when applied in SM channels and that they can still rely on their knowledge and experience. At the same time, our findings highlight the need to complement traditional marketing wisdom with an in-depth understanding of the SM landscape.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In the next section, we discuss the rationale of our research model which is also shown in Fig. 1. The model contains the basic hypotheses of Service Quality (direct and mediation effects), hypotheses testing the moderating effect of SM channels on the relationships of the basic model, and the use of control variables. Our basic model is predicated on outcome quality being influenced by brand trust and service quality. However, we assume that those effects are moderated using various SM channels.

### 2.1. Base model of service quality: Direct and indirect effects

Since the digital transformation has accelerated, NPOs have increasingly operated in a digital context. And consequently, the logics of service marketing must be reassessed to reflect the changed conditions. Marketing researchers have spent nearly three decades attempting to understand how services can be managed effectively and efficiently. Based on the seminal work of Grönroos (1984), Brown and Swartz (1989), Cronin and Taylor (1992), and many others, service quality can be conceptually deconstructed into process and outcome quality. Outcome quality, sometimes also referred to as *functional quality* can be defined as what the customer receives during the exchange (Mohr & Bitner, 1995, p. 239). Using the example of the helpline examined here, this would correspond to the quality of the advice provided. Process quality can be defined as "the manner in which the outcome is transferred to the customer" (Mohr & Bitner, 1995, p. 239) and the concept takes the numerous interactions between the client and the service provider into account. In other words, the process of service delivery (i.e., social interactions during a social counseling session) may affect the perceived service outcome. This effect is supposed to be even higher if several service episodes occur within a short period. In the SM era, the frequency and characteristics of social interactions have changed substantially (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016).

Prior research highlights the relevance of both components of service quality in the traditional setting. However, empirical results pertaining to any links between the two components of service quality are mixed and inconsistent (Dabholkar & Overby, 2005). For example, Johnson, Zinkhan, and Ayala (1998) found that both process and outcome quality have a relevant and significant effect on servicer referral. Similarly, Dabholkar and Walls (1999) report an effect of outcome quality on process quality. In contrast, De Ruyter, Bloemer, and Peters (1997) found no direct relationship between the two service components and, subsequently, non-significant effects of process and outcome quality on customer satisfaction. Delivering the service via SM dramatically enhances the possible range of features that customers receive during the exchange (Mohr & Bitner, 1995, p. 239), which in turn can be expected to directly impact the perceived quality of the outcome of the transaction. Similarly, SM offers novel approaches to how services are delivered to the customer (Mohr & Bitner, 1995, p. 239), for example, through interactive media that are independent of time and place. Those new forms of service delivery via SM should also directly affect the perceived quality of the process. Accordingly, in this study, we follow the approach of Cronin and Taylor (1992) and propose that process quality directly influences outcome quality in the era of SM.

Trust has frequently been presented as an antecedent of quality of experience goods in general, and service quality in particular. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 82) define trust as "the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence." The core function of trust is to reduce uncertainty and cognitive dissonance. Prior research has shown that in traditional settings trust significantly influences customer behavior. Setó-Pamies (2012) surveyed the tourism industry and found a significant effect on repurchase intention and word-of-mouth. Similarly, Chiou and Droge (2006) showed an effect of trust on service quality, satisfaction, and customer loyalty in their study in the

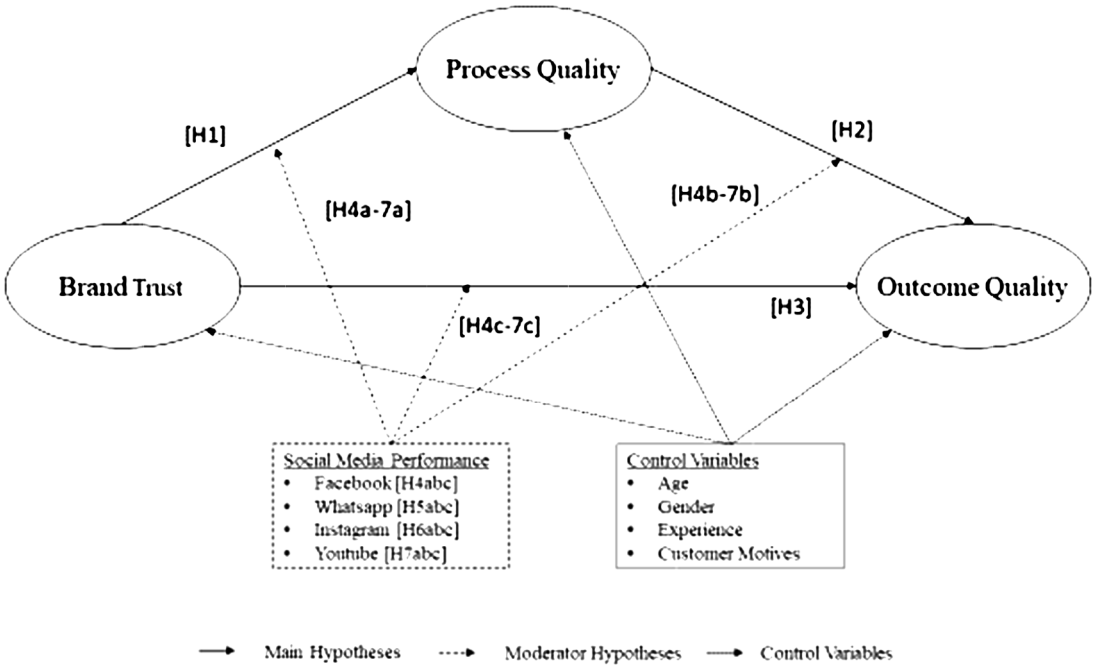


**Fig. 1.** Research model and hypotheses.

context of cosmetics. Trust has been shown to be highly relevant in customer communication via SM as well (Gretry, Horváth, Belei, & van Riel, 2017; Khadim, Hanan, Arshad, Saleem, & Khadim, 2018; Sadek et al., 2018). In line with prior research findings, also for the digital era, we postulate a positive effect on the two components of service quality, namely process, and outcome quality.

Fig. 1 is a visual representation of our research model. The hypotheses of the basic model are stated below:

H1: Brand trust has a positive influence on process quality in service delivery.
H2: Process quality has a positive influence on outcome quality in service delivery.
H3: Brand trust has a positive influence on outcome quality in service delivery.

### 2.2. Social media marketing in NPOs: Moderation effects

Research in the area of SM usage in NPOs identified multiple motivational factors behind the usage of SM including the aspiration to improve cost efficiency (Waters et al., 2009; Waters, 2007; Zorn et al., 2011), to increase market orientation (Levine & Zahradnik, 2012; Milla et al., 2018), to enhance stakeholder engagement (Ihm, 2015) and to enhance marketing efficiency (Kraus, Fink, Rössel, & Jensen, 2007; Wilde, 2015). Namisango, Kang, and Rehman (2019) reviewed the functions, enablers, and inhibitors of SM use and identified seven different functions resulting from SM usage of NPOs. The meta-analysis revealed that SM engagement can support relationships, information exchange, conversation and interaction, co-creation and innovation, community-building, collective action, and reputation and legitimacy of NPOs (for the complete review see, Namisango et al., 2019). However, the actual success of SM usage depends on many factors including the chosen strategy (Ihm, 2015; Levine & Zahradnik, 2012; Milla et al., 2018), the selection of SM platforms (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Soboleva, Burton, Daellenbach, & Basil, 2017), and the quality of communication (Carboni & Maxwell, 2015).

Trust is a critical element in service contexts. Given that service customers can often judge the quality of a service only after it has been received, information asymmetry between service producer and customer is typical when services are delivered (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014). That is, trust in the service provider can be increased by decreasing this information asymmetry, for instance by providing customers information about the brand (Chiu, Huang, & Yen, 2010; Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003).

Social media can reduce such information asymmetries. This is because it provides rich communication contexts for current and potential customers of an organization (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017). Through digital social networks, these customers can easily communicate with the organization and with other users (Ba, 2001; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). Furthermore, actions on SM such as sharing brand experiences with other users and the brand itself and receiving feedback can potentially strengthen ties among consumers and brand entities. These enhanced relationships would enhance consumers' perceptions that the brand is trustworthy (Habibi et al., 2014). Overall, additional information about the brand received through SM as well as repeated interactions and the building of long-term relationships help to enhance brand trust (Holmes, 1991).

Therefore, we hypothesize that trust enhancing capabilities of SM strengthen the relationships between brand trust and process quality as well as brand trust and outcome quality. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H4a: Facebook usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and process quality.
H5a: WhatsApp usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and process quality.
H6a: Instagram usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and process quality.
H7a: YouTube usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and process quality.
H4b: Facebook usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and outcome quality.
H5b: WhatsApp usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and outcome quality.
H6b: Instagram usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and outcome quality.
H7b: YouTube usage positively moderates the relationship between brand trust and outcome quality.

Two-way SM communication can also help to improve organizational processes. Previous research examined how SM communication makes it easier for users to give feedback and offer suggestions for new products (Andriole, 2010; Baumer, Sueyoshi, & Tomlinson, 2011; Nascimento & da Silveira, 2017) and can also help directly involve these users in creative processes (Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008; Warr, 2008). In addition, SM makes it easier for the organization to research valuable customer information (Piotrowski, 2011; Stafford et al., 2010). Thus, informing users about service processes before they actually happen and learning from users about their service needs has the potential to improve service processes (Nascimento & da Silveira, 2017). We therefore hypothesize:

H4c: Facebook usage positively moderates the relationship between process quality and outcome quality.
H5c: WhatsApp usage positively moderates the relationship between process quality and outcome quality.
H6c: Instagram usage positively moderates the relationship between process quality and outcome quality.
H7c: YouTube usage positively moderates the relationship between process quality and outcome quality.

Previous research investigated the impact of specific SM platforms on NPO success. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) identified information, community, and action as key functions behind NPOs' usage of microblogging, which is a key function of all SM services. Microblogging platforms engage stakeholders in dialogic and community-building practices more than do other SM platforms (Kruikemeier, 2014). Soboleva et al. (2017) also showed the potential for NPOs to use Twitter to reinforce partnerships with corporate partners. In this study, we aim to test the effects of different SM platforms on the postulated relationships between variables, that is to say, we search for differences between H4-7a, b, and c.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Setting: Helpline 147 Rat auf Draht

The emergency number 147 Rat auf Draht, which loosely translates as "Help through the wire," is an anonymous helpline in Austria established in 1987 to help individuals with personal issues, questions, and crises. Rat auf Draht operates as a non-profit, limited liability company and is funded by government grants and public donations. The 147 Rat auf Draht emergency helpline is considered the most important Austrian emergency resource for children, adolescents, and their caregivers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, 147 Rat auf Draht was one of the key providers of assistance and information for the Austrian population. A team consisting of psychologists, life- and social-counselors, and psychotherapists processes around 100,000 inquiries a year and conducts up to 250 counseling sessions a day. In 2019, the company reported revenues of around EUR 810,000 and employed 17 people. Since 2001, 147 Rat auf Draht has provided written advice by email and has recently expanded its services to online chats and SM channels such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. In addition, 147 Rat auf Draht offers advice videos on its webpage and via its own YouTube channel. The consultations are currently processed exclusively via telephone and online services and are free of charge. The 147 Rat auf Draht organization is a non-profit funded by donations, public funds, and *SOS Kinderdorf* (Satke, 2019).

### 3.2. Data collection and sampling

Data collection was focused on four SM channels that each have a different communication focus. While YouTube is mainly based on videos, WhatsApp on chat texts, Instagram on photographs, Facebook is leveraging a blend of all of these media. The selection of SM channels followed two criteria. First, the channels had to be frequently used by NPOs. According to Wilde (2015), the four SM channels meet this criterion. Second, all SM channels had to be observable in one case company as a matter of comparability. The four SM channels selected for this study were all used by147 Rat auf Draht. Data were collected through a web questionnaire. The online survey included multiple-item questions measuring brand trust, process quality, outcome quality, and perceived SM performance (Table 1).

An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent to 692 users, all of whom had connected with 147 Rat auf Draht through SM channels over two consecutive months. In total, 174 respondents completed the questionnaire (return rate 25.1%) and 64% of those respondents were female (male: 36%). Respondents were aged between 10 and 19 which reflects the helpline's focus on children and adolescents and the average respondent was 18 years old. Among the respondents, 36% had asked the non-profit organization for help on more than one occasion. A clear majority (71%) had contacted them in the year the study was conducted (2017). Respondents had asked for advice on several topics (general advice, emergency, and information gathering).

### 3.3. Method of analysis and scale measurement

Established scales were used for measuring all latent variables. Brand trust was captured with four items taken from Delgado-Ballesterer, Munuera-Alemán, and Yaggue-Guillén (2003). Process quality was also operationalized with four items. We have selected the items presented in

**Table 1**
Scale measurement properties.

| Latent Variable/Item | Factor Loadings |
|---|---|
| Brand Trust (CA = 0.903, rho_A = 0.948, CR = 0.929, AVE = 0.767) | |
| I think the brand Rat auf Draht is trustworthy. | 0.802 |
| I think the brand Rat auf Draht is competent. | 0.893 |
| I think the brand Rat auf Draht is honest. | 0.903 |
| I have very little confidence in the quality of the brand Rat auf Draht. (r) | 0.902 |
| Process Quality (CA = 0.822, rho_A = 0.830, CR = 0.882, AVE = 0.653) | |
| The service of Rat auf Draht is empathetic. | 0.828 |
| The service of Rat auf Draht is reassuring. | 0.838 |
| The service of Rat auf Draht is informative. | 0.728 |
| The service of Rat auf Draht is supportive. | 0.832 |
| Outcome Quality | |
| The service of Rat auf Draht has helped me a lot. | 1.000 |
| Perceived Social Media Performance – Facebook (CA = 0.889, rho_A = 0.900, CR = 0.918, AVE = 0.693) | |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is informative. | 0.780 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is interesting. | 0.871 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is cool. | 0.842 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is clearly structured. | 0.811 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is helpful. | 0.853 |
| Perceived Social Media Performance – WhatsApp (CA = 0.913, rho_A = 0.959, CR = 0.932, AVE = 0.733) | |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is informative. | 0.838 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is interesting. | 0.919 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is cool. | 0.878 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is clearly structured. | 0.785 |
| The Facebook page of Rat auf Draht is helpful. | 0.829 |
| Perceived Social Media Performance – Instagram (CA = 0.822, rho_A = 0.830, CR = 0.882, AVE = 0.653) | |
| The Instagram site of Rat auf Draht is informative. | 0.862 |
| The Instagram site of Rat auf Draht is interesting. | 0.945 |
| The Instagram site of Rat auf Draht is cool. | 0.890 |
| The Instagram site of Rat auf Draht is clearly structured. | 0.922 |
| The Instagram site of Rat auf Draht is helpful. | 0.912 |
| Perceived Social Media Performance – YouTube (CA = 0.966, rho_A = 0.948, CR = 0.973, AVE = 0.877) | |
| The YouTube channel of Rat auf Draht is informative. | 0.940 |
| The YouTube channel of Rat auf Draht is interesting. | 0.942 |
| The YouTube channel of Rat auf Draht is cool. | 0.933 |
| The YouTube channel of Rat auf Draht is clearly structured. | 0.949 |
| The YouTube channel of Rat auf Draht is helpful. | 0.919 |

Collier and Bienstock (2006) for process quality. Outcome quality was captured with a single-item measure as suggested by Chen and Kao (2010). Perceived SM performance was operationalized with five bipolar items taken from Akar and Topçu (2011). Control variables such as age, gender, experience, and motives were measured with single items.

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for the analysis and testing of all hypotheses. PLS-SEM has become very popular in business research due to its characteristics in the context of sampling distribution assumptions, statistical power, the capability of handling complex models, handling latent variables with reflective and formative indicators, etc. (Sarstedt & Cheah, 2019). In contrast to covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), PLS-SEM estimates statistical models by combining principal components with ordinary least square regressions. In a discussion of when to use PLS-SEM, Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, and Ringle (2019) suggest applying three criteria: (a) causal predictive analysis, (b) complexity of the problems explored, and (c) scarcity of prior theoretical knowledge. Our study meets these criteria and following the decision rules provided by Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2011) and Sarstedt, Hair, Ringle, Thiele, and Gudergan (2016), PLS-SEM is the chosen analytical approach.

PLS models include four features (Wold, 1980): i) Each latent variable (LV) is estimated as a weighted aggregate of its indicators. ii) The weights of the indicators in each aggregate are determined by the weight relations of the various blocks. iii) The model builder has the option to choose from different models for the design of the weight relations. iv) The selection of estimation mode is guided by the subject matter of the model. The estimation proceeds in three stages: i) an iterative procedure estimates the weights and the LVs; ii) the LV estimated in the first stage provide regressors for estimating the other unknown coefficients of the model through OLS (ordinary least squares) regressions; iii) the location parameters are estimated.

The benefits and limitations of PLS modeling have been heatedly debated across a variety of disciplines including marketing (e.g., Fornell & Bookstein, 1982; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012). For many years, CB-SEM was the dominant method used to analyze complex interrelationships between observed and latent variables. In fact, until around 2010, there were far more articles published in social science journals that used CB-SEM instead of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). However, in recent years, the number of published articles using PLS-SEM increased significantly relative to those applying CB-SEM (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017 in Hair et al., 2019).

### 3.4. Measurement assessment

We follow the recommendations by Hair et al. (2017) to assess the scale properties of the latent variables used in our research model. Table 1 shows all latent variables, goodness-of-fit indices such as Cronbach's Alpha, construct reliability, average variance extracted, the corresponding items, and their respective factor loadings.

All latent variables are measured with reflective indicators and all their respective loadings are above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). Cronbach's alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), and rho_A were used to assess internal consistency reliability (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). Again, all rules of thumb suggested by Hair et al. (2017) were met with values above the threshold of 0.7, indicating a satisfactory to good internal reliability of the scales (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014). Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to measure convergent validity. An acceptable AVE is achieved if the mean squared loading exceeds 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and Table 1 illustrates that all constructs comfortably meet this criterion.

Two approaches were used to assess discriminant validity. First, the square roots of AVE's were compared with the squared inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Second, the more recent hetero-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of the correlations was used. Henseler et al. (2014) recommend a maximum threshold of 0.9 for similar concepts. Tables 1 and 2 show the AVEs and their respective square roots, inter-construct correlations, and HTMT scores for each latent variable. The hetero-monotrait ratios (HTMT) shown in the upper correlation matrix are clearly below 0.9. Table 2 also shows that the square roots of AVEs (bold numbers on the diagonal) are substantially larger than the construct correlations (shown in the lower matrix). Both criteria are in line with the recommendations of Hair et al. (2019) indicating good discriminant validity.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Basic model

After assessing measurement properties, the main model was tested using the bootstrap algorithm of SmartPLS 3.0. Results are highlighted in Table 3.

The results of the bootstrapping analysis reveal a positive, significant effect of brand trust on process quality, which in turn leads to an increase in outcome quality. Hence, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. The strength of the relationship is mediocre for the relationship brand trust and process quality but is strong for process quality and outcome quality. In contrast, the path leading from brand trust to outcome quality is not significant. The effect of brand trust on outcome quality is fully mediated by process quality. Hypothesis 3 cannot be supported.

### 4.2. Control variables and robustness check

As a next step, the validity and robustness of the basic model are tested. For this purpose, control variables such as age, gender, experience, and consumer motives are included in the analyses. Results are also shown in Table 3. Including the control variables does not significantly change the estimated path coefficients of the basic model indicating satisfactorily robustness. As a final step, a cross-validation exercise with randomly split-half samples was conducted. Again, consistent results support the validity of the basic model and its results.

### 4.3. Analysis of moderating effects

Analyzing the effects of the performance of various SM channels on the relationships between brand trust, process quality, and outcome quality reveals mixed effects. Facebook and YouTube have significant negative moderating effects on the relationship between brand trust and process quality, and YouTube has a slightly weaker effect. Both moderating relationships show a strong effect (Facebook −0.424 versus YouTube −0.522). Hence, the data support Hypotheses H4a and H7a whereas H5a and H6a are rejected in the current study. In other words, a weaker performance on brand trust can be compensated by a stronger performance in Facebook and YouTube activities. This is an interesting finding that will be discussed in more detail in the discussion section.

The moderating effect of SM performance and brand trust on outcome quality is only significant on a 10%-level considering the activities on Instagram (std. est. par. = −0.137) and YouTube (std. est. par. = −0.127). Both effects can be regarded as weak. Analyses reveal insignificant results for all other combinations of brand trust and Facebook and WhatsApp. Accordingly, H6b and H7b are supported, while H4b and H5b are not supported by the data.

YouTube also shows a marginally significant moderating effect with process quality on outcome quality ($p = .063$) which in turn indicates support for H7c. A successful YouTube channel reinforces the positive effect of process quality on outcome quality. The moderating effect of YouTube is reasonably high (0.367). All remaining moderating effects of process quality and SM performance on output quality are insignificant, therefore H4–H6c are rejected. Standardized parameters range from 0.027 (Instagram) to 0.367 (YouTube).

Overall, YouTube shows the strongest effect on the basic models. All p-values of moderating effects are below the significance thresholds.

**Table 2**
Construct correlations.

| Variable | Brand Trust | Process Quality | Outcome Quality | Facebook | WhatsApp | Instagram | YouTube |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brand Trust | **0.876** | 0.288 | 0.394 | 0.062 | 0.134 | 0.058 | 0.049 |
| Process Quality | 0.366 | **0.808** | 0.771 | 0.158 | 0.147 | 0.071 | 0.059 |
| Outcome Quality | 0.304 | 0.702 | NA | 0.168 | 0.130 | 0.152 | 0.025 |
| Facebook | 0.047 | 0.258 | -0.031 | **0.832** | NA | NA | NA |
| WhatsApp | 0.135 | 0.117 | 0.031 | NA | **0.856** | NA | NA |
| Instagram | 0.047 | 0.187 | 0.047 | NA | NA | **0.808** | NA |
| YouTube | 0.043 | -0.100 | 0.182 | NA | NA | NA | **0.936** |

Note: Construct correlations are below the diagonal. Square roots of AVE's are shown in the diagonal. HTMT ratios are shown above the diagonal. NA = Not Available.

**Table 3**
Standardized path coefficients.

| Hypothesis | Path | Stand. Est. | p-Value |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Basic Model* | | | |
| H1 | Brand Trust → Process Quality | 0.366 | 0.000 |
| H2 | Process Quality → Outcome Quality | 0.683 | 0.000 |
| H3 | Brand Trust → Outcome Quality | 0.054 | 0.221 |
| *Control Variable: Age* | | | |
| H1 | Brand Trust → Process Quality | 0.371 | 0.000 |
| H2 | Process Quality → Outcome Quality | 0.682 | 0.000 |
| H3 | Brand Trust → Outcome Quality | 0.054 | 0.251 |
| *Control Variable: Gender* | | | |
| H1 | Brand Trust → Process Quality | 0.381 | 0.000 |
| H2 | Process Quality → Outcome Quality | 0.670 | 0.000 |
| H3 | Brand Trust → Outcome Quality | 0.074 | 0.095 |
| *Control Variable: Experience* | | | |
| H1 | Brand Trust → Process Quality | 0.367 | 0.000 |
| H2 | Process Quality → Outcome Quality | 0.686 | 0.000 |
| H3 | Brand Trust → Outcome Quality | 0.040 | 0.382 |
| *Control Variable: Customer Motives* | | | |
| H1 | Brand Trust → Process Quality | 0.366 | 0.000 |
| H2 | Process Quality → Outcome Quality | 0.680 | 0.000 |
| H3 | Brand Trust → Outcome Quality | 0.055 | 0.183 |
| *Moderation Social Media Performance: Brand Trust – Process Quality* | | | |
| $H4_a$ | Brand Trust * Facebook → Process Quality | -0.424 | 0.024 |
| $H5_a$ | Brand Trust * WhatsApp → Process Quality | -0.055 | 0.403 |
| $H6_a$ | Brand Trust * Instagram → Process Quality | -0.296 | 0.225 |
| $H7_a$ | Brand Trust * YouTube → Process Quality | -0.522 | 0.050 |
| *Moderation Social Media Performance: Brand Trust – Outcome Quality* | | | |
| $H4_b$ | Brand Trust * Facebook → Outcome Quality | -0.085 | 0.151 |
| $H5_b$ | Brand Trust * WhatsApp → Outcome Quality | 0.008 | 0.448 |
| $H6_b$ | Brand Trust * Instagram → Outcome Quality | -0.137 | 0.053 |
| $H7_b$ | Brand Trust * YouTube → Outcome Quality | -0.127 | 0.080 |
| *Moderation Social Media Performance: Process Quality – Outcome Quality* | | | |
| $H4_c$ | Process Quality * Facebook → Outcome Quality | 0.220 | 0.174. |
| $H5_c$ | Process Quality * WhatsApp → Outcome Quality | 0.027 | 0.371 |
| $H6_c$ | Process Quality * Instagram → Outcome Quality | 0.169 | 0.193 |
| $H7_c$ | Process Quality * YouTube → Outcome Quality | 0.367 | 0.063 |

Facebook also compensates for lower performance on brand trust whereas Instagram strengthens the effect of brand trust on outcome quality.

## 5. Discussion

We have set out to investigate whether (1) the established wisdom of service marketing regarding the positive impact of brand trust on service quality still holds true in the era of SM and (2) the choice of SM channel moderates these relationships. The setting of this study—a major Austrian NPO—was ideal to investigate those questions because SM provides an attractive opportunity to generate impact, especially for NPOs. Moreover, the case NPO used all of the four most common SM channels.

We found that the established model of service quality also applies to the era of SM. Trust in a brand influences the perception of the quality of the provided service. This implies that the marketing tool kit does not have to be defined anew once firms provide their services over SM channels. The differences between online and offline marketing are not as fundamental as is sometimes assumed (see, e.g., Hamill, 2016). Existing knowledge, experience, and skills acquired in traditional marketing have not lost value in the face of the digital transformation and can still be applied in a digital environment. This is not only good news for marketing researchers, but can particularly benefit educators and practitioners. While it is of utmost importance that marketing practitioners engage in life-long learning to keep their knowledge up to date with rapid change in the ongoing socio-technical transition, they can still rely on their core knowledge gained through education and work experience.

However, the traditional wisdom on how to foster the perception of service among customers needs to be complemented with in-depth knowledge on the distinct role different SM channels play in this game. The effects of online marketing campaigns either via entrepreneurial blogs and websites (Huang, 2012) or via the use of multiple SM platforms (Bilgin, 2018; Ebrahim, 2020; Godey et al., 2016; Seo & Park, 2018) has been examined from various perspectives. Researchers have developed holistic frameworks of SM marketing (Felix et al., 2017) and identified challenges of managing brands in the SM environment (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Multi-channel SM activities significantly affect brand equity, brand image, brand awareness, and brand loyalty (Bilgin, 2018; Ebrahim, 2020; Godey et al., 2016; Seo & Park, 2018) as well as branding recognition and identity (Alalwan et al., 2017). Social media marketing activities have illustrated their ability to influence brand loyalty either directly (Ebrahim, 2020) or indirectly through brand awareness and brand image (Bilgin, 2018). Brand awareness in turn seems to affect commitment, and brand image influences online word-of-mouth and commitment (Seo & Park, 2018). Similar effects have also been found in the case of luxury brands where significant positive effects of SM marketing activities were found on the two main dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness and brand image (Godey et al., 2016). However, the majority of studies report multiple SM platforms as one homogeneous communication channel and do not differentiate between the individual SM platforms as communication channels with different characteristics. Only a few studies focus on the use and effectiveness of specific SM channels and investigate platform-dependent differences. For instance, Gulbahar and Yildirim (2015) found Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Foursquare were the most popular platforms for hotel marketing in Turkey but also observed significant regional differences in the choice of those SM channels. Smith and Gallicano (2015) indicated that in comparison with YouTube, both Twitter and Facebook are more effective SM platforms to communicate with customers and to create and present brand stories.

More recently, the (interaction) effect of branding and SM has been theoretically linked to the conception, measurement, and consequences of customer journeys. Kuehnl, Jozic, and Homburg (2019) report a positive impact of brand metrics such as brand attitude, brand experience, and brand love on the effective design of customer journeys. Similarly, Demmers, Weltevreden, and van Dolen (2020) analyze the effect of brand posts on attitudinal variables such as brand engagement in consecutive stages of the customer journey.

Our study builds on these results and contributes to this discourse by considering the differences between individual SM platforms and the effects occasioned by conscious channel choice. In terms of the customer journey, we extend prior research by adopting the concept to the service delivery stage (rather than the purchase stage) and the context of NPOs. We measure the interaction effect of brand trust and SM on perceptual marketing performance variables such as process and outcome quality which in turn influence customer loyalty and word-of-mouth.

The findings of the current study offer some major insights. First, they highlight the differences in strength of the moderation effect that the four different SM channels have on the relationships postulated in the traditional model. Some platforms seem to particularly foster specific dimensions of service quality and to have the capacity to compensate for missing brand trust and process quality. This advantage gained from integrating SM channels into the corporate strategy is very relevant for NPOs. Given limited budgets and the extra pressure to justify marketing spending for NPOs, channel choice might be one of the most discussed issues in the relationship between financing bodies, top management, and marketing departments. However, the specific characteristics of the service offered by the NPO determine the suitability of a particular SM channel. In addition to a specific profile of users and an individual culture, each SM channel has a specific set of media elements that prioritize different types of communication. Even if, in recent years, many platforms have expanded their functions leading to a certain convergence, in most cases the original communication focus still dominates each specific communication channel. This ranges from unidirectional to bidirectional communication with a stronger focus on text or visuals and the possibility of transferring greater or lesser volumes of content. The researched platforms can be categorized along these dimensions: WhatsApp is mostly used for bidirectional and text-focused communication; Facebook, in contrast, is dominated by bidirectional, mixed media, and content-focused communication; Instagram corresponds more closely to a unidirectional and visually oriented communication style; and YouTube is a unidirectional, visual, and content-focused platform.

We found that a more content-oriented communication focus can positively affect the perceived quality of a process, while a more visually oriented focus fosters the perceived quality of an outcome. Specifically, the choice of SM channel moderates the relationship between trust and perceived outcome and process quality. The findings of this study complement the research of Ebrahim (2020). Ebrahim examined the role of trust in SM and demonstrated that the influence on the brand equity of the SM attributes of trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth is mediated by brand trust. Our findings complement that discourse by highlighting the importance of an organization carefully selecting the appropriate SM channels to deliver its aims. As in traditional marketing, the challenge is to identify the platforms that best match the target groups and to use them in a way that fits the platform culture, communication style, and user profile (Kollmann, Kuckertz, & Kayser, 2012). Doing so often requires market research and an in-depth understanding of the SM landscape. Once the platforms have been selected, success is further influenced by the practice and quality of SM usage. This aspect is also highlighted by Carboni and Maxwell (2015), who found that longer Facebook posts and increased advertising spending is a significant predictor of increased stakeholder engagement with NPOs, while the number of posts was a negative predictor.

The substitution effect uncovered in our study indicates that for NPOs SM channels can serve as sources of intimacy and trust in the relationship with the customer. This aspect of our findings is important in light of the rising demand for services offered by NPOs such as Rat auf Draht during times of global crisis and the existential threats caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Psychological support, emergency help, counseling intimacy, and trust play a crucial role in the perception of services. It is likely that the specific features of the SM channel in question—such as a content or visual focus—can translate to specific patterns in customers' perceptions of the provided service delivered through that channel. For example, YouTube offers a strong focus on videos, which enables NGOs to deliver their services via unidirectional visual content. This mode of service delivery determines how customers perceive the process and quality of the service delivered, which was identified as particularly important to prevent a negative impact on the company's brand (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013). While such a spill-over effect is beyond the scope of this research and needs to be investigated separately in future research, it could be an important key to service quality in the era of SM. The identified substitution effects could arise from the dominant form of communication of the individual platforms.

Finally, our findings also add to our understanding of how we can master the current challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The service our case firm offers is also part of the official helpline offered by the Austrian government. Here SM proves to be an important substitute for face-to-face communication. In times of existential fear and loneliness during extended periods of lock-down, social contacts are crucial resources to help counter psychological issues, especially among children forced into digital homeschooling. Enhanced sensitivity for the important choice of a specific communication channel is key to offering an optimal client service during the pandemic.

Our results show that Facebook and YouTube can compensate for an absence of brand trust by enhancing the perceived quality of a process. The content-oriented communication characteristics of the two platforms seem to influence the quality of communication and information transfer in such a way that a lack of trust in the brand can be compensated. The lack of brand trust can also be compensated via YouTube and Instagram through outcome quality. Smith and Gallicano (2015) identified Twitter and Facebook as more effective communication channels through which to create and present brand stories than YouTube; nevertheless, it can be assumed that in our case the compensation effect would be attributable to the visual focus of the SM channels in the form of images (Instagram) or videos (YouTube) rather than their content orientation. In line with the popular notion of a picture being worth more than a thousand words, an appealing visual presentation of content (i.e., in form of an infographic or an appealing picture) seems even to be able to compensate for a lack of trust in the brand. Effects like this might not surprise many marketers, as they regularly use the power of images, visuals, and presentations to enhance perceptions of quality. With its focus on the visual, SM seems to be particularly suitable for this purpose.

In addition, YouTube as a communication channel can compensate for the lack of process quality via the perceived outcome quality. One explanation could be the unique combination of content and visual-oriented communication focus. Especially in the case of Rat auf Draht, the communication via videos did not take place in real-time but through well-planned and professionally created high-quality (counseling) videos. Regardless of a lack of brand trust or process quality, the videos could apparently convince customers with regard to perceived outcome quality. The one-to-many logic of this communication channel also offers opportunities to rapidly scale the service offering during times of elevated demand due to existential crises, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The findings of our study have to be interpreted with the limitations of the data, method, and theoretical lens applied in mind; however, those same limitations indicate routes to some fruitful future research. While the collection of data from one firm helped to hold many contextual factors constant and, thus, enabled us to compare the four different SM channels, replicating this research in other firms would help to identify the boundary conditions. The study was focused on the context of NPOs and a target group consisting of children and adolescents. Investigating other types of organizations and target groups would likely lead to findings with a different nuance. The partial least square analysis can deal perfectly with small sample sizes in combinations of mediation/moderation models, but it does not provide an overall quality measure. Bigger samples in future studies would enable researchers to use overall least square analysis. While we performed

several robustness checks, we cannot rule out bias and endogeneity rooted in unobserved variables. Finally, we can only measure what is captured by the measurement model chosen to operationalize our constructs. Future research could test the robustness of our findings against alternative operationalizations. This study adopts a service marketing perspective to highlight the specific qualities of this kind of market offering. The focus does mean the findings are limited to the service aspects of firms' marketing activity on SM. We would recommend supplementary research replicating our study (Frank, Kessler, & Fink, 2010) with firms with more product-oriented than service-oriented market offerings. From a theoretical standpoint, it might also be beneficial to blend marketing theory with theoretical concepts of technology acceptance. Given the findings of our study, we would expect that customers' general acceptance of the technology that enables SM frames their perception of the services provided via the different SM communication channels. Finally, we would like to point out that the data for this study were collected before the Covid-19 outbreak. We assume that the identified patterns would be even more pronounced during the current pandemic.

Overall, this manuscript shows that the general model of service quality still applies in the era of SM; however, different SM channels have different impacts, which is a major takeaway. Alongside answering our research questions this manuscript created insights that should be followed up in future studies.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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