THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ON BRAND LOYALTY: THE MODERATING ROLE OF WORD OF MOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on such customers who follow at least one brand on the social media in Pakistan. The data was collected through a structured questionnaire from the university students of Pakistan. The results showed that the brand loyalty of the customers is affected in a positive manner when the brand has presence on various platforms of social media. It has been found that customer interaction has a fully mediating role in social media marketing and brand loyalty. Also, the word of mouth has no moderating role on the relationship between customer interaction and brand loyalty. The implications for marketing practice and future research are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the trend which got most popular in internet marketing, is social media marketing (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). Social media marketing is a new and rapidly growing communication tool to develop positive relationships with customers (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012). Even some industry experts claim that if you are not a part of social networks like Facebook and Youtube, then you don't exist in cyberspace. So, the low cost and effectiveness in consumer engagement can't be achieved without it (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

As Social networking sites, which consists of network of friends for social and professional interactions (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009) are getting more popular, it provides the customers a social platform to share thoughts about their favourite brands with the friends and family (Cheung & Lee, 2012). To interact and engage new customers, one must make best use of social media (Kietzmann, Hermkens, & McCarthy, 2011). A brand community on social media provides effective and improved means to create strong bonds between brand and consumers (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Through information sharing on brand communities, consumers can get quick information and also the interaction can lead to the building of brand loyalty (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Brand loyalty is highly affected by the various brand communities on social media platforms, as consumers always look for different creative ways to connect with the brand (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012). As brand communities are such a platform, where information related to brands can be shared, it leads to commitment and then brand loyalty (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011).

The role and impact of word of mouth on the relationship of customer interaction with brand loyalty is missing in the past studies. So, the paper focuses on the gap of word of mouth being a moderater in the relationship of customer interaction with brand loyalty. Word of mouth plays a great role in consumer's decision making process. The importance of word of mouth communication among customers is evident by many previous researches (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006). Its impact on marketing, especially on online platforms, can't be ignored (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). Consumer interaction and engagement was also believed to be formed by word of mouth behavior (Bridgen, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to focus on the advanced mean of building brand loyalty and that is through social media marketing. More specifically, the paper tries to identify the impact of social media marketing on brand loyalty, through customer interaction and also the moderating role of word of mouth, as the concept is getting increasing attention from marketing academia and experts.

The study is based on the fashion industry of Pakistan, since previous researches havn't taken this region into count. There are two generally accepted models in the study of consumer attitude; one among them is ABC model, as the model is based on the relationship of purchase with consumer attitude (Xiaofen & Yiling, 2009). This study is supported by

the same model.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty

Among the many popular research themes for marketers, building and then maintaining brand loyalty is very important one (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Loyalty can be measured by the probability of product being repurchased. Brand loyalty is most likely to present when favourable attitudes of a brand are remain the same in repeated buying behaviour (Keller, 1993).With the growing demand of fashion brands, it is very important for them to provide valuable services to their customers, and for that, using social media for marketing is a great way to attract more customers (Kim & Ko, 2012).

The importance of brand communities can't be ignored from marketing point of view, as such communities help in understanding the needs of customers (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). And when the needs of customers have been taken care of, they tend to participate in communities more often. And then, the increased participation in brand communities helps in turning the visitors into members, members into contributors and then contributors into such consumers who develop strong relations (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2010). Participation of consumers in a virtual brand community may ends up in developing emotional feelings and commitment to that brand (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2007), which creates a feeling of attachment.

Facebook being the most popular social media site have the presence of all popular brands, to communicate and update the customers along with building brand loyalty (Valck, Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009). When these brands create new communities on such online platforms, customers become part of it and develop new connections (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Such businesses who created there facebook communities earlier, have more fans and comments and also more visits to their physical stores than others who adopted it later (He, Wang, & Zha, 2014).

Through the adoption of social media platforms, one can provide its users with extensive experiences and those experiences in return strengthens the branding and keep the users loyal (Cromity, 2012). Being more precise, now we can say that being part of a virtual brand community may create loyalty towards that particular brand (Andersen, 2005). Thus it can be said that social media helps in building brand loyalty through communication, providing more information

and updating the community regularly.

Hypothesis 1. Social media marketing is positively and significantly associated with brand loyalty.

Mediating role of customer interaction between social media marketing and brand loyalty

The internet offers a platform for consumers to share opinions and experiences (Thurau & Walsh, 2004). If we look at the statistics of facebook in the whole world, then facebook is used by 1 in every 13 people around the world with approximately 250 million users logging in on daily basis. This interactive media is touching everyone's life, including young children who use it to connect with friends to senior citizens who use it to have new interactions levels with people and businesses (Shen & Bissell, 2013). Many consumers regularly rely on other consumers for product and services related advice and information, which they look forward to buy (Punj & Staelin, 1983). When we talk about general activities carried through the online brand communities, many members willingly post comments and get involved in interactions with other community members (Vela & Casamassima, 2011). In these interactions, knowledge and experiences get shared (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013).

Social media is such a platform which helps in developing relationships with consumers in an online environment (Vinerean, Cetina, Dumitrescu, & Tichindelean, 2013). Some researchers term social media as a people's web, which clearly indicates that social media is to provide interactions among them (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Online brand communities are such a platform which plays a great role in identifying individual customers to larger group. As, identification is "the perception of belonging to a group with the result that a person identifies with that group" (Bhattachary, Rao, & Glynn, 1995, p. 47), customer who identify with a particular brand through a community, can develop long term bonds with those entities (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Many participants of social communities think that by participating in such communities can provide them with more knowledge, and by interacting with others they can get something out of this (Evans, Wedande, Ralston, & Hul, 2001). There are many social benefits such as social enhancements, and maintaining interpersonal connections are major drivers which encourages participation in social media communities (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). Online brand communities and communication is very helpful in promoting brand through social media platforms (Balakrishnan, Dahnil,

& Yi, 2014). Social media communities are a useful source of customer interaction and communication but the main opportunity is to run these communities in such a manner that they can be helpful for both brands and customers (Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005). And for that, one should not be concerned about the negative interactions as customer interactions can be managed (Nicholls, 2010).

Online communities, in a way, affect brand loyalty through the social relationships that come to existence because of shared interests of customers (Oliva, 1998). Customer interaction is expected to have a great impact on customer loyalty for many reasons. Firstly, interaction plays an important role in locating a desired product or service, by enabling a search process. The information then helps customer to choose desired product by building more refined knowledge. So, the interaction is expected to be positively related to brand loyalty (Alba, et al., 1997). Secondly, as there is a stream of information exchange on social media, through this informational exchange among customers, an e-retailer can increase brand loyalty of customers, as some customers may appreciate and value the information they gained from other community members or they can be loyal because they like to share the information with others (Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnavolu, 2002). Now, we can say that customer interaction on social media plays an important role in creating brand loyalty.

Hypothesis 2. Customer interaction mediates the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.

Moderating role of word of mouth between customer interaction and brand loyalty

Word of mouth has been recognized as such an effective force affecting switching, loyalty and consumer choice (Wangenheim & Bayo´n, 2004). Word of mouth is kind of an exchange of information related to brand, product or service and it possess the power to affect actions (Alon, Brunel, & Fournier, 2014). When we talk about the traditional and online word of mouth, direct observation is a limitation in traditional word of mouth, as the information is only exchanged in private conversations. On the other hand, online word of mouth has overcome this limitation (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Besides this, participants in both traditional and online word of mouth exhibit same motivations (Thurau & Walsh, 2004). So, we won't be focusing on their difference, but on the latter discussion. Also, online word of mouth has many more features like spreading information in a vast extent,

quick, information in a huge volume, quick to receive and anonymity (Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). As, electronic word of mouth communication is getting popular, many searches are trying to study its factors, which influence customer behaviour, from last few years (Park & Kim, 2008).

Managers must keep a check on the online word of mouth related to their product or services because when a customer has a bad experience, and that experience turns into a negative word of mouth , many customers will never choose the company or its product again (Stauss, 2000). The buying behaviour of consumers can be highly affected after reading a positive or negative comment online. It also changes the word of mouth communication of that reader with other consumers, which not only affects an individual person's perception about brand, but also others (Thurau & Walsh, 2004), which in return encourage a customer to fully trust that brand and then there will be a feeling of attachment. Word of mouth has a significant effectiveness on consumer's choices (Richins, 1983) and consumer's choices derive the behaviour of post-purchase product perceptions. Positive reviews helps firms to generate product awareness without spending much on promotion and advertising (Chen, Fay, & Wang, 2011).

When a person receives word of mouth about particular brand, that person is more likely to have positive attitude and trust towards that brand (Meuter, McCabe, & Curran, 2013).Organization's managers and decision makers should be active and alert about the consequences and effects of word of mouth, as it can have huge impacts on the organization's reputation and brand loyalty (Williams & Buttle, 2014).

We can derive from this that word of mouth can effect the customer's choice and perceptions, which in last creates a sense of loyalty towards the brand.

Hypothesis 3. Word of mouth moderates the relationship between customer interaction and brand loyalty, so that the relationship is stronger in presence of word of mouth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The primary data was collected through the help of structured questionnaire. The sample consisted of mostly university students who use social media regularly and are consistent followers of fashion brands. To make sure that respondents are qualified for this research or not, they were asked whether they use social media and follow any fashion brand

there or not. Then, after making sure, respondents were given the questionnaire to fill. Total 300 questionnaires were distributed to collect data. From which 170 received and 150 were unusable, so the response rate was 50%. A cover letter was also used, which consisted of scope of the study, assurance of anonymity and confidentiality and the participation was voluntary.

All of the measurement questions were measured using five-point Likert scale by taking 1 for Strongly disagree and 5 for Strongly agree. Questionnaire was in English language, as in Pakistan, English is a compulsory subject starting from the school. That's why university students were well aware of this language and there was no need of translating questionnaires into native language.

MEASURES

Social media marketing (Cronbach's alpha = .74) was measured with 11 items such as "Contents shown in brand's social media seem interesting" and "Brand's social media enables information sharing with others", taken from Kim & Ko, 2012. Customer interaction (Cronbach's alpha = .78) was measured by 6 items such as "I feel a sense of kinship with other community members" and "I have met wonderful people because of the community" came from Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2013). Brand loyalty (Cronbach's alpha = .67) was measured by 3 items such as " I consider myself to be loyal to the brand" and "I am willing to pay more for my brand" derived from Delgado-Ballester, Manuera-Aleman, & Yague-Guillen (2003). Word of mouth (Cronbach's alpha = .73) was measured by 3 items such as "I often say positive things about this brand to other people" and "I recommend this brand to anyone who seeks my advice" taken from Hur, Park and Kim(2010).

Sampling technique

The sampling technique used for this study was cluster sampling technique. We used that sampling technique because of the convenience. As it was a tough task to visit other cities and areas so we mainly focused on the universities of that area which are easily accessible.

Sample Characteristics

Sample characteristics consisted of gender, age, employment status and qualification. These characteristics were considered because somehow they effect on the behaviour of individuals and their behaviour. The sample consists of 48% male and

52% female, having average age of 24. 39% were unemployed and 61% employed. And as per education 38% undergraduate, 60 % graduate and 2 % were intermediate.

RESULTS

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations and Reliabilities

Variable	Mean	S.d.	1	2	3	4
1. SMM	3.65	.48	(0.74)			
2. CI	3.35	.70	.496***	(0.78)		
3. BL	3.41	.80	.258**	.534***	(0.67)	
4. WOM	3.67	.77	.480***	.582***	.559***	(0.73)

*N=150, ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, reliabilities in brackets, SMM =social media marketing, CI =customer interaction, BL = brand loyalty, WOM = word of mouth*

TABLE 2
Results of Moderator and Mediator Regression

Predictors	β	R²	ΔR²
Moderator Analyses			
Step 1			
Control Variables		.03	
Step 2			
CI	.34*		
WOM	.39*	.38	.35*
Step 3			
CIx WOM	.007	.38	.00
Mediator Analyses			
Step 1			
Control variables		.03	
Step 2			
SMM	.40**	.09	.05**
Step 1			
Control variable		.03	
Step 2			
CI	.59*	.29	.25*
Step 3			
SMM	-0.01	.29	0.00

*N=150, *p< 0.001 **p< 0.01,*
SMM = social media marketing,
CI = customer interaction, WOM = word of mouth

The hypotheses were investigated using regression analysis. First of all means, deviations, correlations and reliabilities were calculated to understand the relation between them. Table 1 consists of all the values of mean, standard deviation, correlations and reliabilities.

Regression analysis was done to test the hypotheses. Moderation and mediation regression analyses results are displayed in table 2.

According to the results, the first hypothesis was supported which was, social media marketing is positively and significantly associated with brand loyalty as $\beta=.42$ and $p< 0.05$. Second hypothesis was supported, that is, customer interaction mediates the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty, as $\beta=-0.60$ and $p<0.05$. Third hypothesis was not supported, that is, word of mouth moderates the relationship between customer interaction and brand loyalty, so that the relationship is stronger in presence of word of mouth, as $\beta=0.007$ and $p>0.005$.

DISCUSSION

There is a never ending debate about the social media. Practitioners and researchers are always trying to figure out that how these platforms can be made useful for the brands. Moreover, some believe that social media marketing is a great way to broaden the boundaries of brands and businesses; on the other hand some believe that social media should only be for such people who want to connect with friends. So, the aim of this study was also to increase the knowledge regarding this perspective that how social media marketing is beneficial for the emerging and existing brands. For this we developed a framework, with the help of which we can conclude that social media marketing some how play a role in creating brand loyalty. Social media is also termed as 'people's media' according to some researchers which can depict that the main purpose of social media is to bring people together and enhance interactions between them. Now those interactions can have positive as well negative impact.

The results of this study show that presence on social media platforms and getting involved in social media based marketing activities can drive brand loyalty. So, organizations should be particular and more concerned about all the information and knowledge they share on such platforms. If social media marketing campaigns are used well and in a beneficial way, then it can provide many opportunities to such businesses. They should take such values, activities, applications and communication ways which are more capable of making customers loyal towards them.

In today's era of technology, it is very hard to convince the customers about your brand and services.

But, social media marketing is a very reliable and easy to access platform to provide with such capabilities which can develop brand loyalty without any cost incurred. First hypothesis of this study was based on this and after its acceptance, it supports the theory.

A customer interaction is an automatic activity, which one can't resist. Social media is based on such interactions as its existence was about interacting and getting to know new people. So, when customers become part of such brand communities which provide them access to interact with other followers or customers, they tend to share their experiences and viewpoints. Here, it is very tough task to control such interactions but they can be controlled. This study shows that customer interactions do have a mediating role in social media marketing and brand loyalty. As through these interactions positive experiences can be pass on. Word of mouth is an emerging point to be considered as per marketing perspectives, because it passes along in no time and have strong impacts. It was hypothesized that word of mouth strengthens the relation between customer interaction and brand loyalty, but the results came contrary to this.

If we look at the theoretical point of view then there is significant impact of word of mouth, but as this study carried out in the context of Pakistani culture, which is based on collectivism, which means people here tend to develop their views as a whole or in group, so it might be considered that they develop their own perceptions and don't care about the word of mouth talks.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The goal of this study was to know how the presence of brand communities on social media can affect the relationships with customers and brand loyalty. And to fulfill this goal we tested our model in the same context. By considering the random sample of regular users of social media we derived considerable results. For future researches, other moderators and mediators can be considered like culture, specific social media platform and characteristics of social media.

As our study have shown us that social media platforms can generate positive results for brands but there are many such activities which can turn this ideal situation into something which has negative impacts. Customers are becoming more educated and aware; they can involve in any activity and deliver their view points to others, which have a very commendable impact. Moreover, if they lose their trust, you can't stop them from sharing that experience with others. So, the future research can also be focused on dynamics to control such experience to pass on, or how to work to

change the viewpoints of such customers.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

As this study was based on the fashion brands of Pakistan, the managers should focus on the customer interactions happening in their communities, and to avoid negative interactions they should introduce new campaigns and apps, so that customers can get involved in other things, which leave a positive impact and reduce the effect of negative interactions. Moreover, they should also manage such interactions and can start different topics and games which can involve customers in new positive conversations.

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