

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA BRAND COMMUNICATIONS ON CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY

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ABSTRACT

The invent of Web2.0 technologies has resulted in the emergence of various social networking sites. And the usage of social media among youngsters can be seen growing at an exponential rate. They are using social media for communicating almost every aspect of their lives, be it socialising, travelling, partying or even shopping. Social networks can be seen flooded with various advertisements, which make people explore different purchase options in the virtual spaces. Companies are enthusiastically making use of such spaces to reach out to their customers and boost their brand communications. Though social media has been continually providing very effective ways to engage customers with brands, studies regarding how these affect people perception about the brands are scanty. The present study attempts to investigate how brand communication on Facebook affects people perception towards brands and hence brand equity. The constructs of brand equity have been taken from Aaker model of consumer-based brand equity. The study has been supported by 490 students/scholars of University of Jammu in the age between 20-40 years. The study is expected to develop a better understanding about effective utilisation of social media for marketing communication.

Keywords: *Web2.0, Social Media, Aaker Model, Consumer-Based Brand Equity, Marketing Communication.*

Introduction:

Communication, these days, has been greatly affected by the internet and technology. The social networking platforms are influencing the interaction process among internet users via two-way participation channel rather than being a unidirectional, information tool. Social media, with the similar accelerated development in mobile technology, is now accessible anywhere, any time (Anzmac, 2010). Consumers, undoubtedly to a large extent, have adopted the social media. Facebook, for example, as of the first quarter of 2017, Facebook has gathered 1.94 billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2017). Twitter, at the same time, has got registered 313 million active users (Twitter, 2017). Consequently, brands have been forced to establish and maintain their existence on these social platforms. The upsurge of users on these communicative platforms impels the marketers to target social media platforms for communicating and creating an effective brand identity by reaching out to them and communicating more (Sri Jothi P.,

Neelamalar M., Shakthi Prasad R., 2011). Brand managers employ different strategies to communicate and interact with their target audience. Marketers keep striving hard in order to engage people on social networking sites with their brands. Consumers engage with brands not only by directly responding (commenting/re-tweeting) on an advertisement/post, but also communicating (forwarding the message) it to other consumers, who can further directly respond to the sender, show no reaction or forward it to others with their own inferences (Barwise & Meehan, 2010; Beuker & Abbing, 2010; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Patterson, 2012). These social networks have given a big boost to the already existing power of word-of-mouth. Traditional forms of brand communication via public relations, television advertising etc., have undoubtedly, achieved a considerable success, but in today's customer-dominated business environment, their productiveness is decaying quite noticeably (Wright et al., 2010). Social media platforms are able to accommodate comparatively much more audience, at a lesser cost, and that too with customer

involvement. There are a number of studies pertaining to the understanding of the concept and measurement of brand equity (e.g., Jung & Sung, 2008; Cui, 2011; Mohan & Sequeira, 2012), and also those regarding the social media communication (e.g., North & Fin, 2011; Toppi, 2012). But there are very few studies that combine these two concepts to understand the impact of social media communication on brand equity dimensions. Despite the companies putting in lots of efforts into social media marketing for brand building and brand engagement, not much research work has been done pertaining to the impact of all these activities on consumer behaviour. Since so many companies use social media platforms for their brand communication, it is important to understand how this social media communication influences consumer perceptions and hence, the brand equity.

The present study thus, attempts to comprehend how brand communication on social media affects consumer-based brand equity in terms of brand awareness, brand association, perceived brand quality and brand loyalty. The subsequent section presents a literature review on key concepts of the study, viz, social media and brand equity, together with the findings from previous studies. The review of literature is followed by hypotheses of the study. Further, the research tools and methods used for hypotheses testing have been discussed. Finally, the results, their implications and limitations of the study are presented.

Literature Review:

Social Media Brand Communication:

Social media, formed out of web-based technologies is a set of online and mobile environments focused fundamentally on interactivity, allowing discussion between the stakeholders with one another and with the company (Porter et al., 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Since the explosion of the web as a business medium, one of its primary uses has been into marketing practices. These social media websites have become interactive platforms for advertisers and the audience. People get more attached to brands in social networking sites than the usual banners and pop-up ads. Advertising on social networking sites (SNSs) is a great way to promote a company's offerings. In addition to having their own corporate websites, many organisations find it useful to have a social media presence through Facebook, Twitter, etc., as this makes them visible even to those who might not be aware of the organisation's existence. Majority of the studies have shown that consumers find social media as more trustworthy sources of information than the traditional marketing communication tools used by companies (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Karakaya & Barnes 2010; Kietzmann et al. 2011). According to Keller (2009), internet enables to reach consumer

groups that are not easily accessible, thereby making creation of brand awareness easier. Thus, marketing and brand managers may assume that brand communication will increase through social media communication (Smith et al., 2012). Researchers (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Chu & Kim, 2011) in the field of social media communication mainly focus on word of mouth (WOM) and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) studies. Firm-created WOM may be characterised as being firm initiated but consumer implemented (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). With time, the social media has evolved into a space where enormous information can be and is disseminated. Consumers today now look towards these sites for gathering product related information as they can be more confident by having a feedback from their peer groups. However, Baird & Parasnis (2011) claim that people in social media, engage because of networking and personal connections with friends and family, and not brands. But as is quite visible, a number of companies today are making increasing use of social media marketing in order to promote their brands. In terms of marketing, social media can be categorized as a digital communication channel. A big number of companies today are using social media marketing for promoting their brands. Social media helps companies to reach their specific segments and engage customers to a much greater extent than traditionally thought (Winer, 2009; Toppi, 2012). So many studies exist that support social media to be incorporated into integrated marketing (North & Fin, 2011).

Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE):

The concept of brand equity has been considered from different perspectives (Boo et al., 2009). The two perspectives of brand equity as suggested by Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995) are financial-based (Simon & Sullivan, 1993) and customer-based. According to Simon & Sullivan (1993) brand equity is defined as, "the incremental cash flows which accrue to branded products over unbranded products". The consumer-based brand equity, on the other hand, emphasizes upon the consumer's mindset. The consensus is that brand equity can be examined from two significant perspectives-financial and customer/consumer based. This study however, focuses on the customer based perspective and concentrates on the measures related to the consumer mindset like the associations, evaluations and relationships customers have towards the brand. In the brand equity literature there are two main frameworks that conceptualize customer based brand equity. Keller (1993) considers brand equity as being, "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand". To understand, how customer based brand equity can be built, measured and managed, Keller (1998) described a detailed conceptualization of brand knowledge. He

emphasised that brand knowledge can be defined in terms of two major constituents, brand awareness and brand image. The brand image is defined as the perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer's memory (Keller 1993). Another framework was proposed by Aaker (1991) which is one of the most generally accepted and comprehensive definitions of the brand equity (Buil, Chernatony, & Martínez, 2008). Aaker (1991, 1996) considers brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and / or to that firm's customers". The set of assets / liabilities are grouped into five categories: brand loyalty, brand name awareness, perceived brand quality, brand associations and other proprietary brand assets. Other proprietary brand assets include patents, trademarks and channel relationships. The fifth component other proprietary brand assets is not relevant to consumer perception. Hence only the first four dimensions should be regarded as customer based brand equity (Yoo & Donthu 2001). Yoo et al. (2000) states the behavioural approach and Keller (1993, 1998) represents the cognitive approach of brand equity. Customer based brand equity flourishes when the consumer is familiar with the brand and sustains some favourable, strong and unique brand associations in the memory (Kamakura & Russell, 1991). Brand equity was considered to be consisting of brand strength and brand value (Srivastava & Shocker, 1991). Brand equity dimensions according to Lassar et al. (1995) include performance, value, social image, trustworthiness and commitment. However, the present study considers Aaker's model of brand equity to understand the impact of social media brand communications.

Impact of Social Media Brand Communication on Consumer-Based Brand Equity:

Marketing and branding practices, like differentiation, generate consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), in the sense that individuals react more favourably towards a branded product than they would towards a non-branded one in the same category (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Anzmac (2010), in his article, proposed a relationship between social media participation and engagement, and behavioural outcomes. Also, these relationships were proposed to have a mediating effect of brand engagement and motivation. The model hypothesized social media consumption, social media engagement, and consumer roles in social media as the antecedents to behavioural outcomes (viz., brand awareness, word of mouth, purchase intention and satisfaction with social media). Ligita Zailskaitė-Jakstė and Rita Kuvykaite (2013), showed through their empirical research of Coffee Inn takeaway coffee brand that when communication in social media (SM)

is properly managed, brand awareness is built and favourable brand image is formed. The study proposed that consumer involvement into brand equity building by invoking communication in social media can provide the brands with more favourability. Rana Babac (2011), in his dissertation work, examined the impact of social media use on the brand equity of magazine brands, through a qualitative study of Vogue Turkey. It was found that social-media use – when incorporated within a magazine's larger brand management strategy - impacts the brand equity of magazine brands in four different ways: by opening up a new direct communication channel between the brand and its audience; by increasing magazine brand's presence in the daily lives of its audience; by involving the audience in promoting the brand in a natural manner; and finally by materializing the relationships between the magazine brand and its audience in concrete terms. Many studies indicate that social media marketing that companies use as a tool for their marketing activities is centralized about six dimensions: Online Communities, Interaction, Sharing of Content, Accessibility, and credibility. As'ad, H. Abu-Rumman and Anas Y. Alhadid (2014) in their empirical study on mobile service providers in Jordan concluded that there is a statistically significant impact of these dimensions of social media marketing on the brand equity of the mentioned service providers. Yoo et al. (2000) suggest that a message contained in the brand communication process, if triggers a positive and satisfactory customer reaction, increases the probability that a brand will be incorporated into the customer's consideration set. This will further shorten the decision-making process, turning that choice into a habit and hence improving the brand equity. Also, Keller (2009) explains that a brand has positive customer-based brand equity when consumers react more favourably to a product and the way it is marketed when the brand is identified than when it is not. According to Krishnamurthy (2003), marketing through online communities gives a positive message and helps customers understand a product better. Also, successful online communities create a strong sense of belonging among the participants. Although findings about the behavioural effectiveness of online advertising are not consistent, most of them suggest that internet advertising has a strong positive influence and significant relationship with consumer purchase intentions (Martin et al., 2003; Manchanda et al., 2006; Malik et al., 2013). Bruno Schivinski and Dariusz Dabrowski (2013) in their study investigated the effect of social-media communication on consumer perceptions of brands. For this they conducted an empirical study on 504 Facebook users using a standardized online survey across Poland. To test the proposed model, 60 brands across three different industries (non-alcoholic beverages, clothing, and mobile operators) were

analysed. They concluded that firm-created social media communication does not directly affect brand equity but indirectly influences consumer perceptions of value based on brand attitude. User-generated social media communication, on the other hand, had a positive influence on brand equity and brand attitude. Thus, on the basis of previous studies, it can be hypothesised that social media brand communication has a significant impact on consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) metrics. Since, the current study is based upon the Aaker's model of customer-based brand equity, as per which there are four main constructs of brand equity, viz., brand awareness, brand associations, perceived brand quality and brand loyalty, the hypotheses can be framed as below:

H1: Social media brand communication has a significant impact on brand awareness.

H2: Social media brand communication has a significant impact on brand associations.

H3: Social media brand communication has a significant impact on perceived brand quality.

H4: Social media brand communication has a significant impact on brand loyalty.

Research Methodology:

Sampling & Data Collection:

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, a quantitative research has been carried out using a structured questionnaire, employing convenience sampling technique. The data collected was primary in nature, with Facebook users constituting the respondent base.

To understand the influence of social media brand communications on brand equity, people in the age group of 20-40 years are found to be most fitting, as they use and engage with social networking sites more aggressively as compared to the print or any other media and other age groups (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011).

Initially 250 people (students and research scholars) from the University of Jammu were selected to form the sample, but only 220 questionnaires were found tenable for the analysis, with response rate of 88%. The sample was first subject to pilot testing with 50 respondents to check for the research instrument's validity and reliability.

The final sample size, thus, came out to be 220, as mentioned before.

Around 75% of those Facebook users surveyed, were females; the mean age within the sample being nearly 24 years (S.D. = 0.65). Further, 100 percent of the sample reported using Internet social Media on a daily basis. Of the type of brand advertisements followed, soft goods (i.e. beauty & fashion products) were most common with around 62% people mentioning that they followed that type of brand; remaining 38%

followed both soft goods & hard goods (i.e. electronic items and other appliances).

Measures Used in the Study:

The instrument used for the research contains two sections. In the first section, there is demographic information related with the sample and also questions about social media usage. In the second section, there are scales used to measure the impact of social media brand communications on consumer-based brand equity constructs, viz., brand awareness, brand associations, perceived brand quality, and brand loyalty. First, qualifying questions were asked to see if an individual can serve our research purpose. They were asked, "Do you use Facebook?", (Yes or No). Next, they were enquired if they were aware of brands' advertisements that appear in their social network. After getting a positive response for these, the questionnaires were handed over to the respondents.

These questions were then followed up with a set of statements set to measure the impact under study. Respondents were initially asked, "Now, think of any retail brand you have "liked" and/or "Follow" on Facebook. Consider that brand and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements." The statements for the dimensions social media brand communications and all the four constructs of brand equity have been taken from a similar study conducted in Poland (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2013). Some items were also added by the author, thereby making SM brand communication as a 15-item index, brand awareness as an 8-item, brand associations as a 6-item, perceived brand quality a 7-item, and brand loyalty as a 12-item index. All the statements were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

The Cronbach's reliability coefficient alpha values for different constructs have been mentioned in the table 1 below:

Since all the values of Cronbach Alpha are above 0.7, therefore all the constructs in the current study are found to be sufficiently reliable (Hair et al., 2006).

Findings & Discussion:

An alpha level of .05 was used for all the statistical tests. All analyses were conducted using the statistical package of SPSS Version 19. In addition to the descriptive statistics reported previously, a correlation for Facebook users was run to observe the relationship between social media brand communications and consumer-based brand equity constructs. SM brand communication was found to correlate significantly (all values above 0.5) with all the four constructs.

To test the hypotheses, regression analysis was done one by one to examine the impact of social media brand communications on the four constructs of consumer-based brand equity, namely, brand

awareness, brand associations, perceived brand quality, and brand loyalty.

In all the four cases, models were found to be significant, with an adjusted R^2 value of 0.232, 0.416, 0.318, and 0.248, respectively and $p < 0.05$.

The first regression was conducted to find out the impact on brand awareness by the variables: Gender, Age group, and social media brand communication. As can be seen in the regression model (table2), gender (Beta= -0.018, $p > 0.5$), is not a significant predictor. However, age group (Beta= 0.180, $p < 0.05$) and social media communications (Beta= 0.410, $p < 0.05$) come out to be significant predictors of brand awareness. Hence, H1 is supported.

The second regression was carried out to find out the impact on brand associations by the variables: gender, age group, and social media brand communication. As can be seen in the regression model (table3), all the three variables, gender (Beta= 0.240, $p < 0.5$), age group (Beta= 0.232, $p < 0.05$) and social media communications (Beta= 0.585, $p < 0.05$) surface as significant predictors of brand associations. Hence, H2 is supported.

The next regression was carried out to find out the impact on perceived brand quality by the variables: gender, age group, and social media brand communication. As can be seen in the regression model (table4), none of the three variables, gender (Beta= 0.112, $p > 0.5$), age group (Beta= 0.319, $p > 0.05$) and social media communications (Beta= 0.428, $p > 0.05$) surfaced as significant predictors of perceived brand quality. Hence, H3 is not supported.

The last regression was done in order to investigate the impact on brand loyalty by the variables: gender, age group, and social media brand communication. Here again (table5), none of the variables, gender (Beta= -0.029, $p > 0.5$), age group (Beta= 0.062, $p > 0.05$) and social media communications (Beta= 0.480, $p > 0.05$) surfaced as significant predictors of brand loyalty. Hence, H4 is also not supported.

Conclusion:

We found strong support for two of our hypotheses, while other two got rejected. Our findings with regard to the first two hypotheses support the existence of influence of social media brand communication on creating brand awareness and developing brand associations. However, gender, in case of brand awareness, was not found to be a significant predictor. A possible explanation for such finding to be true could be that whosoever browses his/her social media account, at least comes across the advertisements/posts regarding various brands they or their friends have liked. Thus, almost anyone on social media would know about the brand existence. But getting a feeling of being associated with some brand definitely comes when one constantly follows it, uses it, and likes/prefers it over the other ones. Thus, it

definitely depends on the gender and age of a person about how one feels about a brand. And this has been supported in our study that age, gender, also do influence how social media communications impact ones' brand associations. However, as predicted by the present study, social media brand communications fail to generate the understanding of brands' quality and loyalty towards them. The rationale behind this as understood by little interactions with the respondents comes out to be that quality and loyalty are something that cannot be decided by just looking at certain positive / negative posts or feedbacks or comments by people on brand related posts. Only after using (regular use, in fact) a product or a brand, one can decide upon the quality and remaining loyal towards a brand. Thus, it can be concluded that although initially such communications might not affect the understanding of quality and loyalty towards a brand, they still help a lot in creating awareness and feelings of attachment towards a brand, which can further influence the other two. So, the brand managers should keep on putting efforts towards engaging people on social media which, may be not directly, but definitely help in increasing brand equity.

Research Limitations & Future Scope:

There were certain limitations associated with the present research that can provide guidelines for future studies. Since the present study took into consideration only one social networking site, i.e., Facebook, it is suggested that other major sites also be taken into account for analysis in order to attain a comprehensive understanding of social media brand communications. Moreover, no one specific retail brand was chosen for the study. And there are possibilities that different brands exhibit different customer attitudes and behaviour towards them. Hence, diverse sectors and industries should be appraised in future studies. This might help in understanding how differently customers perceive different brands on social media channels. Further, the sample size was quite small with 220 being the final sample size. And also, since convenience sampling technique was used, making generalizations about the whole population would be unfair. In addition to this, the participants were between 20-40 years of age group, and thus, the influences found might not represent other age groups. In addition to this, the factors such as income, education, occupation, etc. of the respondents were not taken into account for the study, which could otherwise have served as valuable inputs in understanding marketing activities on social media platforms and their impact on consumer-based brand equity. Thus, it is proposed that in order to validate and generalise the findings, future studies be conducted in different countries while taking into account bigger size of population, demographic

factors other than age and gender, different age groups and for different industries.

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Table 1: Reliability Measures

Constructs	Cronbach Alpha Value
Social Media Brand Communications	0.808
Brand Awareness	0.738
Brand Associations	0.726
Perceived Brand Quality	0.853
Brand Loyalty	0.702

Table 2: (Regression Test) Impact on Brand Awareness by: Gender, Age, and Social Media Brand Communication

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.072	.315		6.584	.000
	Gender	-.020	.068	-.018	-.293	.770
	Age Group	.074	.025	.180	2.960	.003
	Social media brand Communications	.503	.078	.410	6.482	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Awareness

Table 3: (Regression Test) Impact on Brand Associations by: Gender, Age, and Social Media Brand Communication

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.006	.309		.019	.985
	Gender	.299	.067	.240	4.455	.000
	Age Group	.107	.025	.232	4.369	.000
	Social media brand Communications	.807	.076	.585	10.587	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Associations

Table 4: (Regression Test) Impact on Perceived Brand Quality by: Gender, Age, and Social Media Brand Communication

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.354	.319		4.243	.000
	Gender	.133	.069	.112	1.915	.057
	Age Group	.141	.025	.319	5.554	.071
	Social media brand Communications	.564	.079	.428	7.175	.064

a. Dependent Variable: Perceived Brand Quality

Table 5: (Regression Test) Impact on Brand Loyalty by: Gender, Age, and Social Media Brand Communication

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.033	.282		3.659	.000
	Gender	-.029	.061	-.029	-.466	.641
	Age Group	.023	.022	.062	1.032	.303
	Social media brand Communications	.533	.070	.480	7.668	.082

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Loyalty
