

FIRM-CREATED SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION AND CONSUMER BRAND PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Social media has changed the business communication strategies in the corporate world. Firms are using social media to reach their maximum stakeholders in minimum time at different social media forums. The current study examines the role of firm-created social media communication on consumer brand perceptions and their loyalty with brand. A online survey is conducted through social media forums including Facebook and Twitter to collect data regarding social media communication of a well reputed clothing company's brand in Pakistan. A link is sent to 900 customers of that that company. Out of 900 questionnaires, 534 were received. So, the response rate is 59.33%. During data screening and entry, 13 questionnaires are rejected due to incomplete answer. Therefore, 521 questionnaires are completed in all respect and seem to be helpful for the study. So, the positive response rate is 57.89%. The empirical results report positive and significant influence of company-generated social media communication on brand trust, brand equity and brand loyalty. The findings of this study provide important information to the marketing professionals and brand managers to understand consumer behavior through social media communication.

Keywords: Firm-created social media communication, brand trust, brand equity, consumer behavior, brand loyalty.

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1 Introduction

The rapid growth of information technology has brought revolution in business communications. Since the appearance of the first social media networks some two decades ago, social media is continually to develop all around the world latest, meaningful and new ways to connect with the consumers and brands. Now, in a few years, social media is still budding and growing speedily, becoming an essential part of our everyday lives. Social networking is now becoming truly a global face and phenomenon. According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2012), companies are taking the advantages of Web 2.0 technology by using social media communication for the promotion and publicity of their brands. In recent years, brand management has been confronting two opposite tendency: the loss of brand authenticity and the increasing influence of empowered consumers on brand communications (Burmam and Arnhold, 2008). The social Web is changing traditional marketing communications. Traditional brand communications that were previously controlled and administered by brand and marketing managers are gradually being shaped by consumers. For instance, Nokia is actively using social media as corporate communication strategy to disseminate information regarding large number of corporate activities to customers through social media (Erkkola, 2010). However, the increasing brand competition and frequent use of social media by corporations have posed serious challenges to brand managers. The increasing social media growth has reduced brand managers' control over their brands (Berthon et al. 2007). Social media contents are generated by corporations as well as user towards company and brand related messages (Berthon, et al., 2008).

According to Berthon et al. (2007), in a previous few years, the quick growth of social media mediums has arise the issues of whether these kind of growth has reduced the control of brand for managers. As compare, Social media provides an important opportunity to the consumers to interact with company and convey their feelings, comments or proposals to the corporations. The corporations in turn respond customers and answers their comments and queries in order to build better relationship. Through social media customers also provide important feedback that is very helpful for corporations to improve their products as per customer desire. The effective use of social media provides corporations, unique distinctive advantage over their competitors by gaining higher level of brand equity, corporate reputation and favorable stakeholders' responses. It is also useful to communicate with customers who do not follow traditional communication

media including television, newspaper, radio and magazines frequently (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). As social media is offering a prospect and opportunity for the consumers/users to connect and talk with thousands, even millions of other users all around the world.

The main objective of this study is given below,

- What is the impact of firm-created social media communication (FCSMC) on brand trust (BT), brand equity (BE) and brand loyalty (BL)?
- What is the impact of brand trust on brand equity?
- What is the role of mediation variables brand trust and brand equity on brand loyalty?

2 Literature Reviews

2.1 Firm-created Social Media communication

People like to consume on social media more than one third of their waking day (Lang, 2010). Habibi (2012) stated that just Facebook is the one medium of social media which has online users above than 0.8 billion. According to the Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden (2011), the distinctive aspects of the social media are using for public relations and sponsorship. These features have also effects on consumer activities (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) and different channel of Web users (Ross et al., 2009). Hu and Kettinger, (2008) argued that such types of discrimination make the investigators to take these studies on social media as a separate study. It is a group of Web based application which constructs on the vital and tools basics of network 2.0 that allow the users to share their views and information (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). There are two interconnected theories of the basic: User Generated Content (UGC) and Web 2.0. According to the Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), Web 2.0 is a place where requests and needs are constantly developed and replaced by diverse participants in a regular and two-way approach. Solis (2010) stated that there are many ongoing discussions about social media and worldwide, while the social media is playing a vital role of converting and integrating in the growing amplification of latest medium.

2.2 Brand Trust

Trust is a declaration and inspiration to be opened (Haigh et al., 2012). According to Borrowing Bainbridge's, (1997) and Delgado-Ballester, (2001), Feeling of fulfillment held by the customers in their communication with the product which is according to his/her perceptions and the brand is reliable. Trust has received full deliberation from investigators in many fields such as social science and economics. Investigators are also applied it in another areas such as marketing. According to trust a brand wholly means that there is a high possibility or hopes that the brand will result in encouraging Outcome for the consumers. Andaleeb, (1992); Doney and Cannon, (1997) and Larzelere and Huston, (1980) stated that brand trust is expectation; the base of consumer's trust on specific characters that make it reliable, capable, truthful, and answerable. Delgado et al. (2003) Illustration a study on urbanized by believes on brand trust.

2.3 Brand Equity

The idea of BE is a very important marketing feature (Styles and Ambler 1995) that can make a relationship and differentiates between a firm and its community that can make rear long-term buying behavior (Keller. 2013). The understanding of brand equity can make good growth and creates difficult competitive barriers and raises brand wealth (Yoo, Donthu, and Lee 2000). Although there is a wide range of study has been conducted on the field of brand equity, but According to Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010), the literature on this field is still uneven and uncertain. However, the dimension of brand equity has been categorized from two main views in the literature. Some researchers pay attentions on the financial awareness of brand equity (Simon and Sullivan, 1993) and other scholars have focused on the consumer-based perspective (Aaker-1991; Keller 1993; Yoo and Donthu 2001). According to Aaker (1991), brand equity can be defined 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 firm and/or to that firm's customers.”

2.4 Brand loyalty

A number of senses have been acknowledged after the proposal of brand loyalty which was produced by Copeland (1923). Brand loyalty is an aspect which meaning are to make and create a extensive time period link with the brand and with its service. Brand loyalty is a primarily aspect which point out the significance of brand equity. Aaker (1991) stated that BL persuades

and inspires the customers to buy a product from a particular company again and again and remain tactless as the other brands are offerings. According to Reichheld (1996), Lee and Cunningham (2001), observation of a customer about a brand affects his decision and it turns his loyalty towards the product or services. Brand loyalty can be seen as another aspect such as an attitude or as a behavior. Loyalty basically consists with a repeated purchasing of a product from the same brand or company, when the purchase is unconscious and emotionless then behavioral occurs, (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003).

2.5 Effects of Firm-created Social Media Communication on Brand Trust

According to Hong-Youl Ha, (2004), one of the most vital purposes of a BT is to achieve a competitive edge and then develop a corporation performance. Hong-Youl Ha, (2004) further stated that brand trust is very important for growing consumers' trust of the brands on the Web. For instance, eBay is a very big online communication and sale site. They have very reasonable and rational pricing. Truthfulness and genuineness are well-regarded in social media. These are distinctiveness of Web 2.0 channels such as Twitter and YouTube. These social sites have become spaces for users to post their views and ideas (Mihail Vladimirov Donchev, 2012). Many scholars found that word of mouse communication have the effects on brand trust and they showed that online social sites are much closed to E-trust, (Dolinsky, 1994; Fournier, 1998; Iglesias et al., 2001; Martin, 1996; McWilliam, 2000; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Reichheld; Schefter, 2000; Tractinsky et al., 1999; Ward and Lee, 2000, and Williams and Cothrel, 2000).

H1 There is a positive connection between firm-created social media communication and brand trust.

2.6 Effects of Firm-created Social Media Communication on Brand Equity

A consumer's process of information acquirement relies on both outer and inner information sources that together persuade his or her overall brand equity judgments and brand choices (Beales et al. 1981). According to the theory of Eysenck (1984), a traditional theoretical relationship between communication and brand equity, the two forms of social media communication is directly affect on brand equity. Brand communication has positively affects on brand equity and it creates satisfactory reaction from the customer for the product as compare to

non-branded product (Yoo Donthu, and Lee 2000). So, firm-created social media communication should be supported by individuals as publicity and touching brand perception and brand awareness (MacInnis and Jaworski 1989). As a result, suppose a positive assessment of firm created social media brand communication will positively influence on brand equity. Formulate the following hypothesis as:

H2 There is a positive association between firm created social media communication and brand equity.

2.7 Effects of Brand Trust on Brand Equity

Kramer and Tyler, (1996), trust is a theory that has acknowledged prominent concentration in many dissimilar social science literatures. Brand trust is a new aspect that appears to be significant and valuable of research in expressions of its effect on brand equity. Although brand trust is a different brand framework (Chaudhri and Holbrook, 2001; Erdem and Swaitm 1998 Erdem et al, 2006), it has direct impact on brand equity. Growing brand equity is a very important goal achieved through gaining more encouraging relations and feelings amongst target consumers for a firm (Falkenberg 1996). Brand trust has direct benefits for a brand. In the recent studies of Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra (2006) illustrated attention to this point. They highlighted that a globally brand may attempt to overcome on the other local brands by performing action of local valued. Follow the hypothesis as:

H3 There is a linkage between brand equity and brand trust.

2.8 Effects of Brand Trust on Brand Loyalty

Brand researchers are agreed that the main significance of creating and enhancing brand communities and consumer experience is to make the customers loyal to the brand or product within the context of brand community. Scholars stated that the growing effects of enhanced relationships in the customer centric model, ultimately they result in customer loyalty, (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Zhou, Jin, Vogel, Fang, & Chen, 2011). According to McAlexander et al. (2002) qualitative evidence, it is still not clear that how the process of increasing brand loyalty looks like in brand communication. According to the trust and loyalty

literatures, trust is one of the background of loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Chiu, Huang, & Yen, 2010; Harris & Goode, 2004; Hong & Cho, 2011; Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2011; Zhou et al., 2011). Considering that online communication, as a social structure, have positive relationship between trust and loyalty. The relationship between trust and loyalty has been observed in different perspective. According to Lau, G.T. & Lee, S.H. (2000), Brand trust contributes to the behavioral intention of brand loyalty. Generating the hypothesis as:

H4 There is a positive relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty.

2.9 Effects of Brand Equity on Brand Loyalty

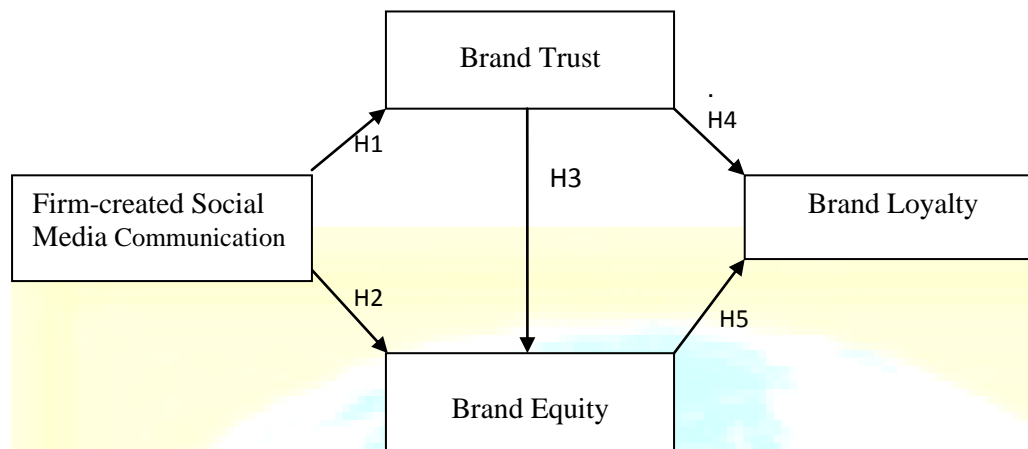
There is a very important role of brand equity on the development of brand loyalty that is based on consumer perception. Companies should try to build and fix the brand equity in customer mind. (Yoo et al. 2000). Brand equity is positively associated to brand associations, and brand loyalty. Aaker (2007) defined brand equity as: “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or deduct from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers.” Keller (1998) stated that brand equity is distinctive from brand loyalty, and can be defined as; “the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand.” This situation becomes steadier with the statement of Aaker (2007) argued that brand loyalty could be considered as an outcome and a dimension of brand equity. This forms the basis research hypothesis as:

H5 There is a relation between brand equity and brand loyalty.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1 which is proposed by this study. This model contains firm-created social media communications as it is independent variable to predict consumer brand perceptions including overall brand equity and brand trust. The model also highlighted the relationship of brand trust on building brand equity and lastly, the relationship between brand trust and brand equity for building brand loyalty.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



3 Research Methods

To examine the impact of FCSMC on brand equity, brand trust and brand loyalty through social media sites, a logical questionnaire consisting of above measurement scale was distributed online to 900 customers of Uniworth which is a well known clothing company in Pakistan. When examining the research problem in this paper, an online quantitative research method has been chosen for this study. The survey questionnaire was distributed through online link shared through Facebook and Twitter. The questionnaire link was available for 2 weeks, from 27th June, 2014 to 10th July, 2014. Every questionnaire was covered with a cover letter. The cover letter highlighted the research process, objectives of the study and declaration for confidentiality of data. Out of 900 questionnaires, 534 were received. So, the response rate is 59.33%. During data screening and entry, 13 questionnaires were rejected due to incomplete answer. Therefore, 521 questionnaires were completed in all respect and seemed to be helpful for the study. So, the positive response rate is 57.89%. As a result, 521 respondents have been used for the investigation.

FCSMC was measured from Mägi (Mägi 2003), Tsiros et al. (2004), and Schivinski and Dabrowski (2013) using four items index and using a 5-point Likert scale ranking from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree." BT was measured from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). The four items are developed on a 5-point Likert-type scale by using a 5-point ranking from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree." BE was adopted from Yoo and Donthu

(2001) by using the four-items of overall brand equity, a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree." Finally, BL was derived from relevant literatures and adopted from Delgado-Ballester, Manuera-Aleman, and Yague-Guillen (2003) by using a 5-point ranking scale, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree."

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was performed through SPSS 17 and Cronbach Alphas are mentioned against each scale in **Table 1**. All scales used in the study are found to be reliable as the Cronbach's Alphas of FCSMC, BE, BT and BL are 0.862, 0.798 0.765, and 0.723 respectively. It is suggested in earlier study that the value of Cronbach alpha more than 0.5 is acceptable for reliability (Nunally & Bernstein, 1978).

Table 1 Reliability Testing Table

Variables Names	FCSMC	BT	OBE	BL
Cronbach's Alphas	0.862	0.798	0.765	0.723

4.2 Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation among Variables

Table 2 reflects the means, standard deviation and correlation coefficients calculated using SPSS 17. It is revealed that the means of FCSMC, BL, BE and BL are 3.53, 3.88, 3.79 and 3.72 respectively, therefore it is reported that means of brand trust is highest at 3.88 followed by that of FCSMC and UGSMC. Highest level of brand loyalty is at 3.72 and brand equity is at 3.79 which are fewer than all means of all variables. Correlation analysis shows that there is no problem of multicollinearity among studied variables. It is further noted that all FMSMC, brand trust, brand equity and brand loyalty have positive significant (significance at 0.01 levels) with each other while all of these variables have no negative significant association with each other.

Table 2 Mean, SD and Correlation among Variables

Sr. No.	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	FCSMC	3.53	0.91	-			
2	BT	3.88	0.83	0.472**	-		
3	BE	3.79	0.76	0.502**	0.681**	-	
4	BL	3.72	0.87	0.527**	0.692**	0.620**	-

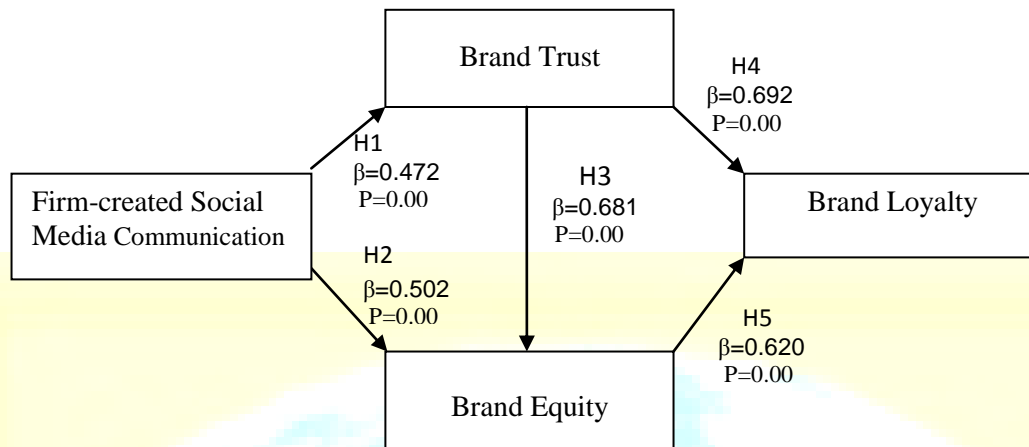
** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.3 Hypotheses Testing

Table 3: Decisions of Hypotheses

Paths	Hypothesis	Estimate	P	Decision
Firm- created communication– brand trust	H1	0.472	0.00	Supported
Firm-created communication – brand equity	H2	0.502	0.00	Supported
Brand trust – brand equity	H3	0.681	0.00	Supported
Brand trust – brand loyalty	H4	0.692	0.00	Supported
Brand equity – brand loyalty	H5	0.620	0.00	Supported

Final path of the research in figure 2



5.1 Conclusion

This study offers three central contributions to brand manager and researchers. First, the research offers theoretical approaches into how many kinds of FCSMC encourage brand trust and brand equity. Secondly, for a better perceptive of these two communication tools, it helps to understand the influence on brand loyalty. Thirdly, it helps to understand the role of mediation variables such as brand trust and brand equity on FCSMC and brand loyalty. The central aim of this study is to make new facts about social media communication how affects on other variables. The assessment of the effect of FCSMC has positively effects on brand trust and brand equity. So, FCSMC shows positive influence on brand trust. Similarly they show positive association on brand equity. Even though the growing expenses in social media marketing, customers are unwilling to internalise the worth that companies are creating. One important feature of these findings is the source of reliability. These result shows that customers are rely deeply on the firm created contents, friends, belief of families and other consumers regarding the excellence of the services offered by these brands. The findings of this research also indicate that brand trust strongly effects brand equity. These outcomes are of great value to brand and communication managers. Similarly, brand trust and brand equity shows strong relationship among them.

There are many users who belonging to different age groups are using social media as their key medium for many ideas and purposes in Pakistan. Some of the most attractive and dynamic

social media websites are Facebook, YouTube, Tweets, MySpace and many others. Social Media has become one of the mainly essential parts in making up a consumer brand perceptions. Days are gone when companies and brands used traditional media to capture their target audience. Now most of companies and brands have adopted this medium to achieve what they are looking for. These are the most popular frequent users' social networking websites of the youth in Pakistan. There are more than 65% users who are young and their ages are between 18 to 40 years old. Facebook, Twitters and Youtube are most popular social networking websites in Pakistan. Mostly young users are attached with Facebook. There are also attached a lot number of females on Facebook. Mostly brands are building their long lasting relations with consumers on Facebook. Every industry is engaging with the social media. But fashion industry especially garments is growing very rapidly on social media and it is a top class industry in Pakistan. Considering the most 10 top brands of this industry have the average fan more than 2 million on Facebook and 90 thousands twitter follower. So, this differentiation highlights the scope of social media platforms in Pakistan.

5.2 Research Limitations and Future Research

Although this research makes a significant and vital contribution to the social media communication and consumer brand perception literature. The study has few limitations. Firstly, methodologically limitation such as data was collected through a structured questionnaire in this study to find causal relationship among independent, mediation and dependent variables. Secondly, Sample size is comparatively small and the data is collected only one single industry, which makes the results hard to explore to other industries in other parts of the Pakistan and world as well. Thirdly, an online link was sent to the respondents on Facebook. The problem is that sometime Facebook users get unknown friend requests along with messages and forced the user to Like their brand on the Facebook page (“ Like us on Facebook,” “Be a fan,”) and on Twitter (“Follow us on Twitter,” “Find more on Twitter”). Therefore many of them did not show the interest and willingness.

Research on social media is a modern and advance study. It is budding very rapidly and this study has its own energetic. This study has also many other perceptions and features to judge as forth coming this study in the marketing communication framework. During this study, some areas are become visible which are precious to explore. So, this included FCSMC and traditional

media communication, Social media communication and new product development. Social media scenery is changing rapidly. So, this kind of researches will give a better understanding to the brand managers and scholars of the nature of social media communication. Furthermore, there is need to examine a wide and large number of industries in future research. These kinds of studies would offer suggestions that how customers observe companies of different kind of industries in social media platforms.

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