

A MODEL OF ONLINE CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT, BRAND AWARENESS AND BRAND LOYALTY: ANALYSIS OF MEDIATION AND FEEDBACK LOOP EFFECT

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Abstract

This study shall play a gap filling role by being one of the few empirical research works of its kind, in online shopping context that aims to measure the relationship of Online Consumer Engagement (OCE) with Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) in the presence of Brand Awareness as a mediator and to test the feedback loop created between Brand Loyalty and Online Consumer Engagement. The findings related to Consumer Engagement lack measurement ability and validation, this study branches out from a spotted gap that empirical research on Consumer Engagement and Brand Relationship Quality, as second order latent constructs, is at its infancy, carving out a more concrete path for exploring the area in depth. Structural Equation Modeling technique has been applied. All the relationships tested were significant, hence accepted. The mediation analysis indicated that Brand Awareness partially mediates and strengthens the relationship between OCE and BRQ. Brand Loyalty's iterative quality revealed the existence of feedback loop from Brand Loyalty to Online Consumer Engagement.

Keywords: Marketing, Online Consumer Engagement, Brand Loyalty, Brand Awareness, Brand Loyalty

JEL Classification: M 300

Introduction

The widely adopted and much popular traditional methods used, to achieve consumer behavior outcomes, are now being superseded by contemporary methods and techniques. Businesses in recent years are focusing on consumer interactivity to effect consumer behavior. Social media has facilitated the process of brand and consumers interactivity all over the world. Online consumer engagement is the impending reality that has acute meaning for both marketers and practitioners.

Engaging the customers leads to the enhancement of Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) and ultimately to rising sales and financial performance (Nammir, Marane and Ali, 2012). The objective of this research is to identify the significance of the emerging concept of "Online Consumer Engage-

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ment (OCE)". OCE, primarily through social media, is an extensively popular mechanism that is being adopted by businesses at large, today. It is important to gauge the usefulness of online consumer engagement in order to direct resources and efforts towards mechanisms that maximize outcomes (Hudson et al., 2015). The paper will focus on consumer engagement in the context of social media platform as the medium of consumer engagement with brands.

This study branches out from a spotted gap that empirical research on Consumer Engagement and Brand Relationship Quality, as second order latent constructs, is at its infancy, carving out a more concrete path for exploring the area in depth. According to Vivek et al. (2012), the importance of "Consumer engagement" has been highlighted in the recent years immensely however, the concept is still naïve to the discipline.

The findings related to Consumer Engagement lack measurement ability and validation (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Also, recognizing the significance of online brand communities, various researchers have highlighted the need for methodical studies that examine how online consumer engagement, through such online platforms, can enhance BRQ and how its benefits can ultimately be transferred to greater brand loyalty and more positive WOM (Park and Kim, 2014). This study, therefore, shall play gap filling role by being one of the few empirical research works of its kind, in online shopping context that aims to measure the relationship of Online Consumer Engagement with BRQ in the presence of Brand Awareness as a mediator and to test the feedback loop created between Brand Loyalty and Online Consumer Engagement.

The purpose of this study is threefold. Firstly, it aims to predict the significance of online consumer engagement in enhancing the brand relationship quality under two conditions: the direct impact of OCE on BRQ (without mediator); and, the indirect impact of OCE on BRQ in light of "brand awareness" being studied as a mediator between the two. Secondly, it seeks to analyze whether brand relationship quality ultimately leads to positive outcomes i.e. word of mouth and brand loyalty, or not. Lastly, it aspires to trace and study evidence, if any, of reverse causality between online consumer engagement and brand loyalty.

The continuous nature of online consumer engagement creates the need to explore the phenomenon to supplement academic insights.

Literature Review

The concept of engagement is new in the marketing discipline; this phenomenon has its origins from psychology, sociology and more recently from organizational behavior (Brodie et al., 2011). Recently, Customer Engagement or Consumer Engagement has begun to receive popularity in the academic research that provides insights for practitioners. Despite the importance of this concept to practitioners, the area lacks measurement validation (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Online Consumer Engagement

Consumer Engagement presumes a different meaning when it is associated to online settings

(Reitz, 2012). The perspective of online CE is a modern mechanism which enhances relationships and constructs interactivity to attain the desired outcomes. OCE can be understood as consumers' rational and emotional attachment to the brand through website or other computer-mediated devices that aim to deliver brand value (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

Brodie et al. (2013) advise a measurement model based on three higher order constructs. Other researchers suggest different higher order constructs that all converge to explaining one concept of consumer engagement. The basic conceptualization that all researchers follow is based on behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects (Patterson, 2006; Vivek et al., 2012).

The multi-dimensional approach of Patterson et al. (2006) draws dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption from organizational behavior discipline. (a) Absorption is closely related to cognitive dimension of engagement which indicates consumer attentiveness on the brand\product\organization; (b) Dedication is closely associated to emotional dimension which illustrates consumers love, intimacy or inseparability from the brand/product/organization; (c) Vigor is categorized as a behavioral stimulus, the mental and physical effort exerted towards the brand\product\organization; (d) Interaction is also a behavioral dimension that explains the two way communication between both parties, i.e. consumers and brand/product/organization (Brodie et al., 2011a).

Brand Relationship Quality

Brand relationship or consumer brand relationship is a connection between the consumers and the brand (e.g., Fournier, 1998). The concept has received sheer importance as a research interest because it has helped to understand consumers, encouraged rehash purchases and brand loyalty (Smit et al., 2007).

Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) is studied as a second order construct, which comprises of many other variables (Fournier, 1994, 1998; Bowden, 2009). Due to BRQ iterative nature it can be studied as an antecedent to consumer engagement or consequence of consumer engagement (Hollebeek, 2011b). Bowden (2009) and Hudson et al. (2015) indicate that involvement, trust, satisfaction and commitment are important measures of BRQ which play a role in customer engagement process. (a) Customer satisfaction is the key measure of long term consumer brand relationship (Hong-Youl and Perks, 2005). Customer satisfaction influences the consumers post consumption behavior i.e. brand loyalty and word of mouth (Cooil, Keiningham, Aksoy & Hsu, 2007). (b) Trust is the ability of the brand or product to meet its promised obligations towards customers at the specified cost (Doney and Cannon, 1997). The aim is to enforce a relationship between consumer and brand, in which brand trust plays a central role in enforcing this bond (McKnight, Choudhury and Kacmar, 2002). (c) Involvement is an observable desire, emotion or stimulus created by specific brands (Thomson et al., 2005). Rothschild (1984) mentions "a state of interest, motivation or arousal". (d) Brand commitment is a long lasting attachment (Bettencourt, 1997) a firm intent to maintain an everlasting relation with the brand (Michel and Vergne, 2004).

H1: Brand relationship quality will be greater through online consumer engagement using social media

Brand Awareness

Hudson et al. (2015) sheds light on the importance of exploring the role of social media interaction on brand knowledge. Pappu et al. (2005) suggests that brand knowledge can be further divided in to two type, brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness is the strength of brand recognition and brand recall by a consumer (Aaker, 1991) the ability of consumer to remember the brand (Keller, 1993). Brand awareness is antecedent to brand relationship (Esch et al., 2006). Shabbir et al. (2010) indicated a mediating role of brand awareness on consumer outcomes in Pakistan. Hudson et al. (2015) indicated through empirical research that there is evidence of meditational relationship between brand relationship quality and social media interaction. Consumer brand engagement in social media can improve brand awareness, brand associations and brand loyalty (Zailskaitė-Jakstė & Kuvykaite, 2012).

H2: Brand Awareness mediates the relationship between online consumer engagement and brand relationship quality

Word of Mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) is a behavioral outcome that is subject to positive or negative views about a brand based on their usage experience (Zhang, Ye, Law and Li, 2010). Word of mouth of users becomes an important input of customers' purchase decision (Brown et al., 2005). Electronic Word of mouth (eWOM) is a vast spectrum of online mediums which includes emails, online communities, forums, social networking sites and blogs (Hung and Li 2007). Word of mouth is the explicit information about the brand from a user at virtually zero cost (Gruen et al., 2006). Hudson et al. (2015) empirically tested the significant positive relationship between BRQ and word of mouth. BRQ impacts brand loyalty, word of mouth and repurchase intentions (Smit et al., 2007; Fournier 1998).

H3: Word of mouth is greater (lower) through greater (lower) brand relationship quality.

Brand loyalty

Loyalty is the ultimate aim of all marketers, and it has been a significantly important topic for researchers over the past years (Boshoff, 1997). It is an intention to purchase the brand or product again in future (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978) and an individual's intent to repeat purchase is so strong that the consumer makes efforts to attain the desired brand (Smit et al., 2007).

Brand relationship quality has immense connectivity with brand loyalty (Fournier, 1994). Brand loyalty is effected by several dimensions one of which is brand relationship playing a critical role in enhancing brand loyalty (Fournier and Yao, 1997). Bowden (2009) suggests that increased consumer brand engagement enhances loyalty through surrounding the stages of brand relationship quality i.e. trust, commitment and satisfaction. Brodie et al. (2011) reveals consumer engagement process as a concept that does not follow a sequence or order rather it has a bi-directional relationship with outcome variables i.e. brand loyalty. The continuous nature of consumer engagement in an exchange relationship to enhance brand loyalty, explains the dynamic and multidimensional ability of consumer engagement to act as an antecedent and consequence in the feedback loop.

H4: Brand Loyalty is greater (lower) through greater (lower) brand relationship quality.

H5: Online consumer engagement using social media is greater (lower) through greater (lower) brand loyalty.

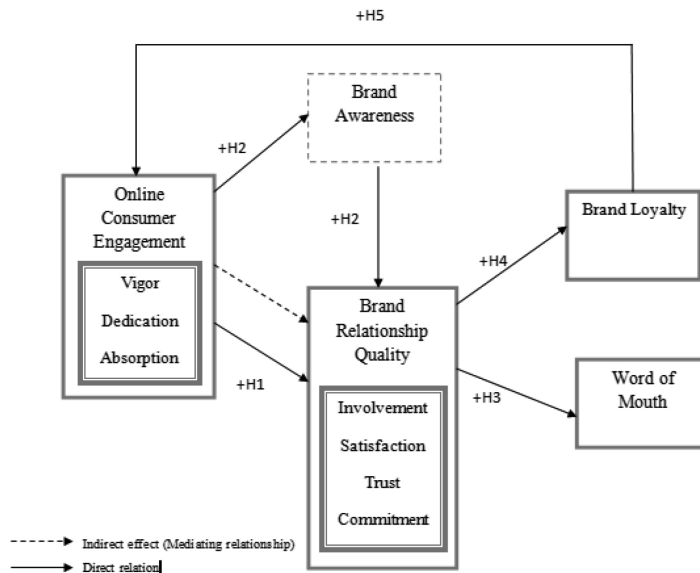


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Methodology

Non-random sampling technique was selected to collect the data using self-administered and online questionnaire. The respondent type chosen were social media users, categorically university students, working officials and household individuals with past experience of online shopping through facebook, shopping websites etc. Out of the total of 550 questionnaires, 362 were usable while the rest were discarded due to discrepancies and respondent errors. To measure the proposed constructs, a questionnaire consisting of 51 items was developed based on pre-existing theory. A survey questionnaire, consisting of 51 items, was developed to measure the proposed constructs, based on the existing theory. Measurement scale chosen for this research was “7 points” Likert scale.

Table 1

Sources of Survey Instrument

Variable Name	No. of items in the scale	Source
First Order:		
Brand Awareness	5	Srull, 1984; Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Rossiter and Percy, 1987
Word of Mouth	6	Citrin 2001, Wixon and Todd, 2005 & Wu and Shaffer, 1987
Brand Loyalty	5	Kim and Kim, 2005 & Yoo et al., 2000
Second Order:		
Online Consumer Engagement		
Vigor	6	Cheung, Lee, & Jin, 2011, Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli et al., 2002
Absorption	6	
Dedication	6	
Brand Relationship Quality		
Involvement	5	Beatty & Talpade, 1994)
Satisfaction	3	Gustafsson et al., 2005
Commitment	6	Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004
Trust	3	Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001

The following techniques were used to test and assess the hypothesized measurement model: Analysis of Reliability- Cronbach's Alpha techniques; Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Path Analysis using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM); and Construct Validity (Convergent and Discriminant).

To study brand awareness as a mediating variable, Iacobucci's testing approach was preferred over the much famous Baron and Kenny's approach because of certain limitations (see MacKinnon, Fairchild & Fritz, 2007; Zhao, Lynch & Chen, 2010). The Bootstrap Test was carried out at 95% confidence interval, to make the analysis more rigorous, instead of the Sobel Test that is considered less strong in comparison (Zhao et al., 2010).

The SPSS software was used to code the data collected. Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Path Analysis and Mediation analysis were run using the AMOS software.

Analysis And Results

The descriptive analysis on the data was done through SPSS. Out of 550 questionnaires that were circulated, 362 usable responses were collected; the response rate was 66% which was more than the appropriate response rate i.e. above 20% (Yu and Cooper, 1983). Moreover, 63.4% of respondents used Facebook followed by 12.1% of respondents which used Youtube to engage with brands/products, around 54% of the total respondents were and about a three fourth of them belonged to the age bracket of 18 to 40 years old. A reasonable high proportion was educated, with 83% with Bachelors and Masters Degrees.

Measurement Model- Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To evaluate the factor structure of latent variables, one-dimensional confirmatory analysis was run (Kim, 2008). Those items that contradicted the validity were removed (Kim, 2008). CFA confines the variables being measured to load on to their latent variables in a way that measured variables would correlate with each other. Table 1 illustrates the standardized loading of each item and second order measurement variables. Construct Reliability was run to test the reliability of variables. And Average Variance Extracted (AVE) also known as Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity (DV) were run to test the validity of the variables.

The criteria for standardized coefficient was achieved by all with values within the range of 0.572 and 0.947. Those items that had standardized coefficient value less than 0.5 were dropped from the model. According to Bagozzi and Yi (1988), standardized coefficient should be greater than 0.5 and below 0.95. Moreover, the values of standardized coefficients of AVE and construct reliability were acceptable according to criteria i.e AVE > 0.5 and construct reliability > 0.7 (Fornell et al., 1981). Also, the test of discriminant validity was run and as all the values of AVE were above 0.5 and values of structural link between two constructs are below the AVE value of each construct therefore the discriminant validity holds.

Table 2

Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Variable	Standardized Loadings First Order	Standardized Loadings Second Order	AVE	CR	DV
Online Consumer Engagement			0.830	0.936	0.911
<i>Vigor (physical /behavioral/interaction)</i>		0.917			
<i>Absorption (Cognitive)</i>		0.846			
<i>Dedication (Emotional)</i>		0.966			
Brand Relationship Quality			0.871	0.964	0.933
<i>Involvement</i>		0.941			
<i>Satisfaction</i>		0.945			
<i>Commitment</i>		0.931			
<i>Trust</i>		0.916			
Brand Awareness	0.835-0.918		0.784	0.948	0.886
			0.692	0.869	0.832
Word of Mouth	0.677-0.916				
Brand Loyalty	0.776-0.893		0.709	0.924	0.842

The goodness-of-fit value was acceptable thus indicating that the model has moderate fit with the data. The table below illustrates standalone and incremental indices.

Table 3

CFA - Model Fit Indices

Standalone indices		Incremental indices	
CMIN/df	*2.127	CFI	0.911
AGFI	0.785	TLI	0.884
GFI	0.755	NFI	0.798
RMSEA	0.061	IFI	0.843

Note: *= Insignificant p-value

Murray and Johnson, (2013) suggested that, due to the complexity of second-order measurement models in comparison to the first-order models, the goodness of fit comes out to be moderate or poor. The value of RMSEA is 0.061 which lies within the range of < 0.05 and < 0.08 indicating acceptable fit. Hu and Bentler, (1999) would consider this value reasonable fit which is extremely close to 0.6. The benchmark value for GFI is 0.7 and the table above shows a higher value of 0.755 for the default model (Kuster & Vila, 2011). These values are deemed acceptable and can be concluded as an acceptable fit to data and can be applied to practice. The values discussed above provided a moderate fit of the model to the data.

Structural Model - Path Analysis

In case of SEM, the structural model depicts the relationship existing within latent variables of the model with the use of directional arrows. To test and to be able to assess the significance of these relationships hypotheses, that are created using past theory, are tested using path analysis. On the basis of the values of significance, the hypotheses are accepted or rejected. The table below is illustrating the model fit indices.

Table 4

Path Analysis - Model Fit Indices

Standalone indices		Incremental indices	
CMIN/df	*2.487	CFI	0.901
AGFI	0.625	TLI	0.804
GFI	0.685	NFI	0.808
RMSEA	0.074	IFI	0.83

Note: *= Insignificant p-value

As the table shows, GFI and AGFI are the only indices not achieving the desired criteria. It is suggested that in the case of a high degree of freedom (989 for this model), in comparison to sample size (362 for this study) has a downward push on GFI and AGFI values (Sharma et al, 2005). Thus, the indices indicate a more that moderate model fit.

The table below illustrates the significance of the relationships between the variables based on which the hypotheses have been accepted. The results show that all the relationships are positively significant meeting the benchmark of p-value <0.05.

Table 5

Path Analysis Results

	Hypothesis and Relationship	Predicted Sign	Estimate (β)	P-value	Decision
H1	Consumer Engagement \rightarrow Brand Relationship Quality	+	0.386	***	Accept
H2	Consumer Engagement \rightarrow Brand Awareness	+	0.601	***	Partial Mediation
	Brand Awareness \rightarrow Brand Relationship Quality	+	0.599	***	
H3	Brand Relationship Quality \rightarrow Word of Mouth	+	0.859	***	Accept
H4	Brand Relationship Quality \rightarrow Brand Loyalty	+	0.817	***	Accept
H5	Brand Loyalty \rightarrow Consumer Engagement	+	0.424	0.04	Accept
Note: *** p<0.05.					
Source: Authors' calculations.					

We therefore, accept all the hypotheses from H1 to H5. Specifically, the relationship between Online Consumer Engagement and Brand Awareness, and Brand Awareness and Brand Relationship Quality, represented by H2, is highly significant and will be further explained in the Section 4.3.

Mediation

This study aims at making contribution to the research field of marketing and brand management by studying a mediator variable i.e. Brand Awareness between Online Consumer Engagement and Brand Relationship Quality. The aim is to determine its effect on the strength of this relationship. The results show that the direct effect of OCE on BRQ, in presence of Brand Awareness, is significant at p-value >0.05. Also, the results shows significant indirect effect of OCE on BRQ, through Brand Awareness, at p-value >0.05. thus concluding that there is partial mediation which means that Brand Awareness partially strengthens this relationship which is also supported by a higher beta coefficient for H4 as compared to beta coefficient of H1. Thus, we accept H4.

Table 6

Mediation Results

Relationship (Brand Awareness as a mediator)	Direct Effect, without mediator	Direct Effect, with mediator	Indirect Effect, with mediator	Results
Online Consumer → Engagement Brand Relationship Quality	0.000	0.000	0.002	Partial Mediation

Source: Author's Calculations.

Discussion And Managerial Implications

Online consumer engagement is the most essential aspect that is key to building consumer loyalty and generating word of mouth. Considering that the research was conducted in a developing economy where social media usage for communicating with brands is still an infant practice, the results came out to be highly significant in supporting the predicted relationships thus pressing the need to rely on these indicators for successful brand management. The earlier literature supports the importance of BRQ in improving the consumer brand relationship (Hudson et., 2015; Bowden, 2009; Fournier, 1998; Kim et al., 2005). Most of the studies emphasize that there is a positive and significant relationship between BRQ and OCE which also provides support to our results. Contrary to this, Hudson et al. (2015) identified that this relationship is significant only with a mediating effect of emotional attachment. Furthermore, adding onto the existing literature, our results indicate the relevance of brand awareness as a mediator in the relationship between OCE and brand relationship quality. It can be clearly inferred that social media engagements create ease for consumers to gain knowledge about the brand every now and then (Richter and Koch, 2007). Brand awareness helps creating productive consumer interaction with brands thus strengthening BRQ. Using social media as touch points, consumer interaction with the brand not only creates awareness through media campaigns but also builds long term consumer associations with the brand. And if these associations are positive then they go a long way in maintaining loyal customers. The continuous encounter enhances brand relationship and demonstrates brand loyalty (Ahuja and Medury, 2010). The evidence of positive word of mouth exists in literature due to BRQ. Word of mouth is a networking process targeted on several recipients and in the case of social media context it encompasses larger recipients. Word of mouth is a modern mechanism for brand promotions which has been deduced by research and accepted by marketers. As consumers build more trust with the brand and feel delightful they tend to recommend brands to others (Edelman, 2010).

According to Oliver, (1999), brand loyalty develops through stages: attitudinal and behavioral. When a consumer starts admiring a brand, a positive attitude towards that brand leads to a positive behavior towards it (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This also implies that favorable attitudes resulting from loyalty process can once again encourage them to get more involved (favorable behavior) with that brand, thus creating a feedback loop in this process. Brodie et al., (2011), suggested a positive impact of Consumer Engagement on Brand Loyalty where as Kugun, (2012) tested and suggested the opposite relationship; that Brand Loyalty states directly impact the different intensity levels of Consumer

Engagement. Loyal consumers tend to get more involved and responsive towards online activities and promotions being carried out by a particular brand.

The results and discussion made above highlights the importance of not only engaging consumers to firm up their loyalty towards the brand but also the need to direct back the resulting consumer attitudes and behavior, towards the brand as a reinvestment in to a healthy never-fading brand relationship quality. Social media is, globally, expediting the process of brand and consumers' interactivity with escalating awareness in developing economies. Furthermore, managers need to consider how to break through the clutter of information being targeted at the consumers worldwide. They need to rely on more unconventional practices and think and play out of the box to shine out bright and clear in that clutter. The empirical testing of conceptual model under pins the fact that Online Consumer Engagement is the imminent reality that has serious implications for global brands, thus highlighting ample room for more advanced empirical research in this field.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has been conducted on cross-sectional data due to limitation of time and resources but we suggest that a longitudinal study would help in doing an in-depth analysis of the feedback loop and would add more substance to Brand Loyalty's iterative quality.

Also, the measurement of Brand Relationship Quality can be further enriched by incorporating Brand Experience as a construct between OCE and BRQ as it can be intuitively suggested that higher consumer engagement with a brand, through online platform, will enhance consumers' brand experience and would, therefore, affect the Brand Relationship Quality of a particular brand.

The present model has been developed and tested in the context of online shopping, in general, but future research can test this model across specific industries. It can be tested, especially for retail industry, not just in the context of online engagement but also, in terms of in-person consumer engagement with retail brands and its impact on brand relationship quality with the retail customers.

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