

Does Social Media Marketing Stimulate Customer Engagement in Virtual Brand Communities? Examining the Related Outcomes

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Abstract

In recent years, customer engagement has gained significance due to the rapid growth of the Internet in the last few decades, which has offered enormous opportunities to customers. The purpose of the study is to assess the effect of social media marketing activities on customer engagement in social media brand communities. In addition, the study also examines the related outcomes of customer engagement in social media brand communities. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire from 159 social media users who follow particular brands on social media or were members of brand pages on social media. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling in Amos 22.0. The results of structural equation modeling indicated that social media marketing activities significantly affect customer engagement in virtual brand communities. Moreover, customer engagement stimulates brand loyalty and consumers' intention to repurchase the brands promoted using social media platforms. Also, customer engagement positively influences consumers' willingness to pay a premium for the said brand. Social media has provided marketers a new opportunity to connect with existing and prospective customers and collect insights about the customers through interaction in social media brand communities. The marketers can utilize these customer insights in policy formulation and strategic decision-making. Therefore, this study will help brand managers boost customer engagement on the social media brand community pages. To the best of our knowledge, this study is a novel attempt to conceptualize the effect of social media marketing on customer engagement. It also provides valuable insights to the marketers on envisioning the related outcomes of customer engagement, i.e., brand loyalty, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay a premium to increase their brand community engagement.

Keywords

Social Media, Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement, Virtual Brand Communities and Brand

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have emerged as one of the most popular technologies of the 21st century, which billions of people use daily. Facebook, by far, is reported to be the most used social platform, followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. As of January 2022, monthly active users and daily active users of Facebook were 2.93 and 1.93 billion, respectively (Dixon, 2022).

The estimates show that social media users will continue to grow to 6 billion in 2027 globally, which accounts for 75.94% of the world's population. The mounting rise of social media channels has provided firms with new opportunities to identify their customer and build a brand community (BCs).

The last decade witnessed the rise of virtual brand communities (VBCs) on social media platforms due to the increasing customer engagement in VBCs (Wirtz2013). People are using the Internet more to participate in brand communities than to make purchases; therefore, membership and usage of VBCs are likely to expand (Bressler and Grantham 2000). These virtual communities enable brands to post brand-related information, acquire a huge following, develop customer relationships, and enhance customer and brand interaction in real-time (Lipsman et al. 2012).

The concept of customer engagement in VBCs has received significant attention of marketers and academicians in the last ten years (Kumar et al.2010) as it measures a brand's customer interaction across all touchpoints throughout its lifecycle. Engaging customers regularly across all channels enables firms to forge and strengthen a direct connection with consumers and provide benefits beyond simple business dealings. Highly engaged customers are loyal to the brand and purchase more than the average customer.

Social media is a tool that has captured the attention of marketers by providing deep customer insights that are useful for strategic decision-making. Marketers benefit significantly from social media platforms because it provides information about customers, their perceptions of brands and companies, new product ideas, customer feedback, and so on (Henning-Thurau et al.2010). Consequently, they use these communities more frequently to connect with present and potential customers. Marketers may stimulate favorable consumer attitude by advertising their products and services on social media platforms (Gupta and Kumar 2021). In contrast, customers can use VBCs to share their experiences and feelings about specific products or services, as well as to express their support and passion for specific products or services. Hence, engagement in VBCs is evolving as a prominent relationship marketing variable that yields promising outcomes for the firms.

Thus, the study aims to examine the role of social media marketing on customer engagement and how growing engagement will result in brand loyalty, consumers' intention to repurchase the brand, and their willingness to pay premium for the said brand. Based on the aforementioned objectives, this study made a substantial contribution to the extant literature, as earlier studies had not looked at the important aspects of VBCs and the effects of social media marketing on customer engagement and subsequent related outcomes.

1.1 Objectives

1. To probe the result of social media marketing on customer engagement in VBCs.
2. To investigate the impact of customer engagement in VBCson brand loyalty, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay premium.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Virtual Brand Communities

Virtual brand communities (VBCs)was first coined by Rheingold (1993) and it can be defined as a “network of relationships between consumers and the brand, product, fellow consumers, and the marketer” (McAlexander et al. 2002). These communities are socially enclosed forms of brands in consumers' day-to-day life which not only connects consumers to the brands but also enables interaction among the consumers themselves (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Earlier, these communities were not widely dispersed due to their limited geographical scope. Indeed, the geographical aspect has been most impacted by digitization, as members of these communities are not required to present at the same place to interact and discuss with one another. There can be two types of brand communities: consumer-generated and marketer-generated (Lee et al. 2011).

2.2 Social Media Marketing and Customer Engagement

Recently,the use of social networks has accelerated the pace of customer engagement. The evolution of consumer engagement on social media has produced significant sectoral changes. The platform is so handy that marketers are effortlessly using it to promote their goods and services. Therefore, social media is a type of online space where people with mutual interests build a network to share their thoughts, comments, and ideas (Weber 2009).Social media are computer-mediated technologies that enable users to exchange content, ideas, and other forms of

expression via virtual communities and networks (Obar and Wilman 2015). The extant literature conceptualized social media marketing activities as- “entertainment”, “interaction”, “trendiness”, “customization”, and “word-of-mouth communication” (Kim and Ko 2010; 2012; Chen and Lin 2019; Yadav and Rahman 2017; Ibrahim and Aljarah 2018). According to Li et al. (2021), there has been no proper study relating to customer engagement and social media marketing, but there is a link between the two.

Customer engagement is described as the emotional attachment a customer has with a particular brand. It is influenced by factors such as the degree of consumer involvement in product purchases, social media contact, closeness to the brand, and influence over time (Safko et al. 2009). Hollebeek et al. (2014) define engagement as the user's favorably valenced brand-related intellectual, psychological, and behavioral activities occurring during or related to the focal consumer-brand engagement. Furthermore, Brodie et al. (2013) classified it as a multi-faceted concept with cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions which allows consumers to interact, communicate, and collaborate among consumers and the brand, as well as other members of the VBC. The extant literature conceptualized customer engagement as feedback and collaboration (Van Doorn et al. 2010; Carlson et al. 2018). The findings of the study by Cheung et al. (2020), study reveal that social media marketing elements play a considerable role in building customer brand engagement. Therefore, the following hypothesis conceptualizing the relationship between social media marketing and customer engagement in VBCs has been proposed:

H1. Social Media Marketing positively affects Customer Engagement.

2.3 Related Outcomes (Brand Loyalty, Repurchase Intention, Willingness to Pay Premium)

Oliver (1997, p. 392) defined brand loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to consistently rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service in the future, despite other situational and marketing factors that have the potential to induce switching behavior". Brand loyalty helps retain customers and forbids rivals from poaching loyal customers (Reichheld and Scheffer 2000; Dick and Basu, 1994). The extant literature suggests that customer engagement results in customer loyalty towards the brand (Van Doorn et al. 2010; France et al. 2015; Verhoef et al. 2010). Therefore, the present study explores the link between customer engagement and the level of brand loyalty, and the proposed hypothesis is:

H2. Customer Engagement positively affects Brand Loyalty.

Repurchase intention is the loyalty outcome of a customer relationship with a brand (Oliver 1999). It is "the subjective probability that a customer (i.e., experienced customers) will continue to purchase a product from the same online seller" (Chiu et al. 2012) and is a psychological behavior that motivates purchasers to continue buying products or services (Trivedi and Yadav, 2018). (Zeithaml et al. 1996) define repurchase intention as one of five behavioural intentions, loyalty, willingness to pay a price premium, word-of-mouth, and complaining. Sprott et al. (2009), Lee et al. (2019), and Molinillo et al. (2020), in their study, found that customer engagement can enhance repurchase intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis conceptualizing the relationship between customer engagement and repurchase intention in VBCs has been proposed:

H3. Customer Engagement positively affects Repurchase Intention.

The willingness to pay premium is the maximal amount of sum the end-user is ready to pay for a specified quantity of a product (Kalish and Nelson 1991). The willingness to pay premium price decisions is heavily influenced by the customers' value perception of where they should acquire the most value by engaging themselves with the service provider. It is usually represented by a price figure (Chathoth et al. 2014; Liu et al. 2022). It can significantly vary from customer to customer due to differences in customer preferences. Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) in a study, investigated that customers' willingness to pay premium prices is considered as a significant outcome of customer engagement (Kumar et al. 2022). Customers who are highly engaged are more likely to form emotional attachments and attitudes, further motivating them to pay a higher price. Hence, it is justified to propose the following hypotheses:

H4. Customer Engagement positively affects Willingness to Pay Premium.

Brands have realized the potential of VBCs and thus given it high significance to connect people with affinity and liking for a brand. Our model, shown in Fig 1, mainly focuses on relationship established among customers and

brands while using social media communities. The study addresses the effects of four kinds of SMM activities which elicits customer engagement towards brands. Consequently, increases brand loyalty, repurchase intention and willingness to pay premium. In sum-up our proposed research model integrates four hypotheses. Based on the above discussion following research model is proposed for the study (Figure 1):

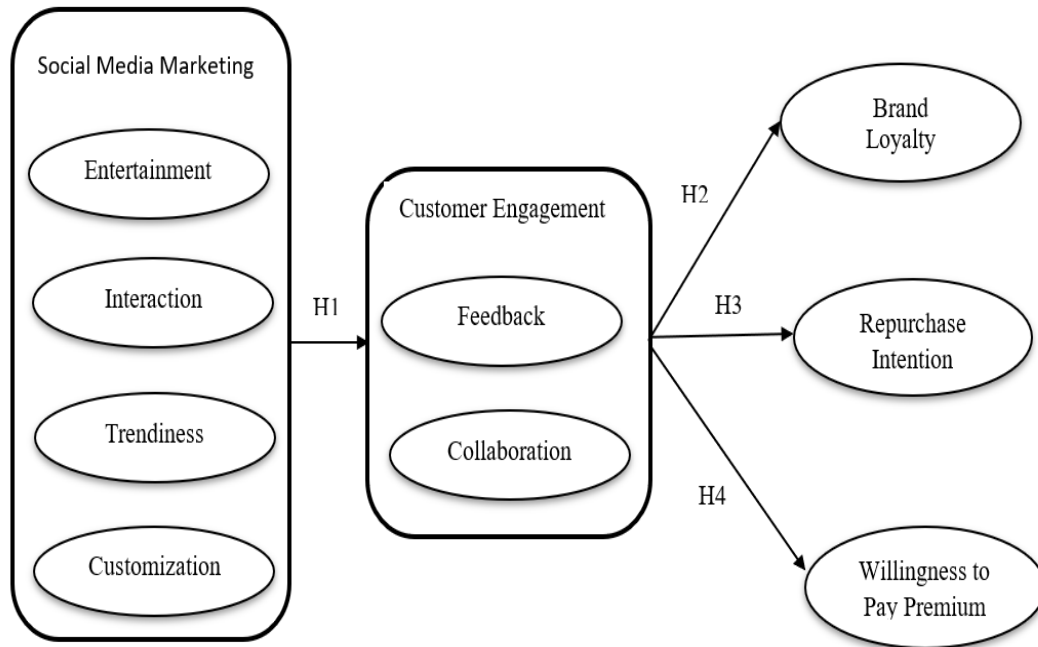


Figure 1. Proposed Research Model

3. Methodology

Data for the study were collected from social media users who follow any brand fan page or are members of any VBCs on social media platforms. A qualifying question about whether they follow any brand on social media was asked, and only those who follow any brand fan page were included in the final analysis. A total of 217 respondents were contacted to collect data in virtual mode. However, out of 217 responses, 159 were following brand pages on social media, and the remaining 58 were excluded from further analysis. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire which was developed through an extensive literature review. The introductory part of the questionnaire explains the objective of the study and categorically informs the respondents that the information provided by them will be used only for academic purposes. Participation in the survey was completely on a volunteer basis. The questionnaire was divided into two major sections. The first section asks the respondents whether they follow any brand on social media. This section also includes all the statements corresponding to the constructs conceptualized in the proposed research model. The section, on the other hand, includes general demographic details of the respondents, such as gender, age, education etc. The research utilized primary sources in order to collect relevant data. The opinions of respondents were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree).

Social media marketing activities were conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprised of four major subdimensions, namely- entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization. The scale for social media marketing activities was taken from (Kim & Ko, 2010; 2012). In addition, customer engagement in VBCs was conceptualized with two subdimensions, namely feedback and collaboration. To measure the construct of the customer engagement scale developed by (Van Doorn et al. 2010); (Carlson et al.2018) was used. Moreover, related outcomes of customer engagement to measure the scale was developed by (Verhoef et al.2010) for brand loyalty; (Lee et al. 2019) for repurchase intention, and (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014)for willingness to pay premium.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Respondent's Profile

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were first examined in the study. Regarding the participants' gender, 62 were female, and 97 were male. Most of the participants are between the ages of 18 and 25 (73%) and 26 and 35 (24.5%), while only 2.5 percent of participants are between the ages of 36 and 45. There are a total of 21 married and 136 unmarried participants. The highest education level of participants is post-graduation or above, i.e., 45.3%. Mainly, 61% of participants are students who filled out the questionnaire. 37.1 percent of those who took part have an income of <25000, 19.5 percent have income between 26,000-50,000, 18.9 percent have income between 50,000-75,000, and 22 percent have an income of 75,000 or above (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondent's profile

S.no	Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	97	61.00
		Female	62	39.00
2	Age (in years)	18-25	116	73.00
		26-35	39	24.5
		36-45	4	2.5
		Above 45	0	0.0
3	Marital Status	Married	21	13.2
		Unmarried	136	85.5
		Others	2	1.3
4	Education	High School and below	9	5.7
		Intermediate	29	18.2
		Graduated	47	29.6
		PG and above	72	45.3
5	Occupation	Private Employed	24	15.1
		Government Employed	8	5.0
		Self-Employed	15	9.4
		Unemployed	15	9.4
		Student	97	61.0
6	Monthly Income	<25000	59	37.1
		26,000-50,000	31	19.5
		51,000-75,000	30	18.9
		75,000 and above	35	22.0

4.2 Measurement Model

The primary data collected through a survey questionnaire was analyzed in Amos 20.0 by applying structural equation modelling. First of all, confirmatory factor analysis (see Figure 2) was conducted, and the goodness of fit of the measurement model was ascertained using various fit indices as suggested by (Hair et al. 2010). The results of the goodness of fit are detailed in Table 2. It is evident from Table 2 that confirmatory factor analyses produced satisfactory fit as all the fit indices are consistent with the recommended thresholds suggested by (Hu and Bentler 1999). Thus, overall, the measurement model produced acceptable goodness of fit (Table 2).

Table 2. Measurement model goodness of fit

Fit indices	Model values	Recommended threshold
CMIN	582.463	--

Df	334	--
CMIN/df	1.744	Less than 3
GFI	0.802	More than 0.8
TLI	0.897	More than 0.9
CFI	0.909	More than 0.9
RMSEA	0.069	Less than 0.08

The results of confirmatory factor analysis also produced statistical measures to ascertain reliability and validity. The results are given in Table 3. Reliability (internal consistency) was examined using composite reliability (CR) values. It is clear from Table 3 that CR values for all constructs range from 0.778 to 0.976. Thus, all the CR values are greater than the critical value of 0.7, as suggested by Nunnally (1978). Hence the constructs under study confirm internal consistency, i.e., reliability. Moreover, convergent validity was ascertained using average variance extracted (AVE) values. As shown in Table 3, all AVE values are more than the critical value of 0.5 (Table 3), as suggested by (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In addition, the square root of AVE for each construct (shown in diagonals) is greater than the inter-construct correlations (Figure 2), which confirm discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 3. Reliability and validity

	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Willingness to Pay Premium (WTP)	0.778	0.637	0.798				
2. Brand Loyalty	0.865	0.616	0.714	0.785			
3. Repurchase Intention	0.883	0.655	0.683	0.732	0.809		
4. Social Media Marketing (SMM)	0.944	0.809	0.672	0.711	0.694	0.899	
5. Customer Engagement	0.976	0.954	0.341	0.324	0.362	0.343	0.977

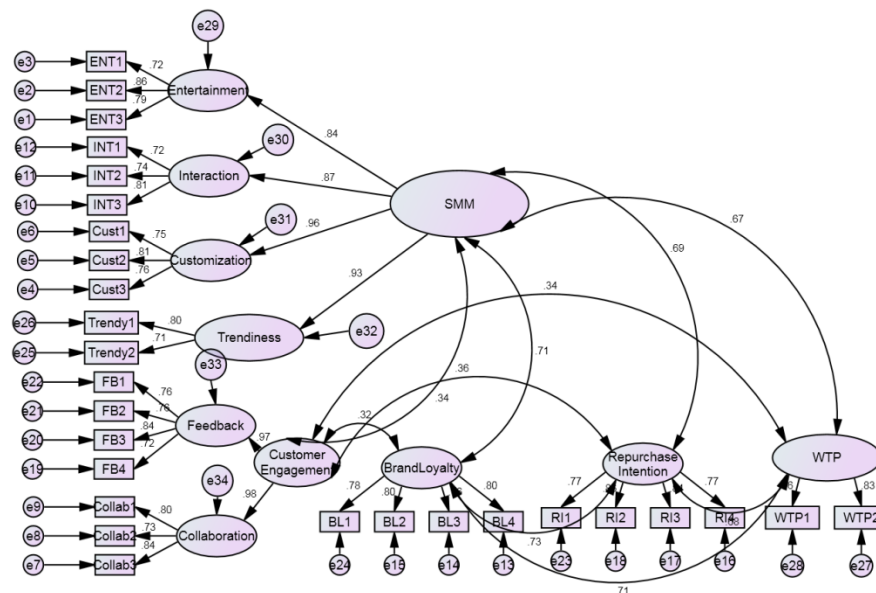


Figure 2. Measurement Model (Confirmatory Factor Analysis)

4.3 Structural Model

After examining the goodness of fit of the measurement model and the reliability and validity of study constructs, the construct scores were imputed and saved in a separate SPSS file. The structural model hypothesizing the underlying relationships among the constructs (Figure 3) was analyzed in Amos 20.0. The results of the structural

model path analysis are detailed in Table 4. The results of path analysis demonstrate that social media marketing exhibit a positive impact on customer engagement in VBC (estimate=0.420; S.E.=0.082; p<0.001). Thus, hypothesis H1 was accepted. Moreover, customer engagement was reported to exert a significant positive influence on brand loyalty (estimate=0.442; S.E.=0.091; p<0.001). Thus, hypothesis H2 was supported by the results. Also, customer engagement was found to positively influence repurchase intention (estimate=0.447; S.E.=0.082; p<0.001). Hence hypothesis H3 was also supported. Additionally, customer engagement was also found to exhibit a positive influence on consumers’ willingness to pay premium for the promoted product/brand (estimate=0.566; S.E.=0.106; p<0.001). Thus, hypothesis H4 was also supported by the empirical results.

Table 4. Structural model (Path analysis)

			Estimate	SE.	CR.	P	Std. Estimated
Social Media Marketing	--->	Customer Engagement	.420	.082	5.147	***	.379
Customer Engagement	--->	Brand Loyalty	.442	.091	4.875	***	.362
Customer Engagement	--->	Repurchase Intention	.447	.082	5.467	***	.399
Customer Engagement	--->	Willingness to Pay Premium	.566	.106	5.349	***	.392

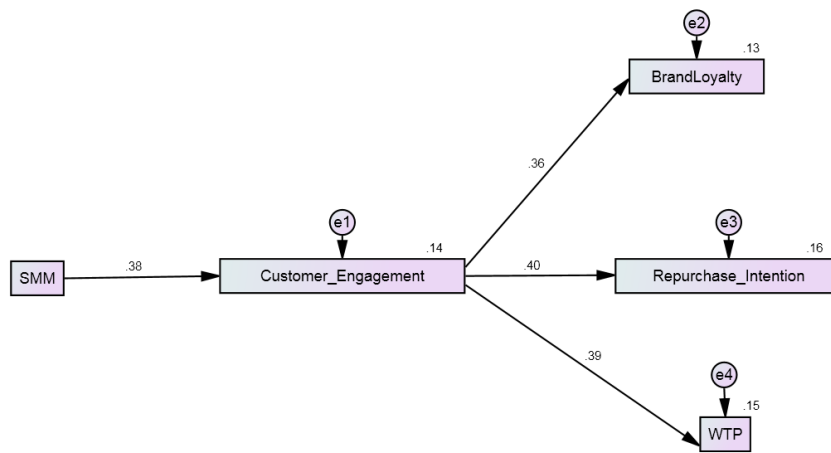


Figure 3. Structural Model

5. Discussions

The current study looked at the rapidly growing phenomenon of brand communities formed on social media platforms. Marketers are already aware that VBCs strengthen customer relationships. This research study provides them with insights into how to engage customers in a VBC. The study investigates the effect of social media marketing on customer engagement in VBCs. It also conceptualized the related outcomes of customer engagement in VBCs in the form of brand loyalty, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay premium. The proposed conceptual model was empirically tested through a survey and data collected from 159 social media users who are also a member of these brand communities on various social media platforms. The results of structural equation modelling conducted using Amos 22.0 showed that social media marketing exhibits a positive influence on customer engagement in VBCs’.

Consumers are more likely to engage with websites that appear standardized and reliable (Erkan and Evans, 2016; Lim et al., 2017). This can be accomplished by making the information easily findable, understandable, and readable on the website. The prior research asks for empirical research to examine social media marketing's function in the process of brand-building, documenting how businesses might use SMM activities to forge relationships with consumers and reinforce consumers' behavioural intentions (Cheung et al., 2019; Godey et al., 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012). Therefore, the outcome of the current study is in line with the existing literature and supports that social media marketing activities have a positive impact on customer brand engagement.

Furthermore, the study also examined the outcomes of customer engagement in VBCs' and found that customer engagement leads to brand loyalty. An invested person is more likely to experience positive thoughts toward an organization, brand, or product, resulting in loyalty towards the brand. Results indicated that customers' post-purchase connections with the brand significantly influence the formation of service brand loyalty (Hollebeek 2009; Patterson et al. 2006). Moreover, according to Kaihatu (2020), customer involvement motivates clients to participate more and changes non-transactional habits into buying ones (Prentice et al., 2019). Respondents believe that getting involved in VBC makes them feel active, zealous, and aware of the e-marketplace and motivates them to shop. As a result of this interaction, they are more likely to repurchase from the e-marketplace in the near future (Djohan et al. 2022). The present study also confirms that customer engagement positively influences customers' intention to repurchase the brand. Moreover, the study also showed that engagement in VBCs encourages customers to pay a premium price for the said brand. The findings are consistent with the prior research. (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Kumar et al., 2022).

Thus, this study contributes to the marketing literature by providing a broad framework of the interconnection between SMM activities, such as entertainment, trendiness, interaction, collaboration, and customer engagement (feedback and collaboration). The findings support that social media marketing played an important role in driving customer engagement, ultimately driving brand loyalty, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay premium. This result has been corroborated by the findings of (Kim and Ko 2010; 2012; Van Doorn et al. 2010; Carlson et al. 2018; Verhoef et al. 2010; Lee et al. 2019).

6. Conclusion & Future Research

The primary goal of this research is to understand how brand communities can help to set up everlasting relationships with customers, specifically through brand loyalty, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay premium, all of which are mediated by customer engagement. A survey of 159 brand page followers on various social media platforms showed that social media marketing activities significantly influence customer engagement in VBCs. In addition, the results also revealed that customer engagement in VBC has a significant impact on brand loyalty, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay premium. Building on previous research, this study emphasizes the role of social media marketing in engaging customers, as well as the impact of customer engagement on brand loyalty, repurchase intention, and willingness to pay premium. This study will assist brand managers in uplifting customer engagement toward the social media brand community pages and the findings may be useful for companies that own a brand page on social media and want to involve their customers in the development phase, unite the people into the brand to feel like they are a part of it; all of this is possible through VBCs.

In consideration to the managerial contribution, the research findings signify the importance of consumers engagement in brand communities on social media platforms. The study highlights on how engaging customers may be beneficial for the marketers in building brand and creating long-term relationships with customers. The study boosts our knowledge on the dynamics of online brand building, where consumer participation is employed as a strategy to boost brand value. Also, companies' brand image is enhanced as customers get an opportunity to share or exchange information with people having similar interest. Moreover, it could help them to position their products according to the needs and demands of customers and, based upon their socio-demographic profiles, i.e. gender, income, age. This study is a novel attempt to understand how VBCs use available channels and how they anticipate benefits for customers as well as marketers. Many business firms see customer engagement as a notable benefit of their social media activity. The Marketing Science Institute has also identified it as a key research priority (Bolton, 2011). Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate consumer engagement in this context as people are spending more and more time on social media.

The results of the study provide opportunities for future research in the domain of customer engagement. The study only focuses on the SMM as one of the determinants of customer engagement. However, other determinants such as

information quality, relationship quality, community characteristics or consumer characteristics may also influence customer engagement in the VBCs. Future research may be directed to investigate the role of these determinants in stimulating customer engagement.

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