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Love Me, Love Me Not: The Counterintuitive Relationships in Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Brand connections are one of the key marketing fields that have seen growth through social networking sites (SNS). The literature agrees that SNS users have positive relationships with their favorite brands based on their experiences. However, such acceptance could be formed prematurely, because sometimes analysis of consumer relationships excludes the mediator position of the social network itself. This study seeks to examine the mediating role in consumer relationships between affective and cognitive customers and SNS. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 41 people were conducted to establish qualitative research designs. The results indicate a deep affective customer-SNS partnership, which implies that SNS consumers and brands work together in a counterintuitive way. The results suggest that while SNS are trusted and highly valued by users, they do not always support brands. This shows that close relationships with social platforms outweigh users' relationship with other brands on these SNS platforms. This study shows that SNS have an interfering adverse impact on consumer-brand relationships within these platforms. The research discusses the counterintuitive influence of social platforms on consumer-brand relationships.

Keywords: Social networking sites; Social media; Brand relationship, Brand community, Consumer experience

1. Introduction

Consumer experience on social networking sites (SNS) typically leads to positive rather than negative emotions (Brodie *et al*., 2011). Most studies have mainly focused on consumer engagement on SNS rather than on a potential consumer relationship with these social platforms. In addition, the literature on brand relationships tends to examine brand relationships within online brand communities with little or no consideration for the role of customer-SNS relationships (Kamboj and Rahman, 2016). However, only recently has a handful of studies paid attention to the mediating role of SNS in customer-brand relationships. Numerous studies have looked either at the positive or at the negative side of brand relationships on SNS (Ramadan *et al*., 2023c) with no examination of the simultaneous co-existence of such influences of the customer-SNS relationship on brand relationships.

Recent studies have indicated potential positive interference by the host SNS in customer-brand relationships (Hudson *et al*., 2016,). This positive role of SNS on these relationships has encouraged brands to be proactively engaged in SNS marketing strategies (Ramadan *et al*., 2018). Notwithstanding the importance of brand relationship building on social media, little is known about the potential negative consequences of SNS on customers' relationships with brands and the extent to which SNS-based brand relationships are associated with undesired and unintended consequences. This has been emphasized by Simon and Tossan (2018, p. 175), who argued that customer-SNS-brand interactions can provide value for consumers.

This study addresses this gap in the literature and suggests that the customer-SNS relationship might generate a counterintuitive impact on the customer-brand relationship. Fournier and Avery (2011) warned brands to be cautious about their involvement with SNS, implying that the complication of brand relationships on these platforms extends beyond being simply perceived as a tool to generate interactions with customers (Ramadan *et al*., 2023a). Despite the complication of this interaction, studies have not directly explored the impact of SNS on customer-brand relationship. This study offers three key contributions to the field. First, it examines users' experiences with SNS and their affective and a cognitive relationship with these platforms. Second, the study contributes to the existing literature through the identification of the counterintuitive effect of customer-SNS relationship between customer-brand relationship, as the extant literature clearly lacks attention to this field. Third, it discusses the ensuing effects of the latter relationships on the social networks' monetization model and the ensuing implications for brand relationships.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

- RQ_1: Do affective and cognitive relationships with the SNSs have counterintuitive effects on brand relationship?
- RQ_2: To what extent do affective and cognitive relationships with the SNSs positively or negatively mediate the relationship between customer experience and brand relationships?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Experience with friends on social networking

Over the past decade, customer social networking experience has become at the center of researchers' attention. One important area that has received reasonable attention is customers interactive experience on SNSs (Handarkho, 2020). Through online communities on these platforms, people tend to build strong relationships with other people whom they feel similar to (Ramadan *et al.,* 2018). Such interaction between consumers present significant challenges and opportunities for brands. One manifestation of the social network experience is the selection of friends who enjoy doing or talking about the same things. Similarity has a huge effect on driving people to like each other, leading to a unique experience with friends (Peslak and Bhantnagar, 2011), and to a heightened acceptance of brand endorsements. Thus, the SNSs' experience is not only about socialization and interaction amongst users, but it is also about value for brands that exist within SNSs (Ramadan *et al.*, 2018).

2.2 Cognitive and affective relationships with the SNS

The cognitive and affective dimensions of any relationship constitute two psychological processes that are independent of each other but are essential to our understanding of relationships. According to Dabholkar *et al.* (2009), the insertion of cognitive and affective aspects of relationship in our studies helps in understanding the psychological processes and in enhancing marketing practices of managing and maintaining relationship with customers. Cognitive relationships are also essential in online brand relationships, as they shape consumers' intentions to either interact or not with online brands (Pavlou *et al.*, 2007). They also decrease uncertainty, online security-related issues, and opportunism, hence promoting a much closer brand relationship (Ramadan and Kanso, 2023; Ramadan *et al.*, 2023d). In addition, cognitive dimensions are part of the interaction mechanism between the two parties, which is vital to the sharing, exchanging, and creating new relationships between customers and users (Bowden, 2009; Ramadan *et al.*, 2023b).

2.3 Online brand relationship

Consumer-brand relationship is defined as "the tie between a person and a brand that is voluntary or is enforced interdependently between the person and the brand" (Chang and Chieng, 2006, p. 935). Various studies (Abosag *et al.*, 2020) have identified a broad spectrum of constructs that contribute to consumer–brand relationships, such as affective-based constructs (love, liking, and passion), self-connection (social and self-identity), trust, commitment and loyalty. Brand relationships have flourished on SNSs and online sites, resulting in positive purchase intentions (Farah *et al.*, 2020), reduced brand switching, and positive word of mouth (Hudson *et al.*, 2016). On both Instagram and Facebook, users reflect their interests and what they love by linking themselves to brands with which they identify similarity.

3. Methodology

A total of 41 in-depth interviews were conducted. Even though data saturation principles indicate that a sample size of 5 to 25 is considered sufficient (Farah,

2017), the convenience sample was increased in order to capture users from various age segments using different SNS platforms. The pre-selection criteria ensured all respondents were SNS users and brand followers on these platforms. Most respondents have been using SNS for the past six years and have been following and interacting with brands on these platforms for over two years. Interviews lasted for an average of 40 minutes. The interview questions were developed following the literature review that guided this research work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, coded verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 8. Qualitative reliability techniques ensured the accuracy and validity of the findings. The data was also checked for validity through triangulation, member scrutiny, and examination of participants' experiences using specific qualitative research approaches. Inter-coder reliability checks were also conducted between the two coders to corroborate their independent findings.

4. Findings

Four key themes emerged from the research in relation to the relationship with social networking sites and their potential risks in brand relationships: (1) experience with friends on social networking sites, (2) the affective relationship with the social networking site, (3) the cognitive relationship with the social networking site, and (4) brand similarity.

4.1 Experience with friends on Social Networking Sites

SNS made use of social networking services in communication and interaction and contributed to increasing the overall connectivity and sociability between people (Nie, 2001). In terms of experience with friends on social networking sites, the latter enabled people to maintain good relationships and to connect easily with others independent of their looks or locality (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). As per the literature, liking and similarity have an important impact on the flow of social networking experience in which they are the primary phases in the development and enhancement of the overall experience.

a) Similarity with friends

Similarity with friends on SNS was basically one of the most sought-after categories in this research. A person interacts more with people to which he/she feels similar. This is reflected in the following statements:

> *"Similarity is a wide word, but yes I do feel similar to them, but not too many, I say that I'm of course similar to people I am close to and not to all"*
>
> *"Similar to my circle only, since we share backgrounds and some thoughts but different from many"*

b) Friend Liking

SNS members consider liking and communication between users to be central aspects of an enjoyable experience on SNS. Friend liking, particularly on Facebook,

is a component used to provide a mode of communication between social network users. This was shown in the following statements:

> *"I like my Facebook friends to a high extent, I really do, these are the people I somehow love and want to be around"*

> *"I love the fact that I can find my friends on these social networking sites and bond with them virtually"*

4.2 Affective Relationship with the Social Networking Site

Love was perceived as having a strong positive effect on the overall interaction process between SNS and their users. While people mainly join SNS to socialize, it seems that these platforms are actually driving people to form an emotional attachment with them. The following statements mirrored this:

> *"I love Facebook; I even start scrolling in my page without me even noticing. I am really attached to it"*

> *"I log into Instagram several times a day, sometimes unconsciously. It became part of my daily routine"*

Facebook and Instagram are considered the most popular network spaces for personal representation. Facebook is developing both platforms in a way that allows its users to build and enhance their relationships (Ramadan *et al.*, 2018). In fact, these platforms are becoming an icon of love in the minds of their users, as seen in the following statements:

> *"I am attached to Facebook, there is a huge deep connection between us, I don't pass a day without checking it very often"*

> *"I feel addicted to Instagram, as I always feel the urge to check the latest posts by my friends. I just love it!"*

Nonetheless, while people start getting attached to SNS, their users seem to focus less on their relationship with brands being featured on these platforms.

> *"Brands and their ads on Facebook are useless; we are on Facebook to interact. I'm not there to check brand updates"*

4.3 Cognitive Relationship with the Social Networking Site

Trust is considered a positive key for interpersonal relationships in various aspects (Ramadan, 2018; Farah *et al.*, 2023). SNS trust is considered by its participants as a vital factor in good social networking experience, as it is a crucial element of any online presence. Moreover, trust at the brand level was deemed to provide genuine brand image and equity as per the following statements:

> *"I do trust Facebook as a brand as a platform, and this is the main reason why we are all still on Facebook. Why would I stay if I don't trust it?"*

> *"Facebook is my search engine on brands level, it is replacing Google in some places. When I check brands, I don't refer to any source other than Facebook"*

4.4 Brand relationship

A brand community is a group of participants with a common interest in a given brand, which often develops into a subculture around the brand (Cova and Pace,

2006). Recently, brands have started depending on social media as an integrated marketing tool (Ramadan, 2019). On Facebook, participants endorse brands when they 'like' them, forming a relationship with the brands featured on this platform. In fact, the study participants were aware that there is a strong relationship and close association with the brands they are following on the SNS platforms:

"It is my world, and of course I feel similar since I choose what I follow, it resembles me"

"Pretty similar, brands are our mirrors, the brands we choose is the mirror of what we are interested in"

5. Discussion

The research gap focuses on the impact of users' relationship with social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, on the customer-brand relationships. The study addresses this gap through an in-depth exploration based on SNS users. The results show a noteworthy finding that these SNS are now considered as stand-alone brands, rather than facilitators of the consumer-brand relationships. Indeed, this bond becomes a strong, cherished one, which appears to interfere with the customer-brand relationships on these platforms.

The findings from this current study are important in two respects. First, the analysis differentiated between two levels of relationships, namely cognitive and affective. This is a stepping stone in understanding the impact of customer-SNS relationships on customer-brand relationships. Second, the findings have not only unveiled the positive impact based on the cognitive component of this relationship, but it has also revealed the negative impact on the customer-brand relationship. Essentially, the key finding of this study is the identification of a counterintuitive relationship between users and SNS that negatively affects customer-brand relationships. Accordingly, the accepted assumption by some studies on the positivity of the customer-SNS relationship on brand relationship must be used cautiously, given its potential impact on the management of customer-brand relationship within SNS.

Indeed, this research posits that, when people get too emotionally attached to SNS, this would negatively affect how they feel toward the featured brands on these platforms. In fact, the findings suggest that, when bonding and engaging with a particular SNS, users are likely to forego some potential relationships with brands featured on this platform. The findings of this study also suggest that, whilst SNS are trusted and highly liked by users, they do not always lend a helping hand to brands that exist on these platforms. Therefore, brands on these social platforms must be aware of any negative influence, which could have a diluting effect on their own relationship with consumers.

6. Implications

SNS are now converting their users from casual customers into loyal fans, hence building a trust-love relationship (De Vries *et al*., 2012). From a scholarly perspective, this research fills a gap in the literature by highlighting the potential change in the role these platforms play. This shift in roles, from a typical mediating platform to that of a relational brand object, ultimately affects the overall

monetization model of SNS. From a managerial perspective, the findings revealed that people join SNS primarily to socialize with other people. Indeed, SNS users genuinely cherish the bond that happens between them and the platforms, which gives them the opportunity to socialize with friends they feel similar to. Accordingly, companies need to develop a method through which they can increase their awareness of the level of affection that their customers have for platforms. Furthermore, they need to counteract the potential negative impact from the relationships between their customers and SNS, managers should engage with their customers through affective stimuli and emotionally based activities.

This study also has several implications for social networking sites. While SNS should push for a deeper type of bonding with their customers, they should try to keep it less emotionally charged to reduce the consequences of such an intense relationship. Certainly, SNS should not push for excessive user attachment to their platform, as it could negatively affect their model of monetization with brands using their services. However, this strategy carries the risk of impeding perceived quality and the uniqueness of the overall social platforms, leading users to start searching for other SNS alternatives (Ramadan *et al*., 2018).

7. Future Research

Today, brands focus on building relationships with their customers using SNS. This study revealed that increased customer attachment to SNS could adversely affect the relationship between consumers and brands that use these social platforms. In summary, the research deliberated on the counterintuitive relationship between SNS and brands alongside the related implications, which should be expanded upon in future research. On that basis, brands must be aware of the risks they encounter due to SNS monetization systems. The key limitation of this study relates to the exploratory nature of this research. Accordingly, future studies, whether quantitative or qualitative, could further assess the potential risks and negative effects that SNS might present to the consumer-brand relationship model.

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