

A NETNOGRAPHIC QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF ANTECEDENTS AND OUTCOMES OF ONLINE BRAND ENGAGEMENT

Mahnoor Pervaiz*

Abstract

This study aims at exploring the role of Online Brand Engagement (OBE) in retaining customers, augmenting brand loyalty elevating brand image & strengthening brand association. This is an exploratory study with qualitative approach & netnographic technique of data collection. Using purposive sampling, 20 social media users were voluntarily selected to participate in this study, they strived to engage themselves with the restaurant brands on their online pages for more than a month, the researchers then conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews from those participants to explore the framework of online brand engagement in Pakistan. Thematic finding indicates that satisfactory online brand engagement triggers special feeling for the brand and that results in generation of word of mouth. It also creates ease and convenience that foster the customer-brand relationship. Moreover, positive OBE develops sense of trust which strength image of that brand, customer feel associated with the brands. This whole process culminates into customer retention and brand loyalty.

Keywords: Online Brand Engagement, Customer Retention, Brand Loyalty, Customer Brand Relationship

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Digitalization has revolutionized the way businesses used to work, and it has given a new meaning to the world where conventional customers have become social customers. Seeing the power of digitalization, brands and brand executives cannot neglect the role of social media while making brand strategies. Research shows that brands, brand managers and marketing executives are showing great interest in engaging with customers using social media platforms (De Vries, Gensler, & LeeFlang, 2012). The use of social media by managers and marketing executives is stated as using social media for developing strong brand engagement. Research shows that social media platforms have been taking lead as effective dominant digital channel of communication. Literature reveals the fact that, social media communication channels enable consumers to learn about their favorite brand, share information on, can purchase with brands, interact with brands and evaluate the brands (Chappuis, Gaffey, & Parvizi, 2008; Qualman, 2012). If we talk of Pakistan, it has more than 47.5 million mobile internet users and 2 million fixed broadband subscribers in the country. Moreover, Pakistan ranked 20th in the world for online population and has left behind Korea, Spain, Canada, Australia, and many other developed countries in the race (Economist 2018). According to global stats among all social sites' users, 91.86% people use Facebook. The increasing trend of social media usage gives a ground to brands to engage and communicate with customers present on social platforms. Brand engagement on social media has been the topic of interest for scholars and research shows that using social media for engaging customers is an effective strategy for brands and it yields substantial benefits for a brand. According to (Yang, Lin, Carlson, & Ross, 2016), engaging with customers on social media is positively associated with financial performance of a brand. However, there is scant research done on finding out how brand engagement online increases customer satisfaction and strengthens customer-brand relationship. Reviewing literature reveals the other part of story as well, (Fournier & Avery, 2011) in their study warns that brands must be cautious enough in social

*Assistant Manager Business Development in AMF Enterprises. Email: mahnoorpervaiz38@gmail.com



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media involvement, they might become “uninvited crashers,” having that it is more complicated for brands to build relationship with customers via social media.

This research is meaningful because of number of contributions; first, it explores whether brand engagement on social media (Facebook) is influencing customers satisfaction, brand image, and customer brand relationship by using netnographic technique (involving participants in online engagement with brands food brands). Second, it investigates brands using social media effectively as a vital platform in engaging social customers to increase customer satisfaction. Last, the perception of social customers is stated in results that what change will occur after engaging with brand online in brand image and customer satisfaction by taking interviews from participants of study. Interviews are focused on finding out which strategies or factors of brands in engaging social customers are efficient in building brand image and satisfying customers. These results are helpful for brand executives and marketers to gain insight for designing social media strategies.

1.2. Customer-Brand Relationship

According to Fournier & Avery (2011), the customer-brand relationship is important to study and it has been the center of attention for marketers over past few years. The success of customer brand relationship is that brands focus is on customer and customers feel more cared, and their needs are fulfilled in a way that loyalty for brand increases. If we see historically, customer brand relationship has been the point of attraction for marketers (Sirgy, 1982). The basis of this relationship found in literature suggests that when customers are interacting with brands, they can build a strong relationship with those brands just like the relation they enjoy with their friends. Customers when having a strong relationship with brands they start to define their characteristics when describing brand (Phau & Lau, 2001). If we look more thoroughly to literature, it tells about the importance of relationship as, customers are more attached to brands when they start to project their self on brands (Edson Escalas, 2004).

Analysts normally receive (Fournier, 1998) conceptual framework of brand relationship quality (BRQ) for considering customer relationships. BRQ was created to clarify that customers don't simply purchase brands since they function admirably. Buy conduct is additionally because of the apparent connections customers have with a collectivity of brands in order to profit by the implications they include into their lives (Fournier, 1998). History suggests here that to have a strong customer-brand relationship brands must engage and interact with customers.

1.3. Brand Engagement and Social Media

With time social media has become a strong platform to engage with social customers. It is stated that using social platforms for brand engagement has its roots from multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives, having the phenomenon of marketing in main light (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). If we see practical background of how brands engage customers on social platforms, comes from the phenomenon of “social currency,” which highlights the degree up to which customer information regarding brand on social media on daily *basis* (Zinnbauer & Honer, 2011). A brand page is used to engage customers on social media. Brand page is an identity of brand presence on social media which is developed and managed by a brand. Brand page is designed to share brand-related information with social customers and it has made an ease for brands to communicate and exchange information on web (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010).

Number of research are done on brand engagement and social media, but this study is focused on exploring the influence of online brand engagement of social customer-brand relationship.

1.4. Research Problem

Recent studies show that consumer-brand engagement has caught the attention of many practitioners and researchers. Brand engagement is defined by number of researchers as a construct of multi-dimensions which possess emotional, behavioral & cognitive dimensions (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; L Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; L D Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). This study revolves around brand engagement on social media, examining Facebook (leading social media channel) to understand and to see the role of brand created and customer created social media communication as suggested by (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Another literature, (Linda D. Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014) affirms a future need to analyze the relationship between social media communication and consumer-brand relationship. (Watson, Morgan, & Hemmington, 2008) suggests a need of future research using netnographic approach to dig out the factors behind consumer preferences of online food community. Therefore, this study explores the role of brand engagement in enhancing brand and customer relationship, brand loyalty & customer retention. To study consumers and brands communication online, this will be an exploratory study, taking qualitative approach; data will be conducted through netnographic examination and interviews of participants.

1.5. Research Objectives

- To know the association of brand engagement with customer brand relationship and customer satisfaction
- To understand how social media plays an effective role for brands (food) to satisfy social customers.
- To explore the role of online brand engagement in retaining customers

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Conceptualizing Brand Engagement

The phenomenon, brand engagement has been gaining popularity at field of marketing & the concept is evolving with time (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011). In marketing standpoint, many terminologies are used to define engagement, such as, “Customer-Engagement” (Bolton, 2011; Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014; Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, & Morgan, 2014), “Consumer-Engagement” (Laurence Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014), “Customer Engagement Behavior” (van Doorn et al., 2010; Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013), “Consumer Brand Engagement” (Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014), “Brand Community Engagement” (Kuo & Feng, 2013), & “Brand Engagement” (Keller, 2013; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Many researchers studied brand engagement and gave different definitions as well, the construct of theory tells that literature provides many definitions of brand engagement.

- Brand engagement is an investment (emotional, cognitive or behavioural) made by customer while interacting with brand (Linda D. Hollebeek, 2011).
- Brand engagement is defined being customer focused as, a co-advocate and interactive customer experience which results a psychological state in service relationships (Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014).
- Focused on behavioural dimension of brand engagement while defining it and it is stated that it's a behavioural act which a customer shows towards a brand & it works more beyond purchase decisions (van Doorn et al., 2010).
- Brand engagement as a psychological procedure which results in creation of loyalty. He presented a structural work for engagement process focusing on methods which helps in creating loyalty for new consumers of a service brand and a method which can lead to retention of customer loyalty for continuous purchasing of a service brand (Bowden, 2009).

2.2 Two-views on Brand Engagement

Researchers have two views related to brand engagement; one view sees brand engagement construct as unidimensional phenomenon such as emotional (Sprott et al., 2009) & behavioral (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010), the other view sees it as multi-dimensional phenomenon consisting of the mix of cognitive, emotional & behavioral dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011; Linda D. Hollebeek, 2011; Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014). This study, however, is focused on the existing user perspective (Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014) and will explore the relationship of brand engagement with brand loyalty and customer brand relationship.

2.3 Brand Engagement & Brand Loyalty

Since brand engagement has been the topic of interest of many researchers, (Bowden, 2009) studied brand engagement thoroughly and came up with a detailed and dynamic outlook of brand engagement as a psychological construct which triggers customer's loyalty in different phases of customer-brand relationship. Brand engagement is evolving with time and managers are focusing on new techniques to engage with customers, brand engagement is defined as a process having the power of social media in mind (Porter, Donthu, MacElroy, & Wydra, 2011).

In today's exceedingly competitive environment, keeping customers delighted or happy and keeping up a long-term relationship with them has long been a vital strategy for businesses. Agreeing to the relationship marketing researches, brand loyalty is one of the most important relationship marketing results. This phenomenon can be understood by conceptualizing it into two types of loyalty; one behavioral loyalty & attitudinal dependability (Zheng, Cheung, Lee, & Liang, 2015). Behavioral loyalty refers to the process in which customer continue to choose the same brand and buy the product/service from same brand or supplier. While, attitudinal loyalty goes a way forward and talks of the commitment of a customer when examining unique set of values linked with brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Therefore, it can be said that customer participation in online brand engagement leads to brand loyalty. This research will be proposing an understanding of a process which can help managers in sustaining brand engagement by using Facebook brand pages.

2.4 Brand Engagement & Social Media

Pool of marketing research reveals that internet on a very basic level changed the way customers create and get information related to brands (Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010). The time is gone when consumers had to step out of the home and pay visit to the outlet of brand for getting any information or to communicate with a brand. At present customers depend on different internet-based data sources to make purchase decisions (Ong, Nguyen, & Syed Alwi, 2017) this includes using social platforms to share brand-related content with others (Zheng et al., 2015). Social media has become vital platform for brands to engage customers online because now consumers have mobile phones in their hands all day long and they spend most of the time on social platforms. In this scenario, brand are captivating their attention towards engaging customers on social media and this is called online brand engagement (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). The theoretical construct of brand engagement on social media has basis from multidisciplinary panorama which includes; marketing (Yang et al., 2016), sociology (Bourdieu, 1986), psychology (Pham & Ahammad, 2017), information systems (Zheng et al., 2015) and marketing practice (Wei et al., 2013). If we see practical background of how brands engage with customers on social platforms, comes from the phenomenon of “social currency,” which highlights the degree up to which customers get information regarding brand on social media on daily basis (Ong et al., 2017). Moreover, brands use a brand page to engage and interact with customers on social media. Brand page is an identity of brand presence on social media which is developed and managed by a brand. Brand page is designed to share brand-related information with social customers and it has made an ease for brands to communicate and exchange information on web (Casaló et al., 2010).

Social media provides multiple platforms where brands and customers can talk an engagement with each other and gives an opportunity to brands to capture attractive customer base (Murdough, 2009). Marketers realized soon that social media is helpful in number of ways to them and embraced social media for marketing purposes such as; doing research, sales & promotions, services, customer relationship management and most importantly for branding and communicating with customers online (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Now brands use social campaigns which give an extra space to brands to find the touch points of customers & to boost existing interaction of customer and brand story all day long, which may result in; strengthening customer-brand relation, provide marketers with themes by having customer feedbacks, & encourage customers to engage with brands online (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Islam & Rahman, 2016).

2.5. Food/Restaurant Industry of Pakistan

Pakistani people love to try new food cuisines, and this is the reason that many international food chains are willing to open restaurants in Pakistan. The most favorite food of Pakistanis which is fast food, making the fast-food industry 2nd largest in country (“Fast Food Industry of Pakistan Growth and History,” n.d.). The industry holds 27% because of production with value addition & accounts for 15% of the overall employment in manufacturing sector. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Pakistan has very lucrative world’s 8th biggest market of food businesses. And there are number of food manufacturing business in Pakistan the number goes beyond 1000. The lifestyle and habits of Pakistanis are changing which has become a reason for surge in restaurants openings. A survey reveals that an average customer is spending 42% of his income on food in Pakistan (“Fast Food Industry of Pakistan Growth and History,” n.d.). These statistics show that food industry is indicating growth in Pakistan and now it has become utter important for food brands to create differentiation in this competitive market. And the differentiation can be made by giving some extra care to customers, by talking to customer and by knowing t\what they feel about the brands and here comes the role of brand engagement. Recently the trend of brand engagement is shifted towards social platforms and brands are using internet and social sites to meet, engage and interact with their customers to build strong customer-brand relationship (Casaló et al., 2010).

Researchers have been working on the phenomenon of brand engagement over time, but there’s numb empirical investigation on brand engagement up to this date & researchers have called for need to investigate empirically the relationship of brand engagement with other constructs (Bolton, 2011; Islam & Rahman, 2016). This study responds to the need of investigation of research on brand engagement with various brands and industries (Laurence Dessart et al., 2015; Linda D. Hollebeek et al., 2014). Brands are making tremendous ventures to grasp brand engagement. Brand engagement has turned into a focal idea in customer-brand relationship. The experimental examination of brand engagement is canvassed in past writing, yet none of the examinations so far have exactly analyzed the connections between brand image and brand love at the same time concerning brand engagement in the food industry of Pakistan. This investigation is the first to explore online brand engagement with regards to restaurants or food brands.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study grounds in interpretive beliefs (Goldkuhl, 2012), it takes qualitative approach. It is an exploratory study (Stebbins, 2001), in which participants are selected based on their preference of restaurants. Multi-methods are used for data collection to ensure triangulation (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014), social media communication will be gauged through netnographic method and participants' perception and perspective is studied through interviews.

Customer feedback surveys often do not provide accurate information and gives little insights into customer experiences. People fill these surveys only out of obligation, in hurry and often provide misrepresentation of their experiences. Service experience, (ex; restaurant meal) is best described in terms of subjectivity, interpretative and effective in nature, thus it requires a qualitative approach to comprehend it (Andereck, Bricker, Kerstetter, & Nickerson, 2005). However, the netnographic method (online ethnography) provides researchers with highly personal lived experiences by viewing online blogs, messages, comments or communication (Mkono, 2012). Netnography is a research technique used for online market research, it was developed by Robert Kozinet (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2006).

The methodology is not purely netnographic, as it also involves physical interviews from customers. Moreover, the people were tasked to get engaged with their favorite restaurants online and then their online interaction and comments, which became archived, were analyzed.

3.2 Procedure

- For studying 10 restaurants, 20 customers were selected to be the participants of this study voluntarily.
- Pre- customer engagement interviews were conducted from those participants.
- The participants were asked to communicate with their favourite restaurant brands on their social media platforms, with their complaints and suggestions.
- That communication was examined qualitatively in terms of responsiveness of the brands and their level of customer engagement.
- Post- customer engagement interviews were also conducted from those participants to understand their response on the communication happened between them and restaurant brands.
- Thematic analysis was performed on the data collected from interviews (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010).

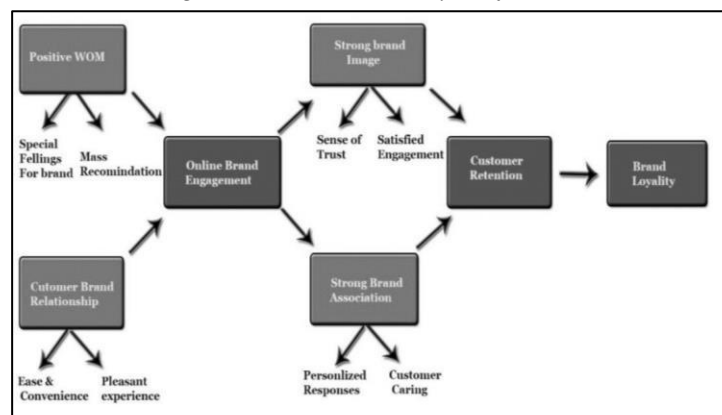
3.3 Sampling Method

Purposive sampling method is applied in this study (Palinkas et al., 2015), and participants are purposively selected based on their preferences of restaurants in Karachi. Their consent is taken, and it has been considered that they are participating voluntarily. The reason behind choosing selected participants is their interest in the topic and limitations during data collection process.

4. FINDINGS, THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Once the codified categories, which were identified from the consolidated data through netnography and interviews, were formed, the relationship among themes and sub-themes which emerged after thematic analysis of the data are presented in figure 4.1. Following is the detailed discussion on those themes.

Figure 4.1: Thematic Analysis of the data



4.1. Online Brand Engagement Generates Positive WOM

4.1.1. Special Feelings for Brand

The first theme of this paper discusses about how online brand engagement yields positive word of mouth for brands. To facilitate this point literature tells that at present many organizations are seeking best ways to involve online brand community in generating customer's positive word of mouth communication to promote the brand (Delgado-Ballester & Fernandez Sabiote, 2015; M. Zhang, Hu, Guo, & Liu, 2017). Dealing with social customers requires different techniques than offline customers because they take deep interest due to higher edge of time and money related costs (Wirtz et al., 2013). The online presence of brands gives them higher tendency to offer customers with a special and pleasant experience to encourage customers in generating the positive word-of-mouth (Lin, Fan, & Chau, 2014; H. Zhang, Lu, Wang, & Wu, 2015). As one of the participants responded.

"The best thing about online engagement with my favorite brand was when they mentioned my name while conversation and called me with respect. At that time, I felt special for myself and for the brand as well."

In past, many researcher's work points on this rationale and further provides an understanding how customer experience results in positive word of mouth and how it can be used for brand promotion (Lin et al., 2014; H. Zhang et al., 2015).

4.1.2. Mass Recommendation

In current study, we have found out that online brand engagement not only generates positive WOM, but it makes customers to recommend the brand to masses. Participants while giving interviews showed positive attitude towards brands that engaged with them effectively and they said that they will recommend the brand to others as well. Reviewing literature shows that many researchers have raised the notion that active participation of brand with customers yields a strong influence on strong commitment & recommendation intentions in diverse online scenario (Okazaki et al, 2014).

There has been a great attention on recommendation intentions & positive word-of-mouth of customers in both academic & business domains (M. Zhang et al., 2017). Participants of this study when asked about their recommendation intention after online engagement with their admired brands most of them showed positive response & said that they will continue to recommend the brand. One participant said.

"I have never put a review about any brand on social media, but after this online engagement with my admired brand I am much satisfied & now I will definitely post a amazing review about this brand on Facebook pages and groups."

4.2. Online Engagement Creates Strong Customer-Brand Relationship

4.2.1. Ease & Convenience

In today's busy world every customer seeks for ease & convenience with brands. Customers when talk of convenience the focal point of customers is on resources mainly time, energy & opportunity that they have to give in buying a good or service (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Many research papers have been written in finding the relationship between convenience and customer brand relationship. One paper suggests that the factor of convenience has an influence on brand purchase and evaluation behavior of customer (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). So, the point we can take from these papers is that convenience plays a vital role is developing and strengthening customer-brand relationship. Literature supports this point and makes it more stable, it is stated that customer loyalty is not alone responsible for developing strong customer brand relationship, the factor of convenience also adds in the relation (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). This study also supports the same notion and participants of the study also said that their relationship with their admired brand has become stronger after the online engagement because it has saved their time and other costs. As a participant opined.

"I am a businessman and I usually don't have enough time to visit brands myself, online brand engagement has made my life easy. Brands are giving convenience to me & that's what makes my relationship strong with them."

When customer feels convenience with brand their intention goes way forward than purchase and they enjoy a good relationship with a brand as stated in customer engagement concept (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). As one participant said.

"I loved it when I got prompt response from the brand, I was engaging with for a booking for my friend's birthday celebration, it saved my time and traveling cost. Now I may refer it to my friends as well."

4.2.2. Pleasant Experience

In this paper, we have reviewed customer's feelings and came to know that customers who enjoys pleasant experience while interacting with their admirable brands online are more likely to build stronger relationships with brands. Customer experience has been defined as a psychological sensation which results in perception about service

delivery and subjective response of customers (Brodie et al., 2011). At present many studies reflect the importance of customer experience for brands ((Delgado-Ballester & Fernandez Sabiote, 2015). A highly- structured framework is given which presents experience into cognitive & affective domains. The bond which customers feel with brand in online brand engagement is often measured by warmth and pleasant experience customer feels (H. Zhang et al., 2015). It manifested in following response.

“My experience of online engagement with my admired brand was amazing, I loved the whole way brand showed that it cares for me as their customer & listened to my feedback thoroughly.”

4.3. Online Brand Engagement Creates Strong Brand Image

4.3.1 Sense of Trust

Trust is an important factor for success or failure of a brand. Reviewing literature affirms the notion that, trust has a vital influence on customer’s choice to stay or leave the brand (Thakur, 2018). Past empirical studies shows that higher degree of trust builds strong brand image & customers give positive reviews about brand (Thakur, 2018). Sense of trust creates a strong brand image for customers & they tend to like the brand more. Past researches also declares that when trust is build it provides certain benefits to customers like it lowers anxiety, and uncertainty & these benefits, in turn, has influence on satisfaction and brand image (Thakur, 2018). As a participant opined.

“The experience of online engagement with my admired brand has built trustworthy relation with brand & now I love the brand more.”

4.3.2. Satisfied Engagement

The current paper talks of satisfied online engagement as a mean of creating strong brand image. When participants of this study were asked about their experience most of the responses were satisfied and they said now they have clearer image of brand in mind. In academic and business literature customer engagement is often described as a psychological state of mind that results in frequent interactions with a brand (Thakur, 2018). Many business practitioners identify the importance of satisfied customer engagement for a business. Emerging literature about customer engagement manifests that customer engagements is favorable for brands in a broad perspective and way more than purchase intention (Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Thakur, 2018). These emerging views support current study and prove that satisfied customer engagement is vital for brands to create a strong image. Moreover, it is stated in previous papers that customer engagement is a distinct & significant domain in online business scenarios (Linda D. Hollebeck, 2011). A participant manifested in following response that.

“When I asked the brand about one particular item they stopped keeping, the way brand answered and told me the real reason of not keeping it made me feel satisfied.”

4.4. Online Engagement Creates Strong Brand Association

4.4.1 Personalized Response

The emergence of internet and social media has given attention to new trend of customization and personalized response to customers. Now brands engage with every customer keeping in mind the individuality of customer & according to different needs. One participant had faced exceptional personalized response when the CEO of restaurant contacted her back and made sure that he will try to fix the problem she faces. One more participant shared her feelings, she said she was uncertain that brand would respond her, but after getting response she was overwhelmed because brand responded her by mentioning her name and making sure the feedback which she had given would be taken in consideration. In a nutshell, the responses were leading to the fact that after getting personalized responses participants were feeling strong associations with brand. This study points towards another benefit brands can enjoy while engaging with customers online is they can create strong brand associations. Brand put a lot of efforts & recourses in marketing and promotional activities to create brand associations. This study reveals that online brand engagement can be used as a powerful tool in creating strong brand associations. As a participant opined that.

“While my interaction with brand I received number of managers whom I can contact whenever I want to visit or order anything from restaurant. This made me more associated with brand when I got some special treatment.”

4.4.2. Customer Caring

Everyone loves to be cared in his/her life whether it is a personal life or professional. The caring factor can help brands stand out the crowd and they can create strong brand association with it. Customers have got a lot of choices and only those brands can win the heart of customers who shows them that they care about their customers. Every big brand somehow is working in different ways to show customers that they care about them. Since it’s an era of social media and customers now spend more time on social platforms to compare and search brands. So, here online

brand engagement plays a role of bridging the gap between customer and brand. This study shows that brands who are most active in engaging with their customers online and who are showing their customers a caring behaviour they are creating strong brand associations. As one of the participants manifested.

“The feeling of being cared by my most admirable brand was too good, now whenever I think of customer care first thing pops up in my mind is the name of that brand.”

5. IMPLICATIONS

The key contribution this study gives is, it provides a new perspective of online brand engagement to retain customers. Customer retention has not yet been explored in the context of online brand engagement. In this paper, we argue that brands can retain its customers if they go on the right path in engaging with customers online. This paper provides a practical insight to business practitioners and brand managers for retaining customers. We discuss in detail if a brand provides a satisfied, trustworthy, pleasant, and strong online engagement experience to customers they tend to continue buying from the same brand and vice versa. Moreover, this study fulfills the call of past research which states that there's a gap for future research in the business of food service where customer reviews play a prime role (Thakur, 2018). This research is done on food industry of Pakistan and takes 10 restaurants under examination for the study. Moreover, this study is a valuable addition in the literature on brand engagement which may be helpful for many people in understanding the phenomenon of online brand engagement.

6. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

This research paper has certain limitations which bounds the study to generalize its results & opens the door to future research. First, this research is follows convenience sampling in which all participants were residents of Karachi, however, social media users are present all over country. Second, the results of this study only take Pakistan's food industry in account & leave a gap for further study in different industries. Third, also we collected responses from 10 participants & 10 restaurants/cafes only and took self-reported interviews from the participants may cause potential confounds which may bias our results. Fourth, since the study is taken only in Pakistani context so the cultural differences may have significant effect on brand engagement. Last, only Facebook brand pages were used to evaluate performance of brands in engaging social customers. Future study can be done by using different social platforms and taking diverse respondents in account to get the true insights and results. Moreover, this study calls for future research on different service sector industries like apparel, traveling, fashion to gauge the impression of online brand engagement thoroughly.

7. CONCLUSION

Every brand must know the art & science of maintaining customer relationship by engaging with them in a profitable and effective manner. Social media has given a lucrative opportunity of engaging with customers & utilizing new trendy techniques to grab the attention of social customers. The objective of this study is to explore the role of online brand engagement in elevating brand loyalty, retaining customers & establishing long lasting relationship with customers. To perform this job, we have reviewed academic literature to build theoretical background and performed experiment with brands to get the true results. Customers depend on different internet-based data sources to make purchase decisions this includes using social platforms to share brand-related content with others (Ong et al., 2017). Social media has become vital platform for brands to engage customers online because now consumers have mobile phones in their hands all day long and they spend most of the time on social platforms (Zheng et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the study validates and supports the results of past quantitative study (Zheng, Cheung, Lee, & Liang 2015). We reach to the same conclusion that online brand engagement has influence on brand loyalty of customers. In this study, it is confirmed that when participants were given satisfied response in online engagement their brand loyalty was elevated. The paper presents a detailed discussion about 4 main themes which were made as result of participant's views in semi-structured interviews.

First theme shows that online brand engagement generates positive word-of-mouth & the theme has further outcomes that customers with positive word of mouth faced convenience & tends to recommend the brand to masses. Previous literature also affirms this notion that if customer has satisfied experience of engagement, it motivates customer to give positive feedback & reviews about brand. Similarly, if a customer is not satisfied with brand engagement the intention to give positive word-of-mouth about brand is weakened (Thakur, 2018). Second theme which was built because of this study was that online engagement creates strong customer-brand relationship. This theme has further two outcomes, one that customers who feel strong brand relationship has face convenience in engaging online & had pleasant overall experience. Other themes which emerged as a result of this study are online brand engagement creates strong brand image, & strong brand association. Now, we can conclude that online brand

engagement has many benefits of it is used in an effective and satisfying way. Similarly, it can be proved harmful to brands that foresee the power of social customers and doesn't engage with them in proper manner.

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