Perceived Relationship, Reward and Brand Post as Antecedents of Customer Engagement in Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

The presence and focus of brand users are difficult to predict in the social networking sites (SNS) medium. Marketers are still compiling the tactics of administering customers and prospects due to the ever-present new challenges. Research on customer engagement confirms the importance of antecedents in the SNS platform. However, various theoretical and practical support were extremely difficult to obtain. This study intends to fill this shortage through the well-known partial least square (PLS) technique. The questionnaire data were obtained from 389 respondents who actively interacted with brands at a minimum of 2 years in the SNS channel. The findings have verified the contribution of perceived relationship, reward, and brand post as antecedents to customer engagement. In closing points, this manuscript discusses the conclusion and implications to strengthen future literature and industry blueprints.

Keywords: *customer engagement, antecedent, behaviour, social networking sites, structural equation modelling*

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the globalisation of technology pioneered by social media, ensuring customer engagement in the digital medium is the central focus of the firm's management. As the customer-brand relationship evolves through experiences, customer engagement is one of the main business aspirations beyond the transactional level that counted imperative for firms (Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, & Verhoef, 2010; Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, & Morgan 2014; Marketing Science Institute, 2016; Palmatier, Kumar & Harmeling, 2018). Customers engaged with brands would certainly have some reactions on social media sites they used, such as clicking on existing buttons after posting, sharing suggested media elements to their cliques and multiple other activities. They are motivated by several reasons that will be raised for the investigation of this study.

Among the platforms that attracted and trusted many brands are social networking sites (SNS) with exponential development plots in just a few years. In the current trend of emerging markets, like in developed countries, famous SNSs are Facebook, Instagram, Google Plus and Twitter (Statista, 2017). With intrigued affordances and reach capabilities, SNS helps firms to begin their corporate profiles by

introducing brand names, disseminating information on products, and building strong relationships with customers (Wirtz, den Ambtman, Bloemer, Horváth, Ramaseshan, van de Klundert, Gurhan Canli, & Kandampully, 2013; Md Jani, Zakaria, Maksom, M. Haniff, & Mustapha, 2018). SNS has met the inclination of customers and prospects by regularly reviewing information about brands and products to receive suggestions of usage from contacts and to share experiences related to brands. The review of many recent works on aspects of online behaviour (Hudson, Huang, Roth, and Madden, 2016; Wu, Fan, & Zhao, 2018) have put the stimulus for this study to investigate active customers' behaviours that emphasise engagement with the brand's activities. The focus of discussion is on the brand page of SNS, due to the existence of entire brand activities in this entity which record multilateral interactions amidst a firm, a brand and customers.

Although engagement has faithful relationships with online communities and brands (Dessart et al., 2015), there is still a lack of consensus in the scientific literature on the antecedents of customer engagement (Dovaliene, Masiulyte, & Piligrimiene, 2015). Understanding antecedents, which is limited in emerging markets, is crucial for online product manufacturers and service providers. For example, Gaber, Elsamadicy, and Wright (2019) claim that there are sparse works in the investigation of consumer motivation to interact and engage in social media. It is necessary to keep in mind that customers may display unexpected responses when they engage with adverts, campaigns, and announcements provided on social media posts. Customers and prospects can also trigger some comments and questions that require the management to make informed decisions and start new ventures in the analysis phase. Identifying the antecedents and assessing their impact on customer engagement is an essential initiative for business (Hu & Zhang, 2016) and bridging to the evaluation of the overall social media success. Given this rationale, there is a call for research in exploring antecedents on customer engagement in SNS pathways. The present study aims to fulfil the urgency in offering the two-fold. First, it models the antecedents of customer engagement by adapting the theory of marketing relationships and consumer behaviour. Second, it appends a new illustration of customer engagement to the digital marketing literature using the PLS-SEM approach. In the next section, this paper presents the conceptualisation of customer engagement terminology. The remainders of the section present the methodology, accompanied by relevant findings and discussions. The conclusion of this paper ends with theoretical and practical implications.

RELATED WORKS

Multi-faceted interactions among customers are constantly updating user-generated content (UGC) immediately within electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) platform community on social media. These situations can often disrupt and influence ongoing conversations between firms and their market segments (Blazevic, Hammedi, Garnefeld, Rust, Keiningham, Andreassen, Donthu, & Carl, 2013; Marketing Science Institute, 2016). Community members can easily express their actions and emotions by giving clicks on buttons, tabs, and commenting on dashboards of the social media panel. In response to the above restriction, businesses need to devise effective techniques to address aspects of customer behaviour in numerous ways that go beyond direct transactions.

The definition of customer engagement in SNS community incorporated by this study is the manifestation of customer behaviour beyond transaction and has a brand or firm focus, as a result of motivational drivers (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Every firm that cares and pushes efforts on customer engagement has the strength of multiple brand enthusiasts who can add value to the customer's expansion and quality of products. Previous studies have found evidence of a positive relationship between customer engagement and firm performance (Kumar and Pansari, 2015; Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2017). Following the

foregoing discussion, the next paragraph will propose predictions for antecedents to customer engagement using well-known relationship marketing and some supporting theories.

Theory of Relationship Marketing

Customer engagement is advocated by the principle of relationship marketing theory in user behavioural research (Palmatier et al., 2018). This theory suggests all activities encompass of establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges between firms or brands and customers (Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006). Social media, as a reputable medium, appears to strongly influence key relationship marketing variables that lead to more relational outcomes, such as prolonged eWOM and loyal customers. Marketing academia literature has highlighted the offerings of drivers to customer engagement as antecedents (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Md Jani et al., 2018). A set of antecedents will significantly provide managerial guidance to firms on how to make social media efforts in product or service offerings useful and influential for their customers. Ascertained from theories of relationship marketing and consumer behaviour, this study is the first work that anticipates perceived relationship, reward, and brand post as antecedents that drive the motivation of customer and prospects for engaging with brands on SNS. The following subsections will demonstrate the proposed hypothesis to foresee the meaningful facet of customer engagement.

Perceived Relationship as an Antecedent of Customer Engagement in SNS

Literature found that published adverts are hard to succeed excellently in a social-based platform like SNS (Zhu & Chen, 2015), unless the firm addresses the relationship aspect to meet the customers' social needs. SNS channels facilitate the establishment of the connection by the approval of members' authentification through the profiles of the brand and/or fan (usually brand advocates) pages. Once connected, brands and customers (friends/followers/fans) are perceived as having relationships, constituted in a series of repeated exchanges between two parties relate to each other. They can share attributes that lead to initiate brand-related as well as product or services activities, converse and comment around focal objects, for examples, media postings, experience sharing (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Existing relationships can be multiplied by communicating, creating, sharing and collaborating among the social network of friends, followers, and fans (Ruhi, 2014), making customers less likely to switch suppliers and thus, raising positive implications towards the brand (Palmatier et al., 2018). In accordance, this study is offering the latent construct of perceived relationship, which was identified important in engaging customers with the focal brand in the SNS environment. Therefore, this study proposes that:

P1: Perceived relationship will have a positive effect on customer engagement in SNS.

Reward as an Antecedent of Customer Engagement in SNS

Pivoted on the social exchange theory, customers perceive what they give as a 'cost', and what they receive as a 'reward' (Braun, Batt, Bruhn, & Hadwich, 2016). Proactive firms may be rewarding customers in the tangible and intangible gratifications form, such as monetary benefits, for examples special offers, referrals, rebates, loyalty card, firms' credit card and loyalty programs (Islam & Rahman, 2017), functional benefits of information and support (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987), as well as psychological appreciation benefits (membership and entertainment) within a desired in-group (Wirtz et al., 2013) and expertise recognition (Hennig-Thurau Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). In an online context, tangible rewards can

be conveyed to customers and prospects through the announcement and copywriting posted on brand websites. Meanwhile, intangible rewards can be nurtured by firms, along with good relationships with their customers. Recent studies have theoretically shown that rewards are positively driving customer engagement (Wirtz et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015) in online brand communities (Baldus et al., 2015; Islam & Rahman, 2017). Therefore, the next proposition is claimed as follows:

P2: Reward will have a positive effect on customer engagement in SNS.

Brand Post as an Antecedent of Customer Engagement in SNS

The brand post refers to the form of adverts, campaigns, event messages, brand activities or any media offerings related to brands and products published by firms on their own SNS brand pages. The brand post is also meant for the post that can be created and managed by customers and fans in an online community, clearly asserted by literature as UGC. This study attempts to use the theory of user gratification to explain the basic psychological needs of how postings through the SNS interface has shaped the cause of the customers to remain influenced in the SNS medium. Thus, they actively engaged with brands to meet their gratification. Vividness reflects the richness of the brand post's formal features by incorporating dynamic animation and, contrasting colours or pictures. Past studies had shown that the brand post adverts' content having vivid features are significant influences their status on online engagement (Kujur and Singh, 2017). Information-seeking is another important reason for people to use SNS. The posting contains useful and rich information about brands and products will socially motivate customers toward the posted adverts, campaign or messages on SNS (Kujur & Singh, 2017). Regardless of channel platform used, marketers also need to consider some sort of humour in their advertising campaigns and adverts. As an entertainment value, the customers' feeling is an important factor in the deployment of SNS (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). Next, this study postulates the following proposition:

P3: Brand post will have a positive effect on customer engagement in SNS.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

This research aims at the population of online customers with the following criteria: 1) they have a profiled SNS at a minimum of 2 years, and 2) actively interacted with at least one brand in a brand page initiated by a firm. They are likers, followers, and advocates to the preferred brands that occupy the SNS site space with inquiries, comments and other feedback on brand-sponsored activities. Since there is no active SNS user list that meets the criteria mentioned, it is impossible to define the sampling frame and get it directly for research purposes. Therefore, customer data was obtained through a convenient sampling technique by distributing online questionnaires to groups that meet the above criteria. To determine the minimum sample size, this study applied the advantages of G * Power 3.1 software (Faul, 2007). Conventional settings are as follows: $f2 = 0.15$, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.95 (Perugini, Gallucci, & Costantini, 2014), while predictors = 3 represents three antecedents (*Perceived Relationship, Reward* and *Brand Post*) which leads to the dependent variable in the model (*Customer Engagement*). The minimum sample size required is 119 to obtain 95% statistical power. Since the number of survey respondents has far exceeded 119 (389 respondents), the PLS analysis was considered as necessary to be carried out with adequate power expectations.

Questionnaire and Scale Development

The questionnaire comprises of two parts: 1) demographics, and 2) questions to measure three tested antecedents as independent variables (11 items), and a dependent construct of customer engagement (9 items). The measurement for this purpose was taken from the relevant prior studies, and it was adapted to the context of customer engagement with brands on SNS. Refer Table 1 for the list of adapted sources. Respondents gave feedbacks by indicating answers through the 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=" strongly disagree" to 7= "strongly agree".

The questionnaire was designed according to the recommended approach by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). To obtain content validation, the questionnaire set was reviewed in three phases: 1) before the pilot test (four academic experts in the field of social media, marketing, and business), 2) during the pilot test (thirty-three SNS brand customers became the respondents), and 3) after the pilot test (seven academicians and five SMEs have reviewed the instrument under the Fuzzy Delphi method). Each phase is useful to ensure the clarity, enhancement, and appropriateness of the questionnaire. Two language experts were also invited to improve the accuracy in Malay and English languages to fulfil the need for face validity.

Table 1: List of constructs and adapted sources

Antecedents	Adapted sources	Number of items
Perceived relationship	Clark and Melancon (2013)	4 items
Reward	Jang et al. (2008)	3 items
Brand post	Kujur and Singh (2017), de Vries et al. (2012)	4 items
Dependent construct	**Adapted sources**	**Number of items**
Customer Engagement	Hollebeek et al., (2014), Bashir and Ali (2016), Gutierrez Cillan et al., (2017)	9 items
Total		**20 items**

Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed either via email, social media or messenger applications by placing two links in English and Malay languages to facilitate respondents. To ensure the ethics of conducting the study, the form was attached to an attentive page which invited prospective respondents and explained the purpose of the study, the estimated time to fill out the questionnaire and appreciation of those who cooperated. The availability of the online questionnaire forms was from August 8th, 2018, to September 28th, 2018. A total of 515 answers were obtained and the completeness of respondent data was ensured as Google Forms provides control settings for authors during questionnaire development to remind those who did not respond to the request. However, only 389 confirmed themselves as active users on SNS branded sites while 126 stated their inactive status. Subsequently, only 389 respondent data were moved to the analysis phase.

Analysis of Data

Data were analysed using the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) approach through the SmartPLS 3.2.8 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). Recently expanding in management information systems and marketing research, PLS-SEM is much convenient to handle (Awang, Afthanorhan, & Asri, 2015) relatively to CB-SEM in the rationale of non-normal data and sample

size. As noted above, the study data were collected through a non-probabilistic sampling technique that leads to non-parametric analysis testing. Thus, the PLS method was chosen because it does not require the normal distribution; instead, it uses bootstrapping to estimate the standard error empirically for parameters (Amaro & Duarte, 2015). Besides, PLS-SEM is used to maximise the explained variables of the endogenous latent variables in the model (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017) to uncover the dominant antecedents for customer engagement. For the analysis, the exogenous variables are (i) *Perceived Relationship* (consists of four indicators PRel1, PRel2, PRel3, PRel4) (ii) *Reward* (consists of three indicators REW1, REW2, REW3) and (iii) *Brand Post* (consists of four indicators POST1, POST2, POST3, POST4), which are anticipated to have significant relationships to the endogenous variable namely customer engagement (consists of nine indicators OCE1, OCE2, OCE3, OCE4, OCE5, OCE6, OCE7, OCE8, OCE9).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile

Out of the 389 people, 279 respondents filled the questionnaire using the Malay language link while the rest chose the English link. The 18 to 25-year age range was the majority respondents that provided cooperation for data collection (34.70%), and closely followed by the groups between 26 to 35 years (30.80%), confirming the younger generation is the largest netizen in SNS. 72.80% of the respondents are women, while only 27.20% are men; thus, it can be the basis to show the higher tendency of women in getting brand reviews and information online. The respondents were mainly users of SNS between 2 and 4 years, covering 76.10%. Facebook and Instagram, as expected, are the channels they routinely use to communicate with the brands they are interested in (69.00%).

Measurement model

With PLS-SEM, the measurement model analysis necessitates the assessment of convergent validity and discriminant validity (Ramayah, Yeap, Ahmad, Abdul-Halim, & Rahman, 2017).

Convergent Validity

This step was carried out to ascertain the reliability and validity of the items. In convergence validity, the examined facets are loading factors (threshold value is 0.7), average variance extracted (threshold value is 0.5) and composite reliability for assessing internal consistency (threshold value is 0.7) (Hair et al., 2017). After analysis generation, results have shown encouraging values. All loadings that exceed 0.7 have indicated the reliability. With all numerical items surpassing 0.9, Cronbach's Alpha has exhibited good values. The composite reliability shows considerable values with a maximum of 0.953 while the minimum is 0.938. Sequentially, AVE values are satisfactory with *Reward* that has yielded the most leading value of 0.834. Table 2 shows the full picture of the declared results.

Discriminant validity

In the PLS technique, two criteria are required to test the discriminant validity. Through the first cross-loading criterion, loadings for each indicator in this study analysis are the highest for their designated constructs. Table 3 has shown that all constructs are not interchangeable and discriminated from each other. The second applied is Fornell and Larcker's criterion. It mentions the squared AVE of every variable on

the diagonal (in highlight) should be higher than the correlations on the off-diagonal (Henseler et al., 2015), and the result has proven the existence of discriminant (see Table 4).

Structural model

To evaluate the structural model in PLS-SEM, it is crucial to assess the significance and relevance of the model, to determine the combined effect of exogenous variables and to evaluate the effect size. Path analysis was executed through a bootstrapping technique with 5000 resamplings using one-tail test type to assess the importance and relevance of the model by looking at beta value, t-value, as well as R^2 which viewed as the combined effect of exogenous variables on the endogenous variable (Hair et al., 2017). Due to its need to assess the effect size, this study also reported the value of f^2. See Table 5 for details.

Perceived Relationship ($\beta = 0.293$, t = 7.396, p < 0.01, $f^2 = 0.181$), *Reward* ($\beta = 0.161$, t = 3.556, p < 0.01, $f^2 = 0.045$), and *Brand Post* ($\beta = 0.504$, t = 10.193, p < 0.01, $f^2 = 0.354$) are positively related to *Customer Engagement*. Thus, the results revealed the significance of all three propositions P1, P2 and P3 and are marked as "supported" in the Decision column in Table 6. In observing the value of R^2 (can be obtained also from the Figure 2), the combined effect of these three exogenous constructs is 68.40% which was considered as moderate by Hair et al. (2017) on explaining the amount of variance in *Customer Engagement*. It was found that the antecedent *Brand Post* ($f^2 = 0.354$) has the strongest effect on *Customer Engagement* when examining the relative importance of exogenous construct compared to *Perceived Relationship* ($f^2 = 0.181$) and *Reward* ($f^2 = 0.045$).

Table 2: Convergent Validity

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Perceived	PRel1	0.906	0.916	0.941	0.799
Relationship	PRel2	0.896			
	PRel3	0.867			
	PRel4	0.905			
Brand Post	POST1	0.907	0.935	0.953	0.837
	POST2	0.930			
	POST3	0.913			
	POST4	0.909			
Reward	REW1	0.897	0.901	0.938	0.834
	REW2	0.923			
	REW3	0.920			
Customer	OCE1	0.805	0.929	0.941	0.641
Engagement	OCE2	0.845			
	OCE3	0.861			
	OCE4	0.843			
	OCE5	0.834			
	OCE6	0.822			
	OCE7	0.685			
	OCE8	0.705			
	OCE9	0.785			

Table 3: Cross Loading Criterion

	Brand Post	Customer Engagement	Perceived Relationship	Reward
OCE1	0.663	0.805	0.588	0.469
OCE2	0.655	0.845	0.588	0.475
OCE3	0.697	0.861	0.597	0.538
OCE4	0.702	0.843	0.552	0.553
OCE5	0.656	0.834	0.523	0.501
OCE6	0.623	0.822	0.525	0.533
OCE7	0.459	0.685	0.371	0.472
OCE8	0.489	0.705	0.374	0.491
OCE9	0.625	0.785	0.501	0.457
POST1	0.907	0.694	0.494	0.605
POST2	0.930	0.712	0.534	0.608
POST3	0.913	0.741	0.593	0.617
POST4	0.909	0.707	0.479	0.630
PRel1	0.532	0.585	0.906	0.357
PRel2	0.515	0.561	0.896	0.376
PRel3	0.523	0.599	0.867	0.379
PRel4	0.485	0.574	0.905	0.371
REW1	0.550	0.482	0.346	0.897
REW2	0.667	0.636	0.406	0.923
REW3	0.612	0.566	0.378	0.920

Table 4: Fornell and Larcker criterion

	Brand Post	Customer Engagement	Perceived Relationship	Reward
Brand Post	0.915			
Customer Engagement	0.781	0.801		
Perceived Relationship	0.575	0.649	0.894	
Reward	0.673	0.622	0.415	0.913

Table 5: Results of Propositions, P1-P3

Proposition and relationship	Beta value	t-value	f^2 value	Decision
P1. Perceived Relationship → Customer Engagement	0.293	7.396	0.181	supported
P2. Reward → Customer Engagement	0.161	3.556	0.045	supported
P3. Brand Post → Customer Engagement	0.504	10.193	0.354	supported

CONCLUSION

The purpose of disclosing the effect of the highlighted three antecedents on customer engagement through SNS has successfully yielded significant findings. Using PLS-SEM technique, *Perceived Relationship*, *Reward,* and *Brand Post* have positively impacted brand-focused customer engagement. This study has proven that the focal customer engagement concept can integrate with the SNS that is rapidly gaining popularity in the digital world. With relevant literature and scales validated from previous studies, the purpose of modelling the proposed antecedents of customer engagement in SNS has contributed new knowledge and has proven valuable to research for social media and e-Marketing. The following sections will provide relevant implications for theory and practice.

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