Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities of Sri Lankan Fashion

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ABSTRACT

The development of online global networking and increased penetration of Social Media (SM) in people’s daily lives offer many business opportunities to promote brands and to engage with customers on a daily basis with reduced costs. The biggest question that businesses strive to find the answer for is which SM tactics are the most effective, followed by how to best keep customers engaged in SM to gain a competitive advantage (Stelzner, 2016). In Sri Lanka, where the widely utilised social networking site is Facebook, with the creation of online brand communities, firms can reach out to a plethora of customers in a shorter period of time, whilst simultaneously strengthening brand loyalty and customer engagement. This research aims to identify and analyse the factors which drive customer engagement in online brand communities of Sri Lankan fashion brands on Facebook, based in Colombo. Five variables that may impact customer engagement in online brand communities were found from a rigorous and thorough literature review: customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping, electronic word-of-mouth, brand responsiveness, economic benefits and branded social content. Following a quantitative approach, a sample of 200 respondents who have ‘liked’ a Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page and residents in Colombo were selected to answer an online questionnaire. Correlation and regression findings proved that all independent variables have positive relationships with customer engagement in online brand communities, proving the developed hypotheses. Significant predictors were found to be customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping, electronic word-of-mouth and economic benefits, with economic benefits being the most influential factor.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of global networking and social technologies stimulates businesses to capitalise on opportunities created to develop corporate reputation, innovate and enrich customer relations by amplifying customer engagement and loyalty online. Social media (SM) comprises of pictures, text, networks and videos as contents and multiple interaction channels between individuals and firms, where these interactions are facilitated and disseminated (Kietzman, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011; Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012). As SM is progressively gaining importance in people’s daily lives and with SM establishing an increasingly significant communication channel to desired audiences (Murdough, 2009), businesses would stand to gain by building an advantageous online brand image amongst competitors.
Customer engagement (CE) has gained much attention in recent marketing literature (Dessart et al., 2015), supporting the increasingly interactive nature of consumer and brand relationships (Vivek et al., 2012). By intensifying customer loyalty and feeling of relatedness to the brand, customer engagement, which is a value co-creating psychological process, maintains repeat purchases and strengthens consumer relationships beyond those of traditional buyer-seller (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, cited by Dessart et al. 2015; Bowden, 2009; Vivek et al., 2012). As a consequence, brand loyalty is built and accordingly, consumers will prefer to shop at such businesses.

Individuals sharing similar brand interests connect electronically via online brand communities (OBC) which enable individuals to embrace their collective interest and foster bonds amongst themselves (Algesheimer et al., 2005, cited by Dessart et al. 2015; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006, cited by Dessart et al. 2015). Effects of social networks on consumer behaviour have been brought to light, where it has become imperative for retailers on SM to identify activities that engage customers online (Zhu & Zhang, 2010; Goh et al., 2013; Rapp et al., 2013).

However, not many studies on customer retention and engagement through OBCs exist. This area of study is vital to businesses on account of the current power shift from businesses to the consumer which manipulates brand image and reputation via ‘participative/collaborative web’ activities (Siano et al., 2011) on online platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram.

Recent market trends show that increasingly more Sri Lankan consumers, especially millennials (Digital Marketer, 2016), tend to conduct online research prior to purchasing, as more Sri Lankans connect to the internet and gain more access to information, of which more than five million users are active online and more than 3.5 million are daily Facebook users, which is the larger SM network compared to Instagram, LinkedIn (Digital Marketer, 2016). Facebook allows retailers to directly interact with potential customers (Dekay, 2012). Hence, many top brands in Sri Lanka are making use of Facebook to market and merchandise their products, and to expand their customer base, as Facebook is the second most traffic receiving website in Sri Lanka with majority of Facebook users residing in the Western Province with nearly 2.8 million users (Digital Marketer, 2016). Thus, being a major city and capital located in the Western Province, Colombo is selected to be the geographical location to be studied.

This study aims to examine the development and factors of customer engagement in online brand communities of the fashion industry of Sri Lanka which motivate repeat purchases from existing and potential customers via the social networking site (SNS), Facebook. It will take the customer’s perspective in identifying the most engaging SM activities by apparel retailers. This study targets customers based in Colombo who have ‘liked’ Sri Lankan apparel brand Facebook pages such as Amanté, Cotton Collection, GFlock, Fashion Bug and Emerald which employ SM as a communication channel by which existing and prospective customers can be reached.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

It has been claimed that customer engagement in dynamic business environments leads to sales growth (Neff, 2007, cited by Brodie et al. 2011), profitability (Voyles, 2007, cited by Brodie et al. 2011) and competitive advantage over rivals (Sedley, 2006, cited by Brodie et al. 2011), improving corporate performance. The justifications for these assertions are that engaged customers play a major role in marketing activity of recommending brands and certain products/services to others (Brodie et al., 2011), new product/service development (Hoyer et al., 2010), and value and experience co-creation (Brakus et al., 2009).

Drawing from relationship marketing theory which studies co-creation of value in marketing relationships, and the service-dominant (S-D) logic stated by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008a, cited by Brodie et al. 2011), theoretical foundations of customer engagement are analysed. Customer engagement is viewed in three different aspects (Cheung et al., 2011):

1. As a psychological process which develops loyalty. A framework suggested refers to the process by which mechanisms underlying engagement form loyalty from new customers and from existing customers to purchase repeatedly (Bowden, 2009).

2. As behavioural manifestation. Customer engagement is defined as a customer’s behavioural manifestation that drives a customer not just to purchase from a particular brand or firm, but to go beyond mere purchasing (van Doorn et al., 2010). This definition is further supplemented by detecting various other behavioural actions related to customer engagement such as rating service/product, blogging, word-of-mouth to other potential customers (Verhoef et al., 2010; Bijmolt et al., 2010).

3. As a psychological state where customers are vigorous and dedicated, absorbing and interacting in brand interactions, taking into consideration the disciplines of social psychology and organisational behaviour (Patterson et al., 2006, cited by Zheng et al., 2015).

As the role of interactive digital media in people’s lives grows rapidly, with introductions of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and more, consumption communities have flourished where social identities of customers depend on their consumptive roles in SM (Hammedi et al., 2015), relating to their brand usage or consumption (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Brand-related factors concerning trust in the brand, brand identification, customer satisfaction, as well as community and social factors such as connectedness, perception of the value gained from participation, monetary incentives were identified as drivers intensifying engagement in online brand communities indicated by a new study carried out using semi-structured interviews (Dessart et al., 2015). A conceptual framework of online customer engagement (Nadeem et al., 2015) shows that site service quality, peer recommendations and predisposition of online shopping on Facebook are drivers of customer engagement as they lead to trust and loyalty.
Brand Responsiveness

Brand responsiveness can be understood as website service quality which is defined as “service that is helpful, responsive, and offered willingly, and in which consumers’ inquiries are responded to promptly” (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003, cited by Nadeem et al., 2015). Social-interaction has a strong positive impact on customer engagement due to higher levels of interaction when brands promptly and openly communicate with customers (De Vries & Carlson, 2014). Brand responsiveness in online brand communities helps in mitigating negative word-of-mouth information which amplifies perceived betrayal; greater the brand responsiveness, more positive the effect on negative Word of Mouth (WOM), diminishing the reduction in patronage (Adjei et al., 2016).

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

eWOM is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, cited by See-To & Ho 2014). As per van Doorn et al.’s (2010) model, highly satisfied customers, where customer satisfaction is an antecedent of CE, results in positive WOM, increasing CE. Customer purchase intentions are positively impacted by characteristics of eWOM information and customer behavior pertaining to eWOM (Erkan & Evans, 2016).

Branded Social Content

Quality branded social content is content which connects with customers, develops “relevant conversations with those that show interest and convert them to win sales and advocacy” (Woodcock et al., 2011). To engage with customers on Facebook, it has been empirically concluded that photo and video updates are better received and liked by customers than status or link updates (Kwok et al., 2015) as images and videos are more compelling and receive more engagement than text-only posts (Brookes, 2010, cited by Sabate et al. 2014). Exclusivity appeal, image appeal and incentives were found to perform more on Facebook (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Economic Benefits

Economic incentives are extrinsic motivators, such as price promotions, lucky draws, offers to induce customers to participate and engage in online brand communities (Wirtz et al., 2013). Some Facebook users admit to participating in online brand communities of brands they like to reap monetary incentives and financial rewards, thus, influencing customer cognition and behavior (Dessart et al., 2015). In online brand communities, being extrinsic motivators, monetary incentives increase all types of members’ short-term participation intentions, although more strongly influencing passive than active members, and decrease long-term participation intentions of active members, exhibiting a long-term crowding-out effect for active members, unlike passive members (Garnefeld et al., 2012).
Customer Predisposition to Using Facebook for Shopping

The concept customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping is the “involvement expressed by consumers’ willingness to follow brands, browse for information, and purchase items on Facebook” (Jin, 2012). After visiting a brand’s Facebook fan page, the customer’s attitude is a significant precursor to the future usage of Facebook for online shopping, to visit the page again and to intend on collecting information online before purchasing offline (Jin, 2012). Increased Facebook activity by regular users leads to positive attitudes, helping purchasing decisions (Duffett, 2015).

Based on the fundamentals of previous research conducted, a conceptual model which examines customer engagement in online brand communities is fashioned, with hypothesized relationships (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of customer engagement in online brand communities
H1: There is a relationship between customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping and customer engagement in online brand communities.

H2: There is a relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and customer engagement in online brand communities.

H3: There is a relationship between brand responsiveness and customer engagement in online brand communities.

H4: There is a relationship between economic benefits and customer engagement in online brand communities.

H5: There is a relationship between branded social content and customer engagement in online brand communities.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research manifests some positivist philosophy characteristics, taking a deductive approach where a theory is tested objectively by utilising quantitative methods. For this research, cross-sectional research design was used, employing questionnaires, collecting data from many respondents at one time, so that association patterns between variables are identified.

Almost 16 percent of Sri Lanka’s local population, which is 3-3.5 million, uses Facebook (Digital Marketer, 2016), which is much more than other SM channels (Copacetic Media, 2015). Hence, Facebook is the SM channel that was studied. Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, has a population of 2,375,000 (Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, 2015) which has the majority of Facebook users, of nearly 2.8 million (Digital Marketer, 2016). As such, Colombo was chosen to be the geographical area of study. With internet penetration among the Sri Lankan population continuing to increase (Ishara, 2015), the number of Facebook users is increasing as well, concentrated with people of ages 18-34, and 71 percent of total users being males (Digital Marketer, 2016). The target population for the study comprised of Colombo residents who have a Facebook account and have ‘liked’ Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan pages. As Facebook fan pages have a constantly changing fan base who ‘like’, engage with the brands and ‘unlike’, it is not feasible to measure a constant population of the number of fans in online brand communities in Colombo. Due to the target population being unknown as a result of the dynamic, shifting population and unavailability of relevant information, a reliable sampling frame is not available to employ a probability sampling method, and snowball sampling is the only feasible approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011) to select the sample of 200 respondents (Figure 2).
Primary data were collected from a small number of respondents after learning of their membership in online brand communities on Facebook, through self-completion online questionnaires which were comprised of closed-ended, structured questions. The questionnaire aimed to obtain certain demographic and online behaviour information such as the age, gender, and sharing, commenting, liking habits on Facebook of the participants in Part A of the survey, and with all Part B questions measuring the constructs to be responded using a five-point Likert scale, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Initially, preliminary results via a pilot test were gathered.

The instrument used for data collection consists of modified questions from various published studies as referenced. The variables were measured with the use of questions from different published research articles modified to this study’s context (Figure 3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Customer Predisposition to Using Facebook for Shopping | 1. I am interested in utilizing Facebook to follow up on brands’ online updates.  
2. I am interested in utilizing Facebook to browse brands I like.  
3. I am interested in utilizing Facebook to browse for brands for offline shopping purposes.  
| Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)       | 5. I am interested in utilizing Facebook to refer to consumer reviews.  
6. Recommendations and reviews make online shopping more simple.  
| Brand Responsiveness                  | 8. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if the company is willing and ready to respond to consumer needs online.  
9. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if, when you have a problem, the company shows a sincere interest in solving it.  
10. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if inquiries are answered promptly by the clothing brand. | Wolfinbarger & Gilly (2003), cited by Nadeem et al. (2015)                                         |
| Economic Benefits                     | 11. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if it helps me to get offers, discounts and coupons.  
12. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if it helps me to participate in lotteries and raffles.  
13. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if it helps me to get better services. | Gummerus et al. (2012), cited by Chow & Shi (2015)                                                 |
| Branded Social Content                | 14. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if it has charming/attractive features.  
15. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if there is unique information value.  
16. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if it provides relevant information.  
17. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if it enhances my knowledge about new products, related products and changes.  
18. I would engage more with the Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan page if it gives me enough information so that I can identify items to the same degree as if I am in the store. | Liu and Arnett (2000), cited by Lim et al. (2009); Mathwick et al. (2008), cited by Chow & Shi (2015); Nambisan & Baron (2010), cited by Chow & Shi (2015); Wolfinbarger & Gilly (2003), cited by Ha & Stoel (2009) |
19. I have purchased products from Sri Lankan clothing offline stores after browsing their Facebook page.
20. I have purchased products from Sri Lankan clothing offline stores if others’ recommendations and reviews on Facebook are positive and lead to relevant, desired products.
21. I have become a fan and participate in Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan pages because I receive economic incentives online such as discounts, deals, offers, coupons and promotions.
22. I comment, like and/or share posts from Sri Lankan clothing Facebook fan pages when I find those posts interesting/useful.


Figure 3: Operationalisation of variables

Reliability and Validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha Value</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Predisposition to Using Facebook for Shopping</td>
<td>0.720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Word-of-Mouth</td>
<td>0.710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Responsiveness</td>
<td>0.723</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Benefits</td>
<td>0.705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branded Social Content</td>
<td>0.877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities</td>
<td>0.742</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Reliability test (Cronbach’s alpha)

Reliability was tested by conducting Cronbach’s alpha test, where inter-item consistency was checked to observe homogeneity and consistency of the indicators which were utilised to measure the constructs (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). This coefficient stands to be acceptable if it is 0.7 and above (Hair et al., 2009, cited by Duffett 2015). All the variables met the required standards of Cronbach’s alpha above 0.7 on testing (Figure 4).
Validity was tested by conducting Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s tests, so that the adapted measurement scales used from existing research was valid and usable to assess constructs used in the study (Duffett, 2015). The values for KMO test are between 0 and 1 (Field, 2005), for which above 0.5 values are acceptable (Kaizer, 1974), and Bartlett’s test should have a significance value less than 0.05 if relationships between variables are to be established, testing null hypotheses (Field, 2005). Depicting significance, all variables were found to have KMO values above 0.5 and Bartlett’s test values less than 0.05, partially ensuring convergent validity (Figure 5).

All indicators of dependent variable, customer engagement in online brand communities, were loaded on one factor after the deletion of one question. The extracted factor explained 57% of total variance from all factors; hence it was worth including in the model. All the variables were tested and the extracted variances were calculated which distinguished each factor from the other factors. Meeting factor loading requirements, convergent validity was established.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Exploratory data analysis was conducted, with descriptive tests, normality test, correlation analysis testing developed hypotheses and regression analysis.

Utilising Pearson correlation coefficient to measure bivariate correlations, the strength of relationships between two or more variables as per the hypotheses was measured through correlation analysis (Datt, 2015). Value of 0 indicates no relationship; increasing value indicates possible relationship with correlation value being 0.3 or higher to suggest stronger relationships (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, cited by Yong & Pearce 2013). Upon running

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>KMO Value</th>
<th>Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Predisposition to Using Facebook for Shopping</td>
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<td>Electronic Word-of-Mouth</td>
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<td>21.488</td>
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<td>Brand Responsiveness</td>
<td>0.629</td>
<td>25.797</td>
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<td>Economic Benefits</td>
<td>0.620</td>
<td>23.698</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Branded Social Content</td>
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<td>Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities</td>
<td>0.623</td>
<td>41.293</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>Significant</td>
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</table>
the Pearson correlation test as the correlations were significant at the 0.01 level, the following were proved. There are moderate, positive correlations between customer engagement in online brand communities and the independent variables: customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping (0.335), electronic word-of-mouth (0.371), brand responsiveness (0.348). There are rather strong, positive correlations between customer engagement in online brand communities and the independent variables: economic benefits (0.476), branded social content (0.409). Hence, all hypotheses are accepted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>95.0% Confidence Interval for B</th>
<th>Collinearity Statistics</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.149</td>
<td>1.957</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand Responsiveness</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Benefits</td>
<td>.446</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>4.045</td>
</tr>
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<td>Branded Social Content</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>1.245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Regression analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted (Figure 6) where it was found since p-values of customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping, eWOM and economic benefits are less than 0.05, they are significant predictors of customer engagement in online brand communities. However, as brand responsiveness and branded social content have p-values more than 0.05, they are not significant predictors of the dependent variable and are removed from the model. This is further reinforced by the 95 percent confidence interval where the value 0 falls in between the interval for brand responsiveness and branded social content, and not for eWOM, customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping and economic benefits, meaning they are significant predictors.

The standardized coefficient: beta values showed that there are positive relationships between customer engagement in online brand communities and the independent variables.

Although bivariate correlation analysis conducted showed statistically significant, positive relationships between customer engagement in online brand communities and the independent variables: brand responsiveness and branded social content, regression analysis showed the variables as not statistically significant as p-values are greater than 0.05. Brand responsiveness was the weakest predictor in comparison to the other independent variables in the bivariate correlation analysis, and it remains the weakest predictor (p-value of .630) and impacting the dependent variable the least (unstandardized coefficient B value of .063) as per regression results.
Since all VIF values are less than 5, there is no problem of multicollinearity. This is further proved by the multivariate analysis of correlations (Figure 7), where all correlation values between independent variables are less than 0.85. Hence no two independent variables violate the assumption of independence of the predictors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations</th>
<th>CEOBC</th>
<th>FBUse</th>
<th>eWOM</th>
<th>Resp</th>
<th>Econ</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities (CEOBC)</td>
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<td>.371**</td>
<td>.348**</td>
<td>.476**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Economic Benefits (Econ)</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>Branded Social Content (Content)</td>
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<td>.360**</td>
<td>.439**</td>
<td>.504**</td>
<td>.558**</td>
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<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 7: Multicollinearity analysis

| Model Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
<th>Durbin-Watson</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.553*</td>
<td>.306</td>
<td>.288</td>
<td>2.28435</td>
<td>1.827</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Predictors: (Constant), Branded Social Content, Customer Predisposition to Using Facebook for Shopping, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Economic Benefits, Brand Responsiveness
b. Dependent Variable: Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities

Figure 8: R Square

232
This model offers R Square of .306; 31 percent of variation in the dependent variable is explained by the five independent variables tested (Figure 8). Although this R Square is not very high, which may be due to differences of influences by independent variables in the context of the study as this research was conducted in Sri Lanka, South East Asia being compared to the Western countries models, it is still statistically acceptable. Furthermore, as Durbin-Watson value is close to 2, no autocorrelation between variables is suggested.

**ANOVA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Regression</td>
<td>446.435</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>89.287</td>
<td>17.110</td>
<td>.000b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>1012.345</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>5.218</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1458.780</td>
<td>199</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities
b. Predictors: (Constant), Branded Social Content, Customer Predisposition to Using Facebook for Shopping, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Economic Benefits, Brand Responsiveness

Figure 9: ANOVA

The regression model is statistically significant as the p-value is less than 0.001 (Figure 9). Hence, the model is a good fit of the data and the outcome can be explained by at least one of the independent variables tested.

**Further Analysis**

Further regression analysis was done to show any differences between genders and within the age group which has most respondents (20-29 years old). Females were found to be more influenced by customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping, eWOM, economic benefits and branded social content than males in the impact of customer engagement. Males are more influenced by brand responsiveness than females to engage with the fan page. However, both males and females share the same significant predictor which is economic benefits (Appendix 1). The age group, 20-29 years old, has positive relationships between all independent variables and dependent variable, with significant predictors being customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping and economic benefits. The weakest predictor is brand responsiveness, similar to the total sample findings.

**CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS**

Studying the correlation analysis and regression analysis, all the hypotheses are proved, similar to previous studies.

H1 can be accepted; as preference of using Facebook to research online about branded clothing products increases, customer engagement in online brand communities increases. Customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping is a significant predictor with a positive relationship with the dependent variable. As customer predisposition to using Facebook for shopping is the second most significant predictor, firms should utilise
innovative strategies to attract potential customers and convert Facebook users into Facebook fans of their fan page by which they can communicate with them to keep them engaged. Such tactics could include increasing or introducing paid Facebook advertisements which pop up on users’ Facebook walls even without them ‘liking’ such pages. This tactic is more effective when the advertisement is innovatively designed, directed at a target audience, yet keeping within a fixed marketing budget.

H2 can be accepted; as consumer interaction through reviews and recommendations increases, customer engagement in online brand communities increases. eWOM is a significant predictor with a positive relationship with the dependent variable. Firms should be constantly aware of any negative reviews or comments about their brands which they can rectify or turn around the negativity quickly in order to not allow negative news to go viral online. They should regularly keep up-to-date on any news related to their brand. Furthermore, they can hire e-leaders, who are digital professionals, or bloggers to spread positive information that will attract customers and make them aware of what the brand has to offer them.

H3 can be accepted; as firms’ responsiveness to consumers’ inquiries and comments increases, customer engagement in online brand communities increases. Brand responsiveness is not a significant predictor as it is the variable that influences the dependent variable the least with a positive relationship and has the least significance. This may be due to the Sri Lankan context in which currently about 48% of Facebook users never or almost never comment or post questions on Facebook fan pages of brands, with only 7% of Facebook users doing so every day or almost every day, as per the demographics analysis of the sample. From a managerial perspective, to facilitate customer engagement, firms should be proactive as well as responsive to customers’ inquiries and comments on their Facebook fan pages regularly.

H4 can be accepted; as brands offer more deals, promotions and discounts on their Facebook fan page, customer engagement in online brand communities increases. Economic benefits is a significant predictor with a positive relationship with the dependent variable, being the variable that influences the most compared to the other independent variables. SM managers are recommended to offer special discounts occasionally to keep customers engaged for a longer period of time, as well as encourage customers’ active participation through the use of raffles, lucky draws. Competitions and lotteries will assist in reaching more Facebook users as they provide bigger prizes to be won and they will continuously check the brand fan page to see if they have won, creating excitement. Use of coupons will incentivise community members to keep engaged with the brand regularly.

H5 can be accepted; as more exclusive, useful and unique brand information is posted on Facebook fan pages, customer engagement in online brand communities increases. Branded social content is not a significant predictor, but it has a positive relationship with the dependent variable. The Facebook brand fan page should provide information which enables the customer to identify the branded products online to the same degree as in the store, as this was most important in requirements of branded social content as per the sample findings, followed by relevance of information, charming and attractive features. Uploading photos of the branded clothes will be both informative and relevant, and by
giving call to actions to customers, such as “Click ‘Like’ if you ...” will psychologically nudge them to engage with the brand. Offering unique information, especially that which enhances customer knowledge about new products and any changes, on a regular basis will capture more customers and keep existing customers engaged longer, instead of overloading with unnecessary information which may drive away customers.

With the increase in active Facebook users, and penetration of phones and internet in Sri Lanka, firms should grab this opportunity to promote their brands and engage with customers on Facebook which is a much more used space by the general population, especially generation Y and millennials (mainly 20 to 29 year olds), who spend a great amount of time on Facebook. With greater customer engagement, brands can be ensured of their long-term success with increased repurchase intention and brand loyalty.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Cross-sectional research design used in this research can detect only patterns of association and is not capable of learning more about the antecedents of customer engagement. Use of longitudinal research design, with qualitative approach will enhance findings with more detail and explanations for greater understanding.

Customer engagement in online brand communities may be influenced differently by the type of media that customers use to check fan pages, such as use of mobile phones, computers, etc. This research does not categorise or segregate the media used, which may result in different findings.

This study explains only 31 percent of the variance in customer engagement in online brand communities. More independent variables can be tested for their effect on customer engagement in online brand communities so as to explain variance for a larger percentage, such as trust, attitude of customer, loyalty intention, entertainment benefits, perceived social and community benefits, brand identification.

As the research is specific to one geographical context and bound to only Colombo, these findings may not be generalised to a wider population such as the whole of Sri Lanka, but it may be extended to the Western Province.

This research only studies the Sri Lankan fashion retail industry, in terms of only one SNS, which is Facebook. Although Facebook is utilised by majority of the population, there are other emerging SNS and SM platforms, such as Instagram which is gradually being used to engage with customers.

Greater sample sizes can be considered for research across multiple industries, such as hospitality, consumer technology, automotives industries to compare the results using the same model. This would provide knowledge of comparison among different industries and the drivers of online customer engagement on each industry.
Appendix 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients (Beta)</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customer Predisposition to Using Facebook for Shopping</td>
<td>.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>eWOM</td>
<td>.184</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand Responsiveness</td>
<td>.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic Benefits</td>
<td>.335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Branded Social Content</td>
<td>-.036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities

Table 1: Regression analysis: Gender
References


