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# **Strengthening Consumer Brand Relationships through Consumer Engagement: Online Brand Communities in Landscape of Social Media**

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## **Abstract**

*The study advances conceptualization and dimensionality of consumer engagement and validate antecedents and outcomes in the context of social media. The data collected from active members of online brand communities, unveiled that consumers engage with brands and other consumers with brand communities. The study conducted exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and hierarchical regression modelling to validate construct and test proposed hypotheses. Findings of the study exhibit that brand satisfaction, brand identification yield significant relationship with consumer engagement while brand trust turns out to be insignificant. Furthermore, consumer engagement significantly mediates the relationship between brand identification, brand satisfaction and brand loyalty. The study asserts that parsimonious conceptualization of consumer engagement consists of three dimensions: cognitive, affective and behavioral. Contributions of the study are two folds; first, endorse consumer engagement conceptualization and secondly, answer to call for empirical testing of Online Brand Community Engagement Framework.*

**Key words:** Consumer Engagement, Online Brand Community, Brand Identification, Brand Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty

## **I. Introduction**

In this era of internet technology consumers are connected with each other and brands through online social media. Firms have recognized social media and online brand communities worth and aiming on to develop long term customer relationships, get deeper customer insights and strengthen brand through engaging consumers (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). Based on the premise, online brand communities have become a key medium for collective action of information distribution (Wiertz & Ruyter, 2007) to consumers through social media. Marketing researchers and practitioners are in endless efforts to extend beyond merely customer's purchase relationships (Sheeraz, Khattak, Mahmood, & Iqbal, 2016) and one promising way to build and enhance customer relationship is consumer engagement (CE) concept. Subsequently, CE concept has got enormous scholarly attention in various stream of research across disciplines such as information system (Wagner & Majchrzak, 2006), psychology (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006), and education (Bryson & Hand, 2007). More importantly, in marketing research CE conceptualization and measurement particularly in social media becomes significant and encouraged researchers to call in top priority research areas for 2014-2016 (MSI, 2014) and allocate dedicated special issues in various journals.

Since start of this decade, brand management research emphasized importance of CE and a number of research studies of practical managers to academicians contributed towards the nascent concept. In branding literature, few studies conceptualized engagement incur only in consumption related situations (Doorn et al., 2010) while others assert that it requires a subject and object relationship (Hollebeek, 2011). In addition to this, few studies aimed to conceptualize CE through theoretical, qualitative and quantitative studies (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). In order to clear boundaries, establish the conceptual meanings and dimensions of CE, Dessart et al. (2015) proposed Online Brand Community Engagement Framework. However, till now literature in brand management lacks consensus on uni-dimensionality or multi-dimensionality of CE (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2016). Therefore, different conceptualizations prevail up till now and there is a lack of agreement and unanimity on dimensions and their meanings among researchers.

Though the concept prevails in early stages of brand management literature but various studies acknowledged its importance in building and enhancing customer relationships (Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Subsequently, scarce literature of consumer engagement evokes empirical investigation for prospective variables as antecedents and outcomes in enhancing consumer brand relationships (Coulter, Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012). However,

CE has been conceptualized as mechanism or process which build up by means of various attitude/behaviors and turns out into favorable brand foci outcomes (i.e. brand loyalty) (Naumann & Bowden, 2015). Therefore, some of the attitudes such as brand satisfaction, brand identification and brand trust can serve as possible antecedents of consumer engagement.

The current study attempts to address the research calls initiated from literature and above mentioned discussion for conceptualization and dimensionality (uni-dimensional or multidimensional) of brand engagement in the perspective of online brand communities. More specifically, the study aims to delineate conceptualization, dimensionality of CE and the empirical validation of recently proposed antecedents and outcome in an online brand community framework.

The contributions of the study to construct of CE are twofold: theoretical and practical. *Theoretically*, the study advances conceptualization of CE in the context of online brand communities and confirmed its three dimensional nature of construct. Furthermore, the study validated online brand community engagement framework on the basis on empirical data in Pakistan. While *practically*, this study proposes that before making decisions, managers need to critically consider and analyze all three (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) facets of CE construct. Managers also need to carefully examine the three dimensions of CE in order to create strong brand loyalty in consumers.

## II. Literature Review

### A. Consumer Engagement

Engagement concept can be mapped out in terms of employee engagement in organizational behavior (organization commitment, organizational citizenship behavior) and hereafter organizational performance research studies (Saks, 2006). Engagement concept has been utilized in advertisement to investigate company and customer relationships by means of rational or emotional bonds (McEwen, 2004). On these premises, Bowden (2009) developed a conceptual framework of consumer engagement and regarded as a holistic process in creating consumer brand relationships. Likewise, Brodie and colleagues considered consumer engagement as a psychological disposition (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011a, p. 2). Whereas, Doorn et al. (2010) conceptualized consumer engagement as a behavioral manifested construct and coined the term of customer engagement behavior (CEB).

From inception of concept to date literature lacks consensus on conceptualization and dimensions of consumer engagement. Bowden (2009) considers CE as a psychological process, Brodie et al. (2011a) consider it as a psychological state, whereas (Doorn et al., 2010) offer an approach in which considers CE as a behavioral manifestation. Similarly, there are several streams of definitions as well which observe this notion having different facets. Vivek et al.

(2012) view CE as uni-dimensional concept and on the other hand (Patterson, Yu, & De Ruyter, 2006) and consider it as multiple dimensional concept. However, dominant point of view in literature favor multi dimensionality of consumer engagement (cognitive, affective and behavioral) rather than just behavioral dimension. Therefore, based on extensive literature review the study views CE as a multi-dimensional approach (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). The cognitive dimension possesses sustained cognitive process that ensures lasting and active mental states of experience of consumers with respect to the focal point of their engagement (Hollebeek, 2013). The affective dimension deals with the enduring emotional states with respect to the focal point of their engagement (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). The behavioral dimension is the behavioral manifestation towards an engagement focus, beyond just purchase.

### **B. Brand Identification**

The notion 'brand identification' (BI) is found rooted in the understanding that brand carries symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959) and can help customers to gain their goals of fundamental identity (Holt, 2005). There are different theoretical foundations that may support the definitional aspects of BI, for instance some definitions are rooted in the organizational behavior literature while some are from organizational identity literature (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). It can be defined as 'as customer's perceived state of oneness with brand' which is closely related to the organizational behavior literature and its understanding of 'identification' concept (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). The current research views BI as a formative construct with three dimensions which includes cognitive dimension (perception), emotional dimension (feeling) and evaluative dimension (valuing).

### **C. Brand Satisfaction**

Oliver (1997, p. 13) defines satisfaction as 'a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided a pleasurable level of consumption related fulfillment'. Brand satisfaction can be viewed as how satisfied a consumer is with a particular brand (Oliver, 1980). Erciş, Ünal, Candan, and Yıldırım (2012) discuss that brand satisfaction can also be termed as the positive attitude a consumer exhibits which is usually a resultant of his consumption experience evaluation with a certain product. Rockwell (2008) states that brand satisfaction is 'accumulation of customer experience and expectations with brand'.

### **D. Brand Trust**

Trust can be defined as the confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared (Deutsch, 1977). Extending the definition to the brand trust, it is based on customer's belief that brand has specific qualities that he/she desires (Delgado-Ballester & Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2005). Literature suggests four components of trust including perception of competence, predictability, benevolence and integrity (Hegner & Jevons, 2016). However, in

branding meanings of trust are attached with brand itself. The individual level trust, when shared online brand communities' results in the relational consequences including commitment, self-brand connections and brand emotional attachments to a focal brand.

### **E. Brand Loyalty as an Outcome**

Brand loyalty is defined as “the biased behavioral response expressed over time by some decision making unit, with respect to one or more alternative brands out of set of such brands, as a function of evaluative psychological processes” (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Conceptualization of brand loyalty can be traced back from the work of Oliver (1999) who suggested that loyalty formation process is an attitudinal development process starting from the cognitive believe to the actual purchase of brand. Dessart et al. (2015) argued that informational and entertaining quality helps in enhancing affect, cognition and behavior of online brand community members. Which in turns strengthen the thesis that as the brand satisfaction increases the consumer engagement is aggravated and consumer while trusting a brand engages in a community to enhance relational concerns. On the basis of the above discussion, following is hypothesized.

**H1a:** Brand identification is positively related to CE

**H1b:** Brand satisfaction is positively related to CE

**H1c:** Brand trust is positively related to CE

Algesheimer et al. (2005) argue that participants of brand communities possess baseline relationship which can result in a number of outcomes (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011b) , where brand loyalty is one of the outcomes. On the basis of the argument, it can be hypothesized that:

**H2a:** Brand identification is directly related to brand loyalty

**H2b:** Brand satisfaction is directly related to brand loyalty

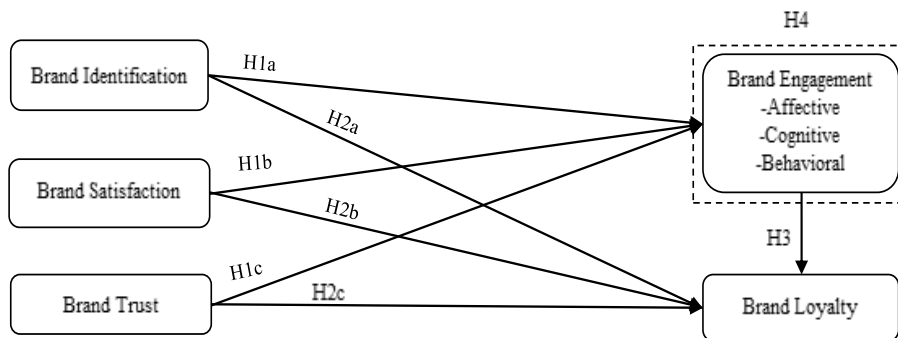
**H2c:** Brand trust is directly related to brand loyalty

The community engagement is also concerned with the behavioral development towards a focal point. Dessart et al. (2015) suggest that CE can result in certain outcomes such as affective commitment, word of mouth, loyalty and brand community involvement (Vivek et al., 2012). There is likelihood that psychological process of identification, satisfaction and trust can be translated into strong CE which can further strengthen the loyalty for a brand. Therefore, it can be proposed that CE can enhance psychological and behavioral aspect of sustained relationship with brand and association with it. Thus, it can be hypothesized that,

**H3: Consumer engagement can enhance brand loyalty**

Prior literature advocated that there are various predictors of OBCE which may be specific to brand, social or community value based and/or functional value expected from particular community membership (Wirtz et al., 2013). Whereas, positive online interactive experiences with brand can evoke and sustain brand loyalty in consumers in long term (Kumar et al., 2010). Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

**H4: Consumer engagement mediates the relationship between drivers (brand identification, brand satisfaction and brand trust) and brand loyalty.**



*Figure 1: Conceptual Model*

### III. Methodology

#### A. Sampling and procedures

The study is focused to learn about consumer relationships and consumer engagement in social media perspective. Therefore, population for the study consist of all social media user which should members of brand communities. Purposive sampling with following criteria is used to select sample: a) Customers who are more inclined or attached to social media. b) Must have sufficient awareness of social media websites and/or tools. c) Must be a member of any online brand community in social media. The perspective of the study focus on the social media, the study employed online questionnaire and data collection was carried out. A total of 151 questionnaires were gathered back and after initial screening 101 were found completely filled in all respect. The sample consists of a diverse group of respondents ranging from university students to professionals which provided information. The sample consisted of 72% male and 28% female and majority of sample (71%) fall within 21 to 25 years' age group. In today's environment, young

people are more inclined to social media and online websites therefore 65% of the sample consisted of students and others include private job holders, academicians, engineers and Government job holders. Furthermore, respondent's purpose of joining online brand community is information gathering (68%), entertainment (18%), networking (9%) and monetary incentive (5%). Similarly, most of the respondents (90%) had an experience of offline purchase with respective brands.

## **B. Measures**

Brand identification scale (of three items Alpha= .825) is adopted from study of Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) which investigated drivers of consumer brand engagement. Brand satisfaction and brand trust measures are adopted from study of Lau and Lee (1999) by employing six items (Alpha= .863) and three items (Alpha= .798) respectively. The study investigated the relationship of customer's trust and brand loyalty. CE is measured by adopting seven items (Alpha= .897) by study of Dessart et al. (2016) which offered scale of consumer engagement. Lastly, brand loyalty is measured by using four items (Alpha= .885) adopted from the study of Kim, Han, and Park (2001) which investigated brand personality, brand identification and brand loyalty based on social identification theory.

## **IV. Analysis and Results**

The data is aggregated at individual's unit of analysis and is analyzed by utilizing SPSS and AMOS. In order to validate the CE construct and to test the proposed hypotheses this study employs various statistical tests such as *exploratory factor analysis*, *confirmatory factor analysis*, bi-variate correlation and *hierarchical regression modeling*.

In order to identify the factor structure, EFA is conducted with principal component analysis followed by Promax rotation (Byrne, 2010). Table 1 exhibit that EFA test yielded results that are according to the expectations based on theory and literature discussed earlier. The results of KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy (.847) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (469.26, p value=0.000) exhibit that items have positive correlations. Similarly, factor extractions also (Table-1) show that cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors emerged in data for CE.



**Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis Results**

<b>Factors</b>	1	2	3
CE-B-1	<b>1.049</b>		
CE-B-2	<b>.713</b>		
CE-B3	<b>.611</b>	.434	
CE-A-1		<b>.968</b>	
CE-A-2		<b>.755</b>	
CE-C-1			<b>.972</b>
CE-C-2			<b>.668</b>

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

Furthermore, on the basis of EFA we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to conform the dimensionality of CE. All seven items extracted in EFA are carried out to CFA model to check model fitness of the selected items (see Figure-2). The three factor model of CE yield good fitness of model for all indicators of goodness of fit (CMIN/DF at 1.564, GFI at .954, CFI at .987, TLI at .974, RMSEA at .075, PCLOSE at .245).

The correlation results reveal (Table-2) a positive relationship among the variables. Brand identification is strongly correlated with brand engagement and brand loyalty (0.819, 0.744 respectively) which is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

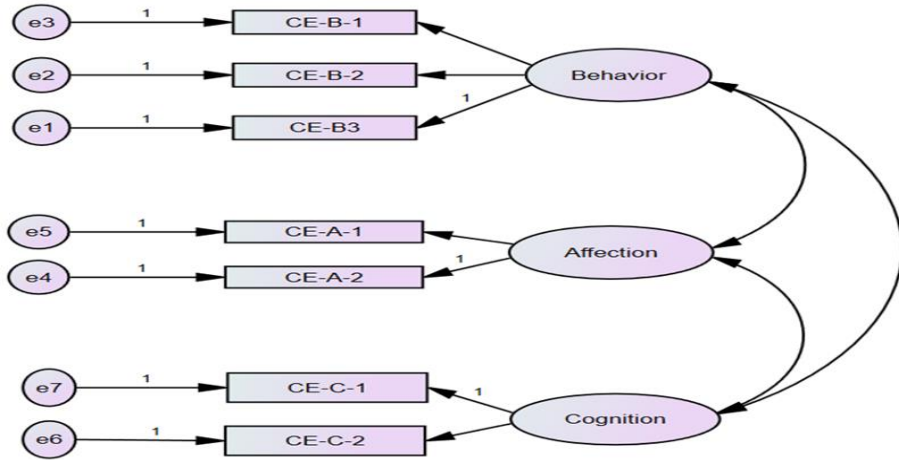


Figure 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Measurement Model

Similarly, results showed that brand identification is significantly correlated with brand satisfaction and brand trust. It can be observed from Table 2 that other variables are positively correlated but have correlation value less than brand identification, brand engagement and brand loyalty. For instance, brand satisfaction is positively correlated with brand trust, brand engagement and brand loyalty has coefficient value 0.782, 0.646 and 0.776 respectively which is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

Table 1: Correlation Matrix

	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Brand Identification	1				
2	Brand Satisfaction	.545**	1			
3	Brand Trust	.457**	.782**	1		
4	Brand Engagement	.819**	.646**	.544**	1	
5	Brand Loyalty	.744**	.776**	.675**	.781**	1
	Mean	2.554	2.074	2.198	2.343	2.277
	Standard Deviation	.976	.861	1.025	.855	.925

	Alpha	.825	.863	.798	.897	.885
	** Significant at 0.01 level					

The brand identification, brand satisfaction and brand trust are regressed on brand loyalty (Table-3). The results yields  $\beta$  values of 0.451, 0.421, 0.139 ( $p < 0.01$ ) respectively. It shows that brand identification, brand satisfaction and brand trust have strong and positive impact on brand loyalty and consequently supports our hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c.

In step 1a, the analysis yielded that brand identification and brand satisfaction have significant impact on CE. It exhibits that one-unit change in independent variables; brand identification and brand satisfaction can cause 0.661 and 0.251 change in CE respectively which is significant at  $p < 0.01$ . However, brand trust turns to have insignificant relationship with CE. Therefore, our hypotheses H2a and H2b are accepted while H2c is rejected. Furthermore, it can be observed in step 2b that CE is positively related with brand loyalty ( $\beta = .234$   $p < 0.01$ ) which supports our hypothesis H3.

**Table 2: Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results**

Dependent variable	Consumer Engagement		Brand Loyalty		
	Step 1a		Step 1b	Step 2b	
Constant	.264		-.028	-.095	
<b>Independent Variables</b>					
Brand Identification	.661***		.451***	.296***	
Brand Satisfaction	.251***		.421***	.362***	
Brand Trust	.045		.139*	.129	
<b>Mediator</b>					
Consumer Engagement					.234 **

R <sup>2</sup>	.728		.756	.771
ΔR <sup>2</sup>				.015

\* Significant at 0.10 level; \*\* Significant at 0.05 level; \*\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

The mediation analysis involve four steps: first, independent variables(s) should have direct impact on mediator variable, second, independent variable(s) should have significant impact on the dependent variable and third, mediating variable of the study should have significant relationship with dependent variable and lastly, when mediator is added there must be change in dependent to accept mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). It can be observed from Table 3 in step 1a, 1b and 2b that brand identification and brand satisfaction satisfies all three conditions for mediation while accepting H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b and H3 respectively. Furthermore, the last step for mediation to take place is to check whether the relationship of dependent and independent variable is significantly decreased after adding mediating variable. In the step 2b it is clear that the β value of independent variables is significantly decreased after introducing mediating variable. For instance, β values of brand identification and brand satisfaction (0.451 and 0.421 p<0.01) have decreased (0.296 and 0.362 at p<0.01) after addition of mediator in the analysis. Thus it partially supports our Hypothesis H4, however CE does not significantly mediate the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty.

**V. Discussion and Conclusion**

The study aimed to advance the conceptualization of CE in the context of online brand communities and confirmed its three dimensional (cognitive, affective and behavioral) nature of construct. Furthermore, the online brand community engagement framework is also validated on the basis of empirical data. The findings suggest that the study empirically contributes in brand management literature by investigating relationship between consumer engagement, brand identification, brand satisfaction, brand trust and brand loyalty in the context of online brand communities in social media. The core aim of significant number of consumers (68%) in social media is to join online brand communities which offer information gathering as compared to entertainment (18%), networking (9%), and monetary incentive (5%) in Pakistan. This could be possible due to tendency of young consumer to get information through social media (API, 2015) as compared to entertainment, networking and/or monetary benefits. Conforming to prior studies in other contexts, brand identification and brand satisfaction yield significant positive relationship with consumer engagement in online brand communities (Lau & Lee, 1999; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). On the contrary, brand trust yields unexpected results with consumer engagement and brand loyalty and turns out to be in consistent with prior studies (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Lau & Lee, 1999).

CE significantly mediates the relationship between brand identification and/or brand satisfaction and brand loyalty. However, brand trust yields insignificant results with consumer engagement which show that brand trust has no relationship with CE in online brand community. Therefore, in developing consumer brand relationships brand identification and brand satisfaction has most important to be considered while involving all three dimensions of CE (cognitive, affective and behavioral).

Although, from start of this decade various studies focused on the issue to improve theoretical conceptualization of CE in online context of social media but most of the studies were limited to conceptual or qualitative nature (Aksoy et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015). Therefore, the study empirically confirms three dimensional natures of CE construct rather than uni-dimensional concept in online brand community context. The results of the study refined and validated conceptualization and dimensionality of CE in online brand community engagement perspective. In line with prior research, the study enhances conceptualization of CE as conforming three dimensions: cognitive, affective/emotional and behavioral (Brodie et al., 2011a; Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Furthermore, antecedents (brand identification, brand satisfaction and brand trust) and outcome (brand loyalty) proposed in online brand community framework (Dessart et al., 2015) are empirically tested. The results partially support online brand community framework and concluded that in social media predictors (except brand trust) and outcome (brand loyalty) have significant relationship with consumer engagement.

The study concludes that all three (cognitive, affective and behavioral) dimensions must be considered in developing CE in online brand community engagement rather than just behavioral dimension. Along with this, the study also endorses strong role of CE in developing brand loyalty in consumers based on the drivers (brand identification and brand satisfaction). Furthermore, brand identification has strong impact on CE as well as brand loyalty of consumers and highlights the importance of brand identification. Therefore, brand managers must consciously develop a strong brand identification in order to create CE and brand loyalty. Whereas, brand trust relationship needs to be investigated in future studies whether it appears insignificant in all other contexts or not.

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