Social Media Communication and Customer Loyalty with the Mediating Role of Social Customer Relationship in Retail Chain Stores in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The main aim of this study is to investigate the impact of social media communication on customer loyalty and social customer relationship and examine the mediating role of social customer relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty. An online survey was used to gather information from followers of retail chain store Facebook pages in Sri Lanka, total of 340 respondents were invited to collect the information. The proposed model was tested using structural equation modeling, and confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the reliability and validity. The main finding of this study is that the social media communication influences consumer loyalty and social customer relationships positively, while social customer relationships partially mediate the relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty among customers of retail chain stores in Sri Lanka. Retail chains use many marketing communication tools to attract and retain their customers, they should dedicate their effort to implement social media communication as one of the marketing communication media strategy for improved customer loyalty.

Keywords: Social media communication, social customer relationship, Customer loyalty, Marketing communication strategy

1. Introduction

Businesses place a high priority on getting closer to their consumers. To do so, today's companies are putting a lot of effort into developing social media communications (Faiz & Diya, 2019). It turns out customers much more pragmatic. Social media, such as social networks or microblogs, are gradually replacing conventional media, and increases the emerging marketing opportunities by communication with customers in a more efficient way (Michael et al., 2019) . This trend of customers being social media fans of brands and using social media as a source of knowledge about products and services is growing. This leads to the conclusion that, in addition to conventional marketing communication tools, social media has a significant effect on business performance. Companies must design experiences that provide tangible value in exchange for consumers' time, interest, endorsement, and data in order to fully realize the potential of social media (Malthouse et al., 2013). According to Elena, (2016), customer purchasing decisions are influenced by social media: Customers use social media to study goods or services they are interested in purchasing. Companies are using social media to expand their contact with customers, and the result is improved customer engagement.

Delafrooz et al., (2017) stated that with increased use of social media throughout the world, businesses are facing very high burden to engage with their customers. This centre of customer activity is increasingly virtual these days, residing inside a social media or social networking platform. Consider how quickly consumers and companies alike are adopting social media for their communication with one another. According to Digital 2021, Sri Lanka report, there were 7.90 million social media users in Sri Lanka in January, 2021, which is equal to the 36.8% of the total population and the number of social media users increased by 1.5 million between 2020 and 2021. Around 7.8 million people are accessing social media using their mobile phones. According to the Digital 2021 Sri Lanka report around 7 million people are using facebook, 1.3 million are using Instagram, 3.8 million are using messenger, 1.3 million are using linkedin and around 187.2 thousands are using twitter, accordingly some Sri Lankans use multiple accounts and different social media platforms.

Since social media enables customers to connect with hundreds or even thousands of other consumers around the world, companies are no longer the only point of communication for customers to get to know about the market offerings (Nikunj et al., 2017). Furthermore, users are primarily using social media to search for information rather than conventional media such as television, radio, or magazines (Rem & Mesut, 2012). They consider social media to be a more reliable source of knowledge than the conventional marketing messaging tools used by businesses (Rosman & Stuhura, 2013; Stuhura, 2018). Internet users believe user feedback on social media platforms, this change lead marketers to expect brand communication and to shift away from being exclusively created by the business and toward being increasingly generated by customers themselves through so-called user-generated social media communication. This is critical, because the social media communication developed by the customers may pose significant challenge to the firm-created social media communication

network (Travis et al., 2018).

According to the current research, Marzouk (2016) discovered that social media influences consumer loyalty toward products, and that social media aids in the development of loyalty and customer retention from the employee's perspective, Furthermore, social media is regarded as a powerful customer service channel (Mbango & Phiri, 2015; Malthouse et al., 2013; Michael et al., 2019). According to Carolyn &Gautam (2011), brand communities built through social networking websites have a significant effect on customer loyalty to brands, and that building a brand community through social media websites can improve customer satisfaction. However, the impact of social media communication on social customer relationship on customer loyalty as well as the mediating role of social customer relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty was not studied and there were few studies in Sri Lanka that attempted to examine the impact of social media communication on customer loyalty. The main aim of this study is to examine the effect of social media communication on customer loyalty and social customer relationship, as well as, to assess the mediating role of social customer relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty among Sri Lankans.

2.   Literature review
2.1 Social Media Communication
According to Elena (2015), Social media is a game-changing medium that enables people, businesses, and various groups from all over the world to communicate, share, and exchange knowledge and ideas in an engaging manner. Carolyn & Gautam (2011) stated that clients may discuss their online feedback, suggestions, supports or disagrees, or disappointment with various aspects such as product quality or customer service on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. When we are talking about social media, we refer to: social networks (Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram), WeChat, Tiktok, Skype, Snapchat, Wblogs, forum, youtube and yahoo answers, etc…

Social networking is becoming a more common way to attract consumers and communicate with them (Delafrooz., 2012). Many internet users are active on social media, and a lack of a social media presence for a company will immediately make a negative impact on customers (Faiz et al., 2019: Michael, 2019).

Since it has been extensively used in marketing operation in terms of advertisement and transaction by different types of companies, social media has become an important part of our everyday lives. It's a fantastic way to share knowledge and ideas while still engaging with others (Nikunj et al., 2017; Rem & Mesut., 2012). For many businesses, social media remains a valuable electronic resource that, when properly used, may yield substantial results. It aids businesses in growing consumer interaction with business activities that may be aimed at attracting more consumers for the purpose of increasing sales (Saputra, 2018; Travis et al., 2018).

In service, exchange, and manufacturing industries, social media is an important tool for strategic formation. In addition to dealing with customers and communicating with them, (Michael et al., 2019). In this regard, numerous companies have used a variety of digital platforms to build preferences and aspirations among consumers in order to increase company efficiency and encourage brand recognition. (Faiz et al., 2019).

2.2 Social Customer Relationship
Companies must adapt to this change by implementing a strategy called social customer relationship management that acknowledges that rather than handling customers, the business's function is to promote collaborative interactions and dialogue that customers appreciate (Carolyn & Gautam, 2011).

Customer relationship management is all about getting to know the customers and communicating with them. Communication in this age of emerging technology involves using social media (Malthouse, 2013; Nikunj et al.,2017). Social media is essentially an interactive diary of likes and dislikes, desires and dissatisfactions. Companies should respond to the growth of social media in order to get closer to their customers, whether that means blogging, Facebook, or Twitter for combating against competition (Elena, 2016).

Traditional customer relationship management techniques face interesting challenges by using social media as a platform for customer interaction. Customer relations approach is designed to manage customer relationships in order to achieve the most value from customers over lifetime, which is facilitated by processes and technology of the firm (Travis et al., 2018). These strategies usually concentrate on the organizational responses required to handle the customer. Companies, on the other hand, no longer have control of their consumers' social media interactions. Consumers and their increasingly influential virtual networks are now influencing the discussion, which, because of their unparalleled immediacy and reach, may trump a company's marketing, sales, and public relations efforts (Nyadzayo & Khajehzadeh, 2016; Nikunj et al., 2017).

2.3 Customer Loyalty
Customer loyalty is described as a customer's consistent purchase of products from a collection of options over a period of time. Customer loyalty, in the conventional sense, was often thought to be linked to repeat buying conduct. Repetitive purchase behaviour will not be possible for certain items, such as buying a house or a car

(Jothi Krishnan, 2020). In these cases, attitudinal customer loyalty is calculated, which refers to how customers feel about the product they bought and how likely they are to recommend the brand to others. The most critical measure of brand value is typically customer loyalty. The explanation for this is that loyalty grows after a purchase and shows a customer's continued patronage over time (Jothi Krishnan, 2020); Malthouse et al., 2013).

3. Research methodology
3.1 Conceptual framework and hypotheses development
According to previous research, a company should use its communication to shape stakeholders' interpretations and expectations in order to establish a trustworthy partnership (Malthouse et al., 2013). Via communication mechanisms specifically designed to create a trustworthy partnership, companies may communicate with a wide variety of stakeholders, both current and future and help to maintain the brand image (Nyadzayo & Khajehzadeh, 2016; Rem & Mesut, 2012). Corporate communication can influence consumer relationships, according to the literature, because a firm's chosen communications allow stakeholders to understand the firm's products, and it positively loads the perception of the brand, leading to an overall positive assessment of the company's brand (Saputra, 2018; Delafrooz et al., 2017).

The increased use of interactive social media allows stakeholders to engage with one another, disseminate their own messages about a company, and, ultimately, challenge brand reputations (Bruhn, 2012). Brand reputations, on the other hand, are easily harmed. A negative message about an organization could easily and quickly spread to a vast number of people all over the world using social media (Michael et al., 2019).

According to Malthouse et al., (2013), Customer Relationship Management benefits from the prevalence of social media because it provides an atmosphere that makes it easier for consumers to communicate with businesses and facilitates connections that were previously ignored by customers. When social media is combined with customer relationship management, tasks like answering questions and providing technical support become simpler. Because of the ease, important information collected from consumers in the form of surveys and other methods of data collection receives a higher response rate when combined with social media (Faiz et al., 2019).

Social networking has a major impact on CRM in a variety of ways. Companies can see greater social media impacts as these channels evolve and more sophisticated technology that easily incorporates other elements of CRM becomes available (Carolyn & Gautam 2011; Elena, 2015). Given the interplay and mediating function of social consumer relationships, Figure 1 depicts the direct and future transmission of online social media communication across a variety of empirical constructs towards customer loyalty. Hence the visual representations and the network of the proposed constructs are given in Figure 1
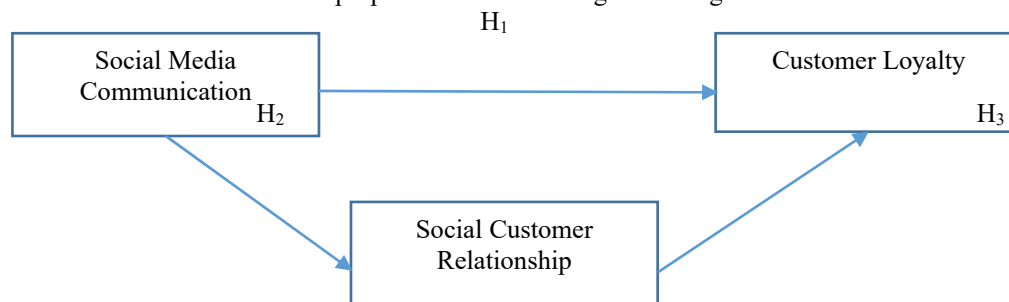

Figure 1: Conceptual framework
Based on the above literature review, following hypotheses were developed.
H1: Social media communication positively influence customer loyalty
H2: Social media communication positively influence social customer relationship
H3: Social customer relationship have positive impact on customer loyalty
H4: Social customer relationship mediates the relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty

3.2 Population, sampling and data collection
All of the other measurements and operations used in the study were adapted from previous research. The literature was used to develop measures of social media contact (SMC) were adopted from (Zillur et al., 2017; Rem & Mesut, 2012; Rosman & Stuhura, 2013), social customer relationship (SCR), and customer loyalty (CL). Social customer relationship dimensions were adopted from (Carolyn & Gautam , 2011; Elena, 2015; Miloslava et al., 2019) and the customer loyalty dimensios were adopted using the dimensios proposed by (Delafrooz et al., 2017; Faiz et al., 2019; Jothi Krishnan 2020), with the exception of the demographic profile. It's important to remember that the measurement items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree."

Three hundred fifty existing Facebook fans of retail chain store pages were invited to participate in our online survey. These were people who had posted their views, emotions, or stories to particular brand groups on social media. In addition, the participants were familiar with texting, sharing images, and posting links to discuss or respond to others.

4. Analysis of Data

4.1 Analysis of respondents' demographic characteristics

The age of respondents ranged from 20 to more than 60 years, according to the findings of the descriptive study. The majority of respondents are between the ages of 30 and 40, with 35.25%, followed by respondents between the ages of 40 and 50, with 31.80%. There are 245 female respondents (70%) and 105 male respondents (30%). The sample size was also examined in terms of educational level. There were 180 people who said they had advanced level qualification (51%). Then came respondents with bachelor's degrees 70 people (20%) and diplomas and higher diplomas 53 persons (15%). 47 people are with bachelor's and postgraduate degrees (14%). According to the occupation, the majority of respondents were 190 private sector workers (54%), 120 government employees (34%), and 40 entrepreneurs operating small and medium-sized companies (12%). The majority of people earn between 50,000 and 80, 000 rupees per month (70%) and 15% earn more than 100, 000 rupees per month.

4.2 Normality test for data

Each construct had six elements, each of which was graded on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with a 1 indicating strong disagreement and a 5 indicating strong agreement with the statements.

Table 1.1: Normality test results

	Social Media Communication	Social Relationship	Customer	Customer Loyalty
Mean	3.670	4.130		3.862
Std. Deviation	0.551	0.614		0.623
Skewness	0.815	0.750		0.820

According to the above study of normality measure, all of the variables' mean values are very close to 4 or 5. This indicates that the responses are on the same line in terms of the variables. Consumer loyalty has the highest standard deviation of 0.623, indicating that there is a greater difference in customer loyalty. For social media communication, the minimum deviation is 0.551. This demonstrates that there is no major variation in social media communication. All of the skewness coefficients are between -1 and +1, indicating that the data are normally distributed.

4.3 Measurement of model; Reliability and validity of measures

Cronbach's alpha is a simple measure for determining a composite score's reliability, or internal consistency which was used here to determine the quality of items in each variable. Internal consistency was resolved before the variables were operationalized. The Cronbach Alpha was used to determine the degree of internal accuracy of an instrument and how well it corresponds to other instruments. Cronbach's alpha of.70 and above is to be good,.80 and above is considered to be better, and.90 and above is considered to be excellent (Sekeran & Bougue, 2013). According to the reliability analysis, cronbachs'alpha coefficient of all the 18 items are more than 0.8, this indicates that there is a higher internal consistency between the items of each variables. Accordingly Social media communication 0.825, social customer relationship 0.903 and customer loyalty was 0.910.

The confirmatory factor analysis was measured in this study using a structural equation model to estimate the overall fit of the proposed model. The primary goal of this measurement of the proposed model is to determine convergent and discriminant validity in preparation for further model analysis (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent validity refers to the likelihood that all indicators in a measurement model can validate with each other (Wang & Wang, 2012). According to (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), standard factor loadings should be statistically significant and greater than the minimum value of 0.60, composite reliabilities should be larger than 0.80, and values of average variance extracted for all measurement items should be more than 0.50. In order to assess convergent validity, all factor loading of items in the measurement model are between 0.76-0.91, composite reliabilities are between 0.81-0.93, and AVE values are between 0.743-0.861. As a consequence, these findings suggest that the measurement model follows the convergent validity criterion.

Table 1.2: Confirmatory Facto Analysis

Variable	Measurement Items	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Social Media Communication	SMC1	0.881	0.931	0.743
	SMC2	0.871		
	SMC3	0.851		
	SMC4	0.910		
	SMC5	0.872		
	SMC6	0.832		
Social Customer Relationship	SCR1	0.841	0.914	0.861
	SCR2	0.825		
	SCR3	0.863		
	SCR4	0.764		
	SCR5	0.791		
	SCR6	0.867		
Customer Loyalty	CL1	0.914	0.817	0.853
	CL2	0.912		
	CL3	0.911		
	CL4	0.819		
	CL5	0.821		
	CL6	0.868		

The discriminant validity is also evaluated in this analysis. Discriminant validity, according to Kline (2010), refers to the fact that all items used to calculate constructs do not estimate potentially unrelated constructs. The discriminant validity is assessed using the Fornell & Larcker (1981) typology, as in other studies. The average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct should be greater than the squared correlation between the same constructs and any other constructs in the model used (Wang et al., 2014). The square root of average variance extracted is greater than the correlation of constructs, as shown in Table 1.3, confirming discriminant validity in this analysis of data collected.

Table 1.3 Discriminant validity analysis

Variable	SMC	SCR	CL
SMC	0.861		
SCR	0.721 ***	0.927	
CL	0.682 ***	0.836 ***	0.923

The analysis in this study also evaluated the model's fitness by calculating, absolute fit measures: $X2/df = 2.642$, GFI = 0.851, RMSEA = 0.041. Incremental fit measures: NFI = 0.911, AGFI = 0.921, CFI = 0.936. According to Hair et al., (1998) cut off values of these measures for: $X^2/df \leq 2: \leq 5$, GFI ≥ 0.90, RMSEA $\leq .06.$: NFI ≥ 0.90, AGFI ≥ 0.90, CFI ≥ 0.90. According to the above analysis, the measures implies that all values meet acceptable standards of fit indices, indicating that the model is fit and hence appropriate for testing the hypotheses.

4.4 Path analysis and hypothesis testing

The results of the structural model using standardized path coefficients to display the relationship between variables are shown in Table 1.4. The first hypothesis (H_1) proposes that social media communication influences customer loyalty in a positive way. The impact of social media communication on customer loyalty is 0.722 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that hypothesis H_1 is supported. Likewise, hypotheses H_2 indicates that social media communication positively influence social customer relationship ($\beta = 0.731$), and H_3 states that social customer relationship positively influence customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.554$). All these relationships are statistically significant at ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1.4 Hypothesis testing – Direct Effect

Hypotheses	Estimates (β)	P – Value	SE	Results
H_1: SMC - - - - - - -> CL	0.722	0.001	0.035	Accepted
H_2: SMC - - - - - - -> SCR	0.731	0.001	0.056	Accepted
H_3: SCR - - - - - - -> CL	0.554	0.000	0.040	Accepted

Using social customer relationship as a mediating variable, Table 1.5 shows the indirect impact of social media communication on customer loyalty. The effect of social media communication on customer loyalty is reduced from 0.722 to 436, but it is still significant at $p < 0.05$, As a result, it seems that social customer

relationship partially mediates the relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty.

Table 1.5 Hypothesis testing – Indirect Effect

Hypotheses	Estimates (β)	P – Value	SE	Results
H$_1$: SMC - - - - - - -> CL	0.436	0.000	0.035	Significant
H$_2$: SMC - - - - - - -> SCR	0.412	0.001	0.056	Significant
H$_3$: SCR - - - - - - -> CL	0.468	0.000	0.040	Significant

5. Findings and discussions

The findings of study have raises concern in three ways. Firstly, social media communication significantly and positively contribute to customer loyalty of chain stores in Sri Lanka which is a combination of marketing communication excellence, retention of customers leading to financial achievements as stated by Carolyn & Gautam , (2011); Delafrooz et al., (2017). Secondly, mediating variable social customer relationship has also demonstrated positive and significant relationship with customer loyalty (Faiz et al., 2019) in the chain stores in Sri Lanka. Finally, the effect of social media communication on customer loyalty is partially mediated by social customer relationship.

The study's findings show how customer loyalty is influenced by social media communication practices through the mediating function of social customer relationships. Few studies have been conducted to investigate the impact of social media communication on consumer loyalty (Faiz et al., 2019; Miloslava et al., 2019; Muhammed & Peter, 2019). This study propose a theoretical model to bridge the basic gap and confirms that social media communication practices not only directly influence the relationship with customer loyalty but also indirectly influence the relationship through establishing the mediating role of social customer relationship to some extent.

This study indicates that social media messages brings better financial performances in terms of improved consumer satisfaction, implying that engaging in social media communications reaps more benefits for businesses. (Zillur et al., 2017; Rem & Mesut, 2012) and thus positive customer loyalty results could be attributed to a firm's level of participation in social media networking initiatives for better customer communication and relationship building. The study's results support previous research that links social media communication practices to customer loyalty. More precisely, it is investigated whether social media communication practices are directly linked to an intermediate variable known as social customer relationship, which is then positively related to customer loyalty.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to see how social media communication affects customer loyalty in chain stores in Sri Lanka, as well as the mediating role of social customer relationships. The study finds a positive relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty, and that the relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty is partly mediated by social customer relationships. The study also discovered that not only does social media communication have a significant and direct impact on customer loyalty, but that intermediate indicator called social customer relationships have a significant and direct impact on retail chain store customer loyalty.

The objectives were discussed in this study and reiterated in accordance with the expectations. The study advises marketers to identify social media networking behaviours and then adopt them with fair expectations that they will be in line with their organizations' marketing communication strategies. In addition, chain stores should work to develop their social media networking skills as a foundation for marketing communication strategies. As markets become more competitive, chain stores have resorted to reducing advertising spending in order to stay competitive. chains should consider putting their marketing communication expenditures into social media communications, which is a low-cost advertising tool that generates customer loyalty.

Retailers should focus their marketing communications efforts on improving their experiences and relationships with consumers by using appropriate and efficient communication platforms. Customers' relationships with chain stores should be prioritized. chain stores should develop and expand social media networking practices that improve customer interactions as a means of strengthening and satisfying customer relationships. As a way of promoting the positive networking message, chain stores should search for celebrities to support their marketing communication messages.

7. Direction for future research

There are limitation in this study that calls for future researches. Although the proposed research model was focused on literature review, the results of this study were solely based on the Sri Lankan context of chain store industry. The results of this study which may differ in other countries due to differences in structure, culture, and technological processes beyond this small sample size. Our research was restricted to the retail chain store

industry. As a result, extrapolating and extending the findings of this study to other industries or geographic locations should be done with utmost care.

Future research could look at how social customer relationships affect the relationship between social media communication and customer loyalty in other industries. Given the variations in geographical settings and location advantages, future research could look at whether the idea of chain loyalty is feasible in rural areas or areas outside of cities. Situations where consumers may repurchase from the same chain store due to situational factors are among the issues to investigate. +This would eliminate the risk of false allegiance.

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