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Research Article

The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Image and Customer Loyalty Among Generation Z Consumers in India

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become important environments in which consumers encounter brands, evaluate product claims, observe peer opinions and form expectations about future purchases. However, visibility and engagement do not necessarily produce a favourable brand image or customer loyalty. This conceptual paper examines how perceived social media marketing activities may shape brand image and how brand image may, in turn, contribute to customer loyalty among Generation Z consumers in India. Drawing on customer-based brand equity, consumer loyalty and social influence perspectives, the paper develops a framework linking five perceived social media marketing dimensions—entertainment, interaction, trend relevance, customisation and electronic word-of-mouth—to brand image and loyalty. The framework proposes that social media marketing activities contribute to brand image when content is useful, credible, consistent and responsive, and that a favourable brand image supports preference, recommendation and repurchase intentions. It also identifies authenticity, platform use, product category and consumer involvement as boundary conditions. The paper's contribution is a context-sensitive set of propositions and a research agenda for testing the model across India's diverse consumer settings. Practical implications emphasise meaningful interaction, transparent creator partnerships and outcome measures beyond reach and like. The propositions remain to be tested empirically.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media have changed the relationship between brands and consumers. Brand communication is no longer confined to advertising created and controlled by the firm. It now sits alongside customer reviews, creator content, informal recommendations, product demonstrations and public responses to complaints. These interactions can make brand information more accessible, but they also expose brands to scrutiny and competing interpretations. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as a set of internet-based applications that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content. From a marketing perspective, this means that brand meaning is influenced by both company communication and consumer participation.

For Generation Z consumers, social media may function as a discovery channel, a source of product information and a place to assess whether a brand fits their needs or identity. Yet it would be too simple to assume that all young consumers behave alike. Age cohorts contain differences in income, education, region, language, platform preference and purchasing power. The Indian setting adds further diversity, making it important to frame Generation Z as a specific study population rather than a uniform market segment.

Existing studies provide a basis for linking social media marketing with brand equity and consumer outcomes. Kim and Ko (2012) examined entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation and word-of-mouth in relation to customer-equity outcomes. Godey et al. (2016) reported relationships between social media marketing efforts, brand equity, brand image and consumer responses in a multi-country luxury-brand study that included Indian consumers. Zollo et al. (2020) examined consumer benefits and brand experience as mechanisms connecting social media marketing and brand equity. These studies support further investigation but do not, by themselves, establish that the same relationships apply across product categories and Generation Z consumers in India.

This paper develops a conceptual model centred on brand image as a possible link between perceived social media marketing activities and customer loyalty. It asks: (1) How might social media marketing activities shape brand image? (2) Why might brand image be associated with loyalty? (3) Under what conditions might these relationships be stronger or weaker?

2. Conceptual foundations

2.1 Social media marketing activities

Social media marketing should not be equated with posting frequency or paid reach. Consumers experience it through the content they see, the usefulness of the information, the opportunity to interact, the relevance of material to current interests and the opinions shared by other users. Kim and Ko (2012) identify entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation and word-of-mouth as salient dimensions. These dimensions are useful for conceptual work because they describe perceived qualities of marketing activity rather than platform metrics alone.

Entertainment can attract attention and make brand communication more memorable. Interaction may signal responsiveness and reduce the distance between the firm and its audience. Trend relevance can make a brand appear current, while customisation may improve perceived fit when it is transparent and not intrusive. Electronic word-of-mouth can provide social information, although its value depends on credibility, independence and perceived similarity between the reviewer and the consumer. These dimensions may work together, but their effects need not be identical across brands or product categories.

2.2 Brand image and customer-based brand equity

Brand image concerns the associations consumers hold about a brand. Keller (1993) situates brand image within customer-based brand equity, emphasising the importance of brand knowledge and the associations linked to a brand in memory. Associations may concern perceived quality, reliability, value, distinctiveness, personality or relevance to a consumer's life. Social media content can reinforce these associations when it is consistent with product performance and customer experience. In contrast, a mismatch between promotional claims and public complaints may weaken them.

2.3 Customer loyalty

Customer loyalty is more complex than a single repeat purchase or a positive response to a post. Oliver (1999) treats loyalty as a commitment that develops over time. In a survey, loyalty is often represented through intentions to repurchase, preference for the brand and willingness to recommend it. These measures are useful but should not be confused with verified purchasing behaviour. A consumer may express an intention to repurchase and later choose a competitor because of price, availability or a change in need.

2.4 Social influence and electronic word-of-mouth

Consumer decisions are influenced by social information, community participation and perceived credibility. Hajli (2015) links social-commerce constructs with purchase intention, while Algesheimer et al. (2005) show how brand-community participation can involve social influence. These perspectives suggest that social media marketing may operate not only through brand-created messages but also through the surrounding social environment. Nevertheless, recommendations are not automatically trustworthy; consumers may discount content that appears sponsored, repetitive or inconsistent with their experience.

3. Research gap and contribution

The literature establishes that social media marketing activities can be associated with brand equity and consumer responses, but three issues remain relevant for a focused Generation Z study in India. First, evidence from luxury brands or specific consumer groups should not be generalised uncritically to everyday categories. Second, platform engagement measures such as likes and views do not necessarily reveal whether

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consumers hold a more favourable brand image or intend to remain loyal. Third, India's regional, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity makes context and boundary conditions important.

The contribution of this paper is therefore not a claim that the proposed relationships are new in every setting. Instead, it integrates established constructs into a testable framework for a clearly defined population and identifies conditions under which the relationships may differ. The paper also distinguishes intended loyalty from actual behaviour and treats authenticity and platform context as factors requiring direct empirical examination.

4. Proposed conceptual framework

The framework proposes a sequence in which perceived social media marketing activities are associated with brand image, and brand image is associated with customer loyalty. A direct path from social media marketing activities to loyalty is retained because content may influence purchase consideration or recommendation without operating entirely through brand image. The framework can be tested using regression or structural equation modelling, provided the measures are appropriate and sample size is justified.

Antecedent: perceived social media marketing activities (entertainment, interaction, trend relevance, customisation and electronic word-of-mouth).

Proposed mediator: brand image (favourable, distinctive and credible brand associations).

Outcome: customer loyalty intentions (repurchase intention, preference and recommendation intention).

Potential boundary conditions: perceived authenticity, product involvement, platform type, product category, region and prior brand experience.

5. Propositions

Proposition 1: More favourable perceptions of a brand's social media marketing activities are associated with a more favourable brand image.

Proposition 2: A more favourable brand image is associated with stronger customer loyalty intentions.

Proposition 3: Brand image provides an indirect pathway through which perceived social media marketing activities are associated with customer loyalty intentions.

Proposition 4: Perceived authenticity strengthens the association between social media marketing activities and brand image; content perceived as misleading or overly promotional may weaken this association.

Proposition 5: The strength of the proposed relationships varies by platform and product category, so an average effect should not be assumed to apply equally to all consumer contexts.

6. DISCUSSION

The framework treats social media marketing as a relationship and information environment rather than a simple broadcast tool. Content that is entertaining may attract attention, but attention alone is unlikely to create durable loyalty. Useful product information, credible recommendations and appropriate responses to questions may be more directly relevant to the associations consumers form about a brand. This reasoning is consistent with research connecting social media marketing activities with brand equity and brand-related outcomes (Godey et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012).

Brand image is proposed as a central but not exclusive pathway. Consumers can develop favourable brand associations through repeated, consistent experiences across product use, service and communication. Conversely, positive social content may have little effect if product quality is poor or the brand fails to resolve customer problems. This suggests that social media strategy should be coordinated with the wider customer experience.

The framework also cautions against treating Generation Z as a homogeneous group. A short-video campaign may work differently for an inexpensive personal-care product than for a high-involvement electronics purchase. Local language, creator credibility, affordability and access to customer support may shape how content is interpreted. These are empirical questions, not assumptions that can be settled by age labels alone.

7. Managerial implications

Prioritise usefulness and credibility: explain product benefits, limitations, pricing and practical use rather than relying only on trend-based posts.

Treat interaction as service: answer questions clearly and resolve complaints instead of using generic replies that do not address the issue.

Use creator partnerships transparently: select creators with relevant audiences, disclose commercial relationships and avoid unsupported claims.

Measure outcomes at multiple levels: distinguish reach and engagement from brand-image measures, recommendation intentions and actual repeat-purchase behaviour.

Coordinate social communication with product quality and after-sales service. Online promises that are not supported by experience can damage image and loyalty.

Respect privacy and consumer autonomy. Personalisation should be proportionate, understandable and consistent with applicable law and platform rules.

8. Research agenda

A first empirical study could survey adults aged 18–27 who use social media and have interacted with or researched a consumer brand during the previous three months. The sampling plan should define the population, recruit beyond a single institution if national claims are intended, and document regional and demographic coverage. A later study could repeat measurement over time to assess whether brand image predicts subsequent behaviour. Experiments could manipulate message authenticity or response quality, while qualitative interviews could explore how consumers interpret sponsored content and peer recommendations.

Future work should test measurement equivalence across language groups and platforms before comparing group

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coefficients. Researchers should report the exact questionnaire, item adaptations, reliability and validity evidence, missing-data handling, effect sizes and confidence intervals. If possible and ethically permitted, self-reported intentions should be compared with consented behavioural measures.

9. Limitations

This paper is conceptual and presents propositions rather than empirical findings. The framework simplifies complex relationships and does not include every possible factor, such as price fairness, product satisfaction, trust, brand attachment or switching costs. Its relevance must be assessed through empirical tests. The proposed relationships should not be interpreted as causal until temporal order and plausible alternative explanations have been addressed.

10. CONCLUSION

Social media marketing can provide brands with opportunities to inform, entertain and interact with consumers, but its value depends on how consumers interpret these activities and how well they match the brand's actual performance. This paper proposes that perceived social media marketing activities are associated with brand image and that brand image is associated with customer loyalty intentions among Generation Z consumers in India. It also identifies authenticity, platform and category as important boundary conditions. The model offers a practical starting point for empirical work, while making clear that the propositions remain to be tested.

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