

# CREATING BRAND LOVE AND BRAND EQUITY THROUGH THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ACTIVITIES ON BRAND ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND INTIMACY

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# **CREATING BRAND LOVE AND BRAND EQUITY THROUGH THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ACTIVITIES ON BRAND ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND INTIMACY**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of social media marketing (SMM) activities on brand engagement, brand intimacy, and brand love. While previous studies have examined the effects of SMM activities on brand love and brand equity, brand engagement and brand intimacy have rarely been examined in the SMM literature. To fill this research gap, this study draws from Social Identity Theory and seeks to explore the effect of SMM activities on brand engagement and brand intimacy and how these two dimensions' impact brand love. Data were collected from 453 consumers. The findings show that SMM activities have positive effect on brand intimacy, brand engagement and brand love, and both brand intimacy and brand engagement has an impact on brand love. Finally, parallel to the literature, the effect of brand love on brand equity is confirmed.

**Keywords:** *Social media marketing activities, brand engagement, brand intimacy*

**Track:** *Consumer behavior*

## **1. Introduction**

Social media platforms increase the interaction between consumers and businesses (Machado, Vacas-de-Carvalho, Azar, André & dos Santos, 2019). Consequently, social media has led businesses to interact with more consumers and enable consumer engagement (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, Rokka, Aiello, Donvito & Singh, 2016). Recently, research on social media marketing has increasingly appeared in the literature. The theoretical framework of social media marketing activities is discussed in the literature in terms of five dimensions: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth communication (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Previous studies on social media marketing activities have examined its effects, mainly on brand love and brand equity (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Machado et al., 2019; Kim & Ko, 2012). Unlike previous studies, this study aims to contribute to the literature by investigating the effect of social media marketing (SMM) activities on brand engagement and brand intimacy as well, as Liu, Shin and Burns (2019) state that SMM activities are antecedent of engagement. Moreover, brand engagement can increase brand love (Machado et al., 2019; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), and brand love is strengthened by brand intimacy (Almubarak, Pervan, & Johnson, 2018). Therefore, the study enhances our understanding of how SMM activities affect brand engagement and brand intimacy and how these two factors impact brand love to create brand equity.

This study is built on Social Identity Theory, which provides guidance in explaining consumer behavior as it examines the social communities in which individuals feel a sense of belonging. By joining social communities, consumers have the opportunity to know to get to know themselves and to exchange information and experience by interacting with other group members (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert 2010). Moreover, information processing is catalyzed by brand intimacy to enhance consumer identity (Donavan, Janda & Maxham, 2015). When a consumer with low brand intimacy has little knowledge of the brand, he or she will be more prone to rely on his or her social identity (Donavan, Janda & Maxham, 2015). Through social media, consumers become involved in brands' communities, identify brands with their own identities, and interact with brands (Lam et al., 2010). In recent years, the rapidly growing brand communities reveal the brand-consumer relationship through the personal identity of the individual and his/her social identity as a member of the brand community. Earlier research emphasizes that the social identity theory provides a basis for brands to establish a strong bond with customers based on their social identity (Machado et al., 2019).

In this study, we try to find out whether SMM activities will influence brand engagement, brand intimacy and brand love. As the social media becomes more important every day, it is necessary to understand the effect of SMM activities on these dimensions as it was important on businesses' performance. As the earlier research studied on the relationship among brand engagement, brand love, brand intimacy and brand equity (Almubarak et al., 2018; Wallace, Buil & de Chernatony, 2014; Sarkar & Sreejesh, 2014), our study tries to fill the gap by relating social media activities as antecedent to these variables. The study also examines the effect of brand intimacy on brand engagement relating to social media, which has been rarely seen in marketing literature.

## **2. Hypothesis Development**

Entertainment motivates consumer engagement in fun environments in virtual brand communities (Liu et al., 2019). Ashley and Tuten (2015) point out that through interaction, a brand becomes a part of the consumer's own identity, and interaction between the consumer and the brand can deepen the consumer-brand relationship. Consumers participating in social media platforms provide the opportunity to find the latest and quickest information (Godey et al., 2016). Social media ensures customized information, which provides an opportunity to reduce misunderstandings and prejudice against brands by creating a platform to exchange ideas and information among people online (Kim & Ko, 2012). Through consumer engagement, consumers proactively share their individual experiences and perceived value regarding a brand or business openly and mutually through dialogue (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). Based on the discussion above, the following hypothesis is proposed.

***H<sub>1</sub>: Social media marketing activities have positive impact on brand engagement.***

Brand intimacy, which is developed based on the feelings of intimacy among individuals, can be expressed as the positive feelings of a consumer towards a brand (Almubarak et al., 2018). Through brand intimacy, consumers establish an emotional affinity toward brands. When brands are active in social media, they are able to express themselves to larger masses, and consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interaction with the brand increases, thus creating brand intimacy (Almubarak et al., 2018). When SMM activities increase consumers' interactions, sharing their knowledge and experiences through customization, consumers' positive views of the brand increase (Godey et al., 2016). Through word-of-mouth marketing, the consumer gets to know the brand, thus increasing his or her affinity toward it (Labrecque, 2014). Based on studies in the literature, the following hypothesis has been developed.

***H<sub>2</sub>: Social media marketing activities have positive impact on brand intimacy.***

Brand love is defined as the positive attitude of the consumer towards a brand; in other words, it is defined as a state of passionate emotional attachment (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and improves the relationship between the consumer and the brand (Albert, Merunka & Valette-Florence, 2008). Brand love leads the consumer to actively engage in the brand (Islam & Rahman, 2016). Therefore, nowadays, businesses focus on developing brand love to create consumer engagement and establish long-term relationships with consumers (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). Based on our study, the following hypothesis was developed.

***H<sub>3</sub>: Social media marketing activities have positive impact on brand love.***

Intimacy, which is one type of human relationship, is defined as the sense of closeness and commitment of an individual to a person in a relationship (Kozinets, 2014). Brand intimacy develops similarly, and the consumer's feeling of intimacy towards the brand leads the consumer to seek to know more about the brand and to interact with the brand, as the success of an enterprise depends on its ability to establish close relationships between consumers and brands (Turri, Smith & Kemp, 2013). Businesses develop consumer and brand intimacy through social media brand communities. Brand intimacy improves consumer engagement, increases the interaction between business and consumer, and ensures successful relationships (Kozinets, 2014). In addition, Graffigna and Gambetti (2015), in their studies, include brand intimacy among the emotional components of consumer brand engagement. For these reasons, the following hypothesis has been established.

***H<sub>4</sub>: Brand intimacy has a positive impact on brand engagement.***

Through consumer engagement, consumers who feel love toward a brand share their experiences with the brand, influence other consumers through WOM, and develop re-purchase intentions and long-term brand loyalty (Brodie, Ilic, Juric & Hollebeek, 2013). Consumers who follow blogs through social media platforms and become members of virtual communities increase their engagement through their interactions with brands have positive feelings towards the brand (Machado et al., 2019; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Based on the discussion above, the following hypothesis has been developed.

***H<sub>5</sub>: Brand engagement has a positive impact on brand love.***

Almubarak et al. (2018) state that brand love is strengthened by brand intimacy. Through brand intimacy, businesses understand consumers and thus are able to develop their marketing strategies and communication programs accordingly (Albert et al., 2008). Considering that brand love is highly influenced by intimacy, businesses need to develop brand intimacy to create brand love (Heinrich, Bauer & Mühl, 2008). Intimacy largely stems

from emotions (Sarkar, Ponnampalani & Murthy, 2012). Therefore, since love and passion are known to increase as intimacy and affinity increase, the following hypothesis was developed.

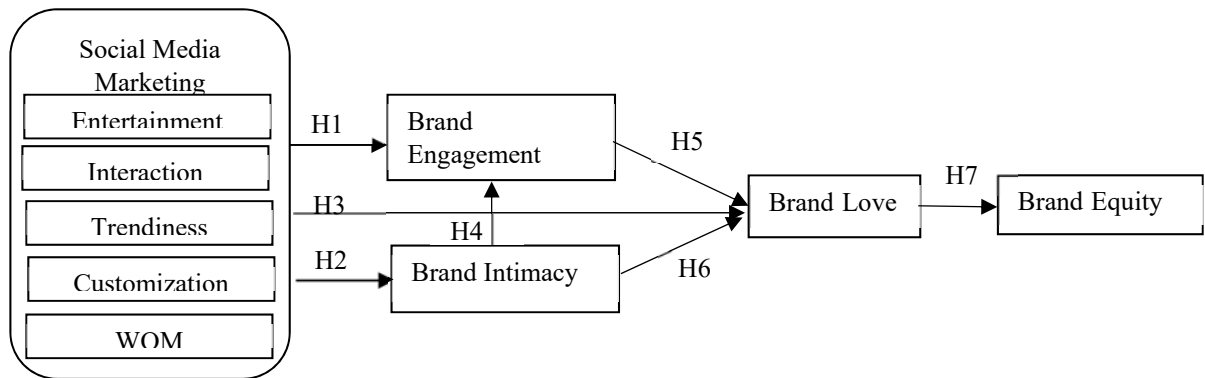
**H<sub>6</sub>:** *Brand intimacy has a positive impact on brand love.*

Earlier studies show that brand love affects brand loyalty, intention to buy, and re-purchase intention (Islam & Rahman, 2016; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Moreover, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) found that the impact of brand love on brand loyalty is positive. Similarly, Machado et al. (2019) found that brand love affects brand equity positively. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed.

**H<sub>7</sub>:** *Brand love has a positive impact on brand equity.*

According to the hypotheses and literature review presented above, we propose the following research model.

**Figure 1:** Research Model



## Methodology

### Sample and Data Collection

We used Prolific Academic to gather the data from the UK, using online survey design. We preferred to gather the data via Prolific Academic because the system provides a wide range of demographics, and participants are diverse. Respondents had to be the residents of the UK, over 18 years old, and social media users. We first asked the respondents to keep particular brands in their mind then fill the questionnaire. We used 7 point Likert scale to gather the data (ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree). At the end of the questionnaire, the participants also answered demographic questions. The survey took around 3 minutes to complete. In total, 503 respondents completed the survey, and 453 usable questionnaires were obtained after deleting 50 inadequate responses.

### Measures

We used existing measures for the constructs. The measure for social media marketing activities is multidimensional, with five sub-dimensions adapted from Kim and Ko (2012).

We used this scale because this scale is used for the relationship between SMM and brand equity in the original study. We adapted the measure of brand love (5 items) from Loureiro and Kaufmann (2012) and brand intimacy (3 items) from Simon and Tossan (2018). We used one-dimensional scale for consumer engagement (4 items) from Sarkar and Sreejesh (2014), and finally, we adapted the brand equity scale (4 items) from Yoo and Donthu (2001).

## **Analysis and results**

### *Demographics and descriptive statistics*

Among 453 respondents, the respondents were mostly female (63,4%), 31,3 of the respondents were between 18-25, most of the respondents had 2000 £ and lower income (%67,5), and 59,6% of them were graduated from a university or college. Most of the respondents use social media 1-3 hours a day (51,9%) and 84,3% of the respondents use social media for more than four years. The mean values ranged from 3,95 to 5,51 (SDs ranged from 1,09 to 1,58) for all the variables (both first-order and second-order constructs). All the skewness and kurtosis values were between the recommended range (skewness <2, kurtosis < 7), ranging from -.47 to .48, and -.77 to 1.14, respectively, supporting the normality of the values (Tang, Fang & Wang 2014).

We used Harman's single factor test to check the common method variance. We included all items of all factors into factor analysis, and unrotated principles factor analysis accounted for %39,82 of the variance with a single factor while the cut-off point was %50 (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003). Besides, we loaded all items to a single factor in confirmatory factor analysis, and single-factor model indicated poor fit ( $\chi^2 = 3143,478$ ;  $df = 252$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 12,474$ ; CFI = 0.61; NFI: 0.59 TLI = 0.57; GFI = 0.54; RMSEA = 0.16). While model fit was satisfactory when all items loaded to their respective factors, we concluded that common method bias was not a problem (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

### *Measurement Model*

A confirmatory factor analysis was performed to analyze the relationships for both first-order and second-order constructs. We first tested the reliabilities using Cronbach alpha values. Social media marketing as a construct was measured with five sub-dimensions (Entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word of mouth marketing). Cronbach alpha values for the sub-dimensions were 0,80, 0,81, 0,60, 0,82, and 0,74 respectively (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Cronbach's alpha values for the other dimensions were 0,93 for brand love, 0,90 for brand intimacy, 0,75 for brand engagement, and 0,90 for brand equity. The results indicated internal consistency.

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed, whether the sub-dimensions of social media marketing activities. The results for the model fit were satisfactory ( $\chi^2 = 127.010$ ,  $df = 34$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.74$ , CFI = .96, NFI = .95, GFI = .95, AGFI: 90, TLI = .94, and RMSEA = .07). All the factor loadings were significant ( $<0,01$ ), ranging from .61 to .87. The results confirmed the presence of the sub-dimensions as SMM is the latent variable. We also checked composite reliability and average variance extracted values, as Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle and Mena (2012) recommend. All composite reliability values were higher than the cut-off point (.70), ranging from .76 to .82 except trendiness (.61  $<.70$ ). AVE values were also higher than the cut-off point of .50, ranging from .59 to .70 except trendiness .45  $<.50$ . Due to low CR and AVE values, we removed trendiness from the study. After removing trendiness, all correlations were significant and lower than .90, ranging from .55 to .77. and model fit was better for the sub-dimensions ( $\chi^2 = 47.771$ ,  $df = 21$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.28$ , CFI = .99, NFI = .96, GFI = .98, AGFI: 95, TLI = .98, and RMSEA = .05). For the second-order constructs, AVE values were higher than the squared correlation between variables. Thus, convergent and discriminant validity were achieved.

Confirmatory factor analysis for the whole model was also satisfactory as social media marketing activities were second-order reflective constructs. However, the last item of brand engagement had low factor loading. Thus we dropped the item from the final analysis (.48  $<.50$ ). Correlations among the variables were statistically significant ( $p <.01$ ) and ranged between .43 to .74. The final model was also satisfactory ( $\chi^2 = 592.872$ ,  $df = 238$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.49$ , CFI = .95, NFI = .92, GFI = .90, AGFI: 88, TLI = .95, and RMSEA = .06). Both CR and AVE values were higher than the recommended level of .70 and .50, respectively, indicating convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was also achieved while AVE values were higher than squared correlations of the variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

#### *Hypothesis testing*

We used structural equation modeling to test the hypotheses. The model for the structural model was satisfactory ( $\chi^2 = 674.161$ ,  $df = 241$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.80$ , CFI = .94, NFI = .91, GFI = .89, AGFI: 86, TLI = .93, and RMSEA = .06). According to the results, all hypotheses were supported. Results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The structural model results

				Est.	SE	C. R.	Stn. Est.
H1	SMM	→	BE	.69	.091	7.54*	.480
H2	SMM	→	BI	.81	.080	10.233*	.599
H3	SMM	→	BL	.17	.069	2.504**	.181
H4	BI	→	BE	.45	.061	7.376*	.428



H5	BE	→	BL	.17	.060	2.816*	.250
H6	BI	→	BL	.26	.046	5.699*	.369
H7	BL	→	BEQ	.82	.072	11.332*	.603

p<.01, p<.05, **BE**: Brand Engagement, **BI**: Brand Intimacy, **BL**: Brand Love, **BEQ**: Brand Equity, **SMM**: Social Media Marketing Activities; **R<sup>2</sup>**: **BE**: .66, **BI**: .36, **BL**: .51, **BEQ**: .36

### Conclusion

The results of the current paper concluded that companies' social media marketing activities are important antecedents of brand engagement, brand intimacy, and brand love which have significant roles in creating brand equity. The study contributes to the discussion of the effect on social media marketing activities that the companies will consider their brands in terms of engagement, intimacy and love. Consumers engage to their brands when they find social media of the brands are interesting and fun. Consumers also have high engagement when they find a social media environment that provides chances to participate and share. Customized services are another reason to have higher engagement levels. This is important while high level of engagement drives to brand love as Sarkar and Sreejesh (2014) pointed out. According to our results, SMM activities positively affects brand intimacy. It can be proposed that when perceived SMM activities meet the expectations, consumers feel closer to the brand which arise from a connection between the consumers and the brands, as AlmuBarak et al., (2018) also concluded. We also found direct positive effect of SMM activities on brand love, which can be an effective mediator for brand equity that Kim and Ko (2012) explained the direct effect of SMM activities on brand equity. Another unique result of our study is the effect of brand intimacy on brand engagement. According to the results, there is a positive effect of intimacy on engagement. The consumers who feel themselves closer to the brands are more likely to engage the brands' activities and this behavior causes them to develop love with the brand. Thus, the feeling of love helps the brand to enhance its equity.

In the social media era, to make consumers closer to the brand, make them more engaged with the brand and develop a relationship at the level of love, companies should take into account the social media activities seriously. Because, in today's marketing approach where social media is used intensively, consumers always interact with the brand and this interaction is a quite important determinant of the consumer-brand relationship. Since the social media marketing activities affects the consumers' brand intimacy perceptions, companies should make consumers to feel closely to the company and to feel free say their thoughts by interacting with the customers in social media sites.

Cross cultural studies might be proposed to understand whether cultural differences affect in a similar manner. Also, the difference among product classes or difference for service brands might be considered as future studies.

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