Brand Loyalty: College Student Loyalty to Brands with Social Media Outlets

By

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It has been a journey here in Rochester, New York. First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this senior thesis to my parents. Although they are five hours away, their support and love has felt no distance. I am grateful for all they have done for me. They are two wonderful people I am lucky to have in my life. I would also like to dedicate this senior thesis to my advisor, Tracy. She welcomed me into Rochester Institute of Technology in September of 2010 with open and sarcastic arms and I consider her both a mentor and a friend. While a chapter in my life is coming to an end, the relationships I have formed here will not.
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BRAND LOYALTY: COLLEGE STUDENT LOYALTY TO BRANDS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA OUTLETS

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Social media benefits brands in creating emotionally based relationships. Brands have the ability to both market and communicate with their consumers. These social media platforms allow brands to humanize themselves and form bonds with their fans and followers. The aim of this study focuses on college student’s perception of brands they follow on social media platforms and interact with on these platforms and their loyalty to those brands. The research question “Do brands with social media outlets have strong college student brand loyalty?” will be posed. The population of this study will be undergraduate college students. They are frequent and loyal users of social media. Surveys will be distributed online among the Rochester Institute of Technology’s undergraduate community.
Introduction

Social media gained popularity by the founding of MySpace and Facebook. MySpace, originally for music artists, gained popularity quickly when Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook in 2004. The number of social media users began to climb. Since 2007, Facebook has improved with changing features and anyone with a registered email address can have a profile.

Twitter began in 2006 as an SMS-based communications platform. Twitter started as a platform for users to follow one another and post messages in 140 characters or less. As Twitter began to improve, users were able to add followers to their Tweets and the use of hashtags were implemented to help users search popular topics. The growing popularity of Facebook and Twitter as well as other social media platforms has changed from just individual users to companies and brands using these sites to reach their consumers and communicate quickly.

Social media benefits brands in creating emotionally based relationships. Brands have the ability to both market and communicate with their consumers. These social media platforms allow brands to humanize themselves and form bonds with their fans and followers. These relationships that are formed motivate consumers, and provide them with resources in making decisions and meeting their needs.

Past studies have focused on the use of social media by brands that help create consumer loyalty to their brands. Based around various theories, the
following studies have all proven the positive significance between social media and brand loyalty with users who follow brands they frequently participate in purchasing. The aim of this study focuses on college student’s perception of brands they follow on social media platforms and interact with on these platforms and their loyalty to those brands. If brands are interactive and accessible through social media, college students are more loyal to these brands.

Trust is a key factor to success in maintaining long-term relationships between brands and their consumers. Trust is the confidence that makes a consumer have one brand preferred to another brand. It is one of the strongest tools of making and keeping relationships with consumers on and off the Internet. Brand trust develops and forms the foundation for an individual to obtain brand loyalty. There are two types of brand loyalty. They are behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. Behavioral brand loyalty is frequency of repeat purchase of a product. Attitudinal loyalty is priority of a brand over another, and the dedication of the consumer.

**Literature Review**

Social media is an active and quickly moving domain. Trends or information that was popular yesterday easily change by tomorrow. It is important to brands to use social media carefully. Choosing a social network platform is important. There are hundreds or social networking opportunities. Companies choose between using social network channels already in motion or create their own.
Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel (2011) sought to use Consumer Based Brand Equity as the theoretical basis to the research. Consumer Based Brand Equity is the core in brand associations and brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is an outcome of Consumer Based Brand Equity. Consumer Based Brand Equity is known as the aspects of customers brand knowledge that creates a differential effect in behavior towards the brand. Consumer Based Brand Equity is a way of assessing the value of a brand in the consumers mind. Marketers aim to determine how Consumer Based Brand Equity influences consumers future brand buying behavior. Unfortunately, there is little evidence concerning how Consumer Based Brand Equity relates to change in consumer buying behavior because models do not have past buying behavior.

The primary research for this study took place in the United Kingdom with two brands of packed hot beverages. Consumers who were willing to participate received frequent buyer cards to track their purchasing. Once the study was conducted, participants were divided into four groups based on their buying frequency - only one purchase, two purchases, three or four purchased, and five or more purchases. After examining the data, it was concluded that there was a positive relationship between past brand loyalty and the current propensity to give brand associations. Consumers who had previously bought the brand five or more times have a higher propensity to give brand associations than customers who had only bought the brand once.
Though they are intangible, brands are extremely valuable. They are important in consumer markets. Consumers will develop trust and loyalty to brands in forms of relationships. Through research, brand loyal customers are willing to pay for a brand and their loyalty results in a higher market share.

Zehir, Sahin, & Ozsahin (2011) researched the effects of brand communication and service quality in building brand loyalty through brand trust. The correlation between brand communication and service quality based on brand trust and loyalty was analyzed after hypotheses were stated and a questionnaire was constructed.

The hypotheses stated brand communication has a significantly positive effect on brand trust, service quality is positively correlated with brand trust, and in turn brand trust positively is correlated with brand loyalty. These three hypotheses formed a linear model resulting in the ripple effect. If the first is proved to be true, then the second, the final hypothesis stating brand trust is positively correlated with brand loyalty is true. The results of the questionnaire concluded that perceptions of brand communication and service/product quality could be viewed as an antecedent to brand trust which fuels and supports brand loyalty.

Laroche, Habibi, and Richard (2012) focused on the opportunity for brands to form relationships with customers examining the customer centric model of brand community. They hypothesized that the customer/product relationship has a direct positive effect on brand trust, the customer/brand relationship has a direct positive
effect on brand trust, the customer/company relationship has a direct positive effect on brand trust, and the customer/other customers’ relationships have a direct positive effect on brand trust. Brand trust is a main antecedent of loyalty. It is described as the “Willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function”. This study argued that enhanced relationships in the customer centric model of brand community should increase brand trust after use of social media.

The goal in this study was to show how brand communities based on social media could affect customer relationships with brand elements and increase brand loyalty. The target population of the study was members of brand communities on any social media platform. A questionnaire was dispersed through Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Participants were initially asked to list the brand communities they are a member of and follow on social media platforms the social media platforms they are a member of and to keep these brand communities in mind throughout the questionnaire.

Strong support was found for the effects of social media based brand community on the four elements of the customer centric model of brand community. Support was provided to support the hypothesis for the study. Brand communities based on social media produce positive effects for brand loyalty. Relationship of brand trust on brand loyalty has proved to be positive and significant. Brand trust mediates the effect of customer/product, customer/brand, customer/company, and customer/other customer’s relations on brand loyalty.
Facebook was examined as the main social medium used in exploring the phenomenon in the context of personal branding and loyalty between consumers and music artists (Turri, A. M., Smith, K. H., & Kemp, E., 2013). Social media is a place where brands can humanize themselves and connect quickly and directly with consumers.

There is a large brand presence on Facebook because it is a tool in enhancing relationships with consumers. A Facebook page for a brand is its own humanized personal profile. This personal profile becomes an immediate source of contact for consumers to communicate with their brand. Not only do the personal profiles of brands become a fast channel of communication for Facebook users and their brands, they also appear publicly on search engines for consumers not using Facebook to access them. Internet and social media can create custom personalization between fans and relationships with their artists. A brand commitment is “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship with a brand” (Turri, Smith and Kemp, 2013). Social media user or not, a loyalty consumers to a brand is open to stay in a brand/consumer relationship and put forth effort.

Facebook is the largest social media platform. There are over 845 million users with over 35% of users ranging from ages 18-25 (Turri, Smith and Kemp, 2013). This age range is a frequent online purchaser of music. Therefore, Facebook was the key social media platform to use in this study where self-connection and brand intimacy as well as loyalty were examined between consumers and music artists. An Internet survey was conducted among 422 students in universities in
the southwestern part of United States. The mean age of these students were over 21, which was synonymous with the large population of these users on Facebook.

Turri, Smith, and Kemp (2013) focused on social media being used by entertainment professionals such as music artists. Music artists as a brand focus on developing a personal image for themselves and a relationship with consumers and fans. Results suggested that consumers must feel closeness with an artist.

The results of this study in the context of music artists and consumer loyalty supported the hypotheses that stated, “Self-connection and brand intimacy would be antecedents to affective commitment”. The main form of commitment in a consumer/music artist relationship is purchase loyalty. Purchase loyalty is a consumer who is against digital piracy and supports an artist’s work and is willing to purchase it. Through social media relationships formed between musical artists and their consumers, their consumers are more likely to participate in purchase loyalty. These consumers are unlikely to harm the relationship with the brand or music artist.

The growing popularity in social media marketing initialized this study. After learning that social media marketing requires a solid strategy in execution for brand loyalty because of the fast moving landscape social media has become, a questionnaire was distributed throughout Turkey. It aimed to identify the effect of social media marketing on brand loyalty of the consumers for marketers to plan successful social media marketing tactics in the future.
Initially, the questionnaire has two filtered questions to make sure a participant was qualified for the research. These two filtered questions were whether the respondent was using social more than once a week and if the respondent followed at least one brand on social media. The questions throughout the questionnaire were designed to measure brand loyalty, reasons to follow brands on social media, and the categories of content shared on social media.

The results of the study concluded brand loyalty of the customers is positively affective when the brand does at least one, or all four of the following: offers advantageous campaigns, offers relevant content, offers popular contents, appears on various platforms and offers applications on social media.

Pentina, Zhang, and Basmanova (2013) studied the social media platform Twitter in the United States and the Ukraine. The theory behind this study was based on the trust transfer phenomenon. The researchers wanted to examine the impact of Twitter’s trust on users and Twitter user’s intentions to continue using Twitter as well as the intentions on following brands that are hosted on Twitter.

After secondary research, it had been concluded that 67% of Twitter followers who follow a brand report buying the brand’s product, 60% of FB users who become a fan of a brand are more likely to recommend that brand to a friend, and 74% of consumers buying decisions are influence by social media participants in their online communities. The study’s hypotheses stated that “trust in a social media site will positively affect intentions to continue using this site and to recommend it to
“trust in the social media site will positively affect patronage intentions towards the brands the user follows on the site”, “brand engagement with brands that are followed on the social media site will positively affect users’ patronage intentions toward these brands”. A survey was distributed in the United States and the Ukraine. Individuals who took this survey were asked to share it with their surrounding Twitter followers.

The results concluded that the profile of Twitter members with an average age of 35. Study confirmed that there is an important role of brand trust in the context of social media. There were positive effects of trust in Twitter as a social media site by its members. These members plan to continue using the social site. The members of Twitter who follow brands have had prior involvement with these brands and will continue to have brand loyalty.

Anwar, Gulzar, Sohail, and Akram (2011) focused on the impact of brand image, brand trust, and brand affect on brand extension attitude. Brand extension is when a brand uses a name of an existing brand to make an entry into new product class. This is a safe and beneficial tactic. It reduces the expenses of marketing research and promotional costs. It also simultaneously increases the rate of success while capitalizing on already existing inclination, which exists due to equity of brand.

Brand attitude can be best deliberated through brand quality, trust, and affect. Brand attitude is the strongest way of forming the basis of consumer
behavior and is the highest point of the brands association. Perceived quality is one of the integral parts of brand image. Perceived quality has a relationship with the parent brand and the attitude of the consumer towards the brand extension. Brand quality is directly related with the buying pattern of consumer and building of their attitude towards brand extension and possible brand loyalty.

The objectives of this study were to explore the relationship of brand image, trust and affect on customers’ brand extension attitude; the relationship of brand image, trust, and affect on customer loyalty; the relationship of customer loyalty on customers’ brand extension attitude. To explore that if customer loyalty mediates the relationship of brand image, trust, and affect on customers’ brand extension attitude and to explore the impact of all the mentioned relationships. Overall, if brand loyalty mediates the relationship of brand image, trust, and affect to consumer brand extension attitude.

Through a questionnaire filled out by 200 female participants, results concluded that brand image, trust and affect are positively associated with the brand extension attitude. It was found that brand loyalty mediates the relationship of brand image, trust and affects to brand extension attitude. There is a significant relationship between brand affect and consumer brand extension attitude. Regression analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty as well as a positive relationship between brand loyalty and consumer brand extension attitude. Lastly, there is a significant relationship between consumers loyalty and consumer brand extension attitude and consumer brand loyalty mediates the
relationship of brand affect, brand trust and brand image to customers’ brand extension attitude.

From the review of this literature, the research question “Do brands with social media outlets have strong college student brand loyalty?” will be posed.

The studies mentioned previously since 2011 through the present show that there is a strong correlation between brand loyalty and the relationships a brand establishes with its consumers. Social media has increased in popularity in the last ten years evolving from much more than a social place for individuals. Brands have developed a presence on many social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and MySpace to connect with their consumers in a quick, social way, which humanizes their brand and allows a relationship of trust to develop. Brand trust between a consumer and a brand leads to brand loyalty.

Methods

The sample size is between 30 and 50 students. This will be a convenience sample of undergraduate college students. A convenience sample is a method of drawing data by selecting individuals because of the east of their volunteering or availability. This method is going to be used because of the availability and quickness that the data can be gathered. Undergraduate college students are frequent and loyal users of social media. Surveys will be distributed online among the Rochester Institute of Technology’s undergraduate community to obtain the proper data to answer the research question.
The survey consists of 18 questions about social media, brand loyalty, and sharing of social media. There are 3 demographic questions relating to gender, age, and undergraduate major. The only survey will have an online consent form. It will begin with two filter questions to determine if the respondent can participate in the survey or not. These two filter questions are “Do you use your social media account at least once a week?” and “Do you follow at least one brand on social media?” If the respondent answers “yes” to both of these questions, their responses to the remaining questions in the survey will be viable data to answer the research question.

Results

There were 38 participants in the survey for this study. Of these participants, 100% of respondents use their social media account at least once a week. Of these 41 participants, 100% of them follow at least one brand on social media. The majority of participants in the survey were female at 63.4% while the remaining 36.6% were male. The mean age was 22 years old. Participant ages ranged between 19 and 25, which was the target audience of undergraduate students for this study. On average, brands followed by the 41 respondents posted 20.184 times a week.

When given the choices of retail, sports, news, non for profits or other, 48.78% of respondents follow retail brands on social media while 34.15% follow sports, 14.63% follow news outlets and 2.44% follow a brand that does not fall into either of the given categories. 39% of participants have tried to interact with their brand on
social media and of these individuals 31.71% of them interacted with their brand on social media successfully. An independent-samples t test was calculated comparing the mean score of participants who interacted with their brand and it was successful to the mean score of participants who consider themselves loyal to their brand they follow on social media. No significant difference was found (t(12) = 1.107, p > .05).

63.4% of respondents have shared a post by a brand that a friend has shared via social media platform. 78% of respondents have been introduced to a new brand by a friend who has shared a social media post.

Over half the respondents agree that they consider themselves loyal to the brand they follow on social media. 53.7% of the 41 respondents agree to be loyal to the brand they follow while 28.8% of respondents strongly agree that they are loyal to the brand they follow on social media. When the respondents were asked if they would purchase the brand they follow on social media, not one respondent disagreed or strongly disagreed to not purchasing this brand. 61% of participants agreed that they would purchase this brand, while 29.3% strongly agreed to purchase this brand. 85.4% of participants have in fact purchased the brand they follow on social media and feel as if they are loyal to.
Discussion

From the data collected, I can conclude that my sample of respondents who participated in my online survey are loyal to the brands they follow on various social media platforms. Therefore, I can state that college students who follow a brand on social media are loyal to those brands. I can conclude that college students who follow a brand on social media portray both behavioral brand loyalty as well as attitudinal brand loyalty.

This data relates to the original research conducted in my literature review from a different angle. Previous research has focused on behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty without the impact of social media. The growing popularity of Facebook and Twitter as well as other social media platforms has changed from just individual users to companies and brands using these sites to reach their consumers and communicate quickly. This is enabling brands to create new lines of communication and build brand trust which is the core foundation to brand loyalty.

The results of this study supports Laroche, Habibi, and Richard (2012) where strong support was found for the effects of social media based brand community on the four elements of the customer centric model of brand community. Brand communities based on social media produce positive effects for brand loyalty. Relationship of brand trust on brand loyalty has proved to be positive and significant.
A limitation of this study was the small convenience sample size. The initial suggestion for future research is to obtain a much bigger sample size. A convenience sample of 38 participants was obtained. A larger sample of undergraduate college students can add diversity in results. Another suggestion for future research is to survey individuals outside of the college environment. Different ages use social media, and their opinions may alter the data to learn how brands can reach the appropriate audience with the appropriate method.

Another suggestion for future research is to approach the topic with a different method. A qualitative approach with focus groups could enable the researcher to discover the motives individuals have when it comes to social media and the brands they are loyal to. Focus groups have been used in the past to talk to participants about their associations with brands making this method an appropriate choice for the study. A focus group exploits the theory of the “group effect” which states that in group settings individuals draw upon shared experiences as they develop opinions on the questions being asked by the moderator. A focus group method will enable the participants to share their insights and produce the appropriate data on their opinions of brands who use social media and the whether or not social media as a motive influences their loyalty. The researcher will hope to help the group members attain consensus on the topic under discussion and add their own observations and subtle shades of meaning.
Works Cited


Appendices

Survey

Two filter questions will be at the beginning of the survey to make sure respondents qualify for the research.

1. Do you use your social media account at least once a week?
   Yes  No

2. Do you follow at least one brand on social media?
   Yes  No

(Following these two filter questions, the survey would proceed as follows)

3. Think of your favorite or most consistent brand you follow on social media. What category does it fall into?
   Retail  Sports  News  Non-for profits  Other ________

(Given the answer above, answer the following questions with that brand in mind.)

4. On average, how many times a week does your brand posts on social media? ____

5. Have you tried to interact with your brand on social media? Yes  No

6. Was it successful? Yes  No

7. How likely would you be to interact outside of social media with said brand if they did not communicate through social media?
   Very Unlikely, Unlikely, Neutral, Likely, Very Likely

8. How likely are you to recommend following this brand to a friend interested in it?
   Very Unlikely, Unlikely, Neutral, Likely, Very Likely

9. I am loyal to this brand
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
10. I would purchase this brand.
   Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

11. I have purchased this brand.
   Yes No

12. On average, how many times have you shared a post this brand has posted? _____

13. Have you ever shared a post by a brand that a friend has shared?
   Yes No

14. Has a shared post by a friend from a brand ever introduced you to a new brand?
   Yes No

   Demographics:

15. Age __ 16. Gender __ 17. Major ___