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Effect of community relationship management, customer engagement, and brand trust on food supplement brand loyalty

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Abstract

Social media have revolutionized the behavior of people, perceptions, decision processes, and levels of engagement with a brand. There are a number of empirical studies on the impact of the social media on community relationship management, customer engagement, brand trust, and brand loyalty, but not regarding food supplements. Global health and beauty supplement sales have been continuously growing, employing both traditional and digital media channels for promotion. The purpose of this research was to understand the factors in the social media that affect food supplement brand loyalty in Thailand in order to develop a more efficient marketing program. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to analyze structural equation modeling. In total, 508 young Thais living in Bangkok, Thailand participated in this study. The results showed that community relationship management has a direct impact on customer engagement but it bears no direct influence on brand trust and brand loyalty ($p < .001$). The model explained 69.3 percent of brand loyalty variation. It is clear that by keeping customers engaged, the level of trust and loyalty would increase over time.

Introduction

The value of vitamins and dietary supplements is estimated at THB 49.3 million with growth of 11 percent (Euromonitor International, 2015). It is estimated there will be 4 percent cumulative annual growth in the global dietary supplements market until 2018. Producers increasingly fortify vitamins and other novel ingredients in their products resulting in a greater convenience and multiple, effective health benefits. The fastest growth products are minerals, probiotics, and proteins. The top markets are the USA, followed by China, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Russia, Australia, Taiwan, and Canada. Factors driving this growth are increasing knowledge, access to health-related information, higher disposable income, and the hectic modern lifestyle of people working and studying. People take vitamins and dietary supplements for many reasons but they are mainly driven by the goal of boosting the immune system for disease prevention and ensuring good daily nutritional consumption for beauty and longevity. A survey by the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN) in the USA in 2015 found 68 percent of Americans take dietary supplements and most supplement users were aged 18–34 (66%). In Thailand, Cerebos, the owner of BRAND'S dietary supplement, leads in retail value share with 40 percent, followed by Amway with 12 percent. The market is expected to reach THB 69.8 billion by 2020 with a forecast cumulative annual growth of 7 percent at constant 2015 prices.

Social media provide online information for sharing and discussing any topic of interest. They can either be customer- or marketer-generated from a variety of news sources (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006). While the social media enable multi-way interactive communication, customers are in control of the communication they wish to receive and engage. Brand owners are increasingly using many social media platforms as strategic marketing communication tools in building customer engagement. The social media have many advantages, including speed (virality), audience (ability to targeted peer groups), and cost (compared to traditional media) (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011). Research has found that the social media have a strong influence on purchase decisions. Across product categories, 26 percent of purchases are influenced by recommendations on social media (Bughin, 2015). The impact of social media marketing on brand loyalty is positively enhanced when a brand gives advantageous

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offers, has relevant and popular content, and appears on various social media platforms (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012).

In Thailand, a study conducted by the Research Center for Social and Business Development (SAB) in Greater Bangkok among a representative population aged 18+ years involving 1,026 respondents during June 2015 found that 93 percent of people who had access to the Internet, used social media. On average, people used four types of social media and the top two most popular were Facebook (89%) and LINE (84%). The respondents spent about 4.23 hours/day using social media and females spent 45 minutes longer than males, with 30 percent of the people admitting to accessing social media every 30 minutes and 10 percent every 10 minutes, while 76 percent agreed that social media represented the fifth basic human need.

This being the case, it follows that there are gaps in our knowledge and understanding about the key success factors of community relationship management, customer engagement, and brand trust, and how to measure the effectiveness of the factors that have an effect on the brand loyalty of food supplements.

The objectives of the study were:

1) to study the direct and indirect influences of customer relationship management, customer engagement, and brand trust variables that have an effect on the brand loyalty of food supplements; and

2) to develop structural equation modeling of customer relationship management, customer engagement, and brand trust variables that have an effect on the brand loyalty of food supplements.

Literature Review

Community Relationship Management

Related literature (Ang, 2011; Bughin, 2007; Bughin, Chui, & Manyika, 2010; Fletcher & Ford, 2010; Medeiros & Needham, 2009) hypothesized that community relationship management (CoRM) is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of four components or dimensions:

Connectivity

Connectivity is critical because successful social networking depends on the ability to create and attract a large community of users. Moreover, the platform (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, LINE) must make it easy for users to connect with each other (Ang, 2011).

Conversations

Marketers can observe the level of responsiveness and attitude to the campaign message and the brand from the conversations in the social media. Continuous social media monitoring is very important to gauge the early signals of customer preference for marketing planning and speedy response, especially in a time of crisis.

Content creation

Social media platforms and the new generation of easy-to-use mobile devices enable customers to create and share extensively. User-generated content in the era of Web 2.0 such as blogs, diaries, forums, pictures, and video upload, all give users an opportunity to show off, which is a basic human motivation. The creators of videos are often motivated by fame, "I seek fame. I want the world to see my video" (Ang, 2011; Bughin, 2007).

Collaboration

Collaboration means that multi-users in a social media community can contribute cooperatively to a topic of interest (Ang, 2011). Organizations can also encourage the community to create and upload their own content to increase engagement with others (Medeiros & Needham, 2009).

Effective community relationship management would benefit marketers in public relations, nurturing of opinion and advocates, placing and creating advertisement, new product development, lowering cost-to-serve, building loyalty and sales, and amplifying buzz and visibility (Ang, 2011; Bughin, et al., 2010; Fletcher & Ford, 2010; Medeiros & Needham, 2009).

Based on the above, the hypotheses relative to brand loyalty are:

H1: community relationship management will have a positive effect on customer engagement.

H2: community relationship management will have a positive effect on brand trust.

H3: community relationship management will have a positive effect on brand loyalty.

Customer Engagement

Marketers build relationships with customers through programs aimed at getting individuals involved and connected with their brands (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Greve (2014) defines customer engagement as a psychological process of the customer that leads to the formation of loyalty. It is a customer's behavioral expression toward a brand or a firm resulting from motivational drivers and can be characterized by a degree of vigor, dedication, absorption, and interaction. Engagement provides opportunities for two-way, direct communication and a rich data source for a brand owner. Customer engagement can be determined by the intensity of customers' participation and connection with the organization's offerings and/or organized activities (Vivek, 2009). Customer engagement has abruptly increased with the popularity of social media; thus there are opportunities for marketers to use social media to build relationships with customers (Hudson & Thal, 2013). Empirical studies allow us to state that the relation between customer engagement and customer loyalty is significant.

Vivek (2009) found that customer engagement may be evidenced cognitively and affectively through the customer's experiences and feelings. At the same time, engagement may be expressed behaviorally or socially through participation. Related literature (Vivek, 2009) hypothesized that customer engagement is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of three components or dimensions: enthusiasm, participation, and social interaction (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Dabholkar, 1990; Vivek, 2009; Vivek et al., 2012).

Based on the above, the hypotheses relative to brand loyalty are:

H4: customer engagement will have a positive effect on brand trust.

H5: customer engagement will have a positive effect on brand loyalty.

Brand Trust

Positive expectations and trusting belief in a brand are manifestations of brand trust (Delgado-Ballester, 2003). It is a consequence of brand satisfaction and brand communication (Azize, Cemal, & Hakan, 2012). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), successful relationship marketing requires relationship commitment and trust. Brand trust can be defined as "the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function" (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Luk & Yip, 2008). This is similar to Agustin and Singh, (2005) who defined trust as "a consumer's confident beliefs that he or she can rely on the seller to deliver promised services". Brand trust is expressed as the belief of consumers that the brand will fulfill certain functions (Erciş, Ünal, Candan, & Yıldırım, 2012). Brand trust can be seen as the tendency of the customer to believe that a brand keeps its promise regarding performance (Fuller, Matzler, & Hoppe., 2008; Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011).

Past literature (Delgado-Ballester, 2003; Luk & Yip, 2008) hypothesized that brand trust is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of two components or dimensions: reliability and intentions. Reliability is the ability and willingness to keep promises and satisfy customers' needs and to incorporate benefits such as competence, credibility, and predictability of performance. Intentions involve placing the priority on customers' interests and welfare should unexpected problems with the product arise (Delgado-Ballester, 2003; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005; Luk & Yip, 2008), and incorporating benefits like dependability, benevolence, and concerns for customer needs (Yague-Guillen, Munuera-Aleman, & Delgado-Ballester, 2003).

Based on the above, the hypothesis relative to brand loyalty is:

H6: brand trust will have a positive effect on brand loyalty.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty can be defined as a commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service of the same-brand consistently in the future despite situational influences and marketing distractions which may cause brand switching (Oliver, 1999). It happens because consumers perceive that the brand offers the right product features, images, or level of quality at the right price. When there is strong brand loyalty, consumers tend to recommend that brand to the people around them (Giddens, 2002). Marketers may expect a recurring stream of profit generated by repeat and referral sales with strong brand loyalty. Repeat sales can be as much as 90 percent less expensive to a company than the cost of acquiring new customers (Giddens, 2015). Jahn and Kunz (2012) proposed a basic framework that if the brand fan page satisfies particular needs of a user, this satisfaction should lead to a higher approach to the brand fan page, which should in turn lead to higher brand loyalty. It is the process described as customer-brand relationship.

Jahn and Kunz (2012) proposed three components to brand loyalty: (1) brand commitment, (2) brand word-of-mouth (WOM), and (3) brand purchase. In the current study, brand loyalty was an endogenous latent variable. To measure brand loyalty, each respondent in this study was asked to evaluate his/her feelings with respect to these three components.

Thus, the conceptual framework of this study consisted of one exogenous latent variable of community relationship management, two mediator variables of customer engagement and brand trust, and one endogenous latent variable of brand loyalty (Figure 1).

Methodology

Questionnaire Design

The methodology of all the constructs in the conceptual framework was based on the literature. We adopted and modified 21 items developed by Bruhn, Schoenmueller, and Schafer (2012), HBR Analytic Services (2010), and Jahn and Kunz (2012) to measure CoRM. The scale for customer engagement was developed from 14 items developed by Jahn and Kunz (2012) and Vivek (2009). For brand trust, we adopted and modified nine items developed by Hur et al. (2011), Luk and Yip (2008), and Matzler, Krauter, and Bidmon (2008). We derived 14 items from Bruhn et al. (2012), Jahn and Kunz (2012), and Laroche, Habibi, and Richard (2013) for brand loyalty (Table 1). All items were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale. In this study, we modified and developed all 58 items for calculation by the results of factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. Following this, all the items for calculation were adapted to fit with the model (model fit).

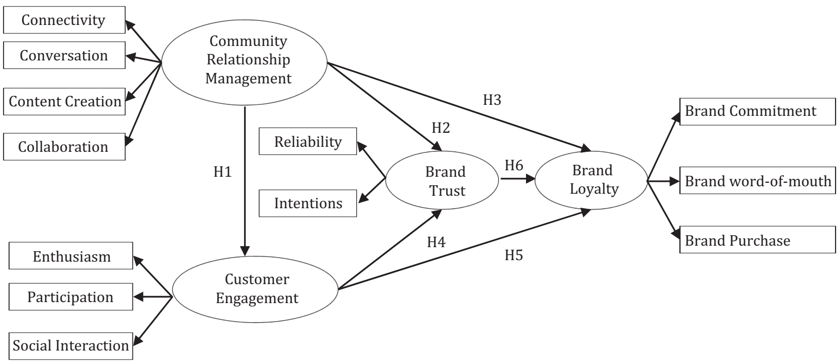

Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Table 1
Questionnaire design

Latent variable	Manifest variable	Reference	Items
Community relationship management (CoRM)	Connectivity	Bruhn et al. (2012);	5
	Conversations	HBR Analytic Services (2010);	6
	Content creation	Jahn & Kunz (2012)	5
	Collaboration		5
Customer Engagement	Enthusiasm	Jahn & Kunz (2012);	4
	Participation	Vivek (2009)	5
	Social interaction		5
Brand trust	Reliability	Hur et al. (2011);	5
	Intentions	Luk & Yip (2008); Matzler et al. (2008)	4
Brand loyalty	Brand commitment	Bruhn et al. (2012);	5
	Brand word-of-mouth	Jahn & Kunz (2012);	4
	Brand purchase	Laroche et al. (2013)	5
Total			58

Data Collection

Anderson and Gerbing (1988) recommended a minimum sample size of 150 when testing a structural equation model via AMOS. The study utilized quantitative methodologies. A questionnaire was used as the study tool, comprising two parts: general information about young Thai people in Bangkok, Thailand, and four latent variables comprising: (1) CoRM; (2) customer engagement, (3) brand trust, and (4) brand loyalty.

This study focused on young Thai people who were generally active social media users. A systematic random sample was employed for the students attending BRAND'S Summer Camp. Out of the 600 questionnaires distributed, 508 completed questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 85%). In the total sample of young Thais living in Bangkok, 117 (23%) of the respondents were male and 391 (77%) were female. The responses to the questions capturing focal constructs used a seven-point Likert scale (rating statements 1–7; 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Table 2 displays the characteristics of the sample.

Table 2
Characteristics of the sample

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	117	23.0
Female	391	77.0
Age (years)		
15	17	3.3
16	119	23.4
17	242	47.6
18	128	25.2
19	2	4.0
Education level		
High school	508	100.0
Online community needs		
New knowledge	178	35.0
Benefits of the product	94	18.5
Advice and services	58	11.4
Promotion	66	13.0
Entertainment	54	10.6
Learning	47	9.3
Communication	11	2.2
Total	508	100.0

Reliability and Validity Construct

We first conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and subsequently reliability analysis to measure Cronbach's alphas for the scale items to ensure internal consistency (Laroche et al., 2013). Multi-item measures were developed based on Cronbach's alpha > 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978, p. 36). We then calculated Cronbach's alphas for each construct. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alphas of the final constructs. As shown, the reliability measure ranges from 0.939 to 0.962 (Table 3).

According to Wheaton, Muthén, Alwin, and Summers (1977) and Hair, Rolph, Anderson, and William (1999), widely used measures of model fit include CMIN/df (χ^2/df). "The CMIN/df ratios in the range of 2 to 1 or 3 to 1 are indicative of an acceptable fit between the hypothetical model and the sample data"; thus, the ratio should be close to 1 for correct models. "…a CMIN/df ratio more than 2.00 represents an inadequate fit" (Byrne, 1989, p. 55). For the comparative fit index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990), CFI values close to 1 indicate best fit. The goodness of fit (GFI) and the adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI) indices should be at least 0.90; GFI and AGFI values of 1 indicate a perfect fit (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1984). The root mean square residual (RMR) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should both be less than 0.05. The smaller the RMR is the better; an RMR value of 0 indicates a perfect fit. For the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), a value of about 0.05 or close to 0 indicates a perfect fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Thus, all the variables that measured latent constructs in this model achieve convergent validity (Figure 2).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling

Table 4 shows the regression weights and squared multiple correlations (R^2) of each item. Figure 2 shows the results of the confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS: CMIN (chi-square) = 81.123, df = 42, CMIN/df = 1.931, GFI = 0.975, CFI = 0.994, RMR = 0.025 and RMSEA = 0.043, which are all considered excellent and significantly above the acceptable thresholds suggested by Bentler (1990), Browne and Cudeck (1993), Byrne (1989), Hair et al. (1999), Jöreskog and Sörbom (1984), and Wheaton et al. (1977).

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, and reliability statistics for the constructs

Construct	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
CoRM				0.962
	Connectivity	4.8474	1.2614	
	Conversations	4.8917	1.1697	
	Content creation	5.0999	1.1967	
	Collaboration	5.0910	1.1571	
Customer Engagement				0.939
	Enthusiasm	4.5013	1.3015	
	Participation	4.9751	1.2309	
	Social interaction	5.0702	1.2690	
Brand Trust				0.949
	Reliability	5.0098	1.2451	
	Intentions	5.2343	1.1843	
Brand Loyalty				0.961
	Brand commitment	4.8694	1.2952	
	Brand word-of-mouth	4.9003	1.3729	
	Brand purchase	4.9567	1.3445	

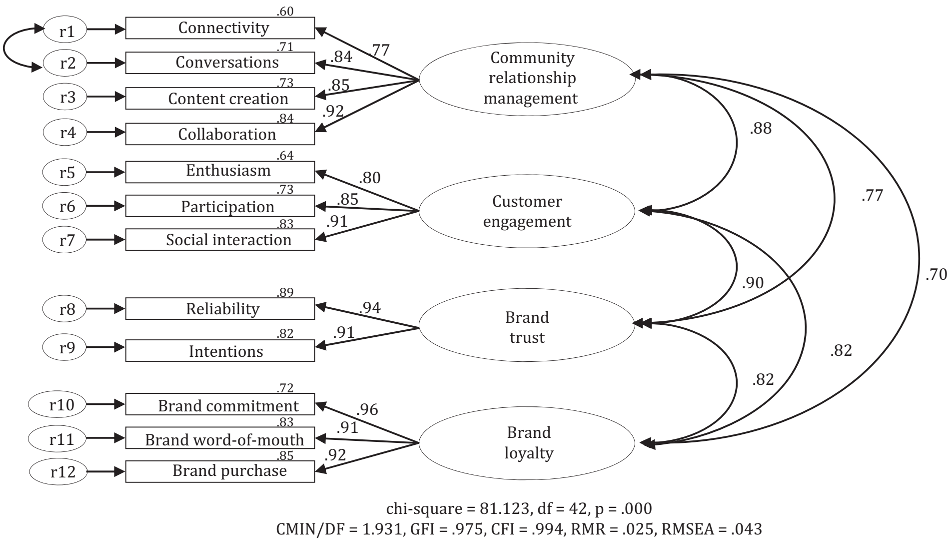

Figure 2 Confirmatory factor analysis of community relationship management, customer engagement, brand trust, and brand loyalty

Table 4
Results of CFA for measurement model

Construct	Item	Regression weight	Squared Multiple Correlation (R^2)
CoRM	Connectivity	0.774	0.599
	Conversations	0.843	0.710
	Content creation	0.854	0.729
	Collaboration	0.918	0.843
Customer engagement	Enthusiasm	0.802	0.643
	Participation	0.854	0.730
	Social interaction	0.910	0.828
Brand trust	Reliability	0.944	0.892
	Intentions	0.905	0.820
Brand loyalty	Brand commitment	0.956	0.725
	Brand word-of-mouth	0.909	0.827
	Brand purchase	0.924	0.853

Results and Discussion

The results from this study should enable marketers to efficiently plan their community relationship management and social media strategy by focusing on the factors which have a positive impact on customer engagement, brand trust, and brand loyalty.

We tested the proposed hypotheses using structural equation modeling. For the conceptual framework, this structural equation modeling complies with empirical data: CMIN (chi-square) = 75.153, df = 43, CMIN/df = 1.748, GFI = 0.976, CFI = 0.995, RMR = 0.028, and RMSEA = 0.038. The results of the model estimation are shown in Figure 3. In conclusion, community relationship management has no direct influence on brand loyalty, and only indirectly, through the mediation of customer engagement and brand trust ($p < .001$). It is concluded that the model explained 69.3 percent of brand loyalty variation.

We analyzed the role of community relationship management in terms of exogenous latent variables; the community relationship management construct comprised four manifest variables. The structural equation modeling showed that connectivity, conversations, content creation, and collaboration had no direct influence, but were indirectly related to brand loyalty ($p < .001$) through the mediation of customer engagement and brand trust.

Looking at customer engagement in terms of mediator/intervening variable, the customer engagement construct comprised three manifest variables. The structural equation modeling showed that enthusiasm, participation, and social interaction were significantly ($p < .001$) related to brand trust and brand loyalty. Customer engagement had an indirect influence on brand loyalty through the mediation of brand trust ($p < .001$). In addition, customer engagement had a direct influence on brand loyalty ($p < .001$). Therefore, it is important for a marketer to actively participate in social media, to look for creative ways to engage with customers, and to build a community for the brand loyalists to do some of the promoting themselves. The brand trust construct, as a mediator/intervening variable, comprised two manifest variables. The results showed that reliability and intentions were significantly ($p < .001$) related to brand loyalty. A marketer must engage and feed the right information. The best brand loyalists trust their network and are willing to share the content.

As an endogenous latent variable, the brand loyalty construct comprised three manifest variables. The structural equation modeling showed that brand commitment, brand WOM, and brand purchase were significantly ($p < .001$) related to brand loyalty (Figure 3).

Conclusion

The finding from the current research that community relationship management affected brand loyalty, was consistent with the research of Ang (2011), Bughin et al. (2010), Fletcher and Ford (2010), Medeiros and Needham (2009), that customer engagement affected brand loyalty was consistent with the research of Dabholkar (1990), Bagozzi and Dholakiam (2006), Vivek (2009), Vivek et al. (2012), and that brand trust affected brand loyalty was consistent with the research of Delgado-Ballester (2003) and Luk and Yip (2008).

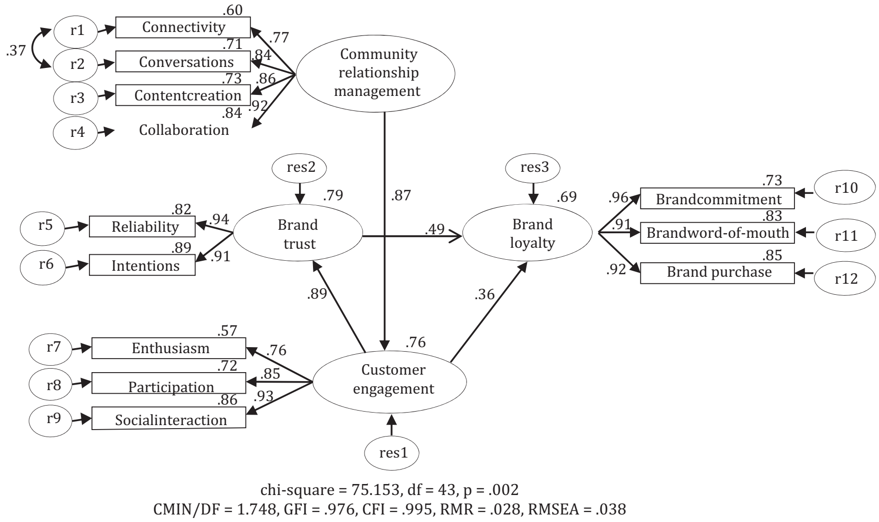

Figure 3 Results for structural equation modeling of community relationship management, customer engagement, brand trust, and brand loyalty

Table 5
Regression weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

Variable			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	*p*
Customer engagement	<---	Community relationship management	0.967	0.039	24.832	***
Brand trust	<---	Customer engagement	0.808	0.032	25.435	***
Brand loyalty	<---	Customer engagement	0.382	0.077	4.969	***
Brand loyalty	<---	Brand trust	0.573	0.084	6.797	***
Collaboration	<---	Community relationship management	1.000			
Content creation	<---	Community relationship management	0.962	0.035	27.159	***
Conversations	<---	Community relationship management	0.925	0.035	26.146	***
Connectivity	<---	Community relationship management	0.918	0.041	22.467	***
Social interaction	<---	Customer engagement	1.000			
Participation	<---	Customer engagement	0.887	0.031	28.332	***
Enthusiasm	<---	Customer engagement	0.836	0.038	22.242	***
Intentions	<---	Brand trust	1.000			
Reliability	<---	Brand trust	1.097	0.032	34.281	***
Brand commitment	<---	Brand loyalty	1.000			
Brand WOM	<---	Brand loyalty	1.007	0.038	26.632	***
Brand purchase	<---	Brand loyalty	1.002	0.036	27.537	***

***$p < .001$

Table 6
Standardized regression weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

Variable			Estimate
Customer engagement	<---	Community relationship management	0.871
Brand trust	<---	Customer engagement	0.890
Brand loyalty	<---	Customer engagement	0.362
Brand loyalty	<---	Brand trust	0.493
Collaboration	<---	Community relationship management	0.917
Content creation	<---	Community relationship management	0.855
Conversations	<---	Community relationship management	0.843
Connectivity	<---	Community relationship management	0.773
Social interaction	<---	Customer engagement	0.929
Participation	<---	Customer engagement	0.850
Enthusiasm	<---	Customer engagement	0.757
Intentions	<---	Brand trust	0.906
Reliability	<---	Brand trust	0.943
Brand commitment	<---	Brand loyalty	0.957
Brand word-of-mouth	<---	Brand loyalty	0.910
Brand purchase	<---	Brand loyalty	0.924

Table 7
Squared multiple correlations: (Group number 1 - Default model)

Variable	Estimate	Variable	Estimate
Customer engagement	0.758	Enthusiasm	0.573
Brand trust	0.791	Participation	0.722
Brand loyalty	0.693	Social interaction	0.863
Brand purchase	0.853	Connectivity	0.597
Brand word-of-mouth	0.827	Conversations	0.710
Brand commitment	0.726	Content creation	0.732
Reliability	0.889	Collaboration	0.842
Intentions	0.821		

Our study showed the high potential of community relationship management in customer-brand relationship building and brand loyalty. It was found that significant relationships existed between community relationship management and customer engagement, brand trust, and brand loyalty. The key success factors of community relationship management were found to have indirect influences on brand loyalty through the mediation of customer engagement and brand trust ($p < .001$). It was concluded that the model explained

69.3 percent of brand loyalty variation. To earn brand loyalty, successful marketers need strategies and investment in growing the relationship with their customers and to develop active engagement in the community, or until they can gain brand trust. This will take time and consistency. By studying the interests and insights of their customers, marketers can develop initiatives which can stimulate and maintain a high level of engagement in the community. Indicators of active engagement can be observed in many ways from joining community activities, contributing ideas and content (user-generated content), spreading community news, and inviting new members.

Recommendation

The findings of this research suggest that community relationship management has indirect influences on brand loyalty through the mediation of customer engagement and brand trust. However, the results of this study are limited because only quantitative data were used. Further research could use qualitative data to test the correlations between community relationship management, customer engagement, brand trust, and brand loyalty. Finally, we recommend that in order to develop the connections between customers and organizations, organizations should not just focus on a specific process within just one activity but should implement many tools together.

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