

ABSTRACT

In a short period of time, online social networking has developed into a sensation, through which a large number of people using internet are linked. For example Facebook which is a widely used online social network in the world has a user base of more than 1.44 billion users. Another online social network Twitter boasts of 302 million active monthly users worldwide. Underlying this popularity of online social networks is the fact that as a media it encourages each member for response. Online social network activities involve user contribution to content creation, which can include simple posting comments or complex activity of recommending content to others. Online social networking websites (OSNS) acts as tools for co-operative communication, enabling information sharing between users. Online social networks provide a platform to construct social relations and linkages among people who share similar backgrounds, interests, activities and real-life acquaintances or even with total strangers. India, with 232 million internet users, is world's 3rd largest internet market and has been reporting a double digit year over year addition to its user base. Moreover, on Facebook, in 2015 India is the world's second largest user base of 101.5 million users. In India, 60% of the active internet users use it mainly for the purpose of social networking out of which majority of the traffic comes from non-metro cities. This highlights that internet is used more for online social networking and online network sites are the places to find majority of virtual users. At a certain point of time, penetration of mobile internet was one of the highest in Punjab (a state of India) i.e. 11% as compared to 8.5% of Indian average. Otherwise also in 2014, Punjab was one of the major customer base of internet users with more than 5.4% of the population using internet.

Borrowing from past literature, it was summarized that over the years the usage rate of social media has been increasing both for consumers as well as marketers. A significant number of studies on online social network usage pattern have been carried out in the developed nations but relatively few studies have been completed in India and no published literature was found on studies focused specially upon Punjab. Social network website users demonstrate behavioural differences in usage of such sites due to varying acceptance of social networking services across geographies, so user pattern in terms of frequency, site preferences, time of use, kind and number of contacts, access devices, topics discussed and activities performed etc. was required to be studied for marketers to create tailored options for users of online social network sites and to become more efficient in their targeting activities across different

geographies. On similar lines one cannot ignore the superseding effect of cultural on motivations to use online social network sites. When an effort was made to trace out the user motivations to indulge in online social networking, no supporting literature was found from India especially from the region of Punjab. Given the notion that there are diverse reasons behind online network usage, a gap was identified to study the underlying motives of social networkers in the state of Punjab to use online social network websites. With large of marketers shifting to online social networking sites for promotion of their products, it is of dire importance to understand perceived personality of social network sites from perspective of consumers. No research was traced when it comes to finding the personality of social networking sites in India from perspective of users. Businesses understanding the huge potential of social networking sites have started to make investments in this medium to connect with customers directly and to promote their products/services. A question arising out of this is, does these investments help in creating or sustaining brand advocacies and loyalties, highlighting a need to study momentum effect in relation to advocacy and loyalty towards the brands in social networking sites. Word of mouth in online networks is deemed to depend upon different kinds of social relationships existing between community members. On the same lines considering the population of Punjab, a need is found to reconfirm the association between social relationships and eWOM (electronic word of mouth) in Social Networking Sites. Different types of social network advertisements also call out for the need to clarify whether audience or users of social networks responds to all advertisement types in the same way or user level of liking towards advertisement types differ. Keeping these gaps in mind, six objectives were finalized with an intention to add to the body of knowledge in management education.

First objective was to study the usage pattern of social networking sites among the social networkers across cross-sections of the population. Second objective was about what motivates people to use or become member of online social networks. Third objective of this research was to identify brand personality of social networking sites as perceived by users. In fourth objective the idea was to study whether the momentum effect on social networking sites leads to loyalty and advocacy for brands or not. Fifth objective was to check whether social relationships play a part in virtual or online social networks or not. Sixth and last objective was to study what type of advertisements are preferred by users of online social networks to judge their engagement in term of liking towards the advertisement types.

The present study was a two phased study that started with exploratory qualitative research using focus group to find out what motivated social networking usage and it was followed by extensive quantitative study. For the quantitative study descriptive research design was selected and a total of 1000 social networkers from Punjab were the respondents. For the identification of sample from population under study snowball sampling was used, which is a non-probabilistic sampling technique. Primary data in the form of the response of the social networking site users, which was of immense importance and backbone of the study, was obtained from respondents with the help of widely used and well known method of survey, utilizing fully structured questionnaire.

Findings of this study revealed that consumer engagement is happening over online social network websites. Consumer engagement in virtual world can be observed through the most basic measurement of engagement i.e. user involvement, which in case of virtual networks is highlighted with regular visits by large number of social networkers. Consumer's make repeat visits to online sites because of value derived from different activities that they are performing on these sites. This motivation to use online social network sites has been found to be influenced by need for information exchange, need for entertainment fit, need for expression, need for networking and need for social acceptance. When consumers or users of online social network websites create content or get engaged in any type of content creation activities, a potential value is created for such consumers. Users were found to share information or opinions received from a friend/contact related to a brand with others on online social networks. Value is also co-created when different consumers or users over online social network websites illustrate a pass-along behavior to share content created by other users in the network. When this content created or co-created is related to any of the brands, consumer brand engagement is materialized. Customers co-create brand related communication by discussing attributes of a brand, recommending brand/brands and sharing concerns for one or multiple attributes for any brand. This leads to brand advocacy and brand loyalty, which is a sign for consumer engagement with brands over social networks.

Users in online social networks use brands as reference points in their online conversations (i.e. eWOM) creating brand advocacy and brand loyalty, which are signs of consumer engagement with brands over social networks and value creation for the brands. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on social networking sites is associated with different social relationships like tie strength, social capital, homophily and interpersonal influence. Trust as

a social relationship among the social network users do not make significant influence on likelihood of electronic word of mouth happening in social networking sites.

Opinion giving behavior on social networking sites is influenced by the social capital, homophily and interpersonal influence among the social network users and opinion seeking behavior is influenced by the social capital, social tie strength and interpersonal influence.

Informational interpersonal influence leads to increased likelihood of eWOM in social networking sites indicating the desire of social networkers to make an informed decision. People of Punjab are more likely to seek advice from others and to indulge in more of information pass along behaviour because of strong association of bridging social capital with electronic word of mouth in social networking sites. Social networkers have been found more susceptible towards reading of posts done by brands on their social network pages.

People on social networks tend to give suggestions to others even for those brands which they have not used personally, so brands can target non users segment to create advocacy and loyalty using momentum effect. This is possible by sharing useful and interesting information about brands. In order to increase consumer engagement, distribution of sales promotion coupons through social networking sites can be one of the good option.

Brand engagement in the form of large number of people following the brand on social networking sites, leads to an impression of quality brand. Social relationship of Trust do not influence the likelihood for happening of electronic word of mouth in social networking sites. This means that people are ready to accept information from any type of contacts. A brand which is new to the market (especially) or any established one can use social networking sites to do promotions and if a brand is able to get a large number of consumer to associate with it in form of followers, then it is easy for such brands to skim the market by carefully tailoring its market communication.

After analysis of all the six objectives under study, it can be concluded that value is created for brands over online social network websites through consumer engagement. Value is created for the brand as loyalty and advocacy is happening over social networks due to momentum effect. Consumer engagement aims to generate value for both customer and companies by extending brand experience throughout all phases of relationship from loyalty to advocacy.