CHAPTER – V

CONCLUSIONS & SUGGESTIONS

Ever since its evolution as a separate discipline, one of the most significant developments in marketing is the use of social media in marketing. Commencing as a tool for connecting the people, social media has emerged as a most potent input for the marketers, helping them in every aspect of marketing (Weber, 2009). The magnanimity of numbers makes it a very potent database, which can be used for a multitude of meaningful applications, including marketing. Social media is being used for identifying customer needs, communicating and engagement with customers and helping them in recognizing and recalling the brands, influencing their purchase decision making process and post-purchase satisfaction. Recognizing the potential of this most potent tool for augmenting the effectiveness of their marketing strategies, all types of firms including the small businesses, non-profit organizations and even political parties are using this for reaching out to their target audience.

5.1 Social Media Usage

There is a multitude of social media platforms, each positioned with a different USP. A vast majority of the users of social media use Facebook, although Linkedin is also growing rapidly (Sawyer, 2008). The next popular social media platform is Youtube, because Youtube is popular for videos sharing and promotions/advertising. Tweets are also attracting user’s interest and people share their opinions, views through single line Tweets. Many big personalities are on Twitter with millions of followers. Other popular platforms are Instagram, Blogs, etc.

With seamless Internet on mobile phones, the frequency of usage of social media is increasing, leading to increased engagement. People use social media for different objectives such as – to keep in touch with friends/relatives (Kostakos and Venkatanathan 2010), getting information about the products (Lea, 2006), knowledge of local events, making business links, etc. Social media is also influencing the purchase decisions of the respondents as they rely on the information gathered from social media to buy mobile phones, electronic products, footwear, fashion accessory, household and lifestyle kind of products.

In the domain of consumer decision making, branding plays a major role in consumer purchase decision as it helps the consumer in search for alternatives. Social media has
emerged as an extended medium for assisting the consumers in brand identification and recall. Social media is a potent source of information and is keeping the users engaged and is influencing their cognitive as well as behavioural aspects (Balakrishnan, 2014; Godey, 2016). The perceptions on social media in terms of its influence on brand choice do point out towards its increasing influence on forming the brand choice and accordingly shaping their purchase intension. Being extended and convenient platforms, they are very effective in assisting the users in the brand recall and recognition and also provide a room for brand engagement. With free flow of content, ideas, information, opinion, reviews, etc., social media is spreading word of mouth and is a very fast and potent platform for brand building. This freedom is leading to convergence of cognitive factors across all demographic segments, which facilitates the strategy formulation for marketing communication through social media. Besides this, it is a rich source of customer information, which can be leveraged to get information on user preferences, their demographic profiles and other such information, which can provide inputs to targeting, segmentation and positioning of the brands. Realizing its importance, more and more firms are relying on social media for brand building and are able to get measurable success through the same.

The brands are using social networking sites platform not only to advertise their brands, but to make users engage with their brands. Consumers are also taking assistance to make evaluation and select the brands. They like the brand pages, so that they can get notifications and exchange information about new products, discounts, freebies, offers and also take participation in discussions regarding brands (Lea, 2006). They also look for the reviews by other users about products/brands, they want to buy. Social Media represent a revolutionary new innovative trend that should be of interest to companies which operate in online space. The study shows that there are varying reasons of the usage of social media and the same is getting more and more engagement in the present times. Particularly the young generation is more prove to its usage. In terms of time spent, purpose of its usage and with more outreach, social media has vast potential to influence the users in terms of their thinking as well as their behavior. There are several social media platforms, prominently Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Youtube, Pintrest, etc. Each of these has its own USPs and attracts the users. Amongst the social media, Facebook has emerged as the most used social media platform with over a vast majority of the respondents affirming their use of this platform. In the present times, there is increasing trend towards using social media for making professional links. Linkedin is a site for professional networking and there is increasing propensity among
the professionals to use it.

Another interesting trend in the social networking is the use of platforms for user generated content and in this regards a popular social media platform is Youtube. It is popular because it allows videos to be uploaded and shared, which can be used for promotions/advertising. Although it emerged as a platform for giving short messages, Twitter is also attracting the attention of the users. It has been used more by the politicians and celebrities more than the common persons, but now people are having their account on the same. It offers a serious platform, which is emerging as a potential source to form opinions, become popular and share the views in a laconic manner.

Instagram is also gaining popularity as people are fond of taking pictures and getting themselves clicked. They now share photos on everyday basis and post their events of daily life. Instagram helps in uploading high quality photographs after editing. It is also being used to build corporate pages and lots of celebrities are also having their profile on the same. Techno savvy users are expressing their views through writing Blogs and the study found that about one sixth of the respondents have their blogs or members of blogs. After writing the blog, the users share it through other platforms of social media and increase the readability of their blogs.

It can be concluded that social media is becoming a permanent feature of life and is becoming a platform for expression of the thoughts, emotions and ideas to larger audience. It has tremendous potential and speed in reaching out to others and it holds the promise of becoming a very potent media for reaching out to the prospective customers. Social media has become a part of the daily routine and people are visiting the social media platforms several times a day, or week (Karl, 2010). Users' engagement increases with the frequency of use of social media (Bhattacharyya, 2011). It is found in the study that most of respondents use various platforms of social media several times a day. With seamless connectivity becoming available to the users, they are visiting the social networking sites several times a day and this increasing engagement is influencing their thinking and behaviour. Social media is very absorbing activity and the time spent by the users on the same is an indicator of their level of engagement on the same.

5.2 Perceptions on social media in terms of brand choice

The results of perceptions of the respondents regarding brand choice on social media,
i.e., what do they think about social media in context to brands show different underlying factors, each representing a unique perspective. The first factor emerging out of the statements broadly relating to various relying on the information obtained from the social media, overtly or covertly, for making a brand choice. These statements relate to the use of social media information, influence of friends/peers, etc., brand recognition, content on social media, sharing of information and experiences, endorsements, brand decision making, etc. On the basis of the prime genesis of these statements, this factor has been connoted as 'Brand Choice.' Family endorsements and marketers influence their brand choice, even if this information is reaching them through social media. Similarly, despite of enormous growth of technology and social media, the role of marketing remain same such as describing the target market, communicating with potential customers, customer engagement, building brand loyalty and so on. Social media communication directly and indirectly influences consumer perception towards brand attitude (Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2013). Firms are engaging with customers to create brand awareness, engage their existing customers and growing channel members.

Users engage themselves on the social media through various methods of expression and with their increased engagement, there is a resultant increased brand engagement as well. In the second factor, each of these statements relate to various engagement activities done by the users on the social networking. These entail posting of content, sharing of videos, brand recommendations, participating in brand conversation, follow brand page, giving advice, etc. Each of these statements relate to brand engagement. Users like to share their thoughts, issues, opinions and concerns related to any events, brands, products and social media platform facilitate them do so and expect immediate as well as continuous reply from the other users. Brands organize various marketing programs and promotional events on social media, so that they can get attention of customers worldwide and engage them in brand related dialogues easily. Firms keep informing their customers and followers about their products and engage them in conversation. If users read and share the messages posted by brands on social media then, it means they are interested to build and continue relationship with brands they interacted with, otherwise brands will lose their followers and potential customers. Brand engagement provides a subliminal and subconscious reminder through colour, logo, symbol, jingle, etc. Brand engagement is an important input for brand recall, which is the next emerging factor.
Just like word-of-mouth spreads the opinion about the brands, the discussions on social media also serve as a medium for word of mouth. Since this happens on the electronic space, this is connoted as E-WOM (E- Word of Mouth). Word of mouth is a very potent means of forming opinion about the brands and social media provides an open and free platform to express the opinions. This pertains to using social media platforms to influence the opinion towards a brand, comments/ reviews assisting in encouragement/discouragement to buy a product, trust, etc (Sernovitz, 2009). The opinions can be expressed freely on the social media and they have the potential to influence the purchase decisions and perceptions about the brands (Taining, 2012; Forbes & Vespoli, 2013).

The fifth factor connoting the perception of the social media and brand choice emerges from a set of the statements pertaining to the social media helping the users in recognizing the brands through the shared content, trends, expert opinions, brand pages and social media advertisements. Keeping with the nature of the emerging statements, this factor has been connoted as Brand Recognition.

**5.3 Variation in Perceptions**

There is no statistically significant difference of influence of age, gender, education and occupation groups on brand choice on social media platforms. Hence, it can be inferred that there is no statistically significant difference of perception of respondents for each of the emerging factors across age, education and occupation groups on brand choice, brand recall, e-WOM and brand recognition. The only significant difference has emerged in case of brand engagement across gender, where men show greater brand engagement than the females. Social media offers almost homogenous platform where everyone can express himself/herself almost freely and this is resulting in a convergence of thoughts, perceptions, opinions and even other cognitive factors. This could be one of the underlying reasons of no significant difference in perceptions emerging across demographic segments on social media and brand choice.

**5.4 Perceptions and Brand Choice**

Social media is a potent source of information and is keeping the users engaged and is influencing their cognitive as well as behavioural aspects. The perceptions on social media in terms of its influence on brand choice do point out towards its increasing influence on forming the brand choice and accordingly shaping their purchase intensions (Naylor, 2012;
Kim & Ko, 2012). Being extended and convenient platforms, they are very effective in assisting the users in the brand recall and recognition and also provide a room for brand engagement. With free flow of content, ideas, information, opinion, reviews, etc., social media is spreading word of mouth and is a very fast and potent platform for brand building. This freedom is leading to convergence of cognitive factors across all demographic segments, which facilitates the strategy formulation for marketing communication through social media. Besides this, it is a rich source of customer information, which can be leveraged to get information on user preferences, their demographic profiles and other such information, which can provide inputs to targeting, segmentation and positioning of the brands. Realizing its importance, more and more firms are relying on social media for brand building and are able to get measurable success through the same (Liu and Lopez, 2016).

Each of the emerging set of perceptions on social media influences the brand choice and the results of regression analysis show that brand recognition is the most important factor that influences the brand choice. With increasing engagement, the users get subliminal cues about various aspects of the brand, which helps in its recognition. A well recognized brand has a greater chance of being purchased as well. With social media, even newer brands are becoming known to millions of users within a very short span of time.

Social media is a very potent and effective platform for exchange of information and ideas and such a word of mouth emerges as the second most important factor that influences the brand choice (Liu and Lopez, 2016). Mere recognition will not serve the purpose as people wish to know the reviews of product usage from their friends circle. Social media immensely assists in such a free flow of opinions and accordingly the users get first hand idea of the brands even before usage.

Similarly, brand recall and customer brand engagement emerging out of the social media platforms has a lot of impact on the brand choice and purchase intension (Aaker, 1991). Brand recognition and brand knowledge will not be effective if the user fails to recollect the brand at the moment of purchase. Therefore, brand recall and engagement become an important factor than influences the brand choice. Firms are using a variety of methods to keep the customers engaged with them. Major brands attract millions of persons on their pages who express themselves. Greater the eyeballs on the social media, more is the digital effectiveness, increasing the possibility of purchase of a particular brand.
5.5 Implications for marketers

Social networking has emerged as a very powerful media for marketing communication and hence there are several implications of the same for the marketers. The study explains the perceptions of the users towards social media and its impact on brand choice. It has been established that social media has an influence on the brand choice and hence it needs to be made an integral part of the marketing communication. While designing any campaign, extending it towards the social media platforms can provide the leverage of targeting the right set of consumers and making the entire marketing communication more effective. Mass advertising is very inefficient as the proportion of the viewers turning into active consumers is very less. Through social media, the marketing communication campaign can be targeted and the probability of a rightful message received by the right consumer is high. Such a recipient of the message is more likely to purchase the product, making the whole campaign more efficient.

Besides being an effective tool for marketing communication, social media is also an effective source of data. In the present times, data analytics has emerged as a very effective means of conducting marketing research and the marketers can rely upon the same instead of using the traditional marketing research techniques. The consumer reviews and engagement on the brand pages can be a very useful source of information and it can be harnessed to study the perceptions of users about the product. With sophisticated mathematical algorithms for behavioural prediction through the social media usage, firms are getting empowered. Through analytics on the big data, precise targeting of the products can be made of very well defined market segments. Irrespective of the nature of the firm, they are using big data analytics to understand their customers and are able to provide customized marketing communication and marketing mix to their customers. This is increasing the effectiveness of their marketing programmes.

If a firm ignores the discussions on the social media space, it is likely to lose out a big market opportunity, or lose out its competitive advantage to their competitors. Traditional methods of marketing research are undergoing a sea change and firms are relying on very novel methods of conducting their research. Analytics tools can help in drawing conclusions from the qualitative data posted on the social media platforms, such as the comments and the tweets. This reduces the dependence on the traditional methods of data collection through questionnaire, interview and observation. Marketers need to imbibe this into their marketing
strategy as well.

5.6 Implications for users

Social media has widespread ramifications for the users as well. With seamless engagement on social media platforms, there is increasing influence on their social and personal life. People seem to believe on the virtual world as real. They need to understand that everything that is written on the social media is not true. They need to corroborate the same from other sources of information as well. If social media is a potent source of information, it is a potent source of misinformation as well. Lots of misleading information can also be spread through social media. There are incidents of spoofing, eavesdropping, and other such issues that can have a wrong influence on the users as well. Particularly, the younger generation is susceptible to such influences.

There is a need to use social media judiciously, as one of the sources of information which needs to be verified before making the final perception about a brand. Developing more stringent legal provisions for preventing misleading information is also an important aspect of managing social media for brand engagement. Users must be aware of these and then should make the final brand choice.

5.7 Suggestions

With social media emerging as a potent source of brand recognition, brand recall and finally influencing brand choice, marketers may use the following suggestions within their marketing strategy in order to develop more effective marketing programmes:

a) Strong data analytics

Social media is a rich source of information in the form of big data. Firms must use this treasure of information and understand their customers better. They should know their perceptions, preferences and sources of influence. This will help them in better product design and a more efficient feedback on their products and services.

b) Customised STP

With better understanding of the customers, the firms can develop more precise segments, target their customers more directly and provide customised brand positioning. Big data
analytics immensely helps in the same.

c) Complaint redressal

Social medial is a very potent method of complaint redressal. More and more firms are resorting to the same to reach out to the customers and solve their problems. This reduces the chances of the customer switch and increases brand loyalty.

d) Customer relationship management

Social media can be an excellent platform for managing customer relationships, which do not end with the purchase of the product. Firms can get access to the data of the users and use the same to build relationships with them and try to develop greater brand proximity with the customers. This will increase the prospects of garnering greater customer life-time value.

e) Competitor analysis

An eye can be kept on the activities of the competitors through the social media. Campaigns can be initiated to spread positive image of the brand vis-a-vis those of the competitors in order to remain ahead in competition.

5.8 Further Research

Research is a continuous process and any research work paves the way for further studies on the domain. With ubiquitous emergence of social media into our daily lives, there is tremendous scope for extending the study on the same.

- The impact of social networking through electronic platforms can be studied from various domains such as marketing, organizational behaviour, management, psychology, etc. Even in the broad domain of marketing, there can be several dimensions of the study, entailing purchase behaviour, influence of reference groups, consumer psychology, advertising, data analytics, targeting, segmentation and positioning, product design, designing marketing mix, post purchase behaviour, etc.

- A researcher aspiring to extend this study on social media and brand choice can find out the relationship between the cognitive (perceptions) and the behavioural aspects of the users. Social networking is undergoing several changes and accordingly the perceptions are also undergoing lots of changes. The impact of these perceptions can
be studied by modeling of relationship between perception and brand choice/purchase intention can be an interesting study.

- It is noteworthy that the perceptions on social networking and its impact on the subjects are not uniform and there are several variations across the demographic, geographic and other variables. These variations can be an interesting piece of study. The study can be extended to other segments, such as semi-urban areas, different demographic segments – housewives, teenagers, etc. The effect of demographic variables on perceptions and brand choice can also be studied.

- Besides this, the ethical and social issues emerging due to social media can also be studied.