

THE VALUE OF ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN CREATING A BRAND-CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP

Archana Sahani, Research Scholer, Panjab University

archisahani4729@gmail.com,

Abstract

Building a good customer and brand relationship is very important, that's why firms use an online brand community. So, the main focus of this study was to understand the antecedent and consequences of customer participation in the online brand community, concerning to loyalty behaviour through U & G Theory. The current study concentrated on social media-based different gratification which influences customer participation after that the actual behaviour of customers towards the brand was analysed. In the end mediation effect of community commitment was also checked. In this study, survey methods were used and data was collected from 202 individuals. The empirical data analysis was conducted by SEM. The findings of the study depicted that out of all gratification, only incentive plays a crucial role in customer participation and community commitment plays a considerable role in creating loyalty behaviour after that mediation effect also showed positive results.

Keywords- Online Brand Community, Customer Participation, Brand Loyalty, Brand Customer Relationship.

1. Introduction

Building a good brand relationship is very important for the brands, this is the area that every enterprise wants to master, and for that brand communities gain popularity because it helps organisations to attract more individual customers and to make strong & long-term relationships with them (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010) which makes organisations competitive & enhances marketing productivity (Webster, 1992). During the past few decades researchers and academicians has been more interested in online brand communities (Paruthi, M et al., 2023; Kim & Manoli, 2023; Kumar et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021 ; De Silva, 2020; Kamboj, 2020). This online brand community is created among the admirers of the brand on social media like Nike sets up their brand page on any social media. The brand community was first introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). They define brand communities as "a specialised, non-geographical bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among the admirers of a brand".

Involving a customer in a marketing area becomes necessary these days for the improvement of the brand which as a result impacts the perspective of establishing a positive relationship with the customer (Andersen, 2005). For involving customers, social media acts as a good medium. Many organisations find it, a very relevant tool for creating relationships. Social media tools have given members globally obtainable communication channels that provide the potential to share & distribute information by interactively collaborating with each other through various modes i.e. blogs, social networking, and other social media by creating online communities (Chen, 2011). Social media is a perfect tool for brands to develop good connections with consumers at online (Ananda et al., 2019), more than 50% of social media users across worldwide must follow any brand (Kamboj, 2020a) because many leading brands

almost 70% is on social media and have social media action like coco-cola and Samsung most popular brand on Facebook with 160 million & 107 million follower or fans with their brand page. Users of social media may also be interested in viewing posts, sharing experiences, and other information in respect of their brand of interest through websites or apps (Jain et al., 2018). These brand communities provide a great platform as a marketing communication channel to a firm and help in forming direct links with current and potential customers of their brand who use social media (Kamboj, 2020a).

Researchers and academicians also accept that the online brand community has contributed to strengthening the relationship with customers, in which scholarly works has been done (Kamboj, 2020a). But participation concepts were little ignored and that is a very important aspect for building good relationships in the community which was broadly accepted in extant literature (Chae and Ko, 2016; Khan, 2017). Past studies only focus on conceptualisation of customer participation and engagement in the social media context but empirical testing was limited (Khan, 2017). So, there is a need for empirical testing by applying U & G theory to give a complete analysis of how loyalty is built through customer participation and for that paper addresses three research questions and **research objective** –

1-Want to know the different gratification that influences customer participation in the online brand community and Does customer participation lead the community commitment.

2-Want to know online community commitment affects customer loyalty behaviour.

3-Want to know whether there is an intervening variable that plays a role of mediation.

Then to answer the RQ1 study investigated whether interpersonal utility, entertainment, information seeking, brand likeability, and incentive affect customer participation and further develop community commitment. To address the RQ2 examine the affect of community commitment on loyalty behaviour i.e. WOM, Re-Purchase intention, and Constructive Complaints. The last RQ3 of the study examines the mediating effect of community commitment.

2. Literature Review

Participation in online brand community

For long-term development & sustainability, participation was considered an important element or aspect for firms (Casaló et al., 2007; Koh & Kim, 2004). In a virtual community, members participate for many reasons and Customer participation in the online brand community provides a remarkable outcome,

2.1 Building Relationships.

Building relationships is an important feature of social networking sites. In previous studies building a relationship was considered important gratification and different authors used some related concepts in their study i.e. interpersonal relationships, social relationships & social interaction (Chae et al., 2015; Ha et al., 2015). Past studies confirm that customer engagement was connected with relationship marketing concepts (Kabadayi & Price, 2014; Vivek et al., 2012).

According to “Yuan et al. (2016) relationship building acts as a motivation for users to connect with social media and allows them to take part in social networking sites, through communities. So, this study quoted that relationship building has an impact on customer participation in the online brand community.

H1: Relationship building positively affects customer participation in the online brand community.

2.2 Information Seeking

Another gratification is the search of information. Information seeking was, to obtain information to gratify needs, satisfy interest, and make clear artistic affairs & current news (Park et al., 2009).

It was spotlighted that information motive directs customers to consume brand-related content in online brand community (Vale & Fernandes, 2018) and brand posts contain information according to users’ needs which they were seeking (De Varies, 2012), so admirers of a brand are motivated to take part in online community when they finds out that online brand community can satisfy their requirement of information, so there is higher chance to bring out favorable response towards the online brand community (Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Kujur and Singh, 2019).

H2: Information seeking positively affects customer participation in the online brand community.

2.3 Entertainment

People regularly use social networking sites for entertainment (Dholakia et al., 2004a) or to have fun (Enginkaya & Yılmaz, 2014a). It was revealed that entertainment was significantly linked with customer participation in social networking sites (Chae & Ko, 2016) which means entrainment value helps in online brand interaction (Enginkaya & Yılmaz, 2014b) by motivating brand community participation (Gummerus et al., 2012b) and customer engagement (Jahn & Kunz, 2012).

H3: Entertainment positively affects customer participation in online brand community.

2.4 Brand Likeability

Brand likeability is also one of the main aspects of engaging customers online. Consumers feel motivated by brand likeability to engage themselves online because they want to share their positive feeling, love & bond for a brand with other customers (Sung et al., 2010). Customers join a brand community or become a member because they favor that specific brand and this is the main reason to follow any brand on social media. (Sung et al, 2010)

H4-Brand Likability positional affects customer participation in the online brand community.

2.5 Incentive

Customers always seek something extra or try to get an economic benefit (i.e. Discounts or specific price) from a relationship with the brand which is considered as a monetary benefit (Gwinner et al., 1998; Harris and Goode, 2004). It was found in the study that customers expected remuneration, that is why they consumed online brand-related content (Muntinga et

al., 2011). Vale and Fernandes. (2018) prove that, motive to get remuneration or incentives was related to a higher level of engagement in the form of contributions & creation of content in the online brand community.

H5: Incentives positively affect customer participation in the online brand community.

2.6 Participation -Community Commitment

In relationship marketing, commitment is considered an important construct because when consumers have trust they are committed to any connection (Li and Chang, 2016) and committed customers display less conversion behavior (Vohra. A & Bhardwaj. N, 2019), they show more willingness to stay in an exchange relationship & put extra effort to maintain it (Turri et al., 2013). It was also found that customer engagement behaviour in the online brand community increases interpersonal relationships and the sense of community (Kim et al., 2008; Madupu and Cooley, 2010) and social interaction with other people in a specific community that creates common values & norms, and that will increase their commitment to the focal online brand community (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia et al., 2004).

H6: Participation in an online brand community is positively associated with an online community commitment.

Response of commitment

2.7 Repurchase Intention

Previous research finds out that there was a positive correlation between commitment & customer retention (Li & Chang, 2016). One of the findings assured that all dimensions of customer commitment & mental state (continuous commitment, affective commitment, and normative commitment) are negatively associated with the wellness of customers for conversion (Bolton et al., 2004). To maintain important & continuous relationships, commitment is regularly needed. It is widely said that affective commitment like psychological attachment and a sense of unity, persuades customers to always be in the existing service & keeps them away from competitors' services (Hur et al., 2011). Brand, customer relationship, and commitment of existing customers will positively impact the occurrence of loyal customer behavior and have a significant positive impact on the willingness of customers to repurchase (Henning-Thurau et al., 2002).

H7: Online Brand Community commitment significantly affects repurchase intention.

2.8 Word-of-Mouth

Loyalty behavior also includes the behaviour of communicating with others regarding their experience of the brand & online brand community, on social media or offline (van Heerden & Wiese, 2021). Word of mouth is an important outcome of commitment and engagement (Hur et al., 2011). Online word of mouth is a new aspect of the channel with the help of this community member easily & immediately share & forward information regarding their likes and interests on social networking sites-based communities (Li & Chang, 2016) and they work as "part-time marketer" (Gummeson, 2002).It was also found in the study that advocate groups as compared to passive supporter groups significantly show high commitment and spread WOM (Paulin et al., 2006).

H8: Online Brand Community commitment significantly affects word-of-mouth.

2.9 Constructive Complaints

The constructive complaint is an opportunity for organisations to improve themselves according to customers but this is not easy to know their fault. When customers feel dissatisfaction regarding products & services, they try to end their relationship with the firm or they convey their dissatisfaction to the firm (Gabrielson & Kriplani, 2004) So, receiving a complaint of dissatisfaction is a good sign for the organisation. If customer conveys their dissatisfaction in a constructive way that is very important for organisations to keep up with failed services (Hur et al., 2011). However, committed customers acknowledge the company regarding their failure of service because they believe service failure is directed toward the performance of the company, not the company itself, and convey their bad experience to the firm (Van Dyne and Ang, 1998).

H9: Online Brand Community commitment has positive affects on their constructive complaint toward a brand.

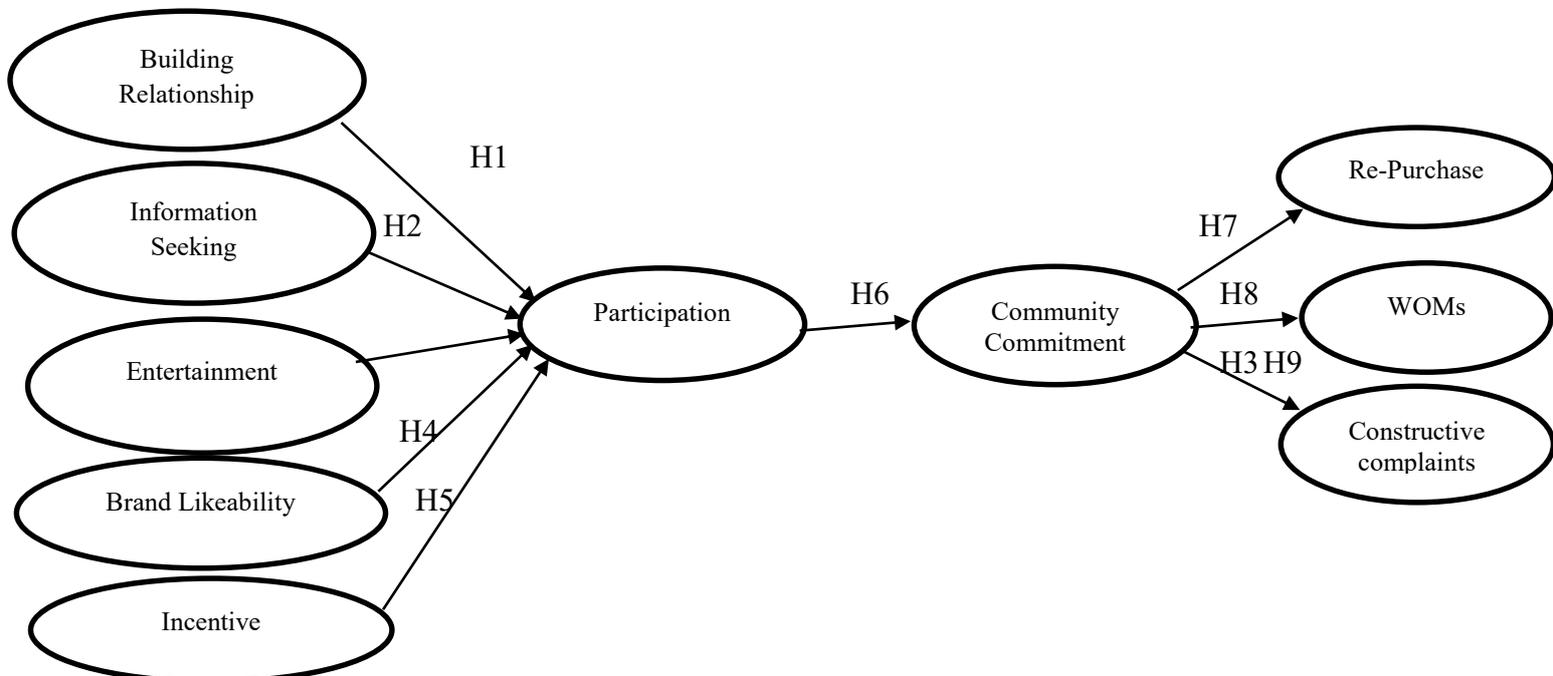
2.10 Mediation affect of community commitment

As above in the study already discussed the importance of community commitment and that is very significant in forming loyalty behaviour. So, study hypothesis-

H10: The affect of participation on (a)WOM, (b) Re-purchase Intention (c) Constructive Complaints is mediated by community commitment.

3. Research Methodology

Fig 1 describes the conceptual model for the current study



3.1 Sampling and data collection

For the sample of the study, approach to individuals who were Indian users of any social media platform. A survey technique was approached for data collection, and structured questionnaire

were used to targeted respondents, who are under the age bracket of 18-35 years, they represent millennial population and are 65% of the total population in India (Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019). This age group is more tech-savvy (Nadeem et al., 2015) and more active on the internet & social media (Bolton et al., 2013; Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019). For collecting data university students were approached as they perfectly representing millennial generation and consistent with the past study as well (de Silva, 2020; Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019; Kumar. J & Kumar. V, 2020, Kamboj. S & Rahman. Z, 2016). Non-probability convenience sampling was used (de Silva, 2020; Kumar & Kumar, 2020) because this study targets the specific class of customers who follow the online brand community. A total of 249 responses were received from the online survey out of which 202 responses were retained for the final sample size and it was justified by the condition of Hair, et al. (2010) in which 200 sample size was sufficient. Previous validated scales have been taken for the various constructs of the study. Seven-point Likert scale were used which was ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree. Table 1 list down the characteristics of the sample.

TABLE 1: Sample Demographic

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male	102	50.5%
Female	100	47.5%
Age		
Below 20	23	11.38%
21-25	86	42.57%
26-30	54	26.73%
31-35	39	19.30%

Source(s): Authors' own findings

4. Results & Findings

4.1 Measurement Model

Table 2 reveals the measurement model results, the value of Cronback's Alpha coefficient was greater than .07 of all constructs, which confirms the reliability of the measures in their particular construct (Hair et al.,2010). For the validity of measures confirmatory factor analysis was applied on AMOS. Version 23, in which all AVE (Average variance extracted) values and CR (Composite reliability) greater than 0.5 and 0.8 threshold values of all constructs (Hair et al.,2010). That means a convergent value was established. Factor loading of all constructs was also greater than .50, this is the minimum threshold limit (Hair et al., 2019a, b) which ensures additional indicators of convergent validity. To ensure the discriminant validity HTMT ratio was calculated and the values of all constructs were less than .90 (Henseler et al., 2014) which also satisfactory. After that model fit also showed acceptable, results (Hair et al,2010) GFI=.80(GFI>.85),NFI=.87(NFI>.85),IFI=.94(IFI>.89),TLI=.929(TLI>.85),CFI=.0939(CFI>.88), CMIN=1.85(CMIN<.5), RSMEA=.065(RSMEA<.08). Only GFI value is less than .85 but that was also satisfactory (Yang, B et al.,2021; van Heerden & Wiese, M,2021).

TABLE 2. Results of Measurement Model

Item	Loading	CA	CR	AVE
BR1	0.824	0.919	0.89	0.73
BR2	0.945			
BR3	0.912			
IS1	.874	.889	.89	.68
IS2	.888			
IS3	.864			
IS4	.649			
ENT1	0.811	0.905	0.90	.70
ENT2	0.871			
ENT3	0.886			
ENT4	0.811			
BK1	.965	.892	.90	.76
BK2	.903			
BK3	.744			
IN1	0.923	0.943	0.94	0.84
IN2	0.922			
IN3	0.915			
PPRT1	0.818	0.896	0.89	0.68
PART2	0.842			
PART3	0.816			
PART4	0.83			
OCC1	0.858	0.934	0.93	0.78
OCC2	0.898			
OCC3	0.93			
OCC4	0.852			
RP1	0.89	0.829	0.85	0.66
RP2	0.941			
RP3	0.562			
WOM1	0.975	0.968	0.96	0.91
WOM2	0.96			
WOM3	0.927			
CC1	0.894	0.906	0.90	0.76
CC2	0.844			
CC3	0.88			

Note(s): Brand Likability (BK), Information Seeking (IS), Incentive (IN), Entrainment (ENT), Building Relationship (BR), Participation (PART), Community Commitment (CC), Re-Purchase (RP), Word of mouth (WOM).
 Source(s): Authors' own findings.

4.2 Method of Common Basis

The study evaluated the potential for common method bias using Harman's single-factor test, and the result shows that a single factor with highest eigen value explain only 46.9% of the

variance, ideally, it should be below 50% (Podsakoff and Organ ,1986), so results were satisfactory.

4.3 Structure Model

The hypothesis was tested, which evaluates the structural model's path coefficient. The results are shown in Table 3 in detail. The relationship of all gratification with the participation result showed they were related but only Incentive significantly affected participation, which means only H5 was accepted or supported ($\beta = 0.382, P < 0.01$). Hence other variables i.e. Building Relationships ($\beta = 0.258, P > 0.05$), Information seeking ($\beta = 0.382, P > 0.05$), Entertainment ($\beta = 0.021, P > 0.05$), and Brand Likability ($\beta = 0.121, P > 0.05$) were not showing satisfactory results that means H1, H2, H3 & H4 were rejected. The next hypothesis (H6) was accepted i.e. participation ($\beta = 0.846, P < 0.01$) has a significant affect on community commitment, next H7, H8 & H9 all were accepted, which ensured community commitment has a significant impact on re-purchase ($\beta = 0.739, P < 0.01$), WOMs ($\beta = 0.641, P < 0.01$) and constructive complaints ($\beta = 0.636, P < 0.01$).

The last mediation effect of community commitment was analysed before that both conditions for mediation checked i.e. there must be a significant relation between the predictor & mediator and between the mediator & output variable it was as suggested by Schneider et al., (2005) and used in a previous study (Shankar et al., 2020) also. So all results shown in Table 3, according to that community commitment fully mediates the relationship between the affect of participation on re-purchase (direct effect=.070, $P > 0.01$; indirect effect=.063, $P < .01$), WOM (direct effect=.083, $P > 0.05$; indirect effect= .069, $P < .01$) and constructive complaints (direct effect= .070, $P < 0.05$; indirect effect= 0.084, $P < 0.01$). Hence H10a, H10b, H10c were accepted and first two were fully mediated and the last one was the case of partial mediation.

Table 3. Summary of Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Path	β)	S. E	P Value	Result	Direct Path	Indirect Path	Mediation Result
H1	Building Relationship-----> Participation	.258	.067	0.176	NS			
H2	Information Seeking-----> Participation	.173	.176	0.832	NS			
H3	Entrainment-----> Participation	.021	.102	0.002	NS			
H4	Brand Likability-----> Participation	.121	.119	0.268	NS			
H5	Incentive-----> Participation	.382	.065	***	S			
H6	Participation---->Community Commitment	.846	.086	***	S			
H7	Community Commitment---->Repurchase	.739	.067	***	S			
H8	Community Commitment---->Word of Mouth	.641	.067	***	S			
H9	Community Commitment--->Constructive Complaints	.636	.07	***	S			
H10a	Participation-->Community commitment---> Re-purchase					070	063	Fully
H10b	Participation-->Community commitment---> WOM					083	083	Fully
H10c	Participation-->Community commitment--->Constructive Complaints					070	084	Partially

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; NS-not significant; S-significant, hypotheses accept

Source(s): Authors' own findings

5. Discussion

The current study explores the relation between loyalty and long-term relationship-building factors with the gratification of participation along with commitment. So current study reveals some factual (novel) findings and contrary results to the current research on online brand community.

Effect of all gratification on online community participation

According to the literature, this study hypothesized that all gratification i.e. brand relationship, information seeking, brand likability, entertainment, and incentive have a significant positive impact on participation, out of which only incentive plays a crucial role for customer participation because the reward, cashback, discounts, coupons were the most important thing which customers want and get attracted towards (Muntinga et al., 2011) and it alliance with previous studies also (Kamboj, 2020a ; de Silva, T. M ,2020). After that building relationship got contrary results as concerned to previous results (Kamboj, 2020a, Ha et al., 2015; Kang et al., 2016) that means building relationship doesn't motivate customer for participation, the reason could be that today people are very busy they don't bother to maintain a relationship, especially with the brand in the era where switching a brand or product is very easy if they will just get some attractive offer of other brands or if they even once dissatisfied with the brands. The next other three gratifications i.e. Information seeking, Entrainment & Brand Likability also showed contradicting results from previous studies (Chae et al., 2015; Chae and Ko, 2016; Kamboj, 2020a) but van Heerden & Wiese.(2021) support findings, so information seeking & entrainment does not play any role for the participation of customer because in the world of internet, customers get easy access of information or online brand community is not a primary outlet for getting information or offers, related to the product. Consumers depend mostly upon personal experience, the brand's official site, and referrals (Kang et al., 2014). Then for entrainment possible explanation was the presence of lots of entraining content like memes, videos etc on social media so might be possible with brand Page content consumers are not entertained to participate (de Silva & T. M ,2020). At last brand likability also doesn't plays role for participation as people liking, taste preferences change a lot.

Next participation leads to community commitment and it was supported by previous studies (Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019;). It was mentioned by Hsu et al., (2012) that when customers communicate within the boundaries of the community that originates community identification which was found to be a valuable predictor of trust that means when customers participate, they share information & it creates positive feelings which lead to a sense of confidence and increase user trust (Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019) and at last it will end with commitment(Zhou and Amin ,2014).

Lastly, the study identified that online brand community commitment increases different forms of customer loyalty and it resonates with previous studies (Li, C., & Chang,2016; Hur,et al.,2011). So, community commitment leads WOM because customers who trust the community are committed also and involved in part-time advocacy of brands and the brand generates profit through strong relationships through communication or WOM (Reichheld,

2003; 2006). On the other hand, customers who have high trust in the brand community require likely less community commitment to make a constructive complaint, or if they do, the reason could be customers already trust the brand and feel free to communicate anything, it is a positive behaviour like active loyalty (constructive complaint) which hardly expected (Hur et al., 2011). So, in the end, a committed person always shows re-purchase behaviour (Hur et al., 2011; Li, C., & Chang, 2016) and this re-purchase is like a long-lasting customer relationship. So, in the end, the study realised that community commitment was very important, so checking its mediation affect also between participation & loyalty behaviour variable, it has intervening potential. The mediation hypothesis was accepted in which community commitment fully mediates between the participation and Re-Purchase & WOM. In the case of constructive complaints, there was partial mediation. So, when customers are committed to the community this attitude facilitates in development of favourable loyalty behaviour.

6. Theoretical Implication & Managerial Contribution

This study gives the overall framework to establish customer loyalty & maintain long-term relationships with the given model in the study. The current study considered all social media-based gratification which actually influenced consumers to make them committed & creating loyalty behaviour through brand social media pages. So given model of study shows realistic and proper channel of achieving loyalty behaviour because loyalty can't be achieved directly it will take time and follow a path and social media gratification plays a major role for it. Next study contributed to participation literature, which means participation was considered instead of engagement because participation is a lower level of engagement which is actually consumer's shows like watching, reading, liking and commenting etc on the brand social media page which give marketers complete framework through which marketing strategies will be developed effectively according to customers. The current study gives marketers complete framework through which marketing strategies will be developed effectively according to customers. So further practical implications discussed according to the result of the study and its reveal that among all gratification only incentive plays a major role in encouraging customers to participate. So, marketers should offer good incentives to customers which is attractive like big discounts, assured cash back & coupons and motivate them to participate. Then participation found significant key for committed customers so the firm should motivate customers to join the brand community on social media and make them to participate in the community by providing useful information, quick response & remuneration which lead to encourage customer for more participation. Lastly result reveal only committed customers towards the community show loyalty behaviour because they trust the community and brand, so firm focus on the customer's commitment then they receive real results like re-purchase, WOMs, and constructive complaints because they already trust the community. So, trust is built with good, valuable & accurate information and services to customers and obsolescence quality of products & brand.

7. Limitations and Future Direction

The study gives a complete result but the study has limitations also, the current study has not considered any product category or particular brand-based online community which opens up a new area of research, then further specific class of products or specialised class of customers or industry may be targeted. The next limitation was loyalty behaviour is a wider aspect so further study can take multidimensional aspects for analysing the complete loyalty behaviour.

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