

## **Mediating role of quality of customer relationship concerning trust on brand satisfaction and loyalty (case study: Communities of the brand created for computer products in social networks)**

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### **Abstract**

The present research intends to examine and evaluate dimensions of the outlook based on trust on quality of customers' relationships and loyalty to brand. Quality of customer relationship together in brand communities created in social networks is of great importance in development of future brand activities, under which this variable has been considered as a mediator of this relationship. In this research, sample group consists of 75 customers of firms listed in computer equipment and laptop sale across Tehran. Partial least squares regression was used to evaluate and analyze data. Results and outputs of software indicate that trust will be the most important component in creation of the optimal conditions in competitive development of organizations. Trust affects quality of relationship, creation of trust on brand communities, customers' satisfaction and loyalty which are the ultimate aim of marketing programs. As a result, professional and ethical behaviors by companies and trusted applications stimulate and encourage the customers to acquire sense of belonging and attachment to brand. The outcome by these processes will lie on acquisition of customers loyal to brand.

**Keywords:** customers' interaction in brand communities, trust on brand, trust on brand communities, satisfaction, brand loyalty

### **Introduction**

In recent years, traditional marketing methods have witnessed a great challenge that as the result the relationship marketing has been suggested as an alternative option. Relationship marketing has changed from focus on marketing for short-term acquisition of customer and discrete transactions to maintenance of loyal customers (Yoganathan et al., 2015). Relationship marketing activities have focused on long-term customer relationship and mutual benefit between customer and seller. Development of relationship for acquisition of customer has been regarded among very efficient means that can be used for success and competition in market by the managers and marketers. By development of mass media, such marketing has been largely subjected to change, e.g. internet has been recognized as a tool facilitating communication among numerous individuals throughout the world. Rests of customers do not make decision in isolation, but they make decision in a social environment with presence of other members who are in an intellectual logic and framework for decision making (Bruhn et al., 2014). According to figures released by Forrester research study, 91% of B2B decision makers have membership in the social networks and 69% of them believe that these networks and communities in long term lead to success in commercial transactions in Europe and North America (the Ramos & Young, 2009). Therefore, development of customer relationships has been given priority in success of firms through use of modern technologies. Brand has been regarded as the most fundamental asset of any organization. Development of brand in cyberspace, social networks and websites has led to creation of communities that have been called brand communities, i.e. from point of view of Muniz and

O'Guinn, these communities are called to specialized communities which lacked geographical restriction and organized based on a series of social relations in which the advocates and consumers of brands have membership (Muniz and O' Guinn, 2001). Yet, this phenomenon has been witnessed in the context of Business-to-business (B2B) in which several persons in a complicated network of different actors involve in decision making process (Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011). Interest in building relationship with customers has caused rise of this attitude, saying that customer hospitality and customer loyalty have been assumed as the core of these activities (He et al., 2012). The firms make effort to build long-term relationship with customers and meet their different needs and expectations so as to increase extent of their customer loyalty (Martínez & del Bosque, 2013). Previous and key studies on customer loyalty have shown that satisfaction raises and improves loyalty (Lee et al., 2009). In cases that customer loyalty and satisfaction increase through building these communities, organizations will achieve a competitive advantage at market (Han et al., 2011). Loyal customers do more purchases found as good missionaries (Harris and Goode, 2004). In this regards, companies are increasingly spending huge expenses at marketing and development of customer relationships on social networks. Yet, there are few studies on this context which represent how the effect of media on building customer relationship and brand loyalty is. Understanding consumer behavior to develop marketing strategies for the purpose of increasing consumer loyalty to organizations and managers is of great importance (Bilgihan & Bujisic, 2014). Social networks have raised a way for customers' ease of access to brand information and properties and representation of customers' comments through creation of digital channels and virtual communications, through which they can share information, facilitate the interaction between members and customers and ultimately facilitate purchase and evaluation of product and brand (Hudson et al., 2015). Customers' trust on such online communities and social networks play a major role in building trust, satisfaction and loyalty among customers, ensured this has a direct effect on quality of customer relationships in brand communities. According to the research by Bruhn et al.(2014), the more quality of customer relationship in brand communities, there will be a positive effect on customer loyalty and trust on brand(Bruhn et al., 2014). In this research, we will examine literature review and its variables and describe the relationship between research variables and hypotheses. Then, the research method will be described and in the next stage the data analysis will be made. Ultimately, we will consider the conclusion and implications in the last part.

### **Literature review and research hypothesis**

#### ***Brand communities***

Concept of brand communities has rooted in sociological concepts. These communities have developed from social groups in which the individuals with common benefits serve in a common area to undertake the daily problems in a common case. Modern technologies have changed this concept and transformed it from the private and restrictive mode to an extensive community which has extended beyond geographical borders, in which different groups of people from different places make communication with each other through mass media independent from time and place (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The first study was conducted in the context of brand communities in 2001 and the brand range was extended to the area of network and online communities, whereby issue of brand communities was raised. This study was conducted by Moniz & Gouveia(2001). In this study, three features were attributed to brand communities which include awareness from type, customs and traditions and sense of ethical responsibility. Awareness from type refers to this issue that members of brand community have awareness from brand, however, feeling to other members is more important in addition to the importance of this awareness. Customs and traditions refer to social processes which are targeted in maintaining and extending meanings, history and culture of

brand and its communities. Moral obligation and sense of moral responsibility in brand communities imply that members of a community express their tendency to support brand and relationship with other members of community in relation to the issues in the context of brand and brand trade. The second study in this context was conducted by Alexander Mc et al.(2002), in which customer orientation in these networks and complicated and dynamic customer relationships were confirmed. As the result, development of customer relationship with brand, product, company and other customers was added to this area. These relationships are grounded on the mutual trust in which users assist each other in sharing contents, experiences and information on brand, product, company and other customers(Mc Alexander et al, 2002). Further, other studies have been conducted at this area, which have focused on innovation, creation of value through these communities, brand and commercial processes of brand (Füller et al., 2008; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Brand communities are divided into three categories: business to customer (B2C), business to business (B2B), Customer to customer (c2c) in these communities. The firms exploit from these communities in business to customer (B2C) so as to resolve their problems, make long-term relationships with other partners and revitalize their loyal customers (Webster, 2002). Strategic problems and needing to integration to customers needing to fundamental information, ideas, comments, long-term international relationships and so forth have been mentioned as the major reasons for use of brand communities in B2B relationships(Wouters, 2004). C2C relationships in brand communities and their quality have been examined in the present research. The interactions between customers in social networks require trust. Firstly, customer relationship is considered as the face to face relationship. Yet, today these issues have extended to interactions through internet in virtual environments that have raised unforeseen opportunities for direct interactions (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2005). Positive outcomes have been reported from the customer relationships in social networks of brands which include increase of loyalty, growth of profitability, improvement of financial performance and brand equity(Gruen et al., 2005; Libai et al., 2010). Adjei et al.(2010) who have studied quality of C2C relationships indicated that such relationships put a positive effect on reduction of uncertainty in brand communities and increase quality of these communities, affecting customer purchase behavior(alternation in purchase and characterization of products by customers).

### ***Trust-based outlook***

Trust on brand and brand community have been mentioned as the major factors in communication transactions (Bruhn et al., 2014). Trust is directly influenced of customer relationship in brand communities, thus two major constructs of this research include trust on brand and trust on brand communities (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008). Trust on brand is of great importance in internet marketing, because it can overcome uncertainty without trust and create the behaviors pertaining to trust such as sharing information or purchase and etc. (Ruparelia et al., 2010). Trust acts as a mechanism that is mentioned as an essential mechanism to induce specific methods for interaction which results in creation of a common goal for relationship with all the members, enabled them for responsiveness (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Trust plays a major role in continuity of communications in internet environment in which risk and uncertainty is high and competence of behaviors is uncertain (Bruhn et al., 2014). These communications take place in network communities among a mass of anonymous users at different places and times (Lages, Lancaster, & Lages, 2008). Trust on brand will be followed by numerous benefits for the users and customers exploited for not loss of customers in these communities. Therefore, it can expect numerous benefits and utility from trust on brand (Bruhn et al., 2014). In this research, trust on brand and trust on brand communities have been mentioned as two important factors contributed in trust-based outlook which

affect quality of C2C in brand communities. Trust on brand has two aspects: one aspect is based on users' behavioral intention and the other aspect is cognitive factor which has focused on users' beliefs in other's reputation (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Trust on brand associates to previous experiences of customers from brand; if these experiences be positive and brand acts based on trust, the customers will be obliged to retaliate with confidence, whereby they will engage in a task with a value for brand equal to trust (Mouzas, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2007). Where users have trust on brand, as the result they will have trust on each other, which this trust will develop among users and virtual environment causing an increase in adherence to ethics, ethical competitiveness and compliance with honesty in this environment, indicating that trust is such mechanism which develops and creates this trusted community (Mathwick et al., 2008). Therefore, we assume that trust on brand can have a direct effect on building trust on brand communities among users and both these dimensions (trust on brand and trust on brand communities) can have effect on quality of customer interactions in commercial issues and brand communities. In this regards, the hypotheses below will be raised:

H1: trust on brand has a positive effect on trust on brand communities.

H2: trust on brand has a positive effect on quality of customers' interactions in brand communities.

H3: trust on brand communities has a positive effect on quality of customers' interactions in brand communities.

#### ***Satisfaction with brand and Loyalty to brand***

According to Rodriguez del Bosque and San Martin (2008), customer satisfaction is not a cognitive agent but a psychological agent (Rodriguez del Bosque and San Martin, 2008). According to Oliver (1999), satisfaction implies consumer's emotional response and evaluation of brand after purchase of an experienced product or service. Satisfaction has been assumed as a key structure in virtual environment, indicating success in effect of websites on users (Lee et al., 2015). Dissatisfaction with brand communities results in negative word of mouth marketing to brand and product, but when level of satisfaction with brand increases, trust on positive brand and marketing will develop among users (Athanassopoulos et al., 2001). Under development of satisfaction among users, their activity will develop in brand communities. When quality of customers' relationship with each other increases in brand communities, it is expected that satisfaction will increase as the result of this quality of relationship; more specifically, users will share better and further information by strengthening relationship and will propose new ideas under which qualitative level of brand community improves. With this improvement, it is expected that users' satisfaction with brand and brand communities which derive from trust on brand increases; further trust plays a major role in making a long term relationship with customer (Lee et al., 2015). When trust on brand exists among users and consumers, it will result in brand loyalty. Brand loyalty has been regarded as one of the precious goals and great indices of the firms which affects success of brand communities (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Since firms face a bulk purchases in B2B relationships, brand loyalty is critical in such relationships to maintain long-term relationship (Rauyruen, Miller, & Barrett, 2007). Brand loyalty has been assumed as the customer's enthusiasm for repurchase of brand and participation in brand communities (Bruhn et al, 2014). Brand loyalty has the potential for changing consumer's behavior, affecting future marketing activities of firms (Oliver, 1999). With regard to what mentioned above, it can say that trust will result in customers' satisfaction with brand and ultimately customers' loyalty to brand. Loyalty will have numerous advantages for the firms including increase of sale, profitability, reduction of firms' sensitivity to changes in market,

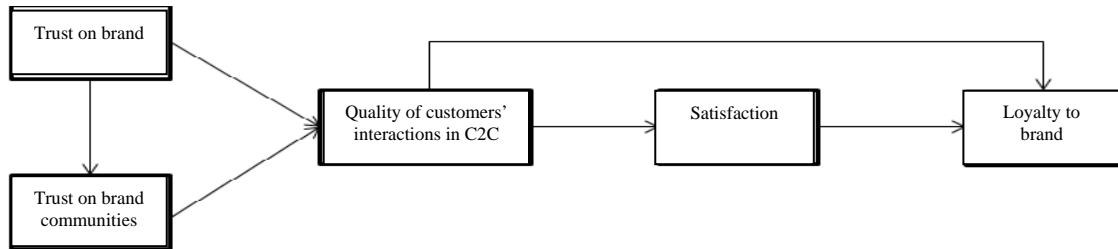
customer orientation (Aaker, 1992; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Therefore, the ultimate part of hypotheses of this research is as follows:

H4: quality of customers' interactions with each other in C2C relationships affects loyalty to brand.

H5: quality of customers' interactions with each other in C2C relationships affects satisfaction with brand.

H6: customer satisfaction affects loyalty to brand.

As the result of these hypotheses and what discussed to date, the conceptual model of this research is proposed as follow.



**Figure 1: Conceptual model of research**

### Research method

In this research, partial least squares approach has been used to analyze data, because firstly this method is not relied on the presumptions such as normal distribution of observed agents and high sample size (Azar, Gholamzadeh & Ghanavati, 2012), secondly this approach is used for forecast intentions and exploration of probable relationships (Chin, 1998). Henseler et al. (2009) have suggested partial least squares approach to estimate path modeling that the sample size is greater than the factors below: 1-10 times the construct indices that have the highest number of composite agents, 2-10 times number of structural paths that end in a specific construct in an internal path model (Fazli & Amin Afshar, 2014). With regard to the mentioned model, 75 collected questionnaires over the least sample size are required. The questionnaire consists of 21 questions with five-point likert scale that has been used previously in the research by Bruhn et al., 2014. Validity and reliability have been examined using different tests for agents and constructs, explained in findings in details.

### Findings of research

Findings of this research have been classified to two groups. The first group is assigned to validity and reliability of constructs and agents for which internal consistency and validity have been used. Three criteria suggested by Fresnel and Locker have been used to examine validity of constructs, which include composite validity, average extracted variance and validity of each of items (Fresnel and Locker, 1981; Hoshangi et al. 2015).

**Table 1: Results from reliability of variables**

AVE	Cronbach's alpha	Pc	
0.817633	0.888487	0.930797	BCT
0.636388	0.721009	0.839646	BL
0.746881	0.831798	0.898380	BT
0.709018	0.794821	0.879660	QU
0.819870	0.926953	0.947929	SA

Cronbach's alpha and Dillon-Goldstein's coefficient have been used to examine composite validity of each of constructs. Table 1 indicates values of composite validity, Cronbach's alpha and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct. Dillon-Goldstein's coefficient and Cronbach's alpha for all the constructs are greater than 0.839 and 0.721, mentioned greater than 0.7. Further, average variance extracted (AVE) ranges from 0.636 to 0.709 which is greater than 0.5, meant that the constructs have at least determined 50% of variances of their indicators.

Factor loading of items has been indicated in table 2.

Factor loading for each agent must be greater than 0.6 for reliability of agents in partial least squares approach (Fazli et al. 2013; Hooshangi et al. 2015). Values of all the factor loadings of agents are greater than 0.6, indicating suitable reliability of agents.

**Table 2: Results from studying the reliability of agents**

Agent	factor loading	Agent	factor loading
BT 1	0.893	QU 3	0.843
BT 2	0.877	SA 1	0.905
BT 3	0.821	SA 2	0.913
BCT 1	0.902	SA 3	0.892
BCT 2	0.906	SA 4	0.912
BCT 3	0.906	BL 1	0.851
QU 1	0.845	BL 2	0.749
QU 2	0.838	BL 3	0.790

Chen has suggested that Square root of average variance extracted of constructs must be greater than correlation with other constructs to examine validity of constructs. This indicates that correlation between construct and its indicators is greater than its correlation with rest of constructs (Chen, 1998). Results from validity have been represented in table 3.

**Table 3: Correlation matrix and Square root of average variance extracted**

SA	QU	BT	BL	BCT	
				0.9042	BCT
			0.7977	0.3329	BL
		0.8642	0.3858	0.5689	BT
	0.8420	0.6231	0.4409	0.6875	QU
0.9054	0.5210	0.4538	0.5233	0.4281	SA

The second category of findings of this research has assigned to structural test and research hypotheses for which path coefficient and determination coefficient have been used.

**Table 4: Path coefficients, t-statistics and result from hypothesis**

Major hypotheses and related indices	Path coefficient	t-statistics	Result from hypothesis test
Trust on brand ← trust on brand communities	0/569	8/137	Confirm
Trust on brand ← quality of customer interaction in C2C	0/343	4/259	Confirm
Trust on brand communities ← quality of customer interaction in C2C	0/492	6/332	Confirm
Quality of customer interaction in C2C ← satisfaction	0/521	5/808	Confirm
Quality of customer interaction in C2C ← brand loyalty	0/231	2/398	Confirm
Satisfaction ← brand loyalty	0/403	4/485	Confirm

Source: researchers' estimations

Openly accessible at <http://www.european-science.com>

The path coefficient indicates contribution of each of predictor variables in determination of variance of criterion variable. Determination coefficient indicated adjusted variance for criterion variable via predictor variables. Value of path coefficients between major constructs and determination coefficients can be observed in figure 2. To calculate t-value, Booth's Algorithm with 500 sub sample has been used. Value of path coefficients and t-statistics together with result from major hypotheses and indices has been indicated in table 4.

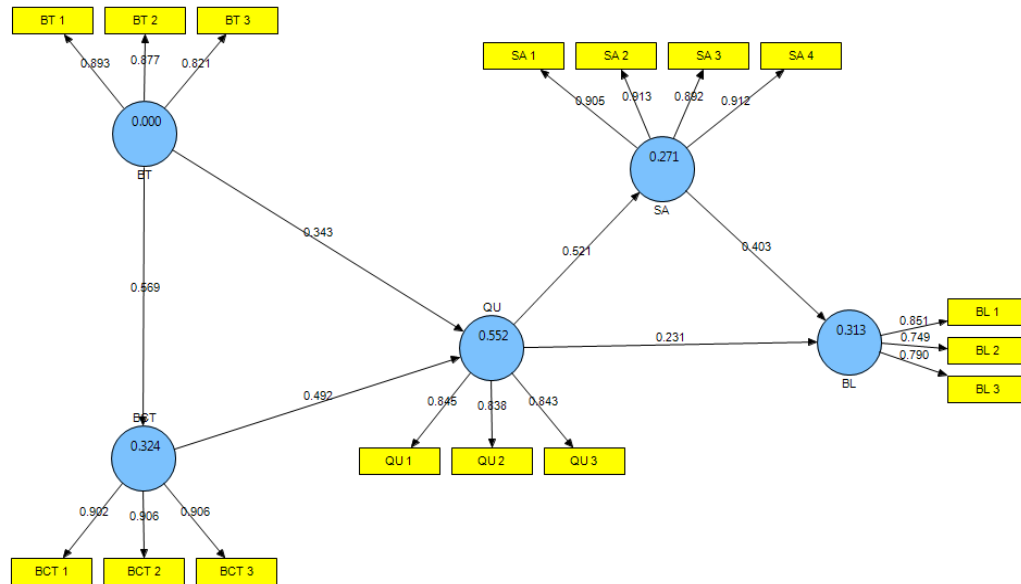


Figure 2: value of path coefficients and determination coefficients between research constructs

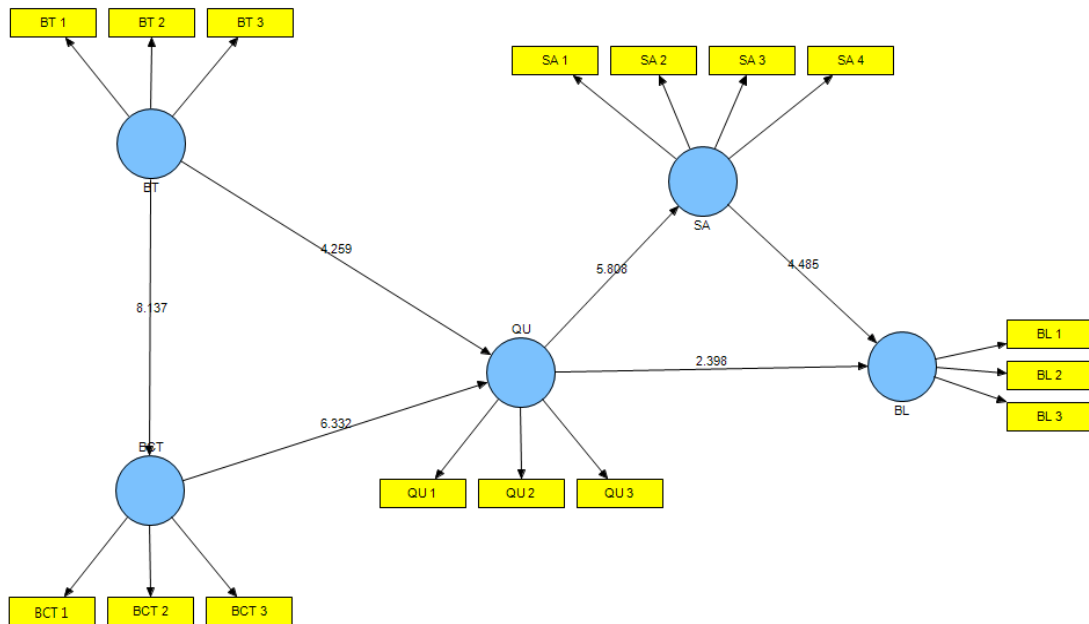


Figure 3: Value of t-statistics between research constructs

With regard to figure 2 and table 4, all the dimensions have affected each other and strengthened each other. As a result, all the research hypotheses are confirmed. For instance,

satisfaction ( $\beta=0.403$ ,  $t=4.485$ ) and quality of customer interaction in C2C ( $\beta=0.231$ ,  $t=2.398$ ) have positive effect on brand loyalty. In addition, determination coefficient of satisfaction equals to 0.313, indicating that 31.3% of variance of criterion variable has been determined via predictor variables.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Customer loyalty has been of great importance for managers of firms. Loyal customers are considered as the best option for acquisition of competitive advantage against competitors in market. Numerous factors have contributed in loyalty. Effect of factors such as trust, communities' relationships and satisfaction on building and developing brand loyalty has been examined in this research. Results indicated that all the research hypotheses have been confirmed. Therefore, it was specified that trust on brand and trust on brand communities are of great importance in virtual and social networks for the customers. If the individuals enable to trust on information, space, other individuals, relationships and so forth, quality of their relationships will increase, having better interaction with each other in relationship with brand and product. With development of trust infrastructures such as building sense of security, significance and receiving suitable feedback and so forth are considered as the important factors in developing customer relationships to build sense of satisfaction, sense of belonging and attachment. Despite variable of trust among individuals, sense of satisfaction will more likely manifest. Sense of satisfaction will strengthen next behaviors of customers. With regard to the results from research, it is forecasted that development of ethical behaviors such as trust can affect acquisition of considered results. Investment in development of trust on brand in brand communities will be as one of the most important programs of managers for acquisition of final loyalty of customer. Values from high-quality and trusted mutual relationships in customer relationships with each other in commercial environments will raise numerous advantages for organizations. In following, several suggestions are proposed to develop marketing programs at online business environments:

In this research, it has been indicated that quality of mutual relationship between customers at business environments has relied on building trust, as a result it is suggested to the managers to design and perform some strategies in building a secure space in their communities; more specifically, compliance with ethical criteria affects persuasion of customers to close and high quality communications.

Satisfaction affects brand loyalty, as a result it is suggested to the managers to make effort to satisfy customers by supply of further services to their special customers; using customer reward schemes, making attempt to make long-term relationship with customers and meeting their needs can be beneficial in building satisfaction sense in customers.

Social behaviors of organizations and their responsibility are of great importance for customers, stimulated them to next behaviors. Therefore, it is suggested to the managers to accept their social responsibility and specify it clearly for customers, under which the customers will have high trust on programs of the firm and will make effort to achieve aims of firm that word of mouth marketing will be one of the advantages. What inferred from this research as the general conclusion lies on this fact that compliance with ethical behaviors has been regarded as one of the most important factors to achieve success in firms in marketing programs and raise loyal customers.

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