

# The Role of Social Networks Websites in Improvement of Customer Relationship and Brand Loyalty

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## Abstract

Brand has been considered as one of the most important intangible assets of organizations. Development of relationship between customer and brand has transformed to one of the most important strategies of the organizations which raise effective results for them. This research intends to examine role and effect of social websites on development of customer relationship and brand in firms listed in computer equipment and laptop sale across Tehran. There are 11 hypotheses in the present research which the required data were collected from sample size (127) using questionnaire. This research has been conducted using structural equations and analyzed using partial least squares regression. Findings of research indicate positive effect of websites on increasing trust and loyalty to brand by customer. Hence, creation of communities for brand is given the priority in marketing activities. Creation and development of close, strong and stable relationship with customer will be among the priorities of these programs that can assist for improvement and loyalty of brand quality.

**Keywords:** Social media, brand communities, relationship marketing, brand loyalty

## Introduction

Development of customer relationship for success of organizations at the period with priority of customer and his satisfaction at economic markets develops the most important facet of the activity in today's firms. Making strong relationship between brand and customer has been confirmed in marketing literature (Cheng et al., 2012). In the relationship outlook, it has been looked into a transactional outlook to B2C relationships to know to which extent customers use the principles to make a suitable relationship with brand for the purpose of examining brand actions (Li et al., 2006). Existing research in the context of customer-brand relationship has grounded on the consumer's reaction to brand (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & Law, 2005; Fournier, 1998). Yet, few studies have focused on development mechanisms for customer-brand relationship. Several systematic studies in 2010 have been conducted to display effect of websites such as Facebook on making relationship with brand and know what advantages members of these websites receive through making relationship with brand, customer behavior and building brand loyalty which is created through these communications (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010). Creation of brand communities in social networks such as face book and so forth has transformed to one of the most important strategies of firms in creation and development of customer relationship in recent years (Park & Kim, 2014).

Customer relationship has been regarded as the most important issue of the firms, so that an attempt is made to develop customer relationships and their comments on quality and content of product or service through creation of brand communities, which this comes to conclusion through brand communities which are created in social networks (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Social networks have witnessed huge developments at commercial sector in the 2000s, so that Google and Facebook have been introduced as the first social network with the most viewers in recent years (Alexa, 2011) that Facebook has conducted over 800 million users (Facebook, 2011). In business sector, quoted from Fortune magazine, over 74% of business companies have the screens

relating to brand of their product that 94% of those screens are updated per week, which this process has increased in European countries followed by American countries. The reason for this behavior is an emphasis on customer, enhancement of customer relationship and their involvement in process of production and control of products of firms (Moth, 2012). One of the major features of social networks lies on consumers' visit from brand communities that these consumers are not interested in brand, found as confused visitors in these pages (Schau et al., 2009). The present research examines consumer's view on brand through internet databases and social pages. This research has been grounded on this basis that creation of brand communities in social networks and enhancement of customer relationship for customers' understanding from brand advantages. Major role of this study is smoothening, representing and elaborating the results from causes for rise of brand-customer relationships through social pages and networks. Why customers join to brand communities for development of customer relationships and how these interactions influence consumer's behavior with brand have been mentioned as the stimulants to conduct this research.

### **Literature review and hypotheses extension**

#### ***Advantages of social networks of brands***

Relationship marketing which focuses on individual transactions in building and maintaining customer relationships in long term has been introduced as one competitive and strategic advantage (Webster, 1992). Since maintaining relationships with customers and managing them are not efficient in some occasions, brand communities were introduced as a solution to cope with this problem and supply better services to customers. Brand communities have developed based on an organized series of social relationships in admiration of a brand in a geographical area, indicating a form of relationship made in the context of product consumption (Laroche et al. 2012). People spend more than one third of their walking day consuming social media (Lang, 2010). Facebook alone, the hallmark of social media, has over 800 million active users. The unique aspects of social media and its immense popularity have revolutionized marketing practices such as advertising and promotion (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). To understand social networks as one of the important marketing instruments, it requires recognizing different aspects of these networks. It cannot recognize social networks unless through Wbe 2.0. This refers to a new term which elaborates a new method through which users use World Wide Web, found as an area in which content of page changes through all the operators and contents are shared through a common way (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

This results in value creation of most of websites emerging through users rather than information marketing (Paquette, 2013). Social networks enable to change behavior of individuals, organizations and institutions which this is due to spending much time during day with these networks (de Valck, van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009). Brand communities refer to a new type of relationship among customers so that these relationships have been influenced by creation of social interactions and the attitudes towards brand have changed (Zaglia, 2013). Social networks bring about numerous advantages for brand whereby strong communications with customer has been considered as one of the benefits (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). Culture and history of brand is another advantage created through these networks for brand, allowing recovery of culture, removal of defects, increase of values, enhancement of individuals' feelings to brand (Kuo & Feng, 2013). Relationship strategies and brand needs have changed by introducing environment of social websites.

Through creation of relationship between customer and brand, customers will enable to talk about brand, express their beliefs, get familiar with new products of the firm and/or the changes which have brought about in the product, exploit from other contents about brand and advertise the

considered brand and product through their profiles (Apaolaza et al., 2015). Quality of relationship with brand in social networks is defined as the general assessment by the consumer from extent of power in his relationship with specific brands in social networks. Since individuals depend on objects, conditions and other individuals over time, thus it is argued that consumers extend their relationship with brand through social networks and depend on it (Li et al. 2006). The more this relationship, there will be more dependence and spiritual value of brand to customer, as features and personality of brand develop in brand communities (Brown et al. 2007). Therefore, it can assume that understanding the advantage from creation and enhancement of relationship with brand to consumer can result in creation of stable relationship with brand in social networks, especially if these perceived advantages include empirical and functional aspects such as direct interaction with other members of these communities, sharing the required information on monetary and financial motivation and so forth which can contribute in increasing quality of relationship (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). In this regards, the first and second hypothesis of research are as follows:

H1: Empirical advantages have a positive effect on quality of brand-customer relationships in social networks.

H2: Functional advantages have a positive effect on quality of brand-customer relationships in social networks.

#### ***Trust on brand***

Trust on brand has been defined as the consumers' desire in reliance on brand capabilities in relation to the expected functions from brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). When there are the conditions such as uncertainty, shortage of information and fear from opportunity seeking, trust will play a major role in reducing uncertainty and shortage of information. These factors cause the consumers feel more convenience versus brand product (Chiu et al., 2010). Building brand loyalty is one of the important results from creation and development of brand communities (Zhou, Jin, Vogel, Fang, & Chen, 2011b). Alexander Mc et al. (2002) have announced that high customer relationships can result in customer loyalty.

Trust on brand has been regarded as one of the most important achievements of loyalty (Hong & Cho, 2011; Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2011; Zhou et al., 2011a). Considering this point that social networks and communities of brand have a positive effect on customer loyalty, it can say that increasing number of communications and their quality can result in increase of brand trust (Ba, 2001). Customers' developed relationships with brand communities which result in increase of relationship between customer and brand can influence trust in a positive way. In addition to increase of communications in social networks, numerous information are shared among members, whereby this causes reduction of information asymmetry, uncertainty and increase of brand forecasts (Laroche et al., 2013). In this regards, it can argue that increase of perceived advantages through brand communities can influence extent of trust on brand. Therefore, the second section of the hypotheses of this research are as follow:

H3: Empirical advantages have a positive effect on customers' trust on brand in social networks.

H4: Functional advantages have a positive effect on customers' trust on brand in social networks.

#### ***Quality of brand relationships***

Quality of mutual interaction and relationship with brand can assist for understanding brand in customer's mind (Hutter et al., 2013). Quality of brand relationship is a reflection from how the brand relationship in communities associates to extent of customers' interactions. Park et al. (2009) have studied brand-customer relationship in brand communities, indicating that extent of firms'

marketing, business and commercial activity can result in creation and development of brand consumer associations (Park et al. 2009).

Therefore, doing marketing and commercial activities through a social network and brand communities can facilitate smoothening, creating and strengthening customer relationship with brand through websites (Park & Kim, 2014). On the other hand, trust on brand has been regarded as a factor which can influence extent of quality. The more trust on brand and brand communities and the more positive interaction between consumers and other members, quality of relationship will be influenced. The more trust, the individuals will more easily share information and view. Therefore, trust will be a key factor to expand quality of relationships. In this regard, the following can be raised:

H5: Quality of brand-customer relationships in social networks has a positive effect on quality of brand relationships.

H6: Trust on brand has a positive effect on quality of brand relationships.

### **Brand loyalty**

Loyalty has been regarded as a positive attitude towards a product which raises due to recurrent use of it, and the reason for it can be psychological processes. In other words, having repetition on purchase is not an optional reaction but is as the result of psychological, sensational and normative factors (Miller, 2006). Brand loyalty has been regarded as a content that has been examined largely in previous research, but high competitive power that the brand acquires in this way is the critical aspect given to this term (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). Brand-customer relationship at favorable level can stimulate customer loyalty. Building brand loyalty is one of the important results from creation and development of brand communities (Zhou, Jin, Vogel, Fang, & Chen, 2011b).

Mac Alexander et al. (2002) have claimed that high customer relationship can pave the way for creation of customer loyalty in an integrative way. If the created relationships be at suitable level and value of these relationships be clear for the customers, customer loyalty will come to realize. In this regard, the following hypothesis is as follows:

H7: Quality of brand relationships has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

### **Word of mouth marketing**

At the early 1950s, researchers have indicated that personal communications and informal exchange of information not just influenced selection of consumers and their purchase decision (Arndt, 1967), but also develop consumers' expectations, the attitude before their use and even the expectations after use of a product or service. Some studies indicate that influence of word of mouth marketing is more than Print advertising, personal selling, radio advertising. How word of mouth marketing studies work is not clear, yet it can attribute four factors to these studies.

-the first includes the communications that influence the decision maker

-the second includes the information receivers who seek information

-the third includes the retrospective data and interpretations that are interpreted after an event

-the fourth includes the pooling that measures final result of word of mouth communication and marketing (Brain, 2008)

Loyal individuals in social networks and communities assist each other to expand brand through brand recommendation (Zhou et al., 2012). This process has been regarded as one of the effects of brand loyalty in communities (Wu and Sukoco, 2010).

The last part of research hypotheses is proposed as follows:

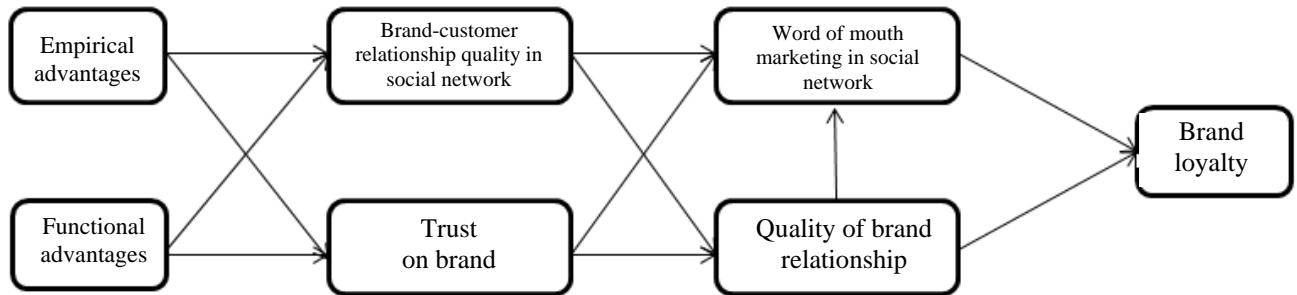
H8: Quality of brand relationships affects word of mouth marketing in social networks of brand.

H9: Quality of brand relationships in social networks affects word of mouth marketing in social networks of brand.

H10: Trust on brand affects word of mouth marketing in social networks of brand.

H11: Word of mouth marketing in social networks affects customer loyalty to brand.

With regard to what mentioned, the conceptual model of research with 10 major hypotheses is 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, 127 collected questionnaires over the least sample size are required. A questionnaire consisting of 7 sections has been used to measure effect of variables on each other. This questionnaire has been standard taken from research by Kim and Park (2014). Validity and reliability have been examined using different tests for agents and constructs, explained in findings in details.

### Findings of the study

Findings of this research have been classified into two groups. The first group is assigned to validity and reliability of constructs and agents for which internal consistency and validity have been used.

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

Variable	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	$\rho_c$
BL	0.770534	0.851037	0.909611
BRQ	0.736266	0.820981	0.893219
BSNRQ	0.560107	0.933724	0.942706
BT	0.792903	0.869714	0.919910
EB	0.584850	0.881527	0.907827
FB	0.681012	0.922300	0.937138
WOM	0.790874	0.911914	0.937992

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). Cronbach's alpha and Dillon-Goldstein's coefficient have been used to examine composite validity of each of constructs.

Table 1 indicates values of Cronbach's alpha and Dillon-Goldstein's coefficient for each construct. Dillon-Goldstein's coefficient and Cronbach's alpha for all the constructs are greater than 0.893 and 0.820, mentioned greater than 0.7.

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. It must calculate both convergent validity and discriminant validity to evaluate validity in partial least squares models. Convergent validity implies that series of agents determine the major construct. Fornell & Larcker have suggested average variance extracted (AVE) as a criterion to evaluate convergent validity. The least required value for convergent validity equals to 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In table 1, values of average variance extracted (AVE) have been displayed for all the variables. Values of average variance extracted (AVE) range from 0.548 to 0.792 which are greater than 0.5, i.e. constructs have determined 50% of variances of their indicators. There are two tests to examine discriminant validity, i.e. the first test examines discriminant validity of constructs mentioned with Chin test. In this test, Square root of average variance extracted of a construct must be greater than its correlation with other constructs, indicating that correlation between the construct and its indicators is greater than its correlation with other constructs (Chin, 1998). Table 2 indicates values of this test. Since Square root of average variance extracted for all the constructs is greater than their correlation coefficient with other constructs, discriminant validity of questionnaire is suitable.

**Table 2: Correlation matrix and Square root of average variance extracted**

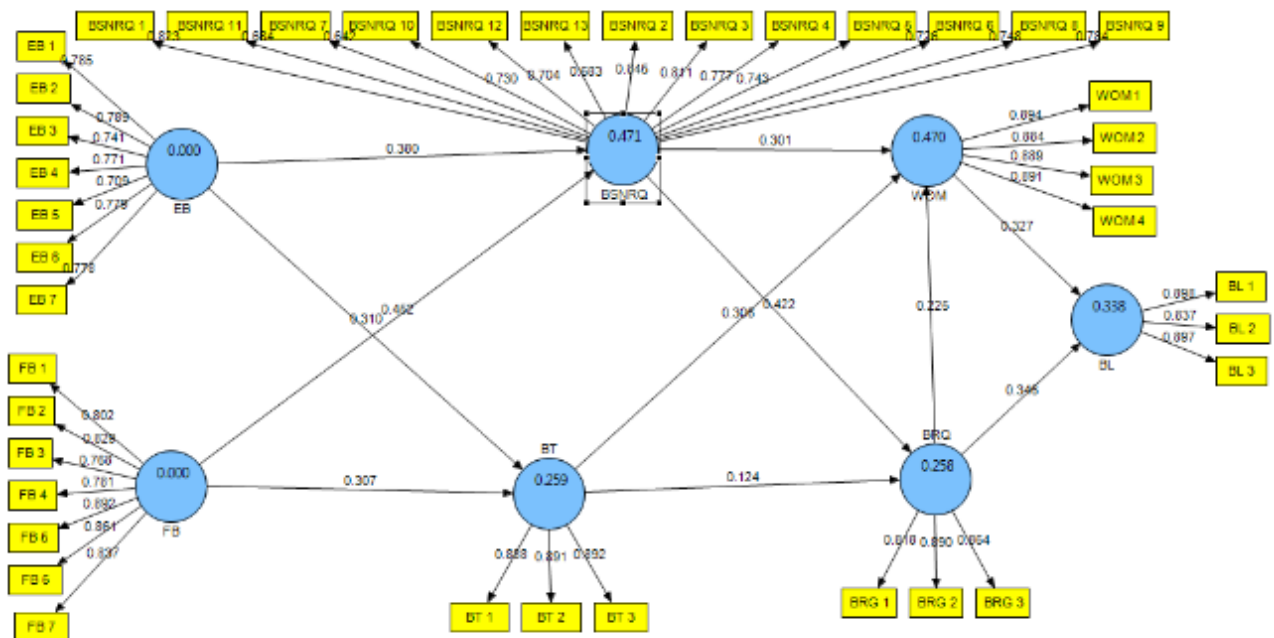
WOM	FB	EB	BT	BSNRQ	BRQ	BL	
						0.8778	BL
					0.8580	0.5071	BRQ
				0.7484	0.4989	0.4241	BSNRQ
			0.8904	0.6249	0.3872	0.3248	BT
		0.7647	0.4196	0.5406	0.2407	0.1247	EB
	0.8252	0.3559	0.4177	0.5873	0.2708	0.2484	FB
0.8893	0.4684	0.3635	0.5807	0.6040	0.4932	0.4973	WOM

The second test which examines discriminant validity of agents is called Cross loadings test. In this test, it is expected that loading of each agent for each latent variable be greater than cross loadings (Azar et al. 2012). In table 3, cross loadings of all the agents have been represented. The obtained values indicate that loading of agents for their latent variables is greater than loading of those agents for other latent variables, indicating suitable discriminant validity of agents.

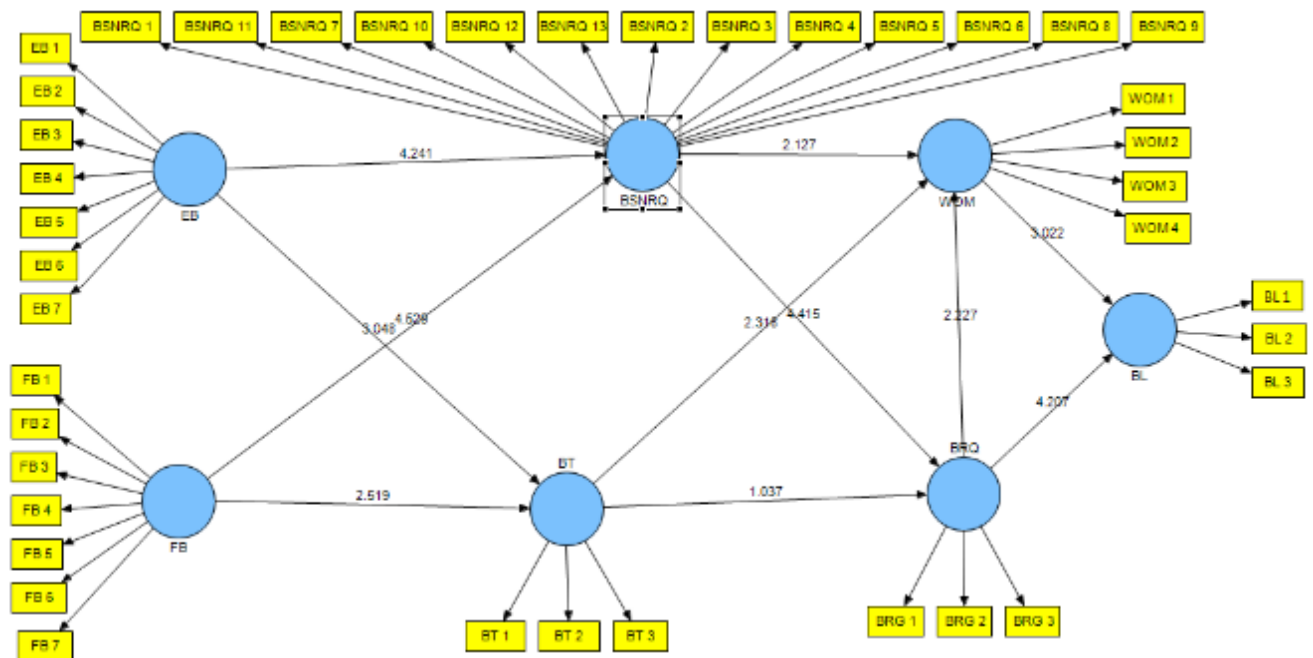
The second part of findings of this research represents structural equation test and research hypotheses for which path coefficient and determination coefficient have been used. Path coefficient indicates share of each of predictor variables in determining variance of criterion variable. Determination coefficient indicates adjusted variance of criterion variable via predictor variables. Value of path coefficients between 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 t statistics between constructs can be observed in figure 3. Value of path coefficients and t-statistics together with result from major hypotheses and indices has been indicated in table 4.

**Table 3: Cross loadings**

WOM	FB	EB	BT	BSNRQ	BRQ	BL	
0.522865	0.195899	0.134182	0.301617	0.424328	0.455074	0.897794	BL 1
0.408273	0.244765	0.098411	0.253138	0.377689	0.410791	0.837187	BL 2
0.365112	0.218669	0.091981	0.298185	0.307485	0.468841	0.897044	BL 3
0.351858	0.199951	0.164194	0.298479	0.355196	0.818112	0.420390	BRG 1
0.434953	0.223918	0.196889	0.302230	0.447744	0.890264	0.483877	BRG 2
0.473708	0.269487	0.253047	0.392668	0.472151	0.864246	0.401384	BRG 3
0.436892	0.499269	0.461478	0.539351	0.823162	0.330938	0.223072	BSNRQ 1
0.476640	0.515779	0.427614	0.564676	0.845265	0.425731	0.376348	BSNRQ 2
0.528073	0.437746	0.437987	0.601293	0.811106	0.390234	0.339580	BSNRQ 3
0.476858	0.511116	0.481295	0.454107	0.777113	0.411127	0.201766	BSNRQ 4
0.473822	0.452953	0.378292	0.555085	0.742546	0.463669	0.374446	BSNRQ 5
0.459196	0.346708	0.420161	0.382799	0.726375	0.411004	0.387944	BSNRQ 6
0.455415	0.441231	0.310490	0.467825	0.641615	0.380485	0.206242	BSNRQ 7
0.437477	0.396336	0.332925	0.413302	0.747836	0.240256	0.333337	BSNRQ 8
0.420118	0.404369	0.409879	0.411160	0.783515	0.361745	0.325504	BSNRQ 9
0.397310	0.435340	0.341122	0.439563	0.730033	0.292485	0.376139	BSNRQ 10
0.438375	0.276501	0.376258	0.419729	0.684494	0.301979	0.325980	BSNRQ 11
0.479611	0.422378	0.444676	0.404415	0.704294	0.359048	0.336782	BSNRQ 12
0.375380	0.520826	0.399701	0.382307	0.682788	0.429761	0.332236	BSNRQ 13
0.486623	0.341623	0.332437	0.887980	0.526477	0.287411	0.210716	BT 1
0.536453	0.390723	0.363838	0.891314	0.573383	0.379615	0.304240	BT 2
0.524558	0.379875	0.419507	0.892053	0.565973	0.360195	0.342794	BT 3
0.346372	0.268190	0.784848	0.367078	0.476586	0.261073	0.114026	EB 1
0.252993	0.215274	0.788671	0.285505	0.415370	0.151555	0.105521	EB 2
0.267151	0.195281	0.740781	0.351641	0.356751	0.243073	0.073269	EB 3
0.279761	0.346743	0.770582	0.300348	0.424521	0.205602	0.117332	EB 4
0.205520	0.272404	0.708928	0.275726	0.370797	0.164810	0.113672	EB 5
0.267675	0.376459	0.778586	0.336065	0.410156	0.110534	0.000562	EB 6
0.308442	0.228165	0.777581	0.320492	0.426617	0.143757	0.143477	EB 7
0.396248	0.801621	0.209352	0.362579	0.525366	0.201789	0.279880	FB 1
0.341969	0.829022	0.215109	0.301693	0.405014	0.211435	0.207462	FB 2
0.359143	0.768405	0.244174	0.291742	0.364669	0.117632	0.134551	FB 3
0.342678	0.780523	0.205564	0.269831	0.340953	0.172523	0.096355	FB 4
0.459405	0.891785	0.353134	0.384023	0.589028	0.294741	0.249121	FB 5
0.367360	0.861446	0.361768	0.367690	0.513202	0.222381	0.163240	FB 6
0.412795	0.836765	0.405842	0.393334	0.560773	0.292450	0.250542	FB 7
0.893952	0.455292	0.286447	0.617327	0.539498	0.470589	0.452893	WOM 1
0.883805	0.392316	0.378456	0.443669	0.584028	0.454497	0.423811	WOM 2
0.888766	0.439993	0.303611	0.556030	0.542832	0.419216	0.381767	WOM 3
0.890690	0.375826	0.327983	0.440238	0.482628	0.407316	0.509327	WOM 4



**Figure 2: Value of path coefficients and determination coefficients between major constructs of research**



**Figure 3: Value of t statistics between major research constructs**

With regard to figure 2 & 3 and table 4, all the relationships have been reported positive. The hypothesis concerning effect of trust on quality of brand relationship is the only hypothesis which has been rejected with the t-value equal to 1.037 which is less than the required value (1.96). In addition, determination coefficient of brand loyalty equals to 0.338, indicating 33.8% of variance of criterion variable has been determined via predictor variables.



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

Major hypotheses and related indices	Path coefficient	t-statistics	Result of hypothesis testing
Trust on brand ← Empirical advantages	0/310	3/048	Confirmed
Quality of brand-customer relationship in social networks←empirical advantages	0/380	4/241	Confirmed
Trust on brand ←functional advantages	0/307	2/519	Confirmed
Quality of brand-customer relationship in social networks ←functional advantages	0/452	4/529	Confirmed
Quality of brand relationship←trust on brand	0/124	1/037	Rejected
Quality of brand relationship←quality of brand-customer relationship in social networks	0/422	4/415	Confirmed
Trust on brand←word of mouth marketing in social networks	0/306	2/316	Confirmed
Quality of brand-customer relationship in social networks ← word of mouth marketing in social networks	0/301	2/127	Confirmed
Quality of brand relationship ← word of mouth marketing in social networks	0/225	2/227	Confirmed
Quality of brand relationship ← brand loyalty	0/346	4/207	Confirmed
word of mouth marketing in social networks← brand loyalty	0/327	3/022	Confirmed

### Discussion and conclusion

Significance of marketing in recent years has caused the organizations and managers use different programs and strategies to achieve this aim. Development of customer relationship is critical to organizations so as to achieve a mutual relationship so far as this relationship has been largely used to use relationship marketing and word of mouth marketing in recent years. When the brands enabled to use customer relationship for their development under development of social networks, communications were found with novel form, as a result the quality was influenced. In this research, an attempt was made to evaluate role of social networks websites in improving loyalty and customer-brand relationship. Positive effect of empirical and functional advantages on trust on brand and quality of brand-customer relationships in social networks has been deduced from the results of this research. In this regards, if managers and marketers focus on customer's mind in creating a common experience and advantages from it and specify the benefits from it for tangible customers, as a result the extent to which individuals trust on brand, firm and product increases and the customer-brand relationships increase in framework of social networks, serving as an instrument for successful marketing. With development of trust on brand, the programs that organizations design for their customers will have better executive capability, influencing quality of brand. In brand social networks that trust and quality exist, customers will feel more security and propose successful ideas for brand. In this regard, it is suggested to the managers to invest in social networks for better execution of relationship marketing process and its role in development of their organizational function in social networks and provide the conditions in a way that the brand communities have a suitable environment for customer, close relationships, representation of new ideas, effective marketing activities and etc.

In this regard, several suggestions are proposed to the managers:

-It is suggested to the managers to increase transparency in social networks in order that customers get presence in these networks with more confidence and trust and quality of their relationship increase. Loyal customers seek more trust on brand and firms.

-Marketing managers seek to provide more services for the customers. The better customer mentality, the organization will gain more profits. Utility will come to realize in the firm by satisfied and loyal customers.

-Further sale, increase of profit and customers have been mentioned as the issues which come to realize through social networks, as a result it is suggested to the managers to provide different services for their loyal customers so as to develop word of mouth marketing in virtual environment by their loyal customers. This will cause increase of customer trust, development of relationship as well as improvement of brand-customer relationships.

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