Engaging consumers via online brand communities to achieve brand love and positive recommendations

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the influence of brand relationship quality and consumer community identification on consumer engagement. This study also examines the mediating role of consumer engagement between brand relationship quality and consumer community identification with brand love. Positive word of mouth is taken as an outcome variable.

Design/methodology/approach – To test the proposed relationships, data were collected from 580 social media-based brand community followers and analysed through structural equation modelling.

Findings – Results corroborate brand relationship quality and consumer community identification as critical drivers of consumer engagement on the online platforms. The results further reveal a positive association between consumer engagement and brand love which consequently foster positive word of mouth. The findings also corroborate the partial as well as full mediating role of consumer engagement on different proposed associations.

Originality/value – This study offers an in-depth insight of specific motivations to engage consumers in the virtual domain, make them adore their brands and spread a positive word. All of these outcomes are

crucial in offering competitive advantages to firms. This study validates the relevance of consumer engagement interactions in contemporary firms' relationship marketing strategies.

Keywords Word of mouth, Brand love, Consumer engagement, Brand relationship quality, Consumer community identification

Paper type Research paper

Involucrando a los consumidores a través de las comunidades de marca online para lograr el amor a la marca y recomendaciones positivas

Resumen

Propósito – Este estudio investiga la influencia de la calidad de la relación con la marca y la identificación con la comunidad de consumidores en el compromiso de los consumidores. Este estudio también examina el papel mediador del compromiso de los consumidores entre la calidad de la relación con la marca y la identificación de la comunidad de consumidores con el amor a la marca. El boca a boca positivo se toma como variable de resultado.

Metodología – Para poner a prueba las relaciones propuestas, se recogieron datos de 580 seguidores de comunidades de marcas en redes sociales, y se analizaron mediante un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales.

Los resultados corroboran que la calidad de la relación con la marca y la identificación con la comunidad de consumidores son factores decisivos para la participación de los consumidores en las plataformas en línea. Los resultados revelan además una asociación positiva entre el compromiso de los consumidores y el amor a la marca que, en consecuencia, fomenta el boca a boca positivo. Los resultados también corroboran el papel mediador, tanto parcial como total, del compromiso del consumidor en las diferentes asociaciones propuestas.

Originalidad – Este estudio ofrece una visión profunda de las motivaciones específicas para involucrar a los consumidores en el entorno virtual, hacer que amen sus marcas y que difundan su opinión positiva. Todos estos resultados son cruciales para ofrecer ventajas competitivas a las empresas. El estudio valida la relevancia de la interacción con los consumidores en las estrategias de marketing relacional de las empresas contemporáneas.

Palabras clave Compromiso del consumidor, calidad de la relación con la marca, identificación de la comunidad de consumidores, amor a la marca, boca a boca

Tipo de artículo Trabajo de investigación

通过品牌线上社区来吸引消费者以实现对品牌的喜爱和积极推荐

摘要
目的 – 本研究调查了品牌关系质量和消费者社区认同对消费者参与的影响。本研究还研究了消费者参与在品牌关系质量和消费者社区认同与品牌之爱之间的调节作用。积极的口碑被作为作为结果变量。

研究方法 – 为了检验所提出的关系, 本研究从580名基于社交媒体的品牌社区追随者那里收集了数据, 并通过结构方程模型进行分析。

研究结果 – 本研究证实了品牌关系质量和消费者社区认同是消费者在网络平台上参与的关键驱动因素。结果进一步揭示了消费者参与和品牌喜爱之间的正相关关系, 从而促进了积极的口碑传播。研究结果还证实了消费者参与对不同的关联具有部分和全部的调节作用。

原创性/价值 – 本研究提供了一个深入的洞察力, 即让消费者参与到虚拟领域中来, 使他们爱慕他们的品牌, 并传播积极的话语。所有这些结果都是为企业提供竞争优势的关键。该研究验证了消费者参与互动在当代企业的关系营销战略中的相关性。

关键词 消费者参与, 品牌关系质量, 消费者社区认同, 品牌喜爱, 口碑

文章类型 研究型论文

1. Introduction

The world has continuously been progressing towards the digital transformation. The advent of this transition has revolutionised the way consumers interact with brands (Shahid *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). In such a highly networked environment, customers have become empowered to such an extent that they are get product/service and content changed for themselves (Rasool *et al.*, 2020). The onset of Web 2.0 along with emerging technologies such as Internet of Things, blockchain, artificial intelligence and many more are propelling and nurturing this change (Rasool *et al.*, 2020; Kaur *et al.*, 2020). These technological progressions accompanied by various social networking platforms have taken a prominent and an essential portion of customers' lives (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019a). Being a part of an interactive ecosystem, nowadays, customers spend substantial amount of their valuable time online (Abbasi *et al.*, 2021a). Consequently, marketers have started making huge investments in providing customers spontaneous digital experiences across all touchpoints to engage them emotionally and passionately with their brands (Islam, *et al.*, 2021; Islam *et al.*, 2017).

As consumers become competent in using digital communication platforms, they proactively involve themselves not only in creating brand-related content (e.g. user-generated content) but also in using technology-enabled service interactions exhaustively (Abbasi *et al.*, 2021b, 2021c; Kumar *et al.*, 2022). Acknowledging this paradigm shift in the digital environment, marketers have given strategic importance to engaging customers online for cultivating healthy consumer–brand relationships (Shahid *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). Consumer engagement, which reflects "the consumer's investment in their brand-related interactions" (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019a), has gained paramount importance in online environment (Khan *et al.*, 2020). Owing to its highly interactive nature, online brand communities (OBCs) have been recognized as a suitable context for facilitating and examining consumer engagement (Casaló *et al.*, 2008; Kumar and Kumar, 2020). OBCs are coined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand's consumers" (Valck *et al.*, 2009, p. 185). OBCs act as essential platforms for "like-minded users" wherein consumers can easily come forward and share their peculiar brand-related experiences and get involved in brand co-creation. The critical role of OBCs is increasingly discerned which, in turn, is linked to engaging consumers (Hanson *et al.*, 2019; Kaur *et al.*, 2020).

Past decade has witnessed burgeoning research interest in engaging consumers on digital platforms (Meire *et al.*, 2019; Rasool *et al.*, 2020). Despite the demonstrated importance of consumer engagement in OBCs, surprisingly few empirical investigations have been conducted across industrial and geographic contexts (Islam *et al.*, 2021). Though companies are making huge investments in employing these digital engagement practices, but little remains known about consumers' latent motivations/precursors that drive them towards these digital platforms actively, thus demanding further research investigations (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021; Rasool *et al.*, 2020). Addressing this research gap, we aim to identify relationship-focused brand relationship quality and social identity-theory informed consumer community identification as key consumer engagement drivers (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017). We also investigate consumer engagement's subsequent effect on brand love, therefore, translating consumer engagement as a mediating variable in brand relationship quality and consumer community identification's relationship with brand love. The subsequent effect of brand love on positive word-of mouth (WOM) is also examined.

Given consumer engagement's emotional and motivational nature (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017), brand relationship quality and consumer community identification were chosen as key relationship-focused and social identity-induced consumer engagement triggers (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019b). The relationship perspective and social identity perspective highlight consumers' latent emotions/feelings and motivations for choosing digital media, including relational or social identification motives (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Consistent

with these viewpoints, we investigate the influence of consumers' intrinsic brand relationship quality (i.e. emotions/feelings) and consumer community identification (i.e. communal/identity) motivations for their online brand community-related investments (Kaur *et al.*, 2020), thereby broadening insights into consumer engagement dynamics in digital environment.

While responding to these research gaps, the study makes the following contributions:

- Despite an evolving understanding of consumer engagement in OBCs, little is acknowledged regarding the impact of individual's intrinsic brand relationship quality and consumer community identification on their digital environment related consumer engagement (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019a; MSI, 2020), as empirically explored in this paper.
- While limited research has scrutinised the direct effect of brand relationship quality on brand love, there exists scarcity of studies regarding the mediating role of consumer engagement on such relationship in the OBC context (Machado *et al.*, 2019).

We, therefore, aim to study consumer engagement's mediating effect in brand relationship quality-brand love and consumer community identification–brand love relationships in the digital context, thus adding empirical understanding to this area. As digital acceleration combined with the recent global pandemic has intensely reformed customer needs and expectations. This shift occurs amid global supply chain issues, concerns of social injustice and a fast growing mistrust towards major social and business organizations. This display of shifts has left businesses and marketers probing for insights that will help their brands survive and flourish through these periods of uncertainty. Therefore, on a managerial front, we propose a set of valuable strategies and implications that will simplify consumer engagement execution in digital context. The proposed strategies can be critical in enhancing the effectiveness of firms' digital engagement initiatives *vis-à-vis* help companies do better in the contemporary challenging times unsettled by societal and technological changes.

The remaining part of this paper is structured as follows. We next review the relevant literature on consumer engagement in digital context and propose the conceptual model and hypotheses. Then, research methodology used is summarized, followed by data analysis and a discussion on findings. We then conclude with an overview of theoretical and practical implications emerging from our research work and discuss some limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review
In this section, we present a brief literature review pertaining to the core constructs of this study.

2.1 Consumer engagement
Over the past decade, the concept of consumer engagement has gained significant momentum in the consumer behaviour literature (Rasool *et al.*, 2020; Rather, 2019). Recent studies suggest a shift of brand relationships towards broader relational orientation which focuses on the significance of building "interactive consumer–brand relationships" (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017). Within this emerging research stream which embraces other relational concepts such as brand relationship quality, brand commitment and brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), consumer engagement has attained huge impetus because it reflects the

dynamic consumer brand relationships. Over the past few years, consumer engagement conceptualization and dimensionality have emerged as focal topics of discussion (Khan *et al.*, 2022). In this study, we embrace the perspective that offers a broader and persuasive view of consumer engagement (Islam *et al.*, 2020; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019a). While demonstrating this dissonance, varying consumer engagement conceptualizations and dimensionalities have been suggested. Most of the prior research studies have conceived consumer engagement as "a multi-dimensional construct enveloping cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions" (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Rather *et al.*, 2019). Though few authors have also added social dimension to it (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017; Kaur *et al.*, 2020), we also consider that significant in digital settings, notably given our dual relationship-focused and social identity-driven viewpoint.

Grounded on the literature synthesis, we specify to consumer engagement as "consumers' psychological state of mind and intensity of their awareness, affection, participation, and connection with the brand" (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017, p. 134). We also consider consumer engagement as a second-order construct consisting of "conscious attention, affection, enthused participation, and social connection" as its different dimensions that represent and corroborate engagement's multidimensional nature (Kaur *et al.*, 2020). This perspective of consumer engagement is well-suited within digital context that is marked by consumer interactive participation, exchange and association with the brand e.g. consumer involvement in co-creation via virtual brand communities (Islam and Zaheer, 2016; Kaur *et al.*, 2020;). As consumers extensively devote their valuable time interacting on these digital platforms; it is meaningful to study the latent forces depicting their engagement within these virtual brand communities (de Oliveira Santini *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Brand relationship quality

The brand relationship quality construct, grounded on the relationship between marketing and interpersonal philosophy of sociology, is noteworthy in providing valuable insights into the roles of brands in the lives of consumers (Breivik and Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) formally conceptualized it as a "voluntary or imposed interdependence between a person and a brand characterized by a unique history of interactions and an anticipation of future occurrences" (p. 21). The human relationship furnishes content and structure for the comprehension of consumer–brand relationships profoundly, as brand relationship quality reflects the strong motivational and emotional bonds of consumers with brands in the same fashion as related to people (Touni *et al.*, 2020).

2.3 Consumer community identification

Consumer community identification is defined as "a sense that individuals come to view themselves as a member of the virtual brand community and feel emotionally connected with other members in the community" (Hsu *et al.*, 2012, p. 75). Following the social identification process, individuals recognise themselves not only through idiosyncratic characteristics but also through the characteristics they share with in-group members (Holsapple *et al.*, 2018). Borrowing from theory of social identity, identification is categorised by the similarity between a person's self-image and the image of a brand community (i.e. a social category; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). Consumer community identification forms a "primary psychological substrate for the kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers are increasingly seeking to build with their customers" (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, p. 76). Consumer community identification offers an influential indicator of relationship quality and its strength, thereby reflecting its practical significance (Mandl and Hogreve, 2020).

2.4 Brand love
In 2006, Carroll and Ahuvia introduced the concept of brand love and defined it as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (P. 81). While Batra *et al.* (2012) define brand love as a "broad, long-term consumer-brand relationship, with multiple interconnected cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements" (p. 6). However, majority of the definitions identify brand love as a relationship rather than a single transient emotion (Junaid *et al.*, 2020). In the recent literature, brand love is suggested as a critical construct affecting consumer–brand relationships (Bairrada *et al.*, 2018; Islam and Rahman, 2017). Derived primarily from the conception of interpersonal love, brand love as a concept has attained significant scholarly attention in the marketing domain (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Junaid *et al.*, 2020); particularly because, developing brands that customers love offer more stable competitive positions and, therefore, result in marketing success. Given its practical relevance, research suggests that demystifying the relationship dynamics of brand love with other relevant variables can offer important payoffs (Junaid *et al.*, 2020).

2.5 Positive word-of-mouth
In recent marketing literature, practitioners and academicians are paying attention to understanding the interplay of customer-to-customer interactions and create value. WOM is one of such valuable outcomes that serves as a non-paid promotional tool to attract customers towards a brand (Harun *et al.*, 2019). Positive WOM has been defined as "the degree to which consumers recommend brands to others" (Westbrook, 1987). Consumer are driven to engage in positive WOM due to multiple factors ranging from emotion regulation to social connection and bonding (Islam and Rahman, 2016a). Due to the technological advances, customers now interact with a brand in multiple ways like OBCs, recommendation sites, social networking sites etc. that were not available in the past (Belanche *et al.*, 2020; Islam and Rahman, 2016b). In the digital domain, positive WOM may be even more significant as reviews spread fast and reach large audiences at a low cost (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). Given that positive WOM significantly affects consumers' purchase decisions and protects the brand from competition, academicians and practitioners alike suggest facilitating positive WOM as critical to brand health.

3. Conceptual model and hypotheses development
In this section, a conceptual research model (as shown in Figure 1) is developed along with a related set of research hypotheses for empirical examination, as discussed below.

3.1 Influence of brand relationship quality on brand love and consumer engagement
An expressive consumer brand relationship built via benevolent interactions develops brand relationship quality construct (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). In a recent study, Zhang *et al.* (2020) unveiled
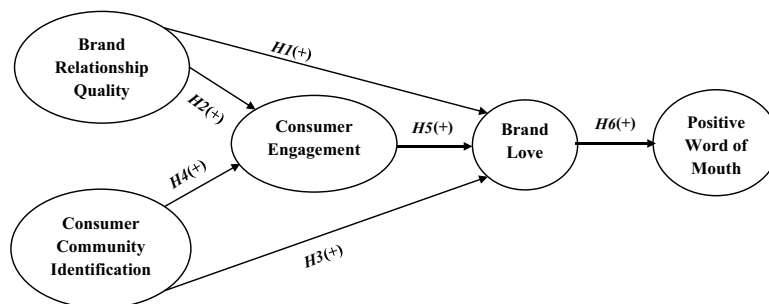

Figure 1.
Conceptual model

how brand relationship quality affects brand loyalty due to the pertinence of brand management and upkeep of its value chain in the service-led rationale. Prior studies reveal that due to their relational schema, individuals that form a strong relationship with a brand tend to hold their relational components firmly (Kumar *et al.*, 2022). Correspondingly, relational components activate spontaneously in consumers during their encounter with the focal brand, guiding their subsequent judgments making them further love the brand (Islam and Rahman, 2016c). Due to value congruity with specific brands, consumers end up admiring brands that offer strong relationship quality (Islam *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we also hypothesize a positive relationship between brand relationship quality and brand love, as below:

H1. Brand relationship quality positively influences brand love.

Creating, maintaining and fostering brand relationships with consumers on digital platforms has emerged as an indispensable driver of consumer engagement. Prior research studies found brand relationship quality as a precursor of consumer engagement. Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) suggest that a consumer's relationship with a brand serves as a basis for connecting and engaging in different brand related activities. In a similar vein, an investigation of existing studies suggests that designing and implementing relationship-focused processes on social media sites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter) enhances consumer participation and engagement with the hosted brands (Rather *et al.*, 2022). Consumers, being social creatures, engage with a specific brands through non-transactional (relational) interactions taking place in networks and communities (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Besides, customers who consider their relationships with a brand as positive tend to stay longer with the focal brand through multiple engagement behaviours initiated by the company. Therefore, we hypothesize as below:

H2. Brand relationship quality has a positive impact on consumer engagement.

3.2 Influence of consumer community identification on brand love and consumer engagement

Given that CCI is a group-based phenomenon in nature, its favourable establishment in specific brand-related online communities is highly likely to grab user support and proactive community contribution (Kaur *et al.*, 2020). When consumers share a sense of community towards particular brands, they embrace related values and develop a sense of belongingness toward such brands (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001). In the similar vein, when consumers perceive similarity between their actual and ideal self-identities in relation to other members of a brand community, they tend to admire such brands and their communities as a whole (Kaur *et al.*, 2020; Mandl and Hogreve, 2020). Further supported by the "identity-based motivation model" (Oyserman, 2009), when consumers identify a strong consumer community identification link with other community members, they find a dynamic support to their individual identity (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize as below:

H3. Consumer community identification has a positive impact on brand love.

Prior research suggests community identification as an indicator of emotional social media engagement (Kaur *et al.*, 2020). Studies also afford empirical evidence to the relationship between consumer community identification and community engagement within social media settings (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Hsu *et al.*, 2012); however, most of these studies have not considered the actual consumer engagement as a dependent variable. Highly

identified consumers show supportive behaviour for the benefit of the brand communities they belong to Popp and Woratschek (2017). Besides, consumers draw emotional benefits through their identification with their preferred brand communities, which they might not receive if they switch to other communities, thereby facilitating their engagement behaviours (Kaur *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, we hypothesize as below:

H4. Consumer community identification has a positive impact on consumer engagement.

3.3 Influence of consumer engagement on brand love

A study by the People Metrics (2009) demonstrated that engaged consumers promote the company or brand, aim to return in the future and feel passion and love for the focal object (e.g. a brand). This finding was further corroborated by multiple studies while admitting the importance of engagement and propounding that companies which encompass consumer engagement as a metric to follow win and grow even in the challenging times (Rasool *et al.*, 2021; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019a).

Specific to social media-based brand communities (SMBBC) in developing brand love, prior studies suggest that community engagement has a positive relationship with brand love (Machado *et al.*, 2019). When consumers are psychologically engaged with specific brands and their related attributes, they cognitively and affectively invest more with such brands and consequently develop intimacy with and admiration towards such brands and their respective brand communities (Machado *et al.*, 2019). Prior literature further supports that consumer engagement positively influences brand love as consumers develop emotional ties with brands that nurture consumer interactions and engagement on their brand communities (Kaur *et al.*, 2020). Considering these viewpoints, we also assume that consumer engagement will positively influence brand love and hypothesize as below:

H5. Consumer engagement has a positive impact on brand love.

3.4 Positive word of mouth as an outcome variable

In their seminal study, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) acknowledged positive WOM a consequence of brand love. Several research studies later provided empirical evidence for positive WOM as an important consequence of brand love (Bairrada *et al.*, 2018). However, most of these studies have been conducted in a non-Asian geographic context, as a reason further examination of this relationship across contexts has been consistently suggested (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Rasool *et al.*, 2020). When consumers admire their preferred brands, they are emotionally connected with those and carry a passionate desire to keep interacting with such brands and their respective communities, advocating those and be more active in posting positive reviews about such brands (Islam *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, speaking positive about a brand (that a customer loves) to others plays a significant role in developing an individual's identity (Bairrada *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize as below:

H6. Brand love has a positive impact on positive WOM.

3.5 Mediating role of consumer engagement

Previous research recognised love as one of the facets of relationship quality (Fournier, 1998). But Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) came up with a novel concept of brand love and defined

it as a construct employed to evaluate satisfied consumers' spirit of love for a particular brand. Prior research suggests that due to value congruity with specific brands, customer end up engaging with and admiring brands that offer strong relationship quality (Islam *et al.*, 2018). Research further advocates that when consumers perceive similarity between their actual and ideal self-identities in relation to other members of a brand community, they tend to engage with and love such brands and their communities as a whole (Kaur *et al.*, 2020; Mandl and Hogreve, 2020). Therefore, while brand relationship quality and consumer community identification contribute directly to the development of brand love, these constructs may also exert an indirect effect on brand love through consumer engagement. On the basis of these propositions, we propose the below two hypotheses:

H7a. Consumer engagement mediates the relationship between brand relationship quality and brand love.

H7b. Consumer engagement mediates the relationship between consumer community identification and brand love.

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample and data collection

To collect data, we carried out an online questionnaire survey among the Indian followers of Facebook based brand communities. To conduct our main study, we presented a brief understanding of SMBBC and informed our contestants about the purpose of our survey. The questionnaire was uploaded on many brand communities and brand pages on Facebook. We also disseminated the questionnaire on different online platforms, namely, researchers' own Facebook and LinkedIn profiles, and through friend's Facebook profiles. After using some contacts generated through personal references, we further rolled our survey instrument to other contacts through email to collect data. Only those participants who liked at least one SMBBC on Facebook were taken as the respondents of our study. A total of 650 responses were received back which after accounting for missing values, unengaged responses and multivariate outliers further reduced to 580, yielding a response rate of 89%.

For a sample size to be adequate, Tabachnick *et al.* (2007), suggest a minimum of 300 responses to apply factor analysis. Hair *et al.* (2010) recommends that an item-response ratio of at least 1:10. Correspondingly, following prior studies (Shahid *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b), as our study comprises of 38 items for various constructs, a minimum sample size of 389 (38*10) is recommended. Likewise, Green (1991) suggests the sample size to be configured as: "$N \geq 50 + 8$ m (Where, N = minimum sample size required, and m = number of items included)". Therefore, for this study, the sample size should at least be 354; [$N \geq 50 + (8*38)$].

Considering the above discussed criteria along with the researchers' convenience, a sample size of 580 is justified to be appropriate. Of the 580 respondents, 60% were male and 40% were female. The respondents fall in the age group of 20–35 years, The average family income was found to be INR 3,10,000 (approximately US$4,000) per annum. The most commonly liked SMBBC were in the areas of electronics, fashion and apparel. The results showed that 67% of the respondents visit their liked SMBBC three to four times in a week, followed by 33% of respondents who daily visit their liked SMBBC.

Facebook was used as the contextual setting as it is most popular and widely used social media platform in India (Islam, *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, many firms use Facebook for developing brand's official fan pages and brand communities (i.e. SMBBC) for getting

engaged with consumers and fostering long-term consumer brand relationships (Kaur *et al.*, 2020; Ting *et al.*, 2021). Besides, Facebook provides an interactive platform for building SMBBCs, the amount of time spent on surfing the Facebook has witnessed an escalation over the years, which further depicts its relevance as a context for the current study.

4.2 Measures
The questionnaire survey was administered on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 ("very strongly disagree") to 7 ("very strongly agree"). The constructs of our study were measured by adapting previously established scales. The questionnaire's content validity was pre-tested by obtaining the insights from two subject specific expert professors. Slight modifications (as applicable) were made to the existing scales to fit to the study context. Brand relationship quality was measured by adapting Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) with sample items include "my liked SMBBC says a lot about the kind of person I am". Consumer community identification was measured through Bhattacharya *et al.* (1995) with sample items include "my liked SMBBC's success is my success". To measure consumer engagement, a 16-item multi-dimensional scale from Paruthi and Kaur (2017) was employed, with a sample item including "I enjoy using my Liked SMBBC more when I am with others". Brand love was measured through Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) with a sample item reading "This brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook is wonderful". Finally, five items were sourced from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1996) respectively to measure positive WOM with a sample item including "I talk about this brand who's SMBBC I liked on Facebook with my friends".

5. Data analysis and results
5.1 Reliability and validity
To analyse the proposed relationships, a two-step approach comprising "confirmatory factor analysis" (CFA) and "structural equation modelling" was followed. First, CFA was run to confirm the reliability and validity of the variables (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Construct validity was assessed by using Cronbach alpha (see Table 1 for scale refinement values). As depicted, each of the values were found to be more than the critical threshold of 0.70, representing adequate scale reliability. Each of the item's loadings were above 0.50, rendering the existence of sufficient convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The "average variance extracted" (AVE) exceeded the threshold value of 0.50, signifying satisfactory convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

"Discriminant validity was also evaluated by relating the shared variance between the constructs to the AVEs of the discrete items (Table 2). The squared root of each construct's AVE exceeded its corresponding inter-construct correlations, thereby confirming the being of discriminant validity among our constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981)."

5.2 Common method bias
The study deployed Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003) for checking common method biasness in the data. By using this test, the existence of common method bias is proposed if a single merged factor elucidates more than 50% of the covariance. To accomplish the same, all the 38 items were combined (extracting only one factor) in an un-rotated principal component exploratory factor analysis. The emerged factor explains 47.885% (i.e. <50%) of the variance, thereby endorsing that common method bias is not a concern (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

Constructs and Items	Item factor loadings (≥ 0.5)
Consumer engagement. Adapted from Paruthi and Kaur (2017) $\alpha = 0.911; CR = 0.917; AVE = 0.735$	
I like to know more about my liked SMBBC	0.651
I like events that are related to my liked SMBBC	0.617
I like to learn more about my liked SMBBC	0.656
I pay a lot of attention to anything about my liked SMBBC	0.619
I keep up with things related to my liked SMBBC	0.620
Anything related to my liked SMBBC grabs my attention	0.622
Engaging with my liked SMBBC makes me feel happy	0.769
I feel the experience on my liked SMBBC to be pleasurable	0.749
Browsing my liked SMBBC satisfies me	0.673
I spend a lot of my free time on my liked SMBBC	0.635
I am heavily into my liked SMBBC	0.726
I am passionate about my liked SMBBC	0.641
I try to fit accessing my liked SMBBC into my schedule	0.514
I love accessing my liked SMBBC with my friends	0.736
I enjoy using my liked SMBBC more when I am with others	0.547
My liked SMBBC is more fun when other people around me also access it	0.514
Consumer community identification. Adapted from Bhattacharya et al. (1995) $\alpha = 0.900; CR = 0.900; AVE = 0.600$	
My liked SMBBC's success is my successes	0.634
When someone praises my liked SMBBC, it feels like a personal complement to me	0.714
When someone criticizes my liked SMBBC, it feels like personal insult to me	0.623
When I talk about my liked SMBBC, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	0.555
I am very interested in what others think about my liked SMBBC	0.505
I have strong feelings for my liked SMBBC	0.568
Brand relationship quality. Adapted from Algesheimer et al. (2005) $\alpha = 0.822; CR = 0.828; AVE = 0.616$	
My liked SMBBC says a lot about the kind of person I am	0.691
My liked SMBBC brand image and my self-image are similar in many respects	0.640
My liked SMBBC plays an important role in my life	0.518
Brand love. Adapted from Caroll and Ahuvia (2006) $\alpha = 0.960; CR = 0.961; AVE = 0.754$	
This brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook is wonderful	0.683
This brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook makes me feel good	0.764
This brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook is totally awesome	0.803
This brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook makes me very happy	0.722
I love this brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook	0.708
This brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook is a pure delight	0.774
I am passionate for this brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook	0.685
I am very attached to This brand who's SMBBC I like on Facebook	0.685
Positive word of mouth. Adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Zeithmal et al. (1996) $\alpha = 0.921; CR = 0.922; AVE = 0.703$	
I talk about this brand who's SMBBC I liked on Facebook with my friends	0.712
I try to spread the good word about this brand who's SMBBC I liked on Facebook	0.752
I have encouraged other people to go for this brand who's SMBBC I liked on Facebook	0.640
I recommend this brand who's SMBBC I liked on Facebook	0.740
I recommend this brand who's SMBBC I liked on Facebook	0.669
Notes: CR = Composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted	

Table 1.
Results of CFA for the measurement model

5.3 Structural model
The model's fit to the data was measured by drawing on the "χ^2 statistic, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), SRMR, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI)" (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Model fit is considered to be acceptable if RMSEA < 0.07, SRMR < 0.09, CFI > 0.90, NFI > 0.90, (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The proposed model presented an adequate overall model fit: CMIN/Df = 3.595, CFI = 0.926, TLI = 0.910, RMSEA = 0.067 and SRMR = 0.1275. As far as hypotheses testing is concerned (Figure 2), brand relationship quality had a positive impact on brand love ($\gamma = 0.124$, $p < 0.001$) and consumer engagement ($\gamma = 0.524$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting *H1* and *H2*, respectively. The effect of consumer community identification on brand love was not significant ($\gamma = 0.071$, $p < 0.001$), thereby not supporting *H3*. However, the effect of consumer community identification on consumer engagement was found to be positive ($\gamma = 0.352$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting *H4*. Furthermore, consumer engagement had a significant positive effect on brand love ($\gamma = 0.806$, $p < 0.001$), supporting *H5*. Finally, the effect of brand love on positive WOM was also found to be positive and significant ($\gamma = 0.597$, $p < 0.001$), hence supporting *H6*.

5.4 Mediation analysis
"To check the (full/partial) mediating effect of consumer engagement on the relation of brand relationship quality and consumer community identification on brand love, Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach was used, followed by bootstrapping as recommended by Zhao *et al.* (2010). In full mediation, the antecedents affect the resultant variable only through the effect on the mediator. Contrarily, in partial mediation, the antecedents affect

Variable	Mean	SD	Positive WOM	BRQ	CCI	BL	CE
Positive WOM	4.50	1.715	*0.838*				
BRQ	3.89	1.714	0.611[*]	*0.785*			
CCI	3.38	1.668	0.598[*]	0.762[*]	*0.774*		
BL	4.75	1.804	0.730[*]	0.589[*]	0.572[*]	*0.868*	
CE	4.45	1.859	0.724[*]	0.735[*]	0.685[*]	0.748[*]	*0.857*

Notes: SD depicts "standard deviation", CE depicts "consumer engagement", CCI depicts "consumer community identification", BL depicts "brand love", WOM depicts "word-of-mouth". The figures in italic depict the square root of AVE; *Correlation is significant at 0.05 level; $N = 580$

Table 2.
Descriptive statistic, inter-construct correlations and square root of AVE
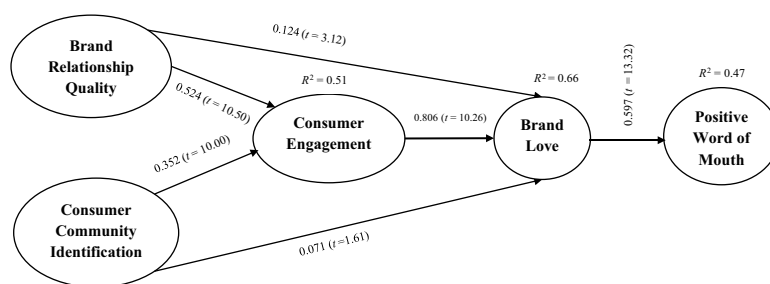

Figure 2.
Structural model

the resultant variable directly as well as indirectly through the mediating variable (Baron and Kenny, 1986). The results revealed that brand relationship quality has a direct positive effect on brand love ($\gamma = 0.124$, $p < 0.01$) as well as an indirect effect via consumer engagement ($\gamma = 0.423$, $p < 0.01$), thereby supporting *H7a*. However, consumer community identification has only a significant indirect effect on brand love via consumer engagement ($\gamma = 0.284$, $p < 0.01$), thereby supporting *H7b*. These results show that the effect of brand relationship quality on brand love is partially mediated by consumer engagement but consumer engagement has a full mediating effect on the relationship between consumer community identification and brand love."

6. Discussion

Though consumer engagement has been the subject of extensive research in recent years, little remains known regarding consumers dormant precursors that motivate them to stay engaged with brands across digital platforms, as therefore investigated in this study (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021; Rasool *et al.*, 2020). Our empirical results provide new insights about consumer engagement and its linkage with other strategically important constructs, namely, brand relationship quality, consumer community identification and brand love in the digital context. Our empirical results corroborate brand relationship quality and consumer community identification as critical drivers of consumer engagement on the online platforms. These results support previous conceptual propositions and generalize some prior findings to diverse contexts (Prentice *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, brand love was found to be effective in fostering positive WOM, which is consistent with prior research (Machado *et al.*, 2019; Wallace *et al.*, 2014).

We also investigated the mediating role of consumer engagement in the proposed associations, yielding the following key observations. Though consumer engagement was found to partially mediate the paths of brand relationship quality to brand love, it fully mediated the path from consumer community identification to brand love. A reasonable explanation for these findings is that brand relationship quality aimed at maintaining enduring and mutually satisfying consumer brand relationships, thereby facilitating consumer's engagement with the brand. Additionally, engaged consumers developed a strong, passionate and biased perception of the brand considering it as irreplaceable in turn generating love for the brand (Albert and Merunka, 2013). This finding further suggests that consumers who are involved in interactive relationship with the brand via OBCs and perceive brand as unique will tend to develop an emotional bond with such OBCs *vis-à-vis* the brand, engendering love for such brands.

Regarding the full mediating effect of consumer engagement on the relationship between consumer community identification and brand love, a probable reason could be that consumer community identification represents consumers' sense of being part of the brand community, exhibiting similarity to "consciousness of kind" (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001), such consumers tend to participate (more actively) in community-based discussions and exercise a positive influence on community engagement (Prentice *et al.*, 2019). This engaging behaviour strengthens their collective identity and makes them admire such brand community's shared culture (Mandl and Hogreve, 2020; Wallace *et al.*, 2014). We next outline important implications that arise from our analyses.

6.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of the study provide implications to marketing theory as well as practice. Theoretically, our empirical findings contribute to the prevailing literature by providing novel insight into key consumer engagement-related dynamics in the virtual context.

Though prior research has explored online consumer engagement, few studies have identified and empirically validated intrinsic emotions and feelings based brand relationship quality and identity based consumer community identification motivations and consumer engagement dynamics across these virtual platforms, as therefore examined in this research.

The empirical findings reported by this study, indeed, represent the relevance of consumer engagement interactions in contemporary firms' relationship marketing strategy (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019a; Rasool *et al.*, 2020). Our results link consumer engagement with elusive yet key antecedent and outcome variables in the context of OBCs, which currently is facing intense competition and a generational shift. Specifically, consumer engagement has a strong effect on brand love which consequently enhances positive WOM, suggesting the strategic importance of nurturing customers' online platform-related interactions and engagement, which raising a host of implications for further research.

Our proposed model suggests a more customer-centric and contextual approach of the emotional benefits to customers in this extremely relevant virtual environment. Interestingly, unlike prior research, our findings suggest that consumer community identification does not directly drive brand love towards their preferred brands and/or communities. This finding makes intuitive sense, as consumers tend to actively engage in such brand/community based interactions, which consequently make people adore such brands, thereby reflecting the strategic importance of consumer engagement to marketers.

Our study reacts to the Marketing Science Institute call for further (empirical) examination of OBC-related consumer engagement (MSI, 2020) and addresses the critical role of consumer engagement in the online context with a focus on its intrinsic motivation-based drivers and ensuing brand love and positive WOM-based effects. To the best of the authors' knowledge, research pertaining to the specific combination of constructs remains un-explored in prior research. Our proposed model offers an in-depth insight of specific "intrinsic and extrinsic" motivations to engage customers in the virtual domain, make them adore their brands and spread a positive word, all of which are crucial in offering competitive advantages.

"Finally, majority of consumer engagement studies have been conducted in Western countries, this study investigates the proposed consumer engagement-specific relations in a growing economy context of India, which further adds to the domain of consumer engagement knowledge (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019a; Islam *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, responding to the calls for more substantive work on consumer engagement across geographies, this work adds to the literature by studying consumer engagement from a non-Western context, therefore, widens the scope of identified antecedent and outcome variables across contexts."

6.2 Practical implications

This study also offers several key managerial implications. Practically, this study identifies the impetus that drive consumers to interact with brand touch-points, admire the brands and speak favourably about those. Given that consumers, now-a-days, are more empowered, more aware of their needs and less transaction oriented; they prefer building evocative relationships to better connect with brands and engage with multiple touch-points. Our results suggest that companies must recognise OBCs as strategically important components in marketing decision-making to foster relationship building and consumer engagement.

Further from a managerial perspective, this study stresses on consumer engagement as a strategic tool to build and maintain OBCs. The results suggest that, when it comes engaging consumers (particularly the new members) with OBCs, firms must focus on cues that can socially nudge a user *vis-à-vis* evoke relationship building. In an attempt to develop valuable relationships with consumers, the proposed sequential flow from brand relationship quality

and consumer community identification to consumer engagement to brand love and positive WOM may serve as a guiding path that practitioners should pursue to facilitate constructive connection with consumers. Such productive recognition can translate into a sustained competitive advantage.

While providing consumers with platforms such as OBCs, practitioners need to focus their attention in encouraging consumers to express their sense of cohesion, belongingness and enjoy communal identification with other brand devotees. Firms can utilize "peer linking" approach for facilitating relationship among community members. Social media managers must socially recognize their members, making them feel special and appreciated by the community. This will help in building members' belief of being an essential part of the community (Vohra and Bhardwaj, 2019); such an impetus not only generates a feeling of love for the brand but also motivates users to spread positive words about the brand. Practitioners may nurture in-depth contacts with consumers, responding to their queries quickly *vis-à-vis* analysing their reviews and feedback to further improve product and service delivery to stay ahead of the competition. A summary of key conclusions and implications is presented in Table 3.

7. Limitations and future research scope

Though the present study adds to the consumer engagement literature, we admit certain limitations that afford prospects for further research. First, as consumers tend to use multiple platform types, further investigation of various platforms (e.g. mobile app vs desktop browser) and their optimal composition represents an important research issue. For example, how can consumers be better engaged across mobile apps, OBCs, websites and offline platforms? Second, future researchers can investigate consumer engagement from value perspective and can analyse how engagement helps in creating value within consumer brand relationships. Third, situational factors such as size of OBC, and valence of information on such communities may also affect consumer engagement. Future researchers may wish to test the moderating effects of such situational factors. Finally, this study

Conclusions	Theoretical and managerial implications
• Brand relationship quality and consumer community identification are critical drivers of consumer engagement on digital platforms	• Business organizations need to take a more customer-centric and contextual approach of the emotional benefits to customers in the digital environment
• Engaging consumers has become a strategic imperative for companies to achieve brand love and positive customer recommendations	• Majority of consumer engagement studies have been conducted in the developed countries. By investigating the proposed consumer engagement-specific relations in a growing economy context of India, this study widens the scope of identified antecedent and outcome variables across contexts
	• Companies must recognise online brand communities as strategically important components in marketing decision-making to foster relationship building, to engage consumers and achieve positive customer recommendations
	• In an attempt to engage consumers on digital platforms, firms must focus on cues that can socially nudge a consumer *vis-à-vis* evoke relationship building

Table 3.
Conclusions, theoretical and managerial implications

investigated the potential favourable outcomes of consumer engagement. However, future studies may consider examining potentially adverse effects of elevated consumer engagement including fatigue and addictive behaviour, which warrant further study.

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