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Generating Customer Engagement and Customer Enragement on Facebook Pages of Tesco and Walmart

Swaleha Peeroo^{1*}, Martin Samy², Brian Jones²

¹ Université des Mascareignes, Pamplemousses, Mauritius
speeroo@udm.ac.mu

² Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom
{M.A.Samy, B.T.Jones}@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Abstract Social media are compelling businesses to review their way of managing customer experiences. There is a dearth of research as to why customers interact with businesses on social media in the grocery sector. This paper aims to explore how customers react to corporate messages on Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart. Netnography approach was adopted to gain an insight into the various ways customers engage with the grocery stores on its Facebook pages. Findings show that the social customer is both a curse and a blessing to Tesco and Walmart as they can create or destroy value for the business. This paper contributes to knowledge by uncovering the various ways customers react with the business and how value can be created and destroyed.

Keywords — social media; customer engagement; relationship marketing; customer empowerment; grocery stores; Facebook.

1. Introduction

The social media revolution has impacted the business world, pushing companies to adapt to a new social order [1]. Social media have empowered customers by giving them a voice to spread their opinions on products and services to a very wide audience and at an incredible speed [2]. The potential benefits of adopting social media platforms have appealed to businesses of all sizes across several industries [3]. Dreading to lose the social media battle, managers have hastily integrated social media within their business strategies [4]. However, many managers are still uncertain of the opportunities and threats relating to social networks owing to the lack of knowledge of their structure and operation [5].

Extant literature covers the field of social media as a marketing tool to build relationship with customers, however there is a dearth of research on the use of social media in the grocery sector, though practitioners in this field are increasingly incorporating social media in their marketing strategy [6]. Following the calls for research for understanding the expectations and motivations of customers to interact with businesses on social media [7,8], this paper aims to uncover the reasons customers engage

with grocery stores on social media and to show how customer interactions on social media can be both a blessing and a curse. In this article, we provide a brief literature of social media, and customer engagement. We outline the netnographic method and present a model based on the findings of the study focusing on the challenges and opportunities that these phenomena present to retailers of the grocery sector. We then conclude, present the limitations and suggest future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media

Social media are a collection of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 [5] and mobile technology [9] and they allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC). Social media are bringing about a societal revolution, as they are an open platform enabling multi-way communication, they are fast and affordable [1]. Social media empower customers and virtual communities to send and broadcast information to a global audience cheaply and instantaneously on the net [1].

Individuals leverage social networks and blogs to create, recommend and share information hence outspreading the reach of marketing influence [10]. Consumers in the digital age use the Internet and social media platforms to find information about products and services, to engage with the businesses they purchase from, and to connect with other customers who may provide valuable insights [10].

Traditional management methods can no longer be used with consumers on social media as they expect firms to listen to them, engage and respond accordingly [9]. Social networking sites are increasingly being used by businesses to establish their marketing network, since social media platforms facilitate the establishment of communication and ongoing real time conversations [11].

Research has identified that large companies use their Facebook pages to (1) promote their products and services such as launching new products and announcing sales promotions; (2) promote sponsored events for e.g. donations or sponsoring sports activities; (3) carry out surveys to get feedback from their fans; (4) make informational announcements for e.g. new opening hours or new business locations; and (5) post fun messages usually in a question style linked to a recent or forthcoming event [12].

Customers connect to a Facebook brand page because (1) they consume the products and services of the company, (2) they hope to get discounts and promotions, (3) they want to show to others that they like a particular brand, (4) they want to get information about the brand before others do, and (5) they wish to have access to exclusive content [13]. Four benefits that customers gain from using social networks are: (1) social benefits by interacting with other members of the community, (2) informa-

tional benefits by accessing information about the products and services of the company, (3) hedonic benefits by enjoying and having fun on the social network for e.g. games, and finally (4) economic benefits by obtaining promotional deals. These benefits encourage community members to continue visiting and being active on social networking sites, therefore offering opportunities to firms to strengthen relationships with their customers [14]. Research has been carried out to understand motivations of customers for interacting with businesses in the apparel sector [8] where customers are highly involved in the purchase. These authors suggested that further research is required to understand motivations of customers to connect with retailers in various sectors. This paper therefore aims to fill this gap by analysing the motivations of customers to interact with grocery stores, which sell mostly low involvement products by analysing responses of customers to customer and company initiated messages.

When brands and consumers co-create brand stories, brand owners do not have full control of their brands [15] as consumer-generated brand contents can spread as quickly as those created by companies [16]. In this social media era, marketers find themselves at the mercy of customers who can post comments about their brands. As this new marketing paradigm evolves, there is genuine excitement about the potential of social media to add value for businesses, but also apprehension about the difficulty of seizing the full promise of this new medium [17].

Co-creation is one of the virtues of the new age marketing enabled by social media. However, for marketers who need to manage their brands, UGC and social media do not only provide opportunities but also threats [18]. Social media and UGC are a potential threat to the efforts of organisations to build, manage and protect their brands because such content is outside their immediate control [15], [18,19]. Interestingly, technologies and tools of Web 2.0 seem to ease the co-creation of value by the company and the customer [20,21].

The open-comment platform of Facebook and the anonymity offered by the Internet produce the ideal conditions for public outrage to be vented on corporate walls [22]. Furthermore, social media have empowered customers and the public by giving them a voice and weakened the position of companies by rendering them vulnerable to customer attacks, negative publicity and corporate reputation damage [23]. The voice of the customer in brand communities may be a threat to the organisation if it carries a negative content [24]. Social media users can generate huge waves of outrage within a short period of time when reacting to a questionable activity or statement of an organisation [25]. Such a phenomenon is qualified as an online firestorm, which is “the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative word of mouth and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks” [25].

Despite the threats posed by the democratisation of communication, marketers are increasingly using social media to connect and engage with their customers. Customer engagement is believed to be the key outcome of social media campaigns [26].

2.2 Customer Engagement

Social media channels such as mobiles and online videos provide new opportunities to engage customers [27]. By giving access to online content and communication through virtual tools, social media enable and facilitate consumer experiences, which may generate customer engagement with specific brands [28]. Though customer engagement has various interpretations, it is often viewed as a motivational concept, with varying intensity. It encompasses an object (i.e. a brand) and a subject (i.e. the customer) [29], and has either a positive or negative valence [30, 31].

Customer engagement encompasses the connection that users form with businesses, following their experiences with the products, services and activities of the business [32]. Hollebeek defines customer brand engagement as “the level of a customer's motivational, brand-related and context dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions” [32, p. 790]. In this definition of customer engagement, there are the three dimensions that have been extensively cited in the literature, namely the cognitive, emotional and behavioural perspectives [30], [33]. From a cognitive standpoint, engagement is a positive state of mind that is represented by high commitment, energy, and loyalty towards a firm [34], for e.g. the person's level of concentration or engrossment in the brand [32]. From a behavioural viewpoint, engagement refers to actions toward a firm that go beyond transactions [34], for e.g. participation, vigour and interaction with the focal brand [33]. From an emotional perspective, customer engagement may be characterised by feelings of an individual towards a brand [28], for e.g. a customer's level of brand-related inspiration and/or pride [32].

Unlike authors who have used multidimensional perspectives, van Doorn et al. focus only on the behavioural dimension of customer engagement [35]. According to these scholars, customer engagement consists of behaviours, which go beyond transactions [35]. Customers engage in several behaviours that boost their relationship with the brand. Behavioural manifestations do not only mean purchases, but also include other activities of the customer such as word of mouth, customer co-creation and complaining behaviour [36], recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, writing reviews and even engaging in legal actions [35]. By moving along the customer engagement cycle, value is generated both for the customer and the company. However, when organisations fail to engage customers, they have to face the potential threat of customer enagement [37], a situation where customers can easily become value destroyers instead of value creators for companies [38, 39]. This forces businesses to be increasingly reactive, or even pro-active, to avoid negative brand image consequences which in turn may lead to increased value co-destruction.

3. Methodology

A netnographic study was undertaken to observe reactions of customers to company posts on Facebook pages of grocery stores. Netnography is a participant-

observation method used for data collection to research the consumer behaviour of online communities and cultures present on the Internet [40]. The aim of this netnographic research was to analyse the reactions of customers of grocery stores to messages posted by the grocery stores on their official Facebook pages. The researchers have observed interactions on the official Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart. For a rigorous and reliable research approach, the researchers have adhered to the five stages and recommended procedures: (1) making entrée, (2) data collection and analysis, (3) providing trustworthy interpretation, (4) research ethics, and finally (5) member checks. [40].

For the entrée, the researchers have chosen Tesco and Walmart, the leading grocery stores in the world according to the March 2013 Global Food Retail report. These two grocery stores have been selected as they have both implemented an international strategy and have stores in several countries. Additionally there are high traffic of postings and a large number of discrete posters on both Facebook pages.

For data collection, the researchers downloaded conversations occurring on the official Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart during a one-month period during which saturation of data occurred [40]. The data were saved in word documents, the data added up to 8008 pages of texts using Arial font size 11. The data were analysed through the qualitative software, NVivo.

The third step of netnography is to provide trustworthy interpretation [40]. Research is reckoned to be reasonable and trustworthy when conventional procedures of netnography are followed while collecting and analysing data [40]. Triangulation of data was used to enhance credibility of the study. Triangulation is achieved through the use of a large number of customers who have posted comments [41]. Additionally site triangulation has been achieved through the participation of customers from two different grocery stores (Tesco and Walmart) in order to lessen the effect on the research of particular local factors belonging to one specific grocery store.

The ethical procedure recommended by Langer and Beckman has been adopted in this research [42]. Comments posted by customers of Tesco and Walmart on the official Facebook page are considered to be publicly available data as they are not password restricted. Therefore the researchers did not need to obtain permission before using these data. However, anonymity and privacy of the participants have been respected.

Finally, the fifth step is carrying out member checks [40]. Member check is a technique whereby part or all of the research findings are given to the participants of the research in order to seek their comments [41]. However, the researchers did not carry out member checks since this research is conducted entirely unobtrusively, and Langer and Beckman argue that in such conditions, it is unnecessary to present the findings back to members of the community who participated [42].

4. Findings and Discussions

When customers respond to company posts or initiate conversations on the Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart, they provide insights into the reasons why they engage with businesses on social media. This study reveals that social media have empowered customers, have influenced the relationships customers have with the grocery stores and have generated customer engagement.

4.1 Empowered customers within the grocery sector

While interacting with Tesco and Walmart on their official Facebook page, customers perceive that they have been empowered since they can voice out their opinions to the virtual brand community and they can also add or destroy value for the business. Co-creation of products and modification of products are not areas in which customers can add value in the grocery sector, since grocery stores do not manufacture products but only source products from their suppliers to sell to final customers. However, this study reveals that customers of Tesco and Walmart add value to the relationship by suggesting products that they would like to have, by informing the grocery stores of their needs and wants, by recommending products to their peers, and by giving advice to other customers as illustrated by the following quote:

“Let's all go to tescos [sic] where allegra [sic] gets her best cloths [sic] their [sic] all half price she thinks that's nice”

Additionally, the researcher has observed that Facebook has given a voice to the customer, which extends far beyond the circle of relatives, friends and colleagues known to the customer. By giving a voice to the customer, Facebook has empowered customers since it is easier for customers to post complaints on the page, to criticise actions of the company, than to call the company or write a letter of complaint as illustrated below.

“I will never buy food at Walmart and risk my life. Walmart, please improve your quality.....dont [sic] go down to any level to lower your prices. Do not risk the lives of people to save a few cents”

4.2 Relationship building within the grocery sector

As the modern food retail industry is booming worldwide and competition in this sector is rife, grocery retailers aim to provide superior customer value to gain customer satisfaction. To improve the satisfaction levels of customers, retailers are increasingly using social media to enrich their shopping experience [43]. Tesco and Walmart have set up their official Facebook pages to communicate, interact and engage their customers to strengthen the relationship with them.

In this study, the researcher found that customers have commented on the relationship they have with grocery stores by posting comments in which they have expressed satisfaction and loyalty towards Tesco and Walmart. This study reveals that customers tend to post positive comments in which they inform the company and other customers about the product or service that they have bought and how satisfied they are with the purchase as illustrated in the following quote:

“Walmart the best store in the whole world, everything that I need is there, yeah [sic] because after looking in the other stores website comparing prices at end Walmart is the my favourite and I finished my day in Walmart.”

Emotional bonding is a prerequisite to strong brand relationships [19]. Customers of Tesco and Walmart have demonstrated their emotional commitment to the firm by posting comments in which they express their affection and attachment to the firm for e.g. by using the word ‘love’. These emotional bonds therefore provide a sustainable competitive advantage [44].

However, this study has also revealed numerous cases of dissatisfied customers who have either complained about a product or service or criticised an action of the organisation and who have vouched that they are terminating the relationship with the grocery stores as illustrated by the following quote:

“Why am I being plastered with ads from this miserable store? I hate wmart [sic]!!!!

When retailers fail to meet expectations of customers, the relationship is broken and customers turn to competitors [45]. However, engaging with customers on Facebook, Tesco and Walmart can help build and maintain relationships with them.

4.3 Customer Engagement within the grocery sector

Tesco and Walmart aim to engage customers on their official Facebook pages. This study reveals that the three most extensively cited dimensions of customer engagement occur on the Facebook page of Tesco and Walmart: cognitive, emotional and behavioural. Cognitive engagement occurs at Tesco and Walmart, whenever customers post comments in which they provide information and help to other customers, or when they give advice to other customers. Another form of cognitive engagement is when customers post comments about their loyalty towards the stores as illustrated below:

“Love tescos [sic] have shopped there for the last 29yrs [sic] since I had my first son. £1 delivery slots will definitely make me shop on line!! [sic]”

Emotional engagement also occurs whenever customers post comments about their feelings and emotions. Four main emotions have been expressed on the Facebook

pages of Tesco and Walmart: enthusiasm, humour, sarcasm and scepticism. Enthusiasm and humour bring positive value to the online community, while sarcasm and scepticism destroy value and even damage the image of the store. Emotional engagement influences the nature of the relationship between the customer and the business [30], [44].

Behavioural engagement occurs when customers request for more information, entertainment, additional incentives and when they participate by responding to posts of the stores. This study reveals that customers converse with other customers on Facebook, share advertisement, give advice to other customers, get or provide feedback to other customers, criticise other customers, help other customers, make themselves or someone else known to other customers and also provide support and encouragement to other customers.

When customers are engaged, the levels of utilitarian and hedonic value that they perceive to experience increase [33]. However, findings have revealed that engaged customers also post negative comments, which may harm the organisation. When this occurs, instead of engaging customers, retailers generate customer enragement [37]. This study reveals that customers destroy value when they post comments to complain, to criticise, to provide information about competitors, to warn customers against a product/service, and to boycott a store. When UGC contains negative brand information, it may damage a brand [46].

4.4 Influence of Social Media on the Grocery Sector

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the four main constructs of the study are interconnected: social media, relationship marketing, customer empowerment, and customer engagement. In the retail sector, more specifically the grocery sector, Facebook generates online customer engagement which influences the relationships customers have with Tesco and Walmart. Empowered customers use Facebook to convey their satisfaction or dissatisfaction to Tesco and Walmart as well as to the members of the community by posting comments. The interconnectedness of the constructs is depicted in Figure 1.

The model depicts the reactions of customers to messages posted on the Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart. Tesco and Walmart use Facebook to engage their customers. This study shows that customers interact with the grocery stores by 'liking', 'sharing' and 'commenting' posts on the Facebook page. This study has revealed that online customer engagement can either create value or destroy value. Positive online customer engagement results in co-creation of value, which leads to a stronger relationship between the grocery stores and their customers. While negative online customer engagement also known as online customer enragement leads to co-destruction of value, which weakens the relationship between the parties.

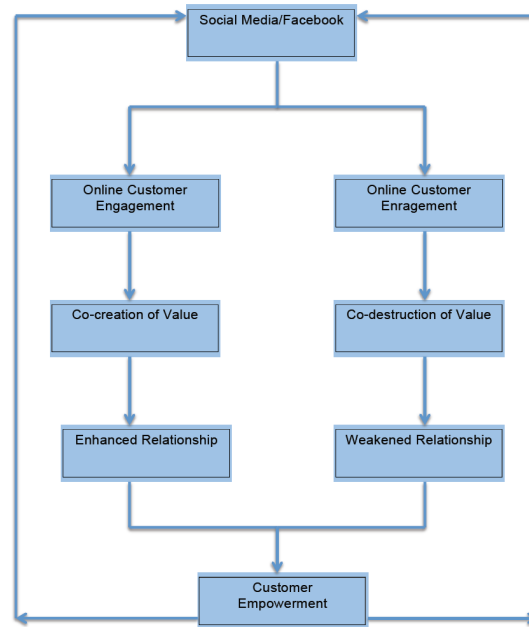


Fig. 1. Customer reactions to messages posted on Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart.
(Source: developed by the authors)

In this social media era, whether the customer is satisfied or dissatisfied with the products and services of the grocery stores, the customer feels empowered as Facebook and social media offer a voice to the customer. When the customer has a positive customer experience, he/she wants to share this experience with the other members of the virtual community. Therefore, the happy and satisfied customer goes back to the Facebook page and posts a positive message, which may eventually positively influence the members of the online community. Conversely, when the customer experiences a negative outcome resulting in online customer enragement, he/she wants to share his/her experience with the other members of the virtual community. Hence, the disgruntled and angry customer posts a negative comment on the Facebook page. This customer backlash may damage the image of the grocery stores and negatively influence the other members of the online community.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyse the reactions of customers on Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart. This paper shows the various ways customers engage with grocery stores. When customers engage positively with the grocery store, value is created and the relationship is enhanced. However, when customer enragement occurs, customers destroy value by taking actions, which harm the business such as posting complaints and criticisms or asking customers to boycott the store, thus endangering the relationships with customers. Social media have empowered customers

who use Facebook to express their satisfactions or dissatisfactions on the official pages of Tesco and Walmart.

This paper contributes to the literature by showing the interconnectedness of social media, relationship marketing, customer empowerment and customer engagement in the grocery sector. It has also identified ways customers co-create and co-destroy value.

This paper has brought to light several implications for retailers. Customers perceive the official Facebook page of Tesco and Walmart as a customer service channel. Therefore retailers should attend to the queries and complaints of customers efficiently on Facebook, so that unsatisfied customers can be turned into loyal customers. Additionally, retailers should encourage customer co-creation on their Facebook page and should also harness CRM 2.0 by using all the information provided by customers in their comments to personalise the communication with them.

The limitation of the paper is related to the nature of the netnography method, which constrained the analysis to those customers who have commented on Facebook, therefore neglecting other sources such as offline customer feedback. Future research might offer a comparative analysis of the use of Facebook by grocery stores and might analyse the social media strategies adopted by these firms. Another avenue for future research could be to focus on one grocery store operating in several countries to identify differences and similarities between social media communication in different country contexts. This will provide the opportunity to look at how communication is customised to specific locations i.e. the influence of place and culture.

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