Social Media Engagement and Brand Outcomes: a Study of Fast Moving Consumer Goods Sector

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Abstract

Social media has become an important tool for marketers to shape and influence the consumers' behavior. Inherent ingredient of the social media is the interaction of consumers with other consumers as persons. Besides, the brand personality is a phenomenon which is evolved into the presentation of brands as persons (brand anthropomorphism) to accentuate the consumer's person-to-person interaction. Literature reflects the impact of consumer interaction in social media on brand outcomes. But the current study postulates that, among the social media users, the social media engagement is a better measure to study the consumer behavior towards brand outcomes. This study analyzed the moderating role of brand anthropomorphism on the relationships of social media engagement and brand relationship quality, as well as analyzed the moderating role on the relationship of social media engagement and brand loyalty. Data was collected from 440 consumers of the fast moving consumer goods in Pakistan through snowball sampling. Data was analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in SmartPLS 3 software. Significant impact of social media interaction was found on the brand outcomes with moderating role of brand anthropomorphism. Future recommendations and managerial implications are also discussed.

Keywords: Social Media Engagement, Brand Anthropomorphism, Brand Relationship Quality, Brand Loyalty

Introduction

Social media or social networking sites act as emerging channel for digital communications by which the consumer of such platforms can interact with their desired brand. They may share information, learn and have a discussion about the purchase and evaluation of their considered brands (Chappuis, Gaffey, & Parvizi, 2011; Qualman, 2010). Social media is being increasingly used as the communication and advertisement media by the small and large firms. Many marketers are focused on building a proper consumer-brand relationship through the application of social media. However, the outcomes are still unknown, along with how much the social media based interactions are associated with the long term commitments. Some researchers such as Fournier and Avery (2011) have advised brands to take proper cautions on applying social media strategy for their brands. This is due to the complexities of dynamics of social media along with the lesser control, once the social media content is out in the open web. So, increasing the interaction does not simply ensures the greater positive behavior of the consumers.

Social media have not only changed the dynamics of communication but it has also changed how a brand is perceived by the consumers in the social media sphere. Brands' social media page interact and engage the consumers just as the other social media consumers' do. Thus, brand anthropomorphism is a phenomenon where consumers perceive the brands as a

reflection of other fellow humans. The nature of brand anthropomorphism phenomenon reflects that its presence or absence affects the relationship of social media interaction and brand outcomes. Although the brand anthropomorphism is gaining traction in the literature, but the earlier researchers have studied the social media interaction and examined its effect on the brand outcomes (Erdoğmuş & Çiçek, 2012; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2012; Luo, Zhang, & Liu, 2015). Based on earlier work, this study strives to contribute to the literature by studying the mediating role of brand relationship quality between the relationship of social media engagement and brand loyalty, where brand anthropomorphism is a moderator. The role of brand relationship quality is tested in a mediated-moderation model to analyze the complex nature of relationships between the variables which has not yet been found in the empirical literature yet, especially considering the social media users only.

Literature Review

Social Media Engagement: Despite the adoption across the firms and industries, the relative research on the social media is still lacking, especially considering the attitudes of the consumers. Literature have considerable studies addressing the social media from descriptive perspective but the explanatory empirical studies are limited (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). This lack of explanation is evident from the inconclusive findings depicted by the contradictory results being reported in the literature (Hudson et al., 2016; Socialbakers, 2015; Traphagen, 2015). Alongside, the marketers are increasingly investing the resources into the social media for sake of increased brand visibility and to bond the relationship with the consumers. These inconclusive results and huge investments & stakes in this new media, require in-depth explanation of relationships leading towards the brand outcomes.

Social media engagement has been regarded as the primary factor for building and sustaining the relationship of firm and brands with the consumer. The relationship of consumer behavior towards brand outcome is not simple and requires more research (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). There is assumed to be a number of factors which may influence the relationship of consumer engagement and brand outcomes. Consumer engagement has been examined to have a positive and significant relationship with the brand relationship, while brand anthropomorphism has been reported to moderate this relationship. This study was conducted in the developed countries where commercial and social dynamics of society are quite different from the developing countries. Firms operating in diverse societies of the world require sophisticated marketing strategies to incorporate the behavioral aspects into their marketing campaigns. So, it becomes imperative to study the said relationships in other than developed countries.

Brand relationship quality

Brands have been a comprehensively studied phenomenon in the marketing literature. Academics have studied the perception of the consumer about the brand as well as how the consumer relate themselves to the brand (Fournier, 1998; Keller, 2003; Muniz Jr & O'guinn, 2001). It is observed that consumer do not find a difference between the brands and their parent firms which have actually built those brands (A. J. Kim & Ko, 2012). It is attributed to the marketing strategy which the firms uses to manage the brand portfolio which may have same product categories, but for different market segments. Separating the identity of the brand from the manufacturer's identity helps to build several identities to attract different consumers in different segments of the market, without compromising the identity of the firm. Moreover, marketers tend to present the identities of the brand as the living personalities

which makes the consumer more inclined to interact and associate with them (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Moon, 2000). It also serves as the differentiating factor to highlight the brand from its competitors (Sung & Kim, 2010).

Normally, brand personality comprised of the qualities, emotions and norms which are used in the real life person to person interaction. This replication of emotions and norms encourages the consumers to treat the brands as another person in their life (J. Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). Generally, people value their possessions as an extension of themselves which then becomes the part of their self. Relationship of the consumers with the brand is also reflected when the consumers associate their personal characteristics with the brand (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995). This association is stronger when the consumers have higher attachment with the brand (Phau & Lau, 2001).

Multiple attempts have been made to explore and analyze the relationship of the consumer with the brand (Blackston, 1992; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). But, one of the most often utilized conceptualization is of Fournier (1998). This conceptualization is known as brand relationship quality (BRQ). Brand relationship quality explains the buying behavior of the customers and that a brand is not only sought by its quality and functions but also from a perceptive relationship with the brands in a holistic way. This perceptive relationship of the customer and the brand adds meaning to the lives of the customers (Fournier, 1998).

The validity of Fourier's model has been sustained by various studies and is strongly supported by (Ekinci, Yoon, & Oppewal, 2005) from the European consumer's point of view. The brand relationship identified in their study has four dimensions; self-concept connection, brand partner quality, intimacy, and sense of nostalgia. Two other researchers also found that attachment connected to the self for the clients was strongly related to the concept of brand relationship quality (H. K. Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2005). Brand relationship quality is assumed to be more comprehensive concept than other behavioral intention of the consumer. This is based on its operationalization which includes cognitive and affective dimension into it (J. Kim, Kim, & Park, 2012).

Brand anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is not a new topic to philosophers, but the recent emergence of this concept in marketing has opened new avenues and applications. Anthropomorphism is the characterization of human elements to non-human entities (Bartneck, Croft, & Kulic, 2008). Anthropomorphism is of two types; first is based on analogy and second is based on human like association to the entity (S. Kim & McGill, 2011). First type of anthropomorphism is of basic level, while the second type of anthropomorphism is a deeper state of connection with the object. Second type is considered more advance because it relates human-like states associated with the object (S. Kim & McGill, 2011). It is suggested that the anthropomorphism serves purposes of understanding and control of the environment, along with socialization (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008), which may be the reflection of natural tendency to personify (Guthrie, 1995).

Brands have been reported to possess human-like characteristics and traits (D. A. Aaker, 1997; Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2009). This anthropomorphism of brands have different levels which vary consumer to consumer and may be explained by their accessibility and knowledge (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). The anthropomorphic nature of the brand,

favourably affects the consumers' perception of that brand. This favourable view of the brand helps the consumer to assume socialization with the brand and strengthen relationship with it.

Thus, consumers' development of relationship with the brand is influenced by the perception of the brand. Higher perception of anthropomorphic nature of the brand will lead the consumer to assume the brand as another human-like. This in turn will help the consumer to build the inter-personal relationship with the brand, just like with any other human.

Brand Loyalty

Several forms of consumer behaviour towards brand has been reported as brand outcomes. This study considers the brand relationship quality and brand loyalty as the brand outcome of the social media engagement. Brand loyalty is the repetitive purchasing behaviour of the customer over time, this repetitive behaviour may be rational or positively biased towards the brand. Repetitive buying of the same brand influences the consumers to keep buying the same product, product-line or same brand (Luarn & Lin, 2003). There have been studies which addressed the relationship of social media and brand outcomes (Erdoğmuş & Çiçek, 2012; Huang, Fang, Huang, Chang, & Fang, 2014; Kunz, 2012; Laroche et al., 2012), but the mediating role of brand relationship quality between the social media engagement and brand loyalty is still not established yet. Huang et al. (2014) studied the role of brand relationship quality between the relational bonds (financial, social and structural) and brand loyalty. But the conceptualization of the relational bonds was different where the role of social media was not covered.

Gaps in the literature and Hypotheses

Based on the above discussions, it is evident that the positive impact of social media interaction on brand related outcomes were studied from various perspectives. But, the complex nature of social media interactions suggests the diverse conceptualizations and presence of multiple moderators and mediators which influence and explain these relationships. Based on this, current study strives to address the three gaps in the literature; first, impact of social media interaction on the brand related outcomes have been studied earlier, but the social media interaction was operationalized which included the social media users and non-users as well. Prevalence of social media users and their varied intensity of usage suggests that the social media interaction should be studied from users and non-users perspective independently. In that case, social media engagement is a better conceptualization to study the behavior of social media users. Second, impact of social media interaction with brand loyalty and impact of relational bonds with brand loyalty have been studied earlier with the mediation of brand relationship quality. But, the mediating role of the brand relationship quality between social media engagement and brand loyalty has not yet been empirically established yet. Moreover, social media and brand outcomes have been suggested to be influenced by the cultural and social background of the consumers. This influence induced the Hudson et al. (2016) to suggest to examine the relationship of social media and brand outcomes in various cultural settings. Third, social media engagement and brand outcomes have been reported to have multiple moderators and mediators. Most of the studies reflect that these relationships and impacts were studied in isolation as mediators or moderators. Thus, there is a need to study these impacts in a relatively more inclusive manners to reflect the underlying nature of relationships. This study is such an attempt to study the mediated-

moderation relationship between social media engagement and BRQ. Based on literature and identified gaps following hypotheses are to be tested.

H_1: Social media engagement has a significant effect on brand relationship quality

H_2: Social media engagement has a significant effect on brand loyalty

H_3: Brand relationship quality impacts the brand loyalty

H_4: Brand anthropomorphism moderates the relationship of social media engagement and brand relationship quality

H_5: Brand anthropomorphism moderates the relationship of social media engagement and brand loyalty

H_6: Brand relationship quality mediates the relationship of social media engagement and brand loyalty
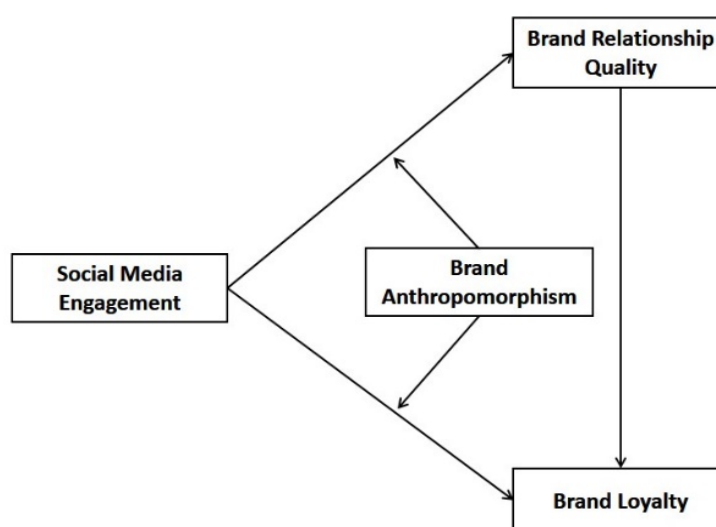
Research Methodology

Selection of Research Sample

Population of the study was the consumers of the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) brands in Pakistan. Snowball sampling was used to collect the responses from the 440 respondents. Considering the ease and availablity of the consumers online, questionnaires were distributed through print and online version. Online questoinnaire was hosted on the Google Documents. Respondents were requested to share and recommend the questionnares to other fellows for sake of filling this questionnaire.

Measures

Measures for this study were adapted from the earlier literature. Brand loyalty scales were based on the study of Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán (2005) which have been extensively used in other relevant studies as well. Brand relationship quality scales were used from the study of Hudson et al. (2016). Brand anthropomorphism measures were adapted from the study of Hudson et al. (2016) which based their scales on the study of Bartneck et al. (2008). Furthermore the social media engagement variable was operationalized

as the second order construct. It had two dimensions of intensity of social media use and the engagement in company's social media activities. This operationalization is in line with the study of Dijkmans, Kerkhof, and Beukeboom (2015) from where the items were adapted as well.

Data Analysis and Results

Reliability and validity of the measures

Reliability and validity of the instrument was ensured by conducting factor analysis. Factor analysis along with composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct were measured (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). *Table 2: Descriptives* shows the CR and AVE values of each construct in the framework. Proper factor loadings and the acceptable values for the composite reliability and variance extracted reflect the validity of the measures (Henseler et al., 2009). Reliability of the constructs was measured through the Cronbach Alpha value which were well above the recommended threshold (Peterson, 1994; Setbon & Raude, 2010). Furthermore, Heterotrait Monotrait (HTMT) ratio test was conducted to check the discriminant validity of the measures. *Table 2: Descriptives* present that the values of HTMT are within the threshold of 1.00 establishing the discriminant validity of the scales (Voorhees, Brady, Calantone, & Ramirez, 2016). Model fit in PLS-SEM is analyzed through the estimation of Goodness of Fit (GoF) and value of $Q2$ (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013). Goodness of fit is calculated as the square root of the product of average R2 and average AVE as depicted in Equation 1, while Q2 is calculated by subtracting the squared prediction error/squared observations from 1.

Equation 1

Goodness of Fit

$$GoF = \sqrt{\frac{1}{p}\sum_{h=1}^{p}cor^2\left(x_J, y_J\right) \times \overline{R^2}}$$

GoF value above 0.36 is considered as the good model fit, while the Q^2 values of above zero indicate that the construct has sufficient predictive relevancy (Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro, 2005). GoF for the model of this study was calculated as the 0.41 which indicates that the model has sufficient fit, moreover the values of Q^2 are also above zero indicating the predictive relevancy of all the reflective constructs (Tenenhaus et al., 2005; Wetzels, Odekerken-Schröder, & Van Oppen, 2009).

But there are certain gaps which this study strives to address. This research is an effort to take up the issues where impact of social media interaction is analyzed through a conceptualization exclusively meant for the social media users, on the brand relationship quality and brand loyalty. Additionally, empirical evidence is provided form a developing country, and the results of the research are compared to the developed countries' results to provide a broader picture for a more generalizable social media effects on brand outcomes.

Social networking sites are increasingly used to search for the desired content on the internet, in addition to the traditional search engines (Bughin, Byers, & Chui, 2011). The access to cellular phones and smartphones has been another important factor in spreading the adoption and use of social media technologies. Now, the most widely used websites include the social networking sites in terms of number of users and in terms of usage in minutes. This phenomenon provides the marketers with an opportunity to reach and engage their potential

customers, like never before. And if the marketers could spread their message through word of mouth they can eventually have better chances of increasing their customer base due to relatively better influence of referral by a friend than other advertisement channels.

Moreover, the generalization of the social media strategy has been an important issue as well especially for the multinational companies which have presence in multiple countries of the world. Hudson et al. (2016) research reflects that the social media strategy may have similar features based on the research conducted in developed countries. Considering the wide cultural and technological differences between the developed and developing countries, it is assumed that the generalizability of such social media strategy across the cultures is still lacking the empirical evidence.

Table 1: Demographics

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	316	71
Female	113	26
Missing	12	3
Age		
Below 20	13	3
20-29	167	38
30-39	189	43
Above 39	53	12
Missing	18	4

Table 2: Descriptives

	Mean	SD	Alpha	CR	AVE	HTMT					
						1	2	3	4	5	6
BA	1.56	0.65	0.93	0.95	0.75	0.87					
BL	1.41	0.54	0.81	0.88	0.64	0.82	0.80				
BRQ	1.38	0.49	0.95	0.95	0.55	0.82	0.87	0.74			
ECSM	1.65	0.77	0.89	0.93	0.82	0.66	0.78	0.75	0.91		
ISMU	1.61	0.77	0.88	0.93	0.81	0.65	0.78	0.75	0.90	0.90	
SME	1.64	0.69	0.94	0.95	0.77	0.67	0.80	0.77	0.97	0.97	0.88

Hypothesis Testing

Structural equation modeling (SEM) technique was used to test the hypotheses of the study. Partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is the suitable technique to test the complex models which include the mediated-moderation relationships. SEM technique is recommended technique which can simultaneously incorporate the endogenous & exogenous variables and measurement error in the estimation process (Davis, 2008; Hoyle, 2012). SmartPLS 3 is the emerging SEM tool which assists the estimation process based on PLS-SEM. *Table 3: Coefficients* shows the path coefficients and significant values of the constructs in the framework. Table 4: Hypothesesreflects the results of the hypotheses testing.

Mediation effect was checked through the variance accounted for (VAF) which is determined by dividing the indirect effect by the total effect of the relationship. (Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013) has suggested that the VAF value of more than 20% reflects the mediation effect. If the VAF is less than 0.20 it reflects no mediation, whereas value of 0.20 to 0.80 reflect the partial mediation.

Table 3: Coefficients

	Coeff.	SD	T	P
SM Engagement -> BRQ	0.338	0.035	9.581	0.000
SM Engagement -> Brand Loyalty	0.279	0.040	7.003	0.000
Brand Relationship Quality -> Brand Loyalty	0.385	0.047	8.130	0.000
Interaction 1 -> BRQ	0.091	0.023	3.965	0.000
Interaction 2 -> Brand Loyalty	0.030	0.016	1.835	0.067

Results

Data analysis reflects the support of first hypothesis that the social media engagement positively impacts the brand relationship quality. Its affect is moderately strong with 0.338, P < 0.05. Additionally, the social media engagement also positively impacts the brand loyalty with a slightly lesser effect (0.279, P < 0.05), supporting the second hypothesis. These clearly indicate that the consumers' social media engagement helps to increase the brand relationship quality with the consumer which ultimately is transformed into the brand loyalty.

Third hypothesis is also supported with a relatively stronger effect (0.385, P < 0.05) of brand relationship quality on the brand loyalty. This confirms the notion that brands which have better relationships with the consumers are expected to enjoy more loyalty from the consumers. Fourth hypothesis was about the mediated-moderating effect of brand anthropomorphism on the relationship of social media engagement and brand relationship quality. Results (0.091, P < 0.05) indicate the support of this hypothesis, which shows that the brand's anthropomorphic characteristics and attribution positively influences the consumers brand relationship quality.

Fifth hypothesis suggested the mediated-moderating role of brand anthropomorphism on the relationship of social media engagement and brand loyalty. Results suggest that the moderating role (0.03, P < 0.10) is relatively weaker than the other interaction affect. This weaker effect was also noted in the study of Hudson et al. (2016) where the moderation was significant at ten percent. Sixth hypothesis of mediation of brand relationship quality between social media engagement and brand loyalty was also supported. Mediation effect was tested through the variance accounted for (VAF) which is determined by dividing the indirect effect by the total effect of the relationship. (Hair Jr et al., 2013) has suggested that the VAF value of more than 20% reflects the mediation effect. If the VAF is less than 0.20 it reflects no mediation. The mediation effect of brand relationship quality between social media engagement and brand loyalty was significant (VAF=0.24), representing the partial mediation.

Table 4: Hypotheses

	Description	Results
Hypothesis 1	SM Engagement > BRQ	Supported
Hypothesis 2	SM Engagement > Brand Loyalty	Supported
Hypothesis 3	BRQ > Brand Loyalty	Supported

Hypothesis 4	Interaction 1 > BRQ	Supported
Hypothesis 5	Interaction 2 > Brand Loyalty	Supported
Hypothesis 6	SM Engagement > BRQ > Brand Loyalty	Supported
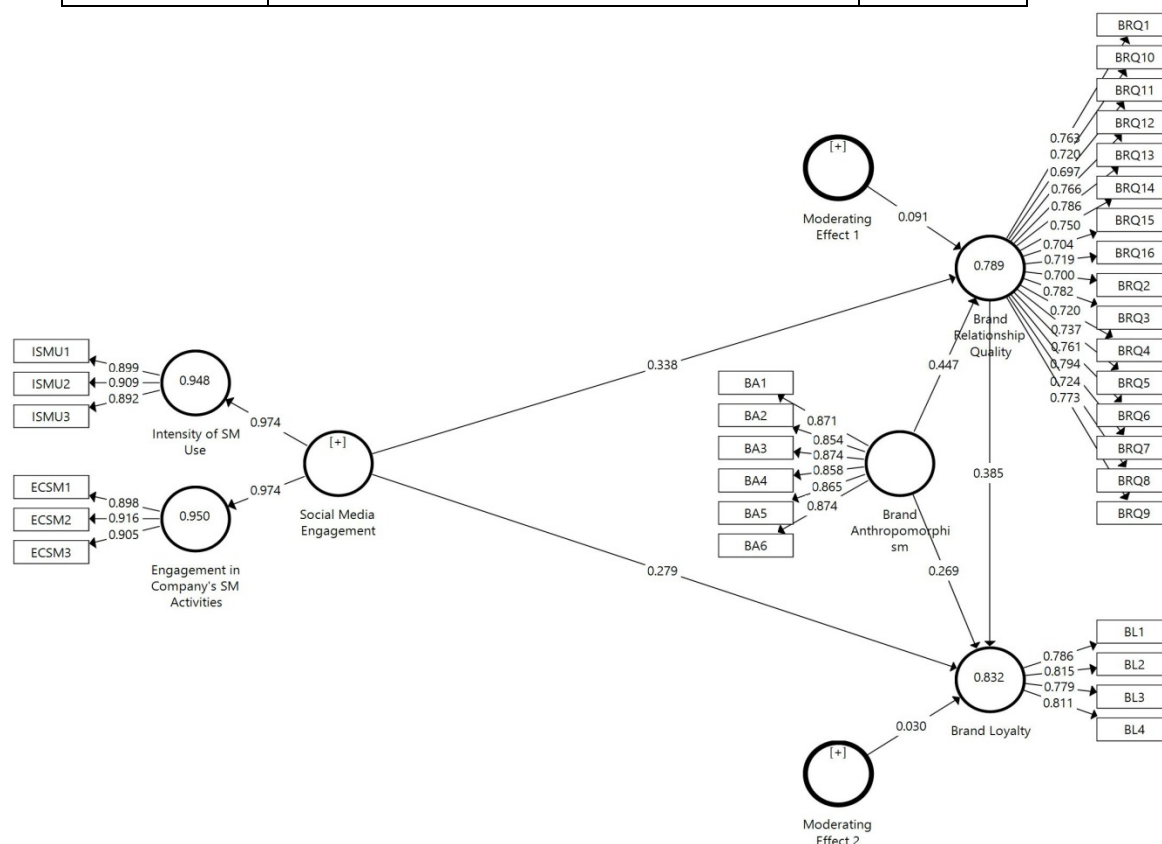
Discussion and Conclusion

Current study examined the role of brand anthropomorphism and brand relationship quality between the relationship of social media engagement and brand loyalty. Results show that the brand anthropomorphism moderates the social media engagement and brand relationship quality relationship along with the relationship of social media engagement and brand loyalty. Moreover, the mediating effect of brand relationship quality was significant between social media engagement and brand loyalty. These relationships were examined in a mediated-moderation framework to study the complex nature of interactions.

Results show that the social media engagement is more potent to build the brand relationship quality when the anthropomorphic nature of brand is high. Same is true for the brand loyalty although the effect of brand anthropomorphism is not that strong. These results support the earlier findings although there are some minor differences of the strength of relationships, especially the moderating effect of brand anthropomorphism (Hudson et al., 2016). Literature suggested that the consumers who do not use the social media have relatively weaker relationship with the brand than the consumers who use the social media. This difference is also evident within the users as well, when compared based on their differences of social media engagement. Higher engaged consumers reflected better relationship quality with the brand while the lesser engaged consumers do not. Although, the

higher engaged consumers had lesser direct relationship with the brand loyalty, enforcing the role of brand relationship quality between the social media engagement and brand loyalty.

This research contributes to the literature in three ways; first, it examines the impact of social media engagement exclusively from the social media user's perspective with two dimensional conceptualization. Second, it studies the role of BRQ between the social media engagement and brand loyalty, especially in a culturally different settings. Third, mediated-moderation framework of social media engagement, brand anthropomorphism, BRQ and brand loyalty were not tested before this study. Results provide some insights for the practitioners which include; first, helping the consumer to attribute the brand with human-like characteristics helps the brands to build the relationship. Considering the Pakistani FMCG industry, Captain Safeguard is a good instance of attributing the human characteristics to the anti-bacterial soap. Second, marketers should differentiate the social media users based on their level of engagement, just as they differentiate between the social media users and social media non-users, although difference is not that proportional. Higher engaged social media users tend to respond positively towards the brand moves for relationship building. Alternatively, the lesser engaged social media users may be reluctant to strengthen the relationship with the brand. So, brands should be more conscious of the lesser engaged consumers while attempting to build the relationship. Third, mediation of BRQ results suggest that it is relatively harder to convert the social media users into the loyalists of the brand. Brands will have to build slowly from developing a relationship with the consumer and gradually transforming them into the brand loyalists. Moreover, the combined positive effect of brand anthropomorphism and BRQ may suggests to use the brand humanoid as the 'front-man' of communication to the social media users for better results.

Despite the fact, that the current results of this study have proven to be in line with the earlier studies, it has the limitation of collecting the data from a single sector of FMCG, which hinders the generalizability of the study. Larger sample size may have provided better results to the interaction effect of brand anthropomorphism. Additionally, future research should incorporate other brand outcomes in the framework as well. Comparison based on the industry and social media tool will also provide more insights into the phenomena.

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Appendix

Table 5:Factor Loadings

	BA	BL	BRQ	ECSM	ISMU	SME
BA1	0.871					
BA2	0.854					
BA3	0.874					
BA4	0.858					
BA5	0.865					
BA6	0.874					
BL1		0.786				
BL2		0.815				
BL3		0.779				
BL4		0.811				
BRQ1			0.763			
BRQ10			0.720			
BRQ11			0.697			
BRQ12			0.766			
BRQ13			0.786			
BRQ14			0.750			
BRQ15			0.704			
BRQ16			0.719			
BRQ2			0.700			

BRQ3			0.782			
BRQ4			0.720			
BRQ5			0.737			
BRQ6			0.761			
BRQ7			0.794			
BRQ8			0.724			
BRQ9			0.773			
ECSM1				0.898		
ECSM1						0.875
ECSM2				0.916		
ECSM2						0.888
ECSM3				0.905		
ECSM3						0.887
ISMU1					0.899	
ISMU1						0.884
ISMU2					0.909	
ISMU2						0.887
ISMU3					0.892	
ISMU3						0.859