



Original Article

Pages: 67-81

The Impact of Social Network Marketing on Consumer Willingness for Brand Purchase, given the Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

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Received: 2020/08/29 **Revised:** 2020/10/28 **Accepted:** 2020/11/12 **Published:** 2021/01/01

ABSTRACT: Social network marketing, as a subset of social media marketing, is one of the innovative and groundbreaking marketing efforts in which consumers are engaged, instead of standing by and watching. This research is primarily concerned with the impact that social network marketing may have on consumer behavioral intention regarding foreign sportswear. This is an applied research conducted based on a descriptive, correlational survey design. The statistical population included potential customers of foreign sportswear brands, including Puma, Nike, Reebok, and Adidas. Of this population, a sample of 384 people was considered for this study. The required data were collected using a questionnaire. For test of the research hypotheses, regression model was used. The results indicated that social network marketing had significant effect on consumer behavioral intention and engagement. Customer/consumer engagement (CR), in turn, significantly influenced consumer willingness to purchase. In addition, consumer engagement mediated the relationship between social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention.

KEYWORDS: social network marketing; consumer behavioral intention; customer engagement

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Serajpour, S., Fattahi, M., & Zamani, F. (2021). The Impact of Social Network Marketing on Consumer Willingness for Brand Purchase, given the Mediating Role of Customer Engagement. *Journal of Resistive Economics (OAJRE)*, 9(1), 67-81.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social network marketing, as a subset of social media marketing, is one of the innovative and groundbreaking marketing efforts in which consumers are engaged, instead of standing by and watching. Under this innovative marketing approach, brands and consumers, without any limitation in time, space or communication tools are connected to each other, since this approach facilitates a two-way communication, rather than the traditional one-way communication (Kim and Ko, 2012). Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau (2008) and Mertz, Yi, and Vargo (2009) observed that the advent of advance communication technology has transformed consumer attitude from the position of a submissive follower to an innovative and influential participant, as is seen in social media (Toor et al, 2017). This change was a pervasive revolution affecting the whole world, to which Iran is no stranger. In the last several years, the use of social media has grown rapidly. In this connection, Facebook has been found the most widely used social media platform (Kemp, 2015). These figures signify the fact that Facebook as a social platform of communication is a growing trend par excellence, even in Iran. The use of Facebook has created many opportunities for businesses. This utility became known to many other organizations in different industries, encouraging them to follow suit, if they were looking for promoting their products and services via Facebook. As Jack Ma, the founder of the Chinese e-commerce commerce company Alibaba, argued, failure to exploit social network platform as a medium for interaction with consumers and other business associated factors that are crucial for prospects of the business can result in the business elimination from the industry and loss of its position on the market (Barhemmati and Ahmad, 2015). In this regard, Philip and Noble (2007) note that the surge of social media platforms, the traditional mass media, as a marketing tool, become less effective. They project the social network marketing will be the marketing tool of tomorrow, given its profound impact on consumers in comparison with conventional methods. Social media, especially Facebook, have received much attention in recent years, and particularly in Iran (Shafique, Anwar, and Bushra, 2010). The social platform, Facebook, has become part of people's life, being constantly used by many to exchange interests and works, and establish social interactions and interpersonal relationships (Hussain, 2012). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) consider intention as determinant of action in a certain direction. They define behavior intention as the subjective probability of shaping the resulted behavior. For example, the intention to buy a particular product is recognized as the right predictor of actual behavior in product purchase (Romayaha et al, 2010). According to the research of Lumber, behavioral intention is defined as a mental state which reflects a person's decision to do the behavior. Therefore, having better understanding of consumer behavioral intentions would help marketing practitioners to better connect with target group. The probability of product purchase during a given time period is often used as the indicator of consumer purchase intention. He maintains that the indicators of volitional (voluntary) behaviors can be more effective for coming to customer decision, because customers could be forced to make purchase (Hume and Mort, 2010). The changes in living style necessitate acknowledgement and acceptance of the new means of communication and adaptation of traditional firms with these changes. Today, the world is dominated by technology, particularly high technology, whose multiple facets need to be understood. Therefore, it is necessary to find out how significant the effect of social network marketing on consumer behavioral intentions (Toor et al, 2017). This research, accordingly, seeks to answer the question as to whether social network marketing has a significant effect on consumer behavioral intention for purchase of foreign sportswear, and whether this effect remains significant in presence of the mediator 'customer engagement.'



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social media and social network marketing

In the context of this study, the term social media refers to “the wide range of internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or facilitate joining online communities” (Dewing, 2012: 1). Online communities include such services as blogs, Wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn), and media sharing sites (e.g. YouTube and Instagram). Social networks act through social media sites which allow users to create their profile on the same sites, share information, and have interaction and communication (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social network marketing is employed by strategic marketers as a marketing tool, given the extreme popularity of these networks among users and the high visibility they offer. Aside from contingent access, these environments can be adapted to consumer characteristics. Hence, the benefits of social network depend on marketers that have the possibility to take advantage of this space and fully optimize it for advertisement, and shape this space according to consumer needs and desires.

Research on social media divides consumers into two groups: the group of participants who are actively engaged in sending opinions and the group of onlooker/followers of the forwarded information by others (Schlosser, White, and Lloyd, 2006; Shao, 2009).

In 2009, it was seen that nearly 53 percent of social media users were identified as spectators / active followers of social media, not the active participants who contribute to content creation of these media. This condition, however, has changed with time and many users are turning into active contributors and engaged consumers (Ngai et al, 2015).

Yusufzai (2016) suggested that internet users in Pakistan are more likely to use social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to connect to government aid programs, communication with businesses, and for recreational purposes. This indicates that Pakistan, as far as it concerns social media use, does not differ from other countries. Yet, despite its increasing dependency on social media for various communication purposes, few studies have focused on the impact of social media on consumer purchases.

Among the few studies conducted in this regard, Nawaz et al (2015) examined the effect of social media on decision making process of 126 respondents working in Pakistan’s higher education institutions. Their study revealed that decision makings of social media users were influenced by the critical views and information shared by other users. Investigating the use of social media among distance learners of public higher education institutions, Arif and Kanwal (2016) found that majority of the respondents were familiar with social media technologies, Facebook was observed to be the most common social media in use. This study also indicated perceived utility, perceived behavior control, and attitudes as the factors that could affect the use of social media. Since these studies were focused on education sector, their findings may not be able to fully capture the effect of social media on buying behavior of the users of these media in Pakistan. Hence, current study contributes to the literature by filling the existing research gap hereon.

2.2. Consumer purchase intention

In the marketing, advertising and sales literature, it is evident that purchase intention (willingness to buy) occurs typically at decision making stage of purchase process in which consumer develops a definitive readiness to move towards a product or brand (Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991; Wells, Valacich, and



Hess, 2011). This willingness is the necessary condition for assessment of consumer behavior, as it is capable of predicting the probability that consumer would actually buy a product. The stronger the willingness to buy is, the higher the probability of a product purchase by consumer will be.

In one of the recently conducted studies, Mirabi, Akbarieh, and Tahmasebi Fard (2015) showed that product quality, brand, and advertising are among the most important factors involved in consumer behavioral intentions. These factors serve as the very reasons for more investment of companies on marketing actions and efforts accomplished through new practices in addition to traditional approaches, as both approaches help them increase their market share. Behavioral intentions of consumers as a key concept in marketing research have been applied to various environments in connection with different variable such as consumer attitudes (Hedayat and Divasari, 2013), perceived value (Shahraddin, Pani, Mansour, and Elias, 2010), and risk taking and ease of use (Faghih, 2013). In an online environment alone, many studies explored the potential determinants of consumer behavioral intentions (e.g. Thamizhvanan & Xavier, 2013; Weisberg, Te'eni, and Arman, 2011; Rose, Clark, Samouel, and Hair, 2012). Chang, Cheung, and Lai (2005) identified over 80 variables as predictors of consumer behavior. These variables were classified under headings of perceived website features, product characteristics, and consumer characteristic. Knowing that identification of all factors contributing to consumer behavior is impossible, this study is particularly focused on the impact of social network marketing and consumer engagement on consumer willingness to purchase.

The growth of the social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, provide consumer with considerable possibility to share and disseminate information and contents about products and brands. Thus, in the context of social media, consumers are, on the one hand, providers of more valuable information, and on the other hand, more eager to gain information on product features before making any purchase (Ahmad and Zahed, 2014). This phenomenon indicates the relevant role of social media marketing and active consumer engagement in providing information to other users of these media based on which their purchase preferences and choices are formed and developed.

2.3. Customer engagement (CE)

Within the framework of this study, customer engagement signifies the “degree of a customer physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in relationship with a service or organization (Patterson, Yu, and de Ruyter, 2006: 3). While customer engagement and customer involvement may appear to be similar, Mollen and Wilson (2010) make a distinction between the two, arguing that although both concepts include an emotionally and psychologically driven consumption element, engagement “extends beyond mere involvement, as it encompasses an interactive relationship with the engagement object and requires the emergence of the experiential value the individual perceives him/herself as obtaining from specific brand interaction (idem).” CE is considered as a necessity intentionally activated by marketers for institutionalizing and maintaining a competitive advantage over others (Sadly and Prax, 2008). CE may also be used by marketers as the valuable predictor of business performances (idem). As such, CE is significant element, which has had a checked importance over time, because with media fragmentation and the possibility of choosing from among a variety of media, consumer attachment weakens. Businesses, necessarily, refine their marketing efforts to get consumers engaged, since an engaged consumer is more loyal, and emotionally, attached to a brand (Sorenson and Adkins, 2014).



2.4. Development of hypotheses and conceptual model

2.4.1. Social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention

Today all around the world, we see presence of competitiveness and enthusiasm among businesses to enter spaces in which people have (physical or virtual) presence. This is because marketers need to employ various methods to secure consumer loyalty to their brand, as different brand components composed by traditional marketing (methods) might not be sufficient for generating income for respective companies. Therefore, there is a need for exploring new practices like event marketing, direct marketing, internet marketing, and social media marketing. Among these practices, social media marketing, due to its accessibility and wide use over the world, it has become the most desirable platform for marketing products and services (Keller, 2008; Kotler and Keller, 2007). Therefore, businesses are passionately using social media in order to connect to consumers.

In addition to its wide use, social network marketing creates considerable advantage for businesses in terms of social commerce, and possibly, in terms of cost minimization. Social network marketing helps transmission of delivery suggestions and get consumer attention quite quickly, and this may enhance willingness to purchase in consumers (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). Dehghani and Tumer (2015) observed that Facebook advertisement, providing interactivity, personalization, and more feedback, can significantly affect brand image and brand equity, and thereby, influence consumer willingness to purchase. Pjero and Kercini (2015), focusing on social media and their impact on consumer behavior, find that information on offered products and services in the virtual world could be influenced by electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) of other users.

In Iran, too, a similar trend is emerging. The conducted study by Bilal, Ahmad, and Shehzad (2014) shows that users of online platforms make their purchase decisions accurately and under influence of the social media usage. They profit from online social channels for collection of information on different companies, brands, products and services, and most of them use Facebook for these purposes. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:

Hypothesis 1 Social network marketing has positive effect on consumer behavioral intention.

2.4.2. Social network marketing and consumer engagement

A few years back, the concept customer engagement began to catch the attention of customers, with emphasis on ‘points of contact’ when marketing products and services (Lea, 2012). At the moment, with a wide range of product and media options and new shopping, customer engagement is making great effort in establishing emotional attachment which can direct eWOM marketing and be creator of future sales (Magneto, 2015). It is acknowledged that companies today need to profit from the impact of social media to promote consumer engagement, rather than using these media as a platform to highlight products and brand sales promotion (Forbs, 2015). Social media, creating value customer value, can be used for customer engagement. That is to say, promotion of social network marketing as a marketing tool is necessary for better business performance. Harris and Ray (2009) viewed social network marketing as a key marketing component in the future and today this prediction has proved to be true. From an external point of view, social network marketing can exchange consumer anger with consumer engagement, and from an internal point of view, social network marketing, as a tool, can shift the traditional focus on control to an approach



welcoming collaboration and virtual interaction. Technology is viewed by companies as an increasingly vital tool for organizing consumer engagement, as is evident from the growing popularity of electronic tools (Economic Intelligence Unit, 2007). Undoubtedly, media sites provide companies with additional means of interaction with consumers with the aid of the new and innovative methods. This has led to talks in place of parallel communication. As noted by chief executive officer of the rapidly growing company, Bonobos, if a person posts a question via social media, we look for it, and we do it immediately (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2013: 7). Based on the above discussion, the next hypothesis is posited as follows:

Hypothesis 2 Social network marketing has positive effect on consumer engagement.

2.4.3. Consumer engagement and consumer behavioral intention

Barhemmati and Ahmad (2015) show that presence of emotional attachment between buyers and companies (e.g. by engaging consumers) creates great opportunities for companies to attain their relationship marketing objectives. This strategy helps persuading consumers to buy products and services provided by respective companies. Consumer participation and interaction is a major concern for online retailers. Studies (including Magneto, 2015) indicate that a highly engaged consumer generates 23 percent more revenues for the company, as they spend more in each purchase and buy products more frequently. And this as a consequence increases consumer lifecycle value, while reducing costs of attracting new customers. Moreover, these extensively engaged consumers also encourage (and convince) their family members and friends to use the same products (Magneto, 2015). Hence, we propose:

Hypothesis 3 Consumer engagement has positive effect on consumer behavioral intention.

2.4.4. Mediating role of consumer engagement

Here we discuss the literature on the relationship between social network marketing, consumer engagement, and consumer behavioral tendencies. Taken together, behaviors of retailers and buyers on social networking sites (SNSs) form a basis for creating and developing an engagement which is not only enduring but also leads to extensive emotional relationships between the two groups. The process of consumer engagement, if managed skillfully, is expected to increase sales, since engaged consumers are not only content and committed, but also unequivocally attached to company brand (Sorenson, 2014). Consumer engagement in SNSs is largely propped by an emotional attachment boosting their buying behavior. Such engagement results in increased consumer loyalty which in turn through these interactions would promote the brand and its associated products among consumers present in the virtual world (Aspern et al, 2017). From here, the research fourth hypothesis is derived as follows:

Hypothesis 4 Consumer engagement mediates the relationship between social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention.

From the literature review, a theoretical framework is deduced which assumes that social network marketing positively affect consumer behavioral intention by which consumer engagement is developed and shaped. In addition, based on this framework, customer engagement, as displayed in figure 1, is expected to have a mediating role in the relationship between social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention.

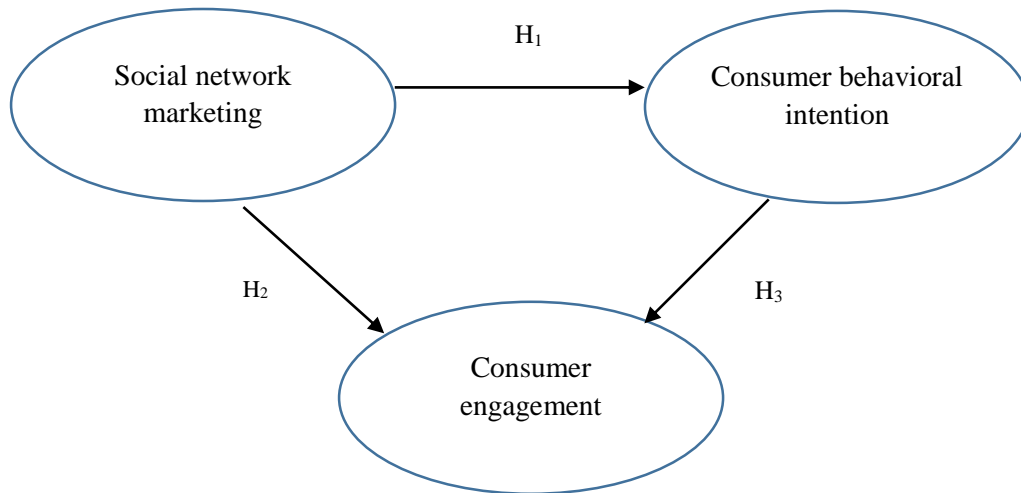


Figure 1 Conceptual model (Toor et al, 2017)

3. METHODOLOGY

This is an applied research conducted through field study according to a descriptive, correlational survey design. The research statistical population included potential customers of sportswear of foreign brands, including Puma, Nike, Reebok, and Adidas, that are not infinite. Using Krejcie and Morgan table for finite population, a sample size of 384 was obtained the individual members of which were selected by simple random sampling.

In this research, the data on social network marketing, consumer engagement and consumer willingness to buy were collected using the questionnaire developed by Toor et al (2017) the validity of which was confirmed. The questionnaire reliability was determined based on the Cronbach's alpha calculated for a preliminary sample of 30 people. Given the calculated alpha (0.96), which is above the threshold 0.75, reliability of the present research is confirmed at 95 percent confidence.

4. FINDINGS

Before test of the hypotheses, it was examined whether the model satisfied certain regression assumptions. First, the assumption on normality of data distribution was examined using Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test the result of which supported the claim on normality of the respective distributions. Another assumption considered in regression analysis is that errors have normal distribution with zero mean. This assumption was examined drawing the diagram of data distribution and normal distribution curve. Comparing the two sets, distribution of errors was found normal, with a very small mean and standard deviation close to 1. In addition, Durbin-Watson test statistic (d-value) was found to be within the acceptable range of 1.5 and 2.5, confirming thereby lack of correlation between the error terms. Thus, regression analysis could be used for test of hypotheses.

4.1. Test of hypothesis 1

H1: Social network marketing has a significant effect on consumer behavioral intention.

In test of hypothesis 1, the variable social network marketing was considered as the independent variable and consumer behavioral intention as the dependent variable in the regression model. Table 1 reports the strength of the relationship between the model and the dependent variable. The correlation coefficient (R) shows linear correlation between observed values and values of the model (predicting consumer behavioral intention). The value of R in the table below (0.410) indicates a moderately positive correlation between the model and the dependent variable. And the value of R-square (0.168) which is coefficient of determination indicates the extent to which the model accounts for the changes in dependent variable (consumer behavioral intention).

Table 1 Model results

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	St. error	D-W
1	0.410	0.168	0.166	0.25487	1.678

Table 2 Regression coefficients (dependent variable: consumer behavioral intention)

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	Test statistic	Sig
	R	St. error	β		
Intercept	1.923	0.168		11.463	0.000
Social network marketing	0.388	0.44	0.410	8.783	0.000

Considering the obtained results from regression equation and given the Sig level ($0.000 < 0.05$) and the regression coefficient (0.388), the effect of the independent variable social network marketing on the dependent variable consumer behavioral intention is confirmed. Meanwhile, the beta coefficient (indicating the amount of change in the dependent variable consumer engagement against a change of one standard deviation in the independent variable social network marketing) is 0.410.

4.2. Test of hypothesis 2

H2: Social network marketing has a significant effect on consumer engagement.

In test of hypothesis 3, the variable social network marketing was considered as the independent variable and consumer engagement as the dependent variable in the regression model. Table 2 reports the strength of the relationship between the model and the dependent variable. The correlation coefficient (R) shows linear correlation between observed values and values of the model (predicting consumer engagement). The value of R in the table below (0.165) indicates a weak correlation between the model and the dependent variable. And the value of R-square (0.027) which is coefficient of determination indicates the extent to which the model accounts for the changes in dependent variable (consumer behavioral intention).

Table 3 Model results

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	St. error	D-W
1	0.165	0.027	0.25	0.82907	1.99

Table 4 Regression coefficients (dependent variable: consumer engagement)

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	Test statistic	Sig
	R	St. error	β		
Intercept	2.930	0.184		15.906	0.000
Social network marketing	0.159	0.409	0.165	3.274	0.001

Considering the obtained results from regression equation and given the Sig level ($0.000 < 0.05$) and the regression coefficient (0,159), the effect of the independent variable social network marketing on the dependent variable consumer engagement is confirmed. Meanwhile, the beta coefficient (indicating the amount of change in the dependent variable consumer engagement against a change of one standard deviation in the independent variable social network marketing) is 0.165.

4.3. Test of hypothesis 3

H3: Consumer engagement has a significant effect on consumer behavioral intention.

In test of hypothesis 3, the variable consumer engagement was considered as the independent variable and consumer behavioral intention as the dependent variable in the regression model. Table 5 reports the strength of the relationship between the model and the dependent variable. The correlation coefficient (R) shows linear correlation between observed values and values of the model (predicting consumer behavioral intention). The value of R in the table below (0.509) indicates a moderately positive correlation between the model and the dependent variable. And the value of R-square (0.168) which is coefficient of determination indicates the extent to which the model accounts for the changes in dependent variable (consumer behavioral intention).

Table 5 Model results

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	St. error	D-W
1	0.509	0.259	0.257	0.71246	1.700

Table 6 Regression coefficients (dependent variable: consumer behavioral intention)

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	Test statistic	Sig
	R	St. error	β		
Intercept	1.595	0.157		10.171	0.000
Social network marketing	0.501	0.43	0.509	11.552	0.000

Considering the obtained results from regression equation and given the Sig level ($0.000 < 0.05$) and the regression coefficient (0.501), the effect of the independent variable consume engagement on the dependent variable consumer behavioral intention is confirmed. Meanwhile, the beta coefficient (indicating the amount of change in the dependent variable consumer engagement against a change of one standard deviation in the independent variable consumer engagement) is 0.509.

Hypothesis 4 Consumer engagement significantly mediates the relationship between social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention.

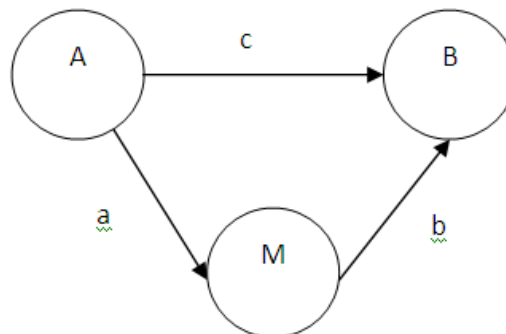
H0: consumer engagement does not significantly mediate the relationship between social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention.

H1: consumer engagement significantly mediates the relationship between social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention.

Table 7 The effects of coefficients in mediating state

	Variable		
	a	b	c
Beta coefficients	0165	0.509	0.410
Sig level	0.001	0.000	0.000
Indirect effect	Direct effect		Total effect
a*b	c		(a*b) + c
0.083985	0.410		0.493985

Considering the above tables and the effects of the coefficients in mediating states in table 7, it can be stated:



According to Subell theory, three states appear:

1. The state in which c is not significant, but A and B are significant, that is, m fully mediates.
2. The state in which c is significant, but both A and B are not significant, that is, m is not mediator.
3. The state in which c is significant, and also A and B are significant, that is, m partially mediates.

Now, considering the beta coefficients and the significance level in the relationship between the three variables, the third state applies. Thus, H₀ is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is maintained. That is to say, consumer engagement partially mediates the relationship between social network marketing and consumer behavioral intention, hence the fourth hypothesis is accepted.



5. CONCLUSION

Considering the obtained results from test of the first hypothesis it could be concluded that social network marketing helps speedy communication of suggestions and thereby quickly attract consumer attention and enhancing willingness to purchase in consumers (Bair and Parasnis, 2011). Dehghani and Tumer (2015) observed that advertisement in social network by providing interactivity, personalization, and more feedback can significantly affect brand image and brand equity. This process can, in turn, affect consumer willingness to purchase. Pjero and Kercini (2015) focusing on social media and their impact on consumer behavior found that information about provided products and services in virtual world can positively influence consumer willingness to purchase. And a consumer is normally influenced by eWOM of other users. In Iran, too, a similar trend is emerging in the virtual world. The conducted study by Bilal, Ahmad, and Shehzad (2014) indicates that user made their purchase decisions under influence of social media. They use online social channels for collecting information about companies, brands, products and services. Considering the obtained results from test of the second hypothesis, it could be stated that since a few years, the concept of consumer engagement began to catch the attention of consumers when marketing goods and services (Lea, 2012). Presently, with a wide range of product options, social networks, and new shopping experiences, consumer engagement creates emotional attachment which can give direction to WOM and initiate future sales (Magneto, 2015). Companies today need to take full advantage of social media in order to engage consumers, rather than using it only as a platform for highlighting product and brand promotion (Forbes, 2015). Social media can engage consumers by creating value for them. In other words, promotion of social network marketing as a means of business promotion is necessary. Harris and Ray (2009) argue that social network marketing will be one of the key marketing components and this proves to be true today. Undoubtedly, social networks provide companies with additional tools for interaction with customers by the aid of new and innovative methods and practices. And this will result in dialogues in place of parallel communication (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2013: 7). Consistent with the obtained results from test of the third hypothesis, Barhemmati and Ahmad (2015) show that presence of emotional attachment between buyers and companies (e.g. by engaging consumers) create enormous opportunities and possibilities for companies for realizing their relationship marketing objectives. This strategy helps persuading consumers to purchase provided products and services by respective companies. Consumer engagement and interaction is one of the major concerns of online retailers. Magneto studies (2015) indicate that an engaged consumer generates 23 percent more income for a company, since engaged consumers spend more in each purchase and buy the products more frequently. As a consequence, it increases the value of consumer lifecycle, while reducing the cost of attracting a new customer. In addition, these engaged consumers are likely to encourage (and convince) their family members and friends as well to consume the same products (Magneto, 2015).

Consistent with the obtained results from test of the fourth hypothesis, taking together behaviors of buyers and retailers in social networking sites (SNSs), an active presence and participation can be shaped and created, which is not only enduring but also can establish extensive emotional and personal relationships between the two groups, if skillfully managed. Based on the consumer engagement process, sales are expected to increase and engaged consumers will be attached to company brand (Sorenson, 2014). Consumer engagement in SNSs is largely supported by an emotional attachment boosting buying behavior. Such engagement would result in consumer loyalty which in turn promotes brands and products among other consumers present in the virtual world (Aspern et al, 2017).



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JOURNAL DESCRIPTION

Name: *Journal of Resistive Economics (OAJRE)*,
 Homepage: www.oajre.ir
 e-ISSN: 2345-4954
 Volume & Issue: *Vol 9, No 1, Jan 2021*
 Publisher: *Imam Hossein University*
 Publisher Address: *No 19, 36th Street, Shahr Ara, Jalal Ale Ahmad High Way, Tehran, Iran.*
 Publisher Phone: +989214240452

JOURNAL STATISTICS

No of Figures: 1
 No of Tables: 7
 No of References:35
 No of Authors: 3
 No of Pages: 16

How to Cite This Article

Serajpour, S., Fattahi, M., & Zamani, F. (2021). The Impact of Social Network Marketing on Consumer Willingness for Brand Purchase, given the Mediating Role of Customer Engagement. *Journal of Resistive Economics (OAJRE)*, 9(1), 67-81.

OPEN REVIEW PROCESS (IN ABSTRACT)

Submitted for Reviewer(s): 29/08/2020

First Reviewer	Second Reviewer	Final Reviewer
Acceptance of Review: 12/09/2020	Accept of Review: 06/10/2020	Acceptance of Review: 18/10/2020
Review Result: 22/09/2020	Review Result: 16/10/2020	Review Result: 28/10/2020
Result: <input checked="" type="radio"/> Acceptance without Amendment <input type="radio"/> Require to Amend (Literal, Substantial, etc.) <input type="radio"/> Rejection	Result: <input type="radio"/> Acceptance without Amendment <input checked="" type="radio"/> Require to Amend (Literal, Substantial, etc.) <input type="radio"/> Rejection	Result: <input checked="" type="radio"/> Acceptance <input type="radio"/> Rejection
Back to Author(s): 05/11/2020 Amendment by Author: 25/11/2020		

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank to Dr. Majid Fattahi (Associate Professor, Department of management, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran) for their expert advice and comments on this paper.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Authenticity of the texts, honesty and fidelity has been observed.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sara Serajpour, Majid Fattahi and Farshideh Zamani contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author/s confirmed no conflict of interest.