Exploring Customer Engagement on Social Networking Sites:
A Qualitative Research Enquiry

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ABSTRACT

The growth in popularity of social media and its perfunctory use by individuals throughout the day has sprouted the need to study customer engagement (CE) on social networking sites (SNSs) from the consumer's lens. To understand user behaviour, it is thus imperative to explore CE from their perspective. This study examines customer engagement and its antecedents and consequences on social networking sites (SNSs) in an emerging economy. Data from 21 semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) and 42 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were analysed through a grounded theory approach using Nvivo coding. The results highlight the usage patterns and conditions faced by users on SNSs and establish the presence of information overload faced by users. The study also shows various parameters related to post and individual that lead to passive and active engagement on these platforms. The study has direct implications for marketing managers across industries as it unravels various levers necessary to succeed on SNSs.

KEYWORDS

Customer Engagement, Focus Group Discussions, Information Overload, Personal Interviews, Qualitative Research, Social Media, Social Networking Sites

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites have become an indispensable part of over four billion users' lives across the world (Hosen, et al., 2021). Such ubiquitous social networking sites have opened up multiple avenues for marketers to reach both existing and new customers (Gupta & Ramachandran, 2021). Digital media spending in the last decade has grown multi-fold, and in 2018, companies spent over 200 billion dollars on digital ads, amounting to about 45% of the total ad spend. It is expected to increase beyond USD 500 billion in the next five years (Enberg, 2019) and soar up to USD 4,414 billion by 2030 (Research

and Markets, 2021, Apr 15). Globally, the digital contents market is expected to surpass USD 38 billion by 2030 (Bloomberg, 2021). A large proportion of this growth has been fuelled by Social Networking Sites (SNSs) (Shi et al., 2018). These sites leverage user-generated content and provide customers with the opportunity to share and interact with fellow site members. These include sites such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Weibo (Hosen, et al., 2021). Facebook recorded a revenue of over 16 billion dollars in quarter 4 of 2018, with daily active users of about 1.5 billion in the same period. As of July 2021, Facebook tops the chart with the most active users worldwide (Statista, 2021). Facebook accounts for a fourth of the US digital spend, and a tenth of the total spend on advertising across channels (eMarketer, 2018). Twitter's ad revenue jumped 23% to 791 million dollars in the same period (Gesenhues, 2019). In addition, customers' average time spent on social media has increased to 2 hours and 15 minutes per day, surpassing that spent on television (Cooper, 2020). Given this, academicians and marketers have been devoting considerable attention to social media, with Social Networking Sites (SNSs) at the forefront of this research growth (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007; Hollebeek et al., 2017; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014a; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2009).

SNSs have entirely changed customer-firm interactions for the foreseeable future by providing customers with opportunities to engage with organisations in a personalised, quick, and seamless manner (Halawani et al., 2020; Harrigan et al., 2018). SNSs provide a novel way of interacting with the customers, wherein the customers are contributors, collaborators, and consumers simultaneously (Vakeel & Panigrahi, 2018). Customers participate in various stages of the marketing value chain, ranging from product innovation, advertising, merchandising, and acquisition & retention (Malthouse et al., 2013; Nambisan, 2002).

Research in the area of customer engagement in SNS consists of studies in multiple contexts. For instance, Lin & Wang (2020) found that gender influences users' behaviour while sharing information on social media. Females are more concerned about the risks related to privacy, and males are concerned over other SNS users' opinions. Jani et al. (2020) studied the relationship between brands and customer engagement on SNS and found that perceived relationship (between brands and customers), rewards (such as credits or points), and posts by brands (advertisements by the brand) positively impact customer engagement. Organisations have to continuously focus on improving their services as consumers have access to enormous amounts of information on websites. They compare specifications and reviews of other users before purchasing any product. The increasing consumer activity influences web-based entrepreneurship (Momen et al., 2020).

Studies show that the cultural attribution of consumers also influences their engagement towards brand messages on SNS. In a study by Yousaf et al. (2020), Americans showed lower engagement to videos and links by brands, whereas Indians showed higher interest in these. When brands posted messages, Americans showed medium engagement when these messages contained any useful information and solidarity, whereas Indians showed higher engagement when these messages contained socioemotional information.

Central to this shift in customer's role is the concept of customer engagement, which emphasises that these novel customer interactions create value for the brand (Dolan et al., 2019). Consumers today are no longer satisfied with simply being consumers of content; instead, they wish to be active partners in the brand interaction landscape. The innovation and efficiency of a firm can be enhanced through online customer engagement and crowdfunding (Siakas & Siakas, 2020).

In light of this, customer engagement has become a strategic imperative for almost every firm. Customer engagement has gained much traction in the managerial and academic world and has turned from a relatively unknown term (0 hits before 2007) (Harmeling et al., 2017a) to one that returns over 400 million Google search hits today. To drive customer engagement strategically, brands today are deploying considerable resources towards it (Verhoef et al., 2010). Some of the brands which are making their presence felt on social media are National Geographic, KFC UK, Nike, Dove, Lego, and

Starbucks (Gilliland, 2020). Brands such as Comcast and P&G are spending over 10 billion dollars on digital platforms (Patel, 2018). Table 1 summarises the use of Social Media by some of the top brands.

Even though a relatively newer term, customer engagement has received considerable attention from academicians; there are varied viewpoints that paint quite a fragmented picture. Primarily, researchers have studied CE from a psychological or behavioural perspective. Some researchers view CE as a psychological state of being involved, interested, and connected to a focal object such as a brand (Bowden, 2009; Naumann et al., 2020; Pagani & Malacarne, 2017; Vivek et al., 2012). In contrast, other researchers view CE as a customer's behavioural manifestations in the form of resource contributions to a firm (Barari et al., 2021; Dolan et al., 2019; Gainous et al., 2020; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Li, Larimo & Leonidou, 2021; Verhoef et al., 2010; Verleye et al., 2014).

With the growing use of SNS, concerns regarding information overload on these platforms and the discontinuation of the use of social media are increasing. Research conducted by Li & Chan (2021), Nawaz et al. (2018), and Fu et al. (2020) further show that customers discontinue the use of social media due to information overload. On this note, Graf & Antoni (2021) call for research on moderating factors influencing information overload. Empirical research is yet to provide firm answers about the antecedents and consequences of customer engagement on social media. Additionally, extant literature has studied CE through post facto data from these platforms to arrive at various conclusions. Moreover, Agnihotri (2020) identifies a research gap in the intersection of social media and social capital in businesses. There are limited studies that have studied CE from the customer's perspective. This study aims to study CE through a grounded theory approach via qualitative research tools, Focus Group Discussions and Personal Interviews to understand what drives CE on SNSs, what customers feel while using these platforms, and the consequences of CE on SNSs. Thus, this research aims to offer a comprehensive view of information overload faced by users on SNSs and its effect on customer engagement behaviour. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: To explore the expectations and behavioural responses of users with respect to SNS.
RQ2: How do users react to excess information available on SNS?
RQ3: What are the antecedents of customer engagement behaviour on SNSs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Engagement

Although customer engagement has received much attention over the years, there still seems to be little consensus in the marketing echelons. Customer engagement has primarily been defined either in the realms of psychological phenomena or behavioural outcomes. Bowden (2009) defines customer engagement (CE) as "a psychological process that helps understand how customer loyalty forms and can be maintained. He uses various measures such as satisfaction, commitment, involvement, trust, and brand loyalty to explain the process of customer engagement" (p. 65).

Some researchers believe that customers' behavioural manifestations towards a brand or firm, beyond purchase, define customer engagement (van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010). The significant dimensions of CE are customer goals, nature of impact, valence, modality, and scope.

Research conducted by Bijmolt et al., (2010) focuses on the value generated by customers by co-creating the firm's competitive strategy and collaborating in the innovation process. Kumar et al. (2010; 2018) take a broader view of how customers can contribute to a firm in various ways beyond direct transactions. These include Customer lifetime value (CLV) encapsulating the customer's purchasing behaviour; Customer referral value (CRV) driven by the customer's referral behaviour and motivated by firms' formal referral programs; Customer Influence Value (CIV) derived by customers' influence on other and prospective customers; Customer Knowledge Value (CKV) derived through feedback for innovations and improvement.

Brodie et al. (2011) and Hollebeek (2011) conceptualise CE as a psychological state that occurs under interactive and co-creative experiences that a customer has with a focal agent such as a brand. It is a multidimensional concept covering cognitive, behavioural, and emotional dimensions in context-specific situations.

Some researchers define CE as the intensity with which a customer participates and connects with offerings and activities of an organisation initiated either by the customer or the organisation (Vivek et al., 2012). The consequences of CE in this study are value, trust, word of mouth, brand loyalty, and community involvement.

Verleye et al., (2014) describe CE as a customer's voluntary and discretionary behaviours directed towards a firm. The customer behaviours include feedback, helping other customers, referrals, and engaging positively with the firm's employees.

Many social scientists focus on the volitional resource investment by the customers in the form of cognitive, emotional, behavioural knowledge and skills into their interactions with the brand (Harmeling et al., 2017a; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014b). The customer-owned resources are customers' network assets, persuasion capital, knowledge stores, and creativity.

Pagani and Malacarne (2017) find CE to be a mental state of being involved, interested, and devoting attention to something. The study by Khan (2017) takes a multidimensional view of CE. It views engagement as comprising behavioural aspects or click-based interactions (participation) as well as simple content viewing and reading (consumption).

Many researchers recently have emphasised the behavioural aspect of CE, especially in the context of social media in the form of likes, shares, and comments (Gainous et al., 2020; Rietveld et al., 2020). These user behaviours are used extensively by social media platforms to determine engagement metrics for various brands advertising on their platforms. Researchers have also considered CE as an extension of relationship marketing. Customer engagement is recognised as an iterative and dynamic process between multiple actors that support the development of enduring long-term relationships (Shawky et al., 2020). The study posits four levels of customer engagement: connection, interaction, loyalty, advocacy.

Many researchers have taken a multidimensional view of CE (Dolan et al., 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2021; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). CE can manifest negative, neutral, or positive valence, which may be displayed at differing intensity levels that can also vary across contexts (Behnam et al., 2021). An and Han (2020) observe that CE is prompted by certain customer psychological, cognitive, and emotional feelings and by interaction with brands. They also find that customer engagement includes both non-transactional and transactional behaviour. However, non-transactional behaviours of customers are essential manifestations of customer engagement behaviours (Kang et al., 2021).

Based on the extant literature, the following tenets of Customer engagement can be distilled:

Customer engagement can be either psychological or behavioural where:

- The psychological aspect of CE entails a customer's connectedness and willingness to interact and contribute to a brand.
- The behavioural aspect of CE entails a customer's resource investment to a firm's/ brand's marketing function, be it the core economic transaction or beyond it.
- CE can manifest itself with positive and negative valence.
- There are different types of CE based on the context, such as active and passive, Customer engagement Initiatives and Behaviours, Task-based or Experiential Engagement.

For our study, we define CE as "a customer's voluntary resource contribution to a firm's marketing function, going beyond financial patronage" (Harmeling et al., 2017b, p. 316). We now discuss customer engagement behaviour manifestation in the context of SNSs.

Customer Engagement on Social Networking Sites

The growth of SNSs has revolutionised marketing (Hudson et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2017). However, companies still struggle to effectively utilise the power of these platforms (Hanna et al., 2011).

A significant chunk of social media traffic is still driven by peer-to-peer communications (Fuchs, 2014). Lacoste (2016) states that individuals and firms expect social media engagements to reap both personal and professional dividends. Firms today can leverage SNSs to build relationships with customers, increase traffic to their websites, innovate and identify new business opportunities (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Qi et al., 2021; Wamba & Carter, 2014), and improve customer satisfaction and retention (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Customer engagement, however, remains the most crucial business objective (Ángeles Oviedo-García et al., 2014).

The voluntary contribution of resources (tangible or intangible) by the customer helps firms' strategies for competitive advantage (Harmeling et al., 2017b). These resources help firms achieve their goals (Kozlenkova et al., 2017) and thus, make CE relevant (Harmeling et al., 2017b).

Extant literature sheds some light on how brands execute CE initiatives and the customers' response towards them. Researchers have tried to study the antecedents and consequences of CE in the Social Media context. Research conducted by Ng, Sweeney & Plewa (2020) looks at antecedents related to firms and customers. These authors outline three customer-related antecedents. First is the customer's knowledge and skill, i.e., customer capabilities that can affect his/her engagement in co-creating value for the brand. Second, are the situational factors such as service convenience and perceived service fairness. Third are attitudinal factors, i.e., trust, commitment, and satisfaction concerning the brand.

On the other hand, firm-related antecedents outlined by Ng et al. (2020) are task- or experience-oriented customer engagement marketing initiatives. Customers are asked to write reviews or refer the brand to their contacts in the task-oriented initiative, and experiential initiatives include connecting closely with customers through some events. The second antecedent related to the firm is social customer relationship management, wherein firms market their brand on social media. Vivek et al. (2012) find that Involvement and Customer participation lead to CE. Another study tries to understand the CE behaviours and finds that users 'like' & 'dislike' for entertainment; comment and upload videos for socialisation (Khan, 2017). Users read comments for information-seeking and relaxing entertainment. Users continue to 'like' less as their YouTube experience grows. Males are more likely to dislike YouTube videos in comparison with females (Khan, 2017).

Dolan et al. (2019) provide a counterintuitive view of how CE occurs on social media. They find that Rational appeals in social media have a superior effect in facilitating active and passive engagement among social media users; whereas, emotional appeals facilitate passive rather than highly active engagement behaviour, despite the social and interactive nature of the digital media landscape (Dolan et al., 2019; Ogbeibu, Pereira, Emelifeonwu, & Gaskin, 2021). In contrast, Rietveld et al. (2020) find that emotional appeals are more critical than informative appeals in driving customer engagement. Positive high arousal and negative low arousal appeals are the main drivers of customer engagement. Including product-oriented informative appeals does not contribute to customer engagement (Wang et al., 2021). Informative brand appeals are a way to connect emotional appeals to the brand.

Naumann et al. (2020) find that involvement is a strong driver of positive CE. Kang et al. (2021) observe that interactivity has a nonlinear relationship with customer engagement. Tie strength plays a completely mediating role between interactivity and customer engagement. Shahbaznezhad et al. (2021) found that the effectiveness of social media content on users' engagement is moderated by content context. Ng et al. (2020) found the outcomes of CE to be customer satisfaction, trust, loyalty, purchase intention, and word of mouth from the perspective of a customer. From the firm's perspective, the lifetime value of a customer, referral to other customers, influence and knowledge, and firm performance are outcomes of CE. Moreover, the generation of the customer is also known to influence their engagement in SNS (Msallati, 2021).

The review of extant literature thus shows that CE is a fundamental tenet of the Social Media landscape. We find that CE behaviour can manifest itself as consumption, contribution, and creation. We also observe that although the drivers of CE have been explored in past studies, there is no concrete evidence towards a complete understanding of drivers of CE behaviour. Additionally, we observe that past literature has paid scant attention to all the different aspects of the posts users encounter on social media and how they might affect their decision to engage with it. Further, social media provides a unique experience to users in its ready availability and unlimited content. These unique conditions of social media affect how users process and interact with any content they encounter on social media platforms, and this needs to be studied from their perspective. Given this, it is imperative to study CE in the social media context, accounting for the platform characteristics and various engagement triggers in the post.

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

This study aims to understand user behaviour in the context of social networking sites. We conducted 22 FGDs and 47 PIs for this purpose. The data analysis was embedded in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to maintain open axiology. The sense-making traversed through a cyclical process of data analysis explained in the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994).

The study tries to understand how users deal with the barrage of information they are exposed to multiple times a day on these sites. The research focuses on understanding the how, where, and why of their usage patterns. In this study, we were interested in users' perceptions towards social networking sites and their usage patterns on these sites. The intention was to discover their motivations in using these platforms and the emotions they invoked in them. Lastly, another point of inquiry was to understand how the users shared and disseminated information and the factors influencing such behaviour.

Given this, we conducted exploratory qualitative research to understand the antecedents of passive and active engagement from the customer's perspective. The research provided valuable insights into customer engagement from the users' perspective. We conducted a mix of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Personal Interviews (PI) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers felt the need for conducting both FGDs and PIs even though FGDs provided valuable insights about how users behaved on SNSs, since specific insights regarding information processing and customer engagement behaviour were still lacking. Semi-structured PIs help uncover deep-seated emotions, motivations and attitudes (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Additionally, FGDs may discourage certain respondents from trusting others with sensitive or controversial information. In such cases, using PIs alongside FGDs proves to be a more suitable approach (Gibbs, 1997).

Method

The FGDs were conducted between 05 October '18 to 10 December '18. We conducted a total of 22 FGDs. Each of the FGDs were recorded (audio and video) and later transcribed. The total number of participants in our FGDs were 176 (8 participants per FGD), aged between 22 and 35 years. Although the age bracket of the participants is large, a majority of the participants in the research were young and homological. 67% of the participants were aged up to 25, and 94% of the participants were 30 or less. Participants were recruited using a mix of convenience and snowball sampling processes (Marshall, 1996; Ogbeibu, Senadjki, & Tan, 2018; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Overall, in our focus groups, we had 96 males and 72 females. Each focus group lasted for about 55 to 75 minutes, with over 1200 minutes of recorded data. FGDs were better suited for this study because they allowed exploring participants' complex human behaviours and motivations by explicitly using group interactions (Carson et al., 2001; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

The participants for the focus groups were screened by their familiarity with at least one of the social networking sites. The focus group discussions began with the moderator introducing the topic

Table 1. Market Place Evidence: Brands that made use of social media platforms for business gains

Brand	Social Media Engagement Actions	Reference
Oasis, Fashion brand, UK	Online stores and social media	Patel (2021)
Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams, US	Interacts with followers on social media	Patel (2021)
HDFC Bank, India	Uses chatbots for conversations with customers	Patel (2021)
Goldsmiths Jewellery, Switzerland	Live video and voice support	Patel (2021)
EVO Entertainment Group, US	Asks for real-time feedback to interact better with customers	Patel (2021)
Nike	Loyalty offers, credits and inspirational videos on social media	Patel (2021), Chan (2020), Salamader (2021), Brenner (2021)
InVision	Promotes its best blog as a part of brand building	Patel (2021)
Evy's Tree (fashion) group on Facebook	Engages customers through a Facebook group	Policella (2019)
Wendy's (fast food)	Active on Twitter	Policella (2019), Salamader (2021), Ramanujam (2020)
IKEA	Uses augmented reality and video chat	Thomas (2021)
Netflix, OTT platform	Interacts with customers in regional language	Chan (2020), Ramanujam (2020)
Hello BC, Tourism company	Encouraged people to post pictures of top destinations during lockdowns (#ExploreBCLater)	Cyca (2020)
Starbucks, Coffee house	Started #WhatsYourName campaign in support of transgender	Cyca (2020), Chan (2020), Salamader (2021), Brenner, (2021)
Digiorno, Pizza brand	Delivered free pizzas for users tweeting #DeliverDiGiorno	Cyca (2020)
Coors Light, Beer company	Gave away 500,000 beers following #CouldUseABeer campaign	Cyca (2020)
Amway, Homecare products	Uses blogs and social media leading to business expansion	Martins (2016)
Denny's, Restaurant business	Uses Facebook and Twitter for customer experience	Martins (2016), Ramanujam (2020)
Dove, Skin and haircare	Started social media campaigns "Ad Makeover" & "Campaign for Real Beauty."	Martins (2016), Salamader (2021), Brenner (2021)
Skyscanner, Airline ticket search engine	Provides best offers and provides social media support	Chan (2020)
Coca-Cola, Beverage company	Began #ShareACoke campaign and saw peak sales (2014-2017)	Chue (2018)
Hershey, Chocolate company	Responded personally to customers' complaints on social media	Chue (2018)
GoPro, Camera company	Promotes brand on social media with breath-taking pictures	Salamader (2021), Brenner (2021)
Wayfair, Home Décor	Uses Instagram to increase customers	Salamader (2021), Brenner (2021)
Pop-Tarts, Toaster pastries	Targets young audience on social media	Salamader (2021), Ramanujam (2020)
Slack, Business communication	Connects with customers through online communication	Brenner (2021)

of discussion and assuring participants that there were no correct answers and that each participant's views were welcome. We also reminded the participants that each person used these sites in their way, and we wanted to understand how different people used and behaved on these sites. We also used projective techniques in aiding participants in their responses (Ramsey, Ibbotson, & McCole, 2006). For example, we asked questions like, 'What factors, in your opinion, will influence you in opening

your social network account?'. The discussion guides provided to the moderators helped them in this regard (Appendix A). Overall, we tried to keep the discussions open-ended.

We followed the research triangulation techniques suggested by Creswell and Clark (2017). We also conducted 47 personal interviews. Although past researchers suggest that theoretical saturation occurs in about 30 interviews (Sandelowski, 1995), social media usage cannot be considered homogeneous, especially across geographies and age groups. Thus, our study used a larger sample size to explore user behaviour across this non-homogeneous population (Boddy, 2016). The interviews helped us in exploring more specific insights which we were unable to capture via the FGDs. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner (Appendix B). The PIs were conducted between 25 October to 09 December '18, using Convenience and Snowball Sampling. As internet penetration increases in India, we deemed it essential to understand the usage patterns of individuals from different parts of the country, different socio-economic backgrounds and different age groups. We approached 20 management students of IIM Lucknow in the first phase, of which six responded positively to being a part of the study. We further used their help to connect with their acquaintances to reach a broader demographic profile. We thus recruited another 36 people to be a part of our study. We also recruited seven international participants for our FGDs and PIs to bring a global perspective to the study.

The participants were screened by their familiarity with at least one of the social networking sites. The audio was recorded for each of the interviews and transcribed. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes with over 1600 minutes of recorded data.

For moderating the FGDs and conducting interviews, we prepared a semi-structured guide (refer to Appendix A and B) as per the method suggested by Johnstone and Tan (2015). We conducted pretesting using the semi-structured guides with twelve students (one FGD of 8 students and PIs for 4). The guides were improved based on the responses in the pretesting phase to make the FGD and PI more relevant to the context of the study. After the first phase of data collection, the guides were further improved by incorporating suggestions from fellow researchers. We then conducted an additional FGD and 5 PIs with the new guides. Although the number of questions was reduced in the modified guide, the transcripts and analysis showed consistency in the ensuing discussion with both the guides.

We used NVivo-12 Pro software for storing and analysing the transcripts. We adopted a thematic analysis approach to our data analysis. We read and interpreted all the transcripts and placed relevant data based on theme-based patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Spiggle, 1994). The iterative methodology of the thematic analysis provided a vital tool. The initial categorisation of data could be shuffled around based on inputs from other sets of verbatim data (Dittmar & Drury, 2000). Thematic analysis of extensive textual data helped us identify commonalities across multiple data sets (Kellehear, 1993).

We used the three-step approach for analysing texts as suggested by Morse (1994). The first step of this is comprehension, which involves gaining an understanding of the context of the study. The second step is synthesising, which involves merging respondent data as per the commonalities discovered. The final step of our analysis was to theorise the findings (Morse, 1994, p. 36).

We divided the stage of synthesising into three parts. Firstly, we applied the open coding method, which involves applying codes that are derived from the text (Blair, 2015). We read each of the transcripts individually and identified themes in each focus group. Secondly, we applied axial coding, in which categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We categorised the themes as per the commonalities and differences we observed across the themes from different focus groups. Lastly, we used the selective coding process, where categories are organised around a central explanatory concept (Borah et al., 2020). We re-analysed and recorded the themes to form fewer theme categories.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that qualitative studies require different criteria compared to social sciences and other positivist research methods to establish reliability for the study. Hence,

multiple techniques like "interpretative validity" (Maxwell, 1992), "descriptive validity" (Wolcott, 1994), and credibility (Patton, 1990) were used.

Additionally, two coders were hired and worked independently to interpret the results, as per the method suggested by Besharov (2014) and Borah et al. (2020). To ensure that the findings were logical, they compared their conclusions and acknowledged the ones acceptable to both.

After the first round of data collection, we inducted recommendations made by fellow researchers to refine the moderator's questions derived from our first discussion guide and the discussions that followed. In order to strengthen the validity of our results, five more PIs and one additional FGD were conducted to compare the results. Additionally, to include a global perspective to our research, four participants from France, Australia, Singapore, and Germany were recruited for the FGDs. Similarly, three participants from France, Germany and Vietnam were recruited for the PIs.

On analysing the data, we found no discerning differences in the significant observed themes, albeit a few minor cultural differences that we discuss in the results.

The demographics are as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the data yielded four significant themes.

Table 2. Sample demographics: Focus Group Discussions [(n=22*8=176) (8 participants per group)]

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	100	57%
Female	76	43%
Age (Years)		
Under 26	118	67%
26-30	47	27%
30-35	11	6%
Occupation		
Student	130	74%
Working Professional	46	26%
Weekly SNS use		
Up to 10 hours	45	26%
11 hours to 20 hours	97	55%
21 hours to 30 hours	29	16%
31 hours or more	5	3%
Daily SNS Use		
Up to 5 times	7	4%
6 to 10 times	29	17%
11 to 15 times	78	44%
16 times or more	62	35%

Table 3. Sample demographics: Personal Interviews [Interviews (N=47)]

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	25	53%
Female	22	47%
Age (Years)		
Under 30	7	15%
31-40	23	49%
41-50	13	28%
51 or older	4	8%
Occupation		
Student	14	30%
Working Professional	23	49%
Housewife	10	21%
Weekly SNS use		
Up to 10 hours	25	53%
11 hours to 20 hours	18	38%
21 hours to 30 hours	3	7%
31 hours or more	1	2%
Daily SNS Use		
Up to 5 times	10	21%
6 to 10 times	29	62%
11 to 15 times	6	13%
16 times or more	2	4%

Table 4. Extracted Themes from NVivo

Themes	Sources	Quotes
High SNS usage in short frequent bursts	113	142
Information Overload and Information rejection	126	128
Passive Engagement	87	87
Active Engagement	81	81

Theme 1: High SNS Usage, in Short, Frequent Bursts

On average, there is a high usage of SNSs among customers aged 25-40, with News, Social News, and entertainment being critical drivers of use:

I get most of my news from Twitter (P2, FGD4).

I like to see new memes from pages I follow (P7, FGD2).

Most of friends from school and college are in different cities, so we kinda like stay in touch by looking at each other's pics and all (PI-14).

We observed that most participants regularly used SNS for entertainment or for staying updated on the current happenings in their social circle and the world. With the modern world scattering friends and family across cities, SNSs provide a way for people to stay in touch. Additionally, it also provides them with opportunities to connect with people of similar interests.

It is also important to note here that participants said that they use SNS for the consumption of news as well. Since most of the items coming on a person's SNS home page are likely to be from someone he/she knows, people, thus, end up trusting the news they see on these platforms. They believe:

If some news is important enough, it will trend (P2, FGD6).

We also observed that participants used SNSs for entertainment purposes as well. With short video formats and memes gaining popularity, SNSs have proved to be one of the most popular channels for entertainment. The high SNS usage thus can be attributed to both news as well as entertainment. In addition to these, SNSs provide a platform for people to interact with members sharing similar interests (Chang & Wu, 2021). Many of the participants mentioned that they were a part of one group or another on these platforms. For instance, a few participants were members of football fan pages and actively followed the teams and players they liked. In addition to this, they had also formed community pages where they would actively engage with other members in discussions, and share materials they received from different sources. This also helped them stay updated on their interests. Some of the participants also mentioned visiting SNS pages to enhance their knowledge or learn skills.

The study showed that customers generally use SNSs in short, frequent bursts, where they check their SNS profiles multiple times a day, with the time spent ranging from thirty seconds to five minutes:

I only check social media when I travel; or when I am on the pot (P8, FGD5).

I am just switching between apps during boring classes. Every platform gets boring after a few minutes (P3, FGD6).

It just sort of fills up empty spaces, you know, whenever you are waiting for something, you just look at your phone (P1, FGD8).

The study participants elaborated that they would inadvertently check their 'Socials' every time they had a few minutes between tasks. Our participants indicated that social networking sites filled in gaps in their day. These small bursts could come in varying forms, such as while traveling in public transport or in between performing other jobs. The respondents also indicated that they would often use their social networking sites while taking a break from work. This shows a sense of exhaustion due to their work even before they access these sites.

Additionally, participants mentioned the role played by push notifications in triggering them to use these websites. For instance, in the event of a notification alerting them to a comment received on their post, they would immediately check their websites to see the comment and possibly respond. Additionally, such forays on the website would lead to them scrolling through their feeds for a few minutes.

Participants from foreign countries in the supplementary FGD and PIs described similar experiences of using SNSs. Participants were vocal about using these sites multiple times a day in short intervals. There were some cultural differences observed, concerning the topics of content that

participants viewed on SNSs; however, they showed similar usage patterns across various features of the sites.

Theme 2: Information Overload and Information Rejection

We observed that participants regularly experience information overload on SNS. In the simplest terms, information overload occurs when a person receives more information than he/she can process:

Sometimes, I end up going through the YouTube suggestions 4 times and still am not able to decide what to play (PI-31).

You can't really trust what you see on FB or Twitter (P3, FGD2).

Twitter is insane, there is just so much content, it gets impossible to decide which threads to follow (P6, FGD2).

The amount of content on any Social Networking Site today is practically endless. The sheer amount of information available on Social Networking Sites impairs users' information sorting and processing abilities. Bontcheva, Gorrell, and Wessels (2013) found that users of social microblogging sites such as Twitter often complain about the number of posts they receive and the subsequent need for a filtering solution to weed out irrelevant data. Users' tendency to socialise with an extensive network of other users could lead to information overload (Rodriguez et al., 2014), and this could, in turn, lead to the undue spread of fake news (Bermes, 2021)

Information search and retrieval strategies are shunted for such an overloaded user, resulting in limited search directions, difficulty in identifying and selecting relevant information, and less systematic search strategies. Information overload leads to arbitrary information analysis by the receiver as well. The participants in our study indicated that they sometimes felt overwhelmed by the amount of data available on SNS, as evidenced by one of the respondents saying that they could not select anything to play on YouTube even after scrolling through it multiple times. Some participants also pointed out that they would scroll quickly through their feeds without paying much attention to it. Additionally, the environment wherein the users accessed these websites also played a role in increasing their information overload. For instance, using social networking sites between work often resulted in them just mindlessly scrolling through it, with the exhaustion of work often spilling onto their scrolling.

Another example was using these sites on public transport and keeping an eye out for their safety and drop points. Participants also mentioned that incredulous claims on these sites, both political and otherwise, left them with a sensation of agitation. They would often scroll past many posts or stop using the site further.

In response to the condition of information overload that users face on SNS, they reject a large amount of information they receive (Azad, 2021). Participants were equivocal in stating that they did not pay any attention to almost 90 percent of the content they saw on SNSs:

I just keep scrolling on FB till I come across something I like (P1, FGD8).

Brand posts really annoy me on FB as they keep popping up over and over again (P4-FGD22).

If I really like the article or video only then do I click it, otherwise I move on the other one quickly; I know there'd be something I like down the feed (P7, FGD4).

I get so many posts and tweets from brands, I just skip over them (PI-4).

It is interesting to note here that whilst a large amount of advertising money is being spent on SNSs, the rejection rate of content is higher than any other medium (Boroon et al., 2021). Since there is an endless stream of content available to the user by simply scrolling down the screen, the easiest strategy employed by users to tackle information overload is rejecting it and moving forward. Typically, a user spends only fractions of a second on his/her decision to view a post before moving on to the next one. This seemed to be a recurring theme across participants. Due to several reasons, mainly related to information overload, there were times in their scrolling where they would hardly pay any attention to their feeds. The evidence provided in Rodriguez et al. (2014) empirical study shows that social media users have a limited information processing capacity. They also show that the said limit is often breached on social media, leading to information overload. They also state that as information moves out of the top few positions from the information processing queue, the probability of the said information being processed by the user declines rapidly. As the information inflow rate increases, much information quickly falls beyond the information processing limits of queues. In the advent of information overload, they posit that users adopt compensatory strategies such as prioritising information from a small subset of users.

With the promise on SNSs of something interesting being just around the corner, participants often skipped past posts quickly. Participants were also of the view that since there were so many pages and friends sharing so much content if something was worth watching and they had missed it, it would pop up again on their news feed. Thus, they seemed to have very little fear of missing out on good posts.

Some of the participants from other countries mentioned that Social Media was inexorably a part of their social life. Thus, unless they had some quiet time at hand, these participants paid little attention to any brand posts, especially if the format contained audio. The focus largely shifted to social news and quick consumption memes that can be shared for fun. This is in line with the study by Khan (2017), which observed that users liked and disliked entertainment. Overall, the participants showed that they used compensatory techniques for information overload, such as prioritising posts from a subset of users (Rodriguez et al., 2014).

Theme 3: Passive Engagement

Users make snap judgments regarding posts that are affected by cognitive cues. The participants said they look for cues within the post to decide which posts to view and which ones to skip:

I always read the tweets shared by this one friend of mine because I know he shares interesting content (PI-14).

I'd watch something really interesting even if it's sponsored content (PI-16).

I really like the posts of this one décor brand (PI-46).

If it's a long video or article, and I am just browsing through, then I just move on even if it seems interesting. I sometimes add it to watch later (P8, FGD1).

The participants believed that cues such as the source, the format, popularity, hashtags play a significant role in their information processing decision. As users are exposed to more and more information, they prioritise information based on such cognitive cues. These peripheral cues play a major part in helping users decide the post to which they want to pay attention. Since they are scrolling through their feeds quickly, they only stop for something that catches their attention.

The research found that post popularity plays an essential role in persuading users through both central and peripheral routes (Chang et al., 2021). This research shows that on social network sites,

argument quality, post popularity, and attractiveness reinforce usefulness and preference, which in turn lead to 'Like Intention' and 'Share Intention'. The researchers also found that the 'like intention' of page fans is the essential factor in their 'sharing intention':

If its anything over 10 seconds, I look at the number of likes and comments and then decide if I want to watch it. It's even more true with brand posts (PI-43).

The right hashtag tells the entire story (PI-26).

Participants mentioned that even though most of the SNSs showed content that was in one way or another relevant to them, they would still filter it out based on an even smaller subset of what they were interested in at that moment. They also mentioned that even if they read a few lines of the post, they would quickly glance at its popularity to see if it was worth the effort to read the post further. Some participants discussed that if any post seemed incredulous, they would read a few comments even before opening it, to determine if it had any credibility. Moreover, participants mentioned that based on the sources that shared the information, they would either look at the post further or completely ignore it, depending on if they liked the source or not. For instance, one of the participants informed that they would ignore a post shared by a particular news channel no matter which of their friends had shared it. This is in line with research suggesting peripheral cues drive passive engagement.

Some of our international participants observed that the posts shared on the groups on their SNSs provide a greater impetus to paying attention to the post. This was echoed across participants from different geographies. This is in line with theories of group membership on social media (Kaakinen et al., 2018; Park & Jiang, 2020).

Theme 4: Active Engagement

The customer's decision to like, share or comment on the content is possibly affected by Central route cues:

If something is cool or funny, I like to share it with my friends (P4, FGD5).

I've shared a few of those (brand posts), where there is a chance of winning, like a coupon something (P3, FGD15).

It depends on the content really, like if I found something interesting then I might share it or retweet it. For example, I shared the Star Wars trailer (PI-24).

We observed that participants generally shared or liked only those posts or tweets which they had viewed. Additionally, central route cues such as the quality of the content or sharing incentives offered in the post, further egged the user to share the post (Zhang et al., 2019). Most of the participants mentioned that they have hardly ever liked or shared a post without viewing it. Participants mentioned that even though they rejected many posts, they would spend a more considerable amount of time on the post which finally caught their attention. Since social networking sites, by their very nature, are social, any content shared by an individual adds to their profile and how others in their network view them. This becomes even more pronounced when the posts are political. Xu and Yang (2012) show that individual retweeting behaviour is highly affected by social relationships, or how many times a user has retweeted a particular user. Extant literature also shows that the acceptance of message arguments and subsequent retweeting depends on the message source's trustworthiness (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Liu et al., 2012).

Many participants mentioned that they have refrained from sharing a post because of the backlash they expected on social media. However, this was also true for non-political posts. For instance, a few participants mentioned that since there were several family members in their social networks, they would refrain from liking and sharing a particular kind of post, which might hurt the sensibilities of their family members.

Participants from foreign countries highlighted how social media had become a polarised landscape leading to their fear of ostracization on sharing or liking inappropriate or insensitive content. They also observed that a lot more evaluation went into sharing something than just viewing it:

There was this one friend of mine that I have stopped talking to because of the kind of posts he shared on social media (PI-44).

I do not like to share controversial ads, especially in today's environment (P7, FGD 22).

The last thing I shared on Insta was this video of a cute influencer (PI-37).

Participants were also of the view that since what they shared on social networking sites reflected on them, the quality of their shared content was also important. A few participants mentioned that they would only share articles or videos if they believed them to be of high quality. This probably also varies from platform to platform. However, the quality of the content could be attributed to its credibility and its entertainment value. For instance, one of the participants mentioned that they like to share the trailers of the latest movies that they find interesting, hence building social capital by sharing good quality content with their network. Thus, results show that central cues drive active engagement on social networking sites.

CONCLUSION

The results from our study provide an understanding of the usage of social networking sites by customers, and their information processing and dissemination behaviour. Our findings can broadly be clubbed into four themes answering our research questions: 1) To explore the expectations and behavioural responses of users with respect to SNS. 2) How do users react to excess information available on SNS? 3) What are the antecedents of customer engagement behaviour on SNSs? These themes are; 1) 'High SNS usage in short frequent bursts' - there is a high usage of SNSs among customers, with News, Social News, and entertainment being key drivers of use; customers generally use SNSs in frequent short bursts, where they check their SNS profiles multiple times a day with the time spent ranging from thirty seconds to five minutes. 2) 'Information Overload and Information rejection' - participants regularly experience information overload on SNS and reject a large amount of information they receive. 3) 'Passive Engagement' - Users make snap judgments regarding posts affected by cognitive cues. 4) 'Active Engagement' - Customer's decision to like, share or comment on the content is possibly affected by Central route cues. These themes do not work independently but are interrelated to each other. All these dimensions interact, and the outcome of that is the user's unique information processing and dissemination behaviour on SNS. The themes discovered in the qualitative exploratory research thus provide a platform to further enquire into user behaviour of SNSs.

Implications

This research makes several contributions to marketing theory and practice. The research extends the literature on customer engagement on social networking sites by highlighting customers' usage patterns and behaviours (Wang et al., 2021). The study elaborates further on two types of engagement. Although past researchers have at times characterised Liking and Sharing as

passive engagement (Dolan et al., 2019), we argue that on SNSs, even liking and sharing are active acts of associating with a post or a brand (Khan, 2017). Thus, Passive engagement is the cognitive effort the customer spends in paying attention to a post. In contrast, active engagement is the customer's effort to actively disseminate the post by liking, commenting, or sharing it. This behaviour is exhibited by users only if the content is of interest and therefore supports the finding of Shahbaznezhad et al., (2021).

We also add to the literature of information overload and describe how it is in play on SNSs. The implications of information overload and information rejection by customers on SNSs provide an impetus for further research. Rodriguez et al. (2014) posits that in the advent of information overload, users adopt compensatory strategies such as prioritising information from a small subset of users. Our exploratory research showed similar results where many participants confirmed that they felt overwhelmed, used compensatory strategies for information processing on SNSs, and rejected a large amount of information. This is in line with previous research on information overload on SNS and confirmed in the Indian context that users of SNSs faced information overload. This finding adds to literature wherein other adverse effects of information overload were studied by researchers, which includes sharing of fake news (Bermes, 2021) and discontinuation of social networking (Li & Chan, 2021; Nawaz et al., 2018; Fu et al., 2020; Azad, 2021). We further extend the literature on information overload by analysing its effects on users' information processing behaviour. We discover the importance of peripheral cues in this aspect and the strategies adopted by users to deal with information overload. This fills the research gap pointed out by Graf & Antoni (2021).

Lastly, we extend the literature on the antecedents of customer engagement behaviour on SNSs. Our results highlight the importance of peripheral cues for garnering user attention and subsequent engagement behaviour, in line with Wang et al. (2021). Further, this research emphasises the central cues driving active engagement behaviours on SNSs. Additionally, this research opens avenues for further research in a global context with the cultural heterogeneity displayed by the participants from different countries. This is in line with the future directions provided by Shawky et al. (2020).

This study has implications for marketing managers across industries in designing their strategies for social media marketing. First of all, this study highlights the importance of attention, a kind of engagement (passive engagement), which forms the first step of a user's journey to process the information on these platforms. Our research discusses various peripheral and central route cues that are critical for brand managers in unlocking the true potential of customer engagement on SNSs. Cues such as popularity, source, and format of the post, play a significant role in garnering user attention and generating subsequent engagement behaviours. This study also highlights the importance of consumer facets such as network homophily and sharing intentions. Managers should try and understand in-depth if the performance of their posts has been affected by the personal traits of the users. This will also help them understand if they need to adjust their performance metrics for a particular user. Attention to posts would become an even more important metric to capture. Hence, our study contributes to this integral managerial pursuit of driving customer engagement.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our study does have some limitations. First, although we have kept a broader demographic profile for our participants, it is still not representative of the entire user base, especially the bottom of the pyramid. Second, while our sample size is adequate and in line with previous studies, the number of people interviewed is still limited. Third, since the interviews were conducted only in one country, generalisation across geographies would need further scrutiny.

The study opens up further avenues for research as well. For instance, a qualitative study with larger sample size and even broader demographic profile across multiple countries could provide a more comprehensive understanding of CE on SNSs. In addition, researchers could try and empirically test our findings in an experimental setup or through big data analytics.

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APPENDIX A: MODERATOR'S GUIDE FOR FOCUSED GROUP DISCUSSION

Moderator: Thank you for giving your consent to participate in this FGD. Theme for this FGD will be *Customer Engagement on Social Networking Sites.* This FGD is mainly exploratory in nature, where I am just looking to get some idea about your awareness of Customer Engagement and how you view it in the contemporary setup of social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc. The insights given by you will be solely used for academic purposes, and the identity of the respondents will be kept confidential. Please ask any question that any of you have at this time.

Moderator: Before we begin, I would request you all to introduce yourself. Please share some basic details about yourself like:

1. Name
2. Age
3. Education
4. Current profession
5. Monthly income
6. Single/Married?
7. Kids?

Moderator: Thanks for your responses. Now, I would be asking some basic questions about Customer Engagement, and its use and impact in our lives. Please express your experiences based on following questions:

- Warm-up:
  - What are Social Networking Sites? Which social network platforms do you use?
  - Who all do you think use Social Networking Sites (SNSs)?
- Part one: Social Networking Sites:
  - What do you like/dislike about these sites?
  - What factors in your opinion would encourage you to open social media account
  - What encourages or discourages you from using Social Networking Sites? Probe: experiences, perception.
  - Why do you think other people use these sites?
  - What would encourage you to start or stop using a SNS?
- Part two: Information Overload:
  - Describe your typical day of using SNSs.
  - What do you understand by Information Overload? Describe briefly after discussion.
  - Have you ever felt information overload while using SNSs? Probe: experiences; Follow-up: What do you do in such situations?
  - Do you think other people face information overload on these sites? Why?
- Part three: Customer Engagement by Brands:
  - What do you feel when you hear the word, "Customer Engagement"? (Elaborate on emotions and not adjectives like 'good or fun')
  - What, according to you, is the meaning of the word 'Customer Engagement'?
  - What, according to you, are the techniques used for Customer Engagement?
  - How do you identify Customer Engagement?
  - Do you know of any examples of Customer Engagement? If yes, please elaborate.
  - What kind of brands do you think use Customer Engagement?
  - Do you engage with brands on social media? Probe: experiences
  - What do you like/dislike about brands on social media?
- Part four: Customer Engagement behaviour on SNS:
  - Describe how you scroll through your feeds on SNSs.
  - How do you decide which post to pay attention to? Probe: Elements of posts such as number of 'likes', 'comments', 'hashtags'

- How do you decide which post to 'like', 'comment', 'share' or 'retweet'? Probe: Discuss last such action by participants
- Do you create content for brands? Probe experiences

Moderator: We are more or less done with this FGD. Thank you all for your time. In case I have any query, I may get back to you. May I, please, have your e-mail/contact? Thank you.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWER'S GUIDE FOR PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Interviewer: Thank you for giving your consent to give an interview. My research interest lies in Customer Engagement on Social Networking Sites. This PI is mainly exploratory in nature, where I am just looking to get some idea about your awareness of Customer Engagement and how you view it in the contemporary setup of social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc. The insights given by you will be solely used for academic purposes, and the identity of the respondents will be kept confidential. Please ask any question that any of you have at this time.

Interviewer: Before we begin, I would request you to share some basic details about yourself:

1. Name
2. Age
3. Education
4. Current profession
5. Monthly income
6. Single/Married?
7. Kids?

Interviewer: Thanks for your responses. Now, I would be asking some basic questions about Customer Engagement, and its use and impact in our lives. Please express your experiences based on following questions:

- Warm-up:
  - What are Social Networking Sites? Which social network platforms do you use?
  - Who all do you think use Social Networking Sites (SNSs)?
- Part one: Social Networking Sites:
  - What are some features you like and dislike about these sites
  - For what activities do you use Social Networking Sites? Explore and prompt with suggestions.
  - Describe your experience of using SNSs.
  - Which is the latest SNS you use and what prompted you to start using it?
  - What is the most important reason for you to use SNSs and why?
- Part two: Information Overload:
  - When do you use these sites during the day? Describe experiences
  - Interviewer describes and discusses information overload
  - Specific instances of information overload experienced. What triggered it? How it felt? What actions were taken after experience?
  - Do you think it is a common phenomenon? Why or why not?
- Part three: Customer Engagement by Brands:
  - Which are some of the brands you encounter on SNSs? Where do you see them on SNS?
  - Do you think brands try to engage with you on SNSs? Probe experiences
  - Which brands do you interact with on SNS? Why? Probe: Do you actively follow brands, if yes, why?
  - How do you feel about brand engagement on social media? Probe experiences
  - How do you feel about advertisements on social media?
- Part four: Customer Engagement behaviour on SNS:
  - Describe your typical user session on SNS. Probe with multiple instances of use during day.
  - What type of content do you like or dislike on SNS? Elaborate with examples
  - How do you select a post to view while you are scrolling? What do you look for?
  - How often do you 'like', 'comment', 'share' or 'retweet' on SNS? What triggers these actions. Probe experiences.

Moderator: We are more or less done with this interview. Thank you for your time. In case I have any query, I may get back to you. May I, please, have your e-mail/contact? Thank you.

Mohit Malhan holds a doctorate in the marketing area from the Indian Institute of Management Lucknow, India. He earned his bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Technology) in Mechanical engineering from the National Institute of Technology Kurukshetra, India and his Master of Business Administration from the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, India. Mohit has industry experience of over three years in the automotive and e-commerce industries. His research interests include Digital Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Information Processing and Marketing Ethics. He currently teaches marketing at Great Lakes Institute of Management Gurgaon.

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