

AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING FEATURES AND BRAND LOYALTY IN THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The key objective of this research was to test the role of social media marketing features (interactivity, perceived relevance, entertainment, and informativeness) in affecting brand loyalty in the fast food industry. The required data was obtained through a quantitative survey from customers of fast food brands in United Arab Emirates. The findings revealed that most of the social media marketing features positively influence brand loyalty. In details, it was found that interactivity and perceived relevance positively affect brand loyalty. However, contrary to expectations, it was found that the impact of entertainment on brand loyalty is insignificant. Finally, the outcomes confirmed that informativeness is a significant predictor of brand loyalty. This research adds to the existing marketing literature on this topic through the examination of selected social media marketing features and brand loyalty in a Middle East country as the empirical research on this topic, particularly, in this region is scarce.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, fast food industry, social media marketing.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of brand loyalty has been a viewed as popular area of interest among several marketing researchers and academicians (Aljumah et al., 2020; Ibrahim, 2021; Mehmood & Hanaysha, 2015). This is because loyal customers represent the foremost important asset for any brand, and maintaining them is the source of brand success and long-term survival. Brand loyalty can be expressed as the consumer's attachment and feelings toward a certain brand (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). It was also defined by Oliver (1999, p. 34) as "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize preferred product/service consistently in the future". Another common definition of brand loyalty was proposed earlier by Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) as a willingness to repeat purchasing behavior that encompasses a mindful decision to constantly purchase from the same brand over time. Loyal customers talk positively about the brand and recommend others to purchase from it. They further tend to have less intention to switch to others even they get better prices or become

exposed to advertisements from its rivals. Recently, social media channels have gained increased attentions from several marketers for promoting their offerings and influencing purchase behaviour of consumers (Chetioui et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022).

In recent years, the total number of internet users has grown considerably due to the quick developments in technological devices, mobile applications, and internet connections. According to Statista (2021), in United Arab Emirates, the number of internet users as of January 2021 represented about 99% of the entire population. In the same year, it was reported that the most popular social networks in the country include YouTube (nearly 8.69 million users), Facebook (almost 7.85 million users), Instagram (7.67 million users), Twitter (5.17 million users), and LinkedIn (5.12 million users). While considering the age group of users, it was also reported that the highest percentage (47.4%) is represented by those who are aged between 25 and 34 years old, followed by is the age category of 35 to 44

which represents 23.6% of the whole population. These statistics reveal that most of the internet users are young.

Previous studies on social media marketing have considered it as a relatively contemporary marketing means that could affect brand loyalty (Chen & Qasim, 2021; Ebrahim, 2020; Ibrahim, 2021; Jibril et al., 2019; Salem & Salem, 2021; Sohail et al., 2020; Tatar & Eren-Erdogmus, 2016; Yazdanian et al., 2019). Social media marketing features allow marketers to actively connect with their customers and prospects (Aljumah el al., 2021; Ismail, 2017) and represent a key source of convenient access, thus simplifying their search for required information about the service providers (Merisavo & Raulas, 2004). If customers respond positively to the advertisements and marketing promotions of a brand via social media, their relationships with the corporate brand will be cultivated (Fournier, 1998). Therefore, a robust customer-brand relationship emerging from social media marketing will reinforce brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998). That is, when customers value frequent brand communications, they tend to exert greater loyalty (Merisavo & Raulas, 2004). Ibrahim et al. (2020) added that social media marketing activities are important for creating strong customer relationship and building brand loyalty. Accordingly, when a firm fosters greater interactions and communications with its customers, it is likely to establish profitable relationships with them, which may as a result lead to better brand loyalty.

Customers nowadays depend more than before on social media channels when making a purchase decision. Undoubtedly, the channels of social media have now become the main source for customers in searching for different products or services (Sharma, 2021) and among the most robust marketing instruments for fast food businesses. Based on the estimates for the year of 2020, the total number of foodservice operators worldwide was nearly 23.13 million. However, only about 300,000 of them are in the region of Middle East and Africa. The Department of Economic Development in UAE reported that the number of fast-food restaurants in the UAE as of 2018 reached 996. In the same year, fast food restaurants in UAE achieved the highest sales value at nearly US\$ 3.6 billion. The

restaurants are expected to attain a sales value of almost 4.5 billion U.S. dollars in the year of 2022. These facts show the importance of fast food industry in contributing to the economic growth of the country.

Moreover, social media channels have been viewed as important sources for conducting marketing research and promoting a firm's products or services. For these reasons, firms have spared much time, financial resources, and other assets for promoting themselves on social media and influencing consumer behaviour. However, despite the importance of social media marketing in influencing consumer behavior, empirical researches that tested its effect on brand loyalty, particularly, in the fast food industry setting are limited (Šerić & Praničević, 2018). In other words, it is rare to find an empirical study about social media marketing features and brand loyalty in the fast food industry in Middle East region. Therefore, this research aims to examine and verify the key features of social media marketing that could affect brand loyalty. This study also focuses on making a contribution to the existing research on social media marketing features and brand loyalty by bringing new insights from the fast food industry in United Arab Emirates. The following sections presents the literature review for this study, then the methodology, results and discussion are presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand loyalty is one of the foremost researched topics in the marketing field. It was described in the earlier literature as the positive feelings of customers about a particular brand, and their willingness to repeatedly buy its offerings on the long term (Fullerton 2003; Gil et al., 2007). Yoo and Donthu (2001) specified that brand loyalty exist when a customer considers a certain brand as his or her primary choice over other competing ones. Two approaches were proposed for conceptualizing brand loyalty; behavioral loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and attitudinal loyalty (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2002). The behavioral loyalty of consumers towards a brand tends to be reflected through repurchase behavior, whereas attitudinal loyalty can be measured through the predisposition of customers towards a brand based on psychological processes that is depicted through brand

preference and positive perception (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2002).

Social media marketing represents an important marketing communication platform that exerts a significant influence on brand performance (Chetioui et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022) and customer loyalty. Prior researches have explored the determinants and outcomes of brand loyalty in the online settings (Tatar & Eren-Erdogmus, 2016; Zheng et al., 2015). Undoubtedly, the factors that affect brand loyalty in the online context differ from those in the traditional environment. Therefore, brands are required to pay attention to various factors allied with the online setting, for instance interactivity, convenience, customization, and perceived relevance (Alalwan, 2018). Empirical studies in the literature have confirmed the positive impact of social media marketing features on brand loyalty (Ibrahim, 2021; Ismail, 2017; Jibril et al., 2019). Such online activities are the brand stimuli which affect the experiences of consumers and strengthen their relationship with the service providers, which as a result improve their behavioral responses that can be represented by loyalty and satisfaction (Laroche et al., 2012). Salem and Salem (2021) also confirmed that social media marketing features have a positive impact on brand loyalty.

In general, social media has a substantial role in influencing buyer's behaviours, necessitating brands to alter the strategies of their marketing communication through allotting additional resources to new media and minimizing those of traditional marketing programs (Chetioui et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, marketing via social media has emerged nowadays as the foremost significant approach for reaching larger number of customers at minimal cost. Because of its interactive nature, firms can easily establish robust relationships with customers and influence their loyalty towards the brand (Valos et al., 2016). Due to the growth of internet, smart phones and online applications, brands benefit from social media to create lasting relationships with customers via collaborative interaction on different social media channels, for instance, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. In view of that, brands tend to promote themselves on

their own social media pages, interact with their current and prospective customers in order to develop robust and favourable brand associations and maintain their customers on the long term (Seo & Park, 2018).

Past studies used different social media marketing elements to measure their impact on consumer behavior (AlShawabkeh et al., 2021; McClure & Seock, 2020; Wang et al., 2019). This study focuses on for main elements or activities of social media marketing to test their effects on brand loyalty. These include interactivity, perceived relevance, informativeness, and entertainment.

Interactivity is an important social media marketing activity that obtained noteworthy emphasis from both business practitioners and marketing scholars. Interactivity refers to "the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized" (Liu & Shrum 2002, p. 54). In other words, interactivity exists through a two-way communication amongst firms and their clients, as well as among the clients themselves (Hoffman & Novak 1996). It was also defined by Jensen (1998) as a two-way communication about a firm and its customers. Several studies provided empirical support for the role of social media interactions in increasing the attentions of customer toward diverse technologies. As reported by Lee (2005), interactivity had a significant effect on the willingness of customer's towards the using Mobile commerce. Similarly, Jun and Yi (2020) found a positive relationship amongst social media interactivity and customers' brand loyalty. Further support was seen in the study of Han et al., (2019) who concluded that a website's interactivity indirectly affects brand loyalty. On whole, social media channels represent an effective medium for the reinforcement of a firm's interactions with its consumers, hence contributing to greater brand loyalty. Islam and Rahman (2017) also indicated that interactive posts of a brand that are shared on social media channels improve brand engagement and loyalty.

Furthermore, entertainment has been established as a key social media marketing activity. It exists when social media channels

are used by marketers to elicit a positive consumer's experience and develop fun through games, photographs, contests, and online videos (Cheung et al., 2019). Entertainment also occurs when firms create memorable experiences for customers on social media channels which can be perceived by them as fun and playful (Cheung et al., 2020). Therefore, entertaining advertising content tend to be used largely in developing social media marketing strategies for the purpose of increasing brand awareness and loyalty (Barger et al., 2016). Entertaining advertising content that is perceived as fun, thrilling, and cool has a positive impact on consumers' attitudes toward the brand, and increases their willingness to revisit the website of the brand in the future (Raney et al., 2003). Therefore, an entertaining post of a brand motivates consumer fans to participate in sharing the content and develop positive brand attitude. (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Manthiou et al., 2013). Yoshida et al. (2018) found that entertainment has a positive influence on consumer's attitudes towards the brand. Accordingly, entertainment on social media platforms can be established by marketers through offering exciting, funny, and interesting marketing materials to the target market (Gallaughner & Ransbotham, 2010). These activities shape consumers' experiences and inspire them to generate and share important marketing messages about the firm. Abbes et al. (2020) added that social media advertisements that are perceived as entertaining and have an element of fun influence brand loyalty.

Perceived relevance has also been regarded as a significant social media marketing feature. It was defined earlier by Zhu and Chang (2016, p. 443) as "the degree to which consumers perceive a personalized advertisement to be self-related or in some way instrumental in achieving their personal goals and values". Godey et al. (2016) conceptualized perceived relevance as the degree to which the firm's offerings are directed towards fulfilling consumers' own preferences. Through social media platforms, firms can customize their advertising messages and develop personal dialogue with individual consumers in order to enhance their responses towards the brand (Merrilees, 2016). Additionally, marketers are likely to develop customized brand messages and offerings in an attempt to deliver greater

value for targeted consumers and build brand loyalty (Kim & Ko, 2012). Schulze et al. (2015) stated that consumers have a tendency to search for relevant brand information on social media channels. In fact, when firms share customized information to match individuals' preferences, they are likely to obtain better brand evaluation and the consumers feel motivated to share such information with their peers on social networks (Cheung et al., 2021). Furthermore, when consumers have higher involvement with the interactive posts of brands, it is common for them to post their thoughts or feelings on their social media pages, thus leading to the formation of consumer-generated marketing (Cheung et al., 2021). Similarly, Ebrahim (2020) reported that customized messages which are relevant to consumers' interests and preferences play a key role in reinforcing brand loyalty.

Finally, informativeness has been considered as a social media marketing activity that received high attention in the literature. Informativeness refers to the ability of marketers to inform customers about available products or services, which will allow them to select from alternatives and make purchase decisions (Rotzoll and Haefner, 1990; Sharma et al., 2021a, 2021b). Kang et al. (2020) also defined informativeness as a brand's ability to provide target customers with sufficient information through different media channels to facilitate their buying decisions. Informativeness is associated with marketers' abilities in logically attracting and influencing consumers' responses towards a brand (Lee & Hong, 2016). Gao and Koufaris (2006) also verified the importance of informativeness in the electronic commerce in determining consumers' attitudes. These views are supported by Blanco et al. (2010) who revealed that informativeness positively affects the behaviours and perceptions of consumers. Lee and Hong (2016) added that informativeness and creative advertisements improve consumers' expressions. Therefore, it can be said that informativeness plays a key role in increasing consumers' loyalty and improving their relationships with the brand. In general, social media channels, for example, Instagram, and Twitter are used by many firms to increase consumer engagement and influence brand loyalty (Arli, 2017; Ngamkroekjoti,

2014). Consequently, these hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Interactivity has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

H2: Entertainment has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

H3: Perceived relevance has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

H4: Informativeness has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the visitors of fast food restaurants (students at higher education institutions) in United Arab Emirates were considered as the target population. This research followed the quantitative approach in which required data was gathered using an online survey over the period of June-August, 2021 from 258 customers of the fast food restaurants in the country.

Choosing an appropriate sampling technique is one of the major elements in the process of data collection. In this research, convenience sampling technique was employed for drawing a sample from the entire target population. This sampling methodology has been established as one of the foremost popular types of non-probability sampling through which the desired sample size can be easily obtained by researchers.

Convenience sampling method is simple and easy to administer, and for this reason, it has been the choice of preference for several researchers. Moreover, the variables of this research were measured via a set of items from past studies. For instance, brand loyalty was measured based on 4 items being adapted from Gil et al. (2007). Social media marketing activities were also measured through 19 items taken from Alalwan (2018) and Cheung et al. (2020) as follows: interactivity (4 items), entertainment (4 items), perceived relevance (6 items), and informativeness (5 items).

The respondents filled the section concerning measurement of variables in the survey based on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from the lowest rank of 1 (strongly disagree) to the highest rank of 5 (strongly agree). Overall, the descriptive statistics showed that 63.2 percent of the surveyed customers are males, whereas

females represented 36.8 percent of the entire response. The majority of the respondents are aged between 26 to 35 years.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Testing the common method bias is very essential before running the final analysis, and therefore, the Multicollinearity was checked before testing the hypotheses in order to ensure that the collected data does not have any significant problems. Multicollinearity can be calculated through different ways. However, in this study, the key focus was on the most widely accepted used measure, which is Variable Inflation Factors (VIF). On whole, the findings showed that the VIF's values did not surpass the threshold value of 5; consequently, the data is free from any multicollinearity problem (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The second step in the implementation of structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) model is to verify the validity and reliability of collected data via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Factor loadings were calculated through the measurement model to verify the validity of selected measurement items. Hair et al. (2010) stated that the acceptable value of factor loadings for every item should be in the range of 0.5 to 1. As displayed in Table 1 and Figure 1, three items were dropped from further analysis because they were registered at a factor loading value that is lower than the threshold of 0.5. To assess the reliability of measurement scales, the Cronbach's alpha values as well as composite reliability were calculated. According to Hair (2010), acceptable values of both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability should be 0.6 or above in order to achieve internal consistency among the items of each construct. The statistical analysis as shown in the below Table reveal that values exceeded 0.7. Thus, the measurement items of the constructs of this study are considered reliable. Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) was used to assess the convergent validity among the latent variables. The results indicated that AVE values for all constructs exceeded 0.5, and this confirms that convergent validity assumptions are fulfilled (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 1: CFA Analysis

Construct	Item	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Interactivity	INT1	0.744	0.693	0.811	0.518
	INT2	0.687			
	INT3	0.762			
	INT4	0.681			
Informativeness	INF1	0.893	0.836	0.901	0.752
	INF2	0.915			
	INF3	0.789			
Entertainment	EN1	0.871	0.617	0.789	0.558
	EN2	0.664			
	EN3	0.689			
Perceived Relevance	PR1	0.695	0.828	0.876	0.589
	PR2	0.616			
	PR3	0.863			
	PR4	0.827			
	PR5	0.809			
Brand Loyalty	BL1	0.907	0.877	0.916	0.732
	BL2	0.854			
	BL3	0.861			
	BL4	0.797			

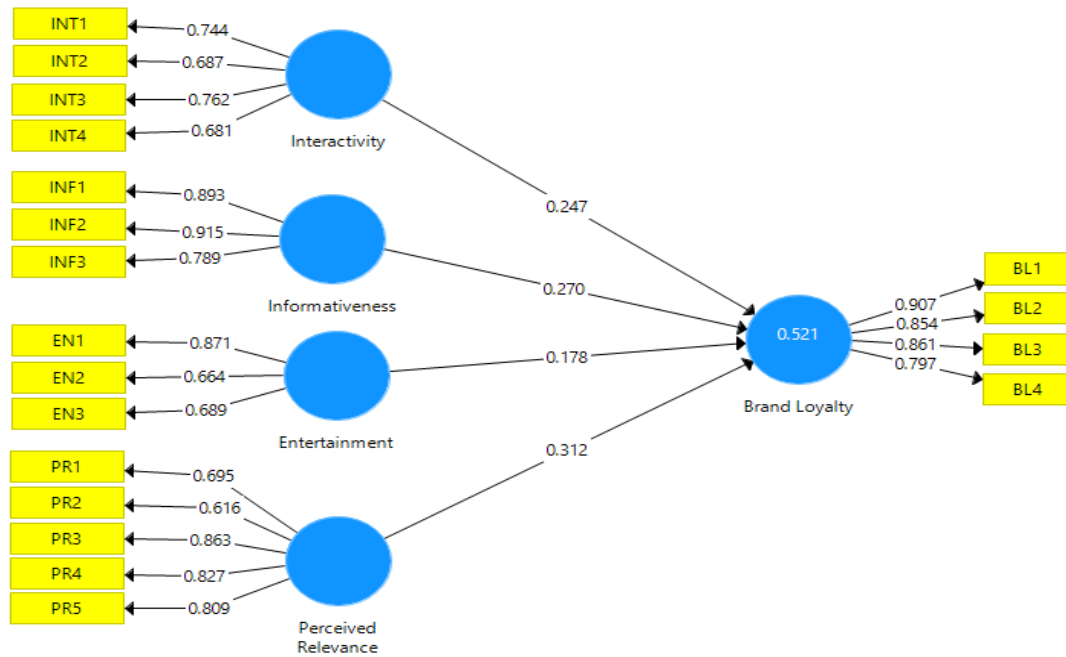


Figure 1: Measurement Model

To estimate discriminant validity assumptions, the procedure which was proposed earlier by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was adopted. In line with their suggestions, discriminant validity was evaluated through the comparison of the relationships between constructs and the square root (SQRT) of the

AVE for the selected constructs. As depicted in Table 2, the square root values of the AVE are more than the correlations between constructs in the same row and column, and this as a result demonstrates adequate discriminant validity.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

	Brand Loyalty	Entertainment	Informativeness	Interactivity	Perceived Relevance
Brand Loyalty	0.856				
Entertainment	0.515	0.747			
Informativeness	0.560	0.582	0.867		
Interactivity	0.402	0.205	0.158	0.720	
Perceived Relevance	0.574	0.412	0.473	0.246	0.768

Once the reliability and validity assumptions are met, the structural model for this study was estimated in order to check the proposed hypotheses. As presented in Table 3, hypothesis H1 concerning the effect of interactivity on brand loyalty was verified. The analysis indicated that interactivity has a positive effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.247$, t -value = 2.442, $p < 0.05$), thus, H1 is confirmed. It also shows that entertainment ($\beta = 0.178$, t -value = 1.123, $p < 0.05$) has an insignificant effect on brand loyalty, hence, H2 is rejected. The path from perceived relevance to brand loyalty also showed a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.312$, t -value = 2.998, $p < 0.05$), providing support for H3. Finally, the results confirmed the fourth hypothesis which suggested that informativeness has a positive impact on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.270$, t -value = 2.281, $p < 0.05$). These social media marketing activities explain 52.1 percent of variance in brand loyalty.

targeted consumers to be engaged in information dissemination, thus resulting in greater degrees of enthusiasm among consumers (Vivek et al., 2012). The finding suggests that fast food brands can increase their emphasis on sharing interactive content with their customers by providing different opportunities for them to participate on their social media pages. For instance, encouraging the feedback and sharing of brand advertisements can be useful for influence brand loyalty.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the effect of entertainment on brand loyalty is insignificant. The insignificant effect could be attributed to the perceptions of consumers towards the online content of selected fast food brands. The respondents could also be interested in the actual purchase value and information communicated by the brands about product or service offerings rather than

Table 3: Results of Hypotheses

Hypothesis			Beta	Std. Dev.	LLCI	ULCI	t-value	P-Value
Interactivity	→	Brand Loyalty	0.247	0.101	0.060	0.378	2.442	0.015
Entertainment	→	Brand Loyalty	0.178	0.159	-0.011	0.495	1.123	0.262
Perceived Relevance	→	Brand Loyalty	0.312	0.104	0.112	0.557	2.988	0.003
Informativeness	→	Brand Loyalty	0.270	0.118	0.056	0.392	2.281	0.023

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary aim of the current study was to test and verify the roles of social media marketing features (entertainment, interaction, informativeness, and perceived relevance) on brand loyalty. The results showed that interactivity has a positive effect on brand loyalty, and this was supported by prior research which outlined that interactivity (Sohail et al., 2020) was positively associated with brand loyalty. Cheung et al. (2021) stated that using interactive features on a brand's social-media channel provide a motivation for

other irrelevant content. Another possible justification for this result could be due to the fact that most of the fast food brands communicate with customers on social media either about sales promotions or new product offerings. Thus, marketing practitioners should understand customers' views towards the social media sites of their brands and conduct marketing research frequently using both qualitative and quantitative methods to accurately learn about consumers' perceptions and interests. Furthermore, the

insignificant result calls for additional future researches to verify it.

The outcomes also revealed that perceived relevance has a positive effect on the brand loyalty. Additional support was seen in the study of Yee et al., (2021) who demonstrated that perceived relevance in the advertising messages on social media have positive impact on brand loyalty. Lacey et al., (2007) also indicated that customization or perceived relevance is vital for brands as it improves the overall commitment of customers. Hewett et al., (2016) added that personalized social media marketing messages that focus on replying to individual customers tend to have greater effectiveness as compared to mass-directed social media marketing. Finally, the results confirmed that informativeness of social media marketing has a positive effect on brand loyalty. The result matches prior studies which showed that informative advertising messages represent an important approach for enhancing consumer brand loyalty. Alalwan (2018) also supported the positive effect of informativeness on the reactions of consumers toward social media marketing programs. Consequently, fast food brands should design timely as well as personalized advertising messages and promote them through social media and internet channels in order to engage consumers and influence their brand loyalty.

Theoretical Implications

This study attempts to contribute to the current literature on social media marketing and brand loyalty and has its distinct theoretical implications. Initially, a unique model which comprises four features of social media marketing was developed to verify their impacts on brand loyalty. By looking at the extant literature, it can be noticed that these dimensions were used separately in different studies. This paper measures their impact on brand loyalty collectively and aimed to bring new insights from Middle East region as the earlier studies on this particular topic are scarce. It is believed that customers may form different perceptions towards fast brands based on cultural, economic and other social factors. Additionally, even though our model was examined in the social media marketing perspective, it is evident that it might be applied in different contexts too. Finally, this study confirms the importance of

selected marketing features and verifies their impact on brand loyalty. It provides additional support for those of previous studies which reported similar outcomes by bringing new insights from the fast food industry in Middle East region.

Managerial Implications

The findings provide noteworthy implications for marketing practitioners in the fast food industry. They reveal that social media marketing strategies should be adopted by marketing professionals in fast food brands in UAE market. Particularly, the findings confirm the importance of utilizing social media content that is interactive and informative in strengthening consumers' loyalty towards fast food brands. Perceived relevance was also found as a key determinant of brand loyalty. Therefore, social media marketing managers should focus on posting interactive advertising messages, which contain a mixture of photographs, animations, and videos that are likely to be perceived by customers as interactive and relevant. Such posts may stimulate their loyalty towards the fast food brands. Furthermore, social media account managers may consider offering mini-games about their fast food brands on Facebook and Instagram besides encouraging customers to read and constantly check brand-related information in an attempt to strengthen their brand attachment. It is also suggested that marketers should develop interactive advertising content, for instance contests, discussions regarding price deals and value proposition in order to simplify consumer and brand interactions on social media pages. Through such interactive content, consumers' may become highly attached towards the fast food brands, recommend them to others, and have less tendency to switch to other rivals.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Certain limitations exist in this paper that can be taken into consideration in future researches. First, a quantitative approach was adopted in this study for collecting consumer data from United Arab Emirates, and this may inhibit the generalizability of the results. To overcome this limitation, future studies can rely on or consider longitudinal design and collect data for the selected variables from consumers across diverse cultures. Second, the

scope of this research is limited to fast food industry context; consequently, future studies can focus on other industry contexts to confirm the findings. Furthermore, a convenience sampling method was adopted during data collection process, and for this reason, future studies can use random sampling techniques to increase the generalizability of the findings. Finally, only four components of social media marketing activities were tested to determine their impacts on brand loyalty. Consequently, upcoming studies can examine other elements, for instance, trendiness and electronic word of mouth.

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