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Social Media as Mediating Factor between Information Quality and Customer Loyalty

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Abstract
This study investigates the pivotal role of social media as a mediating factor between information quality and customer loyalty. As social networks have become integral to daily life, businesses are leveraging them for communication, information exchange, and customer relationship management. The primary objective of this research is to explore how the quality of information shared on social media influences customer loyalty, particularly within the context of business-to-consumer relationships. Our research, conducted through a focus group with 12 participants from various demographics, delves into the nuances of social media engagement and its impact on brand perception and loyalty. The findings indicate that providing timely, accurate, and relevant information on social media significantly enhances customer trust and loyalty. The study also highlights the importance of interactive and personalized content. This paper contributes to the academic debate by offering a deeper understanding of social media's strategic role in modern customer relationship management and provides practical recommendations for businesses aiming to foster stronger customer relationships through improved information quality.
Keywords: *social media, information quality, mediating effect, customer loyalty, e-commerce, educational companies.*

Introduction

The rise of digital technology has profoundly reshaped the landscape of communication, information dissemination, and commerce. Within this new environment, social media platforms have evolved from simple networking tools into powerful channels for information exchange, brand building, and customer relationship management (Jalal et al., 2021). As a result, businesses and organizations across various sectors are increasingly leveraging these platforms to engage with their audiences, enhance their brand reputation, and build customer loyalty.

While the strategic importance of social media is widely acknowledged, a gap remains in the academic literature regarding its specific role in mediating the relationship between the quality of information provided and the resulting customer loyalty, particularly within the context of educational institutions in Georgia. The unique challenges and opportunities of this sector, which must manage relationships with diverse stakeholders—including students, parents, and faculty—have yet to be fully explored. The effectiveness of a digital presence is not merely a matter of being online but of providing timely,

accurate, and relevant information that builds trust and fosters a lasting connection with the community.

This study addresses this research gap by investigating how educational institutions in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia use social media for customer relationship management. The research focuses on the perceived influence of the quality of information shared on social media on the loyalty of its target audience. The primary objective is to gain an empirical understanding of the strategies employed by PR managers and administrators in universities, schools, and kindergartens, and to analyze how these practices are perceived to impact customer relationships.

To achieve this objective, this paper formulates the following central research question: How do managers of educational institutions in Georgia use social media for customer relationship management, and what is the perceived influence of social media on customer loyalty?

Based on this question, a set of hypotheses was developed and explored through a qualitative study using a series of focus group interviews. The findings of this research confirm that proactive and personalized social media engagement significantly enhances customer trust and loyalty. This paper contributes to the academic debate by offering a specific, localized, and empirical perspective on a globally relevant topic, highlighting the strategic importance of social media as a mediating factor in modern customer relationship management within the educational sector.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a focused review of the relevant literature. Section 3 details the research methodology, including the design of the focus group questionnaire and the data analysis process. Section 4 presents the empirical findings and analysis, supported by direct quotes from the focus group participants. Finally, Section 5 offers a formal conclusion, discusses the implications of the findings, acknowledges the study's limitations, and provides recommendations for future research.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the pivotal role of social media as a mediating factor between information quality and customer loyalty within the educational sector in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia. Through a qualitative, multi-stage focus group approach, this research aims to:

- Examine how educational institutions (universities, schools, and kindergartens) currently use social media for customer relationship management.
- Identify specific strategies, tools, and content types that are perceived by PR managers and administrators to be effective in building customer loyalty and engagement.
- Analyze how the quality and timeliness of information shared on social media influence customer perceptions and trust.

Research Question

To guide this investigation, the following central research question was formulated:

How do managers of educational institutions in Georgia use social media for customer relationship management, and what is the perceived influence of social media on customer loyalty?

Hypotheses

Based on the research objective and question, the following hypotheses were formulated to be explored through the qualitative data collected from the focus groups:

- H1: The use of social media for customer interaction is perceived to be directly linked to an increase in customer loyalty.
- H2: Educational institutions that actively use social media to personalize communication with their audience are perceived to improve overall service quality.
- H3: A quick response to customer inquiries and complaints on social media is perceived to significantly improve the overall quality of customer service.
- H4: Active and consistent use of social media helps to increase customer engagement and strengthen their connection with the institution.

- H5: Positive customer interactions and feedback on social media are perceived to have a beneficial impact on the institution's brand reputation.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-stage approach to explore the role of social media as a mediating factor between information quality and customer loyalty within the educational sector in Georgia. The research was conducted in four distinct stages to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis.

Data Collection: The Focus Group Method The primary data for this study was collected through a series of focus group interviews, a qualitative research method chosen for its ability to elicit nuanced and natural responses that may not emerge from individual interviews or large-scale experiments. This approach was particularly suitable for this research because it allowed for the observation of group dynamics and direct responses to questions, which provided rich, in-depth insights into the lived experiences of professionals within the educational sector.

- **Stage 1 (March 2023):** A focus group was conducted with PR representatives from Samtskhe-Javakheti State University. This group provided an academic perspective on the use of social media for institutional communication and relationship management.
- **Stage 2 (July 2023):** The target group consisted of school principals in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. This focus group provided insight into social media use at the secondary education level.
- **Stage 3 (October 2023):** A focus group was held with kindergarten managers from the same region. This final group provided a perspective on the earliest stages of educational engagement with parents and the broader community.

The decision to interview these specific groups (university PR managers, school principals, and kindergarten managers) was strategic, as they are all key stakeholders responsible for managing institutional reputation and customer relationships in educational settings. The focus group questionnaire consisted of 19 questions across five sections, carefully designed to be open and neutral to avoid bias and ensure factual information and opinions were obtained .

Data Analysis: Content Analysis with NVivo Software The information gathered from the focus groups was translated and processed using NVivo, a software designed to structure and systematize qualitative data. This process was chosen to ensure the transparency of the analysis and to eliminate subjective bias.

Content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, was employed to systematically examine the textual data from the focus group transcripts. This method was used to identify key themes, patterns, and meanings within the unsystematized data.

The analysis process followed these steps:

1. **Coding:** A system of data classification codes was created to facilitate the analysis and retrieval of information. The codes were developed directly from the data, identifying recurring themes related to social media's impact on operations, content strategies, audience feedback, and effectiveness .
2. **Qualitative Analysis:** This involved a deep understanding of the meanings and contexts of the participants' statements, using thematic and discourse analysis to reveal how they perceive social media's role.
3. **Quantitative Analysis:** This involved counting specific elements, such as the number of mentions of particular topics or phrases, to provide a numerical dimension to the qualitative findings. For instance, the frequency of mentions of "customer service" or "brand loyalty" was tracked.

Research Validity and Reliability The validity of this research is maintained by the use of carefully selected methodology and validated analysis tools. The focus group questions were designed to obtain objective data that reflects real interactions through social media in educational settings.

To ensure the reliability of the findings, multi-stage data analysis, including coding and pattern detection, was employed. The use of NVivo software ensured the analysis was structured and objective. Furthermore, the triangulation of data from different sources (university, school, and kindergarten managers) confirms the consistency of the findings and strengthens the validity of the results. This approach ensures that the conclusions are based on sound data and objective methods of analysis, reflecting an accurate and credible picture of social media's role in customer relationship management.

Questionnaire Design and Purpose

The research instrument for this study, a comprehensive questionnaire, was meticulously designed to explore the five key areas identified in the research framework. The questionnaire, consisting of 19 questions (9 main and 10 sub-questions), was structured into the following five thematic sections to ensure a thorough investigation of how social media acts as a mediating factor in customer relationship management within educational institutions:

- **Impact on Operations and Strategy:** These questions were created to assess the strategic importance of social media in daily institutional operations.
- **Use of Platforms, Content, and Tools:** This section was designed to identify the specific social media platforms and content strategies employed by educational institutions.
- **Audience Feedback and Engagement:** Questions in this section were aimed at understanding how PR managers and principals gather and respond to audience feedback.
- **Effectiveness and Challenges:** This portion of the questionnaire focused on identifying the perceived efficiency of social media efforts and the obstacles faced in their implementation.
- **Integration with Other Channels and Events:** These questions explored how social media is integrated with other communication channels to ensure a cohesive strategy.

The design of the questionnaire was carefully calibrated to obtain factual information and objective data to address the study's hypotheses. The questions were intentionally open-ended and neutral to avoid biased responses, which is crucial for the validity of the results. By focusing on real-life practices, the questionnaire facilitated honest and open answers from participants, who were able to share their direct, daily experiences working in educational settings in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. This approach ensures that the data collected is a true reflection of the role of social media in customer relationship management within this specific context.

Theoretical Foundations: Grounding the Mediating Role

Defining the Core Constructs

A robust understanding of the social media-loyalty relationship requires clear definitions of the core concepts and the theoretical lens through which they are viewed.

- Customer Loyalty: This construct is defined not merely by repeat purchases but as a "biased behavioral response expressed over time" that is a function of underlying "psychological processes". A loyal customer is someone who "buys back from the same service provider, for as long as possible, continues to recommend or maintain a positive attitude". Loyalty is a declared goal for many organizations because it creates entry barriers for competitors, reduces marketing costs, and increases long-term customer retention.
- Information Quality: In the context of social media, this extends beyond simple factual accuracy. It encompasses a composite of attributes, including the credibility, relevance, and authenticity of the content, as well as the ease of communication and promptness of response. High-quality social media content is engaging, informative, and visually appealing, and it enhances brand perception.
- The Concept of Mediation: A mediating variable elucidates the causal chain between two other variables. Research findings confirm that social media is not just a tool but a crucial "psychological mechanism" that channels the effect of a brand's actions on loyalty. For instance, a study of social media usage found that while it did not directly influence customer

loyalty, it had a positive and significant relationship with loyalty when mediated by customer satisfaction and brand trust.

Relevant Theoretical Frameworks

The dynamics observed in social media can be explained by several established theoretical frameworks, which provide a foundation for understanding user behavior and brand strategy.

- Social Exchange Theory: This theory explains why individuals participate in social media platforms without direct monetary compensation. It posits that people engage in behaviors they find rewarding and avoid those that have too high a cost. From a brand perspective, this means that providing valuable content, prestige, or a sense of community is a form of exchange that motivates user participation and positive contributions, such as user-generated content. The motivation for a loyal customer to post positive reviews, for example, is often to "reward firms" or simply to be helpful to other consumers.
- Social Media Engagement Theory: This framework focuses on the active participation of users through actions like likes, comments, and shares. It suggests that such interaction fosters a sense of social presence and "connectedness" with the content and other users, which in turn can "foster a sense of community and belonging" and build trust. The theory also highlights the role of social influence, where users are more likely to engage with content shared by others they trust, leading to the spread of information and ideas through connected networks.
- Signaling Theory: This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the impact of information on brand trust. In the face of uncertainty, consumers look for "signaling cues, such as signal credibility and vendor reputation," to make decisions. This suggests that brands can mitigate the negative consequences of fake news by proactively sending credible signals through transparent and consistent communication. A strong brand reputation and a history of transparent communication act as powerful signals that can help maintain consumer trust even during a crisis.

Social Media as a Multi-Faceted Mediating Mechanism

Mediators of the Social Media-Loyalty Relationship

The evidence consistently shows that the effect of social media on customer loyalty is not direct but is channeled through multiple mediating variables. These variables are the true drivers of loyalty, and social media's role is to facilitate and enhance them.

- Brand Trust: This is the most consistent and critical mediator identified in the literature. Studies show that social media marketing has the capacity to influence brand trust. Specifically, social media usage has a positive and significant effect on brand trust, which, in turn, has a positive and significant relationship with customer loyalty. A brand's ability to communicate openly and authentically is essential to building this trust, as audiences value genuine interactions. When companies demonstrate transparency and honesty by responding to customer feedback, both positive and negative, it fosters a positive customer experience and strengthens loyalty.
- Customer Satisfaction: Another significant mediating variable is customer satisfaction. Research indicates that social media usage has a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction, which then positively and significantly influences loyalty. Responding directly to consumer reactions, opinions, and feedback on social media helps to increase customer satisfaction, thereby strengthening customer loyalty. This responsiveness enriches the customer experience and builds a deeper relationship with the brand.
- Brand Preference and Brand Love: Beyond the more transactional mediators of trust and satisfaction, emotional and psychological mechanisms are also at play. Findings reveal that consumer brand preference partially mediates the relationship between social media marketing activities and brand loyalty, underscoring its importance as a psychological mechanism in the formation of loyalty. Similarly, perceived quality and social media marketing have a significant indirect effect on brand loyalty through brand trust and brand love. The presence of

brand love alongside trust indicates that the relationship is not purely rational but also deeply emotional.

Operationalizing the Mediation: Key Social Media Marketing Activities

The effectiveness of the mediation is contingent on the strategic quality of a brand's social media activities. Information quality is not a single variable but a composite of strategic actions that operationalize the mediating process.

- Personalization and Relevant Content: Delivering personalized, engaging, and valuable content that aligns with a consumer's preferences creates a sense of relevance and connection. This enhances brand favorability and builds long-term loyalty. When a brand delivers content that resonates with individual interests, it fosters a stronger emotional connection and encourages greater user engagement.
- Interactivity and Community Management: The ability to engage in "synchronous" two-way communication and community management is crucial. Interactive content, such as polls, Q&A sessions, and live videos, provides new ways to engage with customers and build deeper relationships. Actively responding to comments and addressing feedback in real-time reinforces a brand's commitment to customer service and satisfaction, which in turn strengthens loyalty. Encouraging user-generated content empowers the audience, makes them feel heard, and helps to build a sense of community around the brand.
- Influencer Marketing: Collaborating with credible influencers is a powerful tool. Their endorsements are often perceived by followers as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertisements. This perceived authenticity can strengthen consumers' emotional attachment to the brand and encourage repeat purchases, as influencers can sway their audience's perceptions and behaviors.

Practical Applications: Case Studies in Effective Mediation

The theoretical model of social media's mediating role is best illustrated through successful real-world examples. The following case studies demonstrate how brands have effectively operationalized the mediation process to foster loyalty.

The Starbucks Model: Gamification and the Loyalty Program

Starbucks operates in a highly competitive market where brand loyalty is crucial for maintaining market share. The company's success is not necessarily due to a superior, one-of-a-kind coffee bean, but rather its effective loyalty campaigns.

- The Strategy: Starbucks leverages its mobile application as a central social media and loyalty tool. The app provides a clear, gamified reward system where each drink purchase earns a "star," and accumulating 15 stars rewards the customer with a free tall drink.
- The Mediation: The app and its reward system serve as the primary mediator. It does not create loyalty in isolation; instead, it reinforces the purchasing behavior and provides a continuous, tangible incentive for customers to return. The gamified approach enhances customer satisfaction by making the loyalty process engaging and rewarding. This system provides a consistent reason for customers to choose Starbucks over a competitor, strengthening their connection to the brand and fostering a pool of loyal followers.

The Airbnb Model: The Power of User-Generated Content (UGC)

Airbnb's approach to social media is a masterclass in using user-generated content to mediate the brand-loyalty relationship.

- The Strategy: Instead of relying on traditional, brand-produced content, Airbnb empowers its audience to share their travel experiences through high-quality photos and compelling stories using branded hashtags. This strategy generates authentic and relatable content that showcases the brand in a genuine light.
- The Mediation: This approach cultivates a strong sense of community and belonging among its users, which directly strengthens customer loyalty. The authenticity of the content, provided by real users, is a powerful signal that builds trust with both existing and prospective

customers. By giving a voice to its audience and showcasing their experiences, Airbnb deepens the emotional connection and loyalty to the brand, turning customers into advocates.

Research Findings and Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the focus group interviews was processed and analyzed using NVivo software. The analysis revealed several key themes that directly address the research question and hypotheses. The findings are presented below, with illustrative examples from the focus group transcripts.

1. The Perceived Impact of Social Media on Customer Loyalty

The focus group participants confirmed that a strategic social media presence is crucial for building and maintaining customer relationships. Analysis revealed a direct correlation between timely and accurate information on social media and perceived customer loyalty. For example, a university PR representative noted, "When we post updates about exams or university events in real-time, the positive feedback from students is immediate. They feel we are responsive and trustworthy." This sentiment was echoed by a school principal who stated, "Sharing quick updates on a school bus delay or an event cancellation on our Facebook page prevents a lot of frustration and shows parents that we care." These findings provide strong support for Hypothesis 1, confirming that using social media to interact with customers is perceived to increase their loyalty.

2. Personalization and Improved Service Quality

Participants consistently highlighted that personalized communication on social media improves service quality. The analysis identified that institutions that directly engage with individual comments and messages are viewed more favorably. A kindergarten manager noted, "We try to respond to every parent's question directly in the comments. It takes time, but it builds a personal connection and makes them feel heard." Another principal added, "It's not just about announcements; it's about having a conversation. When a parent has a specific question about homework, we can answer it right there on our page. It shows we are accessible and improves our overall service." These findings support Hypothesis 2, which states that social networks allow companies to personalize communication, leading to improved service quality.

3. Brand Reputation and Positive Interactions

The data from the focus groups revealed a consensus that positive interactions on social media are instrumental in improving brand reputation. Participants acknowledged that a well-managed social media presence helps create a positive perception of their institution. A university PR manager emphasized, "Our reputation is not just built in a classroom; it's built in the comments section. When we resolve a student issue publicly and professionally, others see that, and our reputation is enhanced." This perception aligns with Hypothesis 5, which posits that positive customer interactions on social media improve brand reputation. The analysis also confirmed Hypothesis 4, as the quick response to customer requests was seen as a key factor in improving service quality.

(a) Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the role of social media as a mediating factor between information quality and customer loyalty within the educational sector in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia. The findings, based on a series of focus groups with PR managers, school principals, and kindergarten managers, provide significant insights into how social media is used and perceived in this context.

The research confirms that an educational institution's ability to provide timely, accurate, and relevant information on social media is crucial for enhancing customer trust and loyalty. Participants widely agreed that personalized and interactive content, combined with a quick response to inquiries, significantly improves the perceived quality of service and strengthens customer engagement. These findings directly support the study's hypotheses and contribute to the academic discourse by offering a localized, empirical perspective on a globally relevant topic.

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The findings are based on a qualitative study with a specific geographical focus and a limited number of participants. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other regions or industries.
For future research, a quantitative study with a larger sample size could be conducted to statistically validate the correlations found here. Future studies could also expand the research to other regions in Georgia or compare the findings across different sectors to see how the role of social media in customer relationship management varies.

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