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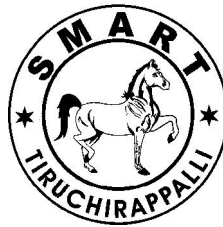
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THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING BASED BRAND COMMUNITIES AND BRAND LOVE, ON BRAND LOYALTY

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Abstract

Social networking-based brand communities are developed to provide a platform for those who want to connect with the brand and brand-related information. Now a days, companies understand the choices of customers and struggle hard to retain their loyal customers. The loyal customers play a very influential role in attracting the new customers and generating positive WoM. Positive communication strengthens brand love among its customers. The aim of this research is to check whether these social networking-based brand communities and brand love, have any effect on brand loyalty or not. This research was conducted using an online survey of Samsung Inc. face book community's members and 200 respondents from the District of Gujrat (Pakistan). The results of structure equation model show that brand communities, which are based on social networks, are positively attached with community makers, which means that they have positive effect (share ideas, take part in discussion, satisfied with the brand) and brand love, based on social media, also has positive effect (passionate attachment with brand) and both constructs ultimately contribute towards loyalty.

Keywords: *Social Networks, Brand Community, Brand Loyalty, Brand Love*

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I. Introduction

For the last many decades, the competition of building brand loyalty and maintaining it is a main topic for the researchers (i.e., Oliver, 1997; Chaudhuri and Halbrook, 2001; Bennett and Rundle-Thiele, 2002; Kotler, 2003). The brand loyalty is regarded in literature as the important dimension of customer for brand resonance affiliated with a brand (Keller, 2008). In the minds of customers, brand is exclusive and a positive thing to be purchased. If customers repurchase the brand and record positive association, then brand loyalty exists. Brand loyalty increases brand equity, which means, increase in marketing share, financial growth and worth of a company (Keller, 2008; Aaker, 1991, Kapferer, 1997; Jang et al. 2008).

Different factors have increased the challenge for marketers to manage brands and also increased their importance for consumers (Keller, 2008). Firstly, the increasing number of new products and services has changed the branding environment, due to which customers have problem in choosing out of these variety of brands. Secondly, now customers are savvy. They have more marketing knowledge and they are becoming more demanding. Finally, social network and new ways of advertisement enable marketers to search new and effective ways of promotion of their products.

Marketers now find new ways of marketing to maintain their brand loyalty. Due to increasing competition, they move on new channels for promoting their brand and creating brand love. Social networks and wide scope of social media marketing are the best place to call up customers and provide them different products. The aim of this research is to prove whether social media-based brand communities and brand love, generate brand loyalty or not. Basically, companies who develop brand communities, have better opportunity to create brand love for their products and when customers develop positive attitude towards any brand, then

they surely show positive behavior for the brand as they make their first choice to purchase that brand. Customers, who are loyal to the brand, are precious asset of a company. They motivate their fellows to buy that brand's product (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009).

Because of the increasing growth of social media and customers attention towards brand communities, our purpose of this research is to explore whether social networking-based brand communities and brand love, have positive impact on brand loyalty. Companies face tough competition and to retain its customer is a tough job. They provide a platform where all customers come and interact with each other. Our research explains that Samsung customers joined brand communities because they want to share their experiences and meet others to know their ideas. They have positive attachment with the brand, which greatly satisfied them and whenever they wanted to purchase any product, the first name is Samsung in their minds.

Samsung has strong brand image and its business is growing rapidly. These types of companies know how to build relationship with other companies and with their customers. The sales person meets the customers individually, tries to know their wants and needs and helps the development of products according to their needs. But now the company calls their customers on social networks and allows them to discuss their problems. Customers are more satisfied by giving their suggestions. They feel more protection on social networks. Brands give them opportunity to meet them directly without any third person.

Social media-based Face book, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, and others show how people communicate with each other and also with the brand they buy from. Social networks permit people to go and virtually meet others they would never meet or talk with before. It allows making them "friends" to finally communicate with them when they need brand information or suggestions or just entertainment.

These brand communities are highly profitable for companies if customers feel comfortable on these sites. Loyalty comes from satisfaction. Different researchers prove that brands work very hard for maintaining their position and image in the minds of customers. Customers know that they are kings of the market and they avail all opportunities and receive special offers from the company.

The remaining part of this research paper starts with a review of the theoretical background of basic constructs as social networks, brand community, brand love and brand loyalty. Further, on the basis of the reviewed literature, the conceptual framework and the hypotheses were developed. Next the hypotheses were tested and results were generated. Finally, the study concludes with the managerial implications.

II. Literature Review

The literature, related to the selected variables and their relationships between each other, was gathered and presented under the heading of each variable.

Social Networks

Now a days, majority of people around us spend a minimum of 3 to 4 hours, using social networks (Lang, 2010). The face book, the heart of social media, has more than 800 million users. Marketing strategies like advertising and promotion are revolutionized because of the unique and comfort aspects of social media (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Customers use social networks to purchase any product and use this social media, along with the life of the product and after the product. It affects the behavior of customer that starts with just acquiring information and ends with post purchase (Mangold & Faulds, 2011). Research on social media is now highly magnified as it discloses many facts and provides information of the customers regarding the brand.

Social media is defined as a combination of applications that are based on the internet and builds on the technological foundations of the web 2.0 and it allows users to exchange their view points in user-generated context (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media motivates customers to join brand communities. Brand community has knowledge about the customer like what type of customer he is and what are his needs and wants. Brand creates customer loyalty by maintaining their good performance level (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998). The marketing, through social media, is all about creating awareness for customers and therefore, it is different from the traditional marketing. Social media marketing requires more attention and planning for the achievement of building brand image and creation of customer loyalty (Gordhamer, 2009).

Wuyts et al., (2010) explained that when brand introduces its products on social media, it helps the marketers to further make experiments to promote their message on social media. Once the message is spread on a social website, there are high chances of attracting customers and building brand loyalty because the message conveyed over site spreads like a virus and every individual forwards the message to his friends. This type of conversation between the employees provides companies the best opportunities to use more cost effective ways to increase the brand awareness, brand recognition and the brand recall, and ultimately, increase the brand loyalty (Jin et al. 2009; Gunelius, 2011).

The different types of social media marketing are the best way to be more responsive to different customers. They make communication with their customers in a sincere way because they are trying to present what is the brand rather than creating image without any picture. The customer now a days, does not have time to visit physically and hence the social media marketers make their product

available and reachable in every channel such as Face book, Twitter, Blogs at any time. (Gordhamer, 2009).

Brand community

Brand communities perform important tasks on behalf of different brands. Furthermore, through brand communities, there is a lot of information sharing that maintains the history of the company and the past culture of the brand and that ultimately provides needed help to the brand customers. These types of brand communities provide assistance to social structure for developing customer and marketer relationships and that totally influence the customer loyalty. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Relationships, developed through brand communities among different community members, are very effective. Brand community creates a platform to brand customers to discuss their ideas, develop positive impression and share their points regarding brand. When people are connected on any site, they are like a family (Webster, 1992). We know that handling of direct relationships with the customers is not an easy job. The only solution to this problem is to develop brand communities. These communities are the easiest way to communicate with the customers. On behalf of any brand, its community executes many tasks. It supports information sharing, identifies the culture of the brand and predicts the history of the brand. When a brand shares all information to its customer through brand community, then customer is highly attached as the customer develops trust towards the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Kim, Chung & Lee, 2011).

Brand community is generally an association of customers with the brand. When they buy a product, they create a connection with that product's brand. But when they join a community on social media, they enhance their relationship with that brand as they discuss their

ideas, share information of brand and communicate with other community members. Brand community has positive effect on customer if he is satisfied with that brand. It leads towards brand loyalty. Brand loyalty exists when customer has emotional attachment with that brand. (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Many researchers conduct research on this topic to identify the dimensions and factors and develop this kind of communities (e.g., Granitz & Ward, 1996; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

As social media encourages users to create their own recognition, brand communities also attract their customers to avail the benefits of the brands. Brand community generates a unique identity of the customer to call up on community. Brand communities motivate their customers to join on a platform and build their own relationships. Brands such as Nokia, Samsung and Black berry deal with a lot of its customer through these communities. They believe that their customers are keen to know the latest information of the brand and avail the best offers. The message on brand communities spreads like a virus. One person gets the message and tells the other two and the chain continues to share information. Similar to the social network sites, communities attract new customers and provide them the best products to retain them. These customers become loyal customers when brand treats them as an individual. Consumers search in their own ways for the different signs and symbols to develop iconic relationship between customer and brand. Where there are a lot of benefits for the brand due to brand communities, customers also avail hundreds of benefits as it enables them to suggest new ideas and become a partner for the new product development. They also play a significant role in advertisement and promotion of the brand. Through brand communities, previous customers also can come back and support brand communities to develop more strategic ideas (Szmigin & Reppel, 2011).

Social media-based brand communities greatly promote the profits of a company. As customers join brand community on social media and attracted towards different new offers, they try to avail the offers and become the permanent customers of the company, increasing the brand loyalty in the process. Customer loyalty and brand loyalty are the same things to some extent and both are beneficial to brand. All products on brand are made for all customers, who may or may not be brand community members. But brand community members receive the information display on social networks earlier than others. It is advantage for brand community members to avail the benefits of discounts and special offers as early as possible. If a member is online and brand discloses some special information or gives discounts, then customer can avail the offer compared to those who did not have knowledge or who knew after the time was over. Social media-based brand communities are highly informative and share consciousness on social sites. In our society, people share strong observations through these brand communities and create value for brands through these sites.

Brand Love

When a satisfied customer has a positive emotional attachment towards a brand, then it is called love for that brand. When there is a word of love in the mind, the first thought is passionate emotional attachment. The brand love is all about satisfaction of the customer towards that brand. When a company introduces or promotes its product, there are a lot of questions in the mind of customer regarding that brand but if it fulfills the desires of the customer, the customer is satisfied. This finally leads to brand love (Ahuvia et al., 2005). The different elements in the brand love are positive attachment to the brand, positive evaluation of the brand and positive way to respond to the brand.

According to researchers, customers are less conscious and they speak frankly when

they admit that they use the word, love, for their own commercial products. Hence it is proved that different elements in the brand love do not fully support the brand love (Oliver, 1997; Shimp and Madden, 1988).

There are different constructs under brand love. Satisfaction and positive emotional attachment are the main elements. (Fournier and Mick, 1999). Here brand love is considered as the first step towards satisfaction. But it is believed that the brand love is not the same as the construct, satisfaction, in many key ways. First of all, satisfaction is naturally treated as our cognitive experience while brand love has stronger affective focus. Secondly, satisfaction is considered transaction-specific while love is the outcome of long-term relationship of a customer with the specific brand.

Finally, satisfaction, the construct of brand love, is different from brand love due to many reasons. Brand love is positive emotional attachment but satisfaction is differing from it. Furthermore, brand love demands declaration of love (i.e., "I am in love with that brand!") and requires a consumer's separate identity while satisfaction does not requires this identity.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is generated when a consumer responds positively towards a company's advertisements and promotions, specifically through social media. Then ultimately a relationship will begin between the consumer and the business. Meeting the requirements of the customer, results in consumer brand loyalty. There is a huge competition in the market and brand must correlate with customer needs in order to make the customers to choose their brand (Keller, 2008).

Brand is the most important factor for creating satisfaction. Innovative products are considered as more important than usual products for creating customer satisfaction. Brand loyalty

has a direct relation with customer satisfaction. Retention of customers is not necessary for proving loyalty of customers to brand. The behavior of customers while buying a product, shows their loyalty toward the brand. (Holt, 1995; Martisiute, Vilutyte & Grundey, 2010)

When customers receive accurate information from brand communities and brand treats its customer according to his demands, then customer is more loyal to its brand. Usually, brand loyalty is defined as the behavior of the customer for repeated purchases of a single product brand over and over again. The attitudinal aspect of the customer toward the specific brand is defined as the emotive affection with specific brand or product that customer wants to purchase repeatedly. Oliver (2010) states in his study that brand loyalty is an assurance to re purchase the specific brand or product in future. This definition explains brand loyalty in two aspects. The first one is the attitudinal aspect of brand loyalty which persuades consumer for re purchase of brand and second one is the customer's long term relationship toward a specific brand. The strength of this commitment with specific brand is also stated by Oliver, (2010) who defines that long term loyalty towards any specific brand requires customer willingness to repurchase specific brand consistently.

Brand loyalty is normally measured as the re-purchase of the specific product/brand over time. The measurement of brand loyalty is implemented in stores by tracking the customer behavior towards the specific brand. This approach is not enough to describe the brand loyalty. Oliver (1999) explains in his research that it is very difficult to measure the past behavior of the customer and therefore, repurchase behavior was taken as a component of brand loyalty. Trust on brand leads to brand loyalty. When a customer is satisfied from a brand, he wants to repurchase the brand and

share his experience with others. Majority of new customers are attracted to the brand because of that loyal customer. His emotions greatly affect brand to provide a consistent standard of product. A true loyal customer is a real asset to the company. Companies do make efforts to retain their loyal customers and provide them best opportunities. Customers on social networks are more knowledgeable and receive the information at the time of posting. Thus the information shared on social networks about the brand, highly supports the satisfaction of customers. If customers receive different offers from the brand, then how can they leave the brand and switch to somewhere. The conceptual model of the study is given in figure 1.

III. Statement of the Problem

This research was conducted to answer the question whether there was Effect of Social Networking-based Brand Communities and Brand Love on Brand Loyalty? The fundamental purpose behind this research work was to enhance the customer loyalty by mobilizing the involvement of social network-based brand communities and their brand love.

IV. Objectives of the study

The research was conducted to achieve the following objectives.

- The fundamental objective of the study was to evaluate the impact of both variables on the customer loyalty.
- To understand the analysis of data using the technique of Structural Equation Modeling.

V. Hypotheses

- H1: There is positive relationship between social networks and brand loyalty
- H2: There is positive relationship between brand communities and brand loyalty
- H3: There is positive relationship between brand love and brand loyalty.

VI. Methodology

Procedure

The quantitative research approach (through quantitative surveys) was selected for the study in order to develop richer understanding and better results of the research topic. It is better to try a methodology which is structured and well defined.

Operationalization of Variables

There are two main factors under this study. They are classified as dependent variable and independent variables. Independent variables were social networks, brand community and brand love and the dependent variable was brand loyalty.

The questions of the survey were designed to measure the brand loyalty of the target sample. Their thinking and response really mattered in the survey. Both variables were measured by obtaining the perception and engagement of the customers towards a brand. Likert Scale was employed, with 5 representing strongly agree to lowest 1, strongly disagree.

Measurement Models

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12 and Statistica 7 were used to compute and analyze the desired results.

Distribution of the Survey

This research was conducted on the Samsung users and Samsung Inc. brand community members. Half of the survey was through online responses and half of the survey was through students of Punjab College in Gujrat and Fawara Chowk College in Gujrat who use Samsung products and also members of Samsung brand community on the face book. Six hundred questionnaires were administered to Samsung brand community members' on face book, from which only 200 were returned. 400 questionnaires were sent to Punjab College in Gujrat and only 100 were returned. 300 questionnaires were sent to FJ College in Gujrat out of which only 100 recorded their response.

VII. Results

The Structural Equation Modeling, with Statistica 7, was used for testing the model and hypotheses, as shown in figure 1. The whole model fitness was assessed with the chi-square test, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990; Marsh, Balla, & Hau, 1996). The fitness of the model was indicated by non-significant chi-squared tests, RMSEA value being less than 0.08 and CFI values being greater than or equal to 0.90.

Two measures were used to check the internal consistency of the constructs. Cronbach's alpha was used for reliability which must be a minimum of 0.70 (Cronbach, 1970) and the average variance was used to estimate the amount of variance recorded by the constructs, a measure relative to random measurement error (Fornell and Larcker 1981). According to literature, an AVE must be greater 0.50 because it is proved that it supports the internal consistency of the data. In our research, all AVEs were greater than 0.5, as given in Table 1, which also shows descriptive statistics for all our constructs and their related relative measures which were also above 0.70.

Unidimensionality

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) evaluates the unidimensionality of the proposed scales. If Eigen Values are greater than 1, then factors are extracted. In our research, a total of four constructs were formed, based on their calculated Eigen values of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and they measured the sampling adequacy. According to the researchers, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity checks whether there is a high degree of correlation among all the variables. The test was significant ($p < .001$), as shown in Table 2. Table 2 indicates the value of the KMO, which was 0.699 and greater than the required minimum of 0.5. This indicates a good degree of correlation among the variables. Finally, the test reveals that

significant factor analysis and component analysis could be carried. The total variance explained by the four factors was 66.8%.

CFA Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was calculated to assess the confirmation of the fitness of variables. There were no poor factors which needed loading. All the variables were assumed to be highly correlated. It was also found that CFA model indicated good fit, including all latent variables. It was proposed that correlation among all variables was greater than zero, which was also significant at $\chi^2=478.0, p=.000, RSMEA=0.097, CFI=0.634, GFI=0.801, RMR=0.024$. It was observed that except the Chi square, which seems to be sensitive to sample size and shown as not a good indicator, all other remaining statistics show a highly good fit for the CFA model (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

Structural Model Estimation

As the model is fit for statistic, the χ^2 is 572.8 and degree of freedom is 276.00. Divide the χ^2 by df which is $\chi^2/df=2.076, p=0.000$. Normally the chi-square is said to be significant at $p<0.05$ but in cases of large sample, χ^2/df is less than 3. Our result at 2.076 was also significant. Moreover, the other statistics indicate that they are acceptable at $\chi^2=572.8, df=276.00, RMSEA=0.035, CFI=0.91, GFI=0.94, IFI=0.91$

Social networks have shown a significant effect on brand loyalty ($\beta=0.29, p<.01$), which supports the first hypothesis H1. Brand community has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty at $p<.05$ level, with $\beta=0.14$, respectively, which support H2. The effects of brand love on brand loyalty were hypothesized in H3. All hypotheses were supported at $p<0.05$ as ($\beta=0.33$).

This model was further tested for other relationships but found no new relationships which proved to be significant and the new model

fit cannot not be improved ($\chi^2=572.8, df=276, RMSEA=0.035, CFI=0.91, GFI=0.94, IFI=0.91$). This proves that brand loyalty fully supports the effects of the two constructs-brand community and brand love.

VIII. Discussion and implications

This study was based on the growing importance of brand communities and brand love based on social media. With the help of the literature on brand community and brand love, a model, given in figure one, was proposed to study the effects of brand community and brand love on brand loyalty through different means. The analysis of the data fully supported the proposed model and the hypotheses were developed on the basis of the proposed model. It was observed that brand communities and brand love, based on social media, increased the loyalty of customers. Furthermore, the model proved how brand loyalty could be increased through brand love and brand communities.

Our research contributes to the existing brand communities and brand love in different ways. It has theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, the study explains the broad concept of social networks in different ways and then moves to social networking-based brand communities. Furthermore, the research explores the concept of brand love and describes how brand communities and brand love could create brand loyalty that enhance the equity of any company. Companies develop many strategies to maintain their loyal customers and these communities are also part of such strategies. Customers come and join the community to meet other people and communicate with them and share a lot of information. These communities are platforms for all customers. Those who have positive attachment with the brand, are the real asset of the company. Brand treats them in a special way because they fall in love with the brand and whenever they purchase a product, they think only of Samsung.

IX. Conclusion

The study demonstrated the impact of social networking-based brand communities and brand love on brand loyalty. The social media is growing rapidly and advertisement through social media is very effective for any brand. Social media-based brand communities provide a platform to brand customers to come and discuss their issues. Our research shows that most of the customers purchase a product because they have emotional attachment to the brand. Customers join brand communities to get updates from the brand. If they receive accurate information and passionate emotional attachment to the brand, then ultimately it leads to brand loyalty. Our results acknowledge the wide scope of brand community. This study was in line with the research of most of the researchers such as Ba (2001); McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001); Algesheimer, and Dholakia (2005); Anderson (2005); Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002, 20006); Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry (2003); Carroll, & Ahuvia (2006); Hu & Kettinger (2008); Kozinets et al., (2010) who suggested that brand communities, which are based on social media, enable the company to increase brand love, trust, brand loyalty and create emotional feelings among all the members. Opportunities on brand communities could be exploited by marketers and develop most appropriate strategies.

X. Limitations and scope for future research

The research has few limitations because results were based on the responses from a small number of respondents. As the data were collected from the students of a college, the variations resulting from other age groups may exhibit different results. The physical data were collected from a single locality. The data should be collected from a large number of population to enhance the research validity. The same variables may be tested for online communities of other brands. The gender may be treated as a variable to understand the

involvement of respondents in developing the brand loyalty for a particular brand.

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APPENDIX

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

| | | |
|--|--------------------|---------|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. | | .699 |
| Bartlett' s Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 2.816E3 |
| | Df | 276 |
| | Sig. | .000 |

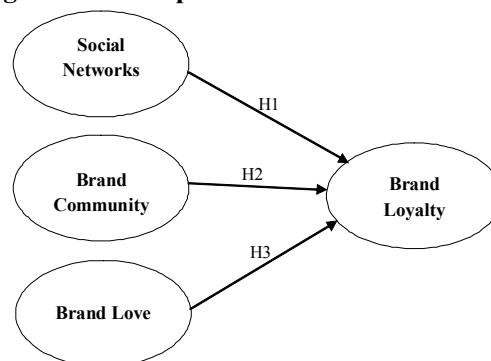
(Source: Output of data analysis using SPSS)

Table 3: No. of items under each construct their Means, standard deviations and reliability statistics

| Construct | No. of Items | Mean | Standard Deviation | Cronbach's A |
|-----------------|--------------|-------|--------------------|--------------|
| Social Network | 7 | 15.24 | 4.96 | 0.78 |
| Brand Community | 6 | 7.12 | 2.96 | 0.72 |
| Brand Love | 7 | 4.23 | 2.12 | 0.75 |
| Brand Loyalty | 4 | 6.74 | 2.89 | 0.81 |

(Source: Output of data analysis using SPSS and Statistica)

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



(Source: Mangold & Faulds, 2011; Kietzmann et al. 2011; Ahuvia et al., 2005; Laroche, et al., 2013)

Table 1: Summary of Measures

| Social Networks |
|---|
| S1: I frequently use Social Networking tools (face book, twitter, LinkedIn etc). |
| S2: I spend 2 to 4 hours daily on social networks. |
| S3: I get attracted towards advertisement on social networks. |
| S4: I often purchase products due to advertisement on social networks. |
| S5: Now social networks are used officially by different brands. |
| S6: I have joined many brand communities on social networks. |
| S7: I do trust upon information obtained via social networks |
| Brand Community |
| BC1: I have joined Samsung Inc. brand community so that I could get updates for the brand. |
| BC2: I participate in discussions of Samsung brand community by commenting on updates. |
| BC3: I am a member of Samsung brand community because I like the brand. |
| BC4: Discussion and comments on community help me in the buying decision. |
| BC5: I want to share my ideas with other Samsung community members. |
| BC6: I like to watch advertisement content of brand on community in leisure time |
| Brand Love |
| BL1: Samsung is a wonderful brand. |
| BL2: Samsung brand makes me feel good. |
| BL3: Samsung brand is totally awesome. |
| BL4: I love all features of Samsung brand. |
| BL5: This brand is a pure delight. |
| BL6: I am passionate about this brand. |
| BL7: I'm very attached to this brand. |
| Brand Loyalty |
| BY1: For electronic devices Samsung is the only brand that I will buy. |
| BY2: If any store is out of Samsung brand products, I'll go to another store. |
| BY3: When I go for shopping, Samsung is the only brand I notice, among other competing brands. |
| BY4: Next time I will definitely buy the Samsung brand products. |

Source : Compiled by the authors