

# **EFFECT OF GENERATION Y ENGAGEMENT WITH FACEBOOK BRAND PAGES ON ONLINE SALES IN SRI LANKAN CONTEXT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the development of new technologies competition within industries are rising and marketers are finding new ways to persuade customers to spend money on their brands. As social network sites have become increasingly important in customers' lives, this new trend has made business to realize that if they wish to reach their prospects and customers, their online presence in social network sites is a foundation of their overall marketing strategy. Brand pages on social network sites have become the key platform where customers interact with brands and therefore, the key objective of this study is to examine how the customer engagement with Facebook brand pages effect on online sales of a business. Further, the study investigates what is the mediation effect of brand awareness on the relationship between customer engagement and online sales. Study proposed a research model that examines in what manner the three levels of customer engagement (consumption, contribution and creation) can contribute to the online sales of a brand and how the brand awareness mediate this relationship, empirically testing the model using 195 respondents. Structural equation modeling technique was used for the data analysis and the results confirmed that consumption level engagement has a direct effect on online sales, consumption and creation levels have direct effect on brand awareness and no mediation effect was found in the study.

**Keywords:** *brand awareness, brand pages, customer engagement, generation y, online sales*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social network sites such as Facebook, We Chat, LinkedIn, Twitter etc. have become more important in customers' lives and the use of social network sites on regular basis help customers to contact with numerous numbers of brands and products by "Liking", "Commenting", "Sharing" and so forth. This new trend amid the customers has made business to understand that if they wish to grasp their prospects and customers, their online existence in social network sites is a foundation of their overall marketing strategy.

Apart social network sites from the online world is very difficult and for individuals or for business there is no escape from social network sites nowadays (Neti, 2011).

**Table 1: Growth of Internet Users in Sri Lanka**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>% Pen</b>	<b>GDP p.c.*</b>
2000	121,500	19,630,230	0.5	N/A
2007	428,000	19,796,874	2.2	US\$ 1,623
2008	771,700	21,128,773	3.7	US\$ 1,972
2009	1,163,500	21,324,791	5.5	US\$ 2,041
2010	1,776,200	21,513,990	8.3	US\$ 1,807
2016	6,087,164	22,235,000	27.4	US\$ 3,800

*\*Per Capita GDP in US Dollars, Source: International Monetary Fund*

**Source:** Internet World Stats Website

Social media channels are fast growing in Sri Lanka due to the significant growth of internet usage as shown in Table 1. Among those social network sites, Facebook has the highest number of users that is 3 – 3.5 million users which account nearly 16 per cent of the local population and 41 per cent of them are millennial (generation Y) who are age between 18 – 24 years and 25 - 34 years. Majority of the users (almost 2.8 million) are concentrated on the western province of the country (Digital Marketing Institute, 2016; Ishara, 2015). As the highest proportion of the total population is the generation Y category this study mainly focused on that.

Data explains that Facebook user engagement with brand pages are increasing day by day. In Sri Lanka, especially the generation Y people have been addicted to social network sites and among all social network sites Facebook on the top. People use Facebook daily for many reasons such as stay connected with friends, entertainment, get information about popular stars or brands, play games, share political views, etc.

There is a significance growth in Sri Lankan E-Commerce sector. Infrastructures are spreading around the country.

Not only to the urban areas but also to the rural areas which increase the number of people who use internet. Now people have more facilities to access the World Wide Web than before. As a result of this e-commerce sector is becoming more and more strong and developed.

### **Research Problem**

Companies who used traditional offline methods to sell their product or service to customers are now moving to online methods. They also invest in online marketing activities to attract more customers to the business. Additionally, companies try to stay connected with their customer through online services. So they gain advantages from both online and offline businesses nowadays.

According to Nithin Bawankule, Google India Director, the Sri Lanka comes to be one of the rapid developing online shopping markets in Asia region because country online sales are picking up very fast.

He further mentioned that customer sales per year in country were accounted at 300 billion rupees and 1 per cent of it was from online sales. They anticipate this value to be about 3 per cent in three years' time as there is a 100 per cent growth in Sri Lankan online market every year. (Bawankule, 2016)

Thus, it is clear that at the same time there is a growth of e-commerce as well as a growth of social network site usage especially Facebook in Sri Lanka. So the companies functioning in e-commerce sector has begun to use social network sites as another marketing tool. Popularity of Facebook has made the companies who presence in online business to create Facebook brand pages as a one method to stay connected with their audience in Sri Lanka.

With all these trends it is important to study whether the presence in Facebook really helps to a company or not. Identifying the Facebook user engagement with brand pages and the effect of this engagement on online sales will be beneficial for the relevant companies, because if there is no any advantage for a company by using social network sites there is no need to waste their time, money and efforts to be in such social network sites.

Hence, this research is trying to give some new insights to the scholars and marketers how the generation Y engagement with Facebook brand pages can effect on online sales in Sri Lankan context.

Although there are academic researches on customer engagement there is a lack of academic research on “how the customer engagement directly effects on online sales of the companies and how the brand awareness will mediate such relationship in Sri Lankan context. This study will fill this gap in literature and this will be a guide for future researchers on their studies.

### **Objectives of the study**

Before managers can more assuredly use social media marketing and branding it is essential for them to study and have knowledge about customers’ behaviors with brands on social network sites. Since understanding the market and the customer needs and wants is the first step of the marketing management process this research will be a guide for marketers.

From the final outcome of the study, companies who use Facebook brand pages to market their products can decide in what ways they can motivate their audience and what type of strategies can be used to be success in the online market.

As, the new trends mentioned above in Sri Lanka and research gaps found in literature this research has set out to study following objectives.

- to find the level of attractiveness of Sri Lankan customers towards Facebook brand pages.
- to find out whether the Facebook user interactions with brand pages has an effect on online sales of a company.
- to figure out the stimulus of Facebook user interaction with brand pages on brand awareness.
- to identify whether the brand awareness can mediate the relationship between customer engagement with Facebook brand pages and online sales.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Customer engagement is a very interesting concept which has been broadly examined in different disciplines by scholars such as Bowden (2009), Hollebeek (2011), Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan (2012). As consensus by Clader, Malthouse, & Schaedel (2009) and Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie (2014) for the success of a company's marketing and sales activities customer engagement is vital.

Recently, scholars have begun to pay their attention on online customer engagement. Many scholars such as Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek (2013), Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie (2014), Clader, Malthouse, & Schaedel (2009) and Tsai & Men (2013) have examined the customer engagement with related to social network sites and brand communities.

Most recent research done by Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski (2016) for measuring customer engagement with brands on social network sites provided three dimensions, namely consumption, contribution, and creation in their study. Through this scale business can identify customer level

of social media engagement with brands. Further the researcher mentioned that the scale proposed be able to use when examining dependent variables such as brand extension, purchase intension and price premium.

A study on Hong Kong students found that the main purpose to join fan pages was to receive discounts and promotions or to get updates on future products Cheung & Leung (2016).

Same result was obtained from another study “Why do customers follow or like travel brands in social media? For the discounts, alas” done in USA and results were clearly in favor of product-related reasons. Over half of respondents claimed, access to discounts and sales as a reason (May, 2012). Further, studies show that exposures to earned and owned social media activities for brands have significant and positive impacts on customers’ likelihood to purchase the brands and also their effects are surprisingly, suppressive on each other (Xie & Lee, 2015). Most importantly in the long run there is a considerable effect on sales of a company from Facebook advertisements. Especially, by gaining “Likes” for the advertisement on Facebook which means a customer’s click on “Like” it can affect strong long-term sales. Moreover, customer visit to a Facebook brand page has strong effect on company short-term sales (Brettel et al., 2015).

But another scholar mentioned that sales figures or intention to purchase a brand cannot be measured by “Likes”. It can be used to decide whether marketing activities such as advertisement or promotion are success or not. So he suggested that further studies need to be conducted to identify whether such activities liking, sharing, commenting and so forth have an effect on purchase intentions and real purchases (Parsons, Using social media to reach customers: a content analysis of official facebook pages, 2013).

A study conducted in Malaysia found that customer engagement, brand

exposure and e-WOM affect positively on brand awareness. Scholar stated that, among those three factors customer engagement has greater impact on brand awareness (Shojaee & Azman, 2013). According to Keller (2001) active engagement is one of the essential stages to build brand equity. Since brand awareness is one component of brand equity it was proposed that active customer engagement can influence on brand awareness.

It is probable to purchase brands which have high level of awareness and therefore it was proposed that brand awareness can mediate the relationship between customer engagement and online sales (Keller, 2001; Yasin et al., 2007).

Through the literature review author has identified that there can be an effect from customer engagement which will measure with three dimensions introduced by Schivinski et al., (2016) to increase the number of purchases by customers which will be the online sales and this relationship can be mediated by the brand awareness.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

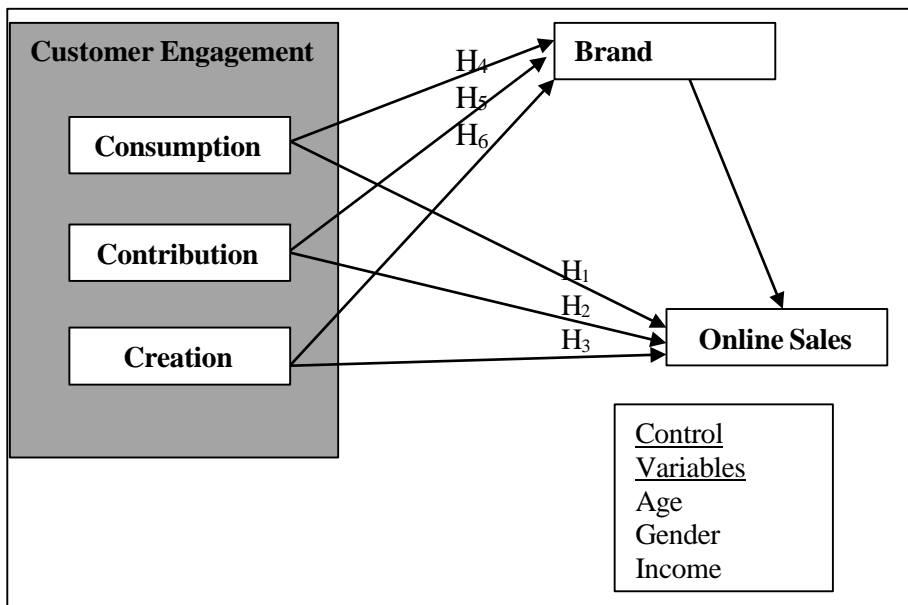


Figure 1: Research Model

### **Measures**

Measurement items for each level in customer engagement were adopted from Schivinski et al., (2016) and items for brand awareness were adopted from Yoo & Donthu (2001). A five-point likert scale was provided, from 1 – always, to 5 – not at all. For the last item that considered under brand awareness, reversed scoring was used when analyzing. Measurement item for online sales was adopted from Cheung, Shen, Lee, & Chan, (2015) which was one item scale.

### **Data Collecting and Testing Methods**

Research does not focus on one brand or one product category as it will decrease the external value of the study. Therefore, to reduce the effect from different brands, in the questionnaire respondents were asked to fill their answers based on their one favorite Facebook brand page. The questionnaire was designed in [www.esurveycrator.com](http://www.esurveycrator.com) in order to collect data online and link was sent out through Facebook to get response from the sample. Snowball sampling technique was used as the participants were asked to send the link for their friends who do online shopping. Researcher was able to collect 195 complete dataset for the study. Among them 52.8 per cent were male and 47.2 per cent were female. Also 41.5 per cent were age between 18-25 years and 58.5 per cent were age between 26-34 years.

SPSS 24.0 and AMOS 21.0 were used and the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique was used for hypothesis testing. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify a clean pattern matrix and to check adequacy, convergent validity, discriminant validity and reliability of each latent variable. Then Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted according to the result of EFA. Model fit, validity and reliability was checked for the



measurement model. After checking the multivariate assumptions structural model was built including all independent, dependent and control variables. Hypotheses were tested at this stage to identify direct effects and the mediation.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Exploratory Factor analysis

For EFA maximum likelihood factoring method was used as same method will be used in AMOS for CFA and structural model tests. For the final four-factor model several items were removed to get a clean pattern matrix and a good model.

From the EFA clean pattern matrix was found and the final model satisfied all adequacy, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability requirements.

### Measurement Model

From the model found in EFA, CFA was conducted in AMOS. To make the model better, measurement model was finalized with little modifications according to the modification indices. All standardized regression weights were greater than 0.7 and correlations were less than 0.8. Model fit for the final measurement model was as follows.

#### Model Fit

Measures of each Factor	=	
Chi-square	=	152.747
Degrees of freedom	=	93
Probability level	=	.000
CMIN/DF	=	1.642

Table 2: Reliability and Validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	BA	Creation	Contribution	Consumption
<b>BA</b>	0.904	0.702	0.387	<b>0.838</b>			
<b>Creation</b>	0.917	0.689	0.572	0.170	<b>0.830</b>		
<b>Contribution</b>	0.929	0.813	0.572	0.245	0.756	<b>0.902</b>	
<b>Consumption</b>	0.846	0.580	0.387	0.622	0.430	0.444	<b>0.762</b>

CFI	= 0.975
TLI	= 0.967
SRMR	= 0.0485
RMSEA	= 0.058
PCLOSE	= 0.217

From Table 2 it is clear that the AVE values are greater than 0.5 which is the evidence for convergent validity; MSV values are less than AVE and square root of AVE values are greater than inter-factor correlations which is the evidence for discriminant validity; and the CR values are greater than 0.7 which confirm the reliability.

To evaluate common method bias (CMB) issue Harman's single-factor analysis was used. From the EFA it was found that four factor model explains 70.995 per cent of the variance. Meanwhile, outcomes also suggested that total variance explained by the single factor is lower than 50 per cent, signifying that there is no CMB issue.

Since all the requirements were satisfied by the measurement model factor scores were imputed to use in structural model.

### **Structural Model**

Multivariate assumptions were checked under two areas outliers/influential and multicollinearity.

Cook's Distance was used for identifying outliers/influential and two records were removed from the total data set as they had abnormal values compared to the other records. VIF values were less than 3 and Tolerance values were greater than 0.1 which supported for no multicollinearity.

Satisfying these two conditions, it can be concluded that model meets the requirements of the multivariate assumptions

### Customer Engagement and Online Sales

**H1:** The consumption level of brand-related content on Facebook has direct effect on online sales

**H2:** The contribution level of brand-related content on Facebook has direct effect on online sales

**H3:** The creation level of brand-related content on Facebook has direct effect on online sales

Table 3: Results of the Effect of customer engagement on Online Sales (OS) Analysis

#### Model Fit

Chi-square	= 2.237
Degrees of freedom	= 2
Probability level	= 0.327
CMIN/DF	= 1.118
CFI	= 0.999
TLI	= 0.993
SRMR	= 0.0179
RMSEA	= 0.025
PCLOSE	= 0.484

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
OS <--- Consumption	.468	.127	3.700	***
OS <--- Contribution	-.126	.133	-.943	.346
OS <--- Creation	.139	.155	.894	.371
OS <--- Income	.090	.047	1.912	.056

Only the consumption level has significant direct effect while contribution and creation have no direct effect on online sales. So, considering the different dimensions of the customer engagement has given a deep view for the considered relationship in this study.

Consumption level is the first stage where the customer gets to know about the brand's sales promotions, new arrivals, competitions, and discounts etc. Consuming does not take any extra efforts like contribution and creation. Once a customer logs in to Facebook most recent posts from friends, brand pages, and social groups etc. are visible on the News Feed. Therefore, without

searching any information Facebook user can see brand contents on his News Feed when he scrolls up and down. He can see posts about sales promotions, new arrivals, competitions, and discounts, etc. which can affect his mind to buy the product.

The study reveals that Facebook users consume more than contribution and creating contents for brands. This means that, Facebook users are highly engaged in activities like reading posts, watching pictures or graphics, following brands, etc. rather than commenting on those posts or sharing those posts. So, high consumption of brand related content will give more and more information to customer and therefor high consumption will also affect customer to decide whether he needs to buy the product or not.

In a website article about online display advertising it was mentioned that combined search and display ad campaigns gets 22 per cent conversations than search only campaigns and therefore display advertising helps to increase sales of the company. When customer see an advertisement which means in related to current study when customer consume brand related content it can increase the sales of the company (Thiagarajan, 2015).

Moreover, a study conducted in UK with 364 respondents examined that for the purchase intention of a customer and for their purchasing behavior there is a slight effect from Facebook (Kodjamanis & Angelopoulos, 2013). Yang (2012) also stated that Facebook had a favorable influence on purchase intentions among 256 Taiwan respondents.

Parsons (2013) stated a completely different opinion that sales figures or intention to purchase a brand cannot be measured by “Likes”. It can be used to decide whether marketing activities such as advertisement or promotion are success or not. But Brettel, Reich, Gavilanes, & Flatten (2015) stated that most

importantly in the long run there is a considerable effect on sales of a company from Facebook advertisements. Especially, by gaining “Likes” for the advertisement on Facebook which means a customer’s click on “Like” it can affect strong long-term sales. Moreover, customer visit to a Facebook brand page has strong effect on company short-term sales.

***Customer Engagement and Brand Awareness (BA)***

**H4:** The consumption level of brand-related content on Facebook has direct effect on the brand awareness

**H5:** The contribution level of brand-related content on Facebook has direct effect on the brand awareness

**H6:** The creation level of brand-related content on Facebook has direct effect on the brand awareness

**Model Fit**

CE on BA Analysis

Chi-square = 1.306

Degrees of freedom = 1

Probability level

= 0.253

CMIN/DF = 1.306

CFI = 0.999

TLI = 0.987

SRMR

=0.0086

RMSEA = 0.040

PCLOSE = 0.360

Table 4: Results of the Effect of

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
BA <--- Consumption	.964	.069	14.041	***
BA <--- Contribution	.091	.072	1.266	.206
BA <--- Creation	-.301	.086	-3.498	***
BA <--- Gender	.162	.084	1.935	.053
BA <--- Age	.070	.084	.834	.404

The study results suggested that consumption level and creation level have a significant direct effect on brand awareness while contribution level has no significant direct effect. According to Keller (2001), active engagement is one of the essential stages to build brand awareness which is one dimension of brand equity in his study. So in depth view, current study suggests that only the consumption level and creation level have a direct effect on brand

awareness.

So, why contribution has no direct effect? It is easy to understand that if a customer comes to the contribution level it means that he or she already consumed the brand content.

For example, if a Facebook user sees a post on his News Feed about a new brand introduced by a company it is a consumption level engagement and it means now he is aware about the new brand. If he thinks new brand is useful for his friends he may share the post as a contribution level engagement, so that his friends will see the post too. Therefore, consumption affects that user to be aware of the new brand rather than contribution which is a direct effect that supports the research finding.

When considering the creation level engagement, the customer may come to this level when he or she starts using the brand and start liking or disliking the brand. Customers have ability to show their experience with the brand on Facebook whether it is good or bad by posting pictures, videos or writing reviews. Results suggest that this creation level of engagement has negative effect on brand awareness which is not even supported by the prior studies.

Most of the studies do not consider brand awareness as a one factor. It includes as a one component of brand equity in studies. So it come up with several factors like brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand image and brand association.

Total factors are considered as the brand equity in many studies. But due to the complexity of the model and time limitation only brand awareness factor was considered in this study. Not including such factors in the current model is a major drawback of the study and that may influence for the negative

results.

Another reason for getting negative relationship may be the drop of one item from the selected scale. Although there were five items adopted from literature one item was dropped when doing EFA to get a good model fit. Therefore, removal of one item may affect to the final outcome of the study.

***Mediation Effect of Brand Awareness***

H7: The direct effect of consumption level on online sales is mediated by brand awareness

H8: The direct effect of contribution level on online sales is mediated by brand awareness

H9: The direct effect of creation level on online sales is mediated by brand awareness

**Model Fit**

customer engagement	
Chi-square	= 3.504
Degrees of freedom	= 3
Probability level	
= 0.320	
CMIN/DF	= 1.168
CFI	= 0.996
TLI	= 0.991
SRMR	=0.0174
RMSEA	
= 0.030	
PCLOSE	= 0.514

Table 5: Results of the Effect of  
on brand awareness Analysis

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
BA <--- Consumption	.964	.069	14.041	***
OS <--- Consumption	.435	.178	2.447	.014
OS <--- BA	.035	.132	.264	.792

Through the empirical evidence, this study suggested testing the mediation effect of brand awareness on customer engagement – online sales relationship. Findings of this study proved that there is no such mediation effect to examine.

Tsai & Men (2013) found that remuneration was the primary reason for using brands' Facebook pages, as users often expected to gain some forms of economic incentives. Second most prominent reason was to seek information

about product/brand/company-related information. Apart from those reasons customers appreciated the entertainment value of a brand page as a place where they could escape their daily routines or relax, pass time, and experience aesthetic enjoyment.

Since, there are more reasons why customers engage in Facebook brand pages; those reasons may dominant on customer's behavior than the brand awareness when making a decision.

For example, if the customer motivation for consuming brand pages is pursuing economic incentive brand awareness may not influence on the customer. In such situation it can be assume that customer neglect the awareness of a brand and so that brand awareness may not act as a mediator.

Additionally, the hypotheses for this study were built depending on foreign literature as there is a lack of local studies. So it can be also assuming that above outcomes can be differ when considering developed countries and developing countries because of the different conditions in each country in terms of technology, economy, customer behaviors, etc.



## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

Findings for the four main research objectives can be concluded as follows:

Consumption level has direct influence on online sales. Finding gives interesting insight that “Liking”, commenting or sharing brand related content and posting brand related contents by customer himself does not directly affect the sales growth of the company.

Therefore, instead of trying to increase engagement with brand pages as a whole considering the levels of engagement and focus on those levels will be more beneficial to an organization.

Generation Y customers highly consume brand related content on Facebook than contributing or creating. It can be concluded that customer has lower level of activeness with Facebook brand pages because consume is the lowest activeness.

Consumption level has direct effect on brand awareness. When a Facebook user use his account it is possible to see posts about brands. It will make the user to be aware about the brand. But the finding suggested that creation level has negative effect on brand awareness which has no support from literature. Practically it seems impossible and the reason for this result may be dropping some factors effect on brand awareness.

According to the analysis results there is no mediation effect from brand awareness on the relationship between customer engagement and the online sales. Which means that when buying something online, Facebook user do not consider about the brand awareness. Internet offers customers to find more options that economically beneficial for them. So they may tend to rely on economic incentives rather than looking for brands they are aware of.

Because results also show that Facebook users do not spend money on expensive items. As the price they pay is very low they may not buy well-known products online. Rather, they may buy online to get discounts even from a brand page they don't know just to get the advantage of the purchasing.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

If managers can monitor the consumption level engagement of their customers and pay careful attention that this level of engagement maintains at a relatively high level, they can increase company sales.

There is an option that posts can be boost by paying. It is one option that can do to make company advertisements visible frequently. If the company has no enough budgets for such activity another option can be posting the same post again and again. So, these methods will help companies to increase the consumption of the posts by its audience.

Also companies can increase their sales by targeting highly consuming users as they tend to buy more.

It was found that only 10 per cent and 54 per cent of the models explains the online sales and brand awareness with respectively. This indicates that there should be more variables that have effect on online sales and brand awareness. If the managers can study and identify what are those missing factors they may take the full advantage of these findings.

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