Article

Social media marketing activities in the Indian airlines: Brand equity and electronic word of mouth

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Abstract
Through a thorough model that describes how positive electronic word of mouth spreads in online communities, this research article has made a noteworthy addition to social media marketing. The study proves that social media marketing activities operate as catalysts for brand equity, promoting brand loyalty and favourable online word of mouth. The study also examines the connection between electronic word of mouth and brand loyalty. The study thus theoretically supports the "stimulus organism response" model and emphasizes the significance of brand loyalty in fostering positive electronic word of mouth. This cross-sectional study investigates the relationship between independent and dependent elements mentioned in the research framework. Between March 1 and March 15, 2023, a survey of Indians who had taken a flight was done, and the data were used to conduct an empirical inquiry. Convenience sampling was used to study three international airports in Northern India. Finally, regression analysis using structural equation modelling was conducted to examine the relationship and impact between the study's constituent parts. The outcomes of the path analysis support every one of the research hypotheses. The results show how an airline brand's social media marketing activities influence several brand equity components and other outcomes, which have numerous theoretical and practical ramifications.

Keywords
Social media, social media marketing, brand equity, electronic word of mouth, airlines

Introduction

Indian tourism has drastically evolved over the years, spending billions of dollars on domestic and international trips, pushing the tourism industry on fast-track growth. With more than 500 million active internet users, Indian tourists extensively rely on digital channels to research for their vacations (Dasgupta et al., 2019). Mainly, social media has emerged as an essential channel for travel inspiration, planning, and reservations for tourists, in addition to serving as a cost-efficient and focused marketing platform for businesses in the tourism sector (Al-Debei et al., 2015). Moreover, social media can be exploited by tourism enterprises to augment their brand awareness

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(Beig and Khan, 2018; Kalra et al., 2023), brand engagement (Pongpaew et al., 2017), brand loyalty (Beig and Khan, 2022; Wang et al., 2021) and purchase intentions (Hu and Zhu, 2022) by producing captivating material, extending personalized encounters, and reacting immediately to customer inquiries and feedback (Beig and Khan, 2018; Lim & Rasul, 2022).

In the contemporary digital era, social media marketing endeavors have gained substantial significance in businesses seeking to establish and perpetuate consumer-based brand equity (Beig and Khan, 2018; Beig and Khan, 2022; Md. ; Godey et al., 2016; Hafez, 2022a, 2022b; Koay et al., 2020; Zollo et al., 2020). Previous research shows that there is a positive association between social media marketing activities and various components of consumer-based brand equity like brand awareness (Malarvizhi et al., 2022; Seo and Park, 2018), brand association (Morra et al., 2017) and brand loyalty (Ibrahim, 2022). Despite some attempts to explore the impact of social media on perceived quality, which has yielded mixed and inconclusive results, there exists a relative paucity of empirical research investigating how social media marketing activities influence the perceived quality of consumers (Fotis et al., 2012; Morra et al., 2017; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015). Thus, one of the primary objectives of this research is to thoroughly examine the impact of social media marketing activities on the three essential components of customer-based brand equity (brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality. Given that the theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory, it is contended that the triad of consumer-based brand equity components (brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality) are the direct result of the impact of social media marketing activities on consumers, ultimately shaping their brand loyalty (Malarvizhi et al., 2022) and electronic word-of-mouth tendencies (Seo and Park, 2018). However, some studies showed that the effect of perceived quality on brand loyalty was insignificant, making it essential for researchers to study its impact (Bravo Gil et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the prospect of negative electronic word of mouth continues to present a significant obstacle for organizations (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Consumers generate content or electronic word-of-mouth on virtual platforms in response to social media marketing activities that expound upon their past experiences with brands (Bahtar and Muda, 2016). The vast reach and influence of electronic word of mouth, which exceeds that of traditional word of mouth, poses a challenge for marketers in managing the feedback and opinions shared by consumers on social media, as the platform allows users to express and distribute their experiences with a brand amongst their social community (Hudson et al., 2015). The profusion of user-generated content has spurred academic scholars to acknowledge the importance of electronic word of mouth in influencing consumer behaviour (Chung et al., 2015; King et al., 2014; Yoo et al., 2013). Substantial empirical evidence indicates that positive electronic word-of-mouth significantly predicts purchase intention, making its generation a central focus of research for scholars seeking to comprehend contemporary consumer behaviour (Filieri et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2023). Despite the ubiquitous presence of social media platforms, marketers have consistently faced a persistent challenge in fostering favourable electronic word-of-mouth (Liao et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2016).

Furthermore, previous research has illustrated a robust association between brand loyalty and electronic word of mouth. Loyal patrons are likelier to participate in affirmative electronic word-of-mouth within online communities (Filieri et al., 2018). However, the association between negative electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty needs more clarity. Specific research proposes that loyal customers may be more magnanimous and less inclined to use negative electronic word-of-mouth (Kim et al., 2018). Comprehending the influence of brand loyalty on electronic word-of-mouth within virtual communities is of paramount significance for marketers who aim to exploit the potency of social media and online platforms for productive marketing communication.

This research article has made a distinct contribution to social media marketing through a comprehensive model that explains the generation of positive electronic word of mouth in virtual communities. The study establishes that social media marketing activities serve as stimuli that influence consumer-based brand equity, leading to brand loyalty and positive electronic word of mouth. Furthermore, the study also examines the relationship between brand loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth. Thus, the study provides theoretical support to the SOR model and underscores the importance of brand loyalty in generating positive electronic word of mouth. Additionally, most existing research has been limited to specific industries or geographic regions, making it difficult to generalize the findings to other contexts. Given the substantial growth in the utilization of social media marketing activities in the aviation sector across the globe over the past decade, scholars must increasingly examine the role of social media marketing activities in shaping the production of favourable electronic word-of-mouth in the world's 5th largest economy, India (Dasgupta et al.,

2019). Specifically, it is crucial to investigate the interrelationships between social media marketing activities and consumer-based brand equity and their respective impacts on generating positive electronic word-of-mouth in the Indian context. Such research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this significant phenomenon.

This manuscript initiates with an introduction followed by a discerning assessment of the literary works that amalgamates the research conjectures concerning social media marketing activities, consumer-based brand equity, and electronic word-of-mouth. Subsequently, the section on research methodology delineates the research design, study measurements, and demographic profile. The ensuing segment comprises the results and discussion, encompassing factor analysis, measurement model testing, and an explication of the findings. The denouement encompasses the conclusion, implications, and policymaker recommendations, along with the constraints and future avenues of research.

Review of literature

Social media marketing activities

Recently, social media has emerged as a preferred promotional tool over traditional media among stakeholders in the tourism industry (Kiralova and Pavliceka, 2015). As part of their marketing strategy, businesses in the travel and tourism industry are increasingly focusing on social networks and digital platforms to interact with their customers (Liu and Chong, 2023). Scholars have conducted several studies to investigate the impact of social media marketing activities on customer satisfaction, service quality, brand image, and electronic word of mouth in the tourism industry (Camilleri and Kozak, 2022; Liu and Chong, 2023). However, literature on the influence of social media marketing activities on user-generated content in the Indian context is scarce.

Social media marketing activities involve disseminating brand-related information through virtual platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Albanna et al., 2022; Beig and Khan, 2018, 2022). Social media enables users to generate content about brands on virtual platforms and share it with other users (Beig and Khan, 2018, 2022; Constantinides, 2014). Social media marketing activities aim to share brand content with other users within online brand communities to generate a positive response among consumers (Zhou et al., 2021). Kim and Ko's (2012) model is the most comprehensive and widely used social media marketing activities research framework.

This model gauges the effectiveness of social media marketing activities across five dimensions: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word of mouth. In recent years, scholars have endeavoured to customize Kim and Ko's (2012) model to cater to the distinct requirements of specific industries (Seo and Park, 2018; Yadav and Rehman, 2017). Considering its widespread implementation and recognition, we also intend to apply their five-dimension framework in our investigation (Godey et al., 2016; Jamil et al., 2022; Mishra, 2019; Zollo et al., 2020).

Consumer-based brand equity

Brand equity has been defined by Aaker (1991) as a collection of assets and liabilities associated with a brand. The brand's name can add significant value to a product, an attribute independent of other product features (Kamakura and Russell, 1993). This value addition results from the consumer's perception of the brand, as evidenced by prior research (Chaudhuri, 1995; Winters, 1991). Consumer-based brand equity is shaped by firm and unique brand associations formed by information that remains in consumers' long-term memory (Keller, 1993), ultimately determining the extent to which a product is perceived as superior to its competitors (Lassar et al., 1995). Investing in brand equity is a strategic marketing decision that can yield substantial benefits, increasing brand wealth and fortifying competitive barriers (Yoo et al., 2000). Researchers have identified various dimensions of brand equity over time; however, Aaker's (1991) brand equity dimensions have remained a common thread in many studies on this topic (Atilgan et al., 2009; Buil et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2003; Pappu et al., 2005; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). According to Aaker (1991), four elements explain the concept of brand equity. These components encompass the level of familiarity and recognition with a brand (Brand Awareness), the strength and favorability of associations with the brand (Brand Association), the consumer's perception of a brand's superiority in terms of performance and features (Perceived Quality), and the degree of consumer attachment and commitment to the brand (Brand Loyalty).

Brand Awareness. In various models of consumer-based brand equity, such as those proposed by Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2010), Wang et al. (2008), and Pappu et al. (2005), Brand Awareness has emerged as a significant dimension. It has been defined as the accumulated power of a brand in a consumer's memory (Keller, 1993) and the ability to recognize and remember a brand as part of a product category (Aaker,

1991). The greater the awareness, the more likely consumers will consider and choose the brand in purchase decisions, leading to increased sales and brand loyalty (Beig and Nika, 2022). Thus, brand awareness is a crucial first step towards building brand equity.

Brand Association. According to Aaker's (1991) conceptualization, brand association follows brand awareness because consumers can only develop associations when they know the brand (Washburn and Plank, 2002). Brand association is the foundation for purchase decisions (Aaker, 1991) and refers to the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and beliefs linked to a particular brand in memory (Kotler and Keller, 2006). These perceptions and beliefs are organized in the minds of consumers in some evocative way to form brand associations (Aaker, 1991). Brand associations can include emotional features, experiential benefits, and attitudes (Keller, 1993, 2003).

Perceived Quality. Perceived quality is a critical element in the consumer-based brand equity framework, according to several studies (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2011; Pappu et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2008). Unlike objective quality, which refers to the technical aspects of a product, perceived quality pertains to consumers' overall perceptions of a product's quality compared to its competitors (Aaker, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). This aspect of brand equity is based on the consumers' subjective interpretation rather than the product's features.

Brand Loyalty. Oliver (1997) defined brand loyalty as the intention to buy a brand as the primary choice, indicating a willingness to remain loyal. This attitudinal perspective can be assessed by analyzing switching costs, consumer preferences, and commitment to future purchases. Price is a crucial indicator of loyalty, with consumers who have more confidence in a brand being more loyal and willing to pay a premium (Lassar et al., 1995). Consumer attitudes primarily drive repeated purchases (Kim et al., 2003), and building brand loyalty can help mitigate competitive threats (Aaker, 1991).

Electronic word of mouth

Electronic word of mouth is a process whereby consumers share their opinions, recommendations, and information about products and services through electronic channels, such as online reviews, social media platforms, and discussion forums (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The importance of electronic

word-of-mouth has grown significantly in recent years, with studies indicating that it can significantly influence consumer behaviour and purchase decisions (Wang et al., 2016; Cheung and Thadani, 2012). One of the key advantages of electronic word-of-mouth is its ability to reach a broad and diverse audience quickly and cost-effectively. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have facilitated this process by enabling consumers to share their opinions and experiences with a vast network of acquaintances, friends, and family (Kim and Ko, 2012). Compared to company-generated content on virtual platforms, consumers regard electronic word-of-mouth as more relevant, significant, and credible (Gruen et al., 2006). Consequently, electronic word-of-mouth has emerged as a powerful tool for firms to reach prospective customers and generate interest in their products or services (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Electronic word of mouth presents opportunities and challenges for companies in managing their online reputation. Although it can impact consumer behaviour and purchase decisions significantly, electronic word-of-mouth can also spread negative comments and reviews quickly through online channels. Companies must, therefore, monitor and manage their online reputation carefully. Research has demonstrated that companies can use electronic word-of-mouth to their advantage by engaging with customers and responding to their feedback transparently and promptly (Brodie et al., 2013). The issue of credibility also presents a challenge for electronic word-of-mouth, as online reviews and recommendations can be easily manipulated or faked. To overcome this issue, companies must build trust with customers by providing high-quality products and services and actively seeking and responding to customer feedback (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). The significance of electronic word-of-mouth in the consumer decision-making process underscores the need for companies to leverage it effectively to build strong relationships with customers and increase their visibility and credibility in the marketplace.

Research Framework

The Stimulus-Organism-Response theory is a prominent model in consumer behaviour research, which has the potential to explain the interplay between Social media marketing activities, consumer-based brand equity and the generation of electronic word of mouth (Seo and Park, 2018). Social media marketing activities can be regarded as stimuli that can affect consumers' cognitive and emotional states, representing the elements of consumer-based brand equity (Godey et al., 2016). Notably, social media marketing in virtual
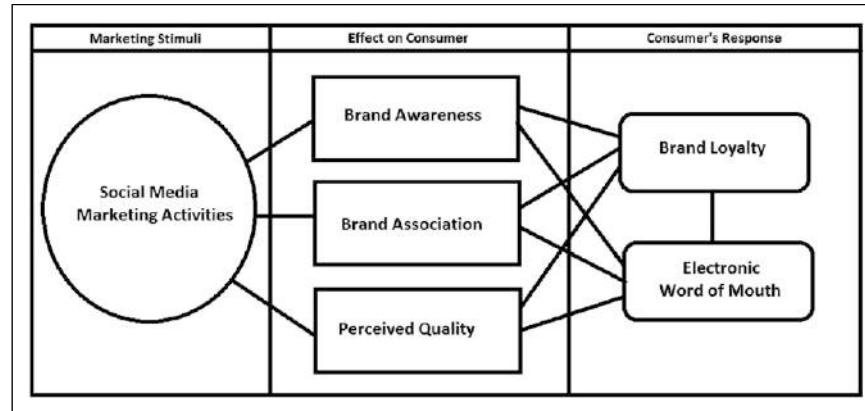
Figure 1. Research framework.

communities can boost consumer-based brand equity by increasing brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality, consequently developing a stronger bond between the consumer and the brand, leading to higher levels of brand loyalty, and ultimately, facilitating the creation of positive electronic word of mouth. In other words, the impact of social media marketing activities on consumers can be observed through the development of brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality, which can lead to a response in the form of brand loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth. Furthermore, it is essential to note that brand loyalty positively impacts electronic word-of-mouth. Stimulus organism response theory provides a valuable framework to comprehend the impact of social media marketing on consumer behaviour, thus facilitating marketers in crafting effective social media strategies that influence the generation of positive electronic word-of-mouth and enhance brand equity (Figure 1).

Relationship between social media marketing activities and consumer-based brand equity

Social media marketing is critical in brand-building activities (Hootsuite, 2021). In 2020, more than 518 million Indian consumers could use social media, making it a crucial channel for businesses to reach potential customers (Basuroy, 2022). By consistently engaging with their audience through various social media platforms, businesses can increase brand exposure and recognition, leading to higher brand recall and customer loyalty (Alalwan et al., 2017). Additionally, social media marketing activities can generate word-of-mouth advertising, as satisfied customers share their positive experiences with others on their social media pages, thereby increasing brand visibility and

potentially leading to new customers (Hutter et al., 2013). Firstly, using social media platforms for marketing can increase brand awareness by creating and sharing content that resonates with the target audience (Kalra et al., 2023). This can lead to a stronger association between the brand and the desired attributes, such as quality, innovation, and trustworthiness (Gensler et al., 2013). Finally, social media can provide a platform for customers to share their experiences and opinions about the brand, which can influence the brand's perceived quality influencing brand image (Kapferer, 2012; Yazdanparast et al., 2016). Moreover, recent studies have found that there is a positive relationship between social media marketing activities and consumer-based brand equity (Md. Hafez, 2022a, 2022b; Zollo et al., 2020; Koay et al., 2020). Therefore, based on the above discussion, the following statements can be hypothesised:

H1. There is a positive relation between social media marketing activities and brand awareness, where exposure to higher social media marketing activities leads to increased brand awareness.

H2. There is a positive relation between social media marketing activities and brand association, where exposure to higher social media marketing activities leads to increased brand associations.

H3. There is a positive relation between social media marketing activities and perceived quality, where exposure to higher social media marketing activities leads to increased perceived quality.

Relationship between consumer based brand equity and brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is an essential component of consumer behaviour that has received significant attention from

researchers and practitioners alike. A growing body of literature suggests that consumer-based brand equity positively influences brand loyalty (Beig and Nika, 2019; Godey et al., 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012; Malarvishi et al., 2022; Seo and Park, 2018; Wang et al., 2021). Brand awareness, or the ability of consumers to recognize and recall a brand, is positively related to brand loyalty because it increases the likelihood of consumers choosing the brand over competitors (Aaker, 1991; Kim et al., 2018).

Similarly, solid and favourable brand associations can increase consumers' emotional attachment to a brand, leading to greater brand loyalty (Keller, 1993). On the contrary, other researchers have suggested that brand loyalty may precede brand association, as consumers develop mental associations with brands over time through repeated purchase and use (Oliver, 1999). Despite the ongoing debate, recent research suggests that the two concepts are closely related, with strong brand associations being predictors of increased brand loyalty over time (Phong et al., 2020).

Finally, perceived quality, or the overall perception of a brand's performance and attributes, can create a strong positive impression on consumers, leading to a greater likelihood of repeat purchases and brand loyalty (Kim et al., 2018; Lassar et al., 1995; Zeithaml, 1988). Notwithstanding the proliferation of studies on the relationship between perceived quality and brand loyalty, specific investigations have failed to establish a significant causal link between the two, underscoring the pressing need for further research to uncover the true nature and extent of their association (Bravo Gil et al., 2007). Consequently, drawing from the discourse above, the subsequent hypothesis can be postulated.

H4. There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty, where higher brand awareness leads to increased brand loyalty.

H5. There is a positive relationship between brand association and brand loyalty, where higher brand association leads to increased brand loyalty.

H6. There is a positive relationship between perceived quality and brand loyalty, where higher perceived quality leads to increased brand loyalty.

Relationship between consumer-based brand equity and electronic word-of-mouth

Brand awareness and electronic word-of-mouth. Brand awareness refers to the degree to which consumers are familiar with a brand and its products or services (Keller, 1993). Electronic word of mouth refers to

sharing opinions, experiences, and recommendations about a brand or product through online platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Brand awareness can significantly impact electronic word-of-mouth, as consumers are more likely to engage in electronic word-of-mouth activities for familiar brands (Seo & Park). The two concepts are interrelated as brand awareness can influence the likelihood of consumers engaging in electronic word-of-mouth about a brand. Specifically, consumers with high brand awareness are more likely to share information about the brand with others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Thus, we can hypothesize that:

H7. There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and electronic word-of-mouth, where higher brand awareness leads to more positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Brand association and electronic word-of-mouth. Brand associations refer to consumers' mental connections between a brand and its attributes, benefits, symbols, and experiences (Keller, 1993). Electronic word-of-mouth refers to sharing information about brands through electronic channels, such as social media, online forums, and review sites (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Consumers with high brand awareness have more knowledge about the brand and are more likely to have positive associations, which can lead to positive electronic word-of-mouth. Specifically, positive brand associations are more likely to lead to positive electronic word-of-mouth, while negative brand associations can lead to negative electronic word-of-mouth (Serra-Cantallops et al., 2018). Consumers are likelier to share information about brands they associate positively with and vice versa. Thus, we can hypothesize that:

H8. There is a positive relationship between brand associations and positive electronic word-of-mouth, where stronger brand associations lead to more positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Perceived quality and electronic word-of-mouth. Perceived quality refers to the customer's overall assessment of the excellence or superiority of a product or service (Zeithaml, 1988). Electronic word-of-mouth refers to sharing information about brands through electronic channels, such as social media, online forums, and review sites (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The two concepts are interrelated as perceived quality can influence the likelihood and valence of electronic word-of-mouth about a brand. Specifically, higher perceived quality is more likely to lead to positive

electronic word-of-mouth, while lower perceived quality can lead to negative electronic word-of-mouth (Sanchez-Gonzalez and González-Fernández, 2021). Consumers are likelier to share information about brands they perceive as having high-quality and positive experiences, and vice versa. Thus, we can hypothesize that.

> **H9.** There is a positive relationship between perceived quality and positive electronic word-of-mouth, where higher perceived quality leads to more positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Brand loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth

Brand loyalty is a crucial factor that impacts the success of a business. It is defined as the consistent purchase behaviour of a consumer towards a particular brand over time (Aaker, 1991). Customers loyal to a brand tend to have positive attitudes towards it and are more likely to make repeat purchases, recommend the brand to others, and pay a premium price for its products or services (Keller, 2013). However, research has demonstrated a less favourable association between brand loyalty and electronic word of mouth than in-person word of mouth, emphasizing the significance of exploring this phenomenon (Eelen et al., 2017). Therefore, based on the above discussion, we can hypothesize that:

> **H10.** Brand loyalty positively affects electronic word-of-mouth

Mediating role of consumer-based brand equity (brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality) between social media marketing activities and brand loyalty

Brand equity, which encompasses brand awareness, association, and perceived quality, is crucial in the relationship between social media marketing activities and brand loyalty. Social media marketing activities are marketing strategies utilizing social media platforms to engage with consumers and promote brand awareness (Kalra et al., 2023). When Social media marketing activities are effectively implemented, they can enhance brand equity, ultimately leading to higher brand loyalty among consumers (Godey et al., 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012). Specifically, brand awareness helps consumers recognize and remember a brand, brand association links the brand to specific attributes or benefits, and perceived quality reflects the overall excellence of the brand. Through these three

components, brand equity can enhance brand loyalty by strengthening consumers' positive attitudes and beliefs toward the brand. Based on this, we can deduce the following hypotheses:

> **H11.** Social media marketing activities positively affect brand awareness, which in turn positively affects brand loyalty.
> **H12.** Social media marketing activities positively affect brand association, which in turn positively affects brand loyalty.
> **H13.** Social media marketing activities positively affect perceived quality, which in turn positively affects brand loyalty.

Mediating role of consumer-based brand equity (brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality) between social media marketing activities and electronic word-of-mouth

Social media marketing activities are marketing strategies utilizing social media platforms to engage with consumers and promote brand awareness. At the same time, electronic word-of-mouth refers to the online conversations between consumers about a brand. Prior studies have indicated that social media marketing activities possess the potential to elevate consumer-based brand equity, thereby exerting a positive impact on electronic word-of-mouth (Seo and Park, 2018). Brand equity can influence the likelihood and the nature of electronic word-of-mouth by shaping consumers' attitudes and beliefs toward the brand (Wang et al., 2017). Specifically, brand awareness can lead to higher levels of electronic word-of-mouth by increasing the likelihood of brand mentions, the brand association can influence the content and tone of electronic word-of-mouth by linking the brand to specific attributes or benefits, and perceived quality can strengthen the credibility and persuasiveness of electronic word-of-mouth by reflecting the overall excellence of the brand. Thus, we can hypothesize that:

> **H14.** Social media marketing activities positively affect brand awareness, which in turn positively affects electronic word-of-mouth
> **H15.** Social media marketing activities positively affect brand association, which in turn positively affects electronic word-of-mouth
> **H16.** Social media marketing activities positively affect perceived quality, which in turn positively affects electronic word-of-mouth.

Methodology

The link between independent and dependent factors identified in the research framework is examined in this cross-sectional study. In this study, we sought to better understand the relationship between three mediating variables (brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association), a predictive variable (social media marketing), and two dependent variables (brand loyalty and electronic word of mouth). We collected participant replies using an English-language questionnaire as part of this investigation. After input from two experts (a psychologist and a research expert), the final questionnaire was changed to make it easier for the sample population to understand.

The survey of Indians who had travelled by air was conducted between March 1 and March 15, 2023, and the results were used for the empirical investigation. Convenience sampling was used to survey three International Airports in Northern India.

The collection of the completed forms followed the direct distribution of questionnaires by surveyors to research participants. 313 out of 350 completed questionnaires were used after data cleaning. The sample size of 290 was determined using the itemized sampling size method (27 items*10 = 270). However, because structural equation modelling analysis was employed to evaluate the relationship between study variables, it requires a sample size of 300 or more; as a result, a sample size of 350 was chosen (Hair et al., 2021).

Measures

Social media marketing activities (11 items), brand awareness (3 items) and electronic word of mouth (3 items) were adapted from the work of Seo and Park (2018). Perceived quality (3 items) was adapted from the work of Joung et al. (2016), brand association (3 items) was adapted from the work Yoo and Donthu (2001) and brand loyalty (4 items) was adapted from the work of Kim et al. (2001). 5-point "Likert scale" was used to evaluate these factors.

Participant profile

The demographic profile is shown in Table 1.

Data analysis

Before doing the statistical tests for evaluating hypotheses, all statistical analysis assumptions (linearity, normality, and non-collinearity) were tested. Finally, regression analysis utilizing structural equation modelling was conducted to investigate the

Table 1. Respondent's profile (313).

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	162	51.7
Female	151	48.2
Age		
Up to 18 years	19	6.07
18–35 years	159	50.7
35–49 years	109	34.8
More than 49 years	26	8.3
Income (in rupees)		
1–5 lac	91	29.07
5–10 lac	180	57.5
More than 10 lac	42	13.4
Purpose of using airline		
Business	71	22.6
Vacation/Tour	151	48.2
Visiting home/friends/kin	58	18.5
Education/meeting	33	10.5
Age		
18–29 years	82	26.3
30–49 years	190	60.7
Above 49 years	41	13.09
Airline		
Indigo	91	29.07
Vistara	77	24.6
Air India	29	9.2
Spice Jet	67	21.4
Go Air	49	15.6

Source: Author's own.

association and effect between the study's components. The process of building structural equation models, which looks at the underlying structures of variables, starts with exploratory factor analysis. Following exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis is vital in validating the measurement model. The measuring scale is examined for validity and reliability, and the hypothesis produced during the exploratory factor analysis is validated using confirmatory factor analysis. Following confirmatory factor analysis, structural model/path analysis tests the proposed hypotheses by examining the relationships between the variables. All statistical evaluations used application software packages "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" and "Analysis of a Moment Structures" version 24.0.

To begin with, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine the fundamental structure of the components in this study. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin = 0.773 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 4795.554 with a degree of freedom = 351 at a significance level of 0.05 were considered sufficient measures of sample
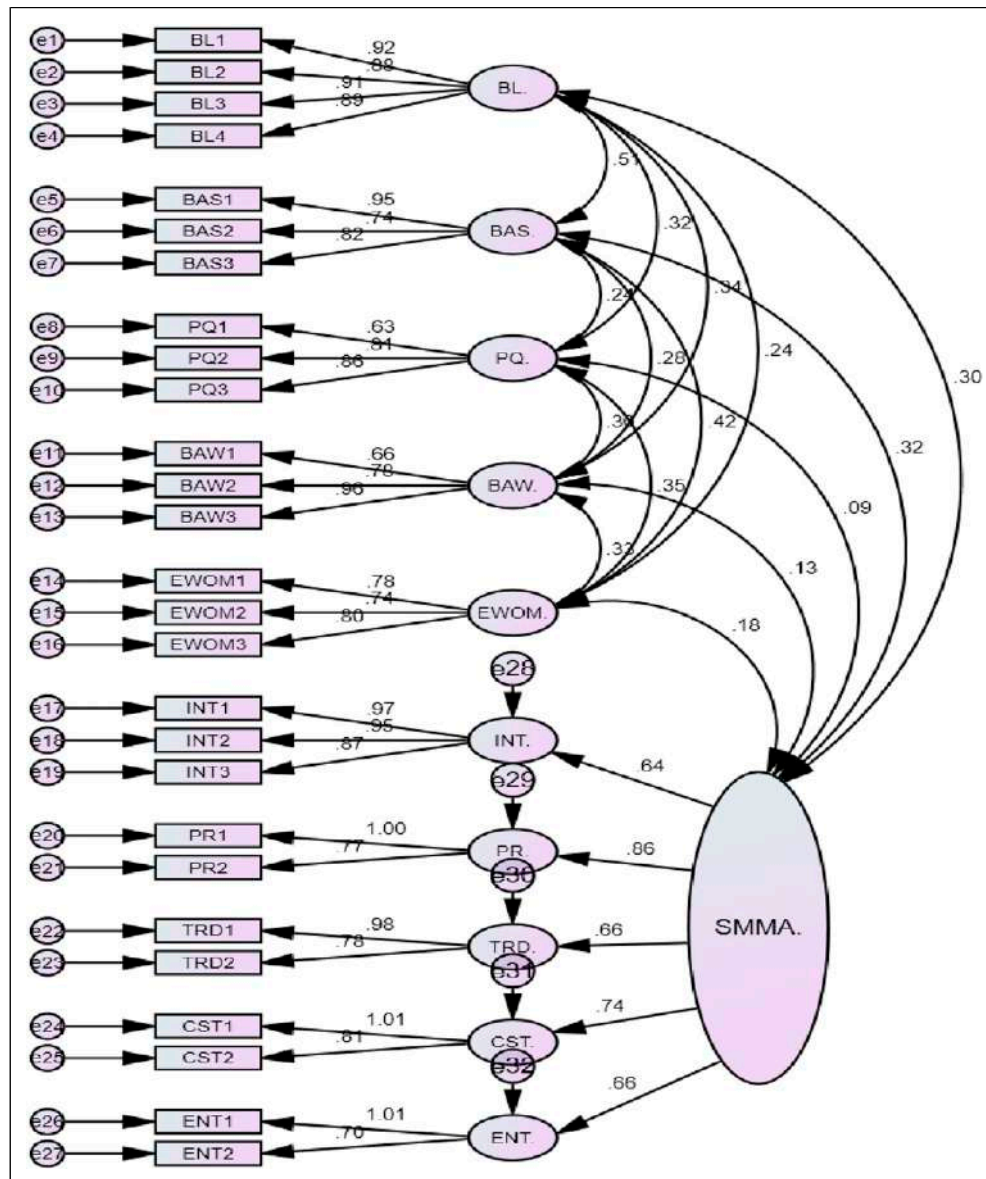
Figure 2. Measurement Model. *Note*: SMMA-Social media marketing activity; ENT-Entertainment; CST-Customization; TRD-Trendiness; INT-Interaction; EWOM-Electronic word of mouth; BAW-Brand awareness; BAS-Brand association; BL-Brand loyalty; PQ-Perceived quality. Source: The authors.

adequacy. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed after exploratory factor analysis to confirm whether or not items (variables representing individual factors) would load on those factors.

Measurement Model

Figure 2 shows the measurement model for all the factors obtained from confirmatory factor analysis in this study. The values of model indices show a good fit as:

Chi-square Minimum Discrepancy Function by Degrees of Freedom divided = 3.8 (<5), Normed Fit Index =.912 (>0.80), Goodness of fit index = 0.904 (>0.80), Tucker-Lewis index = 0.910 (>0.80) and Root mean square error of approximation = 0.057 (<0.08).

The instrument's convergent validity is demonstrated by all of the standard factor loadings, and the average variance extracted for all constructs is more significant than 0.70 and 0.50, respectively (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The fact that the average variance extracted for factors is greater than the square of the

factor inter-correlation coefficient also indicates discriminant validity (Table 2) (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Additionally, dependability has been demonstrated in studies where composite reliability is more significant than 0.60 for all constructions (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Structural model analysis

The hypotheses were tested using structural model analysis, which showed the relationships between the study variables. The path analysis of the SEM (structural equation modelling) results (Figure 3) reveals that the model fit indices have moderate values: Chi-square Minimum Discrepancy Function by Degrees of Freedom divided = 4.7 (<5), Normed Fit Index =.890

(>0.80), Goodness of fit index = 0.809 (>0.80), Tucker-Lewis index = 0.887 (>0.80) and Root mean square error of approximation = 0.059 (<0.08).

Path analysis results. All of the research hypotheses are confirmed by the path analysis results (structural model) (Table 3). Social media marketing activities have an affirmative and significant influence on three components of brand equity, with the highest influence on brand association (b = 0.33, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.22$), followed by perceived quality (b = 0.18, $p = .006$, $R^2 = 0.21$) and brand awareness (b = 0.16, $p = 0.013$, $R^2 = 0.21$). Brand loyalty is also influenced positively by brand association (b = 0.44, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.36$), followed by brand awareness (b = 0.33, $p < .001$,

Table 2. Discriminant validity.

Factors	CR	AVE	EWOM	BL	BAS	PQ	BAW	SMMA
EWOM	0.816	0.596	0.772					
BL	0.946	0.814	0.240	0.902				
BAS	0.875	0.701	0.423	0.514	0.837			
PQ	0.816	0.601	0.354	0.316	0.242	0.775		
BAW	0.849	0.657	0.333	0.340	0.283	0.298	0.811	
SMMA	0.839	0.514	0.180	0.295	0.317	0.092	0.127	0.717

Note: SMMA-Social media marketing activity; ENT-Entertainment; CST-Customization; TRD-Trendiness; INT-Interaction; EWOM-Electronic word of mouth; BAW-Brand awareness; BAS-Brand association; BL-Brand loyalty; PQ-Perceived quality; AVE-Average variance extracted; CR-Composite reliability. *Note 2*: The values in the above matrix's diagonal are the AVE's square root. Source: The authors.
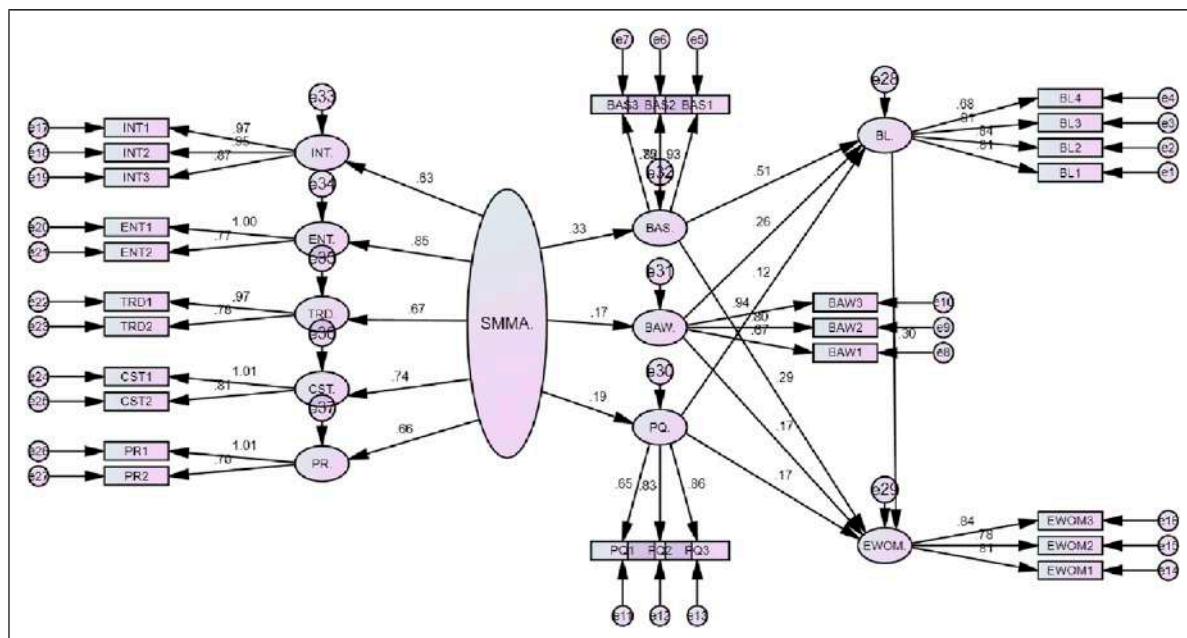

Figure 3. Structural model. Source: The authors.

Table 3. Structural model estimates.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Standard β	Un-standard β	Standard error	Critical ratio	p-value	Relationship
BAS	SMMA	.333	.568	.115	4.930	***	Supported
BAW	SMMA	.166	.194	.078	2.489	.013	Supported
PQ	SMMA	.189	.218	.080	2.728	.006	Supported
BL	BAS	.505	.440	.052	8.435	***	Supported
BL	BAW	.262	.333	.074	4.513	***	Supported
BL	PQ	.122	.157	.074	2.131	.033	Supported
EWOM	BAS	.289	.245	.059	4.170	***	Supported
EWOM	BAW	.174	.215	.074	2.900	.004	Supported
EWOM	PQ	.167	.210	.074	2.840	.005	Supported
EWOM	BL	.300	.292	.074	3.969	***	Supported

Note: SMMA-Social media marketing activity; ENT-Entertainment; CST-Customization; TRD-Trendiness; INT-Interaction; EWOM-Electronic word of mouth; BAW-Brand awareness; BAS-Brand association; BL-Brand loyalty; PQ-Perceived quality. Source: The authors.

$R^2 = 0.36$) and perceived quality (b = 0.15, p = 0.033, $R^2 = 0.36$). Electronic word of mouth is also influenced positively by four components of brand equity, with the strongest influence by brand loyalty (b = 0.29, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.38$), followed by brand association (b = 0.24, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.38$), brand awareness (b = 0.21, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.38$) and perceived quality (b = 0.21, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.38$).

Mediation results

The user-defined "Estimand" technique proposed by this work's authors served as the foundation for the "bootstrapping" method used to carry out the mediation evaluation (Gaskin, 2016). This study investigated the relationship between social media marketing activities and two outcome variables (electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty) as it was mediated by three components of brand equity (brand association, perceived quality and brand awareness).

To investigate the impact of indirect effects, which imply mediation, "bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis" using 2000 bootstrap samples at a 95% confidence interval was used (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In this work, mediation was carried out using the Gaskin-proposed user-defined Estimand technique. (2016). This method involves designating the parameters between the pathways to evaluate the indirect impacts. The indirect impact was identified using bias-corrected bootstrap analysis and a 2000-bootstrap sample with a 95% confidence level. When the "null of zero" (simply "zero" does not exist between the upper and lower confidence interval or the signs of both confidence intervals are positive or negative) is outside of the lower bound and higher bound of the confidence interval, it is confirmed that mediation has occurred. A null of zero

(just "zero" between the upper and lower confidence intervals or confidence intervals with the opposite sign) between the upper limit confidence interval and lowerr limit confidence interval, on the other hand, shows the absence of mediation (lower limit confidence interval). The mediation results are shown in Table 4 below. The results show that the relationship between social media marketing activities and electronic word-of-mouth is mediated by three components of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality). Also, the relationship between social media marketing activities and brand loyalty is mediated by three components of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate how an airline brand's social media marketing activities affect several brand equity components (brand association, perceived quality and brand awareness). The fact that airline social media marketing activities have a significant impact on brand equity shows that as airlines actively participate in social media marketing activities, consumers are more likely to recall or recognize the airline more precisely when compared to other airlines. Due to the significant impact of social media marketing activities on consumers' perceptions of brands, they remember them. Social media marketing activities and brand equity show high connections, which numerous past studies have supported (Chen and Qasim, 2021; Nobar et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2022).

Additionally, according to Seo and Park (2018), airlines' social media marketing activities affect brand equity components (brand image and brand awareness). Nevertheless, this research examined three facets

Table 4. Mediation analysis.

Independent (Predictor) variable	Mediating variable	Dependent (Outcome) variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	LLCI	ULI	Results
SMMA	BAS	EWOM	0.18	.14*	.08	0.22	Supported
SMMA	BAW	EWOM	0.25	.08*	.02	0.15	Supported
SMMA	PQ	EWOM	0.27	.06*	.02	0.11	Supported
SMMA	BAS	BL	0.16	.09*	.09	0.24	Supported
SMMA	BAW	BL	0.14	.08*	.03	0.15	Supported
SMMA	PQ	BL	0.17	.06*	.018	0.10	Supported

Note: SMMA-Social media marketing activity; ENT-Entertainment; CST-Customization; TRD-Trendiness; INT-Interaction; EWOM-Electronic word of mouth; BAW-Brand awareness; BAS-Brand association; BL-Brand loyalty; PQ-Perceived quality; ULCI-upper limit confidence interval; LLCI-lower limit confidence interval. Source: The authors.

of brand equity (brand association, perceived quality and awareness). Regarding the conduct of customers, perceived quality and brand affiliation are crucial in the airline industry (Koech et al., 2023; Thakshak, 2018). Researchers have found that brand associations are created by customers' interactions with brands such as social media marketing activities (Hafez, 2022a, 2022b; John et al., 2006). Participating in social media marketing activities from the brand increases brand perception and awareness, eventually resulting in a higher perception of quality (Barreda et al., 2015; Hajli et al., 2017; Verhagen et al., 2015). This work has improved the literature on the effects of social media marketing activities on brand equity in the service sector, notably airlines, by underlining the role of social media marketing activities in establishing brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality. Due to efficient social media marketing activities, airline brands can become top-of-mind for consumers and are easily recalled or recognized in purchasing scenarios. Customers are, therefore, more likely to recall and consider an airline brand they follow or interact with the social media marketing activities of airlines. Social media marketing activities within the aviation industry may also increase brand recognition and benefit brand association by allowing businesses to communicate with present and potential customers (Seo and Park, 2018).

Additionally, the results demonstrate how brand equity (connection, perceived quality, and awareness) affects electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty. According to Barreda et al. (2015) and Anselmsson et al. (2016), high brand awareness affects other brand-related factors, including brand loyalty. Customers are more likely to suggest a brand and are prepared to pay more for its goods or services if they are familiar with its communications, particularly those on social media (Hajli et al., 2017). According to past studies, a brand with high brand recognition may also command a premium price in the market (Bougenvile and

Ruswanti, 2017). Through social media, brand connections link consumers to the company's characteristics, fostering brand loyalty (Fagundes et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2020). Yee and Sidek (2008) imply that product quality is the most critical factor in determining brand loyalty. According to Jing et al. (2014), businesses should improve their marketing communications to emphasize perceived quality. Social media marketing activities enables businesses to create quality perceptions that foster brand loyalty (Hafez, 2022a, 2022b; Ooi et al., 2023). In line with earlier studies, brand equity variables (brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality) also improve electronic word-of-mouth in this work (Park et al., 2013; Seo and Kim, 2003; Seo and Park, 2018). Social media marketing activities solicit consumer support by encouraging word-of-mouth and exchanging innovative ideas (Filieri, 2013; Wu et al., 2018).

In this investigation, which is comparable to Seo and Park's (2018) work, the airline social media marketing activities components were trendiness, customization, perceived risk, engagement, and entertainment. Because social media is the most practical means to acquire such information, customers prefer social media that offer the most engaging and current information. Customers increasingly prefer social media tailored to their tastes and want reliable information and services that lessen risk or anxiety (Seo and Park, 2018).

Moreover, the mediation results show that all three dimensions of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality) mediate the relationship between social media marketing activities and two outcome variables, that is, brand loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth. This means aviation brands need to focus on building a more robust and better brand through social media marketing activities to achieve a more substantial customer base that will indulge in spreading positive word of mouth to other

consumers. Earlier studies have shown that some brand equity dimensions mediate the effect between social media marketing activities and various outcomes (Erdogmas and Cicek, 2012; Hafez, 2022a, 2022b; Seo and Park, 2018).

These results showed that enhancing brand associations and brand loyalty will boost word-of-mouth. This is especially important in industries like aviation that provide intangible services. It indicates that one can enhance one's reputation through social media, a powerful word-of-mouth marketing technique. Since brand associations have a significant impact on loyalty, a firm with a more substantial reputation benefit from a more extensive loyal client base; these results may lead to the development of a positive feedback loop that motivates airline social media users to carry out continuing, voluntary brand promotion for the business.

Implications

This study aimed to comprehend, from the consumer's standpoint, how social media marketing affects the development of brand loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth through the route of building brand equity (perceived quality, brand awareness and brand association). Since social media marketing is a relatively new, constantly expanding platform for establishing relationships with customers and cultivating good perceptions of businesses in their eyes, the study's findings are expected to make a substantial addition to practice and literature. Like every other non-traditional marketing communication instrument, businesses actively investigate, dig up, and use social media.

In this study, brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, quality perceptions, and brand association) and two other types of consumer behaviour (electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty) were explored in relation to airline social media marketing activities. In previous studies, perceived quality has yet to be studied exhaustively, especially in the aviation sector. Perceived quality is critical for the aviation business concerning multiple outcomes such as loyalty and positive word of mouth. This result also has an essential managerial implication. The results show that airlines' social media marketing activities increased brand awareness, perceptions of quality, and brand associations, proving their worth as a model for establishing brand equity. We can emphasize the importance of brand communication through social media marketing activities for airlines to produce spontaneous and positive content about the brand to make new buyers more confident regarding the possible quality that the brand provides. The brand recognition, brand associations, and perceived quality all positively affected loyalty, showing

that airlines with weak brand recognition, associations, and perceptions of quality may aggressively pursue social media marketing activities to improve brand recognition, brand associations, and quality perceptions to cultivate a loyal customer base. Also, brand equity dimensions significantly impacted electronic word of mouth and loyalty, demonstrating that social media marketing activities can influence customer emotions and electronic word of mouth to build brand loyalty.

Despite the enormous growth potential, more research needs to be done on social media marketing for airlines, particularly in India (Kaya et al., 2022). This work is one of the few empirical studies investigating the relationship between airline social media marketing activities and consumer response. The current study suggested a model that more accurately depicts the effects of airline social media marketing activities by integrating brand equity into the model. In contrast, other studies on social media marketing activities do not consider brand equity's mediating function. The empirical results of this study demonstrated the significance of airline social media marketing activities in building brand equity. This is consistent with the previous works (Aaker, 2009; Seo and Park, 2018). As a result, brand equity helps to mediate the connection between social media marketing activities and electronic word of mouth or client loyalty.

Brand equity investments may also amplify customer responses to airline social media marketing activities. As Social media marketing activities are a method to generate positive effects on quality perceptions, brand awareness and brand association, which increase airline brand value, airlines can utilize them to encourage and attract clients. Brand associations have a considerable impact on electronic word of mouth and commitment. Therefore, a favourable brand impression leads to favourable electronic word of mouth and loyalty, which ensures continued consumer advertising activity. Airlines might encourage customers to spread electronic word of mouth on their initiative and regulate consumers' behavioural and emotional responses to a brand by efficiently managing social media.

The findings of this study indicate that successful social media campaigns are the most critical factors in determining brand loyalty and electronic word-of-mouth. First and foremost, businesses that want to run successful social media campaigns should think about the advantages, values, and benefits they provide to customers in their campaigns and what makes those consumers more likely to stick with their brands. The platforms and applications the brand makes available on social media should be unique, imaginative, and diverse ways to interact with brands there. As a result,

businesses may endeavour to develop more fascinating, participatory, and engaging applications. Brand-consumer interactions have undergone a significant transformation, enabling customers to connect and share opinions on the company's social media platforms. To maximize customer interactions and experiences, these firms should provide precise, pertinent, and timed information about the goods or services advertised on their social media sites. Any incorrect or out-of-date information could leave customers unhappy and harm the brand's reputation.

Additionally, businesses should spend more money developing customized predictive suggestion algorithms for social networking sites. The focus should be on reducing the risks associated with the aviation industry, such as time delays, refunds, loyalty programs etc. The content posted on the aviation brand's social media page should be entertaining, such as the attractive locations on its route and the positive experiences shared by other consumers.

Therefore, these intuitive suggestions will aid in making the clients feel special and result in a more favourable emotive experience. To provide company brand values that can simultaneously inform and entertain customers, businesses should also offer trendy content and encourage customers to share brand-related content on their own will through various activities like interaction, personalization, and information. Therefore, firms should use these techniques to boost social media marketing effectiveness, build a better brand for customers, and improve business outcomes.

The debates over the research's findings perfectly capture how brand managers feel about the significance of social media marketing activities and its outcomes in managerial strategy. These debates can highlight crucial directions for marketing professionals operating in the aviation sector, who are eager to make consumers remember their brands and identify them with favourable traits/associations that will lead to a loyal customer base who will further indulge in favourable publicity.

Future work

The study's flaws are listed below, along with a direction for future research that has been suggested. First, the study's sample consisted exclusively of tourists from India. The conclusions might be more generalized if more thorough studies involved a broader spectrum of passengers. The study's limited sample size could have impacted the reliability of the extrapolated conclusions. Furthermore, biases in sample selection were undoubtedly present because of the non-probabilistic sampling technique. Another potential issue is the requirement to stratify the sample based on demographic factors. Longitudinal research is better in the same manner that a cross-sectional study examines the current relationship between the variables. Given the limitations above, future research should build on this study by gathering data from a more significant sample and considering institutional and cultural contexts. Still on restrictions and recommendations for additional study, constructs like brand equity merit in-depth investigation. The different validity of the conceptions can be examined numerically and qualitatively through a deeper examination of the conceptual differences.

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