



***INTERVENING ROLE OF LOYALTY REWARD PROGRAMS AND
E-WORD-OF-MOUTH ON SMARTPHONE BRAND LOYALTY IN
MALAYSIA***

ALIREZA MOHAMMADI

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MALAYSIA**

By

ALIREZA MOHAMMADI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

August 2019

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my humble effort to my lovely mother, Maryam Fereydonizadeh, and my father, Mohammad Mohammadi, who supported me at all cost during my Ph.D. journey.



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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2019

Chairman : Associate Professor Noor Azman Ali, PhD
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In this research, brand loyalty is assessed under specific boundaries created by social media marketing factors and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). The objective of the present research is to determine the significance of the relationship between social media marketing factors including social network advertising, social media brand communities, and loyalty reward programs with brand loyalty in smartphone market in Malaysia. This investigation examines the mediating influence of loyalty reward programs and moderating role of eWOM on brand loyalty in smartphone market of Malaysia. The Theory of Planned Behavior, Theory of Social Identity, and Laroche model of effects of the brand community are used to develop the research framework.

This study successfully designed and developed a model which improves the present perception of brand loyalty in the smartphone market using the quantitative research approach. The questionnaire is designed and the evaluation is based on the five-point Likert scales. Throughout the time frame allocated, a total of 690 useful responses from individuals who own at least one smartphone, living in Malaysia were gathered. The respondents are selected using a simple random sampling technique through online questionnaire distributed in social media and social network platforms.

The collected ordinal data are further analyzed statistically using the PLS-SEM, a non-parametric analysis approach to determine the relationships and path coefficients between the proposed variables.

This study demonstrates the significance of the relationship between social network advertising, social media brand communities, loyalty reward programs and eWOM with brand loyalty in the smartphone market of Malaysia. Furthermore, the results of this research demonstrate that loyalty reward programs mediate the relationship between social network advertising and social media brand communities with brand loyalty in the Malaysian smartphone market. This study verifies the moderating role of eWOM on the relationship between loyalty reward programs and brand loyalty. The findings of this research benefit both academia and the smartphone industry. The results enhance the theoretical understanding of brand loyalty, customer loyalty, brand switch behavior, social media marketing factor, and eWOM. Finally, the findings of this study provide significant insights for smartphone manufacturers on how they can improve the brand loyalty status among their patrons through social media marketing factors and eWOM.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

PENGARUH MENEROKAI ANTESEDEN, PERANAN PERANTARAAN PROGRAM GANJARAN KESETIAAN DAN BUAH MULUT ELEKTRONIK KE ATAS KESETIAAN JENAMA TELEFON PINTAR DI MALAYSIA

Oleh

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Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Noor Azman Ali, PhD
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Dalam kajian ini, kesetiaan jenama ditaksir di bawah sempadan khusus yang dicipta oleh faktor pemasaran media sosial dan Buah Mulut Elektronik (eWOM). Objektif penyelidikan ini adalah untuk menentukan kepentingan hubungan antara faktor pemasaran media sosial termasuk pengiklanan rangkaian sosial, komuniti jenama media sosial, dan program ganjaran kesetiaan dengan kesetiaan jenama dalam pasaran telefon pintar di Malaysia. Kajian ini meneliti pengaruh pengantaraan program ganjaran kesetiaan dan peranan penyederhanaan eWOM ke atas kesetiaan jenama dalam pasaran telefon pintar Malaysia. Teori Tingkahlaku Terancang, Teori Identiti Sosial, Model Penerimaan Teknologi dan Model Media Sosial Laroche digunakan untuk membangunkan rangka kerja penyelidikan.

Kajian ini telah berjaya mereka bentuk dan membangunkan model yang dapat memperbaiki persepsi semasa tentang kesetiaan jenama dalam pasaran telefon pintar menerusi pendekatan penyelidikan kuantitatif. Soal selidik telah disediakan dan dinilai menggunakan Skala Likert 5 mata. Kajian ini telah mendapat sejumlah 690 maklum balas yang berguna dalam jangkamasa yang ditetapkan daripada individu yang mempunyai sekurang-kurangnya satu telefon pintar dan menetap di Malaysia. Responden yang terlibat dipilih dengan menggunakan teknik persampelan rawak mudah melalui soal selidik dalam talian yang diedarkan di media sosial dan platform rangkaian sosial.

Data ordinal yang dikumpulkan dan dianalisis dengan menggunakan perisian PLS-SEM yang merupakan pendekatan analisis bukan parametrik untuk menentukan hubung kait antara pekali laluan dengan pembolehubah yang dicadangkan.

Kajian ini menunjukkan kepentingan hubungan antara pengiklanan rangkaian sosial, komuniti jenama media sosial, program ganjaran kesetiaan dan eWOM dengan kesetiaan jenama dalam pasaran telefon pintar di Malaysia. Selain itu, dapatan daripada kajian ini menunjukkan program ganjaran kesetiaan menjadi penyederhana dalam hubungan antara pengiklanan rangkaian sosial dan komuniti jenama media sosial dengan kesetiaan jenama dalam pasaran telefon pintar Malaysia. Kajian ini juga mengesahkan peranan pengantara eWOM dalam hubungan antara program ganjaran kesetiaan dengan kesetiaan jenama. Dapatan daripada kajian ini dapat menyumbang kepada akademia dan juga industri telefon pintar. Ia meningkatkan kefahaman teoretikal tentang kesetiaan jenama, kesetiaan pelanggan, tingkah laku pertukaran jenama, faktor pemasaran media sosial dan “*eWOM*”. Akhir sekali, dapatan kajian ini memberi kefahaman mendalam yang ketara kepada pengeluar telefon pintar tentang cara mereka dapat meningkatkan status kesetiaan jenama dalam kalangan pemilik melalui faktor pemasaran media sosial dan eWOM.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The primary idea of the present study was shaped when the researcher observed intense debates by smartphone users concerning which brand is the most prominent. The argument was leading as if individuals were defending their personality by displaying a higher loyalty attitude and support to their preferred brand. By reviewing social science articles, interesting information has been revealed that explained the reasons behind the defensive and protective attitude in that discussion mainly pointing out to brand loyalty. The present research aims to investigate the influences of social media marketing factors on the stated brand loyalty toward smartphones.

In this chapter the background of the study on brand loyalty, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), social media marketing factors including social network advertising, social media brand community, and loyalty reward programs, in addition to smartphone market in Malaysia are presented. This is followed by clarifying the existing gap which is formulated to create the problem statement for the research. The research questions and objectives, as well as the scope and significance of the study, are also discussed in this chapter. Subsequently, the operational definitions of the terms used in this study are presented with a short summary of the chapter at the end of this chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

In this section, the information on the background of brand loyalty is presented based on an in-depth investigation in recent online reports, magazines and related literature. A short background of eWOM and its influences on brand loyalty has been brought accordingly. Consequently, the overview of social media and eWOM, as well as the overview of the smartphone market in Malaysia, is presented. In addition, the role of social media marketing factors in the smartphone market is discussed. This section provides a general overview of social media marketing, smartphone usage, Word of Mouth (WOM) and eWOM, and brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty has been defined by Jacob Jacoby & Chestnut (1978), as "The biased, behavioral response, expressed over time, by some decision-making unit, with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, and is a function of psychological (decision-making, evaluative) processes." Brand loyalty consists of two separated yet interrelated bodies known as "behavioral loyalty" which evaluates brand loyalty based on repurchase patterns and probabilities; and "attitudinal loyalty" which measures it with regard to cognitive "biased" and psychological process of decision making. Brand loyalty significantly influences customers' purchase and repurchase decision-making process. It keeps customers involved with the products and services of the brands. Customers who display a positive attitude and behavior toward their preferred brands are considered as brand loyal customers.

The meaning of brand loyalty is not as simple as repurchase behavior. It is perceived to be the combination of cognitive and emotional bonds that create a strong relationship between the brand and its patrons. Brand loyal customers demonstrate lower brand switch behavior. They are proven to be less sensitive to price and distribution changes. They keep re-patronizing since the brand personality has become part of their personality. Brand personality is one of the most significant entities of brands which creates their character based on the values they promote and signify.

Social Media Marketing has become a trend among numerous companies within different markets and industries. This research aims to assess the influences of social media marketing on the context of the smartphone market. This study is being conducted in Malaysia. There are different social media marketing instruments available in which some of its most effective ones are social network advertising, social media brand communities, social network brand communities, and loyalty reward programs.

There are different online advertising methods available on social networking platforms such as display advertising, banner advertising, and pop-up advertising. The online brand communities are exposed to information which can become viral on the internet. Online forums and social media brand communities such as Facebook communities and fan pages are popular and widely used nowadays which are examples of online brand communities. Social media brand communities have grabbed significant attention by the incredible growth in the number of social media networking users. Facebook alone reported to have around 2 billion users wherein more than 1.5 billion of them are active users. The aforesaid statistics display the spreading of a huge amount of User Generated Content (UGC) being generated online.

Smartphones are proven to be the main instrument for web surfing and accessing social media networking channels. Nokia 9000 Communicator was the first smartphone with internet connectivity to be able to surf the web similar to the way we do nowadays. It was introduced back in 1996 in Finland. However, the limitations in accessing in addition to costly internet service back in 1996 made it practically unreasonable. It has not been popular until the birth of smartphone internet access in 1999, by Japanese NTT DoCoMo which launched i-Mode in Japan (Tech Musing, 2010).

Smartphones have come a long way from 1999 to 2018 to be the main device to access the internet. Nowadays smartphones are widely used to access internet in most part of the world. The significant progress in communication technology provides a fast-growing opportunity for the smartphone market. In addition, it will not stop growing since the new models with higher specifications and a more advanced technology are being introduced every year. Brand loyalty is one of the key factors and requirements to maintain the customers' interest as well as keeping them involved with the brand. The bond between social media and marketing is unbreakable because of its superior advantages over traditional marketing methods. Social media marketing is cheaper,

smarter with higher broadcasting possibilities taking marketing messages beyond geographical boundaries.

The number of people involved in social media networking channels is increasing significantly. The growth in social networking interactions is reflected in an abundant amount of words being spread online. Thus, eWOM can be defined as simple as spreading content online including text, photo, and video. These could be worded positively or negatively. Spreading words online include all sorts of interaction with online posts such as liking, rating and commenting. Consequently, all these fit into the definition of eWOM. Smartphones are the main instruments to surf web in many countries including Malaysia. They are the most popular devices to access social media networking platforms by surpassing other internet accessing tools which indicate their importance in spreading words online (The Guardian, 2016).

Long before the introduction of internet, Word of Mouth (WOM) used to be the main method to spread information such as news, notifications, and stories among people from a generation to another generation in small neighborhoods, cities, and countries. However, the truth and reliability of the source can be doubted unless a verbal reference is given by a person with a reputation of honesty. Moreover, the news would take days, month, years or maybe decades to reach distant places. Otherwise, it would just disappear due to environmental threats. With the recent advancements in social media communication systems, the reliability, security, and speed of spreading words have been enhanced incredibly, removing many difficulties from traditional WOM by the rise of the internet.

Loyalty program is a reward package offered by a brand for patrons who purchase their service or products regularly (Raab, Berezan, Krishen, & Tanford, 2016). According to Lee et al. (2015), rewards encourage members to be involved in relational behaviors. Loyalty programs provide early access to new products or services as well as special sales coupons or free merchandise, and a variety of promotional offers for the dedicated customer (Johnston, 2018). On one hand, rewards encourage sales and promotions, and on the other hand, online brand communities are becoming the most popular platform to spread words and news (Munnukka, Karjaluoto, & Tikkanen, 2015). Hence, establishing and managing a meaningful smartphone brand community has become a trend among smartphone brands. It enables brands to interact with consumers. Moreover, it allows members to interact with each other to share their issues, solve their problems, and give feedback and comments.

Loyalty reward programs are powerful marketing techniques to increase customer involvement. The rewards motivate patrons to participate in the marketing campaign. They receive prizes while helping their preferred brands to spread marketing contents. Social media marketing is capable to capture the target of the most related individuals from the information which is provided by the users themselves according to their user profile information and search history.

A message has the potential to go viral through the social media if the message content is adequately creative, innovative, captivating and motivating. In recent years, different companies and organizations deliver their marketing materials such as official video clips and promotional images through their brand communities and fan pages in social media networking channels. Smart social media marketing improves the possibility that the advertised content reaches the highest related audiences. It is usually smarter and cheaper with superior results in comparison with traditional marketing techniques. On the subject of costing, in comparison with broadcast advertising such as television and radio, social media advertising is considered a cheaper alternative. Nevertheless, when customer engagement is practiced successfully, patrons act as valuable marketing assets to the company by spreading eWOM.

1.2 Overview of Smartphone Market in Malaysia

The number of smartphone users is growing fast and manufacturers are increasing their production capacity to meet the demand in the market. New smartphone models are being launched every year with a new set of features and capabilities. As a result, the users tend to upgrade their smartphones almost every three years on average. Nevertheless, the number of individuals who purchase the latest models annually has risen significantly. Brand loyalty is one of the most influential factors in the decision-making process concerning purchase and repurchase intention. Developing, improving and maintaining brand loyalty is critical to ensure the increasing probability for customers to demonstrate repurchase behavior instead of brand switch act. Most of the smartphone manufacturers are aware of the power of loyalty whether it is in the form of repurchasing (behavioral) or promoting and praising (attitudinal) the brand.

Smartphone activities are divided into two subcategories including traditional activities (i.e. calling and texting) and non-traditional activities (i.e. social media, apps, web-surfing, and gaming). Malaysian smartphone users spend 70% of their mobile activities to non-traditional activities. Smartphones are consuming most of the productive and creative time of Malaysians. According to Hoe & Rees (2016), 91% of Malaysian adults are smartphone users wherein 8 out of 10 are Android users. Generation Y is identified as the group to spend the highest time using smartphones in comparison with Generation X.

In average, Malaysians spend 4.2 hours a day using their smartphones for various purposes including web-surfing, social media networking, education, online shopping, watching movies, trying new apps and searching for information, which are mainly non-traditional activities. Generation Y is spending an average of 5 hours and 12 minutes of the day on their smartphones which are mainly used to check on their social networking accounts like Facebook and Instagram besides texting and playing games.

There is very little research investigating smartphone market which provides a critical ground to conduct this research. Lately, social media messaging and calling applications such as WhatsApp, Line, and Telegram have made communications easier and more fun. Furthermore, some of the mentioned applications have combined gaming features in their platform which allows users to play games while texting at the same time. Smartphones are the most popular devices for social media networking activities and entertainment according to the users' feedbacks (Hoe & Rees, 2016).

Overall, the smartphone market research records in the context of social media marketing and brand loyalty is extremely limited. The conducted studies have mainly investigated smartphone consumer behavior (Rani & Sharma, 2014). On the other hand, brand loyalty in the smartphone market is receiving noteworthy call for attention especially with regard to its competitive nature. As the rivalry grows higher the importance of brand loyalty to maintain patrons seem more vital. Thus, generating loyal customers become a more significant matter. There are two categories of smartphone market known as “growing market” and “saturated market” and brand loyalty is identified as a critical element affecting customers’ purchase decision in both. The smartphone market in Korea, for instance, is considered as saturated because the largest portion of the society owns at least one smartphone. Local brands such as Samsung and LG are competing with Apple and other Chinese and Taiwanese brands to control and maintain a bigger market share. Thus, it is important to apply brand loyalty generating strategies to prevent patrons from brand switching.

The smartphone market in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, China and Vietnam in East Asia is developing fast. The rise in the number of patrons encourages manufacturers to produce more smartphones in order to reduce their production costs. Thus, stiff competition occurs in selling their smartphone products. Brand loyalty is a critical marketing strategy to gain competency in growing smartphone markets. It is important to identify the most influential factors affecting brand loyalty. These variables can be different with regard to the characteristics of the market or industry. In this study, social media marketing factors which are capable to boost brand loyalty in the smartphone market are determined from recent literature.

The main competition faced by the growing smartphone market in Malaysia is to achieve a bigger market share to have a higher ownership frequency. By controlling greater market share, manufacturers aim to be the dominator in the bazaar. Statistical reports demonstrate the success of Samsung, Apple, LG, and ASUS at the beginning of this competition but later, when Chinese brands such as Huawei and OPPO are introduced into the market, ASUS and LG began to lose a big market share (Statista, 2016). Brand loyalty is recognized to significantly control brand switch and brand engagement. Generating loyalty influences customers’ future purchase decision as well as motivating them to promote the brand among their family and friends. Moreover, through social media, they can share their views and opinions with their friends and followers regardless of the time and geographical limitations. This research aims to improve the understanding on the subject of brand loyalty and identifies the factors influencing it in the smartphone market of Malaysia.

The highest time usage is dedicated to social media networking is 21%, texting 19% and web surfing 16%. These are identified as the top three activities of smartphones users. Moreover, Malaysians believe smartphones boost 74% of their work productivity and 75% assist them to complete personal tasks (Hoe & Rees, 2016). Consequently, market growth is discussed followed by the market value. The following infographic (Figure 1.1) by Chaffey (2016), displays the annual growth of the number of active internet, social media, mobile connections, and mobile social media users in the region of Asia-Pacific.



Figure 1.1 : Annual Social Media and Communication Growth in Asia-Pacific (Chaffey, 2016)

Nowadays, the smartphone market worldwide witnesses a surprising growth of 40% in 2013 to be over the \$1 billion thresholds and \$266 billion worth. Furthermore, smartphone units are estimated to reach 1.89 billion units by 2018 (CCS Insight Statistic Report, 2014). Smartphone consignments have overtaken the old generation ordinary mobile phones in the first quarter of 2013. It is estimated that more than 722.5 million smartphones were shipped globally in 2012 (Myers, 2014). Around 90% of the smartphone market has been dominated by the ten leading companies, with a major growth in revenues for Apple in 2014 which achieved roughly 70% of the international smartphone market revenue (Myers, 2014).

By 2016, these statistics have been improved in favor of Apple which owned 79% of the smartphone market revenue. According to The Korea Herald (2017), global smartphone profit stood at \$53.7 billion, in which Apple's iPhone received \$44.9 billion and Samsung achieved \$8.3 billion, accounting for 14.6 percent of the global profits for the year 2016. Samsung Note7 recall is considered as one of the main reasons for Samsung to fall behind at gaining revenue. Nevertheless, Apple's creative innovations, marketing, and loyalty generating strategies are considered as the main reasons for iPhone to surpass Samsung in 2016. Profit share statistics have been followed by Huawei and OPPO respectively.

In addition, Apple's iOS and Google's Android are considered to be the leading operating systems to control the smartphone market, taking 92% of the profit share for themselves (Bennett, 2016). Therefore, it is concluded that the massive success in this market is driven by the high demand from customers as the requirement of having smartphones in the modern lifestyle is increasing dramatically. Even if there is an issue within the market, customers will continue to purchase smartphones because of their daily necessity. However, the brand switching rate could be unstable and variant as the Chinese mobile manufacturers strengthen their presence in the smartphone market of Malaysia (Bennett, 2016).

The smartphone market is a fast-growing and extraordinary business potential worldwide especially in Malaysia because of its high youth rate, smartphone popularity, internet price and ease of accessibilities. This study concentrates on the smartphone market in Malaysia which is highly competitive in nature. Although, the topic on smartphone market has been explored in previous researches the topic is still vague. The reason for the vagueness is the lack in social media marketing research as well as brand loyalty, customer loyalty, and customer satisfaction in smartphone market context. A few researches investigated the roles of social media marketing factors on purchase intention in Malaysia which have not focused on any specific market, product or service (Balakrishnan, Dahnil, & Yi, 2014). In Malaysia, the effect of social media marketing on brand loyalty of smartphones has not been explored mainly because it is a new topic and it is growing in a fast pace, thus, establishing a substantial ground to conduct this research (Chung & Park, 2015; Filieri & Lin, 2016).

The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2016), indicates that mobile broadband access has reached 61.9% of internet access while fixed broadband is 24.7 percent in Malaysia. On the other hand, the 16 million smartphone users are predicted to grow to 20 million by 2020, thus making Malaysia a valuable and challenging smartphone market for brands to compete for a bigger chunk of the market (Statista, 2016). According to the report by International Data Corporation (IDC) Asia-Pacific Magazine Mobile Phone and Tablet Trackers, an overall of 4.8 million units of smartphones and 0.9 million units of tablets were conveyed to Malaysia in the first half of the year 2015 (Greger Lee & Technave, 2017). Smartphones and tablets demonstrate a growth rate of 42% and 15% respectively, in comparison with the first half of the year 2014. The smartphone market in Malaysia remains to be dominated by China and Taiwan vendors, while the tablet space remains dominated by global vendors.

Electronic gadgets have turned to be ordinary instruments for a majority of people since the launch of smartphones. As a matter of fact, computers are being replaced with user-friendly and pocket-size devices such as smartphones and tablets. Smartphones are the offspring of technology advancement and smaller than other electronic gadgets making them easier to move. In addition, smartphones are powerful and capable of doing most of the general and particular daily tasks which are done by computers and notebook, for example, e-mailing, social media texting, scanning, sharing photos, and videos. Even Microsoft office tools can be used on smartphones.

While the need of smartphones with dissimilar functions is growing, many manufacturers begin to limit their target market to be the dominant seller in that market share. Nowadays, the diversity in price range enabled more individuals to purchase smartphones whereas in the early 2010 smartphones were considered as luxury products. As a result, competition among smartphone brands grew higher and tenser.

According to a statistical report by Z. Jensen (2017), a huge market value with a range of products from different manufacturer exist in the Malaysian smartphone market, for instance, Samsung shipped around 10 million units alone to Malaysia in 2014 (Malaysianwireless, 2015). The competition among brands is increasing significantly. Table 1.1 extracted from Z. Jensen (2017), demonstrates detailed smartphone sales in the year 2016 in Malaysia. Samsung remained the best-selling smartphone brand, with the highest market share of 34.3% by selling over 3 million smartphones in addition to an overall steady growth of 17.2%. OPPO is following closely occupying 10.2% of the market share by selling 916,000 smartphones in 2016. OPPO recorded a surprising growth rate of 66.8% making it as the top growing brand among all competitors in the smartphone market of Malaysia.

Huawei sold 852,000 units of the smartphone in 2016 sitting at the third place in market share ranking with 9.7% which is improved from 8.6% in 2015. Asus started great in the early smartphone market competition and managed it pretty well in Malaysia. However, by increasing market competition, Asus displayed a descending trend of 43.3% from 2015 to 2016 to take the fourth place with 9.6% market share. Asus shipped considerably less number of smartphones in 2016 because of high market competition in almost all categories. Another reason for ASUS failure in smartphone market competition was the weak marketing strategies and the higher price tag for ZenFone3 in comparison with its predecessor ZenFone2.

Apple stood at the fifth rank by 8.1% of total market share with not much improvement from 2015. The mentioned statistics have been extracted from the report by Z. Jensen (2017). Significant brand switch rate is being noticed from 2015 to 2016 with regard to the presented reports and statistics. The statistic provides a vital reasoning for conducting this study. A short summary of the statistical reports are presented in Table 1.1; with regard to Table 1.1 which demonstrates a total of 5.9% decrease in smartphone sales from 2015-2016. It indicates the smartphone market in Malaysia is reaching the saturated point where all eligible individuals have at least one smartphone. Therefore, the main motive to purchase a smartphone largely refers to upgrading or seeking for various purposes. The mentioned leads display the significance of smartphone brand loyalty more than any other time to decrease the probability of brand switch.

Table 1.1 : Smartphone Sales in Malaysia 2015-2016 (Z. Jensen, 2017)

Vendor	2016 Shipment Volume	2016 Market Share	2015 Shipment Volume	2015 Market Share	Year-Over-Year Change
1. Samsung	3,017	34.3%	2,574	27.6%	17.2%
2. OPPO	916	10.4%	549	5.9%	66.8%
3. Huawei	852	9.7%	799	8.6%	6.6%
4. Asus	842	9.6%	1,484	15.9%	-43.3%
5. Apple	715	8.1%	865	9.3%	-17.3%
Others	2,442	27.9%	3,065	32.7%	-20.3%
Total	8,784	100.0%	9,336	100.0%	-5.9%

Source: IDC Quarterly Mobile Phone Tracker, Feb 16 2017

Nowadays, smartphones are one of the most popular web surfing instruments to interact (i.e. liking, rating, commenting), review online articles, and post social media materials (The Guardian, 2016). The popularity of smartphones as web surfing devices is demonstrated by a study conducted in the United States which reports 21% of smartphone users are solely using their devices as a primary method of accessing the Internet in 2009 (CNN, 2013). The statistics have been improved to the point wherein 2016 for the first time mobile web surfing surpassed desktop computers web surfing (The Guardian, 2016). Electronic Word of Mouth is a powerful tool to influence customers' decision-making process and its results (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012).

According to Balakrishnan, Dahnil, & Yi (2014), eWOM has been proven to have a major influence on customers' purchase intention. Hennig-Thurau & Gwinner, et al. (2004), defined Electronic Word of Mouth as "Any positive or negative statement made by a potential, actual, or former customer about the product or company which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet". Electronic Word of Mouth has enabled people to spread contents online wherein nowadays it is mainly being done by smartphones. Recent reports indicate that social media networking and web surfing are mainly happening through smartphones, thus, their importance to spread online content is clearer than ever. Stated proofs demonstrate the importance of smartphones in daily routines which leads to an increase in their market demand. The growth in demand increases market value which entices more companies and brands into investing and entering the smartphone market resulting in higher market competition.

According to Statista (2016), with regard to the population growth rate and the increase in demand, the smartphone marketplace of Malaysia would experience a higher competitive environment in the near future. The aforesaid evidences postulate a clear call for attention to the dynamic and competitive nature of the smartphone market. Smartphone market research in Malaysia has a great potential because of the earlier mentioned shortages in the recent literature. Marketing research topics including loyalty, branding, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) are

mainly encouraged for further investigations through eWOM and social media marketing (Balakrishnan et al., 2014; Barger, Peltier, & Schultz, 2016; K. Xie & Lee, 2015). However, a few studies have investigated brand loyalty among smartphone users such as Balakrishnan et al. (2014) and Wieseke, Alavi, & Habel (2014). Nonetheless, the topic can be explored further to augment the current understanding. Therefore, additional research on brand loyalty in the smartphone market is required in order to expand the current understanding over customers' attitude and behavior toward brands.

Statistics demonstrate a large growth in the number of smartphone users in Malaysia. According to Statista (2015b), the number of smartphone users has been increased from 14.5 million in 2015 to almost 20 million 2019 demonstrating a 35% increase. It is predicted that this number will reach 21.3 million in 2021. The mentioned statistics are displayed in Figure 1. 3. However, these statistics not only demonstrate significant economic and financial opportunities, but they also point out that the market is going to be bigger. The Malaysian smartphone market will attract a higher number of Chinese manufacturers. Thus, marketplace competition will be critically higher in the near future (Statista, 2015b).



Figure 1.2 : Number of smartphone users in Malaysia 2015-2021
(Statista, 2015b)

Loyalty generating process is one of the most significant areas to investigate and explore by considering its short and long-term influences on other brand entities. As one of the most critical entities of brand equity, brand loyalty plays a significant role to improve repurchase behavior and praising attitude among patrons. This is a good call for smartphone manufacturers to improve their marketing management, especially by the latest and advanced social media marketing tools. The eWOM is identified as one of the most significant gears to spread customers' experiences and thoughts since the extensive growth in internet access among people, Moreover, we cannot ignore the influences of late but great social media brand communities.

The role of social media brand communities to create suitable online space for customers to communicate with their preferred brand and other customers is critical. They enable individuals to share their experience freely without time and location

boundaries (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Social media networking websites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter are home to many great brand communities.

According to M. K. Kim, Wong, Chang, & Park (2016), customer satisfaction has a direct and significant relationship with customer loyalty. On the other hand, Balakrishnan et al. (2014), claim that customers are enthusiastic to share their thoughts and experiences about the products they use regardless of satisfaction. In fact, customers, whether satisfied or dissatisfied, have the potentials to spread positive and negative eWOM about the product of their use. Moreover, they are provided with the space to be engaged in online activities such as rating and writing online reviews about the brands (Balakrishnan et al., 2014). However, the lack of studies on the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty still exists.

Brand loyal customers are less sensitive to price and distribution changes. Therefore, they demonstrate a lower rate of brand switch behavior. One of the main concerns of the smartphone manufacturers in this phase is to design or upgrade brand loyalty programs. These programs have high potential to keep customers engaged with the trademark. Furthermore, brand loyal customers tend to be involved with their preferred brand. By designing and implementing appropriate online programs, customers demonstrate higher social media engagement with their favorite brand. These activities include loyalty reward programs, online campaigns, hashtag campaigns and etc. The issue of brand switching is more salient when the market reaches the saturation point where the role of brand loyalty will be even more conspicuous (M. K. Kim et al., 2016).

The growth in the number of smartphone users reflects a significant progress in mobile commerce (m-commerce) in Malaysia. According to EcommerceMilo (2014), m-commerce has risen from RM0.10 billion in 2010 to RM3.43 billion in 2015 demonstrating a huge development in m-commerce for Malaysia. The popularity of smartphones provides an appropriate context for m-commerce to grow as well. There is a huge monetary transaction potential in m-commerce related to the growth in customer knowledge and the smartphone market. It has great potential for further improvements and opportunity to reach m-commerce records in developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom and Japan. Movie tickets are the most popular goods purchased through m-commerce in Malaysia. Therefore, research in the context of smartphone market benefits multiple areas of knowledge as well as practice.

The increase in popularity of smartphones for web surfing is causing a slow death for desktop web surfing. It leads to desktop market shrink while smartphone market is being expanded instead, which demonstrates the growth in the smartphone market. The demand for smartphones continues to grow every day. The number of active technical companies in smartphone manufacturing is increasing. Therefore, the smartphone market steals great market share from desktops and tablets as it is displayed in Figure 1.4 extracted from the report by StatCounter (2019). Massive

global profit share of 53 billion dollars and smartphone market value entice many manufacturers to enter marketplace (The Korea Herald, 2017).

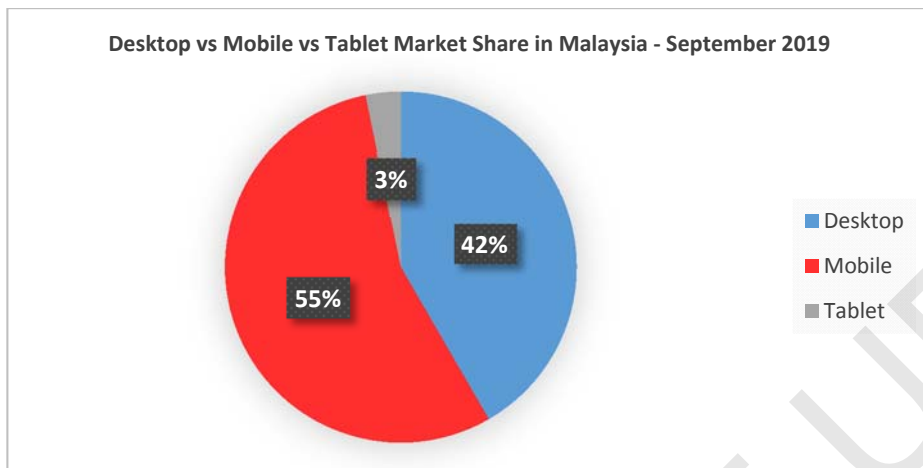


Figure 1.3 : Desktop vs Mobile vs Tablet Market Share in Malaysia
(StatCounter, 2019)

According to Diana Goovaerts (2016), the average time spent on the smartphones is exceeding other internet accessing instruments such as tablets and desktops. Malaysia is one of the countries where the smartphone sales is higher than other internet surfing gadgets such as desktop computers, laptops, and tablets (Kugan, 2015). It demonstrates the popularity of the smartphone among the people who live in Malaysia. Therefore, smartphones are the next big trend for web surfing and social networking.

1.3 Overview of Social Media and eWOM

Since the first social media networking website “sixdegrees.com” was introduced back in 1997, it has evolved significantly (Heidemann, Klier, & Probst, 2010). According to Worldometers (2016), reports display that Facebook alone, the most popular social media networking website with regard to the number of users, has over 1,788 million active users in which 823 million are mobile-only users (47%) (Kit Smith & Brandwatch, 2016). The statistics mentioned in previous studies demonstrate a huge deal of words and messages are being spread and shared. Essentially, half of these active users log in every day. Users commonly dedicate almost one-third of their online time to social media, for example in the United States 22% of internet time is spent on Facebook alone by mobile users (Kit Smith & Brandwatch, 2016).

Facebook users generate 4 million “Like” per minute, upload 350 million photos a day, as a result, an overall of 4 new petabytes of data per day (Kit Smith & Brandwatch, 2016). Moreover, 4.75 billion posts, articles, photos, and videos have been shared daily in 2013 indicating the importance of social media networking websites especially Facebook in generating and spreading eWOM (Zephoria, 2017).

There is a continuing discussion over the issue of branding in social media because of the popularity and capability of online communities to connect likeminded people (Hagel, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Many commerce sages and researchers enthusiastically encourage businesses to be active in social media to use its superior marketing advantages (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Previous research confirmed the significance of the relationship between customers purchase decision and reading social media online reviews (Yayli & Bayram, 2012). There are different aspects of social media and eWOM that influence customers purchase decision such as quality and quantity of the reviews, ratings and the time in which a review is been posted. In other words, eWOM is identified as the factual reflection of patrons' product assessment which has raised brands' concerns.

In order to distinguish the significance of social media marketing, the report by Stelnzer (2016) provides relevant information. According to the report, 90% of marketers agree that social media marketing is critical to their business wherein 46% of interviewees agreed to the effectiveness of Facebook marketing by marking strongly agree to the statement "my Facebook marketing is effective". The mentioned statistics demonstrate the critical influence of social media marketing in the existing market. Moreover, it has shown the boost in social media advertising awareness among marketing divisions. The Business-to-Consumer (B2C) marketers point out the influences of social media on their sales. Whereas the Business-to-Business (B2B) marketers address the influences more on brand loyalty, brand image, and branding strategies. Although marketing expenses are increasing, nonetheless marketing departments are receiving higher funds with the perspective of improvements in the sales and benefits.

According to eMarketer (2013), marketing departments are expected to receive higher returns for social media advertisings, the record shows the returns has increased from \$4.1 billion in 2013 to \$5 billion in 2014. Within a short time frame, marketers have included social media marketing for a vast range of marketing objectives such as customer relationship management, branding, service, sales promotions, and research and development. Brands have valued social media to spread promotional offers, introduce new products and other marketing materials (eMarketer, 2013).

Branding can be practiced or implemented by marketers through social media marketing instruments using various options for example, by participating in social media networking channels as a brand broadcaster, display advertising, providing brand engagement opportunities through social media networks and publishing brand content known as 'content marketing' or 'social publishing' (Mosavi & Kenarehfar, 2014). Promoting brands in social media marketing instruments can be seen as an integrated component in a marketing communication campaigns like an enduring corporate communication channel or as a sequence of micro-operations specifically planned to attract customers by digital exposure.

According to eMarketer (2013), experts believe social media branding marketing tools play a critical role to enhance brand loyalty, brand image, and brand trust. The instruments in social media marketing can be used to enhance loyalty, popularity, awareness and promote the brand, thus improving customer engagement. Moreover, it can inspire consumers to spread eWOM about product specifications including strength and weaknesses. This can significantly influence the number of visitors to offline and online brands' stores as well as social media brand communities. Social media brand community activities vary depending on the performance of different social media networking platforms. It may involve activities such as B2C relationship management or product promotions.

Ashley & Tuten (2015), suggest four subcategories of brands which ranged from high to low involvement based on social media engagement. Social media networks are, but not limited to, online brand communities, online content sharing platforms (i.e. blogs and discussion forums), social media networking websites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), photo sharing networks (Instagram), and innovative hubs. Engagement with social media has been assessed by using 40 attributes that counted not only participation in social media networks but also how the brands contributed. According to Ashley & Tuten (2015), the most commonly used channels are social media networking website followed by video sharing websites. Facebook has been identified as the most favorite social media networking website with regard to the number of active users.

Spreading specific marketing messages through an online advertisement banner or a display advertising is one of the main efficiencies of social media networking channels. Many researchers aim to identify an effective and influential context for the marketing messages in social media. In a content analysis of an online advertisement which go viral, Golan & Zaidner (2008), use Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel to categorize the creative strategies used in the advertisements. The findings showed that the contents of most of the advertisements were mainly humorous or sexual or the mixture of these two. The conducted research by Sinha, Ahuja, & Medury (2011), exhibit that social media noticeably improve consumers' knowledge about brands which strengthens the emotional bonds between them. The findings also discover the bonds are built regardless of the nature of the communications context whether the content is rational or emotional.

Sometimes brands invite interested patrons to use their products in the virtual world, as known as brand entertainment, to experiences the nature of the goods through virtual reality or social network games. Zhang, Sung, & Lee (2010), conduct an exploratory content analysis of branded entertainment content features in Facebook. He found that 70% of brands utilized brand entertainment on Facebook. In addition, Naylor, Lamberton, & West (2012), identify how mere virtual presence and the characteristics of brand supporters on social networks could affect evaluations of unknown brands. Their research supports the use of brand personals to meet objectives to raise brand awareness and enhance the result of brand evaluations by the customers.

According to Sotiriadis & van Zyl (2013), customers are willing to share information through social media progressively because eWOM is available anywhere anytime. The message can be shared within a click and it is easy to share, learn, follow up, retrieve, and receive feedback. Moreover, eWOM enables customers to write reviews about their experience while using the product and services including the pros and cons. A contagious message by a single customer can go viral online and reach millions of readers who could be future potential customers. User-friendly services offered by a variety of social media networking channels including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Google+ and others have made sharing easy and fun.

Based on the findings of Karakaya & Barnes (2010), there is a significant relationship between customers' online engagement and brand choice by the patrons. In other words, online engagement provides a better root to gain new customers attraction as well as maintaining loyal customers to the brand or company. Positive online reviews strengthen loyal customers to continue their loyalty and repurchase the product as well as spreading eWOM about their experience through online brand communities. Nowadays social media networking websites (Facebook) are playing a critical role in motivating people to engage in online activities by sharing posts, photos, videos, and online reviews.

1.4 Problem Statement

Social media instruments play a critical role in the modern lifestyle of people ranging from family communications to business communications as well as entertainment purposes. There are several issues which provide substantial reasoning to conduct this research. Firstly, the fast-growing smartphone market with a high market competition has increased the probability of brand switching behavior among customers creating a major practical gap which to conduct this research. The role of social media in marketing strategies is imperative to comprehend. Furthermore, social network platforms have done a pretty extensive job to connect people and remove distance boundaries. Thus, this research augments the current perception on the influences of social media and network marketing on brand loyalty within smartphone market context which establishes the industrial gap for this research.

Secondly, the lack of research in the previous literature in social media marketing and smartphone brand loyalty which is a major literature gap providing appropriate reasoning to conduct this research. A number of brand loyalty researches have been conducted in Malaysia, however, a very limited number have attempted to investigate the role of social media marketing factors especially in the context of smartphone market (A-qader, Omar, & Rubel, 2017; Nikhashemi, Paim, & Khatibi, 2015; Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015). Likewise, there has only been a few debates over the significance of the relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty, purchase intention, and repurchase behavior in Malaysia (Marmaya, Balakrishnan, & Shuaib, 2018; Shaban, Liu, Mohd Ridzuan, & Alkhateeb, 2017). The present research establishes critical understanding of the direct relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty especially in the smartphone market in Malaysia.

Thirdly, the lack of previous research to investigate the mediating role of loyalty reward programs on the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty has created the necessity to conduct this study. In fact, the role of loyalty reward programs to mediate the relationship between social network advertising and social media brand communities with brand loyalty in the smartphone market have remained unexplored. A few studies have been carried out to investigate the influences of loyalty reward programs on brand loyalty (Chan, Zheng, Cheung, Lee, & Lee, 2014) but its mediating role on the relationship between social media marketing with brand loyalty have not been observed. However, since the role of rewards is always interesting and effective on human behavior, thus, its influence on social media marketing and brand loyalty establishes new opportunities to augment human behavior comprehension.

The previous research investigatin the moderating influences of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) on the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty is lacking. This is another major literature and theoretical gap which justifies the significance of conducting this research. In other words, this study investigates the influences of social media marketing on customers' repurchase behavior, attitude, and emotional bonds toward smartphone brands. Recent literature has explored the relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty by observing purchase intention (Choi, Thoeni, & Kroff, 2018; J. J. Wang, Wang, & Wang, 2018). However, its influence on the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty is not defined yet.

As social media communication tools are becoming ordinary in the modern lifestyle, their influences on people purchase habits could not be ignored. The salient issues aforesaid earlier will be explained in the following to clarify the existing problem.

One of the most significant obstacles to generate and strengthen brand loyalty among customers is the lack of understanding on the potentials of social media communicational instruments to promote products and services. Social media marketing has been underestimated for some time. There has been a significant development in electronic and media communicating systems. However, many brands, companies, and organizations are not fully aware of social media marketing capabilities yet. There have been previous researches on eWOM in Malaysia such as Balakrishnan et al. (2014), nonetheless, the research on exploring the influences of eWOM on brand loyalty specifically in the smartphone market is still lacking. The results of this research augment the current understanding of new communication methods and smartphone-related technologies.

Brand switch behavior occurs more frequently among the customers who are not loyal or less loyal to products and services in comparison to brand-loyal individuals (J. M. Jensen, 2011). According to M. K. Kim et al. (2016), when the smartphone market reaches a saturated point, maintaining users become a serious matter to tackle the brand switch behavior. Brand loyal customers are less likely to commit brand switch

in order to minimize perceived risk indicating the prominence of brand loyalty research.

A joint study conducted by Google & TNS (2014), on 150,000 interviewees from 56 countries reveals that Malaysians are holding the highest global rate for exclusively smartphone web surfing which made up 35% of the total usage. Malaysians spend twice as much time on YouTube in comparison with the global average (Lum Ka Kay, 2016). The alternations in viewing trend demonstrate the necessity to rethink about advertising and marketing strategies.

Figure 1.4 by Statista (2016), demonstrate unstable and high competitive smartphone market in Malaysia which shows the market share statistics among smartphone manufacturers undergo dramatic changes annually. Figure 1.4 highlights brand switch and its significance vividly.

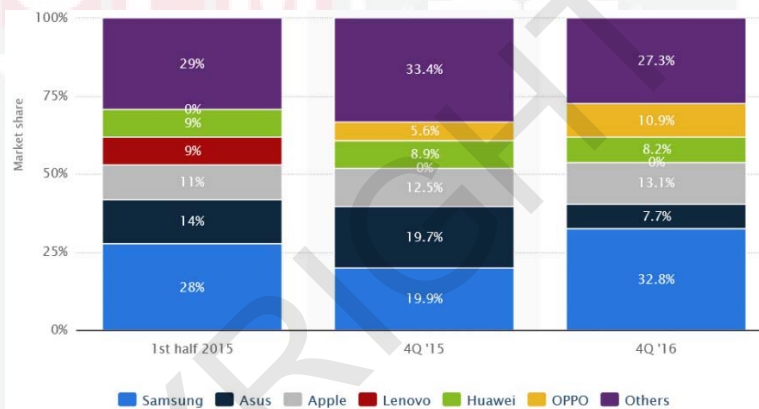


Figure 1.4 : Detailed Smartphone Market Share in Malaysia 2015-2016
(Statista, 2016)

For example, Samsung owned 28% of the market share of the smartphone market in Malaysia in the first half of 2015. The market share dropped to 19% at the end of 2015. A year later, in the 4th quarter of 2016 again Samsung owns 32% of the market share. The instability in market share is due to different reasons such as introducing a new model or promotional offers by the competing brand wherein low level of loyalty among customers is one of the main reasons of brand switching behavior (Pongpaew & Tiangsoongnern, 2016). Similar circumstance applies to Asus where their 29% smartphone market share in first half of 2015 enlarged to 33.4% at the end of 2015 and later in the 4th quarter of 2016 Asus market share dropped to 27.3%. Apple is known for its advanced brand loyalty strategies, plus, high customer loyalty and brand trust (Jon Martindale, 2017; Y. Wang, Su, & Tseng, 2016). According to Statista (2016), Apple smartphone market share in Malaysia demonstrates a low rate but stable and the increasing rate of 11% ownership in the first half of 2015 to 12.5% at the end of 2015 which augmented to 13.1 by the 4th quarter of 2016 in Malaysia.

This study examines the significance of the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia. Moreover, it provides research context for further investigations on brand loyalty and social media marketing as well as augmenting comprehension of the topic specifically in the field of smartphones and similar mobile devices.

1.5 Research Questions

The results of the present study shall provide adequate means to answer the following broad and twofold research question:

What are the most significant factors influencing brand loyalty through social media marketing, in addition to, what is the intervening effect of loyalty reward programs and eWOM on brand loyalty in the smartphone market of Malaysia?

The aforesaid broad research question has further been analyzed to the following sub-questions:

1. What are the most significant social media marketing factors influencing brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia?
2. What is the relationship between social media brand communities, social network advertising, and loyalty reward programs with brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia?
3. Is there a the direct relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia?
4. Does loyalty reward program mediate the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia?
5. Does eWOM moderate the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia?

1.6 Research Objectives

Extracting the most significant social media marketing factors which influence brand loyalty, in addition to, enhancing the borders of understanding about smartphone brand loyalty are the general objectives of this research. With regard to the research questions and the identified gaps in theory, industry, and practice, the following research objectives have been devised for the present research:

1. To determine the social media marketing factors influencing brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia.
2. To examine the significance of the relationship between social media brand communities, social network advertising, and loyalty reward programs with brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia.

3. To investigate the direct relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia.
4. To determine the mediating effect of loyalty reward program on the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia.
5. To examine the moderating impact of eWOM on the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in smartphone market in Malaysia.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The present study aims to identify the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia. Therefore, it mainly focuses on social media instruments that convey marketing contents or influence purchase decision. In other words, the purpose of this quantitative study is to explore the relationship between social network advertising, social media brand communities, loyalty reward programs, and eWOM, with brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia. The findings of this study lead to new domains of research in the field of social media marketing, consumer behavior and brand loyalty for future investigations. The main contribution of this research is recognizing the social media marketing factors which influence brand loyalty and brand switch alongside with the assessment of mediating effect of loyalty reward programs and moderating role of eWOM in the smartphone market in Malaysia.

This study augments the current understanding of social media factors which influence brand loyalty in addition to investigating the mediating effect of loyalty reward programs and moderating role of eWOM. This research examines the relationship between critical social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia.

The present study emphasizes to investigate the role of eWOM in relation to social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in the smartphone market. The findings contribute to the general understanding of the human behavior. The influence of eWOM is critical mainly because of its significant role on consumer behavior which is highlighted by recent researchers. This is a purchase trend research assessing behavior and attitude toward smartphone brands to assess brand loyalty.

The primary data will be collected from smartphone users in Malaysia randomly to ensure that the results represent the research population. The scope of this study is the smartphone users in different demographical ranges residing in Malaysia who are a member of at least one social media networking website or discussion forum. Brand loyalty of smartphone users to their preferred smartphone brand is assessed through the research questionnaire. The research questionnaires are spread in smartphone-related social media brand communities.

To ensure the cohesion of the analysis and results, the boundaries should be determined applied. In this study, the respondents must have three premises of 1) having at least one smartphone, 2) membership in at least one social media brand community, and 3) residing in Malaysia. The citizenship does not matter in this case because the aim of this study is to investigate the smartphone market of Malaysia which includes the people who live here. The data will be collected online and through soft copies by spreading the questionnaire in the targeted social media communities. The highest effort has been made to collect the research data randomly from every part of Malaysia. Last but not least, this study has to be geographically limited to Malaysia due to the fact that accessing people and collecting data from a widely dispersed population is extremely time-consuming.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The present research generate results and findings that benefit researchers, academicians, and brand managers in the area of social media marketing and smartphone brand loyalty. Some of the most noticeable and expected theoretical and managerial contributions are brought in the following.

The magnitude of the present study is twofold including the theoretical significance which brings different theories and models to form the theoretical framework, in addition to, the practice in smartphone context which has received minor contributions in previous literature especially concerning social media marketing.

The present research is has the capability to contribute to the body of its used theories by expanding the domains of existing comprehension over their performance. This is the first study to combine the two theories of Planned Behavior and Social Identity with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and the Laroche Brand Community Model to measure brand loyalty. Consequently, this study generates a clear perception of how brand loyalty can be accomplished by social network advertising management, social media brand community administration, loyalty reward programs, and eWOM. Furthermore, integration of the mentioned theories into a single coherent framework is another expected theoretical contribution of the present study. In addition, the present research contributes to the perception of the relationship between social media marketing factors and smartphone brand loyalty through the used theories that is also one of its primary contributions. In other words, the Theory of Planned Behavior, Theory of Social Identity, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and the Laroche Brand Community Model will be used to measure smartphone brand loyalty in online marketing context.

The fast-growing smartphone market in Malaysia provides a great practical and industrial competition and development ground for smartphone brands. However, it leads to a stiff competition in different smartphone market categories. The results of the present study benefit smartphone manufacturers and brand managers to know their consumers' behavior better especially in response to social media marketing. The

findings are expected to augment brand loyalty management approaches through social media marketing instruments. The number of smartphone users is increasing dramatically and the rate of internet browsing by mobile devices gets ahead of personal computers. It demonstrates the significance of smartphones in peoples' activities and interactions.

Generally, it is proven that brand loyal customers show higher resistance against changes in distribution, price, quality, and service by representing less brand switch. Brand loyal customers are less sensitive to price changes and perform brand switch behavior less often (J. Cheng, Eun-Young, & Thadani, 2016). The present study investigates the loyalty and brand switch more closely to identify the most critical factors that influence smartphone brand loyalty.

The rapid growth in communication technology brought extensive improvement opportunities to social media marketing. Most of these newly presented communication technologies have a vivid influence on customers' purchase decision-making process. The new and advanced smartphone communication tools and applications are introduced every day in addition to the new types of social media networking and online shopping websites and applications. There are cases wherein social media and online shopping-selling applications are being combined.

Due to the new set of improvements in communication technology, this research investigates the relationship between social media marketing factors including social network advertising, social media brand communities, and loyalty reward programs with brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia. In addition, this research examines the mediating influence of loyalty reward programs on the relationship between social network advertising and social media brand communities with brand loyalty of the smartphone market in Malaysia. Furthermore, this study measures the direct impact of eWOM on brand loyalty of smartphones in the country.

Consequently, this research assesses the moderating effect of eWOM in relation to social network advertising, social media brand communities and loyalty reward programs with brand loyalty in the smartphone market. Moderating influence of eWOM on brand loyalty is one of the key contributions of this research since there are no previous studies to consider this matter.

In developed countries, brands advance new communication methods by optimizing social media performance to spread eWOM. Nowadays, the topic on the advantages of using social media to cultivate better communication roots between brands and customers is under special attention by brands in Malaysia. However, in comparison to its full potentials, Malaysia is still in the early steps and many markets such as smartphones have not received noticeable contribution. There is a huge improvement potential available to boost social media influence in marketing activities. The results of this research would reveal significant information about the impact of eWOM and

its relationship to social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia.

Furthermore, the findings of this research expand the current comprehension on the factors influencing the smartphone market in Malaysia extensively. It reveals improvement potentials that would build competitive advantages through social media brand communities, social network advertising, and loyalty reward programs. Exploring the moderating effects of eWOM and its relationship with social media and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia would establish new opportunities for future academic, industrial and practical implementations.

1.9 Operational Definitions of Key Terms

In this segment, a brief operational definition of the terms used in this research will be presented in the following subsections. The definitions are meant to describe the operational characterizations related to the context of in this research.

Brand loyalty

Allegiance attitude and action towards the preferred smartphone brand. It is the emotional bond between the customers and their preferred smartphone brand (Jacob Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978).

Social Network Advertising

Marketing messages spread through social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube would trigger potential customers (Can & Kaya, 2016). Four types of advertising have been discussed in this study and are presented in the following paragraph.

1. Display advertising is a type of online advertising that comes in several forms, including banner advertisements, rich media and more. Unlike text-based advertisements, display advertising relies on elements such as images, audio, and video to convey the advertising content.
2. Banner advertising or web banner is a form of advertising on the World Wide Web (WWW) delivered by an advertisement server. This form of online advertising entails embedding an advertisement into a web page. It is intended to attract traffic to a website by linking to the website of the advertiser.
3. Pop-up advertising is a window that comes up on top of another window on a computer screen by clicking on a link which can be in the form of a photo, flash file, or video during web surfing or using any application which has the built-in advertisement features.
4. Search Engine Advertising (SEA) is the top links in the search result screen mainly paid by a promoter to the search engine providers such as Google and Bing. These links are marked as 'Advertised'.

Social Media Brand Communities

The combination of brand communities and social media leads to the concept which is identified as social media brand community (Laroche et al., 2012). It is a subset of the broader concept of virtual communities and online communities.

Loyalty Reward Programs

Any institutionalized incentive system that attempts to enhance consumers' consumption behavior overtime beyond the direct effects of changes to the price or the core offering is called loyalty reward program (LRP). The term “loyalty program” captures various marketing initiatives which include reward cards, gifts, tiered service levels, dedicated support contacts, and other methods that positively influence consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward the brand (Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005).

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

The online communications including conversation and sharing opinion and experience about their most and least preferred smartphone brands including pros and cons. It can be a positive or a negative comment depending on the wordings of the content (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Smartphone

It is a handheld computer that can perform a variety of actions using different applications and software. Besides calling and texting, web-surfing, entertainment, and social media interactions are identified as the top reasons for smartphones to be used in the daily routine (M. K. Kim et al., 2016).

1.10 Chapter Summary

The significance of conducting the present research has been discussed in the present chapter. The background of study and existing industrial, practical, and theoretical gaps have been identified and discussed. The research objectives have been clearly stated in section 1.5 and followed by the scope and significance of the study. Consequently, an overview of the thesis is brought in the following.

This thesis is divided into five separate chapters. Chapter one presents the introduction of the research topic, including the background of the study, an overview of the smartphone market and social media and eWOM. Consequently, the statement of the problem, research questions, and research objectives are presented in this chapter followed by the scope of the study, as well as the contribution of the research to academia and practitioners. Finally, the operational definition of terms and organization of the thesis conclude the first chapter of the thesis.

Chapter two deals with the review of the literature. This chapter details most aspects related to brand loyalty, social media marketing, social media brand communities, social network advertising, loyalty reward programs, and eWOM in the context of the smartphone market in Malaysia. Theoretical background and framework are also presented in this chapter which enables us to perceive how the research framework is constructed. This chapter provides a summary of the theories that have been used for different relationships in this study with literature support. This chapter allows us to understand, how the gaps in the theory and practice can be addressed by hypothesizing relationships.

Chapter three of the thesis emphasizes on the research methodology and design, whereby all details related to the quantitative procedures are presented. Population and sampling techniques are discussed in details including sampling procedure, sample frame, sample size, procedures for development of measurement items, questionnaire design, and pre-test. Finally, the hypotheses development and research framework are proposed in this chapter.

Chapter four displays the analysis and results of the study. This includes data cleaning and screening through checking for missing values, suspicious responses, outliers, and normality test. Furthermore, assessment of measurement model including reliability and validity of the instruments are discussed in this chapter. Lastly, overall structural model is also given in this chapter which answers the hypotheses which were developed in chapter three of the thesis.

Chapter five discusses the findings of this thesis as well as summarizing and comparing the results of the present study with previous studies. Finally, the conclusions that have been derived from this study are discussed in details. These conclusions will help academicians and practitioners to comprehend the main findings of the study from a general perspective. In the same chapter, the limitations of the study as well as the direction for future study are also given.

In summary, this research intends to enrich the current knowledge on brand loyalty by conducting an investigation in public marketing sector of the smartphone market in Malaysia and to find out the most significant social media marketing factors which influence brand loyalty. Most prominently, this research explores the potential influences of eWOM and the relationship between social media marketing factors and brand loyalty in the smartphone market in Malaysia which is a fast-growing market segment with great potentials.

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