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EMPOWERED CUSTOMERS IN THE GROCERY SECTOR: AN ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS POSTED BY CUSTOMERS ON FACEBOOK

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Abstract

Businesses across a wide array of industries have rushed to adopt social media as a marketing strategy. Social media have transformed the communication landscape since customers now have the possibility to create content on social media sites of businesses and share their lived experiences with the online community. Increasingly, grocery stores are using Facebook to communicate with customers. However, there is paucity of research on the use of social media in the grocery sector. This paper aims to determine whether and investigate how Facebook has empowered customers of Tesco and Walmart. Netnography approach was adopted to observe the social media phenomenon within the grocery sector. Contents posted on the Facebook page of Tesco and Walmart were collected to explore how Facebook has empowered grocery customers. Findings show that Facebook has given a voice to the customer. Customers of Tesco and Walmart have the power to gain information, the power to complain and to criticise, the power to create value and the power to provide information to the community. This paper contributes to knowledge by revealing how Facebook has empowered grocery customers. Future research could focus on

customer empowerment in anti brand communities or other online sources where customers exchange information on brands.

Keywords

Social Media; Facebook; Customer Empowerment; Grocery Stores

1. Introduction

Digital interactivity has spurred an increasing interest among practitioners, especially interactions of customers on social media. The advent of Web 2.0 has dramatically transformed the marketing landscape (Arnaboldi & Goget, 2016). These technology-based interactive platforms have undeniably increased interaction and communication among individuals, profit and not for profit organizations including government institutions (Ekwok, 2017). Businesses post different types of information, promotional campaigns, and consumer deals on social media platforms. For many organisations, social media are an important marketing tool and their main challenge is to identify and implement the appropriate communications mix allowing businesses and brands to be easily recognised and recalled by customers. However, firms need to realise that the opportunities offered by social networking sites (SNSs) extend beyond the boundaries of the unidirectional nature of traditional marketing.

In this digital era, consumers are increasingly invading the marketing domain of businesses and are actively creating marketing content through their user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms. Customers have been empowered as social media offer them a voice that can be heard by billions of users. Within the realm of social media, where relationships are developed around a network of individuals sharing similar interests, organisations no longer have total control over corporate communications as members of the online community also drive conversations (Colleoni, 2013). Within these new media, communications are “viral” because opinions and ideas spread like a virus via the social network through word-of-mouth (henceforth WOM) and are perceived as highly trustworthy by the community members (Balouchi et al., 2017).

When using social media, businesses have ongoing dialogues with customers by actively listening and responding to their queries. Similarly, customers now have the possibility to create content on social media sites of businesses and share their lived experiences with their peers and the businesses. Social media offer opportunities

to businesses to adapt their strategies to the changing needs of customers by responding to UGCs on social media platforms (Ul Islam & Zaheer, 2016). However, businesses seem to miss out on these opportunities and to use social media as merely an additional communication platform.

Businesses across a wide array of industries have rushed to incorporate social media within their marketing strategy (Valerio Ureña et al., 2015). The social media revolution is forcing retailers including grocery stores to revisit their marketing strategies. Adapting to the new realities of the marketplace, grocery stores interact with customers on social media platforms (Tarnowski, 2011). Since the Global Food Retail Report (March, 2013) forecasts that by 2017 sales are expected to grow by 37.2%, it is important for retailers within the food retail industry to understand how social media are reshaping the retail landscape.

Extant research in the field of social media, as a tool for marketers has been carried out, yet there is a lack of scholarly research on its use in the grocery sector, though grocery retailers are increasingly integrating social media in their marketing strategy. In this social media era, empowered customer co-create products or modify products, however such forms of customer empowerment are not applicable to the grocery sector, where retailers do not manufacture but only sell products. This paper will therefore focus on the grocery sector and aims to determine whether Facebook has empowered customers in the grocery sector by analysing comments posted by customers on the official Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart.

In this paper, we present a review of the literature on social media, and customer empowerment. We then describe the netnographic method and discuss the findings of whether Facebook has empowered customers. We then conclude, present the limitations, and suggest future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1 The social media phenomenon

Social media are new media technology that allows instant, multi-way communication among groups of individuals (Arnaboldi & Goget, 2016). Arnaboldi and Coget (2016, p.2) contend that social media are bringing about a societal revolution, as they are an “open and multi-way communication tool”, and they are fast and affordable. Though considered as new media, social media are popularly used

around the world and have become major digital communication channels (Hudson et al., 2015).

Businesses use social media to engage in conversations with their consumers or to communicate with them (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Organisations use social media as a branding tool to communicate their brand image, brand identity, and values (Yan, 2011). Customers also create and disseminate brand content in a participatory, collaborative and socially linked-behaviour, thus leading to co-creation of the brand on social media (Vanden Bergh et al. 2012). The advent of Web 2.0 has empowered customers who now have the opportunity to interact and communicate with businesses (Duffett, 2017).

2.2 Customer empowerment

Users create, share and disseminate information on social media and this contributes to the democratisation of knowledge (Constaninides et al., 2008). Users can easily set up communities of special interests within which they can share their knowledge and experience, and can also engage in conversations with other people, or experts in the field (Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson, 2012). Although UGC can be developed for any purpose, increasingly people create UGC about brands, companies, products and services (Vanden Bergh et al., 2012). The outcome is a unique form of customer empowerment enabling customers to have unprecedented influence on the market power structures and more significantly on the shape of future marketing (Constaninides et al., 2008).

UGC about marketplace information can pose new challenges to marketers since UGC represents a shift in control from marketer to consumer (Vanden Bergh et al., 2012). This shift in control has important implications for marketers since it is customers who decide what to say about brands and not marketers (Christodoulides et al., 2012).

In this social media era, businesses have to face customers who resent being talked at; instead, customers want organisations to listen to them, aptly engage with them, and respond to their needs (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Constaninides et al. (2008) also commented on this migration of market power from company to consumer and argued that these empowered customers have a voice through their UGC, which can be spread virally on the web. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2013) use the pinball metaphor to describe how social media have altered the nature of the relationship between a company and its customers. Customers in the pinball age are different from customers

in the bowling age (traditional, one-way directional and linear marketing) in two main ways. Firstly, customers in the social media era participate actively and secondly they have a high level of networked interconnectedness.

“Those empowered consumers not only receive messages like bowling pins, they actively participate via social media by sharing brand and product experiences with friends via status updates or even filmed reviews. Such consumer actions are immediate and often visible by large numbers of other consumers; they can change the intensity and even meaning of the original message in numerous possible ways. As a result, the ball is diverted, accelerated or slowed, and sometimes brought to a complete halt” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013, p. 238).

Today with websites like Yelp, Urbanspoon and Tripadvisor, more people follow what customers have to say about a business; they no longer have to rely on what companies tell them. Increasingly consumers are using social media to obtain recommendations, opinions and reviews from colleagues, family, friends, experts and members of online communities prior to purchases (Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

Businesses find themselves at the mercy of customers who post comments about their brands. They depend on positive UGC to maintain their legitimacy and reputation (Jurgens et al., 2016). Therefore social media have changed the way organisations communicate and interact with their customers

With ‘Real-Time customers’ i.e. customers using Web 2.0 technology, traditional broadcast media cannot be the only channel of communication (Constantinides et al. 2008). Marketers should try to empower those ‘Real-Time Customers’ to partake in marketing activities that were traditionally unidirectional: branding, product development, product evaluation, and customer service. Consumers are encouraged to actively participate in the creation of new products by suggesting and evaluating new product ideas; developing, assessing and challenging product concepts; discussing and improving prototypes; testing and experiencing the new product features by running simulations; and requesting information about or just consuming the new product (Füller et al., 2009). Co-creation activities on the Internet contribute to perceived consumer empowerment, which further motivates customers to continue co-creating with the firm (Füller et al., 2009).

According to O’Brien (2011), the highest level of value a social media empowered consumer can provide to a business is to co-create products and services.

He claims that this feeling of empowerment will make it easier for businesses to satisfy their customers, thereby creating long term and interactive relationships. However, in the grocery sector, co-creation of products and services are not feasible, but businesses induce customers to co-create value on social media platforms.

2.3 Virtual communities on social networking sites

Social media have profoundly transformed the global communication systems (Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Facebook is the most popular social media platform, boasting 1.55 billion active monthly users (Facebook Statistics, 2015, cited in Kaur et al., 2016).

Facebook is a virtual community where people can connect with family, colleagues, and friends around the globe (Pöyry et al., 2013) and is a digital network centred on relationships (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Millions of users share their activities, opinions and thoughts on Facebook by posting messages and pictures on their walls (Pereira et al., 2014). Contrasting with other social media platforms, Facebook encourages businesses to use Facebook as a marketing tool by giving access to the social network through applications (Pereira et al., 2014). Because of the significant presence of potential customers on Facebook, businesses and brands invest in having a brand presence by establishing a brand community on Facebook where consumers and fans can interact with the business using the 'like', 'share' and 'comment' options (Ho, 2014). When a customer 'likes' a company page, all company wall posts will appear on the customer's news feed and the customer can engage with these company posts by 'liking', 'sharing' and 'commenting' (Pöyry et al., 2013).

Corporate Facebook pages are considered as online brand communities since the fans who have 'liked' the page share a common interest (Pöyry et al., 2013). Brodie et al. (2011b) find that prices, performance, quality and personal experiences with specific brands are the topics of conversations in virtual communities. Customers also discuss quality standards, ethics, laws, environmental issues pertaining to the industry and even discuss how to improve the product/service or their own consumer experience. These discussions in virtual communities portray customer empowerment and value co-creation (Brodie et al., 2011b).

However Jin (2012) depicts social media as a Pandora's box since they can be simultaneously a virtual brand community and a virtual anti brand community. Brand communities are groups of consumers, which engage in collective actions to achieve

joint goals and voice out shared sentiments and commitments. Whereas anti brand communities are groups of users which organise group actions against a brand and become a forum where customers express their discontent; where anti brand information are exchanged and lawsuits and boycotts are encouraged. Jin (2012) contends that on social media positive UGC co-exists with negative UGC. Some users may support their favourite brands by writing positive comments on the corporate Facebook pages or uploading favourable video clips to YouTube. While on the same social media platform, other consumers may post negative comments to complain about a negative customer experience with a brand (Jin, 2012).

Champoux et al. (2012) contend that the anonymity provided by the Internet and the open-comment platform of Facebook, provide the ideal settings for public anger to be vented on corporate Facebook pages. By giving a voice to customers and the public, social media have empowered them, and rendered companies vulnerable to negative publicity, customer attacks, and corporate reputation damage (Horn et al., 2015).

3. Methodology

To determine whether and investigate how Facebook has empowered customers in the grocery sector, netnography is undertaken. Netnography is ethnographic research, which is adapted to study the influence of the Internet on social groups (Kozinets, 2002). Netnographic approach views the online world as a social and cultural world, from which researchers can gain an understanding of online interactions through a cultural frame of reference.

Netnographic methods of data collection involve joining a community, observing the interactions within the community, taking field notes and analysing data. Netnography provides a “window into naturally occurring behavior” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62) that other marketing research tools cannot do.

Netnography is the appropriate method for this research, which aims to determine whether and how Facebook has empowered customers of grocery stores. Moreover, netnography enables observing customers and grocery stores on the Internet unobtrusively (Kozinets 2002).

Kozinets (2002) advises to examine online communities that entice many individuals to actively post and provide data that can be analysed. Because of its wide popularity and pervasive nature, Facebook pages are the most appropriate source for

data. Being the leaders in the grocery sector, Tesco and Walmart have been chosen as they both have official Facebook pages and adopt an international strategy and operate in several countries. Data was collected from observation and computer mediated communications of online community members for a period of 1 month ranging from 6 April 2014 to 6 May 2014. Similar to the one-month non-participant observation netnography of Colliander and Wien (2013), data saturation occurred.

However, those online customer comments posted on Facebook pages pose potential shortcomings. Anyone can post comments on Facebook pages of companies; hence the researcher cannot be sure that all those who have posted comments are real customers and whether their Facebook accounts are true. In order to minimize this type of bias, the researcher collected more than 8000 pages of comments to have a deep insight into customers' activities on social media sites. Moreover, the researcher followed the criteria set by Kozinets to retain the adequate comments; hence, the results are reliable and trustworthy.

As Kozinets points out, netnography is "based primarily on the observation of textual discourse" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64) and content analysis is used to code and analyse data. Qualitative content analysis was used to extract themes from the data. Similar to the studies of Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Stavros et al. (2014), the unit of analysis was the content of the Facebook pages and the coding units comprised of the individual posts and comments. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) define qualitative content analysis as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns". The coding process was performed using the software programme NVivo 7.0. The analysis was performed at two levels: open coding and axial coding to ensure trustworthiness of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding brings meaning to the data by diligently examining and comparing data for differences and similarities. A distinct code is assigned for every aspect of the phenomenon being studied. Then axial coding interconnects the categories identified in the previous stage in order to reveal any fundamental underlying trends and patterns to determine whether Facebook empowers customers in the grocery sector and provide insights into how customers are empowered.

4. Findings and Discussion

An analysis of the comments posted on the Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart reveals that customers respond to company posts by liking, sharing and commenting and they also initiate conversations with the grocery stores. This study confirms that Facebook has empowered grocery customers by giving them a voice to request for more information, to complain and criticise actions of the grocery stores and to provide information to the community members. Empowered customers also co-create and co-destroy value in the grocery sector.

4.1 The power to obtain information

This study uncovers that when Tesco or Walmart post an advertisement for a product or service, customers want to know more about the price, its availability, conditions attached to the offer, the features and benefits of the product, advice and explanation of how to use the product or service. The Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart empower customers to obtain more information. This is inline with Brodie et al. (2011b) who found that in virtual communities, conversations occur on prices, performance, quality and personal experiences with specific brands. Customers also discuss quality standards, ethics, laws, environmental issues pertaining to the industry and even discuss how to improve the product/service or their own consumer experience. These conversations in virtual communities are an illustration of customer empowerment and value co-creation (Brodie et al., 2011b). A sample of comments made by customers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Examples of customer posts by query type*

Information requested	Customer post
Price	<i>“how much in walmart [sic]? (WSR, posted on 15 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).</i>
Availability	<i>“Hi Lucy does Tesco stock any wine from the Angrove family winery SA? (TAC, posted on 23 April 2014, Tesco Facebook page)</i>
Features and Benefits	<i>“Are these for toddlers and up? Are they in infant sizes? (WRRW, posted on 25 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).</i>
Conditions attached to the offer	<i>“How many coupons are you allowed?? I have 16 emails saying I have one but after printing one then it says I’ve reached my limit to print anymore!” (TLS, posted on 16 April 2014, Tesco Facebook page).</i>
Advice	<i>“Hi Lucy, could you recommend a good Italian Red Wine please looking to buy a really good wine for someone as a Thankyou [sic] Present.” (TDG, posted on 23 April 2014, Tesco Facebook page).</i>

Explanation	<i>“I don’t understand, do you go to Tescos [sic] online n there’s a link to google maps, or do you go stright [sic] to google map.” (TLW, posted on 13 April 2014, Tesco Facebook page).</i>
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From the examples provided in the table above, we can see that customers of Tesco and Walmart use the official Facebook page to obtain more information. This is consistent with the findings of Park and Kim (2014) who identified informational benefits as one of the motivators for customers to join brand social networks. Customers could ask for more information in the past using traditional methods such as asking employees, phone calls or sending mails. However, Facebook has empowered them with a real-time communication tool, which makes it so much easier to obtain the desired information since interactions with employees of grocery stores are rare.

4.2 The power to complain and criticise actions of the grocery store

Facebook has given a voice to the customer by enabling them to post comments to inform the grocery store of their discontent about products and services and actions of the grocery stores. Complaints and criticisms are rife on the Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart and represent 80% of the customer-initiated conversations, while only 13% of customer-initiated conversations are about satisfactions of customers.

This finding is consistent with Jin (2012) who asserts that many customers write to companies on their Facebook pages to complain when they are not satisfied with a product or service. Similarly, Einwiller and Steilen (2015) note that when an individual is dissatisfied with a company, its product or service, he/she may be motivated to voice out his/her dissatisfaction online directly on the social media site of the company or the brand. This vast number of customer complaints on the Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart can be explained by the ease that social media provide to customers to post contents. Mitchell (1993, quoted in Einwiller & Steilen, 2015) stated that before the Internet era, customers considered complaining to an organisation as being inconvenient and time-consuming, whereas nowadays the creation and exchange of consumer created content on social media sites is rather easy and effortless (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). Customers can observe other customers posting complaints on Facebook pages of other companies, which may make it easier for them to complain (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). There are various grounds on which

customers post complaints against organisations. This study shows that customers post comments to complain about products and services of the grocery store, employees of the company, behaviours of other customers within the store and the social responsibility of the organisation. For example at Walmart, a customer complained about the lack of staff at the check out counters:

“If you could get more employees to man your north little rock store, that would be great. A back up of 100 customers and only 5 registers open is not good” (WMF, posted on 19 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).

Customers also post comments to criticise actions of the stores. Constantinides and Fountain (2008) claim that customers often confront organisations with their commercial, social, and ethical responsibilities. Analysis of data reveals that customers post comments to voice their disapproval and discontent on the Facebook page of Walmart and Tesco whenever they believe that there is misconduct by the organisation. This is in line with findings of Horn et al. (2015) who argue that empowered customers and the public have made companies vulnerable to customer attacks, negative publicity and corporate reputation damage. On the Facebook page of Tesco, there are mainly two criticisms that customers post regularly. Tesco faces a lot of criticisms from its customers on the sale of unlabeled ‘Halal’ meat and for the labeling of products containing allergens as illustrated by the quote below.

“Shame on you tesco [sic] serving halal slaughtered meat, cruel and barbaric and you are pandering to religion instead of the animals welfare.....Go see it done it is horrific....No backbone and thinking of your profits.....!” (TLA, posted on 9 April 2014, Tesco Facebook page).

Walmart customers criticise the company for three main reasons: low wage policy, sales of GMO products, and the use of gestation crates. Criticisms about these three topics are recurrent and customers voice out their anger at such practices as illustrated by the following customer post:

“Shame on Walmart who pretends to have a conscience, but continues to support cruel and heinous raising of meat. Google GESTATION CRATES if you're uniformed, as I'm sure many are. Walmart, however, is NOT uniformed. Just pathetically insensitive. I WILL NEVER SHOP HERE AGAIN.” (WVLM, posted on 7 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).

Moreover, it is observed that some customers have posted the same type of

comments daily. By repetitively posting negative messages on the Facebook page of Tesco and Walmart, such customers are deliberately attacking the company for a cause, which they consider as being important and just. Horn et al. (2015) have reported this type of consumer misbehaviour. They showed the existence of individuals within the online community, whose sole purpose was to spread negative WOM about an organisation or its employee behaviour, therefore deliberately damaging the reputation of the company.

4.3 The power to create value for the grocery stores

Facebook has empowered customers by enabling them to create value for the grocery stores. This study reveals that customers post comments, which are favourable to the organisation and can be considered to be positive WOM. Sashi (2012) argues that customer engagement on social media expands the conventional role played by customers, embracing them in the value-creation process as prosumers also known as co-creators of value. This study identified comments posted by customers who create value for the grocery stores such as customer referral, customer suggestions and customer defending the company.

Customers act as advocates when they post comments to recommend a particular product or service to other customers. When Walmart advertised a new product for cleaning the dishes, a very enthusiastic customer posted the following comment:

“This is the best for all mama's go get yours” (WSD, Posted on 8 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).

From the comment above, we can see that this very satisfied customer is referring this product to the online also make suggestions to the company and these suggestions turn customers into co-creators of value for the organisation (O’Cass & Viet Ngo, 2011). Customers now have the power to make suggestions to the grocery stores about the types of products they would like to see on the shelves as illustrated by the following customer post:

“Well in the case of things to try in tesco [sic] / I would like to see you stocking woodlands Sheeps yoghurt [sic], Readily available in sainsburys [sic], waitrose [sic] and morrisons [sic] x [sic]” (TVS, posted on 7 April 2014, Tesco Facebook page).

From the example above, the customer not only tells Tesco what he would like to have, but also informs Tesco that its main competitors are already providing this

product. This clearly illustrates how Facebook makes it easy for customers to communicate to grocery stores about their needs.

This study also reveals that customers are problem solvers. Customers post about their complaints and simultaneously provide solutions to these problems. For instance, a customer suggested that Walmart should clearly indicate which products are genetically modified, so that customers can make informed decisions.

“Great tip. Can you please tell the buyers that I don't know if this pineapple is a GMO product or not. Please label them so I know which one I can buy. Thanks.” (WMK, posted on 10 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).

Customers are co-creators of value when they actively defend the company on its Facebook page when the grocery stores are under customer attacks. Customers post comments to show their support to the company and to let the community members know that they disapprove or do not agree with the criticisms. Consider the quote below, which is a post from the Facebook page of Tesco where several customers have been accusing Tesco of being driven only by profit motives when it advertised for its new Tesco Current Account:

“Omg [sic] Tesco is a competitive business just like everything else OBV [sic] there Guna [sic] make profit etc! Get it! It's all about competition just like it's all about us gettin [sic] the best deals n [sic] prices etc!!!! If u [sic] don't like them don't comment” (TKWB, posted on 1 May 2014, Tesco Facebook page).

4.5 The power to provide information

Facebook has empowered customers by enabling them to express their views. This study shows that customers interact on the Facebook pages of the grocery stores to communicate with the other customers to inform them about better deals offered by competitors as illustrated by the following post:

“Going to asda [sic] to get the eggs cheaper or Aldi” (TDB, posted on 11 April 2014, Tesco Facebook page).

Customers also post comments where they expressly ask other customers not to buy a product or service or not to patronise a particular store. These types of comments are considered to be negative WOM. For example when Walmart posted an advertisement for ‘Banquet Frozen meals’, a customer responded by posting the following message:

“do [sic] not buy Banquet products. they [sic] cage their chickens.” (WSV, posted on 28 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).

Another Walmart customer complained that his previous comments were deleted on the Walmart Facebook page and told the company that he would stop buying from Walmart and even threatened to use WOM to convince other customers to boycott Walmart.

“It's sad that I live in American [sic] and get blocked for voicing my opinion. You lost a customer. I will be boycotting all walmarts. I know this will not effect [sic] your financial state but I will spread the word! I know a lot of people who value my opinion. I will spend money else where [sic].” (WAT, posted on 6 April 2014, Walmart Facebook page).

These findings confirm that social media have given a voice to the customer who can now freely express their opinions. Customers too recognise that they wield more power over brands and organisations than before and that they can make or break a brand through WOM and word of mouse (Ramsay, 2010). This form of customer empowerment has resulted in the democratisation of corporate communication (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Vanden Bergh et al. (2012) posit that UGC about marketplace information may have greater impact on a brand than marketer-generated content.

5. Conclusion

Grocery stores are increasingly using Facebook to increase the level of interactions with customers and to have on-going communications with them. The aim of the paper was to determine whether Facebook has empowered customers in the grocery sector. This research shows that Facebook has given a voice to the customer, which outspreads far beyond the circle of friends, colleagues, and relatives known to the customer. Facebook has empowered customers by making it easier for them to post complaints on the page or to criticise actions of the grocery store, than to complain on the phone or through a letter. Customers can obtain desired information in real-time and also provide information to the online brand community. Before the advent of social media, complaining or obtaining desired information were a tedious task and the conversation was private i.e. confined between the customer and the company. Whereas, when customers post comments on Facebook, these conversations are spread to the whole online brand community and it is the viral effect of Facebook which gives power to the customers who know that they now have a tool to pressurise

the grocery stores. This paper has shown that customers have the power to either create value for the grocery stores or destroy value.

This paper contributes to the body of knowledge by showing how Facebook has empowered customers. Several researchers had studied customer empowerment in the social media era, however for this study, the empowerment of customers have been analysed based on the comments that customers have themselves posted and by observing the interactions between the grocery stores and their customers.

Based on the findings of the study, managers of the grocery stores should closely monitor their Facebook pages to be able to meet the expectations of these empowered customers. Customers turn to Facebook to post their complaints or to obtain more information, and therefore grocery stores need to respond to complaints and criticisms of customers on Facebook as this study has shown that customers are using the Facebook page as a customer service channel. By providing multi level customer service channel, grocery stores should give options to customers about how they would like to communicate with the company if they have a query or a complaint to make. For businesses, this would enable them to provide service to individual customers more efficiently. Therefore, this can lead to an increase in customer satisfaction level and higher customer retention rates.

The limitation of the paper is that data has been collected only from the official Facebook pages of Tesco and Walmart. However, customers may be using other social media sites to express their opinions for example on anti brand communities. Future research could consider the various online sources where customers discuss their views on grocery stores. Another avenue for research is to interview customers to explore whether customers perceive that Facebook has empowered them.

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