



Examining the Effects of Electronic Oral Communication on Customer Brand Loyalty in the Context of African Banking Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to analyse the effects of electronic oral communication on customer brand loyalty within the context of the South African banking industry. The motivation of the study was to examine the effects that influence electronic oral communication through brand engagement leading to consumer brand loyalty within the South African banking industry, especially the dominant banks. Two objectives were proposed in this study; firstly, to examine the relationship between electronic oral communication (EOC) and brand engagement (BE) among social media consumers within the South African banks, and secondly, to analyse the relationship between brand engagement and customer brand loyalty (CBL) among social media consumers within South African banks. Descriptive methods were used to conduct the study. Structural equation modelling was used to analyse the data. The study found electronic oral communication to have a significant relationship with brand engagement. Furthermore, brand engagement was found to have a significant relationship with customer brand loyalty. The brand managers of local banks would be able to develop suitable strategies on how to effectively enhance a constructive conversation with customers whilst reducing and respond to negative comments across social media platforms. Again, the brand managers of the South African retail banks could devise appropriate strategies that can promote loyalty among online consumers, thereby becoming brand ambassadors of the banking services in the retail banking industry. The study added new knowledge to the existing literature since new theoretical lenses could be developed pertaining to EOC, BE and CBL within the context of online South African retail banks.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Since the early 2000, the emergence of social media platforms such as TikTok, blogs, YouTube and Facebook have drastically altered marketing communication (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). Unlike before, customers can now engage and co-create value towards the organisation's brands. As such, most consumers tend to be influenced by peers during the decision-making process, as opposed to content created through organisation-based brand promotion (Dyrellov & Melander, 2021). In late 2023, it was estimated that the usage of internet consumption was at 38.2 million and this accounted for 64% of the total population and this number was projected to increase by 4.5% every year (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). An early study by Pillay (2021) has found that, on the African continent, South Africa was reported to be a leading player in the usage of e-commerce and about 50% transactions accounted for the online sales nationally. Dyrellov and Melander (2021) observed that consumers perceive their peers as the accurate source of negative electronic communication since they tend to benefit nothing from broadcasting the information on social media.



Consequently, consumers may become disloyal to such an organisation if they feel that their needs or wants were not fully met (Matonya, Jaensson, & Ngaruko, 2020). Collins and Mostert (2021) advised that it is imperative that service providers, especially banking managers, strive to keep loyal customers because it is expensive to replace them. A study undertaken by van Deventer and Redda (2023) found that consumers could become loyal if they trust and are satisfied with the organisation. On a positive note, Manyanga et al. (2022) revealed that if loyal customers switch brands to competing firms, suddenly sales and profit will be negatively affected. Therefore, the present study intends to analyse the effects that positively influence electronic oral communication through brand engagement leading to consumer brand loyalty within the local banking industry within the context of social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reciprocity theory

Reciprocity theory means “back and forth” according to Bruni, Gilli, and Pelligra (2008), and Sandhu, Saleem and Ali (2021). Dufwenberg and Kirchsteiger (1998) viewed reciprocity theory from an economic perspective, which suggests that individuals act based on selfish motives and do not give regard to other people’s interests and feelings. Two schools of thought are proposed according to Cabral, Ozbay, and Schotter (2012). They are categorised into intrinsic and instrumental reciprocity. In intrinsic reciprocity, a kind (unkind) act of the first party will determine the response of the other party (recipient). Conversely, in instrumental reciprocity, one party acts selfishly with the intention of taking advantage of the other party, without giving regard to the impact or response of the other party. Dufwenberg and Kirchsteiger (1998) stated that consumers do assess if a company prioritises their needs or preferences before engaging in business transactions with such an organisation. In other context, Falk and Fischbacher (2001) found that human resource managers agreed not to cut the employees’ wages because they were afraid that their morales would be negatively affected. Consequently, employees would be angry and frustrated by such decisions (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999). The central theme of reciprocity theory is that future behaviours would be influenced by past actions between two parties especially if one party possesses powers (Lee, Kim, & Pan 2013). So, the subsequent behaviour could either be a positive or negative action (Falk & Fischbacher, 2000). Within the context of the current study, the theory of reciprocity assumes that if bank managers provide excellent customer service to customers and provide timeous feedback to their queries, consequently, consumers would express positive electronic viral messages across social media platforms. Additionally, customers would remain loyal and repeatedly encourage their peers to purchase from the same organisation and they won’t tolerate any alternative products from competing banks.

Since the emergence of social media, consumers have been empowered to express their opinions towards the organisation's brands and services through electronic oral communication (EOC) (Rosario, de Valck, & Sotgiu 2019; Matonya, Jaensson, & Ngaruko, 2020; Sandhu et al., 2021; Chahal et al., 2022). This conceptualisation of electronic communication dates back to the 1950s (Brooks, 1957; Javabdeh & Ahmad, 2022; Rahman et al., 2023; Liu, Jayawardhena, Shukla, & Osburg, 2024). Rosario et al. (2019) define EOC as expressions conveyed by previous, current and potential customers about the organisation's products and services to their peers through social media. A past study by Matonya, Jaensson, and Ngaruko (2020) revealed that these sentiments expressed by consumers on social media can either be positive or negative. Chigwende (2021) adds that delighted consumers share their positive experiences about the service encounter with colleagues, friends, family and other affiliated social media users. Compared to an organisation-based-brand promotion, EOC is perceived to be more trustworthy by many consumers since it is not broadcasted by organisations themselves (Sandhu et al., 2021). Consequently, Collins and Mostert (2021) found that EOC is more likely to influence future purchases since it is seen to be more reliable by social media users than formal paid advertisements. Additionally, Chahal et al. (2022) point out that favourable EOC can influence consumers to pay higher prices. Unfortunately, the negative EOC has dire consequences towards brand awareness and future user engagement among consumers on social media (Dyrellov & Melander, 2021). This is because unsatisfied consumers may collaborate with other affiliated users on social media to ruin the image of the brand and organisation's reputation, especially on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok (Sandhu et al., 2021). It is inevitable that consumers make their future decisions based on informal communication to reduce their perceived risk prior to purchasing any product in the market (Manyanga, Makanyeza, & Muranda 2022). It is for this reason that the present study intends to further analyse the perceptions of consumers, thereby developing suitable strategies that can enhance positive electronic communication on social media regarding banking services in South Africa.

Brand engagement

According to Sedley (2010), and Vivek, Beatty and Morgan (2012), brand engagement (BE) is defined as "repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand". Thus far, past academic scholars have attempted to categorise drivers of BE in the literature (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011; Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015; Gvili & Levy, 2018; Pangarkar, Patel, & Kumar, 2023). Electronic oral communication has been reported to be a major antecedent of user engagement across social media platforms (Gvili & Levy, 2018; Srivastava et al., 2020; Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). The most common engagement tools used on social media include ratings, rankings, audio, video, text or photographs (Dyrellov & Melander, 2021; Al-gasawneh et al., 2022).

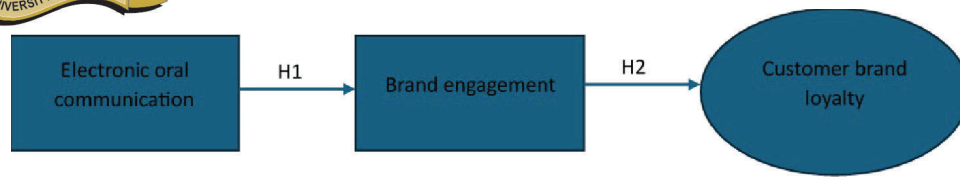
This concept of customer brand loyalty (CBL) can be credited to prominent independent scholars such as Keller and Aaker back in the 1990s (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Hossain & Kibria, 2024). According to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001:82), CBL is defined as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive purchasing behaviour despite switching triggers from situational influences and marketing efforts.” Matonya, Jaensson, and Ngaruko (2020) view CBL as a consumer promise to remain faithful towards the organisation’s brands and services, thereby continuously repeating the purchase in the future. This is an indication of how much confidence consumers have in the organisation’s brands and services (Marvelous, Asphat, & Malon, 2019). Up to now, past research studies have been attempting to categorise predictors of CBL. Din et al.’s (2021) study identified customer satisfaction as one of the predictors of CBL. Generally, customer satisfaction is based on the disconfirmation-of-expectations paradigm, which is confirmed once the perceptions of consumers have been met or exceeded by the organisational marketing offerings (Collins & Mostert, 2021). Therefore, every organisation, especially retail banks, should always strive to outperform their rival firms, in meeting or exceeding their expectations (Din et al., 2021). In contrast, trust is also regarded as a predictor of CBL since no relationship between an organisation and customers can realistically be developed without trust (Collins & Mostert, 2021). This suggests that if retail banks are unable to enhance trust with their customers, they are vulnerable to losing them probably to competing brands (Manyanga, Makanyeza, & Muranda, 2022). However, van Deventer and Redda (2023) found that once a customer trusts an organisation and is pleased with its marketing offering, this will result in purchasing additional products from the same organisation. Amegbe, Dzandu, and Hanu (2021) found that customers judge trust in retail banking based on their experience during the service encounter. Concomitantly, Amegbe, Dzandu, and Hanu (2021) point out that the ability to uphold the bank’s policies, interact well with customers and treat them with respect would ultimately earn the trust of their customers. It is not surprising that Chigwende (2021) found that most organisations, especially banks, are faced with overwhelming challenges in making their customers loyal to both brands and organisations. The proposed theoretical framework of the study is offered in Figure 1. Two research hypotheses are suggested in the study as stated below:

H1: Electronic oral communication has a positive effect on brand engagement among social media consumers for South African banks

H2: Brand engagement has a positive effect on customer brand loyalty among social media consumers for South African banks.

Theoretical Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual model



Source: Authors' own compilation

Independent Variable: Electronic Oral Communication (EOC)

Dependent variable: Customer brand loyalty (CBL)

Mediating Variable: Brand Engagement (BE)

Aim of the Study

The aim of the current study is to examine the effects of electronic oral communication on customer brand loyalty within the context of the African banking industry.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Recently, it was reported that most local banks experienced some fraudulent attempts on their bank accounts and customers suddenly went to social media to report the incidents, while some ran to their local branches to block their cards (Mzekandaba, 2024). Dyrelöv and Melander (2021) observed that consumers perceive their peers as the accurate source of negative electronic communication since they tend to benefit nothing from broadcasting the information on social media. Unfortunately, consumers may become disloyal to such an organisation if they feel that their needs or wants are not fully met (Matonya, Jaensson, & Ngaruko, 2020). Hence, Collins and Mostert (2021) advised that it is imperative that service providers, especially banking managers, strive to keep loyal customers because it is expensive to replace them. Manyanga et al. (2022) revealed that if loyal customers switch brands to competing firms, suddenly sales and profit will be negatively affected.

Despite the threats posed by negative sentiments from consumers, which triggered their disloyalty towards the organisation's brands. It is disappointing to observe that very few studies have been conducted locally that sought to examine the effects of EOC on customer brand loyalty (Dangaiso et al. 2024, Chahal et al. 2022, Pillay 2021, Matonya et al. 2020). For example, Gavaza, Viljoen, and Cilliers (2019) analysed the effects of social media service quality towards customer loyalty in the local banking industry. Eventually, Pillay (2021) examined the impact of electronic word-of-mouth adoption regarding brand love on South African Generation Z. Furthermore,



Dangaiso, Mukucha, Makudza, Towo, Jonasi, and Jaravaza (2024) investigated the interplay of internet banking service, e-satisfaction, e-word-of-mouth and e-retention. Chahal et al. (2022) researched the effects of electronic word-of-mouth on brand equity and intention to purchase green retail products in India.

Moreover, Petzer and Roberts-Lombard (2024) sought to analyse the relationship between the satisfaction-loyalty link in the South African retail banking industry. Adding to the debate, Olifant (2021) researched the influence of loyalty programmes towards customer loyalty in the retail banking sector in South Africa. Among other studies, Chahal, Prakash, Nemmaniwar, Mehra, Jalem, and Radhakrishnan (2022) observed the impact of electronic word-of-mouth towards brand equity regarding imported shoes. A study done in Tanzania by Matonya et al. (2020) on mobile phone users sought to look at the effect of word-of-mouth on brand loyalty. Therefore, it measured electronic communication on positive valence, WOM intensity and WOM content towards brand loyalty.

None of these studies examined the effects of EOC on CBL using BE as the mediating variable. Ntobaki and Buthelezi (2023) show that consumers are concerned about how the organisation engages and manages conversations across social media regarding banking services. Barnhart (2023) noted that new social media platforms are presenting new challenges since organisations are now competing for attention, and consumer tastes and preferences keep changing every day. It is assumed that if brand managers of South African retail banks could familiarise themselves with risks that could harm the organisations, in turn, this could empower them to strategically respond to negative comments that can compromise their brands.

Research Questions

Does EOC influence BE through CL within the context of the South African banking industry?

METHODOLOGY

This study used quantitative method to conduct the data. This decision was taken due to its ability to replicate, generalised results and use study objectives to arrive at the conclusion. The descriptive and explanatory/causal design were utilised in the current study. As such, the demographic information obtained was categorised as descriptive, whilst examining the relationship between EOC, BE and CBL were deemed to be causal or explanatory in nature.

Regarding the sampling method, the target population was drawn from South African individuals, which comprised teenagers, young adults and adults. The sample size of 311 respondents were survey in this study. This study used purposive sampling to select the potential respondents. These individuals were sampled from selected malls within the Gauteng Province. The current study utilised descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse the data in the present study. In conclusion, ethical clearance was obtained from the Vaal University as well as a

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permission letter from the Mall Manager to collect the data from the shoppers at these various selected malls.

Research Measures

The structure of the questionnaire comprised three different sections, of which the first section was based on demographic information, the second section contained items on the usage of social media platforms. The instrument concluded with three different variables that were based on electronic oral communication, brand engagement and customer brand loyalty and each variable had five items in total. The present study adapted existing instruments from Kim and Ko (2012), Solem and Pedersen (2016), and Mohamed (2016). The instrument used was based on a combination of different constructs from different sources since it measured dimensions from different theoretical constructs. The questionnaire had five-point Likert scale items that were based on “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, of which higher mean values suggested positive attitudinal responses, yet the lower mean values expressed negative attitudinal responses. The current investigation assessed reliability through Cronbach’s alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR). Based on previous studies such as Heale and Twycross (2015), and Surucu and Maslakci (2020), a value of 0.70 or higher is regarded to be an acceptable benchmarking criterion. On the other hand, validity was achieved using convergent validity based on average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loadings. According to Sharif, Naghavi, and Nia (2022) a minimum value of .50 is acceptable for AVE. Furthermore, Cheung, Cooper Thomas, Lau, and Wang (2024) regard a minimum value of 0.50 to be appropriate for factor loadings.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 400 respondents were surveyed in the present study profiling the demographic characteristics of pre-teens, teenagers and adults. The study had a sample of 311 in the final survey and it was considered for data analysis. Firstly, the gender categories of the respondents were provided in Figure 2. Secondly, the name of the bank that respondents were affiliated with is illustrated in Figure 3. The province that respondents originated from was the third variable of the demographic questions as depicted in Figure 4. The length of social media usage pertaining to the affiliated bank was the fourth question as shown in Figure 5. The following bar chart illustrates the demographic information of the respondents in the study.



Figure 2: Gender

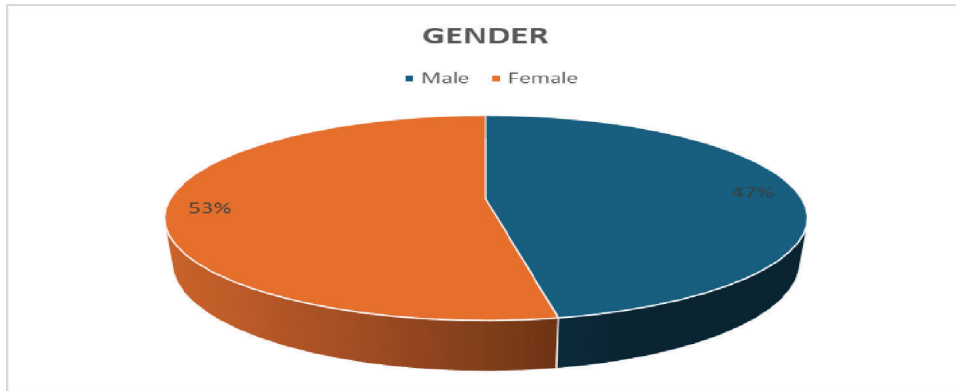


Figure 3: Banks

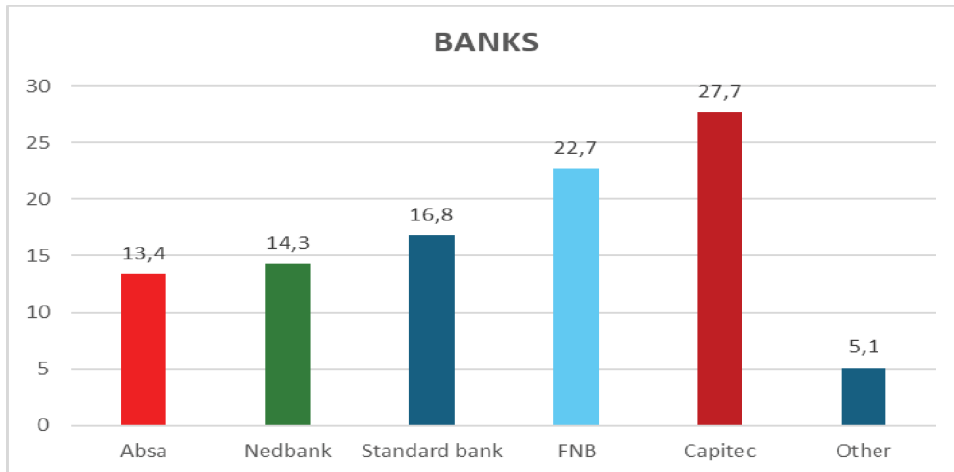


Figure 4: Province of Origin

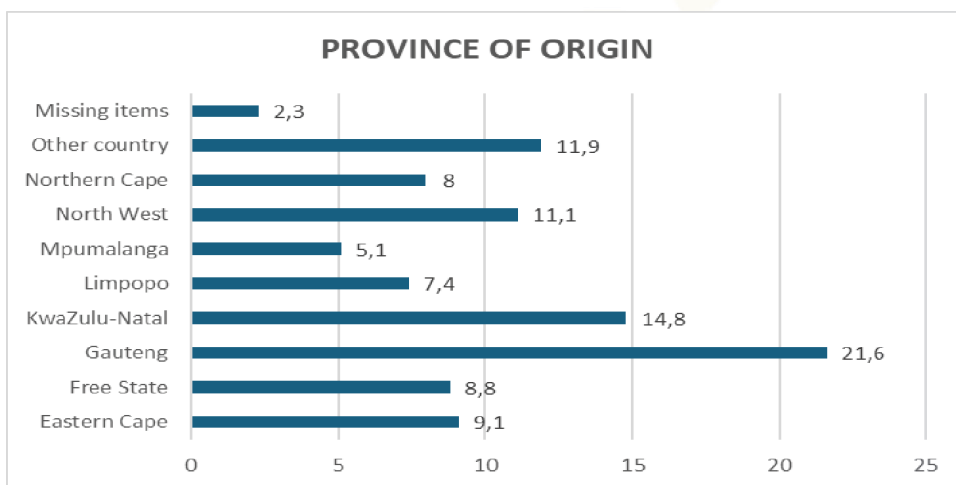
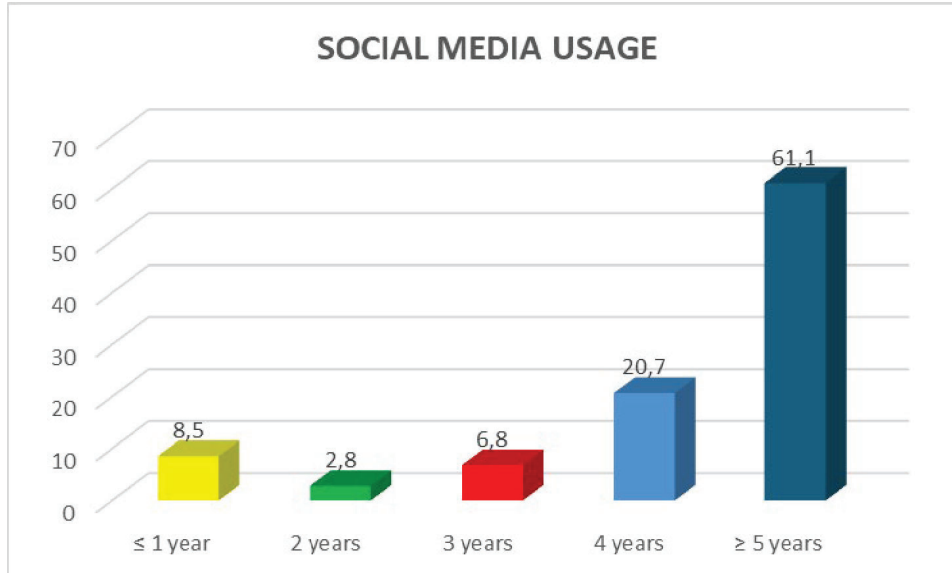




Figure 5: Social media usage



Measurement Model

The confirmatory factor analysis through SPSS was used to determine the reliability and validity of the present study. This study calculated reliability using Cronbach’s alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR). According to the results presented in Table 1, Cronbach’s alpha (α) of the scales ranged from 0.805 to 0.938 and values of the composite reliability ranged from 0.878 to 0.953. Past research scholars such as Heale and Twycross (2015), and Surucu and Maslakci (2020) have proposed that a value of 0.70 or higher is deemed to be acceptable. The present study was therefore found to be in line with these authors, thereby meeting this threshold.

Table 1: Confirmatory factor analysis

Research constructs		M	SD	Factor loadings	AVE	CR	α value
Electronic oral communication	EOC1	2.63	0.780	0.825	0.825	0.934	0.916
	EOC2			0.940			
	EOC3			0.954			
Brand engagement	BE1	4.51	0.498	0.830	0.707	0.878	0.805
	BE2			0.937			
	BE3			0.745			
Customer brand loyalty	CBL1	4.66	0.499	0.864			
	CBL2			0.905			



	CBL3			0.929	0.801	0.953	0.938
	CBL4			0.892			
	CBL5			0.882			

Note: EOC = Electronic oral communication, BE = Brand engagement, CBL = Customer brand loyalty

Furthermore, the present study ensured convergent validity through average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loadings. From the results illustrated in Table 1, it highlights that the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.707 to 0.825. Sharif, Naghavi, and Nia (2022) have set a minimum threshold of .50 to be deemed acceptable for AVE. Interestingly, the present study produced an AVE that met this general rule and is therefore deemed suitable for further analysis.

Among others, factor loadings ranged from 0.745 to 0.954. Cheung, Cooper Thomas, Lau, and Wang (2024) have proposed a minimum threshold of 0.50. As such, this study met and exceeded the minimum requirements.

A structural equation modelling was used to test the relationship between independent and dependent variables. In this case, it was used to measure the relationship between electronic oral communication and customer brand loyalty through brand engagement. The measures of the structural model fit and the study results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Model fit indices

Measure	Name	Good fit If	Results
χ^2 / df	Model chi-square	p-value > 0.05	1.348
RFI	Relative fit index (RFI)	>0.90	0.918
IFI	Incremental fit index	>0.90	0.982
CFI	Comparative fit index	CFI \geq 0.90	0.982
NFI	(Non) normed fit index Tucker Lewis index	NFI \geq 0.95	0.934
TLI	Tucker Lewis index	TLI \geq 0.95	0.978
RMSEA	Root mean square error of approximation	RMSEA < 0.05	0.034
SRMR	Standardised root mean square residual	SRMR < 0.08	0.050

Source: Bacon (1997), Malkanthie (2015), Marquier (2019), Khairi & Sukono (2021)



Figure 6: SEM analysis



* $p < 0.001$

** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$

Hypotheses testing

H1: Electronic oral communication

Based on Figure 6, it is depicted that the standard path coefficients show a positive effect for the electronic oral communication and brand engagement ($=0.107$, $p < 0.050^*$), and therefore, this hypothesis was supported.

H2: Brand engagement

Based on Figure 6, it illustrates that the standard path coefficients show a positive effect for the brand engagement and customer brand loyalty ($=0.328$ $p < 0.000^{***}$), and therefore, this hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

Electronic oral communication on brand engagement

This study findings show that electronic oral communication has a positive effect on brand engagement among consumers within the context of the South African banking industry. This study is consistent with other previous studies. This study answered the common question that has so far been raised by past scholars such as King (2014), namely: "How does electronic oral communication affect brand awareness creation through brand engagement?". Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan's (2020) study carried out in India on the mobile phone and hotel industry found that there was a positive effect between electronic oral communication and brand communication. Another study done in Tanzania by Matonya, Jaensson, and Ngaruko (2020) on mobile money services has revealed that electronic oral communication has a positive effect on customer brand loyalty.



Most past related studies identified satisfaction, loyalty and trust to be the critical consequences of customer engagement across brands (Matonya, Jaensson & Ngaruko, 2020; Collins & Mostert, 2021; Javabdeh & Ahmad, 2022; Rahman et al., 2023). The relationship between electronic oral communication and brand engagement is influenced by the level of trust and degree of satisfaction, ultimately leading to customer loyalty (Phan, Pham, & Nguyen, 2020). Javabdeh and Ahmad's (2022) study, carried out among Malaysian university students, found that trust and security have effects on electronic oral communication and customer brand loyalty towards banking services. Additionally, Rahman, Hoque, Norzehan, Yusuh, Yosoff, and Begum's (2023) research, which was based on Islamic banking customers, revealed that security plays a significant role in influencing consumers' perceptions towards Islamic banking services. Concomitantly, it is shown that Islamic banks prove to have one of the latest secure technological systems that provide safety among their customers (Rahman, Hoque, Norzehan, Yusuh, Yosoff, & Begum, 2023). It is not surprising to observe that a study done by Chahal, Prakash, Nemmaniwar, Mehra, Jalem, and Radhakrishnan (2022) showed that the negative valance on EOC has a negative effect on customer brand loyalty on green products within Asian markets. It is for this reason that trust was found as an indicator of loyalty among customers (Matonya, Jaensson, & Ngaruko, 2020; Collins & Mostert, 2021).

Brand engagement on customer brand loyalty

The findings of the current study revealed that brand engagement has a positive effect on customer brand loyalty. This finding is consistent with past research studies. A study by Collins and Mostert (2021) that focused on South African AirBnBs indicates that customers who were fully engaged by their service providers had returned the favour by spreading positive sentiments on social media. Interestingly, a recent study that focused on local retail banks found that young consumers are more likely to advocate their preferred banks when they are loyal with banking services on social media (van Deventer & Redda, 2023). At an international level, a banking study done in Pakistan by Din, Anjum, Hassan, Sheikh, Ashraf, Khan, Baig, and Gulzar (2021) found that loyalty is an outcome of customer satisfaction during the service encounter, thereby suggesting that when customers are satisfied with the banking services offered by retail banks, the more they will actively engage with the banks on social media. Among other studies, a study conducted among Zimbabwe's banking customers found that bank managers should integrate customer experience, word-of-mouth intention, and customer satisfaction to enhance their customer loyalty towards banking services (Manyanga et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper purported to establish whether EOC has a positive effect on CBL within the context of the South African banking industry. The findings that emerged from this study show that EOC has a positive effect on BE. It is further revealed that a positive effect was established between BE and CBL. It is therefore concluded that EOC is a predictor of CBL. It is, therefore, recommended



that managers of local banks should encourage their followers, especially brand ambassadors, to spread positive electronic oral communication that can reinforce loyalty among customers across various social media platform.

Managerial Implications

This finding of the present study proves that trust and security are considered to be the critical consequences of electronic oral communication and brand engagement towards retail banking customers in South Africa. This implies that bank managers could promote active engagement on customers if they upgrade their security measures such as enforcing biometric technology, facial recognition and one-time pins to authenticate the customer profile, wherever performing banking transactions online. The managers of local retail banks should enforce email verification upon logging onto the banking app or any online transaction. This should be coupled with 24-hour call centres to facilitate customer service and address customer complaints.

Additionally, the findings add that the relationship between brand engagement and customer loyalty is determined by the level of customer satisfaction on the overall banking services facilitated both online and offline. This implies that managers of South African retail banks should increase their budget on staff training so that their employees are empowered to provide friendly, efficient and competent services that adequately address customers' needs holistically. Consequently, the number of complaints from customers either online or offline would be significantly reduced, thereby reinforcing positive electronic oral communication and ultimately promoting loyalty towards the banking services.

Theoretical Implications

The current study confirms that electronic word-of-mouth positively affects customer loyalty through brand engagement. The results of the study could guide future academic studies to conceptualise the framework of content management through social media interface in determining a brand management and promotion model suitable for their customers.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present investigation was carried out in South Africa, and as such, the first limitation is geographical location since the results of this study may not be generalised to other African countries. Again, this study was done on retail banks in Gauteng, which is an urban area. It is advisable to replicate the study in other rural areas such as Limpopo, the Northern Cape and North West. This research used a sample size of 311 respondents who participated in the study. It would be advisable to use a larger sample size to generalise the results to a wider range of banking customers in South Africa. In conclusion, this study mainly focused on the positive effects of electronic word-of-mouth on brand loyalty. It is suggested that future studies should concentrate on the negative effects of electronic word-of-mouth towards brand awareness and



brand image in other sectors such as the fashion industry, furniture and electronic appliances industry.

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