

# Mediating Customer Equity in the Relationship Between Social Media Activities and Customer Loyalty: An Empirical Study on Customers of Saudi Arabia's Mobile Service

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between social media activities and customer loyalty through the mediation of customer equity. This study was carried out on customers of mobile service in Saudi Arabia. A Structural Equation Modelling Approach was used to identify this relationship. To analyze the study data, the analysis moment of structure (AMOS) was adopted. The sample size was 384 and the correct responses were 319. The results of the study showed a significant positive correlation between social media activities, customer equity, and customer loyalty. There is also a significant positive effect of social media activities on both customer equity and customer loyalty. It was also found that there is a significant positive impact of customer equity on customer loyalty. This study did conclude, however, that customer equity significantly mediates the relationship between social media activities and customer loyalty.

**Key words:** *social media activities; customer loyalty; customer equity, value equity.*



## **Introduction**

Customer is the heart of the marketing process and the main reason for the organization's existence, especially considering the rapid environmental changes that result in a continuous change in his needs and desires. Therefore, the organization's survival and its continuity of business activities depends on its ability to continuously satisfy the customers' need and wants and adapting to change that leads to creating positive and enduring relationships with consumers, improve the benefit and value they receive and thus ameliorate the image and value of the organization in the minds of customers and spread positive word-of-mouth among them (Wang et al., 2016).

To increase revenue and develop performance, the organization must have a deep understanding of the customer equity, thereby focusing on the activities that most influence that value and channeling resources towards it (Yuan et al., 2016).

Social media has created a breakthrough in all areas in general and marketing as being an effective means of attraction and a marketing tool that can be used to open channels with customers, provide them with the information they need in an easy and effective way, and enable them to participate and contribute to the product development process (Armellini and Villanueva, 2016). They can also be used as a more cost-effective and efficient alternative marketing practice (Alkaya and Ercan, 2017). As a result, the recent period has seen a substantial increase in organizations' investment in social media marketing such as Facebook and Twitter as being new advertising platforms that allow beneficiaries to communicate with the organization, communicate with each other and interact with brands whether images, text, video, or audio (Castronovo and Huang, 2012).

Based on the above, the present study examines the extent of utilizing social media activities to support the customer's value in its three dimensions (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity) and the loyalty of customers of mobile service in Saudi Arabia.

## **Literature Review**

### **Customer Equity**

There are disagreements about the definition of customer equity. Rust et al. (2004) defined it as the net profit expected from the customer throughout his or her dealings with the organization. The disadvantage of his definition is that he did not care about the other benefits that the organization could bring, such as positive talk to others and their recommendation to deal with the organization. This definition is also difficult to rely upon because of the great difficulty of obtaining business and profit data in traditional markets (Lemon et al., 2001).

Castéran, 2017; Wang et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2016; Lee et al, 2014; Kotler and Keller, 2007 defined it as the total benefits that the organization receives throughout the customer's dealings with the organization, such as increasing his expenditure on the organization's products and services, recommending to others to deal with the organization. This definition is characterized by the inclusion of all the benefits obtained by the organization because of the client's dealings with the organization and did not focus only on profitability as in the previous definition. Therefore, this study will examine customer equity based on this definition.

The researchers differed on the main customer equity dimensions. Ali, 2012 identified only two dimensions of customer equity: customer benefits and customer costs, while Khairuddin, Amar's study, 2009 identified three main customer equity dimensions, namely, customer spending, recommending the organization to others, and intention to continue to deal with the organization. However, the researcher found agreements between them on three main customer equity dimensions (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity). Alkaya and Ercan, 2017; Koivulehto, 2017; Rienetta et al., 2017; Ou et al., 2017; Abdelbaset et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2016; Ural and Duygu, 2015; Lee et al., 2014; Dwivedi et al., 2012; Nam et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2010; Chahal et al., 2010; Stevens, 2006; Rust et al., 2004 are the largest of these studies. So, the current study relies on these dimensions to measure customer equity, and can be illustrated as follows:

- **Value Equity:** The positive relationship between the organization and the customer depends on what he realizes of the value received by him because of his dealings with the organization (Koivulehto, 2017). Accordingly, Rust et al., 2004; Lemon et al., 2001 defined value equity as: “the Comparison between customer sacrifices to obtain product or service, such as (financial cost, time cost, effort cost, opportunity cost) and benefits obtained, such as (mental benefit, emotional benefit). Value is the key point between the customer and the organization. lee et al., 2014 also defined it as the customer's evaluation of the organization's products to determine its credibility and quality. Value equity reflects objective customer opinions on the organization's products and judgment of its efficiency.
- **Brand Equity:** Brand represents the abbreviated formal or verbal expression of the customer's experience with the organization's goods and services. This experience is usually shaped by the customer dealing with the functional and technical characteristics of the organization's goods and services, which is expressed at the right price and the right quality that satisfies his needs and desires. This experience carries a certain mental image, either positive or negative (Ivanauskiene and Auruskeviciene, 2015), hence the importance of the brand as an identifier of the goods and services of the Organization. If the customer experience is positive, the image of the brand and its value in the mind of the customer is positive, and vice versa. The brand equity plays an important role in attracting customers and allowing them to evaluate the brand, helping customers to keep coming back and keep the brand constantly on their minds through consumer-brand linkages at the emotional level (Romero and Maria, 2016)

- **Relationship equity:** Relationship equity is reflected in the way the organization communicates with the customer when the organization's goods and services are displayed. Relationship equity is defined as the tendency of the customer to return to the brand regardless of its subjective and objective evaluation (Lemon et al., 2001). Relationship equity is an important factor in customer equity, because value equity and brand equity are insufficient for the customer to continue with the organization in many cases, the customer can evaluate the product positively from a personal and objective point of view and do not purchase it for many reasons, including marketing efforts for competing products (Yuan et al., 2016). Therefore, relationship equity is the primary link between the customer and the organization, which promotes adherence to the relationship and customer retention. Customer relationship with the organization can be developed through attention to customer loyalty programs, development of emotional engagement of customers with the organization, and positive treatment with them (Chun et al., 2016; Sun and Kim, 2014).

### Social Media Activities

There are many definitions of the concept of social media activities. (Koivulehto, 2017) defined it as a set of websites that allow users to communicate in a virtual environment that brings them together by specific affiliation networks (university, school, institution, city, etc.) through direct communication, such as viewing files, sending messages, Information, photos, and videos, and share them with others. Alkaya and Ercan, 2017 defined it as an electronic system that allows users to create private pages and link them through an electronic and social system, with others who have the same identity and interests to inform others and make them aware of information, goods, services and various issues.

Social media activities have been classified by many researchers. Some have categorized them according to the user type, such as Li's, 2010 study, where users of social media sites were classified into four types, namely, watchers, sharers, commenters, and producers. other studies such as such those by Alkaya and Ercan, 2017; Rienetta et al., 2017; Li and Bernoff, 2011; Koivulehto, 2017; Chege, 2017; Erdogmus and Mesut, 2012; Yuan et al., 2016; Muchardie et al., 2016; Ural and Duygu, 2015; Mehrabi et al, 2014; Kim and Ko, 2012; Tuten, 2008; Rossmann et al., 2017; Kim and Ko, 2010) classified them according to the purpose of browsing social media sites into five main activities, namely, entertainment, interaction, personalization, positive spoken word, and modernization. This classification is the most used in all studies seen by the researcher; these dimensions can be referred to as:

- **Entertainment:** it means the communication of users on social media sites for entertainment.

- **Interaction:** it means communication through social media sites for the purpose of interaction with others and the exchange of information or opinions and to identify the experiences and knowledge of others and interact with them.
- **Customization:** It means that the organization disseminates information and knowledge that customers are interested in and how to search for it.
- **E-Word of Mouth:** This involves user sharing information with others. Organizations should, therefore, take care of credibility with customers in everything that is published about their products on social media. If the information published by the organization was proven false, customers will quickly share and interact with the information. A negative electronic word is faster to spread than a positive spoken word. The origin of promises and information published by the organization is credibility.
- **Trendiness / Newness:** It means that the organization updates its content on social media sites on a regular basis, in line with the ongoing variables, whether internal or external organization.

### Customer Loyalty

Organizations have recently realized that their clients don't necessarily have to be loyal. Therefore, these organizations sought to find out how to achieve true customer loyalty, believing that customer loyalty and retention would cost only 20% of the cost of attracting a new customer (Ernest, 2017), and that the attention to old customers and access to real loyalty makes them move from just insisting on dealing with the products of the organization to work to encourage and motivate potential customers to deal with the organization. True loyal customers are therefore the best free promotional means for the organization's goods and services (Liu and Tsung, 2017).

According to previous studies of customer loyalty, it was found that most of them rely on two dimensions of loyalty, namely, directional loyalty and behavioral loyalty. These studies include those of Adamu and Awad, 2017; Nematizad and Dehghan, 2013; Winters and Ha, 2012; Javed and Sadia, 2017; Ernest, 2017, Morgan, 2017; Bakator, 2017; Sun et al., 2016; Chege, 2017; Leninkumar, 2017; Liu and Tsung, 2017; Orel et al., 2014; Ou et al., 2017; Rai and Srivastava, 2013; Casalo et al., 2010. The two dimensions can be referred to as:

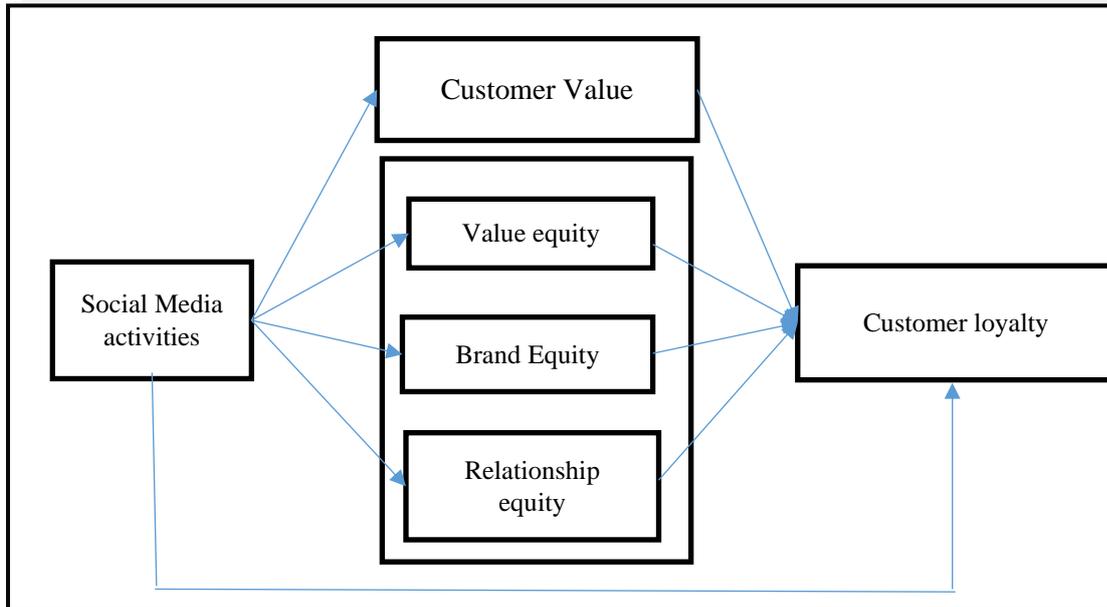
- **Directional Loyalty:** It is the loyalty resulting from knowledge or emotion towards a particular product. Therefore, customer loyalty in this perspective expresses the intention to buy the product in the future (Liu and Tsung, 2017). Morgan, 2017 pointed out that directional loyalty depends on positive attitudes and views towards a particular

product. Therefore, loyalty to a particular product can be determined by combining positive attitudes and opinions.

- **Behavioral Loyalty:** Behavioral loyalty is shown in the customer's public behavior towards a particular product and appears in the form of repeat purchase of the product (Ernest, 2017). Rai and Srivastava, 2013 explained that behavioral loyalty appears in the amount of purchase, and the number of times a certain brand of a product is purchased compared to other brands. Liu and Tsung, 2017 explained that behavioral loyalty appears in total customer purchases of a particular brand within a specified time.

Even though customer equity and its importance has been researched in many studies and links it to many other marketing variables, the researchers did not refer to one Arab study. There is interest in the discovery of customer equity using the three variables shown in the study (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity). Although social media sites are important, especially at the present time, they have not received sufficient attention from Egyptian researchers to show their importance in the marketing process. There are many International Studies that have examined the relationship between social media activities and customer equity, the relationship between social media activity and customer loyalty, and the relationship between customer equity and customer loyalty. However, the researcher did not find any previous study, whether International or Arab, that interested in examining the relationship between social media activities and customer loyalty by mediating the determinants of customer equity (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity). It is clear from the above that there is a research gap that the current study covers, through testing the proposed model of the study as shown in Figure (1) with the following hypotheses:

1. There is a significant correlation between social media activities, customer equity, and customer loyalty.
2. There is a significant impact of social media activities on customer equity.
3. There is a significant impact of social media activities on customer loyalty.
4. There is a significant impact of customer equity on customer loyalty.
5. customer equity mediates the relationship between social media activities and customer loyalty.



**Figure 1.** *The proposed model*

## Methodology

The researchers conducted an exploratory study by setting up a survey and distributed it to a random sample of 40 items from customers of mobile service in Saudi Arabia (Zain, STC, Mobily), 10 customers from the official Facebook page for each of the three companies, in order to know the degree of their practice of social media activities and their views on the services provided by mobile phone companies through their official Facebook pages, as well as their value and loyalty to the company. The sample was divided according to the mean to three categories: the first, less than the mean, the second neutral, and the third higher than the mean, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Results for analyzing the exploratory study*

Variables	Less than the Mean		Neutral		Higher than the Mean	
	Number	Ratio	Number	Ratio	Number	Ratio
<b>Social media activities</b>	12	30	7	18	21	52
<b>Customer equity</b>	11	28	6	15	23	57
<b>Customer loyalty</b>	5	13	9	22	26	65

As shown in Table 1, there is a strong practice by mobile phone companies in Saudi Arabia for social media activities from the point of view of customers as well as a high perception by customers of their value for these companies and high customer loyalty to these companies. According to these results, the problem of the study can be formulated in the following questions:

1. Is customer loyalty due to the strong practice of social media activities, customer equity or not? What is the nature of this relationship, if any?
2. What is the impact of social media activities on customer equity? What kind of impact, if any?
3. What is the impact of social media activities on customer loyalty? What kind of impact, if any?
4. What is the impact of customer equity on customer loyalty? What kind of impact, if any?
5. Does customer equity mediate the relationship between social media activities and customer loyalty?

The research population includes customers of Saudi Arabia's mobile service. The researchers relied on a sample from of Saudi Arabia's mobile service by developing an online survey. Thus, the online survey was available for many participants and was designed depending on Google Drive. The survey was online for three months starting from 10 Jan 2021. 432 questionnaires were collected, and 20 incomplete was excluded. Therefore, the number of units entered the statistical analysis program was 412 units. To achieve the research objectives, a survey list of 33 items was prepared to measure the study variables. Table (2) shows the items measures.

**Table 2.** *Measurement of Research Variables*

Research variables	Previous studies
social media activities	Alkaya and Ercan, 2017; Rienetta et al., 2017; Koivulehto, 2017; Yuan et al., 2016; Ural and Duygu, 2015; Kim and Ko, 2010
Customer equity	Yuan et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016; Rust et al., 2004 Lee et al., 2014; Kheir El-Din & Ammar, 2009
Customer loyalty	Adamu and Awed, 2017; Javed and Sadia, 2017; Ernest, 2017., Morgan, 2017; Bakator, 2017; Leninkumar, 2017; Liu and Tsung, 2017; Orel et al., 2014; Rai and Srivastava, 2013; Casalo et al., 2010.

To test the validity of the scale, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis was used. It is an application of the Structural Equation Model, and the researcher conducted this analysis for each scale of the study variables using AMOS 20 as follows:

- **Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Social Media Activity:** Table (3) shows that all standardized loadings are significant. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) was 0.879 (the closer to the one, the model is significant), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 0.891 (the closer to the one, the model is significant). This indicates the significance of the scale.

**Table 3.** *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of social media*

Items	Standardized Loadings
1	.779**
2	.858**
3	.752**
4	.854**
5	.754**
6	.768**
7	.857**
8	.876**
9	.723**
10	.765**

\*\* Significant at the level of 0.01.

- **Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Customer equity:** Table (4) shows that all standardized loadings are significant. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) was 0.856 (the closer to the one, the model is significant), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 0.887 (the closer to the one, the model is significant). This indicates the significance of the scale.

**Table 4.** *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Customer equity*

Items	Standardized Loadings		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1	.755**		
2	.798**		
3	.894**		
4	.859**		
5	.764**		
6	.747**		
7		.844**	
8		.867**	
9		.823**	
10		.749**	
11		.875**	
12			.896**
13			.729**
14			.759**
15			.857**
16			.759**
17			.889**
18			.798**

\*\* Significant at the level of 0.01.

Where: factor 1: customer equity, factor 2: brand equity, and factor 3: the relationship equity.

- **Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Customer Loyalty:** The results of the statistical analysis in Table (5) showed that all the standardized loadings were significant, and the

value of the Quality Index Conformity was \*\* 0.978, and the value of the comparative conformity index reached \*\* 0.917, which indicates the significance of the scale.

**Table 5.** *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Customer Loyalty*

Items	Standardized Loadings
1	.779**
2	.858**
3	.752**
4	.752**
5	.752**

\*\* Significant at the level of 0.01.

To test the reliability of the scale, the researchers relied on (Alpha Cronbach coefficient), as shown in Table (6). This test is used to find out how reliable the questionnaire items are. As shown in Table 4, the results of the reliability analysis indicate that the coefficient alpha for social media activity scale is estimated to be 0.893 and it is known that if the alpha coefficient is within (0.50 to 0.60), it is acceptable and sufficient. According to (Idris, 2008:423), Cronbach's alpha coefficient is more reliable when reached 0.80. the coefficient of Customer equity Scale has been found ranging between 0.745 and 0.896 which indicates a high degree of reliability. the Alpha coefficient for Customer Loyalty Scale was found to be 0.849, which indicates a high degree of reliability on the scale.

**Table 6.** *reliability test*

Main variables	Sub variables	Number of items	Alpha Cronbach
social media activities	-----	10	0.893
customer equity	Value equity	6	0.837
	Brand Equity	5	0.745
	Relationship Equity	7	0.896
Customer loyalty	-----	5	0.849

## Results and Discussion

1) The correlation between social media activities, customer equity, and customer loyalty: The Spearman correlation coefficient was used to test this hypothesis, and the results for this hypothesis are shown in Table (7).

**Table 7.** *Correlation coefficients*

Variables	Social media activities	Customer equity	Customer loyalty
Social media activities	1		
Customer equity	**0.612	1	
Customer loyalty	**0.647	**0.657	1

\*\* Significant at the level of 0.01.

As shown in table 7, There is a positive correlation between social media activities, customer equity, and customer loyalty at the level of 0.01. That is, the more the organization is interested in social media activities, the more loyal the customer is to the organization. The correlation coefficient between customer equity and customer loyalty was equal to 0.665. That is, the greater the value of the customer, the greater the customer's loyalty to the organization.

2) The direct and indirect relationships between social media activities, customer equity and customer loyalty:

The researcher prepared the proposed model for these relationships using the structural equation modeling through using the AMOS Version 20 software. To determine the significance level of direct relationships between the variables of the model, the Maximum Likelihood method was used. The results were as shown in Table 8.

**Table 9.** *Model Fit*

Indicator	Standardized value *	Obtained Value
$\chi^2$ (p. value)	0.05 >	0.000
GFI	0.90 <	1
RMR	0.06 >	Zero
CFI	0.95 >	1

\* Standard value based on Baek, 2007

As shown in table 8, the model significance was proven, and the statistical analysis showed the results of the path test as shown in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Results of the relationship between research variables

Variable			Direct path coefficient	Indirect path coefficient	Total path coefficient
Independent	Mediator	Dependent			
Social media sites	-----	Value Equity	**0.697	-----	**0.697
Social media sites	-----	Brand Equity	**0.624	-----	**0.624
Social media sites	-----	Relationship Equity	**0.653	-----	**0.653
Social media sites	-----	Customer loyalty	**0.328	-----	**0.328
Social media sites	Customer equity (Value Equity, Brand Equity, relationship Equity)	Customer loyalty	**0.382	**0.451	**0.979
Value equity	-----	Customer loyalty	**0.161	-----	*0.161
Brand Equity	-----	Customer loyalty	**0.227	-----	**0.227
Relationship Equity	-----	Customer loyalty	**0.302	-----	**0.302

\*\* Significant at the level of 0.01. \*Significant at the level of 0.05.

Table 10 shows the following results:

- 1- **The direct effects**, the results were as follows: The direct impact of social media activities on the dimensions of the customer equity (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity) was found statistically significant at the level of 0.01, where the direct path coefficient of the direct impact on the three dimensions of the customer equity was respectively 0.697, 0.624 and 0.653. The second hypothesis was thus accepted. It was found that the direct impact of social networking activities on customer loyalty was statistically significant at the level of 0.01, where the value of the direct path 0.328. Thus, the third hypothesis was accepted. The direct effect of customer equity dimensions (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity) on customer loyalty was statistically significant at 0.01 level, where the direct path value of the three dimensions was 0.161, 0.227 and 0.302, respectively. The fourth hypothesis was therefore accepted.
- 2- **The indirect effects**, the results were as follows: The positive significant effect of social media activities on customer loyalty increases when mediating the dimensions of customer equity (value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity, where the increase was 0.451 (the indirect path value). Hence the fifth hypothesis was accepted.

The statistical analysis showed the results of the coefficient for interpretation as follows: Social media accounts for the percentage of 0.486 of the explained variation in value equity, and the remainder is due to other factors not included in the model. Social media accounts for the percentage of 0.390 of the explained variation in brand equity, and the rest is due to other factors not included in the model. Social media sites account for the percentage of 0.426 of the explained variation in relationship equity, and the rest is due to other factors not included in the model. Social media sites, value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity account for the percentage of 0.703 of the variances explained in customer loyalty, and the remainder is due to other factors not included in the model.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, Mobile operators in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia should pay attention to the use of social media in general and Facebook in particular. It is the most widely used social media site in the KSA. Facebook Pages are thus a huge marketing opportunity, especially when millions of customers engage with Facebook ads of these companies, which must be exploited optimally through attention to the following: (Direct and fast communication with all customer inquiries, Customizable 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, Responding to all customer issues without ignoring any of them, Recruiting qualified and trained individuals to interact on social media pages, Publishing all announcements and information about the organization's services on its pages through social media sites and sending them to all subscribers, Continuous updating and real-time follow-up of everything on the page, Credibility in published data through social networking sites, due to the huge and rapid spread among customers. If you publish false data or services or false promises, it will increase negative posts among customers. Posting negative posts to the organization ultimately lead to a heavy loss for the company. In contrast to the credibility of everything published to customers, attention to all their demands and identifying their problems and solving them quickly leads to more positive posts. Unlike traditional means of communication, spreading positive words among customers will achieve distinctive gains for the company at the lowest possible cost.

Officials of mobile service providers should take care of the value achieved by customers and promote this value by doing the following: Taking care to provide high-quality services to customers, Ensuring error-free services, Accuracy in the dates of the customer, and care to provide timely services to customers, Training and qualify employees on how to deal with customers, respond to all inquiries of customers without any confusion or error, Caring to employ value-based pricing, so that customers recognize the credibility of these prices, Providing exclusive offers and discounts to attract more customers especially it is not easy for a new customer of mobile service to leave the organization and deal with another company in order to keep his original number and not go into the risk of changing it, Providing convenience and ease for customers when dealing with the organization with suitable waiting places,



qualified labor, and a large number of employees to reduce customers' waiting time, Attention to designing attractive and eye-catching ads, and designing a company's logo can remind a customer of the company.

Mobile Providers Management in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shall develop its customers loyalty; the results of the study showed a positive correlation between the social media activities, customer equity, and customer loyalty. Therefore, the researchers recommend the officials of these companies to pay attention to the development of customer loyalty by doing the following: Granting periodic financial rewards such as free minutes, additional balance for customers who are committed to dealing with the organization.

The researchers suggest that further research is conducted on social media sites, customer equity, and family loyalty. These suggestions include the following:

- Applying the relationship between the variables of this study in other sectors, such as education, tourism, and services.
- The impact of social media activities on the sales performance of organizations.
- The impact of the quality of service on customer equity.
- The relationship between product creativity and customer equity.
- The impact of customer equity on customer citizenship for the organization.

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