



Customer Lived Experiences Of Proactive Social Media Engagement And Its Influence On Brand Equity: An IPA Approach

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Abstract: This study examines how proactive social media engagement, conducted through the Social Customer Relationship Management (Social CRM) practices of Scarlett Whitening, influences customer perceptions of brand meaning and overall brand equity. As brands increasingly initiate unsolicited interactions on Instagram and TikTok, understanding how customers interpret these engagements becomes essential for explaining their emotional and behavioral responses. Using a qualitative design, this research employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore customers' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to proactive brand interactions. The population of the study includes active social media users in Indonesia who follow beauty brands. A homogeneous purposive sample of six participants aged 19–30 years was selected based on their direct experience receiving proactive engagement from Scarlett Whitening. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary instrument, complemented by field notes to support interpretive rigor. The findings reveal three key themes: feeling seen and recognized by the brand, reinterpreting brand intentions, and shifts in attitudes and behavioral loyalty. Participants reported emotional validation, increased trust, and stronger relational connection, which subsequently enhanced their willingness to purchase and advocate for the brand. These results demonstrate that proactive Social CRM operates as a relational experience that strengthens customer–brand bonds and contributes to experience-driven brand equity.

Keywords: Social CRM, Proactive Engagement, Customer Experience, Brand Equity, IPA

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has transformed how brands build and maintain relationships with their customers. In this environment, customer expectations for immediacy, personalization, and emotional resonance continue to rise (Bhukya & Paul, 2023). As a response, many brands have adopted Social Customer Relationship Management (Social CRM) strategies to engage customers proactively, commenting on user posts, sending personalized messages, responding rapidly to user-generated content, and even initiating conversations before customers lodge inquiries. Such proactive engagements have the potential to shape how customers perceive the brand and evaluate its overall brand equity (Trainor et al., 2014). Scarlett Whitening, one of Indonesia's leading beauty brands, represents a compelling example due to its highly



interactive presence on Instagram and TikTok, where direct and unsolicited engagements frequently occur.

Although CRM literature has extensively discussed the role of technology-enabled communication in fostering loyalty, much of the research tends to rely on quantitative and system-oriented approaches. Prior studies highlight that social media responsiveness improves trust, satisfaction, and purchase intention (Harrigan et al., 2020; Wang & Kim, 2017). However, these studies rarely explore how customers interpret proactive interactions and what subjective meanings they assign to the brand's behavior. Similarly, the brand equity literature largely focuses on measurable constructs such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty (Aaker, 1996; Keller & Swaminathan, 2019), but does not fully capture the experiential and emotional processes through which customer–brand relationships are formed on digital platforms. Very few empirical studies examine the lived, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of proactive brand engagements on social media an essential area for understanding why certain interactions successfully strengthen brand equity while others remain ineffective.

This research argues that understanding customer experiences at a deeper, phenomenological level is essential because proactive brand interactions are not merely communicative acts; they are relational events that shape brand meaning, identity, and value in the eyes of customers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). By employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study uncovers the subjective interpretations that customers construct when they experience proactive engagement from Scarlett Whitening on social media. IPA enables researchers to move beyond surface-level behavioral outcomes and instead explore how customers emotionally and cognitively make sense of these interactions (Smith et al., 2021). In doing so, this research reveals the mechanisms through which Social CRM contributes to the formation of brand trust, emotional connection, and advocacy.

This study contributes to scientific knowledge in two significant ways. First, it fills a conceptual gap by explaining the meaning-making processes underlying proactive Social CRM an area insufficiently addressed in contemporary CRM and branding research. Second, it provides an empirically grounded framework connecting proactive engagement to shifts in brand perception, customer trust, and long-term brand equity (Coulter et al., 2012). By centering the lived



experiences of customers, this study offers richer and more nuanced insights for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand how everyday interactions on social media can evolve into meaningful components of long-term brand value.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which focuses on exploring the subjective meaning-making processes of individuals who experience a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2021). IPA was chosen because the core objective of this research is to understand how customers interpret proactive brand interactions on social media and how such experiences shape their perceptions of brand identity, sincerity, and overall brand equity. Rather than generalizing patterns, IPA emphasizes depth, idiographic detail, and the lived experiences of participants.

The research subjects consisted of six informants who had directly experienced proactive engagement from Scarlett Whitening on Instagram or TikTok. Consistent with IPA's principle of small and homogeneous samples (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), all informants shared specific criteria:

1. Active users of social media;
2. Followers or customers of Scarlett Whitening; and
3. Individuals who had received unsolicited engagement from the brand, such as comments, reposts, replies, or direct messages.

The informants were aged between 19 and 30 years and represented users who had meaningful interactions that influenced their perception of the brand. Such homogeneity ensured that the focus remained on deeply analyzing a shared phenomenon.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to narrate their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into emotionally significant moments. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted either online via Zoom/Google Meet or through voice call, depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio recorded with participant consent. The interview protocol followed IPA principles, emphasizing chronological storytelling and the exploration of emotional and cognitive



responses. Questions focused on how participants first encountered the proactive interaction, their immediate reactions, the meaning they ascribed to the brand's behavior, and how the experience influenced their perceptions and loyalty.

Additional field notes were taken to document contextual cues, tone of voice, and reflective observations from the researcher. These notes were used to support the hermeneutic process during analysis.

The data were analyzed using the systematic stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as formulated by Smith et al. (2021). The analytical process began with repeated readings of each interview transcript to allow deep immersion in the participants' stories and to capture the nuances of their lived experiences. During this stage, the researcher made initial notes in the margins to record descriptive observations, emotional tones, and preliminary interpretative reflections. These initial notes gradually evolved into more detailed exploratory comments, focusing on three dimensions: descriptive comments that highlighted the content of participants' narratives, linguistic comments that captured their word choices, pauses, and metaphors, and conceptual comments that reflected deeper interpretive insights.

After the initial noting phase, the researcher developed emergent themes by transforming the exploratory notes into concise statements that preserved the essence of the participants' meaning-making processes. These emergent themes were then clustered into broader superordinate themes based on conceptual connections among them. The thematic structure for each participant was constructed individually and treated as a distinct case, in alignment with IPA's idiographic commitment.

Once all individual cases were analyzed, the researcher conducted a cross-case analysis by comparing thematic patterns across participants to identify shared experiences as well as meaningful divergences. Themes that consistently appeared across most informants were elevated into the final set of superordinate themes. Throughout the analysis, the researcher engaged in double hermeneutics, interpreting how participants made sense of their interactions with the brand. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used to enhance analytical rigor and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data.



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that proactive social media engagement by Scarlett Whitening generates a deeply meaningful set of psychological, relational, and behavioral responses among users. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), three superordinate themes emerged from the lived experiences of six informants: (1) feeling seen and recognized by the brand, (2) reinterpreting brand intentions, and (3) shifts in attitudes and behavioral loyalty. These themes demonstrate how proactive engagement functions not merely as communication but as a relational encounter capable of strengthening brand equity at emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels.

1. Feeling “Seen” and Recognized by the Brand

1.1 Unexpected Recognition

Participants consistently described the proactive interaction from Scarlett Whitening as surprising and emotionally impactful. Many did not expect the brand to notice their posts or comments, leading to a moment of positive shock.

“Aku cuma upload review santai, nggak nyangka mereka beneran komen. Kayak... wow, ternyata aku diperhatiin.” (P1)

This sense of unexpected recognition aligns with existing research suggesting that personalized and timely social media responses enhance customers’ perception of brand attentiveness (Harrigan et al., 2020). The interaction disrupts routine expectations, creating an emotionally significant moment that increases brand salience. As Trainor et al. (2014) argued, proactive engagement can act as a form of humanized communication that strengthens relational bonds.

1.2 Validation of Self

Beyond surprise, participants reported feeling valued and validated, especially when the brand acknowledged their experiences or opinions.

“Mereka bilang makasih karena aku percaya produknya. Rasanya pendapatku tuh dihargai.” (P5)

This validation contributes to emotional attachment, a key driver of brand equity as proposed by Keller dan Swaminathan (2019). When customers feel that their identity and



contributions are recognized, they perceive the brand as more relatable and authentic. Such relational validation enriches the symbolic dimension of the brand, further strengthening its equity. Proactive interactions serve as a “social recognition” mechanism that deepens the brand-consumer relationship. This process strengthens emotional loyalty; a core component of brand equity (Aaker, 1996).

2. Reinterpreting Brand Intentions

2.1 Humanizing the Brand

Participants frequently interpreted proactive interactions as evidence of the brand’s personality and sincerity. The tone, immediacy, and warmth of responses made the brand feel alive and human-like.

“Caranya jawab tuh hangat banget. Kayak lagi ngobrol sama temen, bukan admin brand besar.” (P3)

This humanization aligns with Lemon and Verhoef’s (2016) framework, which emphasizes that customer experience on digital touchpoints shapes deeper relational perceptions. The brand’s perceived warmth fosters trust and intimacy, which are crucial antecedents of brand equity.

2.2 Moving Beyond Transactional Behavior

Participants interpreted proactive responses as signals that the brand cared beyond sales. They perceived the brand’s behavior as relational rather than transactional.

“Mereka nggak langsung jualan. Nanya dulu masalah kulitku. Jadi aku merasa mereka bener-bener peduli.” (P4)

This interpretation supports the idea that Social CRM shifts customer perceptions from “brand as seller” to “brand as partner.” Wang and Kim (2017) argued that responsiveness that prioritizes customer needs over commercial intent enhances trust and intimacy. This transformation is essential, as trust strongly predicts long-term loyalty and brand preference. Proactive engagement enables customers to reinterpret brand intentions as sincere and relational. This interpretive process serves as a psychological bridge connecting digital interactions with increased perceptions of quality, trust, and brand image all components of brand equity.

3. Shifts in Attitudes and Behavioral Loyalty

3.1 Behavioral Commitment and Purchase Intention



Participants reported heightened trust and confidence in the brand following the proactive engagement. This often translated into consistent purchasing behavior and willingness to spend more.

“Sejak itu aku lebih yakin beli produknya. Bahkan coba yang lain juga.” (P2)

This finding echoes Coulter et al. (2012), who argued that positive social media interactions can strengthen purchase intention and perceived value. The emotional connection developed in earlier stages appears to solidify into behavioral loyalty, reflecting Keller and Swaminathan (2019) concept of brand resonance.

3.2 Advocacy and Social Amplification

Participants also expressed a tendency to share their positive experiences with peers, effectively becoming brand advocates.

“Aku cerita ke banyak temen. Karena pengalaman kayak gitu jarang banget dapat dari brand lain.” (P6)

This shift toward advocacy is consistent with the literature showing that social media engagement encourages electronic word-of-mouth and customer advocacy (Harrigan et al., 2020). Advocacy strengthens brand equity by increasing brand awareness and reinforcing positive brand associations. Positive experiences generated through proactive engagement contribute to increased trust, which subsequently strengthens customers' confidence in the brand. This heightened trust often develops into repeat purchasing behavior, and over time, encourages customers to voluntarily advocate for the brand. Taken together, this sequential process illustrates how proactive interactions foster experience-driven brand equity by nurturing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral loyalty.

Synthesis of Findings

The synthesis of findings from this study reveals a multilayered psychological and relational process through which proactive social media engagement influences customer perceptions of brand meaning and brand equity. The experiences shared by participants illustrate that proactive interactions are not merely operational or functional components of Social CRM, but rather relational touchpoints that produce emotionally salient and cognitively rich interpretations. Through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, three interconnected relational



mechanisms become visible: emotional recognition, interpretation of brand intentions, and behavioral reinforcement, each of which contributes meaningfully to brand equity construction.

The experience of “being seen” by the brand demonstrates how proactive engagement facilitates customers’ emotional recognition. Participants described feelings of surprise, validation, and appreciation responses that align with research showing that personalized interactions can enhance perceived social presence and emotional closeness between consumers and brands (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This emotional acknowledgment not only heightens brand salience but also activates the early stages of emotional bonding, which prior branding literature identifies as foundational to brand resonance and loyalty (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). The emotional potency of these experiences suggests that proactive engagement functions as a moment of micro-personalization a tactic known to strengthen relational trust (Harrigan et al., 2020).

Customers engaged in interpretive sensemaking to understand why the brand initiated communication. Participants consistently inferred sincerity, warmth, and non-transactional motives, indicating a cognitive repositioning of the brand’s identity. This supports Lemon and Verhoef’s (2016) framework, which posits that customer experience is shaped not only by functional interactions but also by the meanings customers assign to brand behaviors across touchpoints. When customers interpret proactive engagement as genuine care rather than persuasion, they attribute higher levels of benevolence and integrity to the brand. Such interpretations are crucial, as trust is a mediating mechanism linking engagement to deeper brand relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, the humanization of the brand through social media aligns with findings from Labrecque (2014), who argues that interactivity creates perceptions of brand personality and social warmth.

The findings show that emotional and cognitive interpretations culminate in behavioral shifts that reinforce brand equity. Participants demonstrated increased purchase intention, willingness to explore additional product lines, and voluntary advocacy behaviors. These outcomes reflect the behavioral dimension of brand equity described by Aaker (1996) and are consistent with empirical evidence suggesting that interactive social media communication drives electronic word-of-mouth and customer loyalty (Coulter et al., 2012; Wang & Kim, 2017). The experiential chain identified in this study is beginning with feelings of recognition, followed by the development of trust,



progressing into stronger relational commitment, and ultimately leading to customer advocacy that illustrates how proactive engagement becomes a catalyst for long-term relational strengthening.

The synthesis reveals that proactive Social CRM serves as a meaning-making process embedded within the customer journey. Rather than acting solely as digital communication, proactive engagement initiates emotional connection, reframes brand perceptions, and stimulates behaviors that collectively enhance brand equity. This reinforces contemporary views that brand value increasingly emerges from co-created experiences between brands and consumers within interactive social media environments (Brodie et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how proactive social media engagement particularly through the Social CRM practices of Scarlett Whitening shapes customer perceptions of brand meaning and contributes to the formation of brand equity. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the research illuminated the subjective, emotional, and interpretive processes that customers undergo when they experience unsolicited and personalized brand interactions on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The findings offer a rich understanding of how proactive engagement functions as a deeply relational event rather than a mere communication strategy.

The lived experiences of participants revealed that proactive interactions foster a strong sense of being acknowledged and valued by the brand. This emotional recognition generates surprise, validation, and a heightened sense of connection responses that play a crucial role in forming early emotional bonds. These bonds subsequently shape customers' cognitive interpretations of brand intentions, leading them to perceive the brand as sincere, attentive, and human-like. Such interpretations promote trust, a key psychological mechanism that bridges social engagement with long-term brand equity.

The study demonstrates that proactive engagement produces meaningful behavioral shifts. Participants reported increased purchase intention, continued product exploration, and voluntary advocacy, indicating that the emotional and cognitive impacts of engagement ultimately reinforce customer loyalty. These behavioral outcomes represent core components of brand equity,



confirming that proactive Social CRM can effectively enhance brand value by influencing customers' attitudes and relational commitments.

Aligned with the objectives outlined in the introduction, this study contributes to the development of knowledge by filling a conceptual gap in CRM and branding literature. While previous studies have emphasized the functional benefits of social media responsiveness, this research provides a phenomenological explanation of how and why customers interpret proactive interactions as meaningful, and how these interpretations shape their perception of brand identity. Furthermore, the study offers a framework for understanding brand equity as an outcome of experience-driven, co-created meaning rather than mere transactional activity.

The findings underscore the importance of designing proactive, personalized, and humanized engagement strategies that extend beyond sales-driven communication. Brands that adopt genuine relational behaviors are more likely to foster deeper emotional connections, build trust, and promote advocacy, thereby enhancing long-term equity. Future research may expand this inquiry by comparing different industries, exploring negative or misinterpreted proactive interactions, or integrating multimethod approaches to strengthen the theoretical model developed through this study. Nonetheless, this research demonstrates that proactive social media engagement serves as a powerful relational tool capable of transforming everyday digital interactions into meaningful contributors to brand equity.

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