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Social Media as a Tool of Brand Communication in Bangladesh: Problems and Prospects

Bhuyan, Md. Iqbal

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Md. Iqbal Bhuyan[*]
Syed Mizanur Rahman[**]

Abstract: *In today's competitive business world, no business survives without proper branding. Branding is therefore important to every business regardless of the size, because it helps distinguish a business from its competitors. As a key component of branding, brand communication determines whether a brand is successfully established and eventually turns a profit. Since brand communication is not free of cost, it is really hard for enterprises, especially Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), of Bangladesh to carry out a successful brand communication program through traditional marketing activities, which include banner ads, text ads, e-mail, radio and television advertising etc. However, social media has evolved over the last few years to become the most affordable springboard for brand communication through engaging customers in innovative ways and making them true stakeholders in the value-creation process. Attracted by its potential to drive sales opportunities and to enhance customer engagement, companies of Bangladesh are also coming forward to embrace the full prospects of social media. This paper attempts to explore the problems and prospects of brand communication through social media in the context of Bangladesh.*

Keywords: Social Media, Brand Communication, Social Brand Communication, Internet.

1.0 Introduction

Social media is the catchphrase of today's business world. With social media, consumers can interact instantly with brands and share opinions on the products they are interested in. It is inherent nature of consumers to buy products that are recommended by friends, family members, relatives, and someone they know in real life or even in virtual world. This virtual world has been more interactive with the emergence of social media. Now-a-days when a consumer wants to learn more information about a product or is

* Md. Iqbal Bhuyan, Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, Daffodil International University
* Syed Mizanur Rahman, Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Daffodil International University

considering a purchase, they share their queries and views in the social media sites to interact with the other members. They also look for product reviews or consumer opinions on the Facebook fan pages or other social websites. Providing the opportunities of sharing views over brands, social media is therefore ensuring the brand visibility and playing an important role in brand communication.

As a key component of branding, brand communication to the consumers has become one of the most important aspects of a company's marketing strategy. Although traditional forms of brand communication via TV, radio, or newspaper advertising achieved great success in the past, their effectiveness is decreasing drastically in today's more customer-dominated business environment. Virgin America, Inc., a United States-based airline, is spending nearly 70% of its total marketing budget in digital and emerging social media platforms (Frazier 2011). Converse, American footwear and apparel brand, is one step ahead in spending its marketing budget beyond traditional media. Less than 10% of Converse's spend is on traditional media (Frazier, 2011). While big companies around world are investing a huge amount of their financial and human resources to carry out their brand communication through both conventional and modern media, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) of emerging economies like Bangladesh are lacking financial capital to carry out their basic business activities. It is therefore a day dream for SMEs to conduct a successful brand communication due to the lack of both financial and human resources. However, with the blessings of Web 2.0 technologies, it is now possible for both Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Large Enterprises (LEs) to conduct successful and cost-effective brand communication activities through social media sites. This is why nearly every business organizations of the present world are contemplating and exploring the true benefits of social brand communication.

2.0 Objective of the Study
The study is undertaken with the following objectives:
(i)   To assess the pervasiveness of social media as a means of brand communication tool in Bangladesh;
(ii) To analyze the usefulness of social media over traditional media; and
(iii) To assess the problems and prospects of social media as a tool for brand communication.

3.0 Methodology

This is an exploratory type of research. The study aims to get a deeper understanding of both problems and prospects in the use of social media for brand communication in Bangladesh. Therefore, the data collected for the study are primarily based on secondary sources. Since social media is an emerging technology in Bangladesh, content analysis, desk research, and reliance for literature were based on books, journals, articles, trade publications, newspapers, and magazines. In addition, web-based information were thoroughly extracted and analyzed for statistical representation. Furthermore, the collected data and information were critically analyzed and interpreted by the researchers in order to make the study more informative, exploratory, and useful to the readers. The findings of the study may be useful to the prospective researchers desiring to make further study on this important issue, in one hand, and to the marketers, on the other, for attaining the insights of brand communication power of social media in the context of Bangladesh.

4.0 Literature Review
4.1 An Overview of Social Media and Brand Communication

The term "Social Media" refers to the newer platforms of online technologies that are used by large groups of people to interact with each other for sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. In the business world, social media is known as consumer-generated media (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Social media comes in many different forms today. The most popular formats of social media are: blogs (Blogger, Typepad, WordPress), microblogs (Tumblr, Twitter), social networks (Facebook, Google+, Hi5, LinkedIn, Myspace, XING), video-sharing sites (Dailymotion, Metacafe, Vimeo, YouTube), photo-sharing sites (Flickr, Photobucket, Shutterfly), presentation-sharing sites (authorSTREAM, Scribd, SlideShare), social bookmarking sites (Delicious, Digg, Reddit, StumbleUpon), review sites (Citysearch, TripAdvisor, Yelp), virtual worlds (ActiveWorlds, Second Life), and Wikis (Wetpaint, Wikipedia, Wikia).

According to American Marketing Association (2014), a brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. Since a brand is one of the most

valuable intangible assets of every business, the success of companies largely depends on communicating brands with customers. Thus, brand communication is the process of bringing brands into contact with current and potential customers. And the objective of brand communication through social media, also known as social brand communication, has been to gain the traffic on company websites or attention toward a brand. Social brand communication instigates the Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Marketing through blogging or user-generated content sharing. The beauty of social brand communication is that people speaks for the brands. Therefore, global companies have recognized social brand communication as a potential tool for branding their products.

4.2 The Spectrum of Social Media in Bangladesh

Although internet penetration rate in Bangladesh is marked very low, a big online community is gradually developing. According to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), the total number of Internet Subscribers in Bangladesh has reached 36.64 million at the end of October 2013. About 35.11 million of them use the Internet through mobile phones, while the rest (1.53 million) use broadband Internet from Internet Service Providers (ISPs), PSTN (public switched telephone network), and WiMAX operators. A major portion of this internet community is using social media regularly. However, the most visited web sites in Bangladesh (in accordance with their rank) are shown in the table below:

Table 1: The most visited web sites in Bangladesh

Rank	Name of the Sites
1.	facebook.com
2.	google.com.bd
3.	google.com
4.	youtube.com
5.	prothom-alo.com
6.	banglanews24.com
7.	yahoo.com
8.	blogspot.com
9.	bdnews24.com
10.	ask.com

Source: Alexa (2014)

From the table 1, it is observed that facebook.com, a social media site, holds the number one position in Bangladesh on the basis of the numbers of

visitors. The social media sites (other than facebook) which hold their position among top ten overall websites in Bangladesh are youtube.com, blogspot.com, and ask.com. However, the other popular social media sites in Bangladesh are wikipedia.org, wordpress.com, linkedin.com, twitter.com, somewhereinblog.net, plus.google.com, etc.

5.0 Presence of Bangladeshi Brands on Social Media
As the brand-building power of social media grows, it no longer makes sense to treat it as an experiment. That's why companies in Bangladesh are coming forward to have their strong and active presence on social media. Some big companies are even recruiting social media managers for managing their pages on social media and interacting with the page members (clients) actively. Social media principles and guidelines have also been enacted in some companies for their executives.

5.1 Top Brands of Bangladesh on Facebook
With more than 1 billion active users, Facebook is the world's largest social network. Considering its large community it is said that if Facebook users constituted a country, it would be the world's third largest, behind China and India. Among the top most visited sites in Bangladesh, facebook is holding the number one position (Alexa, 2014). Facebook allows millions of its users to connect and interact with each other. Facebook has also the opportunity for companies to create their official page and to engage customer talking about their brands. Today's customers would like to connect and interact with the businesses whose services they want. As the traditional media can't do so, companies are now diligently establishing facebook pages to interact with consumers to expand product and brand recognition, drive sales and profitability, and engender loyalty. The following table shows the most popular official fan pages of different brands in Bangladesh on facebook:

Table 2: Popular Facebook Fan Pages of Different Brands in Bangladesh

Rank	Official Page Name	Brand	Industry	Local Fans	International Fans	Total Fans	Fan Posts
1.	Airtel Buzz	Airtel	Telecommunication	11,68,096	41,275	12,09,371	32,609
2.	banglalink mela	banglalink	Telecommunication	9,29,267	55,154	9,84,421	38,623
3.	Robi Axiata Limited	Robi	Telecommunication	9,23,179	74,537	9,97,716	76,022
4.	Grameenphone	Grameenphone	Telecommunication	7,77,883	74560	8,52,443	69,667
5.	Bikroy.com	Bikroy.com	E-commerce	7,00,704	27,039	7,27,743	42,900
6.	Cellbazaar	Cellbazaar	E-commerce	6,31,623	14,957	6,46,580	32,398

7.	Prothom-alojobs	Prothom-alo	Job portal	5,63,103	72,278	6,35,381	96,965
8.	rokomari.com	rokomari.com	E-commerce	4,16,211	28,142	4,44,353	22,171
9.	Aarong	Aarong	Fashion house	3,35,319	49,387	3,84,706	4,300
10.	Yellow	Yellow	Fashion house	3,29,715	55,576	3,85,291	2,511

Source: Socialbakers (2014)

5.2 Top Brands of Bangladesh on Twitter

Millions of people around the world use Twitter to discuss everything from the news to brands and businesses. At present, there are 230 million active users on Twitter worldwide. And those users post an average of 500 million Tweets every day (Twitter, 2014). Short message services of Twitter are called Tweets. Registered users on Twitter can read and post tweets, but unregistered users can only read them. Among the top most visited sites in Bangladesh, Twitter is holding the twenty-fifth position (Alexa, 2014). Companies can use Twitter to connect directly with people (customers) who are interested in their brand, participate in real-time events and conversations, enhance the online brand personality and thus delight the customers. The table 3 shows the most popular official Twitter accounts of different brands in Bangladesh.

Table 3: Popular Twitter Accounts of Different Brands in Bangladesh

Rank	Profile Name	Brand	Industry	Followers	Tweets
1.	@BanglaSong	music.com.bd	Online music portal	12133	257
2.	@Grameenphone	Grameenphone	Telecommunication	10452	638
3.	@airtel_bd	Airtel	Telecommunication	4033	2485
4.	@TweetRobi	Robi	Telecommunication	3781	1759
5.	@themexpert	ThemeXpert	Template design	654	2072

Source: Socialbakers (2014)

5.3 Top Brands of Bangladesh on YouTube

Founded in February 2005, YouTube allows billions of people to discover, watch, and share originally-created videos. YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers (YouTube, 2014). Over 6 billion hours of video are watched each month on YouTube, that's almost an hour for every person on Earth (YouTube, 2014). Among the top most visited sites in Bangladesh, YouTube is holding the 3rd position (Alexa, 2014). The following table shows the most popular YouTube

channels of different brands in Bangladesh (according to the total number of views of the videos):

Table 4: Popular YouTube Channels of Different Brands in Bangladesh

Rank	Channel Name	Brand	Industry	Subscribers	Videos	Total Views
1.	Grameenphone Ltd	Grameenphone	Telecommunication	3,469	174	5,34,362
2.	banglalinkmela	Banglalink	Telecommunication	1,132	58	3,78,659
3.	Robi Axiata Limited	Robi	Telecommunication	2,669	444	2,86,765
4.	AirtelBuzzVideos	Airtel	Telecommunication	798	44	37,795
5.	pond's Bangladesh	Pond's	Beauty and health care products	15	2	5,687

Source: Socialbakers (2014)

6.0 Economic Benefits of Brand Communication through Social Media

Social media has some inherent characteristics which make it different from traditional media like magazines, newspapers, television, and billboards etc. Social media has become very popular in recent years. According to Pew Research Center's survey (2013), 73% of online adults now use a social networking site of some kind. And 93% of marketers use social media for business (Business Insider, 2013). McKinsey Global Institute (2012) revealed through its research that 90% of companies using social technologies are getting some business benefits. It does not matter whether the business is small or large, online or offline. Social media has a great advantage for every business. The economic benefits of using social media in brand communication or other marketing activities by companies are as follows:

6.1 Accessibility

Social media touches nearly every facet of our personal and business lives (Qualman, 2013). The social media is easily accessible from everywhere of the world with only the internet connectivity. Social media is totally user friendly to use and does not require any special skills, knowledge, training, and specialist equipment to use. It is absolutely simple to connect with others and be a part of communities. Therefore, anyone with online access and basic IT skill can use the social media to initiate or participate in the conversations. In a sense, everyone is now empowered to speak up in social media.

6.2 Inexpensive

Traditional media can be extremely expensive, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Almost all social networking sites are free to

use when compared to the other traditional brand communication tools. To communicate with the customers, companies only need to spend their time updating profiles, posting their messages, and interacting with customers in the social media platforms. It is also possible to follow up the customer responses of every promotional activity attempted in social media. Thus, the main beauty of social media is that companies can inform, engage, and build strong relations with customers with almost free of cost.

6.3 Effective Measurement of Brand Communication
It is hard and requires long-term measurement tools for traditional media to measure the effectiveness of brand communication. As the customer response to brand is almost instantaneous in social media, businesses can easily gauge the effectiveness of brand messaging. If the response founds negative, businesses have the opportunity to take the immediate measures for having positive response toward the brand. Moreover, there are a variety of social media analytics tools to help marketing experts track the reach and effectiveness of their social media campaigns toward brands (Bradbury, 2013). Popular social media analytics tools are Google Analytics, Klout, HootSuite, etc.

6.4 Speed
Social media is faster than any other traditional media to covey the messages to the target stakeholders. Once the message is posted in the social media pages, people can see and participate in conversation instantly regardless of time or geographic location. Thus, real time brand communication has been possible with the blessings of social media.

6.5 Interactivity
One of the unique advantages of social media is that it allows two-way and real-time communication. Conversation (comment) is an important part of social media. Consumers can share their views and interact toward a brand directly and instantly. This participatory nature of social media has given businesses the opportunity to create brand loyalty among customers.

6.6 Ability to target
The communities on social media platforms are basically formed on the basis of common interests, such as politics, hobbies, travelling, or other favorite activities. Through social media marketing, companies can easily enter into

those communities and target their customers who want to talk about specific product or brand.

6.7 Global Reach
The world is now becoming a global marketplace and today almost all countries are part of a global economy (Hill, 2010). With the increasing globalization, time and distance have virtually disappeared as a barrier between consumers and producers around the globe. Since social media is global in nature and accessible 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, businesses are now using social media to reach this global market. Social media enables its users to stay connected with anyone they are interested in who are geographically separated (Qualman, 2013).

6.8 Gaining Traffic on Company Websites
Social media also works as a leading traffic generator. When any blog posts, videos, or other content are shared from the website of a business, this gives the stakeholders a reason to click through and visit the site. Once there, the business has now the opportunity to inspire those visitors to take action by inviting them to sign up for mailing list, make a purchase, or call to schedule a free consultation (Chandler, 2013). Thus, social media sites can help place the company into higher position in page rankings and more likely to show up in a search.

**7.0 Prospects of Brand Communication through Social Media in the Context of Bangladesh**
The opportunities of brand communication through social media in the context of Bangladesh are highly potential because of the following reasons:

7.1 Increased People's Interest and Affluent Community
Bangladeshi people are very much interested to interact in social media. Among the top ten most visited websites in Bangladesh, four are social media sites i.e., facebook.com, youtube.com, blogspot.com, and ask.com (Alexa, 2014). A lot of community pages are also seen in Facebook. From political movement to fund raising for a sick child, people are creating social media contents. If the companies can adapt to this trend in social media, it is, therefore, the tempting opportunities for them to have the customers as their brand advocates.

7.2 Reduction of Internet Bandwidth Price

The government is trying to make internet available among people by reducing bandwidth price since 2007 (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, 2013). It is seen in the figure 1 that internet bandwidth price per mbps was BDT 75,000 in the year 2007, whereas it has been reduced to BDT 6,000 in the year 2013. With the reduced internet cost the number of internet users in Bangladesh is increasing day by day. It has also been observed that a major portion of the internet users of Bangladesh is using social media in any way. Bangladesh is ranked 18th in the world in terms of the number of the Facebook users. Nearly 14.4 million people of Bangladesh use Facebook which is 41.6 per cent of the internet users in Bangladesh (Zafrullah, 2013).

Figure 1: Reduction of Internet Bandwidth Price in Bangladesh
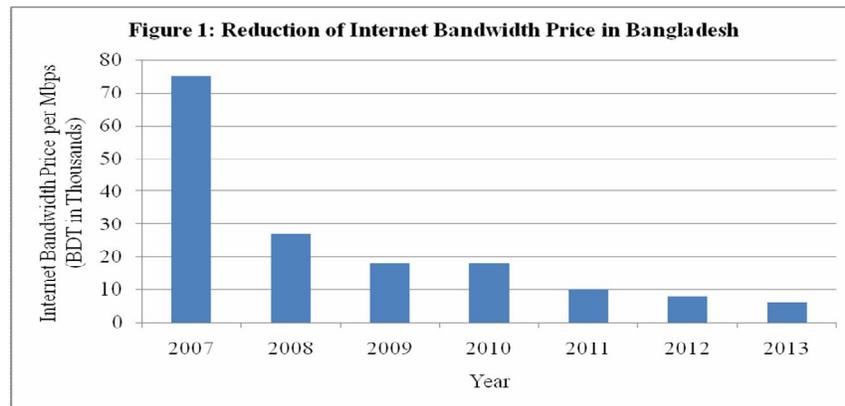
Source: Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (2013)

7.3 Implementation of High Speed Internet

Government of Bangladesh is currently implementing the state-of-the-art equipment and access to broadband internet connections. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has changed the definition of broadband. According to new definition, at least 1.0 mbps speed internet will be defined as "broadband" and bellow 1.0 mbps speed will be called as "narrowband" (The Financial Express, 2013). Thus, high speed internet is encouraging to uplift the number of online community.

7.4 Availability of Internet-Enabled Handheld Devices

The computing power and internet connectivity of handheld devices have increased the number of social media users. Internet-enabled handheld devices are available at competitive price in Bangladeshi markets. People can

use internet and join the social media community from anywhere and anytime they want.

7.5 Digital Bangladesh Project
Digital Bangladesh is a buzz word in the contemporary Bangladesh. The current ruling Bangladesh Awami League party used the concept in its 2008 election manifesto. The term "Digital Bangladesh" means the effective use of computers and modern information and communication technology (ICTs) for building a better Bangladesh in terms of education, health, job placement, human rights, transparency, accountability, and poverty reduction (Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, 2010). The submarine cable network is expected to be the main telecommunications infrastructure for "Digital Bangladesh" by the year 2021. By providing high capacity fiber optic submarine cable bandwidth, the people of Bangladesh will be connected to the "Information Super Highway" (BSCCL, 2014).

7.6 Changed Social Structure
With the wave of globalization, the social structure of the country is changing. The mobility of rural people to urban area, increased highly educated group, and people's eagerness toward online shopping are greatly marked in this changing social structure. As the urban people lack the infrastructural opportunities to pass their leisure time, they are increasingly motivated to pass their time interacting with friends and family members in social media.

8.0 Problems of Brand Communication through Social Media in the Context of Bangladesh

8.1 Poor Internet Connectivity
Bangladesh's internet largely depends on South East Asia-Middle East-Western Europe-4, also known as SEA-ME-WE-4. SEA-ME-WE-4 is the only submarine optic fiber system that connects Bangladesh globally via the internet (BBC, 2012). In addition, six companies operate international terrestrial cables that provide backup connectivity through India. Bangladesh has experienced internet disruption several times after the cable cut on the SEA-ME-WE-4 optical fiber system. To have alternative submarine cable connectivity, Bangladesh has already signed for SEA-ME-WE-5 which will be connected by first quarter of 2016 (Islam 2014). Moreover, Internet's speed in Bangladesh is amongst the slowest in the world and is ranked 139th

out of 188 countries in the Household Download Index published by Ookla Net Index (2014). Slow internet speed makes the buffering to watch and share the posts in social media. As the companies try to share videos, photos, and broad messages in social media, it becomes sometimes cumbersome to get the customers engaged in conversation.

8.2 Unavailability of online payment gateways
Social media also offers the paid ads platforms. Because of unavailability of popular online payment gateways like PayPal, it is cumbersome for Bangladeshi companies to use this paid ads platforms for promoting their products. Although there are some alternatives of PayPal available in the country, it requires USD 10-20 more for accomplishing the transaction. According to report of The Financial Express (2012), Bangladesh is being deprived of BDT 2.5 billion in foreign currency earnings annually owing to different online service sectors caused by a lack of convenient online money transfer channels in the country.

8.3 Lack of sufficient knowledge and education
As per the Population and Housing Census 2011 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the country's literacy rate of the population aged above 7 reached 51.8 percent. As the interaction in social media requires basic literacy of reading contents, the marketers could not attain the attraction of half of the population of the country.

8.4 Government intervention
The people of Bangladesh has already been experienced the government's intervention in the use of social media. According to Global Government Requests Report of Facebook published in June 2013, Bangladesh government had asked for personal information about 12 Facebook users. In March 2009, YouTube was blocked in Bangladesh after a recording of a meeting between the prime minister and army officers was posted revealing anger by the military on how the government was handling a mutiny by border guards in Dhaka (BBC, 2009). Government intervention freaks out and discourages the users to interact themselves freely in social media.

8.5 Restrictions in families and offices
The attitude of parents toward social media reflects the same negative pattern as it was in early stage of television industry. This is because of their fear that teenagers are becoming highly addicted into social media. In Bangladesh,

teenagers ranging from 11 to 18 are the prime users of Facebook today. The intensity of using this site among teenagers is so aggravating that young students can't help staying connected to Facebook in every 30 minute (Ahmmady, 2012). It has also been observed that the use of social media is sometimes being restricted by employers in Bangladesh. Every technology has both good and bad side. Social media has changed the world in many ways. For some, the change has been positive, for others the change has been detrimental (Hoal, 2014).

8.6 Cost of miscommunication

Sometime cost of miscommunication is very high in this regard when people can start from anywhere with any background. Basic ethical part of communication can be ignored once social media is being used by unethical people sometime. Now-a-days, mass media broadcasting companies are trying to get peoples feedback using social media without any censor that may cause of cultural shock.

8.7 Innovation and professionalism

In social media people usually come to talk, play games or share everything, starting from their opinions about a particular event to photos of their pet. In Bangladesh companies sometime expose less professionalism to keep in mind that in a social media, they should portray their brand as a friend who talks to the people in their language and understands them. Sometime branding activism here in Bangladesh is repetitive and less interesting. Creative innovation is necessary for grabbing consumers' empathy finally.

9.0 Conclusion

If a company would like to have successful online presence today, social media marketing is crucial. It is one of the most popular, powerful, and promising means of brand communication, which every company in Bangladesh must embrace. In this study an attempt was undertaken to depict both the problems and prospects of using social media in brand communication. With the uptrend in both number and engagement of users, social media is going to be a big online community in Bangladesh. Companies doing business in Bangladesh can grab the tempting economic benefits of social media identified throughout the study. This study also depicts that social media is not totally a risk-free platform. Random dabbling with social media contents would not ensure the target benefits for the companies. Since fans, followers, and subscribers are free to post their

comments on these platforms, businesses are also susceptible to the possibility of negative publicity. Companies need to be consistent and active with their social participation to minimize the risks associated with any adverse publicity. To do so, companies are suggested to appoint executives who will be responsible for developing and maintaining contents in social media. Businesses should also align other resources with their social media marketing strategies so that they can ensure the attention and frequent communication needed to embrace social media effectively.

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