



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres

Website interactivity and brand development of online travel agencies in China: The moderating role of age

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Website interactivity
Brand development
Consumer behavior
Moderating effects

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to propose a theory-driven model to understand the relationship among social website interactivity, brand experience, brand choice, price premium, and buying intention within the context of online travel agencies (OTAs) websites. The moderating role of consumer age was also investigated. Results suggested the inclusion of social website interactivity in the design of OTA websites enhanced branding elements, which influenced customers' willingness to pay the price premium and to return in the future. The strength of the relationships among these constructs varies across young consumers (aged between 18 and 25) and older consumers (aged above 25). Moreover, results suggested that social website interactivity influenced price premium and buying intentions through brand experience and brand choice. This study offers specific theoretical and practical implications.

1. Introduction

Social website interactivity (SWI) in website design has been recognized as an important feature for building a brand (Voorveld, van Noort, & Duijn, 2013). Social interactivity refers to the act a user performs when navigating a website. SWI, a subsection of website interactivity, pertains to the interaction between websites and consumers, which is believed to impact consumers' behavioral intentions (Aluri, Slevitch, & Larzelere, 2015). In this sense, SWI serves as a fundamental competency that contributes to the development of strong relationships with consumers via the reciprocal communication between systems and users (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2016). SWI has been shown to induce positive attitudes toward branded websites through the elaboration of product-related information (Palla, Tsiotsou, & Zotos, 2013).

Although a growing body of research has been concerned with website interactivity and its potential effect on developing online branding (Wang, Hsu, Huang, & Chen, 2015), there remains limited research on how SWI influences both brand building and behaviors. Due to the pervasive usage of internet, the quality of a brand's online presence has become a critical factor for brand communication and customer relationship management. Research has suggested that brand choice, brand experience, and price premium influences customers'

behavioral intentions (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Hence, the prospective impact of website interactivity on customers' behavioral intentions may not fully materialize unless website users enjoy memorable customer experiences. In this sense, there remains a need to examine how interactivity affects buying intentions when mediated by brand experience, brand choice, and price premium.

SWI has been commonly recognized as a critical antecedent of customer perceptions and behaviors, although the presence of moderating variables can influence its impact (Ku & Chen, 2015). Previous research has suggested that moderators like age, digital status, and product type should be considered (Voorveld et al., 2013). In addition, Chung, Park, Wang, Fulk, and McLaughlin (2010) suggested that age had a significant impact on internet users' perceptions and behaviors. Nevertheless, there remains a scarcity of research on the effect of age (Radzliana, Khor, Azlan, & Lim, 2015), and it remains unknown how different age consumers might respond differently to initiatives for online branding.

Southworth and Kim (2015) suggested that a consumer's age could influence a brand's perception and associated behavioral intentions over time. Previous research has suggested that age may affect both branding and behavior (Ilicic, Baxter, & Kulczynski, 2016). For instance, young Chinese consumers were found to be brand conscious, exhibiting a strong need for a brand's uniqueness (Chan & Wang, 2015).

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.09.046>

Received 21 November 2016; Received in revised form 24 September 2017; Accepted 26 September 2017

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Therefore, the role of age in branding should be illuminated. To our knowledge, no previous research has examined the moderating effects of age on the relationship between SWI, branding perceptions, and behavioral intentions. This study fills this gap in previous research by examining whether age moderates the relationships between SWI and brand experience, brand choice and price premium, brand experience and buying intention, and brand choice and buying intention.

The online travel agencies (OTA) in China have been selected as the research context for this study. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, China remains the top-ranked outbound tourism market since 2012 with outbound tourism reaching 109 million in 2014 (Xinhua Net, 2015). In this regard, purchasing tourism products online has gained popularity among Chinese consumers. Moreover, recent years have witnessed a remarkable development of local OTAs with an annual growth rate over 30% from 2012 onwards (iResearch, 2015). In 2015, the revenues in China pertaining to OTA's third quarter increased by 48.8%, up from the 5.96 billion Yuan recorded during the same period of the previous year (iResearch, 2015). Some popular Chinese OTAs including Ctrip, Qunar, and Tuniu, have been listed on the NASDAQ. Despite tourism growth, Chinese websites have been falling behind competing websites in terms of their interacting aspects, which has a negative effect on maintaining a positive customer relationship (Ye, Fu, & Law, 2016). Hence, to enhance the competitive market advantage of Chinese OTAs, it is important for OTA managers to understand the impact of SWI on brand elements that have the potential to influence the behavioral intentions of consumers.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

The theoretical framework is presented in Fig. 1, and the following sections discuss and support each of the proposed relationships through a series of hypotheses.

2.1. Social website interactivity (SWI)

SWI represents the reciprocal communication that occurs between individuals and technology. The perception of social interactivity is the interaction between the users and the system or website (e.g., e-mail, chat, or toll-free telephone access). McMillan and Hwang (2002) suggested that SWI exists when users possess the capability to communicate with internet tools, including real-time chats, bulletin boards, and search engines, among others. Such internet tools can help to evoke a favorable user experience (Huang & Hsiao, 2012).

Previously, branded websites were examined from a design standpoint to explain how reciprocal interactivity assists marketers in successful online branding. Voorveld et al. (2013) suggested that website interactivity positively influenced brand relationship quality and brand image. To advance prior research, the brand experience was introduced later as a consequence of interactivity. Van Noort, Voorveld, and Reijmersdal (2012) demonstrated that interactivity facilitates online flow and produce a more intensive online experience. Similarly, Yoon

and Yoon (2016) claimed that website interactivity enhanced the online brand experience.

Social website interactivity presents opportunities to communicate in real time while offering consumers the ability to select the desired content and parties involved for communication (Voorveld et al., 2013). When consumers perceive they have some degree of control during the communication process, they tend to be more likely to believe their connection with the brand is exclusive. Mollen and Wilson (2010) suggested that consumer's experiences could be enhanced through real time communication. Therefore, a unique consumer experience is likely to be achieved through reciprocal communication (Nepomuceno, Laroche, & Richard, 2014).

In line with previous research, OTA websites that incorporate features of SWI into their design appears likely to enhance online branding. Interactivity can enhance a company's telepresence, which in turn affects customer engagement (e.g., active cognitive processing, instrumental, and experiential value; Mollen & Wilson, 2010). Interactivity appears likely to help customers obtain more value (e.g., instrumental and experiential value) from websites and a unique brand experience. Based on the findings of previous research, we predicted that if SWI becomes an attribute in a technology-mediated communication (TMC) context that influences customers to have a positive brand experience, then customers would show positive behavioral intentions when making a choice. In contrast, customers may also resist choosing a brand if they encounter negative experiences when visiting a website. It is expected that SWI may enhance users' brand experience and cultivate their brand preference with an OTA branded website. Therefore, the first two hypotheses posited that:

H1. There is a significant positive causal relationship between SWI of an OTA website and brand experience.

H2. There is a significant positive causal relationship between SWI of an OTA website and brand choice.

2.2. Online brand experience, brand choice, and price premium

Online brand experience describes how users relate to brands in a holistic manner (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). It can be attained through interaction with a website (Hamzah, Alwi, & Othman, 2014). Brand experience refers to the feelings and emotions of the consumer after interacting with the brand (Kuo & Feng, 2013). It has been argued that customer experiences are cognitive, social, affective, and physical in nature (Verhoef et al., 2009). For this study, we regarded online brand experience as a complex dynamic of consumer's perceptions and behaviors, which included a consumer's favorable perception of the visual display, the participation in the OTA's community, the perceived attractiveness of cookies, and the value received from offering reasonable prices (Ha & Perks, 2005).

Along with brand experience (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013), brand choice (Raju & Asifulla, 2013) represents another key determinant of a consumer's behavioral intentions. Brand choice has been

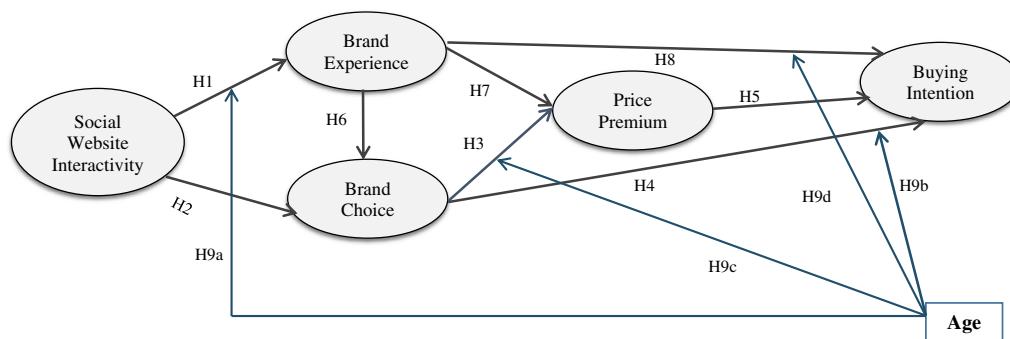


Fig. 1. Hypothesized path analysis model. Age includes older customers (age above 25) and younger customers (aged 18–25).

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