



## Customer engagement with tourism social media brands



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### ABSTRACT

In tourism, customer engagement has been found to boost loyalty, trust and brand evaluations. Customer engagement is facilitated by social media, but neither of these phenomena is well-researched in tourism. This research contributes in two ways. First, we validate the Customer Engagement with Tourism Brands (CETB) 25-item scale proposed by So, King & Sparks (2014) in a social media context, and offer an alternative three-factor 11-item version of the scale. Second, we replicate their proposed structural model, and test our alternative model, to predict the behavioural intention of loyalty from engagement, and to test customer involvement as an antecedent to engagement. Ultimately, we propose a customer engagement scale and a nomological framework for customer engagement, both of which can be applied in both tourism and non-tourism contexts. Managers of tourism brands on social to better assess the nature of customer engagement with the parsimonious 11-item scale.

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### 1. Introduction

Customer engagement has gained much attention in the recent literature. This is due to engagement being linked with numerous important brand performance indicators including sales growth, customer involvement in product development, customer feedback, and referrals (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Bowden, 2009; Kumar et al., 2010; Nambisan & Baron, 2007; Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, much of this brand engagement occurs online through social media (Malthouse & Hofacker, 2010). Customers engaged with brand communities online feel more connected to their brands, trust their preferred brands more, are more committed to their chosen brands, have higher brand satisfaction, and are more brand loyal (Brodie, Ilić, Jurić, & Hollebeek, 2013; Jahn & Kunz, 2012).

In the tourism context, customer engagement has been found to boost loyalty, trust and brand evaluations (So, King & Sparks, 2014).

Social media facilitate customer engagement, but neither of these phenomena are well researched in the tourism context. This has resulted in a need for practical social media recommendations for tourism organizations (Cabiddu, Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014; Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015; Mistilis & Gretzel, 2013). Social media use is high among tourism organizations, particularly Facebook and Twitter (Leung, Bai, & Stahura, 2015); Instagram and other social media like TripAdvisor, Airbnb and Booking.com are growing in popularity and influence (Cabiddu et al., 2014; Filieri, 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel review company and turned over \$1.246 billion in 2014, up 32 percent from the previous year (Forbes, 2015).

The goal of this research is to investigate the nature of customer engagement with tourism social media brands. We contribute to the tourism literature in two ways. First, we test the Customer Engagement with Tourism Brands (CETB) scale proposed by So et al. (2014) in a social media context. Further, we offer a psychometrically sound, concise eleven-item version of the scale. The social media context is very different to the offline hospitality brands (hotels and airlines) context in which the CETB scale was originally developed. Social media are driving fundamental business change, where they enable interactive, two-way communications between customers and organizations (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom,

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2015; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Lee & Choi, 2014; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Social media allow customers to comment, review, create and share content across online networks. They also allow customers direct access to organizations, brands and marketers (Chau & Xu, 2012). This creates challenges and opportunities for marketers, where they must engage with customers in real-time and manage the significant amounts of incoming customer data (Cui, Lui, & Guo, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Pagani & Mirabello, 2012). The disruptive nature of the social media context means that it is valuable to test if a scale developed to measure engagement in an offline context performs similarly on social media.

Second, we empirically replicate So et al.'s (2014) proposed conceptual model and test the nomological framework that incorporates customer involvement as an antecedent of customer engagement and behavioural intention of loyalty as an outcome of customer engagement. The next sections in this paper discuss the conceptualisation of customer engagement, its dimensions, and possible antecedents and consequences. The method, a survey of U.S. consumers, is outlined before the presentation of the scale validation and model testing results. Finally, there is a discussion around the implications for theory and practice.

## 2. Literature

Customer engagement is characterised by repeated interactions between a customer and an organization that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in the brand and the organization (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Phang, Zhang, & Sutanto, 2013). Social exchange theory underpins this notion of investment, which holds that individuals evaluate the tangible and intangible costs and benefits of engaging in relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). For customer-brand engagement to persist, customers must at least achieve a balance in these costs and benefits over time (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). For example, consumers may invest enthusiasm and attention in engaging with a brand to receive benefits such as product news, offers, through to a sense of belonging (Blau, 1964; Foa & Foa, 1980).

Social media are the dominant enablers of customer engagement, and these technologies are very different from previous marketer-customer technology platforms. They are owned by the customer but are transparent, and facilitate two-way interactions between customers and organizations (e.g. Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Dwyer, 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012). Goh, Heng, and Lin's (2013) finding that engaged customers' messages were 22 times more valuable than those of marketers underlines the importance of understanding customer engagement. Social media are defined as the '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' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This definition means that tourism sites like TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Airbnb, and Lonely Planet are considered as social media (Cabiddu et al., 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). They allow customers to comment, review, spread and even create content online that now even appears in search engine results. The importance of social media as a means for customer engagement within the tourism industry cannot be ignored (Cabiddu et al., 2014; Cheng & Edwards, 2015; Dijkmans et al., 2015; Hudson et al., 2015; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

Customer engagement has been conceptualised in different ways (see Table 1). The majority of customer engagement research

has been based on a multidimensional conceptualisation, encompassing some form of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al. 2013; Cheung, Lee, & Jin, 2011, pp. 1–8; Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Patterson, Yu, & De Ruyter, 2006; So et al., 2014). The broader conceptualisation of customer engagement behaviours proposed by Van Doorn et al. (2010) encompasses valence, form, scope, impact of engagement, and the customers' goals. All of these conceptualisations assert that customer engagement is discriminately different from involvement, a construct with which it is frequently compared. As So et al. (2014) state, involvement tends to be limited to a cognitive component, whereas engagement incorporates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Hollebeek, 2011; Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Vivek et al., 2012).

A recent analysis of customer engagement dimensionality concluded that customer engagement is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of three dimensions: cognitive (customer focus and interest in a particular brand), emotional (feelings of inspiration or pride caused by a particular brand) and behavioural (customer effort and energy necessary for interaction with a particular brand) (Kuvykaitė & Tarute, 2015). Conceptualisations of engagement that do not explicitly refer to underlying cognitive, affective, and behavioural components are still likely to encompass these dimensions. The proposed dimensions of customer engagement with tourism brands (So et al., 2014) and Dwivedi's (2015) customer brand engagement conceptualisation can be mapped, largely, onto the customer brand engagement dimensions offered by Hollebeek et al. (2014) (Table 2). Interaction is similar to Activation and Vigor, representing the behavioural component of customer engagement; Identification relates to Affection and Dedication as the emotional component of customer brand engagement, while Attention and Absorption, the cognitive component. The definitions of the Absorption, Enthusiasm and Attention dimensions (So et al., 2014) have both affective and cognitive elements.

### 2.1. Dimensions of customer engagement

This research builds on So et al.'s (2014) conceptualisation of customer engagement, which incorporates five dimensions, identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction, and identification. As So et al. (2014) undertake a comprehensive discussion around these dimensions, the purpose of this paper is best served by briefly introducing each dimension.

#### 2.1.1. Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm represents an individual's "strong level of excitement or zeal" and interest in a brand (Vivek, 2009, p. 60). So et al. (2014, p. 308) note that the dimension of enthusiasm "represents an individual's strong level of excitement and interest regarding the focus of engagement ... and differentiate the construct of engagement from other similar constructs such as satisfaction."

#### 2.1.2. Attention

Attention refers to a customer's level of focus, consciously or sub-consciously, on the brand. Persistent attention towards a brand is likely to lead to higher levels of engagement (Lin, Gregor, & Ewing, 2008; Scholer & Higgins, 2009).

#### 2.1.3. Absorption

Absorption goes further than attention, where it refers to a customer's high level of concentration and engrossment in a brand

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