



Harnessing social media platforms to measure customer-based hotel brand equity

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in the volume of user-generated content being made available in social media platforms of the Web 2.0 genre. Among the most valuable from a marketing perspective is the prevalence of online reviews of products and services which can serve as vast, up-to-the-minute sources of data for research and marketing management. In this paper, we describe our work on the analysis of the different components of brand equity and their relations in hotels, using data extracted from social media platforms. By using online sources of reviews, we can achieve a greater degree of confidence in our findings as we have access to a far greater quantity of reviews spanning any given timeframe. Additionally we can have greater confidence in the information contained therein, as the reviews reflect the opinions of the customers considered at leisure, usually after their return from the hotel, rather than a hastily completed survey as the customer leaves the hotel.

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1. Introduction

The brand appears in marketing literature as a powerful tool of differentiation for products and companies (Clifton, 2003). Although tourism is a critical sector for many countries, there are few systematic studies on hotel brands (Hankinson, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2005; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). The increased competition between various destinations and hotels with similar characteristics makes the brand a key differentiating factor (Cai, 2002; Fesenmaier, 2007; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002; Pike, 2005).

Today it is essential for hotel managers to measure the effectiveness of their brand to remain competitive in the marketplace (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). For this to be effective, it must be undertaken from the perspective of the customer (Wang, Hsu, Hsu, & Hsieh, 2011). There are empirical research studies which focus on the experience of travelers and their perception of the brand of destinations and tourist accommodation as key variables to measure the impact of brands on consumer behavior (Blain et al., 2005; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Kim & Kim, 2005).

Social media forums play an important role for tourists in the exchange of travel experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Consumer blogs, which frequently contain product and service reviews, have become one of the most important themes in research on social media in tourism (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crofts, 2007; Pühringer & Taylor, 2008; Waldhör &

Rind, 2008). These studies show the importance of understanding the roles of blogs to create and share new experiences (Pudliner, 2007), the veracity of the comments of travelers (Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008), and the use of information in the marketing intelligence system (Pühringer & Taylor, 2008; Waldhör & Rind, 2008). This is demonstrated by the success of social media sites such as TripAdvisor.com³ and Zagat.com⁴ as a means of social communication among tourists (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; O'Connor, 2010; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2008).

From a branding perspective, the analysis of social media forums is especially relevant, because these can be used by individuals to take part in discussions in order to inform and influence consumers about brands or organizations. Additionally, electronic word-of-mouth has been shown to be a powerful influence on whether or not to select a brand (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010).

The overall objective of this study is to analyze the different components of brand equity, through the valuations of the hotels on a digital platform such as TripAdvisor.com. This complements existing work on measuring brand destinations and tourist accommodations from the perspective of customers in the field of Web 2.0 through virtual forums such as TripAdvisor (Au, Law, & Buhalis, 2010). This work is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows us to define the concept of brand value for hotels in a virtual environment. Secondly, the study analyzes the components of brand value hotels in a virtual environment and establishes the relationships between them.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we consider social media forums and their importance in the context of current and future tourism. In Section 3 we develop the concept of brand equity and the various dimensions of which it is comprised. In Section 4,

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⁴ <http://www.zagat.com/>.

we describe the methodology we used in our investigation. In Section 5 we present the main findings and the conclusions are presented in Section 6.

2. Eliciting customer opinions from social media

The emergence and growth of social media in virtual environments, particularly under the umbrella of the so-called “Web 2.0” genre of applications, has brought significant business opportunities for both organizations and their customers (Erdem & Cobanoglu, 2010; Kim & Hardin, 2010; O’Connor, 2010). Kim, Song, and Jones (2011) assert that the forums and virtual communities can be a significant knowledge source in which knowledge recipients can access and acquire the knowledge.

Social media platforms allow the creation and development of new activities and provide powerful capabilities to bring together in a virtual environment both users and potential users and resources (Erdem & Cobanoglu, 2010; Kim & Hardin, 2010; O’Connor, 2010; Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2008).

Marketing of hotels can be exploited in virtual environments to create new types of services and improve current products, creating new businesses, increasing the current supply of goods and services, and creating new capabilities the main objective of which is to satisfy customers and seek the differentiation in the market (Fesenmaier, 2007; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In addition, through improved customer knowledge and their needs, hotels can adjust their costs because they can deliver precisely what the customer wants (Kim & Hardin, 2010; O’Connor, 2010; Wang et al., 2002). This new business model has important repercussions for the leisure industry and tourism in general, because it forces companies to adapt, design and develop marketing strategies specifically targeted to social media sites (Fesenmaier, 2007; Kim & Hardin, 2010; O’Connor, 2010).

Social media sites containing user generated comments and reviews can affect the creation of the brand, providing companies with greater effectiveness in the communication process for their goods and services, as well as with greater awareness in brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations (Wang et al., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). It also affects the creation and development of relationships, removing barriers between hotels and their customers, suppliers and other agents.

Understanding the marketing potential of social media is only one part of the task of capitalizing on the benefits it can generate; the other part principally depends on the willingness and ability to respond efficiently and effectively to criticisms published by reviewers. The appropriate design of the virtual tourism community is based on a comprehensive understanding of the consumers’ functional, social, and psychological needs as well as how these needs interact with each other (Wang et al., 2002). Furthermore it is critical to understand how these needs interact, affecting the levels of member satisfaction (Tapscott & Williams, 2006).

3. Customer-based hotel brand equity

Brand equity is a key concept for brand management and is now at the center of a debate regarding its definition and measurement (Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011; Tsanga, Leea, & Lia, 2011; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Its study can be approached from three different perspectives: customer, financial, and a combination of both (Kim & Kim, 2005; Srivastava & Shocker, 1991).

A literature review shows us that there is a lack of empirical studies of the customer-based brand equity in the ambit of the services (Chang & Liu, 2009; Kim, Jin-Sun, & Kim, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2005; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010) and of tourism in particular (Kim & Kim, 2005; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee & Back, 2008). For consumers, tourism services are much more multidimensional than

other goods or services (Pike, 2005). We consider it necessary to deepen the dimensions comprising brand equity from the perspective of tourism, and the relationships that occur between them (Keller, 1993; Boo, Busser, & Baloghu, 2009; Wang et al., 2011).

3.1. Brand value

Although there is no generally accepted definition of perceived value of brand, the price-based definition is the most frequently used definition (Sweeney, Soutar, & Johnson, 1999; Tsai, 2005; Woodruff, 1997). However, the literature indicates that perceived value is treated as a multidimensional construct (Callarisa, Moliner, & Sánchez, 2011; Hall, Robertson, & Shaw, 2001; Sánchez, Callarisa, Rodríguez, & Moliner, 2006; Sirgy & Johar, 1999; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), composed of at least three dimensions: functional, emotional and social. In our case, we focus on the functional dimension (value for money) in the context of a hotel brand. In this sense, the customer’s choice of a brand depends on the perceived balance between the price of a product and its usefulness (Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995). Aaker (1996) points out that brand equity can be measured by asking customers if the brand offers good value for the money paid, or if there is reason to buy one brand instead of competition.

The literature also indicates that the perceived value of a brand is positively associated with future behaviors, such as purchase or search intentions (Oh, 2000), and the willingness to buy (Sweeney et al., 1999; Tsai, 2005; Wang et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is also a positive relationship between perceived value and loyalty (Kwun & Oh, 2004), where the customer’s perceived value plays an important role in building customer loyalty (Oliver, 1997; Zeithaml, 1988).

H1. Brand value has a positive impact on a hotel’s brand loyalty.

3.2. Brand quality

Brand quality is one of the key dimensions of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003; Lassar et al., 1995). In a customer-based brand equity model, Keller (2003) identified seven dimensions of quality: performance; features; conformation quality; reliability; durability; serviceability; and style and design.

In the field of tourism, it appears that perceived quality determines brand value of trip (Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000) and destination (Deslandes, 2003), and in turn has a positive effect on brand loyalty (Boo et al., 2009; Cretu & Brodie, 2007).

H2. Brand quality has a positive impact on a hotel’s brand value.

H3. Brand quality has a positive impact on a hotel’s brand loyalty.

3.3. Brand awareness

Hotel marketing should be primarily aimed at increasing visibility by creating a unique and differentiated brand (Fesenmaier, 2007). Brand awareness is “the ability for a buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category” (Aaker, 1991) and consists of both brand recognition and recall (Keller, 1993).

In the tourism sector, brand awareness is a catalyst of the brand effects on the consumer behavior (Kim & Kim, 2005; Kwun & Oh, 2004; Lee & Back, 2008; Oh, 2000; Sivakumar & Raj, 1997; Webster, 2000). Brand awareness is one of the most important factors for retrieval of information about the brand (Keller, 1993), and is considered as a first and necessary, but not sufficient, step leading to trial and repeat purchase (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). However, brand awareness is an important antecedent of customer value (Kwun & Oh, 2004; Oh, 2000; Webster, 2000) and contributes to the financial performance of hotels (Kim & Kim, 2005).

H4. Brand awareness has a positive impact on a hotel’s brand value.

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