



Friendship on social networking sites: Improving relationships between hotel brands and consumers



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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the utility of social networking sites (SNSs) in developing intimate brand–consumer relationships and analyzes how hotel brands can utilize the mechanisms that underlie SNSs for marketing purposes. Drawing on theories from the interpersonal relationship literature, we identify four communication characteristics as critical drivers of friendship between hotel brands and consumers in the context of SNSs: self-disclosure, language similarity, interest similarity, and frequency of interaction with consumers (interaction frequency). In a study using a sample of 226 consumers who had followed hotel brands on SNSs, we show that self-disclosure and interaction frequency positively relate to consumers' perceived friendships with a hotel brand. Although language similarity and interest similarity do not facilitate friendship directly, they influence brand–consumer relationships through self-congruity. The research provides hotel brand managers with implementable strategies for improving brand–consumer relationships through SNSs.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter have become important communication channels through which hotel brands try to reach consumers. Disappointed by weak returns from using SNSs to advertise products, hotel brands have begun to incorporate social networking platforms in their relationship marketing efforts to strengthen existing consumer networks (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Kang et al., 2014). SNSs benefit hotels seeking to develop brand–consumer relationships, since SNSs facilitate direct interactions between brands and consumers (Syed-Ahmad and Murphy, 2010) and the low cost of SNSs make them affordable to a wide range of organizations, even small hotels (Morrison et al., 1999).

In the hospitality field, SNSs were first studied as emerging vehicles of consumer-generated content in which consumers are perceived as important creators and disseminators of brand-related information (Cox et al., 2009; Kim and Hardin, 2010). Studies have shown that interaction between brands and

consumers can advance online brand–consumer relationships and offline behaviors (Bolotaeva and Cata, 2010; Lee et al., 2012). However, few empirical studies have attempted to determine how brand–consumer relationships are affected by consumers' use of SNSs, especially regarding how such relationships begin and how they develop. Answering this research question would explain how brand–consumer relationships originate through the SNS medium, which in turn would support the development of a set of implementable strategies for facilitating brand–consumer connections through SNSs.

The interpersonal relationship literature suggests that managing friendships is a major function of SNSs (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008), as millions use SNSs such as Facebook to meet new friends or locate old friends (Chen et al., 2009). Indeed, the act of following a person's personal SNS page has become known as “being friends with” or “friending” that person, and the same terminology is also being used in the brand–consumer setting; we suspect that using the same terminology across similar contexts may unconsciously shape consumers' perceptions of their relationships with the brands they follow. Moreover, SNSs offer many other features that benefit friendship, such as proximity, social foci, frequent interaction, and self-disclosure (Grayson, 2007; Price and Arnould, 1999), while offering fewer features that benefit other brand–consumer relationships, especially those requiring

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real experiences with brands (e.g., commitment) and passions naturally attached to a brand (e.g., brand love). Past literature suggests that friendship can be either loose or tight (Price and Arnould, 1999), and it is possible that friendships formed through interactions on SNSs represent the looser form of friendships, compared with tighter forms of brand–consumer relationships such as brand love, brand attachment, and brand commitment.

This research enriches the relevant literature by empirically examining friendships between consumers and hotel brands on SNSs and exploring the antecedents and consequences of such friendships. Our research attempts to answer the following research questions: (i) What are the characteristics of relationships formed between hotel brands and consumers through interaction on SNSs? (ii) Do online relationships between hotel brands and consumers influence consumers' offline purchasing behaviors or commitments to a hotel brand? (iii) What interaction characteristics (e.g., interaction frequency, self-disclosure) can contribute to the development of brand–consumer relationships?

In the remainder of the paper, we first demonstrate the unique influence of SNSs on forming friendships between hotel brands and consumers by comparing such friendships with other relationships such as brand attachment and brand love. Second, drawing on interpersonal relationship and social network theories, the paper identifies and tests a set of interaction characteristics associated with brand–consumer communication on SNSs (language similarity, interest similarity, interaction frequency, and self-disclosure) as antecedents to the formation of friendships. Third, on the basis of brand–consumer relationship theory, we further confirm the value of brand–consumer relationships formed on SNSs in facilitating real consumer commitment to a hotel brand.

2. Literature review

SNSs are an important form of “social media,” the broader category of Internet-based applications that build on Web 2.0 technology and allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Among all types of social media, SNSs have been differentiated from others in several ways: First, SNSs allow users to create personal pages and access others' profiles as they seek information or send instant messages. Second, users are free to post or share messages on personal pages using text, pictures, or videos (Hsu, 2012). Third, SNSs provide visibility into a user's social networks, reflecting both real-world and virtual-world connections (Ellison, 2007; Keenan and Shiri, 2009). In this sense, SNSs were generated to strengthen connections between users, a feature that also applies to the business setting (Keenan and Shiri, 2009).

2.1. Marketing implications of SNSs

The advent of SNSs has challenged long-established business models and traditional marketing channels. Consumer access to SNSs has reduced the effectiveness of television and print media advertising (Gensler et al., 2013) and significantly affected marketing strategy (Akar and Topcu, 2011). SNSs enable multidirectional dialog through the flow of communication from brands to consumers, from consumers to brands, and from consumers to consumers. In this new information age, consumers can let thousands of people know about their brand experiences (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Empowered by new social technology, consumers can even create their own brand stories and post them in video clips, flash games, images, or texts. Such stories can be either positive, favoring brand value, or negative, sometimes couched in parodies that can damage a brand's image (Gensler et al., 2013).

The rise of SNSs also offers companies valuable opportunities to extend the customer base. Digital innovations have made it effortless and costless for companies to reach consumers, promote products, and acquire consumer opinions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Consumers' online reviews can induce brands to improve their products and services and engage in innovations (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). SNSs also help firms improve performance in terms of sales, cash flows, stock prices, and abnormal returns (Gensler et al., 2013). Further, the low marginal cost of SNSs allows brands to solve product-related problems for free, which significantly reduces service cost to the brand while increasing service efficiency (Mathwick et al., 2008). Moreover, since social media enable consumers to create and share content of their own and communicate it with other consumers who are connected within their networks, brands have been able to incorporate such empowered consumers in their marketing programs to co-create brand value on SNSs (Hoyer et al., 2010).

2.2. SNSs and brand building

The use of SNSs in business generates significant marketing value, but it should have specific relevance for branding by creating positive brand attitudes and upgrading the brand–consumer relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). SNSs allow a brand to nest in a broader network context consisting of thousands of networks mapped by consumers and brands (Kozinets et al., 2010). Thus, consumers' social and brand-centric networks may often be integrated and intertwined. When brands try to leverage consumers' networks of family, friends, and acquaintances to spread brand information, consumers' brand attitudes can also significantly affect the brand attitudes of their network connections (Naylor et al., 2012). Brands also can initiate personal dialogs with consumers by posting conversational messages on their fan pages, as if they were part of the consumers' social networks. Such personal-level conversations can allow inanimate brands to be humanized in consumer cognition (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), and humanized brands can produce more favorable consumer attitudes, which in turn can influence brand performance (Puzakova et al., 2013). Brands also use SNSs to strengthen their direct relationships with consumers by developing social networks on their own SNSs, referred to in past research as “brand-created virtual brand communities” (Lee et al., 2011). Research has suggested that members' participation in online communities is positively related to brand loyalty, word-of-mouth brand communication, and brand image (Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Woisetschlager et al., 2008).

2.3. SNSs in hospitality

Initially, SNSs were viewed as important tools with which consumers can search for tourism-related information, as research has suggested that information technology, especially in the form of SNSs, enables consumers to spread their travel experiences either inside or outside their social networks (Gensler et al., 2013). However, some studies indicate that consumers do not consider SNSs to be as important as other tourism information sources, such as hotels' or airports' home pages, guidebooks, and magazines (Jacobsen and Munar, 2012). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) searched for travel information on nine U.S. tourism destinations through Google and reported that travel information derived from SNSs (9%) is rather limited in comparison with that generated by consumer review sites (27%).

On the other hand, SNSs enhance word-of-mouth effects on consumer purchase decisions related to hotel brands. SNSs eliminate the difficulty of accessing other people's travel experiences (Litvin et al., 2008), which, when spread through SNSs, were perceived as more trustworthy than those spread on other media (Mack

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