



Enhancing online brand experiences: An application of congruity theory



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ABSTRACT

Providing a distinctive brand experience is critical to differentiate each hotel brand from others, due to the intangible characteristics of the hotel industry. Rooted in congruity theory, this study investigated how three congruities (i.e., self-image congruity, online–offline brand image congruity, and value congruity) influenced customers' online brand experiences and their brand trust. Results from this study indicated both self-image congruity and online–offline brand image congruity significantly influenced both customers' online brand experiences and their trust toward the hotel's brand. Extending brand experience literature and congruity theory, this study suggested hotels should develop a strategy that could capture these three congruity effects in online and offline channels because these effects should be key determinants for customers' online brand experiences and their responses.

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1. Introduction

The idea of creating unique and valuable customer experiences has become a critical strategy among service industry practitioners as well as in the academic literature (i.e., Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Vargo and Lusch's (2008) service-dominant logic has become the foundation for customers' experiences with brands. Their study has emphasized branding as a method to create customers' values. Duncan and Moriarty (2006) also advocate the importance of providing distinctive experiences to customers by stating, "a brand touch point is created when a customer, prospect, or other stakeholder is expressed, in some manner, to a brand and consequently has a brand experience" (p. 237). With increased competition among hotel brands, customers are exposed to numerous brands, due to different marketing practices developed to differentiate each brand from competitors. Marketing practitioners and scholars accordingly have paid special attention to the importance of creating brand experiences, which play a critical role in developing marketing strategies for goods and services. Despite the industry's attention given to brand experiences, Forrester's website brand experience 2010 report interestingly has addressed few hotel

websites that successfully create customers' online brand experiences (Rogowski, 2010).

Providing a unique brand experience is important to the hotel industry because customers are exposed to various brand-related stimuli as a part of marketing communications before they make purchase decisions from numerous hotel companies. According to Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou's (2013) study, brand experience refers to "the individual's internal subjective response to the contact with an online brand" (p. 2). Brakus et al. (2009) view brand experience as customers' sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli (i.e., a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and/or environments). As identified in Brakus et al.'s study, "brand experience differs from evaluative, affective, and associative constructs, such as brand attitudes, brand involvement, brand attachment, customer delight, and brand personality" (p. 53), emphasizing the importance of customers' responses toward developing brand experiences.

Due to the inherent nature of intangibility, hotels should have strong and unique brand strategies that enable customers to differentiate each brand experience from others. With the development of advanced technology, brand experiences are not only derived from actual consumption experiences, but also derived from a wide range of experiences, such as an online search process (Brakus et al., 2009). It is critical for hotels to investigate how virtual environments create customers' meaningful brand experiences, which, in turn, will influence their responses. One of the important reasons

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hotels need to create unique online brand experiences is because a virtual environment (i.e., websites) serves as an important bridge that drives customers' online experiences to the offline visit. An understanding of how customer behavior can be transformed from indirect online experiences to offline environment experiences may provide important insights into how customers develop their relationships with hotels.

Contingent upon customers' online brand experiences, brand satisfaction and brand loyalty can be enhanced (Brakus et al., 2009; Frow and Payne, 2007). Companies (i.e., Starbucks) articulate the importance of brand experience in their mission statement to build strong brand loyalty among competitors (Verhoef et al., 2009). Even though dimensions of brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009) and outcomes of brand experience (Ha and Perks, 2005; Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013) have been investigated, few studies have documented factors that derive customers' brand experience in a virtual context. This study aims to investigate antecedents of online brand experience, based on congruity theory as a fundamental theoretical background. Congruity theory (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955) explains customers are more likely to have favorable attitudes and behaviors when they hold congruent (similar) beliefs with objects or events. This study specifically investigates effects of different congruities on customers' online brand experiences to better understand how each type of congruity influences customers' responses (i.e., brand experience, trust toward the hotel, and satisfaction with the hotel) in a hotel context.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this research is the first attempt to investigate the effects of different types of congruity on customers' online brand experiences in the context of the hotel industry, filling an existing literature gap in the online brand experience. This study also contributes to a better understanding of how online brand experiences influence customers' trust and satisfaction, signifying roles of providing brand experiences. Beyond theoretical contributions of this study, this study will help hotel management develop favorable online brand experiences that lead to positive customers' responses. This is an important phenomenon because customers tend to make decisions or develop their preferences after browsing hotel websites and/or during their browsing experiences. In turn, online experiences influence customers' responses. It is hoped this study can add current trends in online brand experience development to provide practical insights for virtual marketing in a hotel setting.

2. Theoretical background: congruity theory

Congruity theory explains a person is more likely to have positive attitudes toward the object when an individual perceives an object or a phenomenon is consistent with what s/he holds (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). This phenomenon occurs due to the reduced dissonance between a person's own opinions and an object (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). Social psychology researchers (i.e., Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955) assert outcomes of similarity effects are evidenced with the relationship quality (i.e., positive relationship) and positive outcomes (i.e., satisfaction and affective commitment). In a similar vein, Festinger's (1964) cognitive dissonance theory explains customers are reluctant to change their attitude and beliefs that result in dissonance with their attitudes and beliefs. Since customers are psychologically uncomfortable holding cognitive dissonance, they tend to reduce any cognitive incongruity. When congruity theory is applied to the virtual environment, it is expected customers will transfer favorable attitudes and behaviors toward the hotel, based on their website experiences.

The virtual environment is important in the hotel industry because of its complex and experiential nature of the industry

that inherently holds uncertainty and ambiguity characteristics (Brunelle, 2009). Since customers search information first before they make their purchase decisions, hotels should have effective promotional strategies to attract customers. Hotels create their websites to promote their services and products to entice customers' booking intentions by persuading their actual visits to the property. Congruity effects in the virtual environment are critical in a sense that customers develop their responses, based on exposure to the website. Thus, customers' positive website experience is believed to reflect their self-concept, channel congruence, and congruent values, leading to their positive responses. For instance, Choi (2008) has proposed a theory of shopping congruence between online and offline stores in the retail context. Choi's (2008) study identifies customers' brand attitudes and their purchase intentions are contingent on the level of consistency across channels.

Focusing on core marketing activities (i.e., interactive, external, and internal marketing) in service brands (Brodie, 2009), this study examines the role of customer-oriented (i.e., self-image congruity), company-oriented (i.e., online–offline brand image congruity), and customer–company relationship-oriented (i.e., value congruity) congruent factors to better understand how different types of congruities influence customers' online brand experiences. These different aspects of the congruity are also supported in the uses and gratification theory (Katz, 1959). Explaining individuals' different media-usage patterns, the uses and gratification theory has been applied to new media like Internet (Chung and Austria, 2010; Sheldon, 2008). According to the uses and gratification theory, people use media to satisfy their needs, including (1) a content-oriented area (i.e., the information delivered by the media), (2) a relationship-oriented area (i.e., interaction), and (3) a self-oriented area (i.e., individual needs). Customers' needs in each area can be replaced with the online–offline brand image congruity, value congruity, and self-image congruity, respectively, to explain customers' goals to browse the hotel website and how each congruity is related to developing brand relationship with the hotel.

Self-image congruity is related to customer-focused congruity because customers purchase goods and services to express their own self, fulfilling their psychological needs in addition to utilitarian benefits (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). Self-image explains customers' beliefs about their identities, lifestyles, and preferences, representing their preferred (ideal self) and/or perceived (actual self) image. Online–offline brand image congruity represents company-oriented congruity, since customers develop their own perceptions across environments when evaluating the company (Kwon and Lennon, 2009). For instance, when customers' expectations are met between online and offline environments, a holistic attitudinal transfer process occurs as a result of the congruity effect. Value congruity is the interactive marketing perspective as it explains the value similarity between the customer and the organization (i.e., hotel). Customers prefer to use products and service that represent their personal values. If customers are green conscious, they are more likely to stay at an environmental-friendly hotel. With the unique characteristics of the hotel industry (i.e., intangibility and heterogeneity) (Lovell and Wright, 2002), the role of value congruity lies in the delivery of distinctive brand images to customers.

3. Literature review

3.1. Self-image congruity: customer-focused congruity

Customers are motivated to hold a set of beliefs about themselves (a self-concept) and behave in certain ways to reinforce their self-concepts, supported in the self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986). Self-congruity theory explains customers' tendencies to purchase products and services congruent with their own self-image. Since

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