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Generating brand awareness in Online Social Networks

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ABSTRACT

With their exceptional interactive and communicative capabilities, Online Social Networks (OSNs) allow destinations and companies to heighten their brand awareness. Many tourist destinations and hospitality brands are exploring the use of OSNs to form brand awareness and generate positive WOM. The purpose of this research is to propose and empirically test a theory-driven model of brand awareness in OSNs. A survey among 230 OSN users was deployed to test the theoretical model. The data was analyzed using SEM. Study results indicate that building brand awareness in OSNs increases WOM traffic. In order to foster brand awareness in OSN, it is important to create a virtually interactive environment, enabling users to exchange reliable, rich and updated information in a timely manner. Receiving financial and/or psychological rewards and accessing exclusive privileges in OSNs are important factors for users. Both system quality and information quality were found to be important precursors of brand awareness in OSNs. Study results support the importance of social media in online branding strategies. Virtual interactivity, system quality, information content quality, and rewarding activities influence and generate brand awareness, which in return, triggers WOM.

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1. Introduction

With their exceptional interactive and communicative capabilities, Online Social Networks (OSNs) offer new avenues for businesses (Sigala, 2012; Yoon, Choi, & Sohn, 2008). Most companies use OSNs as tools for customer engagement and collaboration. However, OSNs can also boost brand awareness (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). Brand awareness has a significant effect on consumer choices (Hoyer & Brown, 1990; Lin, 2013). It is, therefore, an important concept both in marketing and consumer behavior. Consumers rely more than ever on OSNs when making decisions. The effects of OSN campaigns on consumers' perception of services and brands have yet to be better understood (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013; Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus, & Cobanoglu, 2013). OSNs have evolved as platforms that can generate brand awareness due to their heavy adoption. Each user who posts on a popular OSN, such as Facebook, is seen by an average 35% of their friends or connections (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013). Therefore, it is important to get the branding fundamentals right in OSNs (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). The

company's effective presentation of its brand contributes directly to brand awareness, which is the customer's ability to recognize and recall the brand when provided a cue (Berry, 2000; Bilgihan, Peng, & Kandampully, 2014; Lin, 2013).

When asked to a group of people "what destinations come to your mind when you think about a skiing destination?" responses would provide a basic understanding of a ski destination's brand awareness in the market. OSNs create opportunities for travel companies and tourist destinations to build strong brand awareness when designed and implemented properly. High levels of brand awareness (recall and recognition) can significantly impact a brand's market share, and contribute to the formation of other brand elements such as brand image, brand equity and brand loyalty (Bilgihan et al., 2014; Chang, 2013; Xie & Chen, 2014).

Brand awareness is viewed as a means through which individuals become informed and accustomed with a brand name and recall and recognize the brand (Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014; Jakeli & Tchumburidze, 2012; Lin, 2013). WOM is vital for a company's success. Companies that are capable of using WOM for marketing purposes are more successful compared to ones that are not (Mason, 2008). When asked about the main objectives of their OSN programs, more than half of marketing decision-makers indicated that 'improving brand awareness or reputation' is among the most important objectives (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2013).

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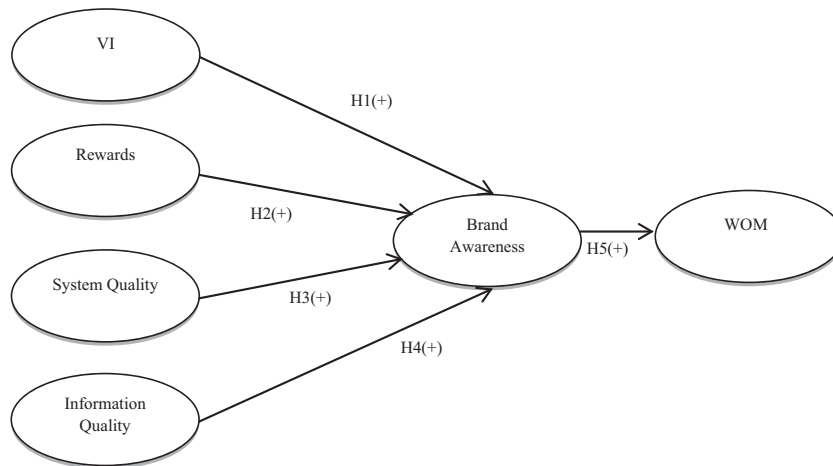


Fig. 1. A proposed brand awareness framework – a mediated model.

Organizations generally try creating brand awareness using limited one-way communications. However, OSNs make two-way conversations possible with consumers participating in the development of a destination brand identity and image (Lim, Chung, & Weaver, 2012). Furthermore, there is a continuing debate over the activities of brands in OSNs (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). OSNs offer a unique opportunity for brands to foster their relationships with customers, while others believe the contrary. Previous studies investigate the role of OSNs in relationship marketing. However, the role of OSNs in building brand awareness is understudied. “There is an important need in the literature to explore the effects of branding on marketing variables related to social media” (Laroche et al., 2013, p. 76). Therefore, the current study aims to fill the gap in literature by investigating the role of OSNs in generating brand awareness.

Given the importance of brand awareness and possibilities of OSNs to foster brand awareness, this research article has developed a theory-driven model (Fig. 1) that hypothesizes the antecedents and the consequence of brand awareness in OSN. The flow of this paper is as follows: first, we discuss the use of OSNs in the travel industry and determinants of brand awareness, and then develop the conceptual framework and hypotheses. That section is followed by a description of the study design. Study results are then presented and discussed. Finally, we conclude with implications and propose the future research directions and limitations.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. OSN and travel industry

OSN refers to a variety of sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers' desire to educate each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004; Di Pietro, Di Virgilio, & Pantano, 2012; Kasavana, Nusair, & Teodosic, 2010). OSNs involve common sites such as Facebook, Instagram, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn and Bebo (Isacsson & Gretzel, 2011; Nusair et al., 2013); these sites also encompass wikis, blogs, message boards, podcast, and Vlogs (Nusair, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2012). OSNs create virtual social environments where users can communicate and interact with each other by posting comments, reviews, videos, and pictures (Ip, Leung, & Law, 2011; Kleinrichert, Ergul, Johnson, & Uydaci, 2012). The function of OSNs has evolved in the past few years, presenting a new prospect for marketers to generate awareness of their brands (Inversini & Masiero, 2014; Law, Buhalis, &

Cobanoglu, 2014; Mason & Nassivera, 2012; Morosan, Bowen, & Atwood, 2014; Phelan, Chen, & Haney, 2013). Thus, OSNs present opportunities for travel marketers and assist businesses to develop their online marketing efforts (Gretzel, 2006).

Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides (2011) stress the influence of OSNs in the travel industry. Based on their findings, OSNs are mainly used for information and experience sharing among tourists. The relationship between the influences of the information received from OSNs and the variations made to holiday plans is significant. User-generated content in OSNs is more trusted than official tourism websites, travel agents and mass media advertising (Fotis et al., 2011). Given the widespread and growing investment in OSN marketing, it is essential to inform OSN marketers on how to generate brand awareness in this central medium.

2.2. The role of brand awareness in the OSN context

In the B2C context, brand awareness refers to the capacity of decision-makers to distinguish or recall a brand (Homburg, Klarmann, & Schmitt, 2010). Brand awareness is a necessary component for the communication processes to occur (Jakeli & Tchumburidze, 2012). For travelers to purchase services from a travel organization or select a particular vacation destination, they must first be aware of the travel organization/destination. Brand awareness enacts a decisive role in the set of brands that interest consumers when selecting a product or service (Lin, 2013; Sam, 2012). The probability of the selected brand is in function of the number of other brands in the consideration set (Baggio, Mottironi, & Corigliano, 2011). The consumer's ability to identify a brand under distinct situations is a result of his or her brand awareness to the brand connection (Keller, 2009; Lin, 2013).

Brand awareness plays a key role in consumers' buying decision-making process. It includes individual recognition, knowledge dominance and recall of brands (Kim, Kim, Kim, Kim, & Kang, 2008). Just like a traditional definition of brand awareness, in the OSN context, brand awareness is defined as the extent to which consumers are familiar with the distinctive qualities or image of a particular brand of goods or services in OSNs (Keller, 1993). Awareness is distinguished in terms of two dimensions: intensity and extent. Intensity of brand awareness indicates how effortlessly consumers recall a particular brand through OSNs; the extent of brand awareness refers to the possibility of acquiring and consuming brand services and products through the utilization OSNs (Kleinrichert et al., 2012), especially when the brand emerges in consumers' mind (Wu & Lo, 2009). It is important for travel brands,

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