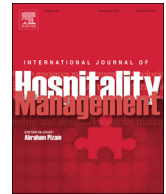




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Antecedents and consequences of customer brand engagement in integrated resorts

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ABSTRACT

The present study identifies the key antecedents and outcomes of customer brand engagement in the integrated resort context using a mixed method. A qualitative study reveals that integrated resort brand experience is multidimensional, and varying effects on brand engagement is found from a quantitative study. In particular, sensory and affective experiences all positively influence cognitive engagement. In addition, behavioral experience influences behavioral engagement, whereas intellectual brand experience positively affects cognitive and behavioral engagements with the integrated resort brand. Furthermore, the results show that brand engagements positively influence customers' behavioral intention in the future. Hypotheses were also tested by employing multi-group structural equation modeling. Male, low-education, and low-income level customers placed more importance on sensory brand experience than female, high-education, and high-income level customers. The findings of this study can provide academicians and practitioners a guide to improve customer engagement and loyalty toward an integrated resort brand.

1. Introduction

Customer engagement in the integrated resort industry has evolved, and it is receiving increased attention from service providers. For instance, Marina Bay Sands in Singapore offers a loyalty program that rewards customer spending in the integrated resort, such as dining at the restaurants, staying at the hotel, shopping, and enjoying entertainment activities. Moreover, the development of technology makes customers to use various integrated resort services more convenient than ever before. For instance, MGM developed the MGM Resort mobile application to help and guide customers in making restaurant reservations, purchasing tickets, shopping, and searching for directions. Integrated resort service providers know the importance of customer brand engagement in terms of increasing marketing efficiency and effectiveness, which consequently encourages customer behavior towards future consumption. At present, many integrated resorts have developed various marketing and promotion programs to promote customer engagement.

Moreover, customer engagement has received attention from academic researchers (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). In particular, in brand management and marketing areas, customer engagement with a certain brand has been considered the customers' psychological state, which occurs through interactive and co-creative experiences with the brand (Brodie et al., 2011). In the tourism

industry, researchers have focused on the concept of customer engagement and its impact on customer behavior. For instance, Dessart et al. (2015) suggested three key dimensions of customer engagement (cognition, affect, and behavior) and brand loyalty as the outcome of customer engagement in the brand community setting. Also, Lei et al. (2017) examined the influential factors on customers' engagement in social network services of integrated resorts. Despite the significant recent interest on customer engagement, this area remains under-explored in the tourism and hospitality industry. Especially, research on branding and marketing management practices of new tourism products, such as an integrated resort, is required to obtain a clear understanding of the mechanism of customer engagement.

The current study aims to expand on the existing studies on brand management that used the multi-dimensional construct of customer engagement (Dessart et al., 2015; So et al., 2014). In particular, Hollebeek et al. (2014) used the three dimensions of customer engagement, namely, cognitive (e.g., interest in using integrated resort brand), affective (e.g., feeling about using integrated resort brand), and behavioral (e.g., behaviors related to integrated resort brand) engagements to examine the possible antecedents and outcomes. In the present study, various customer experiences with integrated resort brand (e.g., sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual engagements) were assumed to produce customer brand engagement.

The authors conduct a comprehensive examination of antecedents

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and consequences of customers' experiences engagement with the integrated resort brand. In doing so, this research contributes to the tourism and hospitality literature by providing a platform for future investigations into how brand experience influences brand engagement. Also, the proposed model suggests that tourism brand experience and engagement are not unidimensional, but multidimensional. Ultimately this research enables both researchers and managers to better understand customers' experience and provides a widely-applicable framework for future research on tourism and hospitality brand. This study broadens the perceptual approach by examining the moderating customers' demographics on the experience-engagement-behavior relationship in the integrated resort context.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand engagement in marketing

In the previous studies, the concept of engagement was examined in terms of psychological and organizational behaviors (Kahn, 1990; Mohr and Webb, 2005). For instance, according to Kahn (1990, p. 700), personal engagement is “the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's ‘preferred self’ in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances.” Recently, in the marketing literature, customer engagement has been found to generate customer perception, purchase intention, and loyalty (Mohr and Webb, 2005); loyal behavior, including repurchase; and word-of-mouth intention. Customer engagement refers to the “behaviors that go beyond transactions and may be specifically defined as a customer's behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (Van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254).

To address engagement from the brand perspective, researchers viewed brand engagement as a unidimensional (Achterberg et al., 2003) or multidimensional (Handelsman et al., 2005; Lutz et al., 2006) construct. Recently, many researchers have used the multidimensional perspective with the combinations of cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. For instance, two-dimensional constructs with cognitive/emotional engagement (Marks and Printy, 2003), cognitive/behavioral (Bejerholm and Eklund, 2007), and emotional/behavioral (Norris et al., 2003) conceptualizations have been proposed. In the tourism and hospitality industry, So et al. (2014) proposed five customer engagement factors including identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, and interaction across hotel and airline customers. The present study employed three-dimensional engagement, including the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects based on the previous literature (Bakker et al., 2007; Klem and Connell, 2004).

2.2. Antecedent of customer brand engagement: Brand experience

This study refers to the findings from the literature review and defines customer brand engagement as a customer's motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent state characterized by specific levels of cognitive, affective, and behavioral activities. Cognitive brand-related activity is associated with the customer level of concentration or engrossment in the brand, affective brand-related activity is linked to customer level of brand-related inspiration and/or pride, and behavioral brand-related activity represents a customer level of energy exerted in the interaction with a focal brand. The levels of cognitive, affective, and behavioral brand engagements predict customer loyalty.

Customer brand engagement is influenced by experience and increases customer behavioral intention in the future. Based on the model of co-creation in the service sector by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), customer experience was assumed to influence customer engagement with an integrated resort brand. The concept of brand experience has been applied in the marketing area, and it is defined as the subjective, internal, and behavioral responses of customers toward

brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009). The provision of a unique and memorable brand experience is important to integrated resort brands, because customers are exposed to various brand-related stimuli, which influence their future attitudes and behaviors toward different brands. Four critical factors were considered in creating an integrated resort brand experience: sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual experiences. The current study examined the integrated resort brand experiences as the antecedents of multidimensional customer brand engagement (e.g., cognitive, affective, and behavioral brand engagements).

2.2.1. Sensory brand experience and customer brand engagement

Sensory experience is defined as the customer's perception of goods or services simulated in the human mind and senses. For instance, participating in a virtual environment, visiting a cultural museum, watching famous art walls at the lobby, and tasting world-class foods can stimulate customer perceived sensory experience. Various types of sensory brand experiences are related to the visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli, which are provided by the integrated resort brand. Customers' perceptions of sensory experiences can influence their cognitive engagement with the integrated resort brand. For instance, good visual impressions increase customers' engagement by stimulating their senses, making them think more, and enhancing interest in a specific brand (Öhman, 2017). Customers are likely to pay attention to brand-related information, when they feel positive about a sensory experience. The authors assumed that sensory experience contributes to customer brand engagement, which makes them pay attention to new brand information through learning or recognizing. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1a. Sensory brand experience is positively related to cognitive brand engagement.

The evolution of technology has provided excellent experiences to costumers. For instance, Marina Bay Sands provides high-tech interactive experiences through a collection of cutting-edge digital installation in the ArtScience Museum. Altschwager et al. (2013) argued that customer engagement with a brand is influenced by customer experience. In the same vein, customer sensory experience may influence customer enthusiasm, which represents a strong level of excitement and individual interest regarding the focus of engagement with a brand (So et al., 2014). Emotional engagement is related to customer passion and positive affection toward the integrated resort brand. Thus, customers with positive sensory experience might have an emotional connection to the integrated resort brand.

H1b. Sensory brand experience is positively related to affective brand engagement.

In the tourism and hospitality industry, service providers focus on providing and stimulating sensory experience including sight, scent, taste, and touch (Schmitt, 1999). Various sensory experiences stimulate customers' positive emotions, such as pleasure, fun, and happiness (Hollebeek, 2011). Bowden (2009) suggested that customer experience with a service brand can influence the level of customer engagement with the brand. Behavioral engagement is related to the extent of a customer's “energy, effort and/or time spent on a brand in particular brand interactions” (Hollebeek, 2011, p. 569). Thus, when customers are satisfied with a sensory experience, they are likely to participate in brand-related behavioral activities. For instance, in the integrated resort setting, the visual and auditory elements of video games influence customer sensory experience. This sensory experience further motivates customers to engage into videogame playing. Thus, a positive relationship is expected between sensory brand experience and behavioral brand engagement.

H1c. Sensory brand experience is positively related to behavioral brand engagement.

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