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## Branding Social Media in the Travel Industry

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### Abstract

It has been established that strong social media brands are important in the travel and tourism industry. Social media brands provide the link between customers and the travel firms and customers may or may not develop a degree of loyalty to brands. The present study suggests that trust in a social media brand has high influence in developing of brand loyalty. Based on hypotheses developed, trust in a travel social media brand is influenced by brand characteristics, company characteristics and customer characteristics. The present survey took place in Greece and examined the attitudes of visitors in the cities of Thessaloniki and Athens. The survey results demonstrate that social media brand characteristics appear more important in their impact on a customer's trust in a brand. It was also established that trust in a travel social media brand is positively influencing brand loyalty. Finally, recommendations are developed for social media marketers in relation to building and maintaining customer trust in a brand.

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### 1. Introduction

Travel and tourism marketers have long been interested in the concept of brand loyalty because brand loyalty is a measure of the attachment that a customer has to a brand (Aaker, 1991). Brand loyalty brings the tourism firm many benefits, including repeat purchases and recommendations of the brand to friends and relatives.

Early research on brand loyalty focused on behaviour. Brand loyalty was construed to be a subset of repeat purchase behaviour (Brown, 1952; Cunningham, 1956) and intention to repurchase. Later, researchers like Guest (1955) and Jacoby (1971) argued that brand loyalty has two components: brand loyal behaviour and brand loyal

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attitudes.

The attitude behind the purchase is important because it drives behaviour. While brand loyal behaviour is partly determined by situational factors such as availability (Jacoby, 1971; D'Hautesserre, 2001; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2008; Christou and Nella, 2010a; Sigala, 2014), attitudes are more enduring. Unfortunately, despite its importance, brand attitudes have not attracted a corresponding degree of research interest. A compilation of definitions and studies on brand loyalty by Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) revealed that research on brand loyal behaviour outnumbered studies on brand attitudes three to one.

O'Shaughnessy (2000) suggested that underlying loyalty is always trust, a willingness to act without calculating immediate costs and benefits. Hence, loyalty to any tourism brand, including a social media travel brand involves trusting it. In tourism marketing, the concept of trust is developed on a limited basis, though much effort has been spent in finding ways to build and maintain it. In that context, trust is built on person-to-person relationships. Trust in a travel or tourism brand differs from interpersonal trust because a brand is a symbol. Unlike a salesperson, this symbol is unable to respond to the consumer (Horster, 2011).

To win loyalty in today's competitive tourism markets, travel social media marketers have to embrace what is becoming second nature to business marketers (Donath, 1999) and focus on building and maintaining trust in the customer-brand relationship (Christou, 2003; Christou, 2010). Unfortunately, the concept of trust in travel social media marketing is largely unexplored. The focus of this study is to examine some factors affecting the development of trust in social media brands used in the travel sector, and to explore how that trust relates to brand loyalty. By applying current interpretations of trust to social media brand loyalty, this study seeks to approach brand loyalty differently and to provide insights into travellers' motivation for loyalty to social media brands.

## **2. Travel social media brand loyalty and trust**

Copeland (1923) appears to be the first to suggest a phenomenon related to brand loyalty, which he labelled 'brand insistence'. Brown (1952) and Cunningham (1956) analysed summary measures of brand purchase patterns and found marked consistencies in consumers' purchase patterns of brands of various products. They concluded that individuals exhibit strong and operative brand loyalty. Others (Lipstein, 1959; Frank, 1962; Farley, 1963) also verified the phenomenon. These spurred continuous inquiry into brand loyal behaviour. Brand loyalty is repeated purchases prompted by strong internal dispositions. Jacoby and Kyner (1988) viewed brand loyalty as a multidimensional construct involving attitudinal components and as a subset of repeat purchasing. Dick and Basu (1994) conceptualise loyalty as the strength of the relationship between the relative attitude towards a brand and patronage behaviour. Trust is the expectation of the parties in a transaction and the risks associated with assuming and acting on such expectations (Deutsch 1958). Trust is the willingness to rely on another in the face of risk; this stems from an understanding of the other party. Trust is an expectation set within particular parameters and constraints; it involves confident positive expectation about another's motives with respect to oneself in risky situations Boon and Holmes (2001). In recent years, travel and tourism businesses face greater pressures as more customers become deal-loyal (Sigala, 2001, 2002, 2003, Badawy, 2009). To win back loyalty travel social media marketers began to embrace the idea of building relationships with customers and winning their trust (Christou and Kassianidis, 2002; Murphy et al., 2007). However, conceptualisations of trust in the tourism marketing literature have generally been lacking. In the travel market, there are too many anonymous customers, making it unlikely that the social media firm could develop personal relationships with each customer. Thus, travel social media marketers may have to rely on a powerful symbol (the brand) to build the relationship.

### *2.1. Trust in a travel social media brand: Model development*

It is proposed in this paper that three sets of factors affect trust in travel social media brand. These three sets of factors correspond with the three entities involved in the brand-consumer relationship: the social media brand itself, the company behind the brand, and the traveller interacting with the brand. It is also proposed that trust in a travel social media brand will lead to brand loyalty. Based on this approach, a conceptual model (Figure 1) is developed below. The brand's characteristics play a vital role in determining whether a consumer decides to trust it. Drawing

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