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Customer engagement and the relationship between involvement, engagement, self-brand connection and brand usage intent

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ABSTRACT

Consumers rely on social media to make travel decisions, and actively engage in relationships with tourism brands on social media. Our research contribution is threefold. First, we validate the consumer brand engagement (CBE) scale proposed by Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014). Second, we use social exchange theory to replicate their proposed model to relate CBE to consumer involvement, self-brand connection, and brand usage. Third, we contribute to tourism marketing theory and practice. The CBE scale exhibited exceptional fit in the tourism context. The models confirmed that all three dimensions of CBE had significant effects on self-brand connection and brand usage intent. Tourism organizations may utilize these findings to foster stronger connections with consumers and increase the likelihood of consumers using their sites by focusing on strategies to develop CBE.

1. Introduction

Online consumer engagement has been the focus of a significant amount of research (Hollebeek, Conduit, and Brodie, 2016; Malthouse, Calder, Kim, & Vandenbosch, 2016). Consumers voluntarily and intentionally engage in online relationships with brands through social media (Malthouse & Hofacker, 2010). Consumer brand engagement (CBE) describes a consumer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity around specific consumer/brand interactions (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Likewise, marketers engage with consumers to facilitate relational exchanges to shape consumer behavior (Grönroos, 1997). Social media platforms enable customer engagement and by doing so have revolutionized marketing through interactions on social media (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Gonçalves, Rey-Martí, Roig-Tierno, & Miles, 2016).

Calder, Malthouse, and Maslowska (2016) argue that customer engagement in certain sectors has unique cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions that sometimes require a context-specific approach when constructing metrics. For example, tourism is a sector where social media plays an increasingly important marketing role Filieri (2014). While consumers increasingly trust tourism social media sites such as TripAdvisor (Filieri, 2014; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013), marketers concurrently are increasingly employing social media as their primary consumer engagement

platform (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2017; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Thus, the tourism sector is a useful context to explore the efficacy of social media to create and leverage CBE (Cabiddu, Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

The present study contributes in three ways. First, it psychometrically assesses Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) CBE scale in a tourism context. Second, it replicates Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) structural model that relates CBE to consumer involvement, self-brand connection, and brand usage, but utilizes partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modeling (SEM) rather than covariance-based (CB) SEM. PLS-SEM is more robust than CB-SEM, with fewer identification issues and is the preferred method of SEM when prediction is an objective (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). Third, the present study also contributes to tourism marketing by situating this research within the tourism context and offering practical managerial implications based on the findings.

2. Literature and conceptual development

2.1. Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory has underpinned previous tourism studies that have investigated organization-consumer relationships in offline settings (Nunkoo, Gursoy, & Juwaheer, 2010; Teye, Sönmez, & Sirakaya, 2002). The present study draws on social exchange theory to

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explore brand-consumer relationships in an online setting. Social exchange theory holds that individuals make rational decisions to engage in a social exchange based on their perception of the costs and benefits (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Guo, Gruen, and Tang (2017) state that exchange between two parties in an ongoing relationship may be economic, social, or a mix of both social and economic benefits and costs. CBE involves social exchanges where access to consumer brand community's relevant information, affiliation, and social status are more often important to consumers than pecuniary resources and outcomes (Blau, 1964; Foa & Foa, 1980).

Contemporary marketing thought considers both relationship marketing and service-dominant perspectives, which combined posit that consumers are now partners with marketers creating exchanges through a co-creation process (Grönroos, 1997; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Consumers exchange with marketers cognitive, emotional, social, economic and physical resources (Blau, 1964; Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Pervan, Bove, & Johnson, 2009). For CBE to continue both the consumer and marketer must perceive that it is equitable (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011), defining CBE as a social exchange.

2.2. Consumer brand engagement

Consumers are highly active exchange partners with social media brands, often doing much of the marketing themselves through their social links with others (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). CBE represents brand performance (Bowden, 2009; Kumar et al., 2010) and is associated with performance outcomes such as brand referrals, sales growth, customer co-creation, and profitability (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Nambisan & Baron, 2007; Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). Indeed, an engaged consumer's message may result in more than twenty times the impact than the same message delivered by a marketer (Goh et al., 2013). Consumers engaged with social media brand communities tend to exhibit higher levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction, emotional bonding, and loyalty to the brand (Brodie et al., 2013). In the tourism context, CBE enhances brand evaluations, trust, and loyalty (So, King, & Sparks, 2014).

This study builds on the significant body of work on consumer brand engagement (e.g., Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, & Morgan, 2014). Hollebeek et al. (2014) contributed to extending CBE theory and practice by conceptualizing and developing a scale that purports to measure CBE. The present study investigates whether Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) scale is a useful measure of CBE in the tourism context.

CBE focuses on the interactive experience of consumers and is “a consumers' positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p.154). The cognitive dimension of CBE is “a consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in a particular consumer/brand interaction.” The affective dimension of CBE is “a consumer's degree of positive brand-related affect in a particular consumer/brand interaction.” While, the activation or the behavioral dimension of CBE is “a consumer's level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand in a particular consumer/brand interaction” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). In short, CBE is the customer's voluntary contribution of resources to a brand's marketing function, going beyond financial patronage (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). To measure the three dimensions of CBE, Hollebeek et al. (2014) developed a 10-item scale confirmed in a subsequent study (Harrigan et al., 2017). A proposed conceptual model of CBE is offered that includes consumer involvement, self-brand connection, and brand usage intent (Fig. 1).

2.3. Antecedents and consequences of CBE

This study extends Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) work by examining the relationships between CBE and the constructs of consumer involvement, self-brand connection, and brand usage intent in the context of

tourism brands on social media. The conceptual model proposed by Hollebeek et al. (2014) is strongly underpinned by previous research into engagement and is worthy of further exploration in a different context (e.g., De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). There are three central propositions in the model that we propose also apply in a tourism social media brand context:

1. Consumer involvement is an antecedent to CBE.
2. The self-brand connection is a consequence of CBE.
3. Brand usage intent is a consequence of CBE.

2.4. Consumer involvement and CBE

Involvement is defined as the “perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests” (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342). Involvement may be cognitive, affective, and motivational, but not behavioral (Richins & Bloch, 1986; Smith & Godbey, 1991; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Characteristics of involved consumers include a greater depth of processing (Burnkrant & Sawyer, 1983), more elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and more product trials (Krugman, 1965; Robertson, 1976). Thus, involvement may be an antecedent to CBE, where consumers have a level of interest and personal relevance in a brand before a specific engagement behavior (Mittal, 1995; Zaichkowsky, 1985).

Consumers may experience informational and emotional involvement with tourism brands related to their level of engagement with these brands on social media. A highly involved consumer will likely invest thoughts, emotions, and behaviors into their preferred brands (Bowden, 2009). Involvement with tourism brands on social media, such as TripAdvisor has become common because social media provides easy-to-access opportunities to interact and participate with brands and brand communities (Cabiddu et al., 2014). At a cognitive level, higher involvement with a brand is likely to lead to a higher level of engagement where viewing a brand as interesting, relevant, or needed would be related to the extent to which a consumer thinks about the brand when using the social media site. At an affective level, viewing a brand as exciting, appealing, or fascinating relates to the extent to which a consumer has positive experiences when using the social media site (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012). Finally, at the activation level of engagement, viewing a brand as important or needed relates to the extent to which a consumer would choose to engage with one social media site over others (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). The fundamentals of social exchange theory hold that consumers will be more likely to invest resources in engagement with a brand if they are in-turn receiving valuable resources from that brand (Guo et al., 2017). The intangible resources accrued via involvement, such as information, affiliation, and status may be motivation for consumers to engage with the brand (Blau, 1964; Foa & Foa, 1980). Thus, we hypothesize that:

- H1.** Consumer involvement will be a predictor of the cognitive processing dimension of CBE.
- H2.** Consumer involvement will be a predictor of the affective dimension of CBE.
- H3.** Consumer involvement will be a predictor of the activation dimension of CBE.

2.5. CBE and self-brand connection

The links that consumers create between a brand and their own identity are referred to as self-brand connections; brands are perceived to be more important to a consumer the more closely the brands are linked to the self (Escalas, 2004). Brands with a story that consumers can easily relate to are not only evaluated more favorably but also have a higher likelihood of purchase than brands with few or no self-brand

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