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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'Hauteserre, 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

from previous research, it is concluded that individuals are trusted based on their reputation (Zucker, 1986), predictability (Remple et al., 1985), and competence (Andaleep and Anwar, 1996).

2.2. Formulation of hypotheses

Travel social media brand reputation can be developed through marketing communication; it is also influenced by reliability, security, and product and service quality and performance. Reputation of a party can lead to positive expectations, which leads to development of reciprocity between them (Creed and Miles, 1996). If a person perceives that other people think that a brand is good, he may trust the brand enough to purchase it (Sigala, 2010) or – in the case of travel social media – to use its services and eventually adopt it. Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A person's perception that a travel social media brand has a good reputation is positively related to this person's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 1)*. Predictability is about a party's ability to forecast another party's behaviour (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Christou, 2011a). A predictable social media brand allows its user to anticipate how it will perform at each use occasion. Brand predictability enhances confidence; the brand user knows that nothing unexpected may happen when it is used. As such, predictability enhances trust in a brand as predictability builds positive expectations. Hence it is hypothesised that: *A person's perception that a social media brand is predictable is positively related to this person's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 2)*. Competent social media brands have the ability to solve travellers' problems and to meet their needs. Sitkin and Roth (1998) considered ability as an essential element influencing trust. A person may find out about a brand's competence through direct usage or word-of-mouth communication – both are applicable in the case of social media. Once convinced that a brand is able to solve his or her problem, a person may be willing to rely to that brand (Christou and Kassianidis, 2002). Therefore, it can be hypothesised that: *A person's perception that a travel social media brand is competent is positively related to this person's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 3)*.

The characteristics of the social media company behind a brand can also influence the extent to which the brand is trusted. Company characteristics that affect a person's trust in a brand are the trust in the company, its reputation and the perceived company motives and integrity (Scheer and Steenkamp, 1995). Hence it is hypothesised that: *A person's trust in a travel social media company is positively related to this person's trust in that company's brand (Hypothesis 4)*. If a person perceives that other people think that the company behind a social media brand is known to be fair and just, that person may feel secure in acquiring and using the company's brand; this leads to greater trust in that brand. Anderson and Weitz (1992) in the marketing channel context support this argument. It is thus hypothesised that: *A person's perception that a social media company has a reputation for fairness is positively related to this person's trust in that company's brand (Hypothesis 5)*. The extent to which a leader's behaviour is relevant to the followers' needs influences confidence and trust in the leader (Jones et al., 1989; Sigala, 2009); benevolence of motives is an important factor in a relationship. In the context of a travel social media brand, when a person perceives the company behind it to be benevolent, this person will trust that brand. Therefore, it is hypothesised that: *A person's perception that a social media company has benevolent motives is positively related to this person's trust in that company's social media brand (Hypothesis 6)*.

The degree to which a company is judged to have integrity depends on the consistency of its past actions, credible communications about it from others, belief that it has a strong sense of justice, and the extent to which its actions are congruent with its words; integrity is an antecedent to trust (Butler, 1991; Sitkin and Roth, 1998; Rowley, 2005). Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A person's perception that a social media company has integrity is positively related to this person's trust in that company's brand (Hypothesis 7)*. Similar characteristics between two parties may lead to trust; as trust begets trust, common characteristics initiate a positive, reinforcing process of interaction (Bradach and Eccles, 1997; Amaro and Duarte, 2015). By conforming to a traveller's opinions, values and standards a social media firm can earn the traveller's trust Bennet (1996). It is thus hypothesised that: *Similarity between a traveller's self-concept and a social media brand personality is positively related to this person's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 8)*. Based on Bennet (1996), to initiate a relationship, a party must be liked by the other. To form a relationship with a social media brand, a traveller must like it first. Therefore: *A person's liking for a travel social media brand is positively related to this person's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 9)*. Brand experience is about a person's past encounters with the brand. In the development of process-based trust, reciprocity (developed through recurring exchanges) is the key (Zucker, 1986; Dwivedi et al., 2009). Experience is likely to increase trust in the partner; as a traveller gains more experience with a social media brand, he understands it better and grows to

trust it more. This experience is not restricted to positive experiences; any experience improves the person's ability to predict the social media brand performance. Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A person's experience with a travel social media brand is positively related to this person's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 10)*. Brand satisfaction is the outcome of the subjective evaluation that the chosen alternative brand meets or exceeds expectations (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995). In a continuing relationship, satisfaction with past outcomes indicates equity in the exchange; this increases the perception of the exchange partner's benevolence and credibility (Ganesan, 1994). Therefore, it is hypothesised that: *A traveller's satisfaction with a social media brand is positively related to this person's trust in the brand (Hypothesis 11)*. An important determinant of an individual's behaviour is other individuals' influence (Bearden *et al.*, 1989); social influence is an important determinant of consumer behaviour. This is reflected in models of consumer decision-making that incorporate social norms (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) and interpersonal considerations (Miniard and Cohen, 1993) as antecedents of behavioural intentions. People may purchase products to conform with peer groups, in response to concerns of what others think of them (Bearden *et al.*, 1989; Sigala and Chalkiti, 2014), or because others have provided credible information about a product (Cohen and Golden, 1987). Thus it is hypothesised that: *Peer support for a travel social media brand is positively related to a person's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 12)*. In this study, travel social media brand loyalty is conceptualised as behavioural intention to adopt a brand of a travel social media and to encourage others to adopt that brand. When a customer trust a social media brand and is willing to use it and to rely on it, that person may form a positive buying and using intention towards the brand. Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A person's trust in a travel social media brand is positively related to this person's loyalty to that brand (Hypothesis 13)*.

3. Research Methodology

The target population for the study was Greek travellers who have made a use or purchase decision for any travel social media. Quotas on gender and age, corresponding to the distribution of Greek residents, were used to ensure a representative distribution of participants in the sample. A shopping-mall intercept survey was used; the method has merits in speed, economy, and control of respondent type. Three shopping malls were selected in Athens and two in Thessaloniki in Greece. Two interviewers and 30 questionnaires were assigned to each mall – a total of 150 questionnaires. The interviewers were briefed on the quota sampling method and given instructions on the respondent interviewing process. Respondents were asked to identify a travel social media brand for which they had often made a use/purchase decision. They were then requested to think about that social media brand as they completed the entire questionnaire.

The measures of each construct were from a variety of sources; some were established measures while others were modified or developed for this study. A new scale was developed to measure perceived *brand reputation*; it was measured by tapping the respondent's perception of how the travel social media brand is known to be and what other individuals have said about the brand. *Brand predictability* involved items measuring the social media brand's consistency in quality and the extent the respondent perceived the brand to perform as expected (Remple *et al.*, 1985; Christou and Nella, 2010b). *Brand competence* involved items to measure the social media brand's perceived *relative competence*. *Trust in the company* was measured by tapping the respondent's faith in the social media company (Larzelere and Huston, 1992; Åkerhielm and Noden, 2003; Christou, 2011b). *Company reputation* was measured by asking respondents to rate the travel social media company in terms of its reputation for fairness and honesty (Anderson and Weitz, 1996; Christou, 2003). *Perceived motives of the company* were operationalised by creating a new scale. The perceived *integrity of the company* was operationalised by tapping perceptions of the social media company's values in areas such as ethics, honesty, and consistency of its actions with its promises. For measuring the extent of *similarity between the traveller's self-concept and the social media brand's personality*, respondents rated themselves and the brand along two identical scales adopted from Malhotra (1991). The difference in scores for each item in the scale indicates the difference between the respondent's self-concept and social media brand's perceived personality. *Brand liking* involved measuring consumer's preference for the social media brand over others, and by asking directly if he liked the brand. *Brand experience* examined respondents' usage of the social media brand, from the first time they recalled using the brand. *Brand satisfaction* involved adapting Westbrook and Oliver's (1996) relevant twelve-item scale. *Peer support* was measured by asking the respondent if friends supported/recommended the social media brand use/adoption. *Trust in the brand* involved asking respondents if the social media brand is doing what it is supposed to do and if they are willing to rely on it – scales were adapted from Remple *et al.*'s (1985) study. All constructs' items were ordered randomly. 7-point Likert scales

were used where possible; the remaining questions were either open-ended or required the ticking of relevant boxes. The questionnaire was administered to 21 individuals for pre-testing.

4. Findings and testing of hypotheses

There were 143 usable questionnaires, and the general profile of the respondents was comparable to the distribution of gender, age, race, income and education of Geek residents. There were an almost equal proportion of male (48.8%) and female (51.2%) respondents, and they were aged 18 to 61 years. The gross household median monthly income was €1,500-2,000. Seventeen social media brands, both travel specific and general ones, were named in the survey. Examination of Pearson's correlation matrix for all the items revealed no problems with convergent and discriminant validity. Scale items belonging to the same construct had higher correlations (coefficients ranged from 0.51 to 0.93), while those relating to different constructs had lower correlations (coefficients ranged from 0.38 to 0.44). Construct validity of the measures was examined through factor analysis; a factor loading of at least 0.3 was used to identify whether a variable is part of a factor (Nunnally, 1978). Items meant to measure the same construct clustered together, suggesting that they measured the same conceptual space. Factor loadings for the variables ranged from 0.487 to 0.653, satisfying Nunnally's (1978) 0.3 threshold. Cronbach coefficient alpha was calculated in order to examine internal consistency and the reliability of the scales; a Cronbach alpha of 0.70 or higher is sufficient (Nunnally, 1978). All scales used exceeded the reliability threshold of 0.70 Cronbach alpha. Pearson's correlation coefficients for the corresponding variables specified in the hypotheses are presented in Table 1. The results support all the hypotheses, *Hypothesis 1* to *Hypothesis 13*. Hence, it has been established that all the proposed brand, company, and traveller-brand characteristics influence trust in an social media brand. It was also established that trust in a travel social media brand lead to brand loyalty. The correlation coefficient between the two variables is 0.86 and the percentage of variation shared by the two variables or the coefficient of determination is 0.788. To examine the significance of the model formed by the hypotheses (Figure 1), regression analysis was performed; trust in a travel social media brand was the dependent variable while the brand, company and traveller-brand factors were independent variables. The model was significant at $p < 0.01$ level and the adjusted R^2 was 0.922. In addition, the independent variables were checked for multicollinearity (where two or more independent variables used in the regression are correlated). All correlations among the independent variables did not exceed the threshold of 0.90 which is indication of collinearity (Hair *et al.*, 1995). Also, pairwise and multiple variable collinearity was assessed by calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF), which tells the degree to which each independent variable is explained by the others; large VIF values (over the threshold of 10) denote high multicollinearity (Hair *et al.*, 1995; Christou, 2013). All VIF values found were bellow 10 hence, did not exceed the acceptable threshold. Five constructs were significant (at $p < 0.05$ level) in explaining trust in a travel social media brand. These constructs, found to be important (as their respective beta coefficients indicated), are social media brand predictability, social media brand liking, brand competence, brand reputation and trust in social media company.

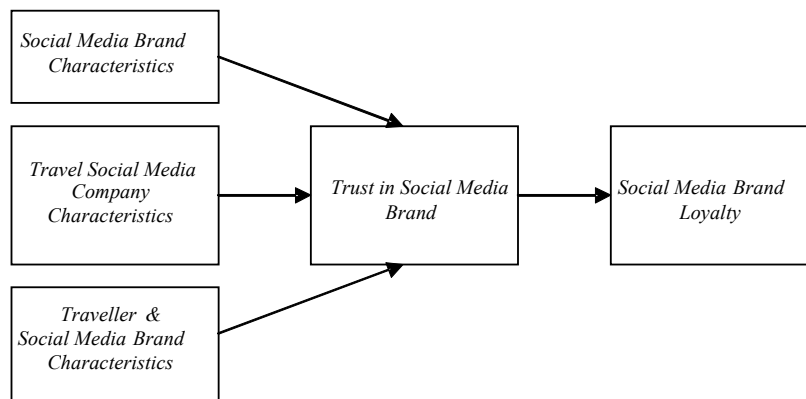


Figure 1: Research model

Table 1: Pearson correlation analysis

No.	Hypothesised relationship	Outcome	Pearson correlation
H1	Brand reputation and trust in an travel social media brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.82^*$
H2	Brand predictability and trust in a travel social media brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.84^*$
H3	Social media brand competence and trust in the brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.81^*$
H4	Trust in a company and trust in social media brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.81^*$
H5	Company reputation and trust in a travel social media brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.80^*$
H6	Company benevolent motives and trust in travel social media brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.74^*$
H7	Company integrity and trust in a travel social media brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.74^*$
H8	Similarity between traveller's self concept and social media brand personality and trust in social media brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.81^*$
H9	Social media brand liking and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.89^*$
H10	Social media brand experience and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.83^*$
H11	Satisfaction with a travel social media brand and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.94^*$
H12	Peer support for a travel social media brand and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.80^*$
H13	Trust in a travel social media brand and brand loyalty	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0.92^*$

* $p < 0.01, n = 144$

4. 1 Discussion and practical implications

Through this study it has been established that a travel social media brand contributes to behavioural intention of brand loyalty. Hence, it is worthwhile for tourism marketers to build trust in their social media brand. Social media brand characteristics, particularly brand predictability, brand competence and brand reputation, are relatively more important in establishing and maintaining traveller' trust. Brand liking and trust in the social media company were also important factors.

The achievement of social media brand predictability requires consistency; this asks for ensuring the consistent quality of service provided by the social media firm. It also requires stringent operating and quality control procedures. To achieve social media brand predictability, travel marketers should try not to make too many drastic changes to products and services too frequently; if major product changes are necessary, marketers should communicate to users carefully regarding the changes, so that they know what to expect from the modified social media service. Brand predictability can also come from repeated interactions between the traveller and the brand. Marketers should try to provide as many opportunities for users to interact with the social media brand as possible. In addition, brand predictability can be developed through consistent communications with users; travel marketers should ensure that they are saying fairly similar things about the product to all people through all different communication channels used, online and offline. Marketers should also be careful about making promises regarding their travel social media brand because if these promises are broken then users may perceive the brand as being unpredictable.

Trust in brand competence is usually perceived as domain-specific; hence, travel social media companies should try to establish their competence in a few key areas, and manage their brands within these. Marketers should carry out research to find out travellers' needs and concerns related to the product area, so they can develop competence which are relevant to them. In addition, marketers should make judicious use of key opinion leaders, who are viewed as authorities in specific areas, to speak on behalf of the company's social media brand. For developing and maintaining a good reputation for a brand, it is essential that the brand please its customers; this calls for genuine quality and delivering on its promises. Other efforts include all marketing communications and promotion, and customers should be encouraged to spread positive word-of-mouth. Complaint handling is also important, in order to avoid negative word-of-mouth. There should be a publicised channel through which feedback

can be easily directed, so unhappy users can easily contact the social media company.

The aesthetic and functional aspects of the social media brand cannot be overlooked. Marketers should make sure that the social media technology and interface used do not just focus on their technical aspects alone, but should also consider its appearance and aesthetic aspects as well. Marketers can also develop brand liking by associating the social media brand with situations in which travellers have positive feelings. Also, the brand can be associated with a well-liked person or travel opinion-leader.

5. Conclusions

The research results reported in this paper show that trust in a travel social media brand and trust in the company behind the brand are two issues strongly interconnected; one cannot be achieved without the other. Travel marketers can develop trust in the social media company by using marketing communications to strengthen the company's image. The link between the social media company and the brand can also be strengthened since the two can reinforce each other. The performance of other services, interfaces and brands within the social media company can affect trust in the company, and as a result, trust in another brand belonging to the same company (this is rather usual in the online media industry). Therefore, marketers should adopt an integrated approach with regard to the management of different online brands belonging to the same social media company.

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