

A study on the effects of social media marketing activities on brand equity and customer response in the airline industry



Eun-Ju Seo, Jin-Woo Park*

School of Business, Korea Aerospace University, 76 Hanggongdaehak-ro, Deokyang-gu, Goyang-si, Gyeonggi-do 421-791, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the effects of social media marketing activities (SMMAs) on brand equity and customer response in the airline industry. A survey was conducted with a total of 302 passengers who used social media managed by airlines, and the collected data were analyzed via structural equation modeling. The results showed that trendiness was the most important SMMA component, and airline SMMAs had significant effects on brand awareness and brand image. In addition, the results demonstrated that brand awareness significantly affected commitment and that brand image significantly affected online word-of-mouth and commitment. It is expected that the results of this study may be used as fundamental data in the development of airline SMMA strategies, particularly by investigating the relative importance of each SMMA component and analyzing the effects of SMMAs.

1. Introduction

In our world today, several billion people are connected in real time. Social media is making traditional methods of finding information and purchasing items obsolete, and as such, new social and economic consequences are being generated. Social media is becoming both more convenient and more important, leading many companies to use it in external promotions, marketing, customer management, and as an internal channel for employee communications. Social media-based marketing has received considerable attention in part due to the fact that the recall rates for social media advertisements are more than 55% higher than those for conventional advertisements, while a 2013 report determined that social media influenced 90% of all purchases (marketingcloud.com, 2013). These trends are also found in the airline industry where Qatar Airways has been liked by more than 12 million people on Facebook. In South Korea, Jeju Air, Asiana Airlines, and Korean Air have received likes from 0.7, 0.54, and 0.38 million people, respectively. It is a little lower than that of the world's leading airlines, but such fans are growing fast. Passenger use of airline social media is expected to increase continuously, and as such, the proportion and importance of social media in the marketing activities within the airline industry are expected to be enhanced markedly.

Despite the emerging importance of social media marketing in various fields and the large number of studies on social media marketing activities (SMMAs), most studies have primarily focused on the effects of SMMAs on customer satisfaction or behavioral intention

(Sano, 2015). The importance of brand equity has been one of the main focal points in recent studies on SMMAs. However, few studies have explored the role of brand equity when investigating the impact of SMMAs on customers (Luis et al, 2012; Kim, 2012; Kim and Ko, 2012; Bruno et al., 2016).

When a video showing United Airlines forcibly removing a passenger from an airplane went viral, the company's stock price fell and a boycott campaign threatened United's sales. This incident demonstrated the importance of social media in the airline industry, and it also emphasized the urgency of research on the effects of airline SMMAs. To our knowledge, however, no studies on the effects of SMMAs on the behavior and brand have been carried out. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify the components of airline SMMAs and to investigate the effects of these elements on customers through brand equity.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social media marketing activities (SMMAs)

Social media is defined as an online application program, platform, or media that eases interactions, joint work, or content sharing (Richter and Koch, 2007). Academic and empirical studies on social media have been conducted since this term was coined in June 2004 at a BlogOn conference by Chris Shipley, a global research director and founder of Guidewire Group, which specializes in marketing consulting for IT

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: asiana2f@hanmail.net (E.-J. Seo), jwpark@kau.ac.kr (J.-W. Park).

companies (Kang, 2001). Social media plays a role when the marketing activities of a company establish an individual relationship with customers and provide companies with opportunities to access customers (Kelly et al., 2010). With the generalization of social media across society, researchers have studied the use of social media by investigating why they used social media, how much time they used, and number of use in specific time periods (Bolton et al., 2013; Rosen et al., 2013). According to the 90-9-1 Rule for the use of social media, 90% of the social media users are lurkers who just watch the contents posted, about 9% interact by adding their comments, and only 1% make new contents (Arthur, 2006). Based on this, social media users can be defined comprehensively and inclusively ranging from lurkers to active participants.

The components of social media have also been addressed in studies with various authors and settings. Kim and Ko (2012) classified SMMA characteristics into entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth (WOM), and they applied them to luxury brands. Sano (2015) applied interaction, trendiness, customization, and perceived risk as the four SMMA components in her study on insurance services. Lee (2017) classified the social media activities of companies into communication, providing information, support for daily life, promotion and selling, and social response and activity in her study on the importance of company social media activities, which compared consumers and companies. Jo (2013) classified the SNS marketing activities of companies as events, information, and advertisements. Kim (2017) identified the characteristics of SNS marketing as information, immediacy, responses, and access while studying the effects of SNS characteristics on consumer attitudes, and Chang (2012), in her comparative case study on the characteristic performances of each medium (i.e. portals, blogs, and SNSes), proposed customer participation, information display, unique differentiation, content suitability, information usage, and response to customer as social media characteristics. This study, based on the aforementioned studies, defines airline SMMA components as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and perceived risk.

Entertainment is a result of fun and play acquired through social media (Agichtein et al., 2008). People who use social media for hedonistic reasons are considered to be seeking entertainment and pleasure, and the virtual community for them is organized focusing on obvious interests (Bagozzi and Utpal, 2002; Manthiou et al., 2013). Entertainment in social media is a significant component that induces positive emotions, increases participating behavior, and generates intention to use continuously (Kang, 2005). Given that social media is a space for consumers to discuss and exchange ideas, interactions in social media offer insights into users who contribute to social media platforms with respect to particular brands; these users meet and interact with one another in cyberspace and discuss specific products and/or brands (Muntinga et al., 2011). These interactions are fundamentally changing the dynamics of brand-customer communications, and they also motivated the development of user-generated content (UGC) in social media (Daugherty et al., 2008; Gallauter and Ransbotham, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). In addition, social media provides the most up-to-date news and information, thereby making it a tool to search for the most practical products (Naaman et al., 2011). Consumers tend to trust information acquired through social media more than that from advertisements in marketing activities or promotions. Therefore, trust tends to exist for the various types of social media that provide the newest information (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Vollmer and Precourt, 2008). Most consumers, for example, select clothing based on the appearance of others wearing the same clothes (Bruno et al., 2016). Trendiness, accordingly, is defined as providing the newest information about products or services (Bruno et al., 2016). The level of customization represents the extent to which a service reflects the demands of customers to satisfy their tastes (Schmenger, 1986). Customization in social media is based on contact with individual users, which is a major difference with conventional advertisement media. It is possible to provide individually optimized information generated by various

sources to customers, and this customization is used as a strategy to generate positive perceived control and customer satisfaction (Ding and Keh, 2016; Nam and Yeo, 2011). The customization of social media is also a tool for companies to communicate the uniqueness of their brands and improve preferences for and loyalty to those brands (Martin and Todorov, 2010). Previous studies have defined perceived risk as a consequence of uncertainties related to consumer behaviors (Bauer, 1960). However, social media decreases these uncertainties by allowing consumers to establish contact with companies and check for new information (Sano, 2014). Perceived risk is selected as an SMMA component because of, as mentioned, its ability to alleviate the anxiety or concern perceived by consumers.

2.2. Brand equity

Brand equity is the net consequences of assets and debts related to a brand name and/or symbol. Brand preference contributes to a brand's product value (Aaker, 2009). The conceptualization of brand equity has changed brand awareness. Keller (1993) explained brand equity by dividing this concept into brand awareness and brand image, proposing 'customer based brand equity'. Brand equity is carved in a consumer's memory as a unique value differentiated from other brands by combining various brand properties. Therefore, brand equity is a socio-cultural phenomenon that goes beyond a mere product name; it is a symbolic meaning that the brand seeks (Keller, 2003).

Brand awareness refers to the ability of a consumer to identify a brand in another situation or to memorize the brand (Rossiter and Percy, 1987). The presence of brand awareness indicates that the consumer knows the brand name, and this increases the possibility of that brand being contained in a list of potential candidates, and ultimately, the probability of that brand being selected (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993) stated that brand image was the general perception of a brand situated in a consumer's memory and the combination of many brand reminders. Therefore, it might be a key marketing component. Brand image is a physical structure formed in the consumer's mind; it is a combination of a consumer's feeling for the product itself and associated indirect factors. In short, brand image is the meaning of a brand accepted through the sensory organs of consumers (Jung, 1994).

2.3. Consumer response

Consumer WOM behaviors are formed as a result of commitment, a positive emotion (Amine, 1998). Consumer response, in this study, is divided into behavioral response and emotional response, and we investigate (through the mediation of brand equity) the effects of airline SMMA on Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) as a behavioral response and commitment as an emotional response. E-WOM has long been considered an influential marketing tool because consumers, before purchasing products or services, seek information online posted by previous users to review information and relieve anxiety (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Pitta and Fowler, 2005). E-WOM is an exchange of service assessment among online users and a different concept from conventional WOM in many ways (Barreto, 2014; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; King et al., 2014; Yoon, 2012). Commitment is an internal psychological state perceived as being related to other people or objects, and it is a continuous desire to maintain a relationship (Lee and Sung, 2000; Moorman et al., 1992). Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued that committed customers formed a special attachment to brands, products, or companies and developed a community, which affected other customers. This induced consumers to perceive benefit, participation, and a sense of belonging. Committed customers are more important for companies because they share value and resources with companies, try to contribute to company profits, and want to be members of companies in order to maintain inter-dependent relationships with them (Gundlach et al., 1995; Ulrich, 1989).

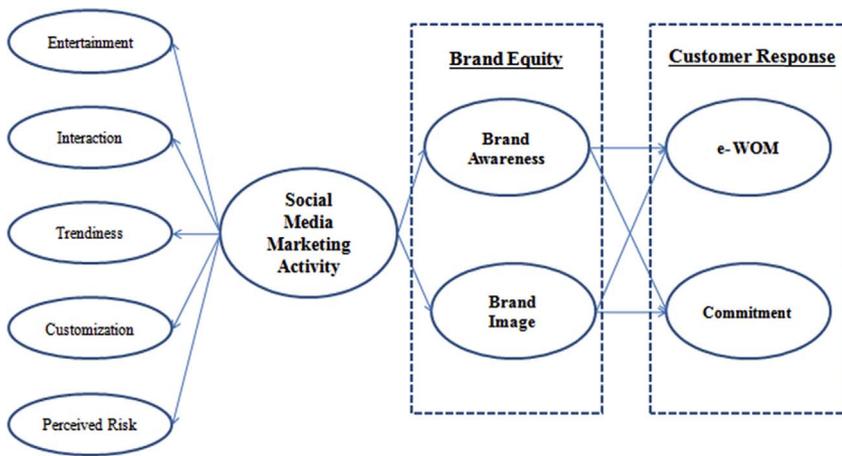


Fig. 1. Research model.

3. Research design

3.1. Research model

This empirical analytical study, using structural equation modeling, investigates the effects of SMMA on e-WOM and commitment, as mediated by brand equity. Fig. 1 shows the research model, which is based on previous studies.

3.2. Hypotheses

The main characteristics of social media are production and the consumption of desired content without constraints of time or location. This indicates that social media, through the active and aggressive participation of consumers, has a greater impact on the way consumers behave or think regarding brands than one-sided communication led by a company. Kim and Ko (2012) studied the effects of SMMA for luxury brands on customer equity and found that SMMA significantly affected equity value, relationship value, and brand value. Chae et al. (2015) reported that when consumers were motivated to use SNS hashtags, they were more likely to have a positive effect on customer participation and brand equity. This was consistent with the results from Song (2012), who determined that SNS advertisements in the food service industry significantly affected brand equity. Bruno et al. (2016) studied the social media marketing efforts carried out by luxury brands and demonstrated that these efforts significantly affected brand awareness and brand image. For the present study, the following hypotheses on SMMA effects are drawn from the literature.

H1. Social media marketing activities have a positive effect on brand awareness.

H2. Social media marketing activities have a positive effect on brand image.

Social media marketing allows companies to communicate with consumers easily and quickly. From the company perspective, their mere participation on social media generates positive effects to the same extent as traditional advertisements. Interactions with potential as well as existing customers enable companies to communicate positive brand images. Alternatively, product and social media marketing can trigger genuine WOM marketing and an inflow of new customers, meaning that social media is a strong tool for communication (Bae, 2002). Seo and Kim (2003) demonstrated the significant effects of brand equity on the consequences of WOM. Park (2013) investigated the brand equity of a franchise company on customer behavior and suggested that brand equity increased positive WOM through brand behavior.

Commitment is an essential component in the relationship between

companies and consumers, and consumers have a long-standing tendency to avoid participation in activities that are perceived as worthless (Dwyer et al., 1987; Moorman et al., 1992). Consumers establish personal relationships with the brands that they purchase in the same way that people form relationships with other people in daily life (Forunier et al., 1998). Committed consumers establish relationships with a brand where they are aware, purchase, use, and experience that brand. Commitment is an interaction between a consumer and brand as equivalent entities. Kim et al. (2008) argued that brand equity could be formed by customer satisfaction, trust, and relationship commitment, and it had a positive effect on improving the image of hospitals. Jing Zhang et al. (2015) studied brand community and found that brand equity significantly affected commitment and value creation. The following hypotheses on brand equity, e-WOM, and commitment are drawn from the literature.

H3. Brand awareness has a positive effect on e-WOM.

H4. Brand image has a positive effect on e-WOM.

H5. Brand awareness has a positive effect on commitment.

H6. Brand image has a positive effect on commitment.

3.3. Sample design

The questionnaire items used in this study were developed based on the literature review and adapted and revised according to a pilot survey. The questionnaire surveyed airline SMMA with five components – entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and perceived risk – covered by 11 items. Four more components – brand awareness, brand image, e-WOM, and commitment – were covered by three items each, resulting in a total of 23 items. A 5-point Likert scale divided the responses from 5 (“strongly agree”) to 1 (“strongly disagree”). Table 1 shows the items.

The survey used for the empirical study was performed from the 10th to 24th of January, 2017, on Koreans who had experience using airlines. The survey was carried out with convenience sampling method at Incheon International Airport and Gimpo International Airport. Surveyors distributed questionnaires directly to research subjects and then collected them after respondents responded. 380 questionnaires were distributed, 352 of which were returned. However, six questionnaires were incomplete, and 44 of the respondents reported that they had not used airline social media, leaving 302 questionnaires for analysis. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1
Questionnaire items.

Concept	Variable	Item
Social Media Marketing Activity	Entertainment	The social media of this airline is enjoyable.
		The content shared by the social media of this airline is enjoyable.
	Interaction	Information sharing is possible in the social media of this airline.
		The discussion and exchange of opinions is possible in the social media of this airline.
	Trendiness	The expression of opinions is easy in the social media of this airline.
		The information shared in the social media of this airline is up to date.
Customization	The use of social media by this airline is fashionable.	
Brand Equity	Perceived Risk	The information that I need can be found in the social media of this airline.
		The social media of this airline provided the information that I needed.
	Brand Awareness	The social media of this airline alleviated my concern(s) regarding the airline's service.
		The social media of this airline alleviated my concern(s) about using the airline.
Customer Response	e –WOM	I am always aware of this airline's brand.
		I am aware of the characteristics of this airline.
		I can always remember the logo of this airline.
	Commitment	This airline is a leader in the industry.
		I have an impressive memory regarding this airline.
		This airline is customer-centered.

Table 2
Sample characteristics.

Classification		Frequency (people)	Composition ratio (%)
Gender	Male	132	43.7
	Female	170	56.3
Age	20 years old or younger	16	5.3
	21 to 30 years old	125	41.4
	31 to 40 years old	99	32.8
	41 to 50 years old	42	13.9
	51 years old or older	20	6.6
Purpose of using airline	business	21	7.0
	tour and vacation	256	84.8
	education or meeting	12	4.0
	visiting friend(s) or relative(s)	8	2.6
	other	5	1.7
Airline using social media	Asiana Airlines	117	38.7
	Korean Air	98	32.5
	A non-Korean airline	24	7.9
	A domestic low-cost airline	63	20.9
Frequency using airline	1 or less	67	22.2
	2 to 3	148	49.0
	4 to 5	58	19.2
	6 to 7	15	5.0
	8 to 9	4	1.3
	10 or more	10	3.3
Total number of respondents		302	100%

4. Empirical results

The data collected via the survey on airline users were analyzed using the SPSS 21.0 program and AMOS 20.0 statistics package program to test the hypotheses in this study. A CFA was performed, before testing study hypotheses, to test validities. The results showed that the tool had convergence validity, demonstrated by squared multiple correlations (SMCs) over 0.5 and a standardized path coefficient over 0.7. The analysis of measurement model showed that all of the indexes were within acceptable ranges ($\chi^2 = 93.958$, $df = 38$, $CMIN/DF = 2.473$,

$p = 0.000$, $GFI = 0.944$, $NFI = 0.959$, $IFI = 0.975$, $CFI = 0.975$, $RMR = 0.03$, and $RMSEA = 0.07$), indicating that the model had excellent goodness of fit. The AVE for all potential variables was over 0.5, supporting the convergent validity of all measurement variables. Table 3 shows the results of the CFA performed on the variables for each concept used in the study.

The structural equation model was analyzed to test the study hypotheses. The results were within acceptable ranges ($\chi^2 = 576.887$, $df = 219$, $CMIN/DF = 2.634$, $p < 0.001$, $GFI = 0.855$, $AGFI = 0.817$, $RMR = 0.085$, $CFI = 0.918$, $TLI = 0.906$, and $RMSEA = 0.074$), supporting the goodness of fit of the structural model used in the study. Fig. 2 shows hypothesis testing results.

The fact that airline SMMAs significantly affected brand equity indicates that as airlines actively carry out SMMAs, consumers are more likely to remember or identify the airline more accurately compared to other airlines. In addition, memories of the SMMAs are retained by customers via the significant effects on brand image. The significant associations between brand equity and customer loyalty or purchase intention are supported by many previous studies. The effect of brand awareness on e-WOM was insignificant ($\beta = 0.086$, $C.R. = 1.397$, $p < 0.001$), rejecting H3, while the effect of brand awareness on commitment was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.318$, $C.R. = 5.197$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. This suggested that a committed customer was more important in sharing the value and resources of a company and developing a relationship with that company. The effects of SMMAs on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.388$, $C.R. = 5.112$, $p < 0.001$) and brand image ($\beta = 0.531$, $C.R. = 6.445$, $p < 0.001$) were significant, supporting H1 and H2. The relative importance of airline SMMA components was highest in trendiness, followed by customization, perceived risk, interaction, and entertainment, meaning that customers preferred social media that provided the most up-to-date information because social media was the most practical means of accessing such information. Customers also preferred social media that fit for their own tastes and wanted reliable content and services contributing to decreases in risk or anxiety. The components of interaction or entertainment were relatively less important compared to other components, though it is important, for SMMAs to be successful, to achieve balance among all components. The effects of brand image on online WOM ($\beta = 0.561$, $C.R. = 7.065$, $p < 0.001$) and commitment ($\beta = 0.755$, $C.R. = 8.041$, $p < 0.001$) were significant and positive, supporting H5 and H6 and explaining 34.2% and 77%, respectively. These results showed that an

Table 3
Results of the confirmatory factor analysis.

Configuration concept	Measurement index	SMC	Path coefficient (C.R.)	Standardized path coefficient	Cronbach's α
Social Media Marketing Activity	Entertainment1	0.742	0.917 (16.103)	0.862	0.864
	Entertainment2	0.781	1.000(Fix)	0.884	
	Interaction1	0.669	0.891 (12.525)	0.818	0.820
	Interaction2	0.605	0.905 (13.525)	0.778	
	Interaction3	0.739	1.000(Fix)	0.86	0.678
	Trendiness1	0.493	0.827 (11.846)	0.702	
	Trendiness2	0.545	1.000(Fix)	0.738	0.865
	Customization1	0.706	0.942 (17.82)	0.84	
	Customization2	0.821	1.000(Fix)	0.906	0.921
	Risk1	0.852	0.985 (23.782)	0.923	
Risk2	0.856	1.000(Fix)	0.925		

improvement of brand image would contribute to WOM. This is especially more important in industries such as the airline industry that provide intangible services. It also suggests that it is possible to establish a positive image through social media, a strong WOM marketing tool. The significant effect of brand image on commitment means that a better image has positive effects on a company via commitment. A virtuous cycle that induces airline social media users to participate in company brand marketing voluntarily and continuously, based on these results, may be developed.

5. Conclusions and implications

This study investigated the effects of airline SMMAs on two types of brand equity – brand awareness and brand image – and two types of customer response – e-WOM and commitment. The results of this study are summarized as follows. First, SMMAs had positive effects on brand awareness and brand image, confirming that SMMAs are a precedent contributing to airline brand equity. Second, brand awareness had a positive effect on commitment, confirming that airlines with low awareness could actively pursue SMMAs in an attempt to increase awareness and develop committed customers. Third, brand image significantly affected e-WOM and commitment, demonstrating that SMMAs have a positive effect on brand, thereby developing committed customers by affecting customer emotions and e-WOM.

The academic and practical implications from this study are as follows. First, studies on airline social media marketing have been limited. As such, the present study constitutes a contribution in that it is the first to empirically analyze the relationship between airline SMMAs and customer response. Second, while previous studies on SMMAs ignored the mediating effect of brand equity, the present study proposed a model that more accurately describes the effects of airline SMMAs by introducing brand equity into the model. Third, this study empirically demonstrated that airline SMMAs are an important determining factor of brand equity. This was consistent with the results from Aaker (2009) that brand equity had a positive effect on the consumer confidence index, meaning that brand equity plays a role in mediating the relationship between SMMAs and e-WOM or the commitment of customers, and, furthermore, that investments in brand equity may intensify customer responses to airline SMMAs. Because SMMAs are a tool to generate positive effects on brand awareness and brand image, which contribute to airline brand value, airlines should induce customers to use social media more actively by developing more interesting and aggressive SMMAs. Fourth, brand image was shown to significantly affect e-WOM and commitment, meaning that a positive brand image leads to positive e-WOM and commitment, ensuring continuous advertisement activity by customers. Therefore, airlines should encourage customers to spread e-WOM voluntarily and to control the behavioral and emotional responses of customers toward a brand by managing

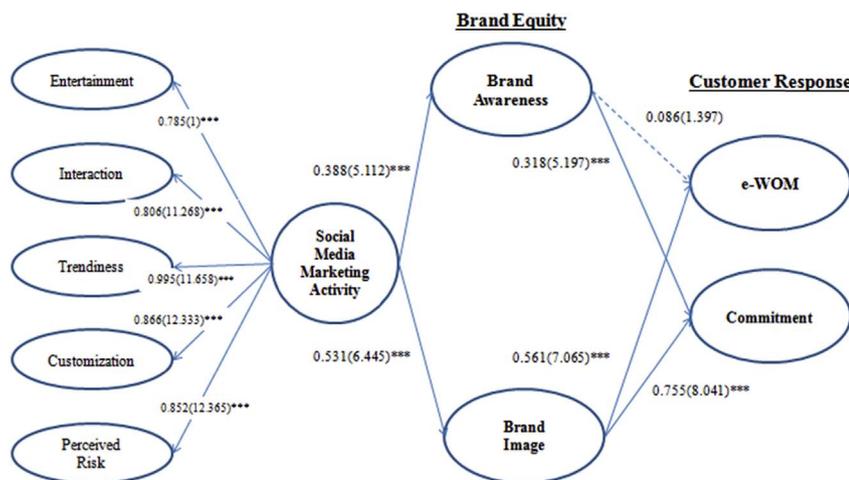


Fig. 2. Hypothesis testing results.

Note: *** p < 0.001

social media efficiently.

The limitations of this study and recommended direction for future studies are as follows. First, the sample for this study was restricted to Korean passengers. More comprehensive studies incorporating a broader spectrum of passengers would allow for a more meaningful generalization of the results. Second, although this study empirically demonstrated that SMMA had a positive effect on customer response, the consequences of these effects on proficiency or the managerial achievement of companies were not addressed. Future studies considering these limitations would provide useful information not only to airlines but also to marketers in other fields seeking solutions for social media marketing strategies and decision-making.

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