The Role of Social Media in Achieving Customer Immersion: An Exploratory Study of the Opinions of a Sample of Customers of Tourism and Travel Companies in Karbala

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of social media users is a potential area for organizations in the field of tourism as organizations interact with their customers in a more efficient way. This technology can be used as an effective tool to create interactions between organizations and customers. The purpose of this research is to reveal the importance of social media use and customer immersion. Therefore, this study is considered an applied and descriptive research study. The results show that immersion in social media interactions creates customer value for brands. Immersion in interaction has positive effects on creating value for customers. The results of this study show the importance of creating social media platforms for brands to maximize interactions between customers and organizations. The more organizations increase their activities and interactions on social media, the better customer immersion they will get. As a population for the study, a sample of (150) customers was selected.

Keywords: social media, customer immersion, travel and tourism companies in Karbala

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the human race spends more than 33% of its time on social media when it is awake (Lange, 2010). The phenomenon of Internet and social media addiction has increased marketers' interest in the motivations that influence customer immersion: being active online and participating in interactive marketing communications (Petrescu et al., 2018). Hence, social media plays an important role in human life nowadays. Social media makes interactions between organizations and consumers easier and at a lower cost. Because of this fact, business owners can use social media as a potential field to communicate with their customers and gain benefits. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are used to capture value (Adjei et al., 2012; Gensler et al., 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Labrecque, 2014; Rishika et al., 2013; Rohm et al., 2013; Hamilton et al., 2016). There are many ways in which consumers can connect with brands through the use of social media platforms which has posed a challenge for brand owners and managers to find the best way to use this potential opportunity strategically and create content so that their interactions with consumers create value for customers. (Schulze et al., 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Social Media

The repercussions that the world is experiencing today from the emergence of the latest means and devices and the development and increase in speed of the Internet have paved the way for the widespread use of the Internet in recent times by all age groups and this is called

social communication (Burcu & Eda, 2014: 140), as social networking sites provide their users with the opportunity to dialogue, access information with ease, identify the problems they face, and try to reach a solution quickly by exchanging opinions and obtaining new ideas (Barry, 2011: 43). The concept of social media is considered one of the controversial concepts among researchers due to overlapping viewpoints on it. The two researchers sought to shed light on some of these concepts through the following table:

Table 1: The concept of social media

T	Researcher	Concept
1	Rose et al., 2011: 30	The second or modern web generation, which facilitates the spread of information through available social media services such as commenting, sharing, following and liking.
2	Turban et al., 2016: 28	A group of electronic systems that facilitate the subscriber's creation of his own social networking sites, allowing him to communicate with members who have the same interest.
3	Agnihotri, 2016: 44	Social media is considered a complement to social relationships and is considered a suitable alternative for those who find it difficult to communicate face to face.
4	Beyari & Abareshi, 2019: 22	The total number of channels provided by technology facilitates the exchange of information and communication between members of society
5	Mou & Benyoucef, 2021: 34	A social hobby created between members of society and productive organizations through social interaction within a dynamic framework to achieve social goals. It aims to consolidate and expand the circle of relations between the organization and members of society.

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the aforementioned literature

Types of social media

The multiplicity and diversity of social media has opened wide the doors of social communication between the classes of society in general and between productive organizations and their customers, creating a fundamental development in social communication patterns and methods of interaction. Which created a kind of great challenge for these organizations in order to use the best means of social communication that enables them to reach their customers quickly and continuously. Hence, many researchers agreed on certain means of communication that are the most common and easy to use among different groups of society. Klobas (2011: 124), Watzlawick et al. (2011: 54) and Awad and Eaton (2013) agreed on the influence of three global social media and their widespread use (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube).

• *Facebook*

Despite the modernity of this communication network, which is estimated to be approximately fifteen years old, it has become more of a means of social communication between different classes of society and between business organizations and customers, through which customers can learn about the latest products and the ease of obtaining them, and they can also express their opinion about them (Hansson et al., 2013: 120).

• *Twitter:*

Despite its short lifespan, as it appeared in 2006, it is considered one of the most important and influential means of social media, even from the political aspect (Champoux et al., 2012: 25). It is considered a good means of communication, as one can view organizations' advertisements and follow their status. It also enables followers to express their opinions about

the organization's products, and the Twitter page can be linked to the Facebook page, which facilitates the organization's marketing work for its products (Park & Cho, 2012: 405).

• *YouTube:*

The YouTube application was launched in 2005 and is considered older than the previous two applications. It is characterized by the feature of lengthening the video time while allowing individuals to download videos and save them on their electronic devices (CHAI-LEE GOI, 2014: 32). The work of the YouTube application is to create a channel through which videos are recorded and published. It is a feature that allows organizations the ability to film a video to market their goods and publish it to reach millions of individuals who follow or subscribe to the channel. Their opinions about the products can also be obtained, as well as customers' tastes can be identified in order to develop Products through the comment feature below the video (De Vries et al., 2012: 88).

Customer Immersion

Concept

The marketing method for the product and service is considered the most important element that generates customer immersion, as the moment that the customer experiences when he learns about the product and service advertisement is the first seed of his connection to it (Chung & Tan, 2004: 871), and in light of the development taking place In the method and methods used in marketing products, as they have entered social networking sites, in addition to e-mail and advertising on television, on buildings, and inside shopping centers, all of these methods put companies in front of a field of strong competition to get customers to indulge in their products and continue their loyalty to them for the longest possible period (Doorn et al., 2010: 248). Some concepts of customer immersion can be viewed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: The concept of customer immersion prepared by the researchers according to the aforementioned sources

T	Researcher	Concept
1	Bridget et al., 2015: 13	A psychological feeling that makes the consumer feel active and interactive with the product
2	Ketelaar, 2016: 2607	The process of communication between the producing company and customers in knowledge exchange relationships to develop the product
3	Tkaczyk, 2017: 690	The company's ability to attract the customer's attention and make him make a purchasing decision

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the aforementioned literature

The degree of immersion is determined according to the speed of his conviction that prompts the customer to purchase the product, and this is reflected in the customer's continuous research about the product and ways to develop it in order to satisfy his evolving and renewable needs, as well as searching for alternatives and trying to make a comparison between the products he purchases and their alternatives (362) (Mathwick & Rigdo, 2004).

Types of customer immersion

The book differed in classifying customer immersion, and some of these classifications can be presented as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Customer immersion classification

	Researcher		Types of customer immersion
1	O'Cass, 2010: 121	Low immersion	High immersion
2	Raymundo, 2017: 148	Indulging my situation	Constant immersion
3	Zhenyu, 2015: 270	Personal immersion	Self-indulgence
4	Hepola, 2017: 14	Situational immersion	Periodic immersion
5	Ketelaar, 2016: 2609	Purchasing indulgence	Advertising immersion
6	Hollebeek, 2014: 67	Productive immersion	Purchasing indulgence

Source: Prepared by researchers based on the aforementioned literature

The researchers agreed with Orcas (2010: 121) and Ketelaar (2016: 2609) in adopting the types of customer immersion in this research to fit them into the research application community:

High immersion: This is an immersion that revolves around products that are necessary and have a high price, as the decision to purchase them requires a long time due to the possibility of bearing risks when purchasing them, such as jewelry, watch brands, perfumes, bags, or home appliances... etc. It requires the customer to search for a long time for the product to find out its origin, how to use it, the amount of benefit for its price, what its alternatives are, and the possibility of its value increasing or decreasing over time.

Low immersion: It is an immersion based on the decision to purchase products that do not require much thought when making the purchase decision because the products are consumer essentials with low prices and the customer is not exposed to risks when purchasing them, such as clothes, shoes, cosmetics, and food commodities... etc.

Advertising immersion: This type depends on whether the immersion is high (a high-risk purchase decision) or low immersion (a no-risk purchase decision). The higher the immersion, the more it pushes the customer to pay attention to the advertisements and its details and to look for alternatives to reach to make the right purchasing decision.

Purchasing immersion: Spending immersion. According to this type of immersion, the repetition of the purchasing process and the preference for a particular brand of product over its alternatives depend on the extent of benefit from the product and the degree of satisfaction that the customer obtained from purchasing it.

Documented Processes

In this context, we envision the dimensions of the process that describe the interactions between social media sites and customer immersion. The current study aims to study the impact of social media sites on building customer immersion. Based on this, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Social media sites, customer immersion.
H2: Social media platforms have positive effects on customer immersion.

METHODOLOGY

Data for the current study were collected in tourism and travel companies in Karbala. The questionnaire was used as a main tool in collecting data and information, and it included two elements.

First, customer immersion and insight were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The study sample consisted of a group of customers traveling to tourism and travel companies in Karbala, and the sample size was 150 respondents. After obtaining the approval of the companies' management for the research community, specifically from the managers of those companies, the nature and purpose of the questionnaire was explained to the participants. (Lindell & Whitney, 2001).

Second: A sample of (150) customers who travel continuously for tourist and commercial purposes was formed from a number of tourism companies in the holy city of Karbala, by selecting (7) companies accredited by the General Authority for Tourism and Travel. (25) questionnaire forms were distributed in each company. Their number is (163). When collecting the questionnaires, it was found that there were 13 questionnaires that were not suitable for statistical analysis. The researchers relied on (150) questionnaires.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

In this section, hypotheses are proposed taking into account the effects of immersion that customers feel in their brand interactions on social media. The conceptual framework of this study is presented in (Figure 1). It evaluates the effects of immersion in their social media interactions with the brand. (Hamilton et al., 2016).
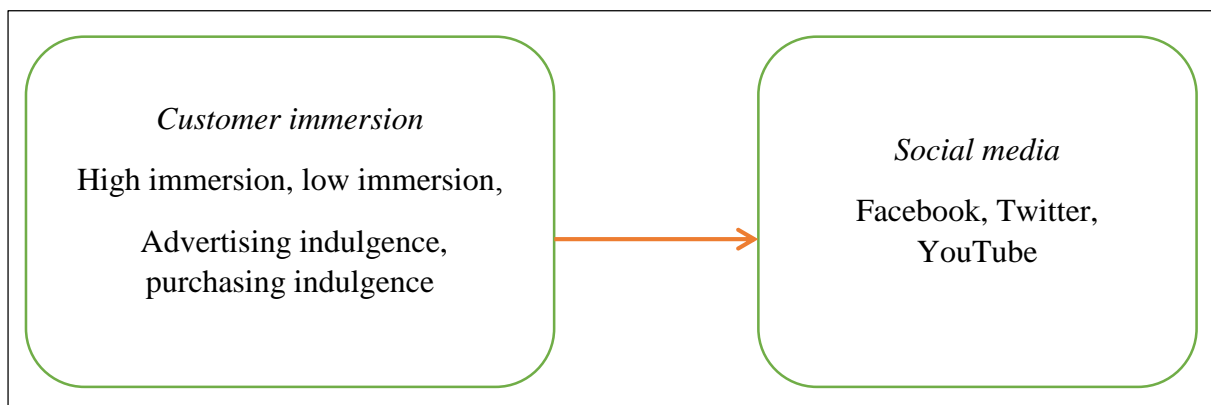

Figure 1: Research model

The correlation between social networking sites and customer immersion is analyzed through the use of the correlation coefficient. In order to discover the nature of the relationship contained in the first main hypothesis, which states that there is no statistically significant correlation between social networking sites and customer immersion.

Table 4: Correlations between social networking sites and customer immersion

Tabular (T) value	Customer immersion y			Dependent variable / / Independent variable
2.438	0.857			Social networking sites (x)
Degree of trust	9.697			Calculated (t) value
0.99	There is a positive and statistically significant correlation at the 1% level for customer immersion			Relationship type

Source: Prepared by researchers based on electronic calculator outputs. N=150

It is clear from the results shown in Table 4 that there is a positive, strong and statistically significant correlation with an error rate of (1%) between social networking sites as a main independent variable and customer immersion as a main dependent variable, as the value of

the simple correlation coefficient between them reached (0.857). This value indicates the strength of the relationship between social networking sites and customer immersion. What supports this positive correlation is that the calculated value of (t) reached (9.697), which is greater than the value of (t). The tabulation value is (2.438) with an error rate of (1%). This indicates that the adoption of social networking sites by the researched organization will contribute to achieving customer immersion, which confirms the incorrectness of the main hypothesis established.

The Impact of Social Networking Sites and Customer Immersion

The data from Table 5 indicate that (54.8%) of the variance in the respondents' ability to perceive social networking sites is explained by customer immersion, and this is supported by the calculated (F) value of (0.986), which is greater than the value The tabularity of (3.84) at a degree of freedom (1.166) and a level of significance (0.05), and from monitoring the values of ($^1\beta$) and the (t) test, it was found that social networking sites There was a significant effect on customer immersion by (0.74), and the calculated (t) value was (14.178), which is a significant value and greater than its tabular value, and thus the second main hypothesis was fulfilled.

Table 5: The impact of social networking sites and customer immersion

F		R²	β¹	β°	Dependent variable Customer immersion
Tabulation	**Calculated**				Independent variable
3.84	201.18	54.8%	0.74 14.184)	0.831 (14.178)	Social media sites Calculated t value

DF= 1,166 N= 150 P≤ 0.05

Note that the tabular value of (t) is equal to (1.645).

CONCLUSIONS

1) Facilitating communication and interaction with friends, family, and society, and provide sources of entertainment and amusement.
2) Promoting social, political and cultural awareness. Providing resources for learning, teaching and research.
3) Enhancing cooperation and interaction between different societies and civilizations. Providing opportunities for marketing and promoting products and services.
4) Promoting health awareness and disseminating medical and health information.
5) Providing emotional and psychological support for people suffering from psychological or social problems.
6) Promoting social, cultural and recreational activities.
7) Providing opportunities for employment and developing practical and social skills.

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