



Generating brand awareness in Online Social Networks



Albert A. Barreda^a, Anil Bilgihan^{b,*}, Khaldoon Nusair^{d,1}, Fevzi Okumus^c

^a Hospitality & Restaurant Administration, Missouri State University, Springfield, MO, USA

^b Department of Marketing, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA

^c Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA

^d College of Economics & Political Science Marketing Department, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

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ABSTRACT

With their exceptional interactive and communicative capabilities, Online Social Networks (OSNs) allow destinations and companies to heighten their brand awareness. Many tourist destinations and hospitality brands are exploring the use of OSNs to form brand awareness and generate positive WOM. The purpose of this research is to propose and empirically test a theory-driven model of brand awareness in OSNs. A survey among 230 OSN users was deployed to test the theoretical model. The data was analyzed using SEM. Study results indicate that building brand awareness in OSNs increases WOM traffic. In order to foster brand awareness in OSN, it is important to create a virtually interactive environment, enabling users to exchange reliable, rich and updated information in a timely manner. Receiving financial and/or psychological rewards and accessing exclusive privileges in OSNs are important factors for users. Both system quality and information quality were found to be important precursors of brand awareness in OSNs. Study results support the importance of social media in online branding strategies. Virtual interactivity, system quality, information content quality, and rewarding activities influence and generate brand awareness, which in return, triggers WOM.

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1. Introduction

With their exceptional interactive and communicative capabilities, Online Social Networks (OSNs) offer new avenues for businesses (Sigala, 2012; Yoon, Choi, & Sohn, 2008). Most companies use OSNs as tools for customer engagement and collaboration. However, OSNs can also boost brand awareness (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). Brand awareness has a significant effect on consumer choices (Hoyer & Brown, 1990; Lin, 2013). It is, therefore, an important concept both in marketing and consumer behavior. Consumers rely more than ever on OSNs when making decisions. The effects of OSN campaigns on consumers' perception of services and brands have yet to be better understood (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013; Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus, & Cobanoglu, 2013). OSNs have evolved as platforms that can generate brand awareness due to their heavy adoption. Each user who posts on a popular OSN, such as Facebook, is seen by an average 35% of their friends or connections (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013). Therefore, it is important to get the branding fundamentals right in OSNs (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). The

company's effective presentation of its brand contributes directly to brand awareness, which is the customer's ability to recognize and recall the brand when provided a cue (Berry, 2000; Bilgihan, Peng, & Kandampully, 2014; Lin, 2013).

When asked to a group of people "what destinations come to your mind when you think about a skiing destination?" responses would provide a basic understanding of a ski destination's brand awareness in the market. OSNs create opportunities for travel companies and tourist destinations to build strong brand awareness when designed and implemented properly. High levels of brand awareness (recall and recognition) can significantly impact a brand's market share, and contribute to the formation of other brand elements such as brand image, brand equity and brand loyalty (Bilgihan et al., 2014; Chang, 2013; Xie & Chen, 2014).

Brand awareness is viewed as a means through which individuals become informed and accustomed with a brand name and recall and recognize the brand (Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014; Jakeli & Tchumburidze, 2012; Lin, 2013). WOM is vital for a company's success. Companies that are capable of using WOM for marketing purposes are more successful compared to ones that are not (Mason, 2008). When asked about the main objectives of their OSN programs, more than half of marketing decision-makers indicated that 'improving brand awareness or reputation' is among the most important objectives (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2013).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: abilgihan@fau.edu (A. Bilgihan), knusair@squ.edu.om (K. Nusair).

¹ PhD Associate Professor.

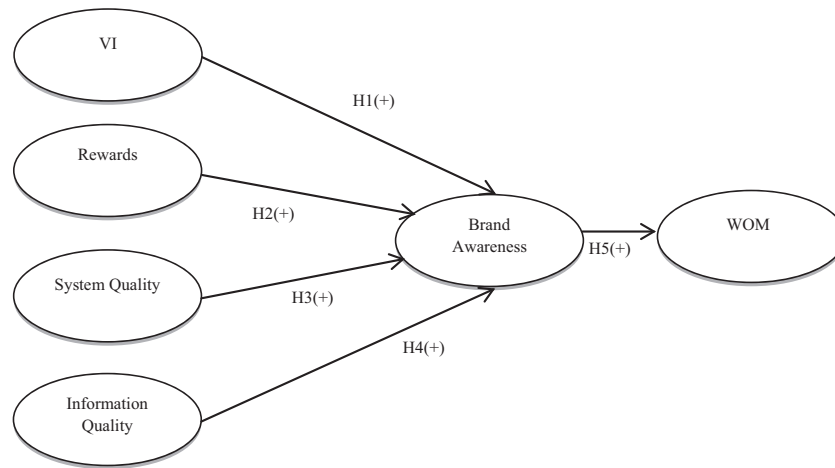


Fig. 1. A proposed brand awareness framework – a mediated model.

Organizations generally try creating brand awareness using limited one-way communications. However, OSNs make two-way conversations possible with consumers participating in the development of a destination brand identity and image (Lim, Chung, & Weaver, 2012). Furthermore, there is a continuing debate over the activities of brands in OSNs (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). OSNs offer a unique opportunity for brands to foster their relationships with customers, while others believe the contrary. Previous studies investigate the role of OSNs in relationship marketing. However, the role of OSNs in building brand awareness is understudied. “There is an important need in the literature to explore the effects of branding on marketing variables related to social media” (Laroche et al., 2013, p. 76). Therefore, the current study aims to fill the gap in literature by investigating the role of OSNs in generating brand awareness.

Given the importance of brand awareness and possibilities of OSNs to foster brand awareness, this research article has developed a theory-driven model (Fig. 1) that hypothesizes the antecedents and the consequence of brand awareness in OSN. The flow of this paper is as follows: first, we discuss the use of OSNs in the travel industry and determinants of brand awareness, and then develop the conceptual framework and hypotheses. That section is followed by a description of the study design. Study results are then presented and discussed. Finally, we conclude with implications and propose the future research directions and limitations.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. OSN and travel industry

OSN refers to a variety of sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers’ desire to educate each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004; Di Pietro, Di Virgilio, & Pantano, 2012; Kasavana, Nusair, & Teodosic, 2010). OSNs involve common sites such as Facebook, Instagram, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn and Bebo (Isacsson & Gretzel, 2011; Nusair et al., 2013); these sites also encompass wikis, blogs, message boards, podcast, and Vlogs (Nusair, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2012). OSNs create virtual social environments where users can communicate and interact with each other by posting comments, reviews, videos, and pictures (Ip, Leung, & Law, 2011; Kleinrichert, Ergul, Johnson, & Uydaci, 2012). The function of OSNs has evolved in the past few years, presenting a new prospect for marketers to generate awareness of their brands (Inversini & Masiero, 2014; Law, Buhalis, &

Cobanoglu, 2014; Mason & Nassivera, 2012; Morosan, Bowen, & Atwood, 2014; Phelan, Chen, & Haney, 2013). Thus, OSNs present opportunities for travel marketers and assist businesses to develop their online marketing efforts (Gretzel, 2006).

Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides (2011) stress the influence of OSNs in the travel industry. Based on their findings, OSNs are mainly used for information and experience sharing among tourists. The relationship between the influences of the information received from OSNs and the variations made to holiday plans is significant. User-generated content in OSNs is more trusted than official tourism websites, travel agents and mass media advertising (Fotis et al., 2011). Given the widespread and growing investment in OSN marketing, it is essential to inform OSN marketers on how to generate brand awareness in this central medium.

2.2. The role of brand awareness in the OSN context

In the B2C context, brand awareness refers to the capacity of decision-makers to distinguish or recall a brand (Homburg, Klarmann, & Schmitt, 2010). Brand awareness is a necessary component for the communication processes to occur (Jakeli & Tchumburidze, 2012). For travelers to purchase services from a travel organization or select a particular vacation destination, they must first be aware of the travel organization/destination. Brand awareness enacts a decisive role in the set of brands that interest consumers when selecting a product or service (Lin, 2013; Sam, 2012). The probability of the selected brand is in function of the number of other brands in the consideration set (Baggio, Mottironi, & Corigliano, 2011). The consumer’s ability to identify a brand under distinct situations is a result of his or her brand awareness to the brand connection (Keller, 2009; Lin, 2013).

Brand awareness plays a key role in consumers’ buying decision-making process. It includes individual recognition, knowledge dominance and recall of brands (Kim, Kim, Kim, Kim, & Kang, 2008). Just like a traditional definition of brand awareness, in the OSN context, brand awareness is defined as the extent to which consumers are familiar with the distinctive qualities or image of a particular brand of goods or services in OSNs (Keller, 1993). Awareness is distinguished in terms of two dimensions: intensity and extent. Intensity of brand awareness indicates how effortlessly consumers recall a particular brand through OSNs; the extent of brand awareness refers to the possibility of acquiring and consuming brand services and products through the utilization OSNs (Kleinrichert et al., 2012), especially when the brand emerges in consumers’ mind (Wu & Lo, 2009). It is important for travel brands,

to retain the dimensions of brand awareness (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002) in OSNs.

3. The conceptual model and hypotheses

The theoretical foundations of the present study are based on two leading marketing concepts, the awareness factor (Ha, 2004) and the WOM factor (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). These two perspectives are effective in explaining how OSN users form brand awareness and how the level of brand awareness could be linked with the intention to generate WOM. Hutter et al. (2013) show the positive effect of OSN engagement on consumers' brand awareness and WOM activities. Due to the relevance of brand awareness as a fundamental element of WOM in online environments, the present study also examines the precursors of brand awareness in OSN marketing. In the following sections, the paper develops hypotheses regarding the effect of the precursors of brand awareness in OSNs and the relationship between brand awareness and WOM. The hypothesized relationships appear in Fig. 1.

3.1. Determinants of brand awareness in OSNs

Widely known brands are far more likely to be contemplated, and consequently chosen, than unknown brands. The more known the brand is, the more possibilities individuals would intend to purchase and recommend the service and product (Hornig, Liu, Chou, & Tsai, 2011). Thus, establishing strong brand awareness among OSN users influences users to recommend and influence purchase desire (Oh, 2000). As users are aware of a lesser-known travel service/product (e.g., travel destinations located in unpopular locations) through exposure at certain OSNs, their future recall, recognition and intention to recommend and to visit that travel product will be strengthened (Mason & Nassivera, 2012).

3.1.1. The impact of virtual interactivity (VI) on brand awareness

Literature on interactivity theory proposes the promising functions of interactivity and multimedia characteristics of the web in enhancing different dimensions of relationship building with customers in the virtual environment (Di Pietro et al., 2012; Fiore, Jin, & Kim, 2005). VI refers to a complex and multidimensional definition (Ihamäki, 2012; McMillan, 2000) and there is no agreement on a group of precise theoretical and operational definitions related to it (Kioussis, 2002). This research adapts Steuer's (1992, p. 4) definition, which conceptualizes VI as "the extent to which online users might participate in adjusting the content of website in real time." This article defines VI as OSN users and travel organizations communicating directly with one another, not including distance or time, exchanging, inquiring and providing travel-related information in a timely manner through the use of OSNs. This definition of interactivity highlights the importance of tools that enhance interactivity with and between users and allows users to share information on travel websites (Chan & Li, 2010).

Much research on VI examines immediate effects on the creation of higher levels of branding elements. However, studies investigating individuals' knowledge of a brand's existence through the influence of VI have not been clearly examined (Jakeli & Tchumburidze, 2012), particularly in the travel context (Ku, 2011). For Duncan and Moriarty (1998), VI refers to the procedure that connects an individual to the brand. Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald (2005) suggest that VI impacts brand awareness over time. They contend that in the complementarity of marketing communications, which refers to the strengthening influence of users' interactivity intentions, VI contributes to achieving recognition and recall in consumers' minds that are beyond the consumer interactivity options.

Macdonald and Sharp (2003) suggest that VI can either increase or decrease brand awareness, while Duncan and Moriarty (1998) provide empirical evidence of the positive long-term impact of VI on brand awareness. Similarly, De Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang (2012) state that interactive posts enhance the number of likes in OSN pages. Interactivity characterizes many-to-many communication. Previous studies suggest that OSN communications positively impact brand equity (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schäfer, 2012; Kim & Ko, 2012). When travelers effectively interact with others, including with the travel brand, they tend to recall the brand and recognize the brand easily. Therefore, the authors offer the following hypotheses linking VI with brand awareness:

H1. Virtual interactivity positively affects brand awareness of travel firms promoted on OSNs.

3.1.2. The impact of rewards on brand awareness

Reward for activities manifests the level of monetary or psychological rewards for dedicated OSN users (Kim & Christodoulidou, 2013; Sheth & Atul, 1995). In the travel industry, reward for activities is one of the central elements that influences brand awareness (Kotler, Rackham, & Krishnaswamy, 2006). In this study, reward for activities refers to the extent which members of OSNs receive monetary, psychological and membership privileges.

Rewards for activities, when strongly directed to create awareness in consumers' memory, affect consumers' behavior to select particular brands from the competitive set (Dobele, Toleman, & Beverland, 2005). Numerous studies explore the impact of reward for activities on brand recognition and brand recall elements that reflect components or outcomes of brand awareness. For instance, Kotler et al. (2006) state that organizations need to allocate financial and psychological rewards to generate customers' awareness of, interest in, preference for and desire for a product/service. When consumers receive rewards from a brand, they tend to recognize and recall the components of the brand. Previous studies have found that financial or psychological rewards are positively correlated with the level of brand awareness (Dobele et al., 2005; Kotler et al., 2006). Similarly, Clifford (2010) found that rewards (e.g. loyalty programs) are associated with positive brand awareness in OSNs. OSN users also can gain social values when interacting and sharing resources with others (Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012). The social benefits that users perceive from OSN could potentially heighten the brand awareness. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Reward for activities positively affects brand awareness for travel firms promoted on OSNs.

3.1.3. The impact of system quality on brand awareness

The dimensions of system quality include user perceptions of the security of the system, ease of navigation and user friendliness (Nelson, Todd, & Wixom, 2005). Thus, in this research, system quality refers to the level with which OSNs are easy to navigate, user-friendly and secure. The less complicated a system is perceived, the more effective the system is perceived (Ruiz-Molina, Gil-Saura, & Šeric, 2013). Comparably, systems bundled with a high level of security systems are distinguished as part of high quality systems. Ease of the system indicates that the information that the OSNs contain is retrieved with low effort. User friendliness exemplifies the level at which a system is uncomplicated to operate, comprehend and access under distinctive conditions (Conklin, Gotterer, & Rickman, 1982). Higher-quality OSNs are perceived as

user-friendly, and consequently, are perceived to have higher levels of helpfulness and function.

Existent literature on system quality examines the effects on consumer awareness (e.g. Chang & Chen, 2008). Ethier, Hadaya, Talbot, and Cadieux (2006) establish that in online contexts, the quality of the website serves as the overall firm atmosphere. The quality of the system augments the probability of the initial impression as the user responds recognizing visual elements of the brand. A user with strong brand awareness is more likely to become a customer (Albert, Goes, & Gupta, 2004). If a user perceives that the system is of high quality, he or she is more likely to recall and recognize the brand, and to generate WOM (McKnight, Kacmar, & Choudhury, 2004). Therefore, the following hypothesis linking system quality and brand awareness is proposed:

H3. System quality positively affects brand awareness for travel firms promoted on OSNs.

3.1.4. The impact of information quality on brand awareness

High-quality information in OSNs helps users have a better understanding of the brand, feel support from other users and make better decisions (Zhang & Watts, 2008). High information quality benefits users who wish to obtain information related to a service or product and receive advice on a particular topic. Information quality plays an important role in creating various benefits to users (Zheng, Zhao, & Stylianou, 2012).

OSNs that offer reliable, updated, credible and rich information to consumers have a distinct competitive advantage over their competitors (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008). In this sense, OSNs that provide quality of information may be perceived more attractive (Gorla, Somers, & Wong, 2010). Therefore, users are expected to hear about an OSN with high information quality. In this study, information quality refers to the level at which travel-related OSNs provide reliable, updated, credible and rich information. In OSNs, excessive user contributions of low quality can lead to what is termed as information overload which describes the situation when users feel they are swamped with unwanted information. Information overload can eventuate in user withdrawal from using OSN. Information quality affects the level of individuals' brand awareness over time (Biedenbach & Marell, 2009; Smith & Swinyard, 1982) and allows these individuals to recognize and recall the brand through the use of travel-related OSNs. We claim that if the information shared on OSN profile is of high quality, it would heighten the awareness of the brand. Thus, the following hypothesis linking information quality and brand awareness is proposed:

H4. Information quality positively affects brand awareness for travel firms promoted on OSNs.

3.2. WOM as the strongest form of brand awareness

Brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the consumer's mind (Aaker, 1996, p.10). In this study, brand awareness refers to the capacity of the decision-makers to distinguish or recall a brand (Homburg et al., 2010). Brand awareness is the portion of the percentage of the target market that is aware of a firm name (Subhani & Osman, 2011). It is a central brand dimension (Aaker, 1996) and has been described to possess an impact on WOM (Xiong & Hu, 2010), the strongest form of brand awareness (Weber, 2009). WOM is acknowledged as a critical component in consumer behavior. The development of different internet and online communication platforms such as OSNs has contributed to the development of innovative forms of WOM communication (Lugosi, Janta, & Watson, 2012; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). WOM

communication is a fundamental source for individuals to obtain credible information. It builds the core of interpersonal communications and substantially impacts consumer behaviors and purchase decisions (Grewal, Cline, & Davies, 2003).

By using OSNs, users can share their personal and professional views, present their experiences, emotions and standpoints on brands to other users. This new form of WOM known as e-WOM has received increasing consideration as a dominant source of service-product-related information and as a successful marketing communication strategy (Yeh & Choi, 2011). The approach we take is a combination of Weber's and Aaker's notions: the strongest form of brand awareness is considered to be word-of-mouth (Weber, 2009). OSN users who have high brand awareness recommend the brand to others (Liao, Wu, Widowati, & Chen, 2012). It is expected that when users are aware of a certain brand, and if they like the brand, they will talk about the brand. Thus;

H5. Brand awareness positively affects WOM for travel firms promoted on OSNs.

4. Research method and data

4.1. Measurement and pilot testing

The present study develops a brand awareness theoretical model and tests five posited research hypotheses (see Table 1). Each latent construct used in this research has been measured using multiple-item, seven-point Likert scales. Research constructs, origin and definitions are portrayed in Table 2, all scales have been adapted from previous research, with "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" anchoring the scale. Adjustments have been made into items to fit the context of travel-related OSNs. VI was measured with a four scale measure adapted from Holt (1997), Jacoby and Chestnut (1978). Reward activities were assessed with a three scale measure adapted from Lee and Kim (2005); system quality was measured with a three-item adapted from Hocutt (1998), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Heehyoung, Olfman, Islang, Joon, and Kyungtae (2008). Information quality was assessed with a four scale measure adapted from Jang et al. (2008). Brand awareness was measured with a two scale measure adapted from Keller (1993), Rossiter and Bellman (2005). Finally WOM was assessed with a four scale measure adapted from Okazaki (2009).

With the intention to increase the validity and reliability of the questions contained in the final Web-based survey, the questionnaire was administered to randomly selected hospitality and tourism graduate students at a large U.S. university. Pilot respondents were asked to disclose any wording that was not well-defined. The comments provided by respondents from this pilot phase raised minimal modifications to the instrument in relation to phrasing, survey outline and linguistic ease of the items. These

Table 1
Summary of hypotheses.

Hypotheses		
H1: VI	→ (+) AWA	VI is positively related to brand awareness
H2: Reward	→ (+) AWA	Reward is positively related to brand awareness
H3: SQ	→ (+) AWA	SQ is positively related to brand awareness
H4: IQ	→ (+) AWA	IQ is positively related to brand awareness
H5: AWA	→ (+) WOM	Brand awareness is positively related to WOM

Note: VI = virtual interactivity; AWA = brand awareness; REWARD = reward for activities; SQ = system quality; IQ = information quality; WOM = word of mouth.

Table 2
Constructs and measurement items.

Constructs	Origin	Construct definitions
Virtual interactivity	Holt (1997), Jacoby and Chestnut (1978)	Users and the brand (e.g. hotel brand, destination) can communicate directly with one another, without boundaries such as distance and time. Users and the brand (e.g. hotel brand, destination) can exchange, inquire, and provide information in a timely manner virtually
Reward activities	Lee and Kim (2005)	The extent which users receive monetary, psychological and membership privileges from the brand (e.g. hotel brand, destination)
System quality	Hocutt (1998), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Heehyoung et al. (2008)	Ease of use, user friendliness and security of the brand's (e.g. hotel brand, destination) OSN
Information quality	Jang et al. (2008)	The level at which the brand (e.g. hotel brand, destination) provides reliable, updated, credible and rich information that users seek
Brand awareness	Keller (1993), Rossiter and Bellman (2005)	The level to which users recognize or recall the brand (e.g. hotel brand, destination)
WOM	Okazaki (2009)	Any positive or negative statement made by user about the brand (e.g. hotel brand, destination) using OSN

aforementioned recommendations were assessed by the authors and incorporated into the final version of the instrument.

4.2. Sampling and data collection

Distinguishing from previous research of brand awareness theory in marketing, the present research concentrates on a sample frame in the travel context. A large, nationally representative, sample of U.S. travel-related OSN users was used for the research study. An online, self-administered questionnaire was created and the link was sent to a systematic random sample of 10,000 travel-related OSN users. The link to the survey was e-mailed to randomly selected respondents from a nationally representative pool owned by a marketing organization. This organization possesses a database of individuals that have utilized travel-related OSNs for travel related reasons at least in the last six months. The e-mail message explicated the aim of the research and encouraged users to participate in the study. Users were instructed to read each statement carefully and provide their responses by filling in the circles for the most suitable response. Respondents were asked to recall their last travel related experience (e.g. reading/writing a comment, looking at pictures/videos) with an OSN page and later select their level of agreements with the statements regarding the specific travel brand/destination OSN page. The questionnaire items were evaluated with 7-point Likert scales anchored at Strongly Disagree 1, Disagree 2, Somewhat Disagree 3, Neither Agree nor Disagree 4, Somewhat Agree 5, Agree 6, and Strongly Agree 7. The last section of the survey contained respondents' demographic information. Participants were guaranteed the confidentiality of their contribution. They specified responses and comments through Qualtrics. An incentive was not offered for answering the questionnaire. In total 230 usable responses were received for analysis of the data. The valid responses were consequentially transferred into SPSS 19 with the purpose of removing data entry inaccuracies. This method of data collection suggests numerous benefits, such as a lower time frame to gather data and lower costs of administrating the questionnaire (Van Selin & Jankowski, 2006).

5. Analysis and results

5.1. Analysis

In this section, data analysis was achieved considering a three stage approach. Initially, confirmatory factor analysis was undertaken to assess the capability of the measurement model. Then, a reliability analysis was conducted. Lastly, the goodness of fit of the model was estimated in both the measurement and structural

model levels. The following goodness-of-fit indices was utilized to evaluate the models: Chi-Square/df ratio, CFI, GFA, AGFA, NFI, PNFI, RFI, IFI and RMSEA (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). The data collected was examined using the statistical software SPSS 19 and AMOS 18. Cronbach alphas' coefficients were calculated to investigate scale reliabilities of each of the six constructs and were above 0.70 for all of them. Each construct possesses reliability coefficients greater than the proposed level of 0.70 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

5.2. Results

Female respondents represent 60% of the sample while male respondents represent 40%. These demographics are reflective of the growing gender group characteristics of the majority of OSN users at most OSNs in U.S; for instance, in the dominant OSN site in U.S, Facebook, the number of women on Facebook almost double the number of men (insidefacebook.com, 2009). About 24% of respondents were between the ages of 45–54 years old, 20% between 35–44 years old, 20% were 55–64 years old, 10% were 65–74 years old, 8% were 19–24 years old and 18% were 25–34 years old. Thirty-six percent of the participants were married, 28% single, 16% either separated or divorced, another 16% declared unmarried and living together and 12% were widowed. The vast majority of the respondents had some college education (34%), 24% had high school/GED, 17% had a 4-year college degree, 15% had a 2-year college degree and 10% had a Master's degree. More than 62% of participants earned under \$50,000, 18% earned an annual income in the \$50,000–\$74,999 range, 10% earned more than \$75,000, and 10% earned an annual income in the \$100,000–\$149,000 range.

In relation to ethnicity, 66% were Caucasian, 15% African American, 5% Asian, another 5% Hispanic and the rest did not specify their ethnicity. Additionally, in relation to how frequently they usually review online social networking websites, 52% checked 1–5 times per day, 28% checked 1–5 times per week, 9% checked 1–5 times per month and 11% checked 6–10 times per day. In relation to the number of contacts respondents have in their contact list, 30% had less than 50 contacts, and 70% have more than 51 contacts. Finally, the most favorite social network website among participants were Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, blogger, Myspace and Flickr in order of preference. The profile of the study sample is provided in Table 3.

5.3. The measurement model

In the present study, the data was analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS 18.0. SEM permits investigators to concurrently examine a group of interconnected relationships

Table 3
Demographic characteristics of sample.

Item		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	92	40
	Female	138	60
	Total	230	100
Age	19–24	18	8
	25–34	41	18
	35–44	46	20
	45–54	55	24
	55–64	46	20
	65–74	24	10
	Total	230	100
Education	Some college history	78	34
	High school/GED	55	24
	4-year college degree	39	17
	2-year college degree	34	15
	Master's degree	23	10
	Total	230	100
Income	Less than 50,000	142	62
	50,000–74,999	42	18
	75,000–99,999	23	10
	100,000–\$149,000	23	10
	Total	230	100
Ethnicity	Caucasian	152	66
	African American	34	15
	Asian	11	5
	Hispanic	11	5
	No specified	22	9
	Total	230	100

Missing cases were excluded in this table.

by appraising these relationships between multiple exogenous (independent variable) and exogenous (dependent variables) in a structural model (Byrne, 2013). Considering a sufficient sample size, the researchers used SEM. The proposed framework was examined following a two-step approach: (1) assess the measurement model and (2) utilize structural equation modeling (Blunch, 2012).

A confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to establish the validity of the measurement model. The results reveal that there was not a violation of multivariate normality assumptions following Tabachnick, Fidell, & Osterlind, 2001 suggestions.

Table 4
Measurement model results.

Construct	Variables	N	Standardized loadings	Construct reliability	AVE
Virtual interactivity	VI1	230	0.92	0.927	0.730
	VI2		0.88		
	VI3		0.68		
	VI4		0.46		
Reward for activities	REWARD1	230	0.67	0.892	0.800
	REWARD 2		0.72		
	REWARD 3		0.80		
System quality	SQ1	230	0.91	0.962	0.727
	SQ2		0.98		
	SQ3		0.95		
Information quality	IQ1	230	0.90	0.954	0.880
	IQ2		0.95		
	IQ3		0.89		
	IQ4		0.91		
Brand awareness	BA1	230	0.84	0.911	0.789
	BA2		0.87		
Word of mouth	WOM1	230	0.91	0.953	0.874
	WOM2		0.91		
	WOM3		0.96		
	WOM4		0.91		

Note: VI = virtual interactivity; REWARD = reward for activities; SQ = system quality; IQ = information quality; BA = brand awareness; WOM = word of mouth.

Because there was no infringement of the assumption of multivariate normality, the maximum likelihood method of estimation has been considered. The goodness-of-fit measures were considered to evaluate the overall goodness of fit (GOF) of the model. The GOF indices for the suggested research framework were acceptable, with Chi-square/df equal to 2.0, root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) of 0.066, normed fit index (NFI) of 0.964, comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.978, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) of 0.91, adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) of 0.86, PNFI of 0.73, incremental fit index (IFI) of 0.986 and relative fit index (RFI) of 0.944. Each of the aforementioned indices related to the measurement model are considered to have an acceptable fit (Hair et al., 1998). Thus, the validity of the data examined in this section is estimated to be good enough to be utilized for further analysis.

After obtaining adequate overall fit indices, the measurement model was examined for its reliability, convergent and discriminant validity. Table 4 shows the results of construct reliability. Cronbach's alpha is commonly expected to assess the reliability of a multi-item scale (Stratman & Roth, 2007). The outcomes of the constructs have reliability coefficients greater than the expected threshold of 0.70. Alpha ranged from 0.892 to 0.962, which is an indication of high reliability for the six constructs (Chen & Hitt, 2002). The attained coefficients were VI (0.927), reward activities (0.892), system quality (0.962), information quality (0.954), brand awareness (0.911) and WOM (0.953). As suggested by Garbarino and Johnson (1999), the average variance extracted (AVE) was considered to examine convergent validity. As portrayed in Table 4, the coefficients of the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.559 to 0.735, surpassing the threshold value of 0.50.

5.4. The structural equation model and hypotheses testing

Following CFA, a structural equation model (using AMOS 18.0) was utilized to examine the proposed hypotheses. A summary of study results, including path coefficients and explained variances, is portrayed in Table 5 and Fig. 2. All of the five proposed hypotheses were supported. Table 5 and Fig. 2 portray the outcomes of the hypothesis testing. VI was found to positively influence brand awareness (path coefficient = 0.84). Study results regarding the VI

Table 5
Standardized path coefficient and *t*-value for the structural model.

Parameter estimates		Standardized path coefficients	<i>p</i> -Value	Hypotheses supported yes/no
Structural paths				
H1: VI	→ (+) BA	0.84	0.001***	Yes
H2: REWARDS	→ (+) BA	0.21	0.001***	Yes
H3: SQ	→ (+) BA	0.49	0.001***	Yes
H4: IQ	→ (+) BA	0.48	0.05**	Yes
H5: BA	→ (+) WOM	0.85	0.001***	Yes

Note: VI = virtual interactivity; REWARDS = rewards for activities; SQ = system quality; IQ = information quality; BA = brand awareness; WOM = word of mouth.

* $p < 0.01$.

** $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

and brand awareness were consistent with previous research (Macdonald & Sharp, 2003), implying that when users virtually interact with the brand and other users, they are likely to develop a mental awareness of the brand. It is easier for them to recall and recognize a brand after interacting indirectly and directly with others. For example, if a user posts a vacation picture of a tropical destination with a comment, the other users who see that post will be aware of the destination if they have not heard about it before. Similarly, H2, which states that reward for activities is positively associated with brand awareness was significant (path coefficient = 0.21). This finding is consistent with Kotler et al. (2006) which indicated that rewards for activities effectively stimulates both dimensions of brand awareness, recall and recognition through the use of travel-related OSNs. This implies that when OSN users receive either psychological or physical rewards, they are likely to maintain recall and recognize the brand under different circumstances.

H3, which states that system quality is positively associated with brand awareness was also significant (path coefficient = 0.49). This finding is consistent with McKnight et al.'s study (2004), which suggests that the quality of the system contribute to the generation of the brand awareness development process. Research results related to H4, which states that information quality is positively associated with brand awareness, were found statistically significant (path coefficient = 0.48). This finding is consistent with Biedenbach et al.'s findings (2009), which indicate that the more consumers receive rich, credible and updated information, the more chances are that they will recall and recognize a brand name through the use of travel-related OSNs. The study findings are consistent with previous research, indicating that that when OSN users perceive high quality of the system and receive good quality of information through the use of OSNs, they are

likely to create a mental awareness of the brand; such awareness assists them to recognize and recall the brand. Lastly, brand awareness was also found to positively influence WOM (path coefficient = 0.85). Previous research suggests similar findings, when users have high brand awareness, she/he will tend to recommend the brand to others (Liao et al., 2012). All of the research hypotheses are supported (see Table 5).

The overall fit indices for the proposed model were acceptable, with Chi-square/df equal to 2.0, RMSEA of 0.66, NFI of 0.96, RFI of 0.94, CFI of 0.98, and IFI of 0.98 and PNFI of 0.72. The aforementioned GOF indices for the structural model indicate an adequate structural model fit (Asatryan & Oh, 2008). Alternatively, these fit statistics portray a good fit of the model with the data. The variance explained was 85% for brand awareness and 73% for WOM.

6. Discussion and conclusions

OSN pages/profiles are the natural extension of the brands' websites. They are powerful and effective tools for driving targeted traffic, customer engagement, conversions and even sales. They are also very effective for boosting brand awareness. Building a strong brand awareness is a critical goal for marketers.

The present study has sought to test the differential effects of OSN elements (VI, rewards for activities, system quality and information quality) on brand awareness, which, in turn, influence WOM. At the aggregate level, each of these constructs positively affects brand awareness, VI having the strongest effect. Brand awareness has a positive influence on WOM. Successful destinations allow users to interact, receive rewards for their online activities, post reviews, receive and provide updated, credible and rich information related to their travel-experiences. The functionality of OSNs has progressed in the past few years, offering an opportunity for marketers and travel practitioners to generate brand awareness that generates WOM. Brand awareness, through the use of travel-related OSNs, might be a fundamental ambition of any travel and hospitality organization's marketing communication attempts. It is recognized that without the generation of brand awareness, other higher levels of brand elements cannot be built. Brands should strengthen their efforts to stimulate VI, offer rewards and provide quality of information and system. The opportunities for brands to develop strong brand awareness through OSNs are then enhanced. Brand awareness will greatly influence the generation of WOM and the consumer intention to try the brand.

The present study offers theoretical and practical implications, which may help both practitioners and marketing researchers to

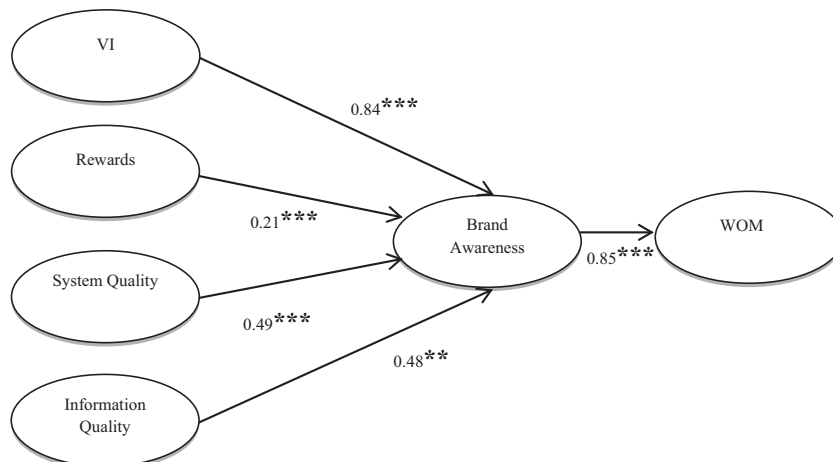


Fig. 2. Brand awareness structural model. * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

publicize brands in an innovative way. Additionally, the present study has a multidisciplinary significance of linking together web-site features (VI, reward for activities, system quality and information quality) with branding and marketing constructs. Consumers use travel-related OSNs extensively for the selection and possible booking of their holiday and business destinations. In essence, the present investigation generates a critical theoretical contribution to the identification of OSN elements, VI, rewards, information quality and system quality that helps the development of brand awareness through the use of OSNs, and the influence of brand awareness on WOM. The results must be contemplated as one of the evolving efforts to examine travelers' use of travel-related OSNs as fundamental sources to interact, receive rewards, exchange information and experience the destination/brand virtually when choosing their vacation and business destinations.

Travel practitioners may design their marketing activities by splitting their resources (time, money, human capital and creativity) among distinctive OSNs in multiple ways to create brand awareness across various OSNs. Travelers and consumers use travel-related OSNs platforms, therefore, according to diverse modalities and during the acquisition of brand knowledge, the manipulation of the system, the interactivity and the level and quality of the information exchanged in the process, and in the post-travel (post-experience) stage. Consequently, travel and tourism marketers are advised to reward their users to post online reviews, exchange information and interact.

The results of this study provide some social media marketing strategies and tactics for practitioners that would be beneficial for OSN campaigns. Findings highlight the importance of quality dimension, therefore organizations are advised to prepare well-crafted marketing messages and post only high quality content on OSN sites. Offering reward systems and member exclusive content are also important. Presenting a strong VI will increase brand awareness in OSNs. Brands have already deployed various social media marketing solutions and try to increase their brand awareness by providing exclusive information to their fans in OSN platforms. For instance, Carnival became the first cruise line to reach one million Facebook fans in 2011. Eleven million people viewed their timeline during the 24 h of a sweepstakes campaign and the page drew more than 20,000 likes and 5000 comments. More than half of Carnival's fan base is comprised of daily active users to the Carnival Facebook fan page. Carnival's each wall post garnered an average of 2500 likes per day and 1700 comments. Fans visit Carnival's Facebook fan page to share memories from past trips, start planning for future vacations, and learn more about Carnival news, features and sweepstakes. The page also serves as an important resource for 'rookie cruisers' who are not sure what to expect and want to learn more. This is a holistic example of the brand awareness model, as the company has high VI, reward activities, information and system quality. This is particularly important for tourism industry due to the intangible nature of the services. Similarly, Intrepid Travel, an adventure travel company, also uses OSNs for building brand awareness. They managed to develop a sense of community who shares their experiences with other users. Their OSN fans are brand advocates and they often respond to another fan's questions. Intrepid Travel also uses their OSN fans as their idea sounding board. Fans ideas and feedback shape the brand's promotions. They also receive entries for the photography competition and share their travel photos with their fans. Their 'Photo of the Day' concept provides escapist elements of travelling in a virtual context. Finally, another goal of their OSN is to bring the conversation together between travelers before their trips. OSN provides a central place for travelers to meet up, discuss upcoming trips and share the excitement in planning the next travel. Marriott Rewards recently introduced PlusPoints, a way to earn points whenever and however guests connect with

the brand online. Facebook likes, Tweets, re-Tweets, Instagram posts and Foursquare check-ins give points to Marriott Rewards. Visit Philadelphia launched "neighborhoods" campaign. Local Instagramers were called upon to take over the account on various occasions, showcasing the city in insiders' views of things to see and do in their own neighborhoods. Similarly, The Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board launched an Instagram campaign that goals to inspire both locals and visitors to discover and rediscover all that the city has to offer. The campaign asks fans to submit their own ideas of iconic spots or lesser-known locales. Further, to OSN marketers/destination managers could adopt gamification for helping travelers to learn and discover a destination (Sigala, 2015), hence, enhancing the brand awareness. Such strategies help brands to increase their brand awareness and create buzz online. The examples above provide further support for the impact of virtual interactivity, reward activities, system and information quality on brand awareness.

Consumers' usage of travel-related OSNs and researchers' and practitioners' investigations are expanding rapidly. Brand awareness is associated with the likelihood that consumers recognize the existence and availability of a company's product or service. Building brand awareness is one of the key steps in promoting a product or service. The aim of OSNs for brands and destinations is to facilitate brand awareness and develop the brand's/destination's personality. Therefore, current study developed a model of brand awareness in OSN contexts. In order to create brand awareness in OSNs, brands need to provide a virtually interactive environment. The study findings indicate that VI is the most important precursor of brand awareness in OSNs. Thus, brands are advised to create talking points and get customers to interact both with the brand and other customers by asking questions, letting them submit context, encouraging knowledge and opinion sharing. Both system and information quality are important branding elements in OSNs contexts. Therefore, brands/destinations should focus on providing well-crafted, high quality OSN content. Finally, rewards for activities are found to be highly correlated with brand awareness. Companies are advised to sponsor giveaways in OSNs. Rewarding people for engaging with the brand is very beneficial. If brands focus on VI, rewards for activities, system quality and information quality, they are more likely to have customers that evangelize about the brand, raising the brands profile and reputation.

7. Limitations and future research

While the research attempts to fill a gap in the body of knowledge that is present, several limitations persist. First, there may be other antecedents that influence significantly the generation of brand awareness such as telepresence and enjoyment. Another limitation emerges from the demographic section of the study; most of the respondents were female. Age representativeness of the sample presents another limitation; a younger sample may yield to different results. Another limitation is that the current research collected data using an online survey. Despite the many advantages of online surveys, it appears that their response rate is lower than traditional mail surveys (e.g. Granello & Wheaton, 2004). Finally, future studies are advised to examine the influence of VI, reward for activities, system quality and information quality on other brand elements, such as brand image, brand attachment, brand equity and brand loyalty.

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