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Effects of relationship types on customers' parasocial interactions: promoting relationship marketing in social media

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## **Effects of relationship types on customers' parasocial interaction: Promoting relationship marketing in social media**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** - This study investigated different types of customer relationships on customers' interactions with the brand, based on prior social media and relationship marketing research.

**Design/methodology/approach** - A cross-sectional, self-administered online survey was conducted to investigate the role of different types of relationships on customers' brand-relevant responses in the context of hotel social media platforms.

**Findings** - Results identified customers' relationships with service, brand, and other customers influenced their parasocial interaction (PSI). Then, customers' PSI positively influenced their self-brand connection and their brand usage intention.

**Research implications** - This study provided insights into the role of relationship marketing in social media platforms by investigating how different types of relationships influence customers' PSI and their brand-related responses, based on PSI theory as a theoretical background.

**Practical implications** - Results from this study provide suggestions for industry practitioners to answer effective ways of managing different types of customers' relationships in social media platforms.

**Originality/value** - This study was the first attempt to propose a conceptual framework to explain different types of customer relationships on customers' interactions with the brand in the context of hotel social media platforms.

**Keywords** Relationship marketing, Parasocial interaction, Social media, Self-brand connection, Brand usage intention

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The emergence of social media has significantly influenced the development of marketing strategies in the hotel industry. Social media has changed how customers communicate, collaborate, and connect with others. Service organizations, such as hotels, need to constantly update their activities on social media because Web 2.0 transformed how customers developed relationships with brands (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). One of the key challenges in social media marketing is customers can develop a relationship with different parties; thus, hotels need to pay attention to different types of relationships to promote customers' interactions with the hotel brand and to enhance their responses toward the hotel brand. The popularity and growth of social media alert hotels to develop relationships with their customers, providing a place where customers can build relationships with the service, the hotel brand, and other customers.

Understanding different types of customers' relationships could benefit hotels because each relationship attributes customers' interactions with the hotel. Relationship marketing, which focuses on creating and maintaining long-term customer relationships, serves as a competitive advantage and strategic resource for the firm (Webster, 1992). Relationship marketing is related to services marketing because its emphasis is on the interactions between the customer and the service provider (Kinard and Capella, 2006). This relationship marketing aims to develop long-term, mutually satisfying relationships with customers, suppliers, and distributors by transforming an organization's focus from fixed transactions to a long-term, ongoing, profitable relationship (Kotler, 2000).

Hospitality organizations recognized the benefits of maintaining ongoing relationships with their customers (Oh, 2002). However, the role of relationship marketing in the social media has not been closely examined to date. To manage interactive features of social media, building

a desirable customer-brand relationship via social media interaction has become important (Hudson *et al.*, 2016). Based on the increasing role of relationship building in the social media, further research has called for investigation of how social media relates to customers' relationships with brands (e.g., Hudson *et al.*, 2016). In addition, more research has called for attention to examine how social media activities lead to loyalty, such as brand usage intention (e.g., Tsiotsou, 2015).

Responding to this research gap, this study investigates different types of customer relationships on customers' interactions with the brand in the context of hotel social media platforms, based on prior research on social media marketing and relationship marketing. As a theoretical background, parasocial interaction (PSI) theory (Horton and Wohl, 1956) is used to provide insights on how an intimate relationship between customers and the hotel can be developed through relationship marketing perspectives. As outcomes of PSI, this research proposes brand-related outcomes, such as self-brand connection and brand usage intent. Specifically, objectives of this study are to investigate:

- (1) relationships between different types of relationships and customers' PSI,
- (2) relationships between customers' PSI and their self-brand connection/ their brand usage intention, and
- (3) relationships between customers' self-brand connection and their brand usage intention in the context of the hotel industry.

Based on PSI theory, this study explores how different types of relationships can be effectively utilized in the context of social media to lead to positive customers' brand-relevant responses. Findings also provide suggestions for hotel marketers to answer effective ways of managing different types of customers' relationships in social media platforms. By investigating

these relationships between different types of relationships and customers' PSI, relationship-marketing strategies can be proposed to enhance customers' self-brand connection and their brand usage intentions to develop positive relationships with hotels.

## **Literature review**

### *The importance of different relationship types on social media*

Relationship marketing focuses on customers' personalized services that enhanced their satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Kim *et al.*, 2006; Malthouse *et al.*, 2013). Relationship marketing refers to “the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and fulfillment of promises” (Grönroos, 1994, p. 9). Relationship marketing enables service firms, such as hotels, to expand their market share by attracting new customers, achieving more business with existing customers, and/or reducing the loss of current customers (Berry, 1999).

Using the remarkable evolution of Web 2.0, social media helps firms build close relationships with customers and enhance customer engagement (Malthouse *et al.*, 2013; Sashi, 2012). Through the interactive nature of social media, companies can manage their brands and communicate with their customers by not only promoting brand-related, user-generated, and firm-generated content, but also interacting with their customers (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). Prior research identified important roles of social media in building diverse customer relationships, customer engagement, and brand trust (e.g., Laroche *et al.*, 2012; Habibi *et al.*, 2014). For instance, Habibi *et al.* (2014) emphasized four different types of relationships—brand, product, company, and other customers—on social media that influenced brand trust. They supported social media provided a rich, continuous communication context and increased repeated

interactions with customers, allowing firms to develop and maintain interactive customer relationships.

### *Customers' PSI*

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced PSI. PSI explains a face-to-face interaction that occurs between media characters and their audience (Ballantine and Martin, 2005). Customers' interpersonal involvement is explained by PSI, based on their subjective experiences. Applying PSI to different media, Ballantine and Martin (2005) advocated PSI theory by explaining how active participants could influence the consumption behavior of other users in the online community context. In addition, Labrecque (2014) applied PSI to investigate social media strategies and identified the key role of PSI for developing positive relationship outcomes. Derived from prior research (e.g., Ballantine and Martin, 2005; Labrecque, 2014), PSI was viewed as an underlying mechanism to understand relationship marketing in social media platforms.

A fundamental concept of PSI was derived from perceived interactivity, which played an important role in social media (Laroche *et al.*, 2012). Prior relationship marketing research suggested the ability to communicate with customers under the Web 2.0 environment, which enhanced customers' perceived interactivity (Song and Zinkhan, 2008) and their PSI (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006). A plethora of social media enabled customers to actively gather and exchange information on services and products (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010). Social media enabled customers to post their opinions, upload pictures and videos about their experiences, and communicate with other customers and service providers. For instance, customers can respond to other customers' postings by clicking 'like', leaving comments, and/or sharing postings to other platforms.

Through interpersonal and interactive communications on social media, customers were exposed to various services, the hotel brand, and other customers, enabling them to develop relationships with different parties. McAlexander *et al.* (2002) proposed different types of relationships in a customer-centric model of brand community. They proposed a model that included four relevant relationships between customers and (1) the product, (2) the brand, (3) the company, and (4) other customers/ owners. Based on initial models of brand communities, which only included relationships between customers, the customer centric model of brand community explained the relationships among all involved elements in a brand community (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Previous studies applied these different types of relationships to explain ways to enhance brand loyalty (Laroche *et al.*, 2013), brand trust (Habibi *et al.*, 2014), and brand relationship quality (Habibi *et al.*, 2016).

Following this customer-centric model of brand community, this study modified four dimensions of the relationship to apply to the hotel industry. Stokburger-Sauer (2010) also modified McAlexander *et al.*'s (2002) brand community integration model to investigate the effectiveness of offline and online marketing management actions. Stokburger-Sauer identified a three-dimensional community integration model, which included customer-brand, customer-company, and customer-other owners' relationships. Derived from the McAlexander *et al.*'s (2002) brand community integration model, this study proposed the relationship between customers and service rather than investigating the relationship between customers and product, since intangibility plays an important role in the hotel industry (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2012). In addition, this study investigated the relationships between customer and hotel brand, rather than separating company and brand dimensions because hotel brand often represents the company. Therefore, this study investigated three types of customers' relationships—service, hotel brand,

and other customers—that influenced customers’ PSI in the hotel social media context, incorporating relationship marketing into idea of the social media context. These different types of relationships were expected to influence customers’ PSI, proposing the following hypotheses.

*H1.* Customers’ relationships with the service positively influence their PSI.

*H2.* Customers’ relationships with the hotel brand positively influence their PSI.

*H3.* Customers’ relationships with other customers positively influence their PSI.

#### *Outcomes of PSI on social media*

Prior research on PSI demonstrated PSI influenced customers’ attitudes and behaviors because PSI explained users’ active and involved media usage (Ballantine and Martin, 2005; Xiang *et al.*, 2016). Customers’ interactive experiences, such as PSI, on social media were related to customers’ positive brand-related responses (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014) because PSI were from interpersonal and interactive communications, and these relationships changed customers’ attitudes and behaviors (Labrecque, 2014). Brand-related responses were important to better understand customers’ relationships with the company (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). Self-brand connections referred to how customers made connections between their self-concepts and brands (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Customers tended to construct their self-identity through the brand, and customers might form meaningful, personal connections between themselves and a brand, based on perceived psychological and symbolic benefits (Escalas, 2004). In addition, brand usage intention explained customers’ likelihood to use the brand in the future (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014).

In the context of social media, PSI positively influenced brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Colliander and Dalhen, 2011), and consumption-related behaviors (Xiang *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, it was predicted that PSI influenced customers’ brand-related responses,



such as self-brand connection and brand usage intention. For instance, Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) identified customer involvement was positively related to self-brand connection and brand usage intention through customer brand engagement in the context of social media. Interactive features of social media promoted relationships with different parties and reduce feelings of uncertainty; thus, customers' PSI was predicted to influence their brand-related responses.

*H4.* Customers' PSI positively influences their self-brand connection.

*H5.* Customers' PSI positively influences their brand usage intention.

#### *Impact of self-brand connection on brand usage intention*

The self-brand connection explained the relationships between customers and a brand (Escalas, 2004). Customers tended to build meaningful and personal relationships with a brand when a given brand was closely associated with their self-concepts (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). When a brand was related to customers' self-concepts, customers were more likely to be favorable to the brand. Prior research confirmed the positive influence of customers' self-brand connections on their behavioral intentions (Escalas, 2004) and their attitudes toward the brand (Moore and Homer, 2008). Therefore, positive relationships between self-brand connection and brand usage intention were predicted, proposing the following hypothesis.

*H6.* Customers' self-brand connections positively influence their brand usage intentions.

#### *Mediating effect of PSI*

Relationship marketing influenced customers' brand-related behaviors (Laroche *et al.*, 2013). For instance, customers' relationships with different parties, including other owners, other customers, company, brand, and product influenced their responses toward the brand, such as brand loyalty, customer-brand identification, and self-brand connection (Habibi *et al.*, 2016; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). By enhancing perceptions of customers' relationships with different

parties, PSI might adjust their attitudes and behaviors. Feelings of PSI influenced intimacy, increased liking, reduced feelings of uncertainty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Perse and Rubin, 1989), and enhanced attitudes toward using social media (Yuan *et al.*, 2016); thus, customers might represent favorable brand evaluations, such as connecting themselves with the brand through PSI. A mediating role of PSI has been identified in previous literature (Labrecque, 2014; Xiang *et al.*, 2016). For instance, Thorson and Rodgers (2006) found PSI mediated perceived interactivity and attitudes toward the website. Labrecque (2014) also identified the mediation role of PSI between social media features, such as interactivity and openness, and customers' behaviors, such as willingness to share information and loyalty. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

*H7.* Customers' PSI mediates the relationships between different types of customers' relationships—in particular, with the (a) service, (b) hotel brand, and (c) other customers—and their self-brand connection.

*H8.* Customers' PSI mediates the relationships between different types of customers' relationships—in particular, with the (a) service, (b) hotel brand, and (c) other customers— and their brand usage intention.

Based on the above discussions, this study proposed the following research framework to investigate the importance of different types of relationships on customers' brand-related responses (see Figure 1).

-----Figure 1-----

## **Methodology**

### *Study context*

The context of this study was social media platforms in the hotel industry. Hotels provide services with high experience and credence characteristics; thus, customers tended to rely on word-of-mouth rather than advertising when they made purchase decisions (Kinard and Capella, 2006). Bowen (1990) classified services into three groups—high contact customized, moderate contact non-personal, and moderate contact standardized service providers. Customers found it difficult to differentiate service offerings among moderate contact standardized service providers, such as fast food restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters (Kinard and Capella, 2006). Therefore, service providers in this moderate contact standardized category needed to establish and nurture relationships with customers to gain a competitive advantage, different from competitors.

#### *Data collection*

A pilot study was performed with undergraduate students enrolled in a Midwestern university. Results from this pilot test were utilized to check the internal validity and to enhance the clarity of the measurement items, modifying the wording of measurement items. Two experienced researchers further reviewed and revised the survey to enhance the clarity of the survey questions.

Then, a cross-sectional, online, self-administered survey was used for data collection. A professional marketing research company, Qualtrics, was hired to collect the data. From its consumer panel, this marketing research company asked for participation in this study. Based on the convenience sampling method, a total of 321 responses were collected, but 7 responses were excluded from the analysis, due to incomplete responses. Therefore, a total of 314 responses were used for data analysis.

#### *Survey development*

The survey consisted of five sections: (1) screening questions, (2) previous social media experience, (3) different types of customers' relationships, (4) PSI, self-brand connection, and brand usage intention, and (5) participants' background information. Two screening questions were asked in the beginning of the survey to determine whether participants met the criteria for completing the survey—(1) have stayed at a hotel and (2) read a message on social media for hotel information during the past 12 months. If participants did not meet these two screening questions, they were directed to the end of the survey. Throughout the survey, seven validation questions, such as “Please click agree for your answer,” were included to ensure respondents read the survey question before they answered the question.

All measurement items were adopted from previous studies to ensure validity and reliability of measurement items. A seven-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) was utilized to assess each measurement item. Measurement items of different types of relationships were adopted from Habibi *et al.*'s (2014) study, investigating the relationships between the customer and the service/the hotel brand/other customers. Items of PSI were adopted from Labrecque's (2014) study. Both self-brand connection and brand usage intention items were from Hollebeek *et al.*'s (2014) study.

#### *Data analysis*

This study aimed to understand the relationships among customers' relationship types, their PSI, self-brand connections, and their brand usage intention in the hotel social media context.

Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach—confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM)—was utilized, employing the LISREL 8.80 structural equation analysis package (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1989) to test the proposed conceptual framework and to examine the proposed hypotheses. In addition, a bootstrapping estimation as

robustness analysis (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) was performed to test the mediating role of PSI.

Since this study was conducted with an online, self-administered survey, a CFA of all items loading on a single latent factor was performed to rule out common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Results of CFA with a single factor indicated a poor fit compared with the multi-factor models; thus, it was concluded common method bias was not an issue in this study.

## **Results**

### *Respondents' profile*

Almost 64% of the respondents were female and almost 35% of the respondents were between 25 and 34 years of age. In addition, almost 32% of the respondents had a Bachelor's degree for their education. Moreover, almost 43% of the respondents stayed at a hotel once a year, followed by every 6 months (30.8%). Furthermore, almost 39% of the respondents visited the hotel 's social media once a month, followed by once a week (28.3 %). Detailed information on respondents' backgrounds is described in Table I.

-----Table I-----

### *Results of CFA and SEM*

According to the results from the CFA, the goodness of fit indices were:  $\chi^2 (120) = 237.50, p = 0.00$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.97$ ; NFI = 0.99; NNFI= 0.99; IFI= 0.99; CFI = 0.99; GFI=0.92; SRMR= 0.027; and RMSEA = 0.056, indicating an acceptable value for each model fit index and an acceptable model fit as suggested in Bagozzi and Yi's (1988) recommendation (see Table II).

-----Table II-----

Results for the measurement model were used to evaluate construct reliability and validity. Table II explains factor loadings for the measurement items, average variance extracted

(AVE), Cronbach's alpha, and composite reliability (CR) in this study. Convergent validity was investigated through factor loadings, AVE, reliability, including inter-item reliability, and CR. Meeting the acceptable cut-off values, values for AVE were greater than 0.5 and reliability values were higher than 0.7 (Hair et al., 1998). Moreover, discriminant validity was investigated by comparing the squared correlations between constructs and variance extracted from a construct (Hair et al., 1998). All AVE estimates were larger than the corresponding squared inter-construct correlation estimates, supporting a theoretically meaningful, statistically acceptable model for this study (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Results for SEM confirmed an acceptable value for each model fit index. The goodness-of-fit statistics for the structural model were  $\chi^2(126) = 293.29, p = 0.00; \chi^2/df = 2.32; NFI = 0.98; NNFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; CFI = 0.99; GFI = 0.91; \text{ and } RMSEA = 0.065$ . The variance explained for PSI was 77%, 44% for self-brand connections, and 57% for behavioral intentions. In addition, nested models were compared with one another in addition to evaluating the overall model fit and parameter estimates (Kline, 2010). The proposed conceptual model was compared to the models that included additional paths accounting for the variance explained by the general domain of the item (Kline, 2010). Next, the differences in the  $\chi^2$  to degree of freedom ratio were compared (Kline, 2010). Additional direct paths were also included in the proposed model to test the differences. Results for the  $\chi^2$  difference tests did not show any significant differences between the proposed model and competing models; thus, the proposed model was accepted due to its parsimonious results, and empirical and theoretical support.

#### *Results of hypothesis testing*

Different relationship types influenced customers' PSI when they used the hotel social media (see Table III). Customers' relationships with the service (H1) ( $\beta = .44, p < 0.00$ ), their

relationship with the hotel brand (H2) ( $\beta = .13, p < 0.10$ ), and their relationship with other customers (H3) ( $\beta = .27, p < 0.00$ ) positively influenced customers' PSI, supporting Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. These hypotheses confirmed the importance of relationship marketing in social media platforms. Customers' relationships with the service, with the hotel brand, and with other customers all had positive effects on developing their PSI.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 proposed outcomes for customers' PSI. Results revealed positive customers' responses from their PSI, confirming the positive relationship between PSI and customers' self-brand connection (Hypothesis 4:  $\beta = 1.17, p < 0.00$ ) and the positive relationship between PSI and customers' brand usage intention (Hypothesis 5:  $\beta = .84, p < 0.00$ ). Advocated in the PSI theory, the relationships between PSI and customers' brand-related responses were supported in this study. Hypothesis 6 ( $\beta = .18, p < 0.00$ ) proposed the positive influence of self-brand connection on customers' hotel brand usage intention. Consistent with previous studies (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), this study confirmed positive relationships between self-brand connection and brand usage intention.

-----Table III -----

### *Mediation analysis*

The mediator role of PSI was examined by performing bootstrapping estimation as the robustness analysis (Preacher and Hayes, 2008), based on the Mplus7.0. Mplus directly provided total indirect, specific indirect, and total effects in the output file (Muthén and Muthén, 2010), enabling researchers to calculate confidence intervals (CIs). For indirect effects, 95% bootstrap CIs were used by applying 1,000 bootstrap samples as recommended for testing the mediation effect (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Bootstrapped estimates suggested relationships with the service ( $\beta = 0.250, se = 0.045, t = 5.639, p < 0.001, CI [0.168, 0.337]$ ), relationships with

the hotel brand ( $\beta = 0.137$ ,  $se = 0.038$ ,  $t = 3.564$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CI [0.057, 0.208]) and relationships with other customers ( $\beta = 0.228$ ,  $se = 0.044$ ,  $t = 5.191$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CI [0.135, 0.310]) had significant indirect effects on self-brand connections through customers' perceived PSI. In addition, relationships with the service ( $\beta = 0.283$ ,  $se = 0.048$ ,  $t = 5.882$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CI [0.193, 0.378]), relationships with the hotel brand ( $\beta = 0.155$ ,  $se = 0.044$ ,  $t = 3.458$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CI [0.063, 0.240]) and relationships with other customers ( $\beta = 0.258$ ,  $se = 0.048$ ,  $t = 5.330$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CI [0.151, 0.349]) had significant indirect effects on brand usage intentions through customers' perceived PSI. Moreover, self-brand connections played a partial mediation role between customers' perceived PSI and brand usage intentions ( $\beta = 0.220$ ,  $se = 0.047$ ,  $t = 4.695$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CI [0.131, 0.317]).

This mediation analysis showed partial mediation between customers' relationships with different parties and brand-related responses, supporting Hypotheses 7 and 8. Results provided evidence that the positive effect of brand-related responses can be explained by feelings of PSI.

## Discussion

This study provided insights into the role of relationship marketing in social media platforms by investigating how different types of relationships influenced customers' PSI and how their PSI influenced their brand-related responses. Different relationships could create a sense of PSI in the social media that signal the importance of customers' relationships with the service, the hotel brand, and other customers. Customers' PSI, a sense of feeling connected with the brand, further led to increased feelings of self-brand connection and enhanced customers' brand usage intentions.

With the plethora of social media platforms, gaining customers' interactions with the brand became important due to increased brand competition (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2013;



Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). This study focused on the role of relationship building that enabled customers to become connected with the hotel in the social media context. Results from this study provided insights on how different types of relationships influenced customers' PSI and how customers' PSI resulted in their self-brand connection and their brand usage intentions. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Habibi *et al.*, 2014), three different types of relationships (the relationship between customer and service (H1), between customer and the hotel brand (H2), and between customer and other customers (H3)) positively influenced customers' PSI when customers used social media. Results empirically supported why relationship marketing was important in the hotel social media context. Making strong relationships with the hotel brand, with the hotel service, and with other customers might be one reason how customers became interactive with the brand.

In addition, these different types of relationships further influenced customers' PSI that enhanced their brand-related responses. Consistent with findings from previous studies (e.g., Labrecque, 2014) that identified the positive influence of PSI on customer behavior, customers' PSI positively influenced their self-brand connection (H4) and their brand usage intention (H5). Customers' self-brand connection also had a positive effect on their brand usage intention (H6). Moreover, this study offered insights into the mediating role of PSI that played in the relationships between customers' relationships building with different parties and the brand-related customer responses (H7 and H8). Relationships with different parties that enhanced the relationship with service, the hotel brand, and other customers promoted favorable brand evaluations through PSI. The feeling of PSI moved beyond the interaction itself, since it led to favorable evaluation toward the brand. Results identified partial mediation effects between relationship building with different parties and customers' brand-related responses through PSI.

All in all, social media could be utilized as a marketing strategy where hotels develop a strong, positive relationship with customers. Social media platforms could be ideal environments that enable customers to connect with the brand, develop a strong self-brand connection, and enhance their brand usage intention in the hotel industry.

## **Conclusions**

Despite the popularity of social media as essential marketing platforms, few academic studies have been conducted to understand the role of relationship marketing on social media. Focusing on relationship marketing on hotel's social media platforms, results from this study provided theoretical contributions and industry implications. Building on prior social media and relationship marketing literature (e.g., Habibi *et al.*, 2014; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006), this study provided a better understanding of relationship marketing in the hotel social media platforms. Customers using social media platforms had opportunities to build relationships not only with the hotel brand and service, but also with other customers. This study extended the role of relationship marketing to the social media context. Promoting different aspects of customers' relationships provided a competitive advantage to hotels through their interactions and engagement in the social media context. When customers developed positive relationships with the service, the hotel brand, and other customers, they tended to favorably interact with the hotel brand, which further influenced customers' brand-related responses.

In addition, this study added to the current literature on how customers' relationship types could be connected to their PSI, derived from PSI theory. Derived from previous research on relationship marketing and PSI theory, this study examined antecedents and outcomes of customers' PSI in the social media context, and three different types of relationships that

influenced customers' PSI. Even though current social media research focused on utilizing social media to create a positive word-of-mouth and customers' active participation, the role of relationship marketing on customers' PSI has been underexplored. This research established different types of relationships as antecedents of PSI and brand-related variables as outcomes of PSI. Moreover, this study identified a partial mediation role of PSI. Mediation analysis revealed the positive effects created by different types of relationships can be partially explained by PSI. Since an effect of relationship building extended to customers' brand-relevant responses, it was worthwhile to explore effects of different types of relationships on customers' brand-related responses through PSI.

Beyond theoretical contributions, this study provided suggestions for hotel managers. Results provided useful guidelines on how to develop customers' PSI by utilizing different types of relationship building. Hotel managers are faced with challenges of maintaining customers with their brand to develop distinctive brand identity. Since there was more than one way of developing relationships on social media, a thorough understanding on the effects of the different types of relationships is critical for hotels' marketing strategies to survive this severe competition.

Hotels can provide an ideal social media platform that helps customers develop favorable relationships with different parties to promote the PSI. Corporate pages in social media can assist hotels by encouraging social interactions between their customers, facilitating customers' engagement in the hotel brand activities, and providing service information. Different technologies in the social media help marketers manage customer-brand interactions, such as expert chats, discussion boards, comments, and bulletin boards can promote customers' positive evaluations toward brand via PSI. For instance, this can be achieved by carefully designing

message content related to service information, by creating a sense of open communications between the hotel brand and customers, and by providing solutions for interactions among customers can positively influence the development of PSI.

Hotels can no longer act as observers, since they need to interact with customers on social media platforms. By establishing PSI with customers, hotels strengthen their relationships with customers by enhancing self-brand connections and increasing brand usage intentions. Thus, managers need to find ways to create a favorable relationship that promotes customers' positive brand outcomes through PSI. These well-developed relationships will influence a hotel's performance, since these different relationships influence customers' brand-related responses, such as brand usage intention.

#### *Limitations of this study and suggestions for future research*

While this study filled the current literature gap and provided suggestions to hotel marketers, it had limitations, suggesting future research. This study used a heterogeneous sample of hotel social media users, focusing on the hotel industry. Therefore, results from this study cannot be generalizable to other service contexts. Customers might prefer to develop different types of relationships in other service contexts. Future research suggests investigation of different types of relationships to better understand the underlying mechanisms of customers' PSI.

In addition, this study did not investigate situational and personal variables that influence customers' PSI. Customers might develop relationships differently, depending on previous relationships with the hotel, such as first time visitors vs. frequent visitors. Customers might also develop relationships differently, depending on how they view the hotel brand, whether they consider the hotel as their business partner vs. whether they consider the hotel as a close friend. Future studies need to include these possible situational and personal variables that influence

relationships between relationship types and customers' responses. In summary, even though further fruitful areas of research must be addressed on promoting PSI, this study attempted to explore an important, yet under-investigated area—the relationship between relationship marketing and PSI in the context of hotels' social media platforms.

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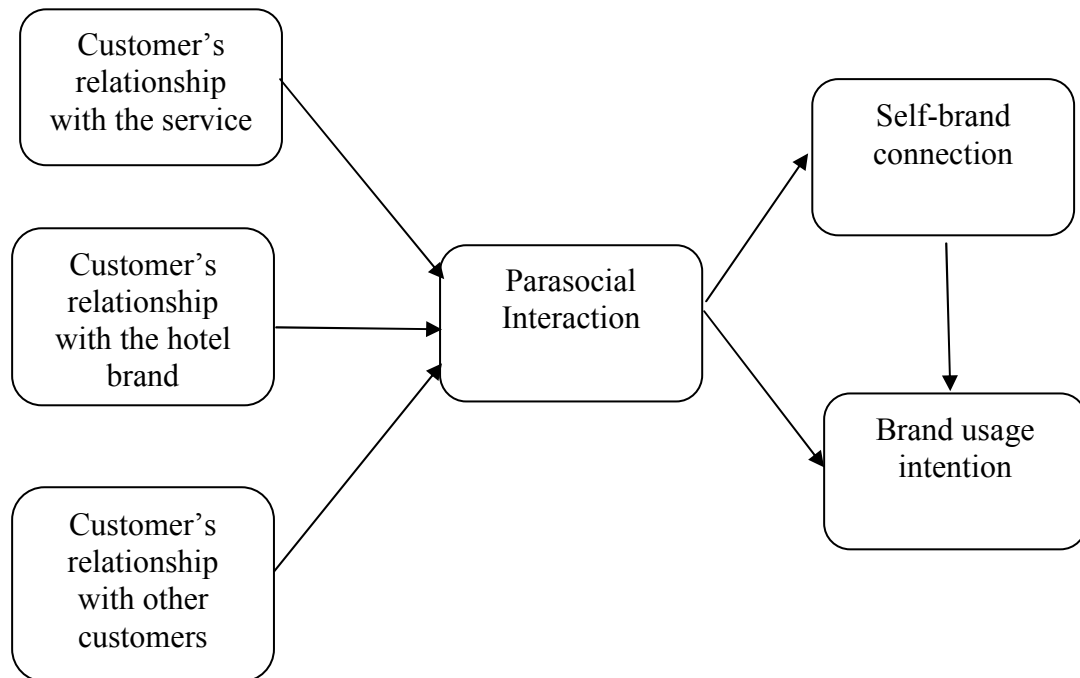


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**Figure 1.**  
Antecedents and outcomes of customers' PSI



**Table I.**  
Respondents' background (n= 314)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	114	36.3
Male	200	63.7
<b>Age</b>		
19-24 years old	51	16.2
25-34 years old	108	34.4
35-44 years old	50	15.9
45-54 years old	48	15.3
55-64 years old	40	12.7
65 years and older	17	5.4
<b>Education</b>		
High school	82	26.1
Associate degree	89	28.3
Bachelor degree	101	32.2
Master's degree	33	10.5
Doctoral degree	9	2.9
<b>Frequency of staying at a hotel</b>		
Once a week	5	1.5
Once a month	10	3.1
Once every three months	67	21.3
Once every six months	97	30.8
Once a year	135	43.3
<b>Travel purpose</b>		
Pleasure	158	50.3
Business	37	11.9
Both pleasure and business	119	37.8
<b>Frequency of visiting the hotel's social media</b>		
Once a week	89	28.3
Between 1 and 2 weeks	42	13.4
Between 2 and 3 weeks	34	10.8
Between 3 and 4 weeks	28	8.9
Once a month	121	38.5

**Table II.**

Summary of measurement items (n= 314)

Construct and measurement items	Mean	S.D.	Factor loading	Error
<b>Customer-service relationship (composite reliability=. 896; AVE= 78.64%; <math>\alpha</math> =. 915)</b>				
I love the service from this hotel.	5.58	1.25	0.91	0.17
I am proud of receiving service from this hotel.	5.37	1.30	0.87	0.24
I love to receive service from this hotel.	5.51	1.33	0.88	0.23
<b>Customer-hotel brand relationship (composite reliability=. 859; AVE= 79.22%; <math>\alpha</math> =. 888)</b>				
This hotel brand cares about my opinions.	5.49	1.14	0.88	0.22
I feel this hotel brand cares a lot about its customers.	5.60	1.13	0.90	0.19
<b>Customer-other customers relationship (composite reliability=. 892; AVE= 78.14%; <math>\alpha</math> =. 914)</b>				
I have met wonderful people because of this hotel's SNS.	5.04	1.59	0.87	0.24
I have a feeling of kinship with other customers in this Hotel's SNS.	4.88	1.64	0.93	0.14
I have an interest in this hotel's SNS because of other customers of this brand.	4.95	1.58	0.85	0.28
<b>PSI (composite reliability=. 884; AVE= 72.68%; <math>\alpha</math> =. 913)</b>				
This brand makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.	5.40	1.27	0.84	0.30
I can relate to this brand.	5.38	1.29	0.86	0.26
I care about what happens to this brand.	5.23	1.32	0.86	0.27
I hope this brand can achieve its goals.	5.48	1.26	0.85	0.27
<b>Self-brand connection (composite reliability=. 932; AVE= 84.04%; <math>\alpha</math> =. 942)</b>				
This brand reflects who I am.	4.49	1.26	0.90	0.18
I feel a personal connection to this brand.	4.38	1.81	0.93	0.13
I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be.	4.44	1.84	0.92	0.15
<b>Brand usage intention (composite reliability=. 896; AVE= 78.62%; <math>\alpha</math> =. 916)</b>				
It makes sense to use this brand instead of any other brand, even if they are the same.	4.95	1.50	0.89	0.21
If there is another brand as good as this brand, I still prefer to use this brand.	5.07	1.43	0.89	0.21
If another brand is not different from this brand in any way, it seems smarter to use this brand.	5.00	1.50	0.88	0.22
'1' being 'strongly disagree' and '7' being 'strong agree.'				
NFI = 0.99; NNFI= 0.99; IFI= 0.99; CFI = 0.99; GFI=0.92; SRMR= 0.027; RMSEA = 0.056.				

**Table III.**

Results of structural model (n= 314)

Structural path	Standardized estimate	<i>t</i> -Statistic	Results of hypotheses testing
Relationship with the service → PSI (H1)	0.44**	5.48	Supported
Relationship with the hotel brand → PSI (H2)	0.13*	1.61	Supported
Relationship with other customers → PSI (H3)	0.27***	5.95	Supported
PSI → Self-brand connection (H4)	1.17***	14.76	Supported
PSI → Brand usage intention (H5)	0.84***	10.62	Supported
Self-brand connection → Brand usage intention (H6)	0.18***	3.89	Supported

\*\*\* $p < 0.000$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ ; NFI = 0.98; NNFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; CFI = 0.99; GFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.065.