



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bridging the Digital Divide: The Role of Social Media and Influencers in Senior Tourists’ Brand Loyalty

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords</p> <p>Social media use, Brand experience, Brand loyalty, Social media influencer, Senior Tourism</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: J601568193@outlook.com</p>	<p>This study explores the relationship between brand experience, social media use, social media influencers, and brand loyalty among senior travellers. As the global population ages, senior travellers are emerging as a significant and expanding market segment within the tourism industry. This demographic shift necessitates greater attention from the tourism sector. Using a quantitative approach, this research employs a structured questionnaire to collect data from senior travellers. The findings indicate that brand experience, social media use, and social media influencers significantly impact brand loyalty in senior tourism. Furthermore, the study offers strategic insights for brand managers targeting senior travellers. To enhance market competitiveness and foster brand loyalty, companies should prioritise delivering high-quality brand experiences and leveraging social media platforms and influencer marketing strategies. Finally, the study identifies areas for future research on brand loyalty among senior travellers.</p>

1. Introduction First-level Heading

The widespread adoption of social media for communication has transformed how businesses traditionally advertise their goods and services to customers, and the tourism industry is no exception to this trend (Appel, Grewal, Hadi, & Stephen, 2019). Social media platforms have provided an effective means of destination branding for tour service operators, where they promote their services through influencer marketing, live streaming, destination branding, and content marketing (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). According to Yang, Isa, Ramayah, Blanes, & Kiumarsi (2020), the term destination branding refers to the development of a unique brand experience that tourists earn while visiting a particular destination. The authors also contended that destination branding is a marketing phenomenon or strategy used by tour service operators to attract more tourists to a particular destination.

China is experiencing a significant shift towards an ageing population. At the end of 2022, the nation's population included 280 million individuals who were 60 years old or older. The current retirement age is determined based on gender and occupation. Men retire at 60, female cadres at 55, and female workers at 50 (Zhang, Strauss, Hu, Zhao & Crimmins, 2022). This retiree population has witnessed a significant increase in their social activities and life experiences. Many retirees are now embracing a more social and adventurous lifestyle, seeking out opportunities to connect with friends, participate in events, and embark on exciting travel adventures. According to the World Health Organisation, China is projected to have one of the highest proportions of elderly citizens in the world by 2050, with those over 60 making up 35% of the population. Thus, China's transition into an ageing society is inevitable.

This important section of the population is a specific market segment for the tourism industry. Nevertheless, elderly tourists face a lot of challenges that restrict their participation in tourism. The barriers to elderly people are the absence of appropriate information for them, trouble in choosing proper tourist locations with guides, and inappropriate tourist groups (Cheng et al., 2020). The current information dissemination mechanisms such as social media platforms are not being used to address these challenges thus causing a big gap in service provision. Another problem is that despite a phenomenal increase in the penetration rate of the internet and usage of social media among the elderly Chinese, the elderly tourism experience potential of social media remains largely unknown since more than 50% of the elderly Chinese are now using social media platforms (Wen et al., 2020).

Moreover, the needs and desires of elderly tourists are very important for creating travel experiences, which are not only pleasurable but also safe and convenient. According to Tomazos, (2022), with the increase in this demographic in the travel market, their specific needs especially in accessibilities and health and safety are becoming more dominant in influencing the offerings of destinations and service providers. Comfort and safety that is associated with the ease of visiting tourism sites for the elderly is a critical

determinant of travel (Liew, Hussin & Abdullah, 2021). This involves the provision of barrier-free access paths, ramps in place of stairs, good signage, and provision of sitting places where they can sit and rest whenever necessary. Some of the adaptations are pathways friendly to wheelchairs, longer walkway handrails, and public transport priority seating. Hotels and resorts have done the same, with many of these facilities modifying rooms to suit the elderly, including such features as non-slip tiles and emergency call buttons (Dirgiatmo et al., 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.2 Brand loyalty

According to Cao et al., (2022), many options in the tourism industry make it difficult for the market to retain their customers, who have become part of their brand. Knowledge of the theories and models that explain brand loyalty and its determinants can be extremely helpful for the tourism industry in order to build long-term relationships with customers. According to Van and Hieu, (2020), theories of brand loyalty are usually concerned with the psychological and behavioural inclinations of consumers to favour a particular brand over other alternatives, based on many positive experiences or perceptions. One foundational theory is the Cognitive-Affective-Conative (CAC) Model, which suggests that brand loyalty progresses in stages: cognitive (a perception of the brand), affective (affective allegiance), and conative (future purchase intention) (Rahman, 2016). In one case, a tourist can select a hotel for the first time based on its good reviews (cognitive), get attached to its services or location (affective), and choose the hotel again for the next visit (conative). One of the essential models is Oliver's Four-Stage Loyalty Model, based on the CAC model that includes the fourth stage, action loyalty, when the loyal activity is strengthened and becomes embedded in the consumer's intent to purchase and advocacy activities (Tien et al., 2019). A case in point is the visitor to a theme park who has consistently delightful visits- he/she would return and also recommend the park to others thus showing action loyalty. Styvén et al., (2022), state that about 70% of the customers who have high emotional engagement with a brand will be loyal for life. Besides, the brand with a high level of customer loyalty may gain annual revenue that is 23% higher than that of its competitors.

Several factors have a considerable effect on brand loyalty in tourism, including customer satisfaction and perceived value, brand personality and customer service. According to Parlov et al., (2016), loyalty begins with customer satisfaction. A positive experience among tourists increases the possibility of return. Research also finds that satisfied customers are two to five times more likely to repurchase the same brand. Regarding tourism, satisfaction may be divided on the factors, for example, the type of accommodation, the staff, and the whole journey (Tovmasyan, 2020). A brand tends to gain the loyalty of tourists when they perceive that they are getting good value for their money. This view is not merely about low prices, but the quality of the services is offered in comparison with the cost. Brands that provide unique offers, loyalty benefits, and outstanding experiences usually increase their value perception. According to Utama (2023), the hotels which provide complimentary upgrade or a special service to return guest can raise the perceived value that leads to coming back.

2.3 Brand experience

Brand experience involves the various sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses consumers have when interacting with a brand (Schmitt, 1999). Positive brand interactions not only foster customer loyalty but also boost their willingness to purchase by establishing an emotional connection (Khan & Fatma, 2017). Additionally, the advent of social media has intensified the immediacy and interactivity of brand engagements, thereby strengthening the emotional ties between brands and their customers (Zollo et al., 2020). The role of brand experience has become crucial in determining a company's success and is integral to effective brand management.

Brand experience plays a critical role in the tourism sector as it stimulates visitor satisfaction and loyalty producing memorable experiences that are deeply rooted in the tourists. According to Jojic, (2018), brand experience strategies in tourism that are successful, however, do not only focus on creating memorable experiences but also are directed at the smooth integration of services and products so that guests are guaranteed a complete and satisfying visitor journey. In tourism, the creation of memorable experiences requires that unique, participative, and emotionally touching interactions are designed to that visitors leave with lasting memories. According to Tsai and Wang, (2017), this procedure needs comprehensive comprehension of the needs of the tourists, which requires the capacity to create these experiences at every touchpoint of their journey.

2.4 Social media use

According to Dolan et al., (2019), social media use has become an integral part of daily life for many demographics, including senior tourists. Despite the notion that social media is more commonly used by the younger population, elderly travellers are also using these platforms. This engagement not only affects their travel choices but also defines their interactions with the brands and their travel experiences. According to the research done by Giglio et al., (2019), the interaction of senior tourists using social media applications is high and increasing. Currently, more seniors are hooked to social media for various activities, for instance, interpersonal communication, traveling, and sharing experiences.

As highlighted by Tan et al., (2018), elders engage in the passive use of social media, a scenario that implies that they read content as opposed to creating it. Feedback, suggestions as well as experiences shared by other travellers are usually considered guides on their travels. They yearn for this and tend to identify with and trust the content posted by fellow travellers more than the sponsored content. For instance, the percentage of these senior tourists who use social media to research, deliberate, and post updates and feedback on their trips, itineraries, and travel products is increasing (Harrigan et al., 2017).

2.5 Social media influencer

Influencer marketing has changed how brands reach consumers of various demographics including the older segment. According to Cifci, (2022), the utilization of influencers in senior tourism poses specific challenges in the aspect of credibility, authenticity, and alignment of the influencer with the brand values. These challenges are vital for developing trust and making successful marketing campaigns work for the older

people. The cornerstones of successful influencer marketing, primarily when targeting senior tourists, are authenticity and credibility (Al-Abbadi et al., 2022). The older people usually question the credibility of the material available on the web and, therefore, are choosy in what they consume. Shen et al., (2022), show that seniors trust more the content, which consists of personal stories and testimonials rather than polished and highly edited presentations.

In addition, ethical values and social responsibility alignment is also critical to the senior consumers. Many senior citizens have strong beliefs, for instance, in relation to sustainability, community involvement, and ethical business practices and they expect brands they associate with to adhere to these beliefs (Vigolo, 2017). When an influencer's actions or previously endorsed products are against these values, the brand's reputation among senior audiences is negatively affected. Brands should do deep background checks and continuous monitoring. According to Wilson et al., (2016), tactics to counter these problems are, however, carrying out extensive audience and influencer research to determine what influences the preferences and values of both the target senior audience and the influencers.

3. Hypothesis Development

Brand loyalty and brand experience are particularly important in the tourism industry, in which a superior and enjoyable experience often results in high levels of customer loyalty and repeat patronage. According to Gumparthi and Patra, (2020), this relationship is even more important for senior tourists as their expectations and satisfaction are related to the loyalty they have for a brand. The processes of how a positive brand experience is turned into brand loyalty in senior tourists can only be achieved through analyzing such a great number of factors inherent in the brand experience. As per the viewpoint of Yasin and Shamim, (2013), brand experience involves all the contact points of a guest with the brand starting from initiating the booking process to the end of their journey.

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between Brand experience and Brand loyalty.

In the view of Giovanis & Athanasopoulou (2018), social media has altered consumer-brand relationships and altered brand image, loyalty, and affection which can be described as brand loyalty. The connection between social media and brand love is not straightforward and is a function of a number of factors such as the type of content being posted, the level of interaction, and the level of authenticity. This is especially the case for the senior tourist market, who are likely to engage with social media platforms in the research, sharing, and identification with brands; Song and Kim, (2022) established that social media positively impacts brand loyalty through the creation of brand associations and the enhancement of the overall consumer experience. The analysis showed that 72% of consumers who interact with a brand on social media will display emotions of brand love than consumers who do not interact.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between Social media use and Brand loyalty.

Social media influencers having a large follower base and credibility can greatly influence the perception of a tourism brand. Aw and Chuah (2021) point out that the influencers, by spreading their experiences, good or bad, help to magnify the effect of the brands' actions. An influencer can be an example, that is, a positive review or shared video by an influencer about a particularly enjoyed tour can improve perceived value of offerings of the brand and localizing the existing customers (Omeish et al., 2024). The trust that the influencers create with their audiences is the main factor of enhancing the perceived authenticity and attractiveness of the brand experience they endorse as per Erdiyana et al., (2022). The positive perception often leads to greater brand loyalty, as consumers develop a deeper emotional bond with the brand through the influencer's promote (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between Social media influencer and Brand loyalty.

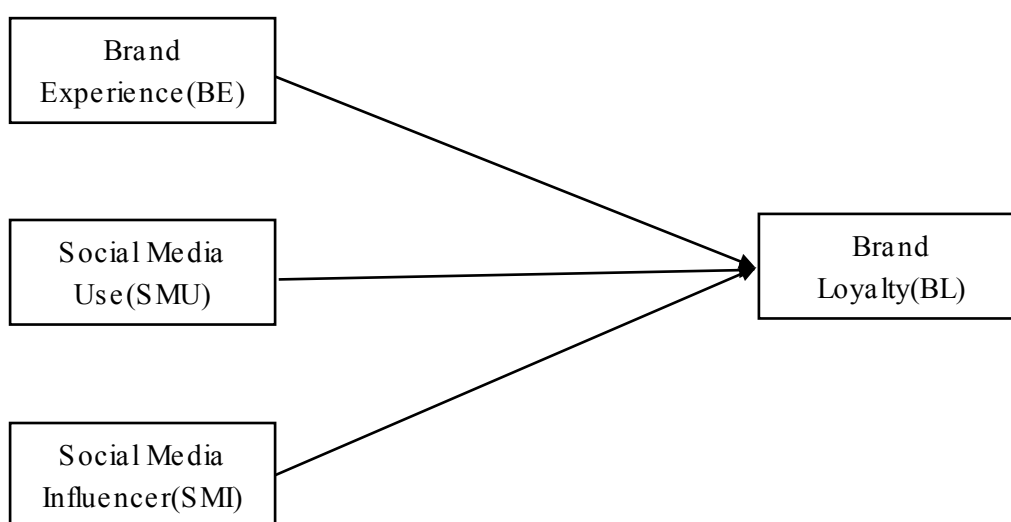


Figure 1 : Conceptual framework

4. Methodology

The philosophy used in this research is positivism, using a questionnaire to collect the primary data to identify the associations between research phenomena and to test the hypotheses proposed in this paper. The experiment analyzed the collected data by quantitative research method. The empirical analysis can be used to directly contact the research object and obtain primary data. In this way, the direct and specific analysis of primary data can increase the credibility of the research. In this study, data were obtained utilizing a questionnaire, which could be transmitted online to increase the range of samples. This questionnaire is divided into two parts: One part is the basic information of the respondents, and the other part is the Experience and outcomes of the senior travelers.

5. Results

5.1 Demographic Analysis(n=200)

Table 1 : Demographic Analysis

Name	Option	Frequency	Percentage%
Age	45-50	132	66
	50-55	41	20.5
	55-60	12	6
	> 60	15	7.5
	summary	200	100
Gender	male	91	45.5
	female	109	54.5
	summary	200	100

Source: Spss frequency statistics result

Frequency analysis is used to study the distribution of categorical data and to select the frequency and percentage respectively. As can be seen from the table above: the result of frequency analysis by Age shows: 45-50 frequency is 132, the percentage is 66% ; 50-55 frequency is 41 , the percentage is 20.5% ; 55-60 frequency is 12 , the percentage is 6% ; > 60 frequency is 15 , the percentage is 7.5% . Where 45-50(66%) is the highest and 55-60(6%) is the lowest. The result of frequency analysis by Gender shows: male frequency is 91 , the percentage is 45.5% ; female frequency is 109 , the percentage is 54.5% . Where female(54.5%) is the highest and male(45.5%) is the lowest.

5.2 Reliability and Validity Statistics

Table 2 : Reliability statistics

Variables	Cronbach's α	N	CR	AVE
BE	0.933	8	0.631	0.932
SMU	0.915	7	0.605	0.915
SMI	0.86	4	0.627	0.870
BL	0.871	4	0.651	0.882

Source: SPSS reliability statistics result

Based on the reliability coefficient, the standardized reliability coefficient is over 0.7, indicating the overall reliability of the questionnaire excellent. All the AVE values of the

constructs are greater than 0.5, indicating good convergent validity. All the CR values of the constructs are greater than 0.7, suggesting good composite reliability and strong internal consistency of the measurement indicators.

Table 3 : Validity analysis

KMO Sampling suitability quantity		0.917
Approximately chi-squared		2869.667
Bartlit, sphericity test		
freedom		253
p value		0

Source: SPSS Validity analysis result

Validity was verified using the KMO and Bartlett tests, which yielded a coefficient of 0.917 and a chi-square value of 2869.667(SIG. = 0.000(0.01) for the Bartlett test, describing the overall validity of the questionnaire excellent.

5.3 Correlation analysis

Table 4 : Correlation analysis:

	mean	std	BE	SMU	SMI	BL
BE	3.313	0.985	Pearson correlation	1	-	-
			SIG.(two-tailed)	-	-	-
SMU	3.287	0.935	Pearson correlation	0.408***	1	-
			SIG.(two-tailed)	0.000	-	-
SMI	3.459	0.955	Pearson correlation	0.390***	0.406***	1
			SIG.(two-tailed)	0.000	0.000	-
BL	3.335	0.989	Pearson correlation	0.344***	0.394***	0.393**
			SIG.(two-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000

Source: Spss correlation analysis result

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the significance and direction of linear correlation between two variables, when using Pearson correlation analysis, we generally use the correlation coefficient R to describe the degree of linear correlation between variables, and if the correlation coefficient $R < 0$, it indicates that the correlation between two variables is negative, if the correlation coefficient $R > 0$, the correlation between the two variables is positive, and if the correlation coefficient $R = 0$, the correlation between the two variables is not.

5.4 Regression analysis results

Table 5 : regression analysis							
	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	VIF	R^2	Adjust R^2
	B	Standard error	Beta				
Constant	1.153	0.285	0.157	4.042	0.000	1.293	F(3,200)= 20.525, p =0.000
BE vs BL	0.157	0.071	0.234	2.212	0.028	1.313	
SMU vs BL	0.247	0.076	0.237	3.272	0.001	1.291	
SMI vs BL	0.245	0.073	0.157	3.346	0.001	1.293	

Source: Spss regression analysis result

As you can see from the Regression analysis table, the regression coefficient of Brand experience is 0.157 ($t = 2.212$, $P = 0.028 < 0.05$), which means that Brand experience has a significant positive direction effect on Brand loyalty. The regression coefficient of Social media use is 0.247 ($t = 3.272$, $P = 0.001 < 0.01$), which means that Social media use has a significant positive direction effect on Brand loyalty. the regression coefficient of Social media influencer is 0.245 ($t = 3.346$, $P = 0.001 < 0.001$), which means that Social media influencer has a significant positive direction effect on Brand loyalty.

6. Conclusion

The significance of the proposed study lies in the fact that despite the extended usage of social media in China, especially among the senior citizens of the country, no research

has been conducted until now on evaluating the interplay between social media usage and brand loyalty among Chinese senior tourism (Hwang & Lee, 2018). In terms of worldwide ranking, China surpasses all the countries across the globe with 1.02 billion active social media users, which is expected to reach 1.21 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2022). Therefore, the findings of the study will help understand the tour operators in the Chinese tourism industry and the potential of social media usage for the promotion of elderly tourism among senior citizens. In addition to that, it also helps in exploring the how senior travellers' brand experience impact on their brand loyalty, which could help the tour operators to improve their capabilities to better meet the customers' demands. Furthermore, the study is also significant in terms of its theoretical implications because the topic under consideration has not yet been explored in the context of China; therefore, the findings of the proposed study will be used by future researchers and academia as a guiding document for conducting further research in the area.

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