



Enhancing consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages: Maximizing consumer benefits and increasing active participation



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ABSTRACT

Facebook has been widely recognized as a popular contemporary trend in marketing. Using a Facebook fan page can help a firm successfully establish and maintain positive consumer–brand relationships by offering special benefits to members who “like” the fan page on their Facebook accounts. The purpose of this study was to determine the correlation between four benefit components (functional benefits, social–psychological benefits, hedonic benefits, and monetary benefits) obtained by fan page members and members’ community participation, brand trust, and brand commitment. The results of data analysis revealed that fan page members are more likely to visit restaurant Facebook fan pages when they obtain social–psychological and hedonic benefits from their interactions on the pages. Because members can develop strong trust and commitment toward restaurant brands through active participation on Facebook fan pages, this study provides a practical foundation for future research investigating Facebook as a marketing tool and suggests brand management strategies for use in online communities.

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1. Introduction

Branding is considered a powerful means of establishing long-term relationships between a business and consumers (Carlson et al., 2008). Consumers that are committed to a brand are more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth, generate repeat purchases, and be willing to pay more for products and services from the preferred brand (Wood, 2000). Many businesses in the food service industry have realized the importance of managing consumer–brand relationships, particularly through the use of brand communication strategies (e.g., Bowden, 2009; Mattila, 2006). Wirtz and Mattila (2003) suggested that the brand information that consumers gain from diverse sources influences their consumption experiences.

Social networking sites (SNS) are defined as a second generation of web development and design features that facilitate communication, information sharing, and collaboration on the World Wide Web (Paris et al., 2010). The emergence of social networking sites (SNS) has provided a new medium for brand communications (Ahn et al., 2010). Many food service businesses begin to utilize these

sites to communicate with consumers who are willing to provide suggestions and criticisms about their performance (Lee et al., 2010). In addition, companies create unique social media pages for their brands (e.g., Facebook fan pages) where they connect with potential consumers, establish awareness, and build relationships with existing consumers (Facebook.com, 2011). Although these are generally perceived as benefits of using SNS, its effectiveness of building consumer–brand relationships has not been fully explained. In particular, the role of members’ active participation in building strong brand relationships is the focus of this study. Active members create highly interactive environment where they give more positive evaluations of service encounters and delivery procedures, which consequently lead to increased attitudinal commitment (Soderlund, 2002). This study aimed to develop a theoretical model to understand the foundation of consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages.

It is believed that, through active participation in online communities, consumers generate trust and commitment toward brands (Flavián and Guinalíu, 2006). A Facebook fan page is a mixed information warehouse co-created by both a business and its consumers (Hsu, 2012). The comprehensive information available on a fan page can assist members to make more objective judgments about the business and its products/services (Flavián and Guinalíu, 2006). When members continuously receive positive information and feedback from an online community, they are more likely to

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display confidence and trust in the brand (Deighton, 1992). Moreover, feelings of trust can further enhance members' psychological attachment to a brand (Mattila and Wirtz, 2002), and accordingly generate brand commitment (Ha and Perks, 2005). Therefore, the extent of member participation plays an important role in building consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages.

In order to build and manage an active online community, restaurant businesses need to understand members' motivations and the benefits that they pursue in return for their participation (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Businesses can attract new members, connect like-minded fans, and motivate repeat visits on their Facebook fan pages by understanding fans' motivations and satisfying their needs (Antikainen, 2007). Research has been conducted to gain insight into members' motivational factors in online travel communities (e.g., Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Hwang and Cho, 2005). For example, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004b) identified four benefit components in online travel communities, including functional, social, psychological, and hedonic benefits. Yoo and Gretzel (2008) identified three factors that motivate consumers to visit online travel communities: support a travel service provider, concerns for other consumers, and needs for enjoyment/positive self-enhancement.

From a thorough literature review, the authors of the present study had identified no previous studies focused on consumer benefits in online restaurant social media communities, such as Facebook fan pages. Because the types of products and services provided differ significantly between the tourism and the restaurant industry sectors, the benefits that consumers pursue on their respective Facebook fan pages may also differ. This study sought to bridge the existing research gap and investigate member benefits on restaurant Facebook pages. It is possible that different sets of benefits can be found as influential to encourage members' active participation. Aside from the functional benefits, social–psychological benefits, and hedonic benefits that have been previously investigated in online travel communities, the item “monetary benefits” was added to the theoretical model in the present study in light of the special offers typically provided by restaurant businesses (e.g., discounts, coupons, free meals offered). Despite the fact that monetary benefits have been widely used in industry practices, no studies have questioned their role in encouraging member participation. The addition of monetary benefit to the research model gives researchers an opportunity to see if the monetary value can be a reason for consumer participation on the Facebook page.

This study established and tested a theoretical model that represents the correlations between benefits, community participation, brand trust, and brand commitment on restaurant Facebook fan pages. It was anticipated that the model would offer actionable implications for the leverage of consumer–brand bonds on restaurant Facebook fan pages, in addition to stimulating updated agendas in social media marketing research. The specific objectives of this research were to: (1) distinguish what benefits restaurant customers seek for by examining the effects of four benefit components (functional benefits, social–psychological benefits, hedonic benefits, and monetary benefits) on community participation; (2) assess the consequences of community participation on brand trust and brand commitment; and (3) assess the mediating role of brand trust between community participation and brand commitment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Facebook fan pages as online brand communities

A brand community refers to “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations

among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). As Internet brand communities become increasingly popular, marketers now frequently use the term “community” as a new marketing buzz-word in place of the traditional term “relationship” (McWilliam, 2000). Businesses establish their online brand communities with the purpose of fostering communication with consumers and offering a gathering place for like-minded people (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Facebook is the dominant social medium used in the food service industry (McCarthy et al., 2010); restaurant brands set up fan pages in order to offer online brand communities where people can communicate with the brands. Through this medium, hospitality consumers have changed the way they obtain information, share experiences, and make purchasing decisions (Lee et al., 2010). The justification for offering Facebook fan pages is consistent with the definition of so-called “brand communities” which provide communication media for hundreds of thousands of consumers who share common interests about brands (McWilliam, 2000). The social nature is the major reason that companies choose SNS as an effective platform to implement their marketing strategies (Lee et al., 2010).

Facebook is currently the world's most successful site, with more than 800 million users (Facebook.com, 2011), a greater number than even Google users (McCarthy et al., 2010). Due to the vast number of members on Facebook, many foodservice businesses utilize it as a platform for connecting a large pool of existing and potential consumers and as a significant tool for brand management (Hsu, 2012). As of 2011, more than 600 restaurant brands hosted online communities through social networking sites (Quinn, 2011). As of May 2012, McDonald's had 19.5 million “likes” on its Facebook page, followed by Chick-fil-A (5 million), Wendy's (2.3 million), and Outback Steakhouse (2 million). With this large number of consumers on their page, these restaurants seem to be successful at a glance; however, people may be reluctant to join a fan page if they do not perceive dynamic communications in the online community (Preece et al., 2004). Many scholars have agreed that active member participation is the precondition for the success of an online community (e.g., Preece et al., 2004; McCarthy et al., 2010). In the following section, we elaborate the importance of active participation.

2.2. Active participation

Previous marketing studies have differentiated the levels of member participation in online communities via diverse approaches (e.g., Äkkinen and Tuunainen, 2005; Kozinets, 1999; Ridings et al., 2006). Burnett (2000) and Preece et al. (2004) characterized community participations as passive or active. Passive members browse an online community and take advantage of the benefits offered, but do not contribute to community activities. Such members have been referred to as “lurkers or free riders” (Preece et al., 2004). An online community may be deemed popular if it has a large number of lurkers because they generate website traffic and increase “hits”. However, lurkers do not necessarily contribute to the success of an online community (Ridings et al., 2006). In contrast to passive members, active members are highly motivated to participate in an online community by engaging in activities, such as creating messages, disseminating information, and providing emotional support to others (Casaló et al., 2007). Active participation can enhance members' brand knowledge (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and thus enables them to help other members to solve problems with product usage and to make informed purchasing decisions (Flavián and Guinalíu, 2006). Therefore, converting lurkers to active participants is a critical goal in creating vital online communities (Kozinets, 1999).

Based on the above discussion, active participation is indispensable condition for successful online community (Koh and Kim, 2004). Okleshen and Grossbart (1998) proposed two types of community participation: observation frequencies and community interactions. Observation frequency indicates the extent to which members visit an online community but do not participate in community activities, whereas community interaction denotes the extent to which members actively participate in community activities, such as initiating conversations with others and replying to messages (Lee, 2005). Although both types of participation are critical to the success of an online community, community participation has been measured by the number of repeat visitors, the average duration, or the frequency of chatting (Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004b). The present study claims whether such numbers can explain how members participate in community activities. As proposed earlier, passive participation is less likely to generate community success. Therefore, both observations and interactions are substantial characteristics of active participation because they reflect members' commitment toward the community (Koh and Kim, 2004). Community participation in the present study is assessed as "active" member involvement gauged by level of observation frequencies and community interactions.

2.3. Theoretical foundations of participation benefits

Online communities have gained attention from marketers and researchers due to their economic power and ability to affect power relationships between marketers and consumers (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). The key to operating a successful online community is to deliver consumer value or create the types of benefits that consumers pursue. If an online community fails to deliver regular benefits to community members, its success may be jeopardized (Wang et al., 2002). When members perceive the benefits they receive as worthwhile, they are likely to become more active participants (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Kang et al. (2007) indicated that consumer benefits should be consistent to encourage active participation, commitment, and loyalty to the community and its products and services. In order to operate successful online communities, the organizations should have in-depth understanding of their members, for example, who the members are, what their needs are, and what other dynamics should be considered to stimulate their participation (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004b). In the following sections, theoretical foundations of each benefit factor are elaborated. Further, a discussion of the relationships between benefits and active participation follows.

2.3.1. Functional benefits

Social capital supports the fundamental needs of obtaining information through social interaction. It is defined as "the number of people who can be expected to provide support and resources" (Boxman et al., 1991, p. 52). The benefits of social capital to a community are the flow of information (Burt, 1992). The development of information and communication technology (ICT) eases the way social interaction is maintained, especially through online communities (Wasko et al., 2005). According to Hansen (1999), strong ties facilitate the cost-effective transfer of complex information and tacit knowledge, whereas weak ties are beneficial for cost-effective searching for new information (Wasko et al., 2005).

Based on this aspect, functional benefits refer to the utility derived from a product and the quality perceived and/or performance expected (Sheth et al., 1991). In the present, functional benefits describe the ease and/or efficiency of commercial transactions and information exchange in online communities (Wang et al., 2002). Satisfactory interaction with other community members may encourage a consumer to make purchase decisions (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996). Moreover, by being immersed in the

"information warehouse" offered by an online community, members can obtain answers to their inquiries and disseminate useful information without temporal or geographic constraints (Wang et al., 2002). These functional needs can be fulfilled when community members achieve their specific goals of participation (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996).

2.3.2. Social-psychological benefits

Social theories (i.e., social exchange and social identity theory) elaborate members' motivation for online community participation. Social exchange is defined as reciprocal interaction among individuals who expect social rewards (i.e., approval, status, and respect) through community participation (Blau, 1964). Although there is no guarantee for such rewards, members are willing to contribute to the community and expect reciprocal interactions with other members, in the case of online communities, members expect to receive help from others when they post useful information (Ridings et al., 2006). Thus, social exchange theory explains that a higher level of member interaction in the community will encourage the participation of others in community activities (Blau, 1964).

Social identity theory explains individuals' identification with other members within a community (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Members establish social identity based on the degree to which they feel a sense of belonging to the community as well as the degree to which they gain benefits from social interaction (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). When members identify themselves as a part of the online community, they are likely to join and actively participate in the community's activities (Dholakia et al., 2004).

Social-psychological benefits are a combined concept of social benefits and psychological benefits. In Wang and Fesenmaier's (2004a) study, social benefits refer to the help and support that members provide to each other. Psychological benefits include identity expressions and a sense of belonging to the community (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004b). The results of Chung and Buhali's (2008) study confirmed that psychological benefits and social benefits overlap and thus suggested that social and psychological benefits can be combined as a single benefit factor in the context of online communities.

2.3.3. Hedonic benefits

Entertainment value explains the reason for member participation in online communities. Online environment provides individuals with opportunities to gather and explore new things that they cannot experience offline. For example, individuals can create fictional identities, engage in role-playing games where everything seems possible, and solve challenging problems (Dholakia et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2002). Interest-based theories divide entertainment value into two categories; self-interest and community-interest (Äkkinen and Tuunainen, 2005). In relation to entertainment value, members look for intangible returns (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). When it relates to the self-interest, individuals look for fun and relaxation experiences as well as find a way to spend their free time. With community interest, individuals pursue enjoyment from playing games or interacting with others (Dholakia et al., 2004).

Hedonic benefits refer to the utility derived from feelings or affective states, such as pleasure, fun, and entertainment, gained through consumer experiences (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004a). Members engage in diverse activities in online communities (e.g., games, contests, polls) that can arouse or excite positive emotions or passions (Armstrong and Hagel, 1995). Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) also suggested that a large number of members are viewed as pleasure seekers who attach importance to the experiential values or hedonic benefits of involvement in online communities.

2.3.4. Monetary benefits

Researchers begin to pay attention to relational benefits that consumers receive from long-term relationships with service companies (Gwinner et al., 1998). Relational benefits assume that both companies and consumers must benefit each other from the relationship so as to continue it for a long period. Companies provide these benefits to their consumers for the purpose of increasing loyalty and commitment (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Selnes, 1993). Consumers focus on not only the core service benefits, but also the additional benefits they are likely to receive as a result of being part of a relationship (Gwinner et al., 1998). Relational benefits categorized by Gwinner et al. (1998) are social, psychological, and special treatment (e.g., monetary savings or customized service). Among these benefits, monetary savings are the primary reason for a consumer to develop a relationship with a company (Harris et al., 2003).

Consumers seek to receive economic advantages (i.e., discounts or special price breaks) from their relationships with a business or brand, which can be referred to as monetary benefits (Gwinner et al., 1998; Harris and Goode, 2004). The incentive motivation theory explains why people take actions in relation to external rewards or benefits (Whishaw and Kornelsen, 1993; Ellingsen and Johannesson, 2008). In the hospitality industry, monetary benefits are offered as a part of special treatment or individualized services (Lee et al., 2008). Han and Kim (2009) found a positive effect of offering gift certificates on consumer attitude toward restaurants. Treadaway and Smith (2010) further suggested that special promotions and coupons can be used in online communities in order to strengthen consumer–brand relationships.

2.3.5. The impact of benefits on active participation

Motivation is the force that initiates, directs, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors (Heckhausen and Heckhausen, 2008; Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). The forces that underlie motivation can be biological, social, emotional, or cognitive in nature (Pinder, 2008). Consumers are motivated to engage in ongoing relationships with a service provider that offers expected benefits (Friman et al., 2002). Other examples include Lee and Cunningham (2001) and Lee (2009).

Several online community studies in the fields of hospitality and tourism management have investigated community participation as an action driven by benefits (e.g., Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Lee, 2005). Wang et al. (2002) first identified how four types of benefits (functional, social, psychological, and hedonic) pursued by members influence their participation in online travel communities. Although previous studies have applied benefit constructs similar to those developed by Wang et al. (2002), the results of prior studies have been inconsistent, with diverging categories of benefits (e.g., Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004b). These discrepancies can occur due to the varied characteristics of online communities, such as member characteristics, mutual member interests, and the communities' purposes (Koh and Kim, 2004). For this reason, the present study argued that results of Wang et al.'s study may not be generalized to other industries and emphasized the need to replicate this study in different types of online communities like Facebook. Therefore, the present study investigated the benefits that members pursue and the impact of these benefits on members' active participation on restaurant Facebook fan pages. We proposed the following hypotheses:

H1. Functional benefits have a positive influence on active participation.

H2. Social–psychological benefits have a positive influence on active participation.

H3. Hedonic benefits have a positive influence on active participation.

H4. Monetary benefits have a positive influence on active participation.

2.4. Brand commitment of online community members

Brand commitment is defined as the strong and positive psychological attachment of consumers to a specific brand (Beatty and Kahle, 1988). This definition is attitudinally rather than behaviorally based (McAlexander et al., 2002). Committed consumers tend to generate enduring attitudes toward a brand, to maintain the relationship with the brand, and to avoid considering alternative offerings from other brands (Butler and Cantrell, 1994; Pritchard et al., 1999).

Active members in a brand's online community typically show high levels of interest in the brand and in its products and services, and continuously update their knowledge through inquiries with the business and communication with other members of the online community (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). These frequent interactions with the brand enhance consumers' positive attitudes, strengthen the consumer–brand bond, and consequently lead to consumer commitment (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Raju et al., 2009). Having a large number of active online community members can help a business establish strong consumer–brand relationships over the long term (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). For example, members of restaurant Facebook fan page are the fans of the restaurant. Their active participation means that the page mostly involves positive comments on products and services as well as delivers restaurants' endeavors to solve customer complaints. Such interactive communications can foster psychological attachment toward a brand. Thus, the brand commitment in this study indicates members' willingness to continue relationships with brands through the participation in online communities. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H5. Active participation has a positive influence on brand commitment.

2.5. Brand trust among online community members

Trust is a fundamental principle of interpersonal exchange and is developed gradually through repeated interactions (Gefen, 2000). Brand trust is defined as consumers' secure belief that a brand will perform as expected upon consumption (Ha and Perks, 2005). Garbarino and Johnson (1999) suggested that brand trust is developed through consumers' positive experiences with a business and its products and services over time. Through continuous positive contact with a brand, consumers become confident that the brand can consistently meet or exceed their expectations (Deighton, 1992). Active participation in an online community can facilitate consumer–brand communication as well as information exchange among consumers, and accordingly contributes to the generation of brand trust (Flavián and Guinalú, 2006).

In addition, brand trust becomes an important component to make a good decision when products are associated with perceived risk which means consumers face some degree of uncertainty in satisfying their needs (Hess and Story, 2005). Consumers are more likely to look for a trustworthy brand to avoid the inherent risk from the products and services (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2000). The intangibility of hospitality products may motivate consumers to participate in online communities operated by the company. Online communities provide the most personal, trusted, and direct contacts with the brand, members can learn the consumption experience of others which is a major

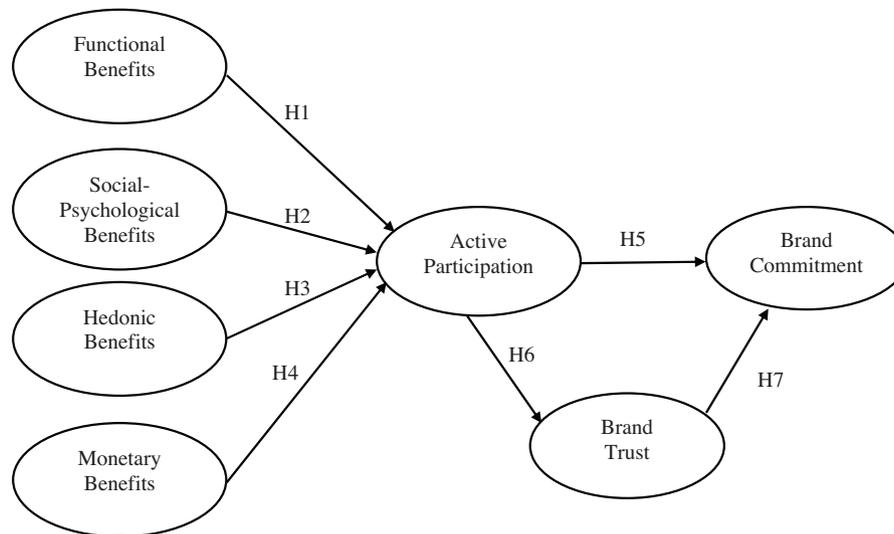


Fig. 1. The conceptual model of enhancing consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages. Note: * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$. 1. Numbers in parentheses are the t -values. 2. Numbers outside of parentheses are the standardized path coefficients.

source of trust (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2000; Drury, 2008).

When consumers believe that a brand and its products and services are trustworthy, they are likely to develop attachment or commitment toward the brand (Beatty and Kahle, 1988). The relationship between brand trust and commitment has been well documented in previous marketing studies, such as Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Hess and Story (2005). Consumers tend to find one's identification through participations which in turn, generate a reliance or confidence of the online community. The emotional dependence potentially leads to commitment to the online community and the brand (Kim et al., 2008). Based on the discussions above, the present study further assessed the mediating effect of brand trust on active participation and brand commitment. Accordingly, the following two hypotheses were developed:

H6. Active participation has a positive influence on brand trust.

H7. Brand trust has a positive influence on brand commitment.

Based on the discussions above, the present study developed a conceptual model (Fig. 1), which presents the relationships between four benefit components (functional, social–psychological, hedonic, and monetary), active participation, brand trust, and brand commitment to restaurant Facebook fan page communities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

In order to verify measurement scales, the preliminary questionnaire was distributed to a total of 15 graduate students majoring in hospitality management at a major university in the Midwestern United States. Students were asked to review its wording. Based on their feedback, minor modifications were made to the test in order to improve clarity. The questionnaire was pilot tested with 214 undergraduate students in the same university. This data set was only used as the pre-test to ensure the reliability of measurement constructs. During a three-week period in June 2011, an invitation email and two reminder emails that included the survey's website address (URL) were sent to 20,940 alumni (including graduated and current student alumni members) at the same university. A total of

392 responses were received from the survey. After deleting 61 incomplete responses, 331 usable responses remained for further analysis.

A screening question was asked at the beginning of the questionnaire to determine whether respondents were “fans” of a restaurant brand's Facebook page. A drop-down list of four restaurant brands (Outback Steakhouse, Chili's, Red Lobster, and Cheesecake Factory) and a text box for other brands were provided for the respondents. The four restaurant brands in the drop-down list were among the top ranking in “Best Restaurant Facebook Fan Pages”, a publication provided by Hilinsky Corp., a social media marketing consulting company (Best Restaurant, 2009).

3.2. Survey instrument

The survey consisted of questions related to three areas, divided by section: (1) participation benefits; (2) active participation, brand trust, and brand commitment; and (3) demographic information and respondents' experiences or habits with restaurant brand Facebook pages. The first part of the survey measured four participation benefit components (exogenous variables). Functional and hedonic benefits were adapted from Wang and Fesenmaier (2004a), while social–psychological benefits were adapted from Chung and Buhalis (2008). Monetary benefits were assessed using three items from Gwinner et al. (1998) and Lee et al. (2008). All 14 items in the first section of the survey were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*extremely important*).

The second part of the survey examined active participation, brand trust, and brand commitment (endogenous variables). Active participation was measured with four items from Casaló et al. (2007), whereas brand trust was measured with five items adapted from Chiang and Jang (2006) and Wilkins et al. (2010). Brand commitment was measured with three items adapted from Ahluwalia (2000). All of the constructs in the second section of the questionnaire were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The third part of the survey elicited demographic, such as education, gender, and age. In addition, several open-ended questions were asked regarding respondents' experiences/habits on restaurant brand Facebook pages: (1) How long have you been a member of this specific restaurant brand's Facebook page? (2) How long, on average, do you participate on

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Biological gender (n = 327)		
Male	97	29.7
Female	230	70.3
Age (n = 326)		
18–20 years old	36	11.0
21–30	174	53.4
31–40	83	25.5
41–55	29	8.9
Over 55	4	1.2
Education (n = 329)		
High school or less	49	14.9
Associate degree	15	4.6
Bachelor degree	126	38.3
Graduate degree	138	41.9
Duration of membership in Facebook restaurant fan community (n = 324)		
Less than 12 months	212	65.4
12–24 months	84	25.9
Over 25 months	28	8.6
Average hours spent per week on Facebook pages (n = 328)		
Less than 1 h	185	56.4
1–5 h	99	30.2
6–10 h	34	10.4
More than 10 h	10	3.0
Number of Facebook page memberships (n = 320)		
1 membership	56	17.5
2–5 memberships	221	69.1
6–10 memberships	18	5.6
More than 10 memberships	25	7.8
Brand profile		
Outback Steakhouse	28	8.5
Chili's	32	9.7
Red Lobster	32	9.7
The Cheesecake Factory	61	18.4
Other brands	178	53.8

this specific restaurant brand's Facebook page each week? and (3) Of how many restaurant Facebook pages are you a member?

3.3. Data analysis

The study followed a two-step approach to test the hypothesized model with the use of Amos 6.0 software (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). In the first step, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) tests the measurement model, which depicts the pattern and reliability of observed variables constituting the latent variables representing the constructs. Then, structural equation modeling (SEM) tests the validity of the conceptual model and hypotheses.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The demographic profile of the restaurant respondents is shown in Table 1. Female participants comprised 70.3% of the respondents, whereas 29.7% were male. The majority of respondents ranged in age from 21 to 30 (53.4%), followed by the 31–40 age group (25.5%). The results indicated that 38.3% of respondents had completed a bachelor's degree, while 41.9% possessed a graduate degree. Sixty-five percent of the respondents reported being members of at least one restaurant brand's Facebook page for less than a year. In terms of user experiences/habits, 69.1% of the participants were fans of two to five restaurant brand Facebook pages. More than half of the

Table 2
Item measurement properties.

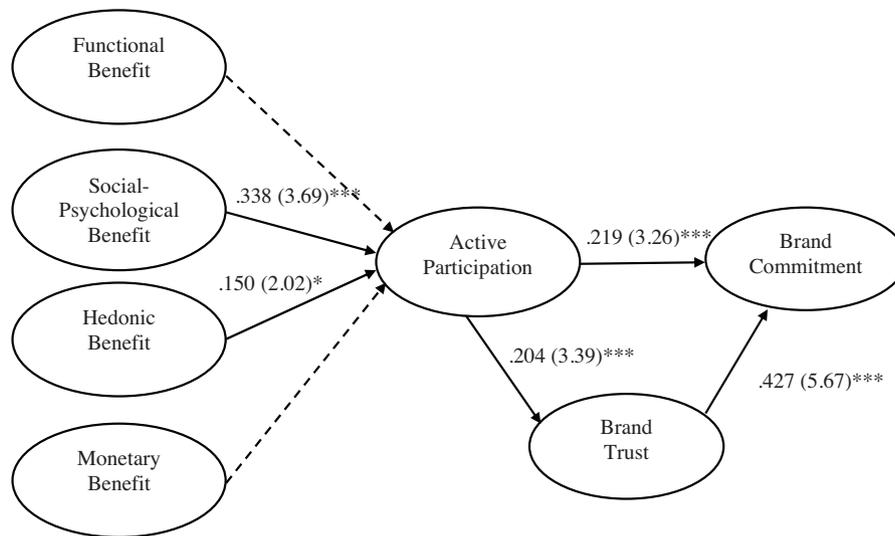
Construct	Standardized factor loadings	Composite reliabilities	Cronbach's alpha
Functional benefits			
Information	.776	.898	.745
Communication online	.889		
Experiences	.481		
Social–Psychological benefits			
Self-identity	.792	.901	.844
Involvement	.751		
Belonging	.844		
Relationship	.654		
Hedonic benefits			
Amusement	.523	.911	.838
Fun	.802		
Enjoyment	.835		
Entertainment	.874		
Monetary benefits			
Special deal	.788	.959	.883
Better price	.845		
Free coupons	.909		
Active participation			
Active participation	.739	.928	.866
Frequent visit	.846		
Enthusiasm	.860		
Activities	.714		
Brand trust			
Products/services	.645	.954	.883
Claim	.592		
Expectation	.835		
Reliability	.943		
Promises	.902		
Brand commitment			
Reservation	.600	.889	.702
Loyalty	.742		
Better deal	.636		

respondents (56.4%) reported spending one to five hours per week on the specific restaurant Facebook page on which they had based their survey answers.

4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate scales for the measurement of specific constructs proposed in the conceptual model ($\chi^2 = 623.844$, $df = 278$, $p < .001$, TLI = .911, CFI = .924, RMSEA = .061). The ratio ($\chi^2/df = 2.244$) fell between 1 and 3 (McIver and Carmines, 1981). The values for TLI and CFI were greater than .90, and the value for RMSEA was below .08 (Hair et al., 2006). Therefore, the CFA results indicated a satisfactory model fit.

Table 2 shows the measurement items with factor loadings, composite reliabilities, and Cronbach's alpha estimates for each construct. All of the factor loadings were equal to or higher than .50, with the exception of one factor loading in functional benefits (.481). Because functional benefits included only three items (the minimum number of measurements for an individual construct required by structural equation modeling) (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988), the item was not removed, an approach that has been supported in previous studies (Byrne et al., 1989; Welkenhuysen-Gybelts et al., 2003). The Cronbach's alpha estimates and composite reliability values were determined to be greater than .70, indicating a satisfactory level of internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978) and high reliability of the multi-items for assessing each construct (Hair et al., 2006).



Note: * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$

1. Numbers in parentheses are the t-values.

2. Numbers outside of parentheses are the standardized path coefficients.

Fig. 2. The results of the conceptual model of enhancing consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages.

As shown in Table 2, convergent validity was satisfactory with all factor loadings significant at the .001 level (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Table 3 shows the correlation coefficients, squared correlations among the variables, and the average variances extracted (AVE). The AVEs exceeded the .50 threshold for all constructs (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), which indicated that a large portion of variance was explained by the constructs (Hair et al., 2006). Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing AVE values and the squared correlations between constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All of the squared correlations (R^2) between pairs of constructs were less than the AVE for each construct, which indicated acceptable discriminant validity.

4.3. Structure equation modeling

The structural equation modeling results validated the proposed model (Fig. 1) and the hypotheses with a satisfactory model fit ($\chi^2 = 655.276, df = 286, p < .001, TLI = .907, CFI = .918, RMSEA = .063$). The Chi-square ratio (χ^2/df) was 2.29, reflecting an acceptable model fit according to the criteria proposed by McIver and Carmines (1981). Five hypotheses were supported, including H2, H3, H5, H6, and H7; whereas H1 and H4 were not supported (Fig. 2).

4.4. The mediating effect of brand trust

This study employed Barons and Kenny's (1986) four-condition approach to examining the mediating effect of brand trust on the relationship between active participation and brand commitment. The hypothesized model was re-estimated by constraining the direct effect of brand trust on brand commitment (the path coefficient was constrained to zero). Three conditions were met in the conceptual mode, with all paths in designated relationships found to be significant: (1) active participation (the independent variable) was found to influence brand trust (the mediator variable), β_{21} ; (2) brand trust (the mediator variable) affected brand commitment (the dependent variable), β_{32} ; (3) active participation (the independent variable) influenced brand commitment (the dependent variable), β_{31} . The fourth condition for analyzing the mediating effect was also met since the parameter estimate between active participation and brand commitment ($\beta_{31} = 219***, t = 3.26$) in the mediating model was less significant than the parameter estimate ($\beta_{\text{active participation to brand commitment}} = .302*, t = 4.12$) in the constrained model (Table 4). Moreover, the difference in the χ^2 between the mediating model ($\chi^2 = 655.276, df = 286$) and the constrained model ($\chi^2 = 696.110, df = 287$) was statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 40.834, df = 1$). Therefore, brand trust played a partial mediating role in the relationship between active participation and brand commitment.

Table 3

Latent variable correlation matrix.

	Functional	Social psychological	Hedonic	Monetary	Participation	Brand trust	Brand commitment
Functional	.84^c	.59 ^a	.44	.03	.28	.18	.12
Social psychological	.77 ^b	.87	.54	-.10	.43	.21	.19
Hedonic	.66	.73	.87	.12	.33	.21	.03
Monetary	.16	.32	.34	.92	-.06	.07	-.27
Active participation	.53	.65	.58	.24	.89	.19	.29
Brand trust	.42	.46	.46	.25	.44	.88	.45
Brand commitment	.35	.43	.17	.52	.54	.67	.81

^a Correlations are located above the diagonal.

^b Entries below the diagonals are the latent construct squared correlations (R^2).

^c Entries on the diagonal is AVE.

Table 4
Mediating effects of brand trust in restaurants' Facebook pages.

Constrained model	Mediating model
$\beta_{\text{active participation to brand commitment}} = .302^*$, $t = 4.12$ $\chi^2 = 696.110$, $df = 287$ $\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 40.834$, $p < .05$	$\beta_{31} = 219^{**}$, $t = 3.26$ $\chi^2 = 655.276$, $df = 286$

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

5. Discussion

This study indicated that only two benefits (i.e., social–psychological and hedonic benefits) have a significant impact on members' active participation on restaurant brand Facebook fan pages (H2 and H3), which in turn influences brand trust and brand commitment (H5–H7). However, the results showed no significant effects of functional and monetary benefits on active participation (H1 and H4).

The effect of social–psychological benefits on active participation was found to be significant (H2). This indicates that members seek both psychological attachments to the communities and social relationships with other members on restaurant Facebook pages. These social–psychological benefits may enhance members' perceptions of community attractiveness and motivate them to provide useful feedback on community activities (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). Hedonic benefits were also found to be a significant motivating factor for active participation (H3). Members were found to be likely to spend more time on restaurant Facebook fan pages particularly when the pages incorporated unique features geared toward members' interests that made visiting the sites relaxing and entertaining (Dholakia et al., 2004).

This study revealed that functional and monetary benefits are not influential factors in encouraging active member participation on restaurant Facebook pages (H1 and H4). It could be interpreted that a Facebook fan page is not a primary outlet for consumers seeking product information (functional benefits) and promotions and sales offers (monetary benefits). As indicated in previous studies, consumers mainly rely on personal experience, official brand websites, and the referrals of family and friends when seeking functional benefits (Hwang and Cho, 2005). In particular, consumers' primary sources for promotions and sales are coupon books, review sites, and word of mouth (Luk and Yip, 2008; Yin and Dubinsky, 2004).

The findings proved the positive impact of restaurant Facebook pages on strengthening consumer–brand relationships. The acceptance of H5–H7 indicated that restaurants can enhance brand trust and brand commitment by encouraging members' active participation. That is, members' active interactions on a Facebook page demonstrate the restaurant's effort to communicate with consumers and to correct service failures (McCarthy et al., 2010). These interactions exert a strong influence on members' trust and commitment toward a restaurant brand.

Moreover, these results can indicate brand trust as a bridge between active participation and brand commitment. It can be interpreted that active participation on restaurant Facebook pages enhances members' reliability of information and generate trust in brands, which in turn strengthen consumer–brand bonds and accordingly lead to brand commitment. These positive relationships were consistent with the results of studies by Casaló et al. (2007), Ha (2004), and Holland and Baker (2001).

This study confirmed the partial mediating effect of brand trust between active participation and brand commitment. Partial mediation implies not only a significant relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable, but also a direct relationship between the independent and dependent variable (Preacher and

Hayes, 2008). It was found that brand trust as a mediating variable accounted for some, but not all, of the relationship between active participation and brand commitment. This result is consistent with Baron and Kenny's (1986) explanation that a single mediation effect cannot fully account for the relationships between independent and dependent variables.

Finally, the result of this study verified the usefulness of Casaló et al. (2007) measures of active participation. An inquiry into the measurements on active participation plays a crucial role in assessing community success (see Appendix A). Previous studies on online hospitality and tourism communities primarily utilized usage frequency (e.g., frequency of visits to an online community and total hours spent in the community) to evaluate member participation. The present study, which takes into account the differentiation between lurkers and active participants, addresses the level of active involvement in measuring community participation. The results confirmed that active participation is essential in generating brand trust and developing brand commitment, which strengthen the consumer–brand relationship over time.

6. Implications

The findings of this study provide theoretical and managerial implications for researchers and marketers. This research adds to the theoretical body of knowledge about building consumer–brand relationships through the use of restaurant Facebook fan pages. The study stresses the importance of evaluating the level of members' participation in the online community. The role of active participation in a successful online community illustrate the need to develop more comprehensive scales for measuring a member's behavior than those utilized in previous studies (e.g., user frequency or log-in time). The study also validated the feasibility of social–psychological benefits as a single construct in restaurant studies, which provides an alternative benefit/need construct for use in future studies. From the findings, marketers can build more sustainable and vital restaurant Facebook fan pages. They are advised to identify the benefits that members seek when visiting fan pages to better understand consumer needs, which should drive design of webpage features and functions. These can deliver the desired benefits to consumers and provide opportunity to convert lurkers into active members. Successful restaurant Facebook fan pages may be a highly effective marketing strategy for building and maintaining consumer–brand relationships.

The results of the present study indicated that members primarily seek to satisfy social–psychological and hedonic needs on restaurant Facebook fan pages. As such, restaurant marketers should identify and implement activities that deliver social–psychological and hedonic benefits to members on Facebook fan pages. For example, a restaurant may consider providing personal space on its Facebook fan page for active participants to share information about their dining experiences. The embedded blogs of experienced consumers can help members easily identify opinion leaders and meet with like-minded people, and can make a Facebook fan page more credible than review sites (Stockdale and Borovicka, 2006; Watson et al., 2008). Restaurant marketers also can monitor communications among members to gain insight into consumers' views and opinions about a brand and its products/services (Dellarocas, 2001) and to segment members based on their postings by specific criteria, such as the taste of particular food items, food presentation preferences, and positive or negative opinions about new menu items. This approach can aid marketers to discover consumer interests, identify additional niche market segments, and develop new menus or items to satisfy the needs of newly identified niche markets.

Based on the results of the study, it is recommended that restaurant marketers create positive hedonic experiences by using a variety of tools and features on Facebook fan pages, such as games, Facebook Live (a live streaming video channel that is intended to keep users updated to what is happening on Facebook), and Listen with Friends (allows Facebook users to listen to music at the same time as their friends and discuss the tunes using Facebook Chat). Positive information about the brand and its products and services should be strategically embedded into the entertainment experience (Fisher, 2011). For example, a business could post several versions of funny commercials never before released to the public in order to encourage discussion among members and to catch the attention of new members and encourage purchases.

The results of the study indicated that functional benefits do not significantly influence community participation. These findings suggest that it is not necessarily effective for a business to simply post numerous status updates on its Facebook fan page. Instead, it is suggested that brand and product information (functional benefits) be strategically interwoven into Facebook fan page activities or programs (e.g., consumer communications, games, and videos) that deliver strong social–psychological and hedonic benefits. Marketers are advised to avoid employing long text descriptions of brands, products, and services for educational purposes, since consumers are inclined to pursue these functional benefits from other sources, such as official websites and brochures (Choi et al., 2008).

Providing monetary benefits to participants on Facebook fan pages was also identified as likely to be an ineffective strategy, because consumers prefer to get monetary benefits from other sources. Restaurant marketers may consider offering active members some non-monetary credits to strengthen consumer–brand affective bonds (Buil et al., 2013; Chandon et al., 2000). For instance, Wendy's congratulates the winners of its marketing campaign by posting their pictures on Wendy's Facebook wall, which may increase consumer attachment to the fan pages. Non-monetary credits may make active participants feel valuable and important to an online community.

Successful Facebook fan pages can help members make group identifications and establish affective bonds. Marketers are therefore advised to carefully consider member feedback when making decisions about changes to products/services. This approach can help consumers to recognize that a restaurant brand is truly concerned about its consumers, which contributes to brand credibility (Weber, 2009). Through such efforts, a successful Facebook fan page may assist a business in converting prospective consumers to committed consumers.

In light of the partial mediating impact of brand trust between community participation and brand commitment, marketers should not ignore other influential variables on brand commitment, such as actual dining experiences in restaurants, word of mouth from family/friends, and marketing communications in other channels. Future research is needed to investigate how brand trust and other mediator variables together influence the relationship between community participation and brand commitment.

7. Limitations and future study

This study contains several limitations. First, the present study investigated only brand trust and brand commitment as consequences of community participation. Additional constructs, such as brand loyalty, purchase intention, and brand equity, could be added to validate the effectiveness of utilizing social media as a tool to build consumer–brand relationships. When consumers engage in various social media activities with a brand, positive emotions may lead to brand loyalty and consequent brand equity.

Second, this study surveyed a sample of alumni (including current students and graduates) of one university. The particular characteristics of the sample may have a potential influence on their behavior. Most respondents were below age 40 and college educated, which explains their high usage of the Internet in daily life. It would be useful to expand the study to a larger, more generalizable sample, in order to validate the findings. For example, consumers who are over age 40 and have a less formal education may seek different benefits, resulting in the need for building different consumer–brand relationships in the online environment.

Finally, future researchers can duplicate this study by investigating consumer participation benefits across different types of restaurants, such as fast food and luxury restaurants. For example, monetary benefits may be important for budget-conscious fast food restaurant consumers, whereas consumers of luxury restaurants may seek status or reliving the hedonic experience by engaging in discussions about their elegant dining experience.

Appendix A.

Participation benefits

Functional benefits

Obtaining up-to-date information about the restaurant brand
Efficiently conveniently communicating with others online
Sharing experiences in the restaurant brand

Social–psychological benefits

Seeking self-identity
Getting involved with other members
Seeking a sense of belonging
Establishing and maintaining relationships with other members of Facebook

Hedonic benefits

Being amused by other members
Having fun on the brand's Facebook page
Seeking enjoyment on this Facebook page
Being entertained on this Facebook page

Monetary benefits

Obtaining discounts or special deals that most consumers do not get
Obtaining better prices than other consumers
Receiving free coupons for the Restaurant brand by becoming a member of the Facebook page

Active participation

I take an active part in the Restaurant brand's Facebook page
I frequently provide useful information to other members
In general, I post messages and responses on the brand's Facebook page with great enthusiasm and frequency
I do my best to participate in activities offered on the brand's Facebook page

Brand trust

What the restaurant brand says about its products/service is true
I feel I know what to expect from the Restaurant brand
The restaurant brand is very reliable
The restaurant brand meets its promises

Brand commitment

If the restaurant brand had no available reservations, I would have no problem finding a different restaurant with which I would want to make reservations*
I consider myself to be highly loyal to the restaurant brand
When another brand has a special deal (e.g., discount price for meal), I generally visit that restaurant with the better deal*

*Reverse coded items.

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