Social Networking Service as a Marketing Technology Tool and Sustainable Business in the Lodging Industry: Investigating the Difference across Older and Younger Age Groups among Tourists

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Abstract: Despite the importance of social networking services (SNSs), their engagement and their role as a critical marketing technology tool in explaining travellers’ approach behaviours are not well known. The present study investigated the influence of SNS engagement on traveller loyalty generation for a chain hotel brand and the health of this business by considering the roles of brand attitude, awareness, trust, and attachment and the impact of age. Fostering customers’ SNS engagement in the hospitality industry will be a vital constituent of hotels’ sustainable business. A quantitative process was used to meet the research objectives. The proposed research framework encompassing these variables was successfully developed. The framework’s efficiency in predicting brand loyalty was also demonstrated. Our results showed that SNS engagement considerably enhances loyalty and other study constructs.Attachment had a salient role in boosting loyalty. In addition, age had a moderating influence. The study constructs maximized the influence of SNS engagement on loyalty as mediators. Overall, our results considerably increase our understanding regarding the role of SNS engagement in the formation of traveller loyalty to chain hotel brands and the sustainability of such businesses.

Keywords: SNS engagement; senior traveller group; young traveller group; contemporary issue; brand loyalty; chain hotel; healthy business

1. Introduction

For the past few decades, social networking services (SNSs) and their websites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, KakaoTalk, and Instagram) have considerably influenced and altered customers’ responses and behaviours [1–4]. SNSs and related media are rapidly becoming a central part of customers’ behaviours and of their everyday lives [2,3,5]. In total, 53% of consumers showed repurchase intention for brands that were transparent on social media, and 86% of consumers showed no repurchase intention for brands that were not [6]. SNSs are even more influential in travellers’ decision-making processes and behaviours [4,7]. SNSs easily connect a considerable number of travellers in diverse countries around the world [3,7]. Additionally, many customers are known to associate social media activity with rewards. According to [6], 46% of hotel guests were found to link social media activity, such as a post about a hotel, to an automatic reward [6]. Due to these characteristics of global social interconnections [5], SNSs are becoming a core marketing/promotion tool in the hospitality and tourism industry [4,7,8]. Through customers’ SNS engagement, emotional attachment and trust are believed to be formed, which positively affect brand
loyalty [9]. Especially in the contemporary context of the COVID-19 pandemic in which travellers’ approach behaviours and loyalty to a company/place have vacillated, SNSs and their functions are more crucial than ever. Indeed, in a short time span, SNSs have earned a significant space in customers’ private lives [1,3,8]. Given this, many tourism companies are seeking to employ SNSs as their core customer attraction/retention and loyalty enhancement tool and to strengthen their existing tactics regarding SNS marketing in an increasingly competitive business world.

1.1. Need for Research

Despite the quickly increasing use of SNSs and their popularity, SNS engagement among hotel customers has attracted little attention in the chain hotel industry. Empirical endeavours to explore the influence of SNS engagement on customer loyalty generation for chain hotel brands are also scarce. In addition, it is indisputable that variables such as brand attitude, awareness, trust, and attachment are vital dimensions in the formation of brand loyalty [9–14]. However, there have been no empirical studies that link SNS engagement to these crucial constructs leading to brand loyalty. Moreover, SNS use and effectiveness in eliciting customer approach responses can differ across age groups, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic situation today. Indeed, older and younger generations often show dissimilar behaviours regarding internet use and technology acceptance and consumption [15–17]. Nonetheless, we do not have a clear view of how SNS engagement and its influence on the customer loyalty building process for chain hotel brands differ across age groups. The present research is a fundamental step towards filling these voids in the extant literature.

1.2. Research Objectives

This research aimed to examine the possible associations between travellers’ SNS engagement, attitudes, awareness, trust, and attachment and to uncover the influence of such relationships on their loyalty generation for a chain hotel brand and its sustainable business by considering the moderating role of age in an increasingly competitive business world. In particular, we aimed to (a) unearth the specific role of SNS engagement in the loyalty generation process, (b) uncover the mediating influence of the study variables, (c) explore the moderating influence of age, and (d) identify the comparative criticality of the research constructs in determining travellers’ brand loyalty in the chain hotel context. A conceptualization of the study variables and a related literature review are presented in the following section. The research methods are then explained. Subsequently, the results and discussions are reported.

2. Literature Review

2.1. SNS Engagement

SNSs play a vital role by helping individuals to share their information and communicate through online platforms in the form of texts, videos, pictures, and tags [1,5,8]. Social networks and SNSs in the contemporary business sector are broadly adopted by firms for a variety of marketing/sales purposes. Indeed, reference [7] indicated that the majority of businesses in diverse industries utilize social media and SNSs to develop brand reputation/trust, attract customers, and enhance brand loyalty among customers. SNS engagement indicates the degree to which an individual is involved in directly/indirectly interacting with others through online platforms [4,7]. Consistently, SNS engagement with a brand/product/place refers to customers’ level of involvement in conversing and communicating with others about a particular brand/product/place through social networks both directly and indirectly. The terms “SNS engagement” and “SNS involvement” can therefore be used interchangeably.

2.2. Brand Attitude

Due to the criticality of tourism and marketing, researchers in these fields are vigorously seeking a clear understanding of the attitude that patrons have towards a com-
pany [11,18]. These academics agree that consumers’ post-buying decisions/behaviours are highly related to their attitude towards such decisions/behaviours [18,19]. Attitude indicates the degree to which the performance of an action/brand/product/place is favourably/unfavourably valued [19]. In the present research, brand attitude refers to the degree to which the performance of a hotel brand is positively/negatively valued from the hotel customers’ perspectives. For the last few decades, brand attitude has received considerable attention from researchers and practitioners, as customers’ positive attitude towards a specific brand is a fundamental requirement for inducing positive responses, decisions, and behaviours towards the brand [7,11,20,21]. In their examination of customer behaviours in the online retailing context, reference [22] found that attitude is a crucial driver of brand trust. In the consumer behaviour sector, reference [20,23] uncovered the significant effect of brand attitude on brand attachment. According to [19], attitude is a volitional dimension that is essential for explicating individuals’ motivation and decision-making processes. When customers have an attitude that is favourable towards a brand, they are likely to trust, feel attached to, and establish loyalty to the brand [7,11,18,21].

2.3. Brand Awareness

In diverse sectors of consumer behaviour, brand awareness is regarded as a vital concept, as it is a significant contributor to boosting positive post-purchase intentions/behaviours [12,24]. Brand awareness is believed to be a criterion in the assessment of brand power in the marketplace [24,25]. Aaker [25] and Han et al. [7] indicated that brand awareness is the strength of a particular brand in patrons’ memory. Consistently, brand awareness in the present research refers to the strength of a hotel brand in hotel guests’ memory. Brand awareness is especially critical when developing effective marketing/service strategies for a brand and when reinforcing existing strategies [26–28]. Many studies have indicated the essential role of brand awareness in explaining customer behaviours [12,28]. In the tourism sector, reference [24] found that improving travellers’ brand awareness on social network sites helps them gain confidence in the brand and increases their willingness to buy the brand’s products. The authors of [25,28] asserted that patrons’ high brand awareness often leads to strong brand attachment. According to Lin [27], customers’ capability of identifying a specific brand among diverse brands available in the marketplace is chiefly derived from their level of awareness of the brand; that is, customers’ choice and brand selection process are strongly related to brand awareness.

2.4. Brand Trust

Increasing patrons’ trust in a brand is irrefutably a crucial issue in many business sectors, as trust helps patrons feel confident in the brand, which induces their positive purchase decisions regarding the brand [9,13,29]. Brand trust refers to individuals’ readiness to rely on the capability of a particular brand to meet its stated function [30]. The term “trust” is therefore interchangeably used with the term “reliability”. In the present study, brand trust indicates patrons’ willingness to rely on the competency of a hotel brand to meet its stated function. When customers’ level of trust is high, they feel confident in interacting with a brand and act positively towards the brand [9,13]. In addition, patrons’ trust in the brand elicits their repurchase activities, word-of-mouth behaviours, and willingness to be loyal [9,30]. Li et al. [9] also indicated that brand trust becomes the basis for boosting the level of brand loyalty among customers. Patrons’ trust in a brand is especially crucial when the market situation is uncertain [10,13]. In such situations, patrons often feel doubtful, thereby relying more on brands that they trust [13]. This brand trust likely results in brand loyalty and post-purchase behaviours that are favourable for a firm [10,29].

2.5. Brand Attachment

Because of its crucial role in eliciting customers’ positive post-purchase intentions and behaviours, brand attachment has long been an essential variable in tourism and consumer behaviour [14,31,32]. Attachment refers to patrons’ emotional connection to a
brand/product/place [7]. Self-connection is a core facet of customers’ attachment to a brand/product/place [7,33]. Undoubtedly, brand attachment is a core dimension of the customer loyalty generation process [21]. Researchers have described brand attachment as a conative process [21,32,34]. This conative process is a vital constituent when explaining the process of creating patrons’ loyalty to a brand [21]. If customers’ level of attachment to a brand is high, they often show loyal behaviours towards the brand [9,14]. Indeed, academics in diverse sectors of marketing and tourism have demonstrated a significant and positive linkage between brand attachment and loyalty [9,14,31,35].

2.6. Age and Its Influence

Since age is regarded as one of the most vital personal characteristics, academics have investigated age and its role in a variety of consumer behaviour and tourism sectors [15,17,36]. The existing studies in the literature have identified that age differences exist when explicating patrons’ post-purchase decision-making process and activities [16,17]. In particular, age differences are evident in the tourism literature [15,16,37]. For instance, Chua et al. [16] discovered that the generation process for vacationers’ loyalty intention towards a cruise line is significantly different for different age groups. Their findings revealed that young and old vacationers showed dissimilar levels of responses and behaviours. In their recent research in the restaurant sector, Hwang et al. [38] unearthed the process of building attitudes and behavioural intentions among customers. Their findings revealed that the relationship between innovativeness and attitude and its influence on intentions are considerably moderated by age. In the hotel context, Song et al. [37] investigated guests’ environmentally responsible decision formation and green behaviours. They found that such decision-making processes and behaviours differed across young and senior hotel guests. The senior group tended to be more eco-conscious than the young group. Researchers in these studies discussed above agreed that there is great variation in customers’ behaviours across age groups. Further research focusing on the influence of age in the tourism literature evidenced that age, as an essential facet of consumer characteristics, acts as a crucial factor affecting the formation of post-purchase intentions/activities [15,38,39].

2.7. Proposed Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The hypothesized theoretical framework included travellers’ SNS engagement, attitude, awareness, trust, attachment, and loyalty for a chain hotel brand. The framework also sought to account for the influence of age on the brand loyalty generation process. The proposed model is exhibited in Figure 1. The model comprised a total of eight research hypotheses directly linking the research variables (H1–H8). It also contained research hypotheses on the moderating influence of age (H9a–h).

Hypothesis 1 (H1). SNS engagement is positively associated with brand attitude.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). SNS engagement is positively associated with brand awareness.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). Brand attitude is positively associated with brand trust.

Hypothesis 4 (H4). Brand attitude is positively associated with brand attachment.

Hypothesis 5 (H5). Brand awareness is positively associated with brand trust.

Hypothesis 6 (H6). Brand awareness is positively associated with brand attachment.

Hypothesis 7 (H7). Brand trust is positively associated with brand loyalty.

Hypothesis 8 (H8). Brand attachment is positively associated with brand loyalty.
Hypothesis 9 (H9). Age has a significant moderating effect on the formation of brand loyalty among hotel customers.

3. Methods

3.1. Measures and Questionnaire

The measures of the research variables were adopted from extant studies in tourism and consumer behaviour [4, 15, 21, 40–43]. Specifically, a total of five items were used to measure SNS engagement (e.g., “My friends/family/coworkers/colleagues and I often converse about this hotel brand on SNS”). To assess brand attitude, we utilized five items (e.g., “For me, staying at a hotel with this hotel brand when travelling in the future is unattractive–attractive (scale of 1–7)”). Brand awareness was evaluated with four items (e.g., “I can easily remember the logo or symbol of this hotel brand”). Brand trust was measured with three items (e.g., “I think this hotel brand is reliable”). A total of five items were used to evaluate brand attachment (e.g., “I feel emotionally attached to this hotel brand”). Brand loyalty was assessed with four items (e.g., “This hotel brand deserves my loyalty”). All research variables were evaluated by using multiple items with a seven-point scale. The developed questionnaire contained these measurement items, an introductory letter, and questions about the respondents’ personal characteristics. This questionnaire was pretested with 12 hotel practitioners and researchers. Based on their suggestions, slight improvements were made. The questionnaire was then further improved after being reviewed by two tourism academics. The final version of the survey questionnaire was developed through these processes.

3.2. Data Collection and Demographic Information

In order to meet the research objectives, the present study employed an online survey. The survey participants were randomly chosen using the system of the online survey company. The online survey company is one of the largest survey companies in Korea. The data collection period was from 4 January 2021 to 9 January 2021. The sample population was over 20 years old and had their most recent chain hotel stay within the past 12 months. The developed questionnaire was sent to the potential participants through e-mail. The screening question was “Have you visited a chain hotel within the last 12 months?”. The eligible participants who had a chain hotel stay experience within the past year accessed the
survey by clicking the link included in the survey invitation e-mail. The survey participants were asked to read the research description thoroughly before starting to answer the questions. They were asked to write the name of the chain hotel they stayed at most recently and asked to complete the questionnaire based on their experience with the hotel. The survey took approximately 10.3 min on average. The chosen survey company works with a broad range of panel partners, which allows the surveyors to have an extensive reach to diverse targets and, therefore, collect the most representative samples across the country. For our survey, approximately 2119 individuals across the country entered the survey, and a total of 331 usable responses were gained from diverse areas in Korea. The collected responses were utilized for data analysis.

Of the survey participants, approximately 52.9% were women, and 47.1% were men. The average age of the participants was 39.9 years old. The respondents’ annual income level was asked. The majority of the participants (44.4%) indicated that their annual income was from USD 25,000–54,999, followed by those with incomes from USD 55,000–84,999 (27.8%), less than USD 25,000 (15.4%), and USD 85,000 or more (12.3%). Regarding education level, most participants indicated that they were college graduates (75.6%), followed by high school graduates or less (12.4%) and graduate degree holders (12.1%). The survey participants’ frequency of visits to the chain hotel that they indicated at the beginning of the survey questionnaire was asked. Approximately 41.4% of the respondents reported that their visit frequency within the past five years was 2–3 times, followed by 4–5 times (20.5%), one time (18.4%), 10 times or more (10.9%), and from 5 to 9 times (8.8%). The survey participants reported whether the last time that they visited the chain hotel was within the last month (13.9%), within the last three months (46.5%), within the last six months (73.4%), or within the last nine months (85.2%). In addition, all survey respondents had stayed at the chain hotel within the last year.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model and Data Quality Evaluation

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to generate the measurement model. The maximum-likelihood estimation method was employed. IBM AMOS 22 and IBM SPSS 22, manufactured in New York, NY, USA, were used as data analysis tools. Our results showed that the model had a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 786.220$, $df = 280$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.808$, RMSEA = 0.074, CFI = 0.931, IFI = 0.931, and TLI = 0.920). All loadings (standardized) were significant at $p < 0.01$. The composite reliability was assessed. All calculated values (SNS engagement = 0.919, brand attitude = 0.935, brand awareness = 0.844, brand trust = 0.856, brand attachment = 0.913, and brand loyalty = 0.919) were greater than the cutoff of 0.70 suggested by [44]. This means that the internal consistency of the measures for each construct was supported. The convergent validity was assessed. As exhibited in Table 1, all average variance extracted (AVE) values were higher than the cutoff of 0.50 suggested by [43] (SNS engagement = 0.695, brand attitude = 0.742, brand awareness = 0.577, brand trust = 0.669, brand attachment = 0.680, and brand loyalty = 0.740). Therefore, the convergent validity was supported. As reported in Table 1, these AVEs were greater than the between-construct correlations (squared), which demonstrated the discriminant validity of the construct measures.
Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analysis and correlation.

| Variables          | (a)     | (b)     | (c)     | (d)     | (e)     | (f)     | CR     | AVE     | Mean (SD) |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|-----------|
| (a) SNS engagement | 1.000 a | 0.919   | 0.695   | 4.298   |
|                    | (0.050) b | 1.000   | 0.935   | 0.742   |         |         | 5.162  |
| (b) Brand attitude | 0.224 a | 0.935   | 0.777   | 4.543   |
|                    | 0.050   |         |         |         |         |         | 1.075  |
| (c) Brand awareness| 0.394   | 0.844   | 0.577   | 4.804   |
|                    | 0.155   |         |         |         |         |         | 1.049  |
| (d) Brand trust    | 0.237   | 0.856   | 0.669   | 4.096   |
|                    | 0.056   |         |         |         |         |         | 0.996  |
| (e) Brand attachment| 0.249  | 0.913   | 0.680   | 4.126   |
|                    | 0.062   |         |         |         |         |         | 1.121  |
| (f) Brand loyalty  | 0.219   | 0.919   | 0.740   | 4.634   |
|                    | 0.048   |         |         |         |         |         | 1.194  |

Note: Goodness-of-fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 786.220$, $df = 280$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.808$, RMSEA = 0.074, CFI = 0.931, IFI = 0.931, TLI = 0.920; a Correlation b Squared correlation.

4.2. Structural Equation Modelling and Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesized conceptual model was evaluated. The maximum-likelihood estimation method was used to create the structural model. Our results revealed that the proposed model had an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 888.856$, $df = 287$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.097$, RMSEA = 0.080, CFI = 0.918, IFI = 0.918, and TLI = 0.907). Tables 2 and 3, and Figure 2 provide all the results of the structural equation model assessment. Our theoretical framework included a sufficient level of anticipation power for travellers’ loyalty for a chain hotel brand, as it explained approximately 79.0% of the variance in brand loyalty. In addition, approximately 58.4% and 40.6% of the total variance in brand trust and brand attachment were accounted for by the study variables, respectively.

Table 2. Results of the structural equation modelling ($n = 331$).

| Independent Constructs | Dependent Constructs | Standardized Estimates | t-Values |
|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------|
| H1 SNS engagement      | → Brand attitude     | 0.236                  | 4.049 ** |
| H2 SNS engagement      | → Brand awareness    | 0.435                  | 6.879 ** |
| H3 Brand attitude      | → Brand trust        | 0.523                  | 9.737 ** |
| H4 Brand attitude      | → Brand attachment   | 0.402                  | 6.916 ** |
| H5 Brand awareness     | → Brand trust        | 0.506                  | 8.341 ** |
| H6 Brand awareness     | → Brand attachment   | 0.455                  | 6.880 ** |
| H7 Brand trust         | → Brand loyalty      | 0.438                  | 7.980 ** |
| H8 Brand attachment    | → Brand loyalty      | 0.589                  | 10.192 **|

Note: Total variance explained (R2): R2 for brand loyalty = 0.790 R2 for brand attachment = 0.406 R2 for brand trust = 0.584 R2 for brand awareness = 0.190 R2 for brand attitude = 0.056; Goodness-of-fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 888.856$, $df = 287$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.097$, RMSEA = 0.080, CFI = 0.918, IFI = 0.918, TLI = 0.907, ** p < 0.01.

Table 3. Results of the indirect and total impact assessment.

| On                  | Indirect Effects of |
|---------------------|---------------------|
|                     | SNS Engagement      | Brand Attitude     | Brand Awareness | Brand Trust | Brand Attachment |
| Brand trust         | 0.344 **            | –                   | –               | –           | –                |
| Brand attachment    | 0.293 **            | –                   | –               | –           | –                |
| Brand loyalty       | 0.323 **            | 0.466 **            | 0.490 **        | –           | –                |

Note: Total impact on brand loyalty: $\beta$ SNS engagement = 0.323 ** $\beta$ Brand attitude = 0.466 ** $\beta$ Brand awareness = 0.490 ** $\beta$ Brand trust = 0.388 ** $\beta$ Brand attachment = 0.889 **; Goodness-of-fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 888.856$, $df = 287$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.097$, RMSEA = 0.080, CFI = 0.918, IFI = 0.918, TLI = 0.907, ** p < 0.01.
The proposed influence of SNS engagement was evaluated. Our results revealed that SNS engagement exerted a significant impact on brand attitude ($\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.01$) and on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.435$, $p < 0.01$). These results supported Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively. The hypothesized influences of brand attitude and brand awareness were tested. As expected, brand attitude had a significant effect on brand trust ($\beta = 0.523$, $p < 0.01$) and on brand attachment ($\beta = 0.402$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, brand awareness had a significant influence on brand trust ($\beta = 0.506$, $p < 0.01$) and brand attachment ($\beta = 0.438$, $p < 0.01$). These results supported Hypotheses 3–6. The effects of brand trust and brand attachment were assessed. Our findings showed that both brand trust ($\beta = 0.438$, $p < 0.01$) and brand attachment ($\beta = 0.589$, $p < 0.01$) exerted significant influences on brand loyalty. Therefore, Hypotheses 7 and 8 were supported.

Subsequently, the indirect influence of the study variables within the hypothesized theoretical model was examined. All details pertinent to indirect impacts are shown in Table 3. SNS engagement was revealed to have a significant indirect influence on trust ($\beta = 0.344$, $p < 0.01$), attachment ($\beta = 0.293$, $p < 0.01$), and loyalty for a chain hotel brand ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, brand attitude ($\beta = 0.466$, $p < 0.01$) and awareness ($\beta = 0.490$, $p < 0.01$) had significant indirect influences on brand loyalty. Table 3 also contains details on the total influence of the research variables. The results showed that brand attachment had the strongest impact on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.589$, $p < 0.01$), followed by brand awareness ($\beta = 0.490$, $p < 0.01$), brand attitude ($\beta = 0.466$, $p < 0.01$), brand trust ($\beta = 0.438$, $p < 0.01$), and SNS engagement ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < 0.01$).
4.3. Test for Metric Invariance and Age Influence

A test for metric invariance was conducted to explore the proposed influence of age on brand loyalty formation. A baseline model was created. All responses were divided into older and younger age groups using a median split method. The older group contained 157 individuals. In contrast, the younger group contained 164 individuals. A total of 10 individuals whose median age was 40 years were removed for this grouping. Within the baseline model, all loadings were restricted to be equal between the two groups. Overall, the result of the baseline model assessment showed that the model adequately fit the data ($\chi^2 = 1353.048$, $df = 594$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.278$, RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.896). This model including older and younger age groups was compared to a series of nested models in which a particular path of interest was equally restricted. A chi-squared test was used for this empirical comparison. The results of this baseline model evaluation along with the invariance test are shown in Table 4 and Figure 2.

| Linkages                                      | High Age Group $(n = 157)$ | Low Age Group $(n = 164)$ | Baseline Model (Freely Estimated) | Nested Model (Equally Constrained) |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| SNS engagement → Brand attitude               | 0.206                       | 0.305                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1353.533^a$        |
| Brand awareness                               | 0.527                       | 0.328                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1356.928^b$        |
| Brand attitude                               | 0.506                       | 0.598                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1357.760^c$        |
| Brand attachment                             | 0.501                       | 0.322                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1354.946^d$        |
| Brand trust                                  | 0.528                       | 0.438                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1353.049^e$        |
| Brand awareness                              | 0.387                       | 0.493                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1353.888^f$        |
| Brand trust→Brand loyalty                    | 0.347                       | 0.502                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1354.651^g$        |
| Brand attachment→Brand loyalty               | 0.704                       | 0.518                     | $\chi^2 (594) = 1353.048$         | $\chi^2 (595) = 1354.718^h$        |

Note: Chi-squared difference test: $^a \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.485, p > 0.05$ (H9a: Not supported) $^b \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 3.880, p < 0.05$ (H9b: Supported) $^c \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 4.712, p < 0.05$ (H9c: Supported) $^d \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 1.889, p < 0.05$ (H9d: Not supported) $^e \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.001, p > 0.05$ (H9e: Not supported) $^f \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.840, p > 0.05$ (H9f: Not supported) $^g \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 1.603, p < 0.05$ (H9g: Not supported) $^h \Delta \chi^2 (1) = 1.670, p > 0.05$ (H9h: Not supported); Goodness-of-fit statistics for the baseline model: $\chi^2 = 1353.048, df = 594, p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.278$, RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.896, IFI = 0.897, TLI = 0.886 $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$.

Our results indicated that while the path from SNS engagement to brand attitude did not differ significantly between groups ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.485, p > 0.05$), the link from SNS engagement to brand awareness was significantly different across the older and younger age groups ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 3.880, p < 0.05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 9a was not supported, and Hypothesis 9b was supported. Our findings also showed that while the linkage from brand attitude to brand trust differed significantly across groups ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 4.712, p < 0.05$), the path from brand attitude to brand attachment was not significantly different between the two groups ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 1.889, p > 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 9c was supported, and Hypothesis 9d was not supported. In addition, the linkages from brand awareness to brand trust ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.001, p > 0.05$) and to brand attachment ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.840, p > 0.05$) were not significantly different across the older and younger age groups. Furthermore, the paths from brand trust to brand loyalty ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 1.603, p > 0.05$) and from brand attachment to brand loyalty ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 1.670, p > 0.05$) did not differ significantly across the older and younger age groups. Therefore, Hypotheses 9e–h were not supported.
5. Discussion

5.1. Research Summary

Traveller loyalty for a brand is indisputably a key to the brand’s success and its healthy business in the chain hotel industry. In this research, we explored the relations among travellers’ SNS engagement, attitude, awareness, trust, and attachment and unearthed the effects of such associations on travellers’ loyalty for a chain hotel brand by considering the impact of age. A quantitative approach with a survey methodology was employed. Data quality testing revealed that all construct measures contained satisfactory levels of reliability and validity. SNS engagement was revealed to be critical since this variable directly/indirectly triggered its subsequent constructs in the formation of brand loyalty. In general, the hypothesized relationships within the proposed conceptual model were supported. Among the research variables, travellers’ attachment to a brand was most influential on loyalty. Some previous studies on customer engagement revealed that customers’ supportive behaviours have positive influences on their loyalty to a brand [45], but this research specified this relationship to the chain hotel industry and proved that travellers’ attachment is the most vital constituent of loyalty formation. This research also went a step further and tested the modifying effect of age. The results revealed that the relations between SNS engagement and brand awareness and between brand attitude and trust were significantly influenced by age. The conceptual framework built in the present study contained a sufficient level of capability to explain the brand loyalty generation process. In summation, the present study successfully attained the research objectives in the chain hotel sector in the pandemic world.

5.2. Overall Research Value

Taking a crucial step by filling the existing voids in the chain hotel literature, the results of this research can be notably viewed in a few ways. First, despite considerable interest in SNSs among travellers, scant research has addressed the possible influence of SNS engagement on the formation of travellers’ loyalty in the chain hotel context in a pandemic world. A conceptual development pertinent to the chain hotel brand has also rarely been made. Our findings and the developed conceptual framework offered a critical foundation regarding SNS engagement and its role in the framework explaining the building of travellers’ brand loyalty. Second, increasing travellers’ level of loyalty is indubitably one of every chain hotel company’s priorities. However, the combined role of attitude, awareness, trust, and attachment in the loyalty generation process for a chain hotel brand has not been fully explored. The findings of this study offered vital information regarding how travellers’ loyalty to a chain hotel brand is built through a convoluted theoretical process including these concepts in a pandemic world. Third, given that the theoretical basis for comprehending the intricate nature of travellers’ approach responses/behaviours for a chain hotel is still not wholly unearthed, our results can be helpful for subsequent research related to the topic. The present study, which empirically linked SNSs and such approach responses/behaviours, accordingly has high value in the growing chain hotel industry.

5.3. Implications Related to SNS Engagement

Our results revealed that SNS engagement is an essential variable directly affecting travellers’ attitudes and awareness and indirectly affecting their trust and attachment in the process of developing loyalty to a chain hotel brand and its healthy business. This finding implies that when the level of SNS engagement of a particular chain hotel brand is high, travellers have a more positive attitude towards the hotel brand and are more aware of the brand. Our findings also imply that travellers with a high level of SNS engagement have stronger trust in the brand, feel attached to the brand, and eventually become loyal to the brand. Theoretically, little is known about SNS engagement and its effect on traveller behaviour in the hotel context. The findings of this study are hence of utmost significance as they added essential information about SNS engagement to the hotel literature. From
the managerial point of view, in order to build customers’ strong brand loyalty, hotel proprietors should focus on boosting their customers’ level of SNS engagement about their hotel brand. Helping customers share their positive experiences with the hotel brand and talk about the brand in an active manner through diverse promotional tactics (e.g., offering discount coupons or gift certificates) can be one way to increase customers’ SNS engagement. As evidenced in this study, this effort contributes to inducing better attitudes, awareness, trust, and attachment, which are fundamental for the development of brand loyalty among hotel customers.

5.4. Moderating Effect of Age

The present study revealed that the associations between SNS engagement and brand awareness and between brand attitude and brand trust were significantly influenced by age. The SNS engagement and brand awareness relationship was stronger in the older age group than in the younger age group (older age group: $\beta = 0.527, p < 0.01$; younger age group: $\beta = 0.328, p < 0.01$). In contrast, the brand attitude and brand trust relationship was stronger in the younger age group than in the older age group (older age group: $\beta = 0.506, p < 0.01$; younger age group: $\beta = 0.598, p < 0.01$). This finding implies that at a similar level of SNS engagement, older customers build a stronger level of brand awareness than younger customers. In addition, our result implies that at a similar level of brand attitude, customers in the younger age group form a stronger level of brand trust than those customers in the older age group.

This finding concerning the difference in customer age has vital meaning in theory and practice. From the theoretical perspective, given that extant studies pay little attention to the age difference and its influence on the process of how customers approach decision formation and behaviours, this research successfully expanded our understanding regarding the moderating influence of age. In particular, the present research significantly adds knowledge to the hospitality literature by deepening the SNS engagement–brand awareness relation and the brand attitude–brand trust relation based on age group differences. From a practical perspective, since these associations include a different level of strength between older and younger age groups, different tactics for fortifying the associations for each age group need to be developed and utilized. As an example, in order to increase brand awareness among older customers, exploiting SNS engagement would be efficient. In addition, in order to enhance brand trust among younger customers, exploiting brand attitude would be effectual.

5.5. Implications of the Greatest Influence of Brand Attachment Loyalty

It was evident that travellers’ attachment to a chain hotel brand was the most influential factor in their loyalty towards the brand. This finding supported the results of extant consumer behaviour and tourism studies that asserted the prominent role of attachment in determining loyalty [14,32,46]. Our finding implies that one of the effective methods of boosting brand loyalty is to address brand attachment in the chain hotel industry. Theoretically, hotel academics should actively involve attachment when building a loyalty framework for the enhancement of a hotel’s effectiveness and comprehensiveness. Practically, recognizing the important function of brand attachment, chain hotel practitioners should find a way to help their customers like the brand and feel attached to it to ensure their healthy and successful business. As evidenced in this study, increasing brand attitude, improving brand awareness, and using SNS promotion can be useful tactics for increasing customers’ level of attachment to chain hotel brands.

5.6. Implications of the Mediating Impact

In this research, an investigation of the indirect association among the research variables revealed the importance of attitude, awareness, trust, and attachment as mediators. In particular, these variables as a group mediated the influence of SNS engagement on brand loyalty. In addition, brand attitude and awareness mediated the impacts of SNS
engagement on brand trust and attachment. Academics and practitioners in the hotel sector need to understand the important mediating natures of attitude, awareness, trust, and attachment in explicating travellers’ approach responses/behaviours for a chain hotel brand. Specifically, active use of these mediators could be essential in the course of theorizing chain hotel customers’ various approaches to decision formation and behaviours. To make the best use of SNS engagement for loyalty development, it is therefore necessary to strengthen these mediators.

5.7. Limitations of the Study and Future Research Areas

This research contained several limitations. First, the present research focused on brand attitude, awareness, trust, and attachment to explore the SNS engagement and brand loyalty linkage. However, previous studies also asserted the significance of diverse affective (e.g., satisfaction and emotions) and conative (e.g., commitment) variables in explaining travellers’ brand loyalty generation process (e.g., [19,20,30]). Future research should expand the proposed model by incorporating these constructs to enhance the model’s comprehensiveness. Second, this research was designed and tested in the chain hotel sector during the pandemic. Therefore, interpreting the findings of this study in other contexts needs to be done with caution. It is recommended that future research assess the applicability and effectiveness of the proposed model in other tourism/business sectors.

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