Influence of Offline Activities and Customer Value Creation on Online Travel Community Continuance Usage Intention

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to empirically test a model that examines the roles of offline activities and customer value creation on tourists' continuance use of online travel communities (OTCs). Hypotheses were tested through a sample of 251 respondents on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). SmartPLS structural equation modelling was used to test the structural model. Results indicated that offline activities significantly influence hedonic and social values, while this support was not found with functional value. Similarly, while offline activities positively influence continuance usage intention, no positive relationship was established between offline activities and recommendation intention. Additionally, the three dimensions of customer value creation positively influenced continuance usage intention. This study suggests that in planning offline activities, managers of OTCs must understand the dynamics of customer value creation in order to enhance social bonds among members and continuous usage of the OTC.

Keywords: Offline activities · Social presence · Customer value creation
Continuous usage intention

1 Introduction

Online travel communities (OTCs) are important for both consumers and tourism firms. OTCs provide consumers with the opportunity to make informed travel decisions through reading about and learning from the experiences of others, who share their stories on such platforms [1], while tourism firms use them as strategic platforms to foster customer engagement and deepen consumer ties to their brands [2]. As organisations increasingly host OTCs, consumer interest in these platforms also steadily increases. For instance, recent reports indicate that while TripAdvisor currently welcomes an average of 455 million unique monthly visitors, Facebook is home to 2.13 billion active users [3, 4]. For Facebook, this is an approximate 73% increase from its 2013 records, which calculated 1.23 billion active users [5]. This promising trend has spurred both firms and private individuals to set up their own online communities.

In spite of this positive trajectory for online communities, the recent experiences of such notable firms as British Airways, AirFrance, Sony, Dell, and the British Broadcasting Corporation—all of which shut down their online communities shortly after launch [6]—create serious concerns that raise critical questions about the sustainability of OTCs. Critics have highlighted that so long as online deviant behaviours remain unchecked, users will continue to lose interest in participating in such communities [7]. In order to improve the confidence of participants, tourism and travel sites are organising offline activities as part of their strategy to reinforce and consolidate established online relationships and maintain a loyal customer base [8]. To this end, offline fan clubs that host informal meetings and gatherings are common in recent times. In most cases, these forums provide a company with an opportunity to propagate its brand and generate positive word-of-mouth reviews [9].

However, evidence from the relationship marketing body of knowledge reveals that consumers are wary of relationships or purchase experiences that accrue little or no value [10, 11]. Customer value is a cardinal determinant of relationship continuance, because consumers often perpetuate the relationship from which they derive the maximum value [10]. Accordingly, firms will settle into advantageous positions if they exploit how offline activities impact customer value. Interestingly, despite numerous investigations on customer value, literature is scarce regarding critical questions relating to offline activities and customer value and how they influence continuance intention in OTCs. Additionally, the studies that examine the post-adoption behaviour of consumers in OTCs are few [12]. This paper aims to fill this gap by developing a model to test the role of offline activities in perceived customer value and their effects on continuance intention in OTCs. This paper seeks to contribute to OTC customer post-adoption behaviour literature by examining the importance of offline activities and how they affect different components of customer value in continuance participation. In so doing, it examines the theoretical issues and managerial practices that foster OTCs.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 OTCs

OTCs offer a communication and networking platform for users and a forum where people can interact, share thoughts on places of interest, and provide reviews on areas they have visited [12, 13]. It also offers the opportunity for travellers to discover what other people think about destinations and facilities [2]. OTCs are changing travellers' consuming behaviour, as travellers rely on the opinions and recommendations of other travellers. These communities rely on members to create content relevant for others. Developing and sustaining communities has become a critical issue for community managers, as active participation is crucial for their long-term survival [12, 14]. To make communities more cohesive, they often organise events and offline activities to offer an opportunity for community members to engage and interact. Previous studies on OTCs have focused on the antecedents of community involvement and contribution [15, 16] and consumer intentions to participate [2]. Additionally, [2] found that the perceived usefulness of provided information positively influences attitudes toward participation, just

as [15] earlier found that participants are motivated to contribute to online communities by social and hedonic benefits. However, the members' sense of belonging increases when offline activities are organised that maintain previously formed social ties [8].

2.2   Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

2.2.1   Social Presence and Customer Value Creation in OTCs

According to Short et al. [17], social presence theory describes the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships". The theory is related to two social psychology concepts: "intimacy"—referring to physical distance between communicators and barriers to communication; television offers greater intimacy than radio—and "immediacy," a measure of the psychological distance that a communicator puts between himself or herself and the object of his/her communication. With the advancement of communication technology and the related increasing usage of the internet for communication and interaction, [18] noted that the social presence theory can contribute to a better understanding of social behaviour in mediated environments. Thus, a stream of research has identified social media as platforms with a high social presence, as they afford communicators the opportunity to present themselves to others as "real people" [19–21]. This implies that social media afford users the opportunity to better understand those they are in contact with through their profiles and real time chat. However, critics contend that with the abundance of deceitful profiles in social media, offline activities such as phone calls and physical meetings are necessary to increase social presence among friends on online platforms [22]. Accordingly, members of OTCs can be encouraged to strengthen their online social ties through offline phone calls. Managers of OTCs can increase the customer value of their sites when offline activities, such as phone calls and face-to-face meetings and gatherings, are regularly organised for members.

Zhang, Guo, Hu, and Liu [23, p. 231] define customer value creation as "the process by which producers and consumers, as peer subjects, co-create value for themselves and each other." This involves dialogue and interaction between the firm and the customer for mutual benefits. Early scholars viewed customer value as a trade-off between quality and price [24]. This perspective measures customer value as a function of the quality of the product and the price paid. Several years later, customer value was conceptualized into five dimensions: functional, conditional, social, emotional, and epistemic values [25]. Subsequently, scholars have measured value as both a unidimensional and multidimensional construct [11, 26–28]. From an online social network perspective, [23] presented customer value creation as a three-dimensional construct, having functional, hedonic, and social values.

Functional value is based on the assumption that individuals are rational problem-solvers [23]. From the perspective of OTCs, functional value encompasses their members' need for information that leads to financial savings and a high quality of service. Firms can send offline messages to members concerning information on new offerings. Additionally, offline activities can be organised to promote the firm's offerings.

Hedonic values have been conceptualized as the feelings and emotive aspects of community involvement [29]. Lee and Hyun [30] report that enjoyable features are critical in influencing participation levels in OTCs. Thus, this argues that incorporating

enjoyable features leading to fun and pleasure in offline activities will increase customer value.

Social value is considered an independent dimension in total customer value that is used to enhance user status and self-esteem [31]. These values are derived as evidence of a long-term engagement within the community; they represent a symbolic status used to emphasise unique traits [31]. Previous research has only focused on online engagement for co-creating consumer values, but little is known about the influence of offline activities. Matei [32] posits that offline activities can foster and enhance connections within the OTC. A strong sense of social presence is expected to lead to a strong intention to engage with the offline activities of the OTC, as the presence of other members can complement online activities and strengthen the ties within communities [8, 17].

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed

H1: The offline activities of OTCs positively influence their functional value.
H2: The offline activities of OTCs positively influence their hedonic value.
H3: The offline activities of OTCs positively influence their social value.

2.2.2 Continuance Intention

Members' continued interest and willingness to engage in a community will have an impact on the long-term survival of an OTC [33]. It is important that members stick together; this is essential in attracting and retaining members [34] and encouraging the continuous use of the platform. Liang, Ho, Li, and Turban [35, p. 78] described the continuance intention to use OTCs as "an indicator that shows the degree to which a user intends to continue using the social networking site." This study examines continuous intention because social media has significantly changed consumers' decision making process and greatly influenced their patronage of hospitality and tourism services. Accordingly, this study will reveal strategies critical for managers of destinations, airlines and hospitality services to enhance consumers' continuous participation in their OTCs. Thus, it is argued that members will continue to use OTCs that promote activities and information sharing that are likely to satisfy functional, hedonic, and social values. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: The functional value of OTCs positively relates to continuance intention.
H5: The hedonic value of OTCs positively relates to continuance intention.
H6: The social value OTCs positively relates to continuance intention.
H7: The offline activities of OTCs positively relate to continuance intention.
H8: The offline activities of OTCs positively relate to recommendation intention.

2.2.3 Recommendation Intention

When members are satisfied with their experience on a platform, they are more likely to invite others [12, 36]. Members' desire to continue using the platform is underpinned by their satisfaction and motivates them to share their positive experiences with others [37, 38].

Accordingly, the hypothesis below is proposed:

H9: Continuous intention of OTC use positively relates to recommendation intention.

3   Research Method

3.1   Sample, Data Collection and Survey Development

The data for this study was collected from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; https://requester.mturk.com) in August 2018, as specified by [30]. To ensure that participants were members of OTCs and maintained accounts therein, the study requested that they indicate the OTC to which they belonged. In total, 251 usable questionnaires were received and analysed with SmartPLS 3.27. The operational definitions of the six constructs examined (Fig. 1) are based on previous studies (Table 1). All six constructs were measured with seven-point multiple items adapted from existing studies.
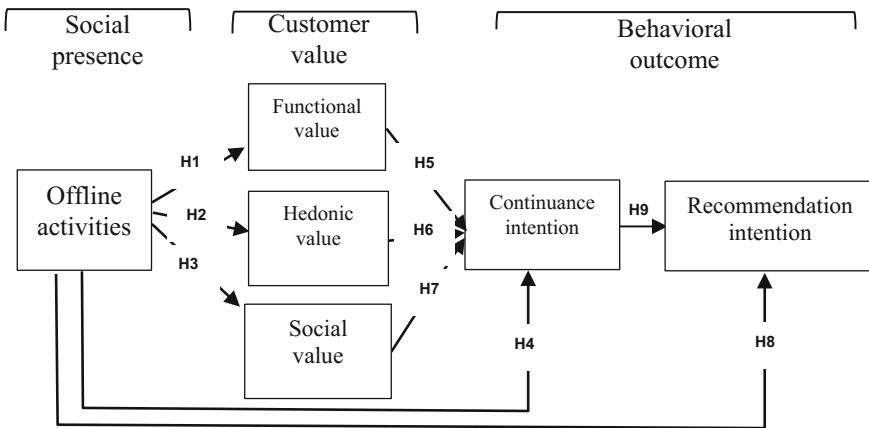

Fig. 1. Conceptual model

Table 1. Operational definitions of constructs

Construct	Extant operational definition	Reference
Offline activities (OA)	Offline interactions aimed at strengthening the bonds of online community members	[8]
Functional value (FV)	Consumer evaluation of information based on its usefulness and accessibility	[23]
Hedonic value (HV)	Consumer evaluation of information based on its ability to offer comfort, pleasure and fun	[23]
Social value (SV)	Consumer evaluation of social media based its ability to satisfy their need for social interaction	[23]
Continuance intention (CI)	Consumer intention to continue using the social network site	[35]
Recommendation intention (RI)	Consumer willingness to share their positive experiences with others and convince them to also use the social network site	[23]

4   Analysis and Results

4.1   Demographic Variables

The sample was male-dominated (65.7%). Marital statuses included single (51.8%), married (40.2%), co-habiting (5.2%), and divorced (2.8%). In terms of education level, bachelor's degree holders were most prominent (68.1%), followed by high school or diploma (19.1%), master's degree (11.2%), and Ph.D. (1.6%) holders. Most respondents were professionals (64.1%), followed by technicians (17.5%), students (10.4%), homemakers (5.6%), and civil servants (2.4%). The monthly income levels (in USD) of the respondents were in the order of $3,100–$4,000 (15.5%), $4,100–$5,000 (11.6%) and $5,100 or more (12.4%). The respondents that visited travel sites twice a week accounted for approximately one third of the sample (34.7%), three visits per week accounted for one fifth (19.9%), respondents with less than one visit per week comprised 19.1% of the sample, those more than five visits 15.5%, and those with four visits 10.8%. The average time spent by the respondents on each visit ranged from thirty minutes to one hour (53%), less than thirty minutes (22.7%), one to two hours (17.5%), and more than two hours (6.8%).

4.2   Measurements, Structural Model, and Hypotheses Testing

The adequacy of the measurement model was assessed based on the criteria of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability. All factor loadings were above the recommended boundary of 0.7 [39]. Likewise, composite reliability conformed to the required values and ranged from 0.882 to 0.93 [40]. The average variance extracted (AVE) values were all greater than the stipulated value of 0.5 [41]. Further, discriminant validity was achieved (Table 3) as the square roots of the AVE values were higher than were the correlations between each construct [42]. Figure 2 illustrates the
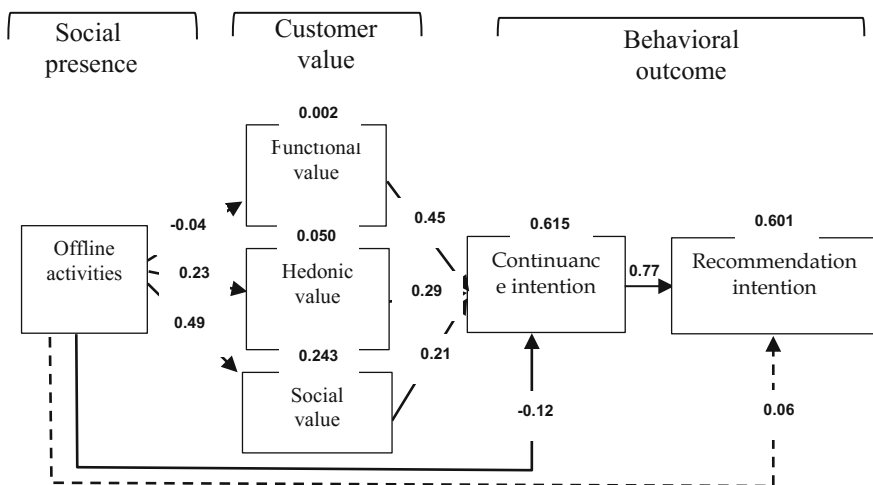

Fig. 2. Structural model results

Table 2. OTC reliability and convergent validity

Variables		Items	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Social presence	Offline activities	OA 1	0.92	0.84	0.93	0.86
		OA 2	0.94			
Customer value	Functional value	FV 1	0.88	0.80	0.88	0.72
		FV 3	0.86			
		FV 4	0.79			
	Hedonic value	HV 2	0.89	0.72	0.88	0.78
		HV 3	0.88			
	Social value	SV 1	0.90	0.89	0.93	0.82
		SV 2	0.90			
		SV 3	0.91			
Behavioural outcome	Continuance intention	CI 1	0.87	0.87	0.91	0.73
		CI 2	0.83			
		CI 3	0.87			
		CI 4	0.83			
	Recommendation intention	RI_1	0.86	0.81	0.89	0.72
		RI_3	0.89			
		RI_4	0.80			

Note the items that loaded below the set criteria were deleted.

result of the structural model analysis for this study, including the coefficient of determination (R^2) and standardized path coefficients for all hypothesized relationships. Below, Table 2 shows the factor loading, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and AVE of the data.

Table 3 shows the discriminant validity and the diagonal values with the AVE.

The relationship between offline activities and functional value was not significant ($\beta = -0.04$ ns). However, the relationship between hedonic value ($\beta = 0.225^{***}$), and social value ($\beta = 0.49^{***}$) was significant. Furthermore, offline activities were found to have a slight influence on continuance intention ($\beta = -0.117^*$) but no direct effect on

Table 3. OTC discriminant validity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) CI	**0.852**					
(2) FV	0.719	**0.845**				
(3) HV	0.683	0.663	**0.884**			
(4) OA	0.03	−0.046	0.225	**0.928**		
(5) RI	0.773	0.714	0.714	0.085	**0.849**	
(6) SV	0.475	0.347	0.588	0.493	0.471	**0.904**

Note The diagonal values in bold are square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE)

recommendation intention ($\beta = 0.063$ ns). Of the customer value dimensions, functional value had the strongest effect on continuance intention ($\beta = 0.449^{***}$), followed by the effects of hedonic value ($\beta = 0.294^{***}$) and social value ($\beta = 0.206^{***}$). Finally, continuance intention had a strong effect on recommendation intention ($\beta = 0.773^{***}$). Offline activities, functional value, hedonic value, social value, and continuance intention were positive and significant (supporting H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, and H9). These antecedents explained 61.5% of the variance in continuance intention, contributing the largest variance proportion, followed by recommendation intention with a total variance of 60.1%, and a social value variance of 24.3%. The variance explained by functional value and hedonic value were trivial (0.002 and 0.050), as according to [43], the coefficient of determination below weak, near weak, and more than moderate, hence, H1 and H8 were not supported.

5   Discussion, Implications and Limitations

The aim of this paper was to develop a model that tests the effects of offline activities on customer value and behaviour in OTCs. Thus, this study returned mixed results, finding that offline activities significantly influence social value and hedonic value but did not impact functional value. Similarly, while support was found for offline activities influencing continuance intention, meaningful support was not found regarding offline activities and recommendation intention. The results also show that the three dimensions of customer value are positive predictors of continuance intention. Similarly, the study found that continuance intention has a significant effect on recommendation intention.

Hedonic value demonstrated a significant relationship with offline activities. Consistent with the findings of [44], the incorporation of activities leading to pleasure and entertainment was found to build emotional ties of members in offline contexts and also lead to cohesiveness in online platforms. Interestingly, the case was different for functional value. Contrary to [45] who argued that every touchpoint is an opportunity to facilitate interaction and enhance the customer experience with the brand, this study did not establish a positive relationship between functional value with offline activities. Thus, this suggests that offline activities should de-emphasize on the firms' offerings but focus primarily on the entertainment value of such events. However, among the three dimensions of customer value, social value showed the strongest relationship with offline activities. Luo & Huang [46] indicated that social loneliness is a critical contributor to membership in OTCs; members find social and emotional support that lead to strong ties and a sense of identification [30]. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that offline activities such as phone calls, email communication, and gatherings like parties and picnics strengthen friendly online ties and increase the online social presence among members [47].

This study also contributes theoretically to tourism literature. First, it extends the social presence theory in OTCs—thus, a contribution to the study of post-adoption behaviour of consumers in OTCs. Offline communications strongly contribute to cohesiveness and strengthen social presence in OTCs. Second, by integrating customer value into the model, this study makes valuable contributions to the tourism literature

by describing how different dimensions of customer value respond to offline activities. Thirdly and lastly, the study has also identified customer value as critical in continuance participation in OTCs. Zhang et al. [23] identified customer value as a determinant of stickiness, but it nonetheless remains unclear how it affects continuance participation. It is evident through the findings that customer value is also critical, especially as stickiness is perceived as an antecedent of continuance participation [48].

Managerially, this study reveals two ways firms can optimize the value of OTCs. In planning offline activities, managers should de-emphasize programs that promote the firm's products and pay more attention to enhancing the social and entertainment value of such events. For instance, in planning gatherings, members are likely to derive maximum value when such meetings promote effective networking sessions with the likelihood of contact exchanges that will promote email and phone communications among members. Similarly, the food, music, and layouts of such venues should gratify members' desire for pleasure and enjoyment. However, in the day-to-day management of the OTCs, managers should encourage information sharing on travel destinations, products, and prices. These factors have been highlighted as key to member stickiness on OTCs [23].

The study is not without limitations. Only two items were used in some dimensions because other items were dropped, as their low factor loading affected other items. It is believed this likely impacts the results, and it is therefore suggested that future studies consider measurement scale validation, particularly in offline activities. Additionally, future research can look beyond the functional, hedonic and social value dimensions to examine if there are other factors that can influence customer value creation. This included shared interest around cultural value, perception of spiritual and religious values and value perceptions regarding recognition and wisdom.

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