

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

A Study on the Influence of the Information Characteristics of Airline Social Media on e-WOM, Brand Equity and Trust

Eun-Ju Seo¹ and Jin-Woo Park^{2,*}¹International Airport Service Incheon, Asiana Airlines, Incheon-City 400-340, South Korea²School of Business, Korea Aerospace University, 76 Hangeongdaehak-ro, Deokyang-gu, South Korea

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Abstract:**Background:**

This study investigates the effect of three of the information characteristics of airline social media – information quantity, information credibility and information quality – on brand equity and trust through electronic Word-Of-Mouth (e-WOM).

Methods:

For the analysis, we surveyed 430 passengers who had used airline social media and analyzed the collected data using a structural equation.

Results:

The results of the analysis showed that while the information quantity and information quality of airline social media had a significant effect on e-WOM, information credibility did not have a significant effect. e-WOM had a significant effect on brand awareness and brand image. Brand image and e-WOM also had a significant effect on trust, but brand awareness did not have a statistically significant effect on trust.

Conclusion:

This study establishes a model for the information characteristics of social media and can be utilized as basic data to explain how airlines should manage and utilize social media information.

Keywords: Information Quantity, Information Credibility, Information Quality, e-WOM, Brand Equity, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the internet is the basic framework in our society [1]. Facebook, the world's largest Social Network Service (SNS), already had more than 2 trillion posts by 2015, and in the same year, more than 100 million new videos were posted every month [2, 3], and more than 100 million new videos are posted every month. Information can have a positive effect on an individual's decision making and performance, but due to human limitations in information processing, too much information can cause information overload [4, 5]. The Web 2.0 program is a large aggregate of interactive technologies and services that enables communication and collaboration *via* social connections among individuals, and social media refers to all social activities or media based on Web 2.0 [6, 7]. The characteristics of social media are defined as participation, openness, conversation, community and fellowship [8]. In other words, it can be interpreted as meaning that everyone can participate and give and take opinions openly, thereby forming a

* Address Correspondence to this author at the School of Business, Korea Aerospace University, 76 Hangeongdaehak-ro, Deokyang-gu, South Korea; Tel: +82-3000354; E-mail: jwpark@kau.ac.kr

community between people who have the same opinions and sharing fellowship.

Providing a new platform of e-WOM, social media has brought a new market to e-WOM by allowing users to interact using the existing networks. Now, people can freely exchange their opinions and experiences about products or services with their friends and acquaintances through social media [9]. Since the aviation industry is very sensitive to the influence of environmental exogenous variables compared to other industries, it is necessary to pay attention to the changes around the companies as well as the competitiveness of airlines. In particular, the aviation industry is different from other industries, as the brand image of airlines has a significant impact on the corporate value. Unlike the traditional marketing, customers are the main players in social marketing. They voluntarily and actively engage in corporate marketing activities using social media, and create public opinions by sharing and developing their opinions about corporate events. The importance of airline marketing through social media was shown in many cases [10]. For example, in 2008, the United Airlines had failed to deliver its services to a passenger and this was produced as the “United Brakes Guitars” video content. The video was translated into five different languages through social media and it adversely affected the airline. In the airline industry, many passengers who have used airlines opt to share information freely about airlines through social media, and such information is considered to be an important factor in recognizing and evaluating airlines. The utilization of social media has continuously increased for airlines in Korea, too, and there are currently more than 1.6 million Korean passengers using the Facebook pages for domestic airlines such as Korean Air, Asiana and Jeju Air. The importance of social media in airlines is increasing, but there is little research on the subject. In particular, it would be prudent for airlines to study the effects of information characteristics of social media because these characteristics might play significant roles in determining factors such as brand awareness and differentiated brand value. However, this research opportunity has thus far been overlooked. Therefore, this study aims to determine the effects of the information characteristics of airline social media on brand equity and trust through e-WOM. Specifically, this study analyzes the effects of three elements of information characteristics - information quantity, information credibility and information quality - on e-WOM, brand awareness, brand image and trust. To accomplish this goal, we developed a research model, which is shown in Fig. (1), based on previous studies.

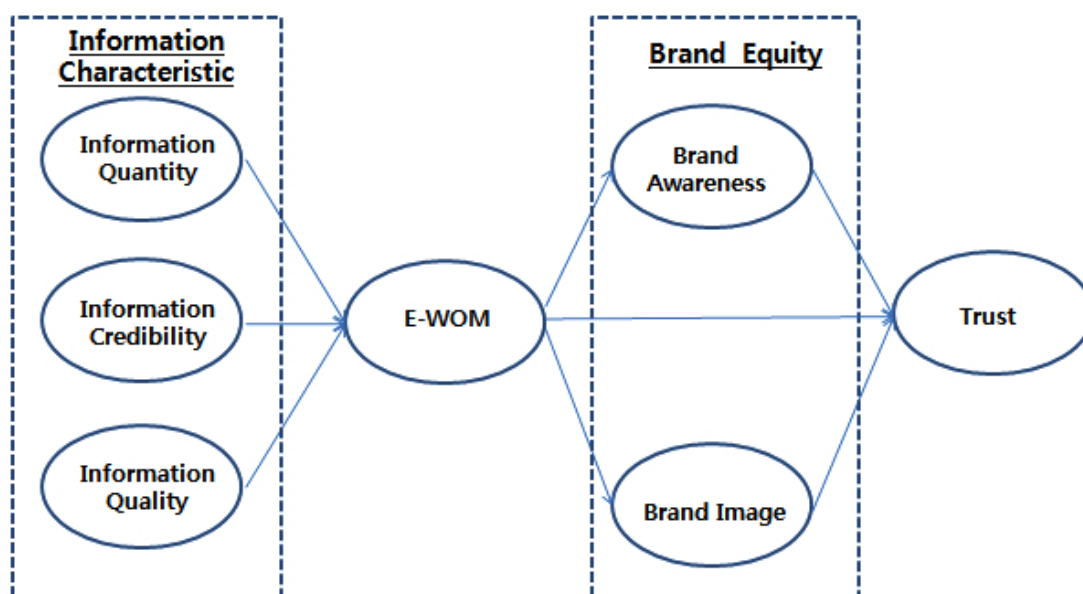


Fig. (1). Research model.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Social Media

Social media refers to web-based services on which users write their own profiles introducing themselves and share connections through relationships among other users. Social media supports mutual communication arising on the basis of such connections [11]. Flex *et al.* [12] defined social media marketing as an interdisciplinary and cross-functional

concept that involves the use of social media to create value for stakeholders and achieve organisational goals. In addition, it is a space where consumers can exchange discussions and ideas. Interaction in social media is fundamentally changing communication between brand and customer [13, 14]. Information is defined as data that conveys messages that are analyzed or contextualized, and information is differentiated depending on the perception of the recipient [15]. Several prior studies have shown that information quantity and information quality are important factors affecting the decision-making process [16, 17]. The results of such studies have been established as information processing theory. Because information on social media can be created by almost every user, the importance of information credibility and information quality is increasingly emphasized, and consumers tend to seek out products and services after feeling satisfied with the information provided [18, 19]. Sussman and Siegal [20] proposed the information adoption model in which information quality consisted of argument quality, source credibility, information usefulness and information adoption. In this study, the information characteristics of airline social media were categorized as information quantity, information credibility and information quality on the basis of information processing theory and the information adoption model.

2.2. Information Characteristics

Information quantity has mainly been defined in two dimensions – the number of choices or the amount of information per choice [21, 22]. It has a close relationship with information overload because it deals with the physical amount of information [4, 23]. Companies communicate information about products and services to persuade consumers and achieve sales [24]. Large amounts of information play a positive role in consumer purchasing behavior [22]. As information quantity increases, consumer awareness increases, the perception of risk due to uncertainty when purchasing goods or services decreases, and the amount of information consumers can obtain when purchasing goods and services increases. All of this will consequently have an effect on the diffusion of WOM and the intent to purchase [25 - 27].

Information credibility is the extent to which a recipient perceives that an information source has knowledge, techniques and experience related to the products or services in question and will provide unbiased opinions and objective information [28]. Information coming and going among consumer-driven conversations is more reliable compared to commercial information provided unilaterally, and it contains a greater variety and quantity of information about goods and services than commercially-provided information [29, 30]. Consumers want to be given more useful information, or they want to judge or evaluate information to make it more useful. Therefore, credibility can be said to play an important role in information exchanges and knowledge integration [31]. DeLone and Mclean [32] suggested that if the primary purpose of a website was information delivery, then the information credibility of that website had a positive effect on user attitude. As the perception of credibility regarding WOM information increases, the positive effects on usefulness, WOM activities and purchasing intent increase [33, 34]. Information credibility is an important variable affecting WOM and product-related attitude [35].

Information quality is the degree to which decision makers are assisted in evaluating products or services and the usefulness of information available for decision making [36]. In particular, the information quality provided on the web is the degree to which users perceive corresponding value for content provided on the web [37]. A higher level of information quality contained in social network e-WOM makes it easier to share and participate in e-WOM [38]. Effective information processing is determined by information quality and information quantity, and the improvement of information quality has been suggested as a strategy for enhancing the efficiency of information processing [39, 40]. Many previous studies on information quality have demonstrated that information quality is a factor that positively affects e-WOM [41]. Based on previous studies on information quantity, information credibility and information quality, the following hypotheses were established in this study.

- H1. Information quantity in social media will have a significant positive effect on e-WOM.
- H2. Information credibility in social media will have a significant positive effect on e-WOM.
- H3. Information quality in social media will have a significant positive effect on e-WOM.

2.3. e-WOM

e-WOM has long been considered an influential marketing tool [42], and social media has been acknowledged as the best platform for e-WOM [43, 44]. e-WOM is a different concept than conventional WOM in many ways [45] and can be defined as the exchanges of service evaluations among people meeting on the internet and the sharing of

opinions with each other [46 - 48]. Social media allows many people to disseminate e-WOM rapidly and easily, and even the process of delivering consentient posts enables thoughts to be shared [49]. Hence, consumers become increasingly dependent on social media to obtain information on brands [50, 51]. Consumers retrieve information posted by people with prior experience using a good or service to identify information and reduce anxiety before purchasing that product or service [52]. Information disseminated *via* WOM tends to be accepted as equitable, fair and unexaggerated [53], and WOM forms consumer attitudes towards brands [54].

In the current digital age, which is continuing to expand, the process in which consumers express opinions online regarding products they've purchased or services they've used is a representative form of e-WOM [55]. Research on the effect of e-WOM has been conducted by various scholars. Reginal *et al* [56] suggested that the vividness and usefulness of e-WOM had a statistically significant effect on brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty and the perceived quality variables of brand equity, while Kim [57] argued that positive activities in marketing communication had a positive effect on brand awareness and brand image. Yim [58] showed that e-WOM had a significant effect on brand awareness, and Sri *et al.* [59] and Li [60] also confirmed that WOM had a positive effect on brand awareness and brand image. Bickart and Schindler [42] showed that power blogs played a leading role in e-WOM and that on the part of consumers, information obtained on power blogs gained higher reliability than that obtained from general corporate websites. In addition, the former information had a greater effect on brand evaluation. In addition, e-WOM forms a feeling of trust for the sender, and WOM influences the evaluation of credibility more effectively [61, 62]. Based on these previous studies on e-WOM, the following hypotheses were established in this study.

H4. e-WOM will have a significant positive effect on brand awareness.

H5. e-WOM will have a significant positive effect on brand image.

H6. e-WOM will have a significant positive effect on trust.

2.4. Brand Equity

Brand equity is the sum of assets and liabilities related to the name and symbol of a brand, and the value of that brand's products will increase as consumers cultivate a favorable feeling about the brand [63]. Brand equity is imprinted as a value distinguished from other products in the memory structure of consumers by combining various attributes that brands have. Therefore, brand equity appears in combination with socio-cultural phenomena beyond symbolic meanings sought by simple product names or brands, and this concept can be explained by dividing brand equity into brand awareness and brand image [64]. Brand awareness refers to consumers' ability to identify brands in different environmental conditions, that is to say, the ability to remember brands [65]. Brand image constitutes the basis of forming the image, attitude and trust toward brands. It is a considerably important concept in that it is the first purchasing step contained in the purchasing consideration sets of consumers. Therefore, when consumers develop trust toward a brand, brand awareness is connected to the concept of product quality [66]. Consumers recognize and/or recall certain brands *via* brand names, logos, symbols, etc., and the formation of brand awareness informs the consumer of brand names and increases the likelihood that such brands will be included in the selection of potential goods or services that consumers will select, thereby increasing the possibility of such brands finally being selected [67]. Brand awareness is enhanced by increasing brand intimacy through repetitive exposure for brand recognition, and companies emphasize the appropriate product family or encourage strong associations with other purchased items and consumption cues to cultivate brand recall [68]. Brand image is a psychological structure system formed by consumers when emotions about the product itself (*e.g.* feelings and beliefs about brands) are combined with indirectly related items. This means that certain brands will be accepted *via* the consumer's sensory organs [69]. Brand image consists of a combination of physical elements, emotions and psychological elements that consumers feel. Positive brand image can be facilitated by a marketing program that has strong, positive and unique associations with brands in the memory of consumers. It can be created through various channels not controlled by marketing managers such as direct experiences, consumer reports or WOM [64].

2.5. Trust

Trust is a concept that has received attention in a variety of social sciences such as psychology, sociology, economics, political science, history and social biology [70]. Trust indicates willingness to have confidence to rely on and exchange with the other [71]. Trust is often used interchangeably with concepts such as confidence and faith. Trust is basically a risk-taking process, and it can be defined as making a selection despite the possibility of suffering damage from other people in a certain situation. Confidence can be defined as acting without taking into consideration any

alternatives under non-dangerous conditions [72]. According to Shaw [73], faith is a belief that one has about any information or thoughts beyond reason and is difficult to change overall, while trust is a breakable or retractable belief. Yamagishi [74] showed that social uncertainty existed everywhere, and trust was the most effective alternative to solve it. Trust can be defined as the belief that the other party’s words or promises are reliable and that the other party will fulfill his/her obligations in the relationship [75]. Trust reduces transaction costs and triggers cooperation by encouraging a desire for cooperation in the exchange relationship between parties and alleviating transaction uncertainty [76].

Consumers become more confident of the brand as their brand awareness increases, and a greater amount of prior information has a positive effect on brand credibility and brand familiarity, thereby finally increasing the likelihood of purchase. As such, companies benefit from enhancing brand awareness [77]. It has been shown that brand awareness has a positive effect on products and companies, and brand image also has a significant effect on trust [78, 79]. Based on previous studies on brand awareness, brand image and trust, this study established the followings hypotheses.

H7. Brand awareness will have a significant positive effect on trust.

H8. Brand image will have a significant positive effect on trust.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The questionnaire used in this study was prepared by first conducting preliminary examinations based on the existing literature and then supplementing and revising the contents of the survey. The questionnaire divided the information characteristics of airline social media into information quantity (3), information credibility (3) and information quality (3), thereby forming nine questions. In addition, the survey asked general questions about demographic characteristics and airline social media and its use, as well as specific questions about factors such as e-WOM, brand awareness, brand image and trust. A Likert 5-point scale was employed, where 5 points indicated “very much” and 1 point indicated “not at all”. The survey was conducted at Incheon International Airport and Gimpo International Airport from August 11, 2017 to September 15, 2017 for Koreans who had used airline social media. A total of 450 copies of the questionnaire were distributed. Of the 442 copies that were returned, 12 were excluded due to insincerity in completing the survey, leaving 430 copies for the final analysis. Table 1 shows the measurement items for the survey.

Table 1. Survey Items.

Variable	Measurement Items
Information Quantity	Airline social media has a lot of information. There is a lot of information about airlines on social media. Many people post a lot of information about airlines on social media.
Information Credibility	I think that information in airline social media is trustworthy. I think that information in airline social media is correct. I think that information in airline social media is influential.
Information Quality	I can understand information in airline social media easily. I think that information in airline social media is certain. I think that overall, information quality in social media is good.
e-WOM	I will leave a positive opinion about the airline that I used on my social media. I will recommend using the airline that I used through my social media. I will recommend using the airline that I used to my social media acquaintances.
Brand Awareness	I can always recognize this airline brand. I know the characteristics of this airline. I can remember the logo of this airline well.
Brand Image	This airline is a leading airline in the same industry. I have impressive experience with this airline. This airline is a customer-centered company.
Trust	The service of this airline is reliable. I think that this airline will not hide important information that I need to know. I believe that this airline will honor its promises.

To analyze the characteristics of the respondents, we conducted a frequency analysis of the demographic and general characteristics. The respondents included 235 (54.7%) women and 195 (45.3%) men. 159 (37.0%) of the respondents were between the age of 30 and 39, 149 (34.6%) were between 20 and 29, 75 (17.4%) were between 40 and 49, 30 (7.0%) were 50 and older, and 17 (4.0%) were under 20. 367 (85.3%) of the respondents were traveling for

tourism/vacation purposes, 34 (7.9%) were on business trips or fulfilling other commercial purposes, 15 (3.5%) were visiting friends and/or relatives, 9 (2.1%) were travelling for education and meeting purposes, and 5 (2.1%) reported “other” purposes. This indicated that the majority of airline use was four tourism/vacations. 188 (47.3%) of the respondents used Korean Air, 154 (35.8%) used Asiana Airlines, 72 (16.7%) used domestic low cost airlines, 11 (2.6%) used foreign airlines, and 5 (1.2%) used foreign low cost airlines. 163 (37.9%) of the respondents flew 2-3 times per year, 149 (34.6%) flew once per year, 77 (17.9%) flew 4-5 times per year, 20 (4.7%) flew more than 10 times per year, 14 (3.3%) flew 6-7 times per year, and 7 (1.6%) flew 8-9 times per year (Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Category		Frequency (person)	Ratio (%)
Gender	Male	195	45.3
	Female	235	54.7
Age	Under 20	17	4.0
	20 – 29	149	34.6
	30 - 39	159	37.0
	40 - 49	75	17.4
	50 and over	30	7.0
Purpose of Trip	Business	34	7.9
	Tourism/vacation	367	85.3
	Education or meeting	9	2.1
	Visiting friends or relatives	15	3.5
	Other	5	1.2
Airline social media used	Asiana Airlines	154	35.8
	Korean Airlines	188	43.7
	Foreign airlines	11	2.6
	Korean low cost carriers	72	16.7
	Foreign low cost carriers	5	1.2
Number of using airlines per year	1	149	34.6
	2-3	163	37.9
	4-5	77	17.9
	6-7	14	3.3
	8-9	7	1.6
	More than 10 times	20	4.7
Total number of respondents		430	100%

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

In the present study, we verified the validity by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis for a measurement model before verifying the research hypotheses. Convergent validity was obtained by showing that the values of the Squared Multiple Correlations (SMCs) for all measured items were 0.5 or more while the values of the Standardized Regression Coefficients (SRCs) were 0.7 or more. Table 3 shows the results of the confirmatory factor analysis of items measured for each construct in this study.

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis for constructs.

Construct	Variable Measured	SMC	Regression Coefficient (C.R.)	Standardized Regression Coefficient	α
Characteristics of Information	Information Quantity 1	0.72	1.04(18.77)	0.85	0.88
	Information Quantity 2	0.80	1.12(19.50)	0.89	
	Information Quantity 3	0.62	1.00(Fix)	0.79	
	Credibility 1	0.52	1.02(21.06)	0.83	0.86
	Credibility 2	0.68	1.00(Fix)	0.86	
	Credibility 3	0.74	0.94(18.68)	0.77	
	Quality 1	0.52	0.87(16.66)	0.72	0.85
	Quality 2	0.72	1.08(21.13)	0.85	
	Quality 3	0.72	1.00(Fix)	0.85	

Note: α = Cronbach' α

A measurement model analysis was performed after the confirmatory factor analysis to combine all factors and test the fit of the model. The model fit in this study was $\chi^2=447.66$, $df=149$, $CMIN/DF=3.00$, $p=0.00$, $GFI=0.91$, $NFI=0.92$, $IFI=0.95$, $CFI=0.95$, $RMR=0.03$ and $RMSEA=0.07$. This indicated that all indices met the acceptance levels and the overall fit was good. Furthermore, after calculating for the respective potential variables in the measurement model, the AVE values of all constructs indicated 0.5 or more. Therefore, convergent validity existed between the measurement variables used in this study.

The structural equation model analysis was conducted to verify the hypotheses. The results showed that the fit index was $\chi^2=566.36$, $df=158$, $CMIN/DF=3.59$, $p<0.001$, $GFI=0.89$, $AGFI=0.85$, $RMR=0.07$, $CFI=0.93$, $TLI=0.91$ and $RMSEA=0.08$, satisfying the acceptance level of fit. Therefore, the structural model presented in this study was judged as fit. The verification results for the hypotheses are shown in Fig. (2).

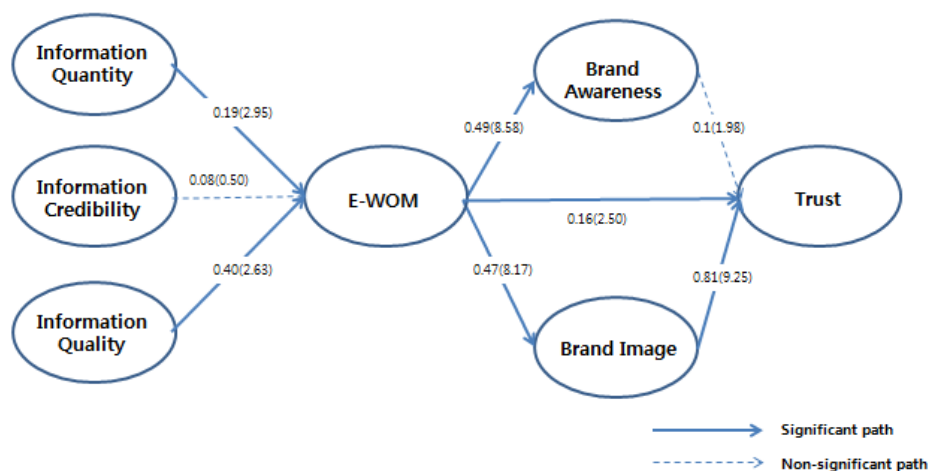


Fig. (2). Analysis Results of Research Model.

Among the information characteristics in social media, the effect of information quantity on e-WOM was $\beta=0.19$, $C.R.=2.95(p<0.001)$, confirming that it had a statistically significant effect. This indicates that information quantity in social media is a leading variable capable of activating e-WOM. Information quality in social media had a statistically significant effect on e-WOM as $\beta=0.40$, $C.R.=2.63 (p<0.001)$, showing that as the quality of information increased, e-WOM activity increased. The result of this study was in accordance with the previous argument [80] that the quantity of information and information quality have a significant impact on word-of-mouth activities. e-WOM had a statistically significant effect on brand awareness and brand image, which were the main factors of brand equity. The results of the analysis for the effect of e-WOM on brand awareness were $\beta=0.49$, $C.R.=8.58(p<0.001)$, while the results for the effect of e-WOM on brand image were $\beta=0.47$, $C.R.=8.17(p<0.001)$. The results of this study were consistent with the results through several previous studies [56, 58 - 60]. In other words, when e-WOM was activated, brand awareness increased. In addition, brand awareness could be improved through e-WOM activities, and when an airline was remembered or identified, this was reflected in the memories of the consumers. However, among the information characteristic variables, information credibility did not have a significant effect on e-WOM. In addition, while brand awareness did not have a significant effect on trust, brand image and e-WOM were confirmed to have a statistically significant effect on trust. The value of analysis for the effect of brand image on trust was $\beta=0.81$, $C.R.=9.25(p<0.001)$, and for e-WOM, it was $\beta=0.16$, $C.R.=2.50(p<0.001)$. This indicated that as the brand image improved, deeper trust formed, and the customers for which trust was established were more important from a company’s perspective because they shared the values and resources of the company and developed relationships with the company. In other words, a positive e-WOM could strengthen the brand image and establish a strong level of trust between brand and customer. Furthermore, e-WOM had a direct effect on trust formation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated information characteristics in social media and identified changes is consumer perceptive

responses. It explored the effect relationships of information characteristics in social media on e-WOM, brand equity and trust. The results of this study can be summarized as follows. Among airline information quality variables in social media, information quantity and information quality had a significant effect on e-WOM, while brand image had a significant effect on trust. Finally, e-WOM had a direct and significant effect on trust.

The implications of this study are as follows. First, we derived new variables related to information characteristics in airline social media through previous research on information characteristics in social media. Based on information processing theory and the information adoption model, we selected information quantity, information credibility and information quality as information characteristics in social media. Second, given that there is almost no research on social media marketing related to the aviation industry, this study has an academic implication in that it is the first study to empirically analyze the effect relationships of information characteristics in airline social media on brand equity and trust. Third, this study illustrated a direct response through which e-WOM activities related to airlines occurring in social media affected trust, indicating substantial changes in customer attitude and an indirect effect relationship through brand equity.

The practical implications of this study can be presented as follows. First, airline marketing-related staff and decision makers should provide more and higher-quality information to their customers and activate positive e-WOM. Social media allows opinion leaders to create profiles of brands amid conversations in social media as part of their daily lives and naturally promote these brands. People will see posted texts, photos and videotapes, and they will spread this information and share their own opinions as well. However, it should be taken into account that e-WOM follows particular directions online. In addition, many consumers are capable of sifting through vast amounts of information, screening it for items of interest, collecting desired content and evaluating it in a calm, sophisticated manner. More importantly, the daily lives that play out on social media can affect corporate brand equity and trust. Many companies and organizations already recognize that brand image is an important component of brand equity. Strong brands have great value, significantly reduce the perception of risk that consumers feel and affect consumer decision making. Second, the current perception of the customer concept is flawed. Relational marketing is needed to cultivate a more nuanced perception. This type of marketing aims to form authentic bonds like those that exist in human relationships, and it recognizes that existing customers will interact with new customers who are considering particular products and services. A stronger relationship can be built by forming and maintaining long-term bonding relationships with customers through a holistic, personalized brand experience. These strengthened relationships do not collapse easily.

The limitations of this study and future research tasks are as follows. First, we failed to divide the types of information in social media in detail and study them. Information in social media is vast, making it difficult to both estimate its amount and distinguish its types. However, research can be performed by differentiating information that users have intentionally exposed themselves to, information that users have subconsciously posted and information that corporate marketers have provided through official accounts. Second, the variables that affect the e-WOM are important, but the variables affected by e-WOM should also be considered as an important factor. Therefore, it will have great significance in airline social media research if the variables to be influenced through e-WOM on airline social media are included in the future research. Third, this study investigated only Korean airline passengers, resulting in a lack of representativeness in the sample. Of the survey respondents, only 3.8% of them used non-Korean airlines. In the future, a comprehensive study should be conducted for overseas cases or foreign airlines. If these limitations are addressed in future studies, it will be of great help not only to aviation companies, but also to marketers in all fields who are concerned about social media marketing strategies and decision making.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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