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Author(s): Ukpabi, D.C.; Karjaluoto, H.; Olaleye, S.; Mogaji, E.

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Customer Value Framework and Recommendation Intention: The Moderating Role of Customer Characteristics in an Online Travel Community

Dandison Ukpabi¹, Heikki Karjaluoto¹, Sunday Olaleye², Emmanuel Mogaji³

¹University of Jyväskylä, Finland

dandison.c.ukpabi@jyu.fi

heikki.karjaluoto@jyu.fi

²University of Oulu, Finland

sunday.olaleye@oulu.fi

³University of Greenwich, Greenwich, UK

e.o.mogaji@greenwich.ac.uk

Abstract

The aim of this study was to develop and test a model that examined the interactions among the customer value framework, recommendation intention and customer characteristics in an online travel community (OTC). Data were obtained using Amazon Mechanical Turk from 251 members of an OTC as a sample. The partial least squares method was used to analyse the data. We found that all the variables of the customer value framework, including functional value, hedonic value and social value, were positively related to recommendation intention. In addition, using multi-group analyses, the study found differences between how different customer segments perceive each of the value dimensions and their effect on recommendation intention. Theoretical and managerial implications are offered.

Keywords: customer value framework, recommendation intention, customer characteristics, online travel community

1. Introduction

Online travel communities (OTCs) provide consumers with a platform for sharing travel experiences [1]. Due to the value that consumers gain from such a platform, the OTC has become a motivator and a critical information source for travel decisions [2]. For instance, while those who join travel booking sites are motivated by the informational content (i.e. the quality of the reviews), including information on the brand or the destination's offering and attractiveness [3], community members on social networking and blogsites are motivated by social, hedonic and altruistic value [4, 5].

Consumer behaviour theorists argue that consumer needs and preferences underlie value perceptions [6]. Thus, the customer value framework has been conceptualised to clarify the understanding and enhance the measurement of customer value [7]. The components of customer value vary across different contexts; however, most consumer behaviour literature typifies customer value into functional, social and hedonic value [6]. Several studies have linked customer value to either positive word of mouth or recommendation intention [8, 9]. In the OTC literature, a positive association exists between customer value and continuous participation [10]. Additionally, consumer characteristics have been found to play different roles in different consumption contexts. For instance, [11] found that males and females differ significantly regarding

satisfaction, relationship maintenance, entertainment and disconfirmation of entertainment with Facebook. Understanding how customer value impacts recommendation intention in OTCs is critical because the sustainability of OTCs depends on new members who join the platform, of whom a significant number have often been motivated by the recommendations of existing users [12]. Accordingly, this study has two main objectives: examining the effect of the customer value framework on recommendation intention and understanding the role of the customer value framework on a participant's characteristics in relation to recommendation intention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumer value framework

Consumer value is considered the overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given [13]. [14, p. 46] defined customer value as an 'interactive, relativistic preference and experience'. [6] recognised the inconclusive effort towards properly describing what consumer value entails because it was not made clear whether customer value is a summative-based (benefits/fewer sacrifices) or a ratio-based (benefits divided by sacrifices) evaluation. They drew on integrated and extended previous conceptual foundations of customer value to develop the customer value framework, which identifies four major types of value that can be created by organisations—functional/instrumental, experiential/hedonic, symbolic/expressive and cost/sacrifice. A recent study sought to develop a better understanding of the framework. [15] posited that consumer value involves a trade-off process, where customers evaluate the benefits received (either utilitarian or hedonic) and the sacrifices given (either monetary or non-monetary) from using a product/service. This was further reiterated by [9], who defined consumer value as the process by which producers and consumers, as peer subjects, co-create value for themselves and each other; these authors also presented customer value creation as a three-dimensional construct that has functional, hedonic and social value.

Functional value is based on the assumption that individuals are rational problem solvers [9]. From the perspective of OTCs, functional value encompasses their members' need for information, which leads to financial savings and high-quality service. It also recognises the desired characteristics of the OTC, which makes it more encouraging to use [6]. Functional value is derivable if an OTC has the appropriate features, functions, attributes, appropriate performance levels (e.g. reliability) and appropriate outcomes and operational benefits [9]. By contrast, social value is considered an independent dimension in total customer value that enhances user status and self-esteem [16]. These value offers are derived as evidence of long-term engagement within the community; they represent a symbolic status that is used to emphasise unique traits [16]. Social value closely relates to the symbolic and expressive value of OTCs, which highlight the extent to which users attach or associate psychological meaning to their engagement in the community [6]. Previous research has only focused on online engagement for co-creating consumer value, but little is known about its influence on recommendation intention in an OTC. Finally, hedonic value has been conceptualised as the feelings and emotive

aspects of community involvement [17]. It represents the extent to which an OTC creates appropriate experiences, feelings and emotions for its users [6]. [18] reported that enjoyable features are critical in influencing participation levels in OTCs.

2.2 The dynamics of customer characteristics in OTCs

While customer segmentation has been performed mainly based on gender, it is essential to recognise that gender refers to psychological features that are related to biological nature and sociological variables [19]. Notably, these differ between males and females. Studies have shown that there are differences in how men and women think and behave based on their role in society. Research on gender differences has suggested that males and females possess different attitudes and preferences in using different information systems [20]. [21] recognised that these attributes can influence the behaviours and attitudes of each gender differently regarding consumption activities. [22] also found that female consumers are more likely to look for hedonic value because they are sensitive, intuitive, passionate, communal goal-oriented and linked with femininity. In addition, females are relationally oriented, and they like to maintain ties by connecting with friends and engaging in social activities [11]. Conversely, male consumers are more likely to look for functional value because they tend to be independent, rational and individually goal-oriented [22]. They are also more rational and focused on task-oriented activities [11].

Age has been used as a variable to ascertain how individuals evaluate value based on their experience with brands [19]. Several studies have shown that patterns of consumption differ significantly between age groups [21]. While young consumers often have a low-income status and are less experienced in product purchasing compared to older consumers, they exhibit quite different and distinctive online shopping patterns [21] and information searching processes. For instance, young people are more likely to engage in consumer-generated media when planning their vacations than are older people [23]. However, because older consumers have wider circles of friends, they are more likely to recommend OTCs when their information needs are met. Customers who perceive that they obtain greater value from using a service and thus are satisfied with it will continue to use it [15]. The time spent engaging with other users on an OTC is important for its survival [10], suggesting the need to make it more valuable for users. Individuals participate in social networks due to perceived value as hedonic value, utilitarian value and social value [24]. Likewise, stickiness—an integrated index for measuring individuals' duration of stay in online communities, frequency of visits and willingness to revisit [24]—has been considered an important behavioural outcome to explore in online communities [18]. It will help ensure a longer period of participation in community activities and interaction with other members in the community [25]. Given that OTCs are relationship-centric and inherently participatory [26], the adequate sharing of travel information and knowledge is a fundamental concern. A community cannot exist, let alone be vibrant and effective, without engagement [27]. Likewise, users' perception of hedonic and utilitarian value offers in OTCs is considered a component of customer satisfaction and a form of positive loyalty (frequency of visits to online virtual communities) [21]. The value offers that are inherent in OTCs should make individuals engage within the community and encourage them to continually use the brand. Thus, we propose the following:

H1. The perceived functional value of OTCs is positively related to recommendation intention.

H2. The perceived hedonic value of OTCs is positively related to recommendation intention.

H3. The perceived social value of OTCs is positively related to recommendation intention.

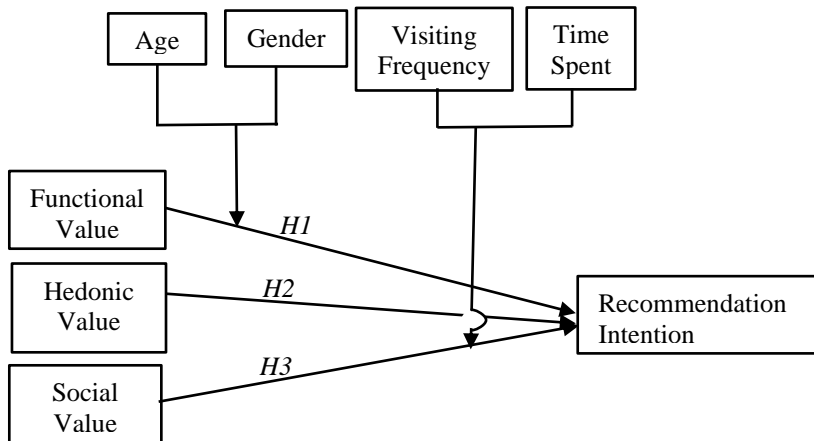


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of our study (authors' own figure)

3. Research Methodology

The data for this study were collected online through the crowdsourcing of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The study opted for MTurk due to its low cost and quick data collection ability. Further, its validity was scrutinised by [28], who explained its peculiar benefits for social science research. Of 253 responses, which were received in August 2018, only 2 cursory responses were deleted, and 251 valid responses were used for the data analysis. Among the respondents, 165 males (66%) and 86 females (34%) participated. See Table 2 for the profile of respondents including five of the most frequently occurring OTCs in the sample.

This study utilised existing validated measures and modified the wording of items to suit the context. The items for functional, social and hedonic value and recommendation intention were adapted from [9]. The study measured items on a seven-point Likert scale, with 'strongly disagree (1)' as the lowest and 'strongly agree (7)' as the highest. Table 1 shows the details of the measurement items.

Table 1. Online Travel Community Measurement Indicators (compiled by authors)

Latent Variables	Indicators
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Functional Value (FV) (0.71^a ; 0.88^b)	<p>FV1. The content (information) on this online travel community is helpful to me (0.89^c).</p> <p>*FV2. The content (information) on this online travel community is useful to me.</p> <p>FV3. The content (information) on this online travel community is functional for me (0.86^c).</p> <p>FV4. The content (information) on this online travel community is practical for me (0.79^c).</p>
Hedonic Value (HV) (0.78^a ; 0.88^b)	<p>*HV1. I feel pleased and relaxed in this online travel community.</p> <p>HV2. I gain joy and happiness from this online travel community (0.88^c).</p> <p>HV3. I feel inspired in this online travel community (0.88^c).</p>
Social Value (SV) (0.82^a ; 0.93^b)	<p>SV1. I can make friends with people who share common interests with me in this online travel community (0.90^c).</p> <p>SV2. This online travel community helps strengthen my connections with other members (0.89^c).</p> <p>SV3. I can expand my social network through participation in this online travel community (0.92^c).</p>
Recommendation Intention (RI) (0.72^a ; 0.89^b)	<p>RI1. I would recommend this online travel community to friends (0.86^c).</p> <p>*RI2. I will participate in this online travel community more often than in others.</p> <p>RI3. I will say positive things about this online community to other people (0.89^c).</p> <p>RI4. I would encourage friends and relatives to do business with the brand of this online community (0.79^c).</p>

* Removed indicators < 0.5

*Average Variance Extracted^a; Composite Reliability^b; Item Loadings^c

Table 2. Online Travel Community Respondent Descriptive Statistics (compiled by authors)

Descriptive	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	165	66
	Female	86	34
Age	Young	122	49
	Old	129	51
Visiting Frequency	Frequent	116	46
	Infrequent	135	54
Average Time Spent	Longer time	61	24
	Lesser time	190	76

Selected OTCs	TripAdvisor	73
	Facebook	35
	Yelp	33
	Reddit	30
	Advocate communities	29

4. Data Analysis

This study used SmartPLS version 3 with the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) approach [29]. SmartPLS software is appropriate for both reflective and formative data analysis. Additionally, [30] contended that partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) and covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) are complementary rather than competitive. Thus, PLS-SEM is recommended for either predicting or identifying key target constructs and/or drivers. Compared to covariance SEM, SmartPLS was preferable for this study because it simplified the issue of sample size [31; 32]. With SmartPLS software, the study was able to assess the measurement scales and examine the structural model [33]. Further, the study embarked on reliability and validity tests of the measurement model. The composite reliability (CR) as a reliability criterion, as shown in Table 1, was above the average of 0.70, as recommended by [34]. The CR and average variance extracted (AVE), as criteria for convergent validity, were of high quality. The CR values were all higher than 0.70, and the AVE for each latent variable was greater than the threshold of 0.50 [33]. Overall, the results revealed acceptable convergent validity of the measurements. Discriminant validity, as suggested by [34], should reflect that the square root of the AVE, diagonally, is greater than the correlation under the latent variables. In this study, the square root of the AVE for the latent variable was greater than the correlation values under the constructs. The results suggest discriminant validity of the study measurements.

4.1 Structural model analysis

This study used the bootstrapping technique with 5,000 samples to determine both the structural explanatory power and the structural model path significance [35; 33]. Specifically, the study tested the proposed model with five distinct samples: the full sample, gender subsample, age subsample, frequency visit subsample and average time visit subsample. The original model explained 62% of the variance in recommendation intentions. In Tables 4 and 5, males and females had equal R^2 (61%). The younger R^2 (68%) was higher than the older R^2 (56%). In addition, the high frequency R^2 (68%) was higher than the lesser frequency R^2 (54%). Higher users recorded the highest R^2 (82%), while lower users accounted for 56%. The functional value had the highest f^2 (0.28) and Q^2 (0.12). These results suggest that functional value has a moderate effect on recommendation intentions and moderate predictive relevance (Q^2) for the recommendation intention [36]. The hypotheses for the full model (H1–3) were significant at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.001$. The functional value ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), hedonic value ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$) and social value ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$) each had a direct significant relationship with recommendation intentions (Figure 2 and Table 3).

Table 3. Online Travel Community Path Coefficient Analysis Result (compiled by authors)

Hypotheses	Variable Relationship	Beta	Std. Dev.	t-values	Decision
H1	FV -> RI	0.44	0.07	6.28***	Accepted
H2	HV -> RI	0.36	0.06	5.97***	Accepted
H3	SV -> RI	0.11	0.05	2.10*	Accepted

Notes. Significant levels * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$

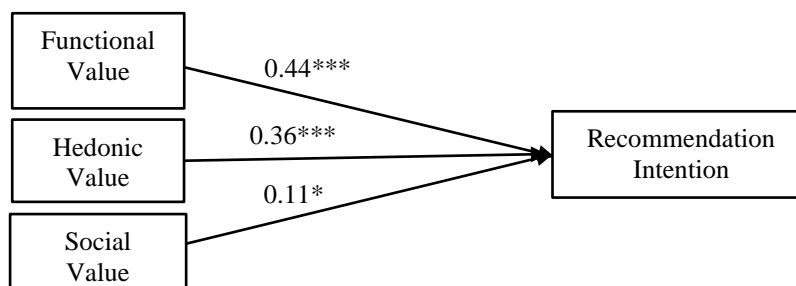


Figure 2. Partial Least Square Result of the Full Sample (authors' own figure)

Notes. Significant levels * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$

This study conducted a multi-group analysis for gender, age, frequency of visit and duration of visit to determine how the perception of value by the different customer segments would influence their recommendation intention (Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7). The age bracket of 19–60 was divided into younger (19 – 29) and older (30 – 60) groups. The younger groups had 122 accounts (49%), while the older group had 129 accounts (51%). Visiting frequency was classified into high and less frequency. High frequency had 116 respondent accounts (46%), and less frequency had 135 accounts (54%). In addition, the average time spent was grouped into high and low users, with 61 response accounts for high users (24%), and 190 response accounts for low users (76%)

Table 4. Grouping for multi-group analysis (compiled by authors)

Grouping			
Group A		Group B	
Male	165 cases	Female	86 cases
High Frequency	116 cases	Less Frequency	135 cases
High Users	61 cases	Low Users	190 cases
Young	122 cases	Old	129 cases

The moderation result between the genders indicates that the influence of functional value on recommendation intention was stronger for the males than it was for the females (male, $p < 0.001$; female, $p < 0.001$). However, in our tests for the age groups, we proposed that the influence of functional value on recommendation intention was stronger with the older than with the younger participants, which was not accepted, although it was significant (older, $p < 0.001$; younger, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Online Travel Community Model Summary (compiled by authors)

Variable Relationship	OS (n = 251)	f ²	q ²	Male (n = 165)	Female (n = 86)	Male vs female (t-value)	Young (n = 122)	Old (n = 129)	Young vs old (t-value)
Functional Value -> Recommendation Intention	0.44	0.28	0.12	0.46	0.42	6.966***	0.48	0.40	6.915***
Hedonic Value -> Recommendation Intention	0.36	0.14	0.06	0.34	0.39	6.321***	0.34	0.39	6.67***
Social Value -> Recommendation Intention	0.11	0.02	0.01	0.10	0.15	2.012*	0.12	0.10	2.14*
R2	0.62			0.61	0.61		0.68	0.56	

Notes: 0.02–0.15 weak, 0.15–0.35 moderate effect, > 0.35 strong effect

Significant levels *p < 0.05; ***p < 0.001

OS: original sample

Table 6. Online Travel Community Model Summary (continued) (compiled by authors)

Variable Relationship	Fre. (n = 116)	LF (n = 135)	Fre vs LF (t-value)	HU (n = 61)	LU (n = 190)	HU vs LU (t-value)
Functional Value -> Recommendation Intention	0.43	0.45	6.63***	0.69	0.39	6.561***
Hedonic Value -> Recommendation Intention	0.42	0.30	6.444***	0.18	0.39	6.139***
Social Value -> Recommendation Intention	0.11	0.12	1.95	0.09	0.10	2.015*
R2	0.68	0.54		0.82	0.56	

Notes: 0.02–0.15 weak, 0.15–0.35 moderate effect, > 0.35 strong effect

Significant levels *p < 0.05; ***p < 0.001

Fr: frequent users; LF: low frequent users; HU: high users; LU: low users

Similarly, we tested for how hedonic and social value influence frequency and duration of visits in relation to recommendation intention (Tables 4, 5 and 6). Our results indicate that the influences of hedonic value on recommendation intention are stronger for frequent visitors than they are for infrequent visitors (frequent visitors, $p < 0.001$; infrequent visitors, $p < 0.001$). By contrast, our assumption that the influences of hedonic value on recommendation intention are stronger with those who spend more time than those who spend less time on OTCs was not supported (more time, $p > 0.05$; less time, $p < 0.001$). Frequent visitors perceive more social value and show stronger recommendation intention than infrequent visitors (frequent visitors, $p > 0.05$; less frequent, $p > 0.05$), while participants who spent more time on an OTC did not perceive social value as strong enough to influence their recommendation intention (more times, $p > 0.05$; fewer times, $p > 0.05$).

Table 7. Online Travel Community Multi-group Analysis Result (compiled by authors)

Variable Relationship	A	B
FV*Male ^a vs Female ^b -> RI	5.35***	4.65***
FV*Older ^a vs Younger ^b -> RI	4.65***	7.37***
HV*Frequent visitors ^a vs Less Frequent Visitors ^b -> RI	5.34***	3.54***
HV*More Times ^a vs Fewer Times ^b -> RI	1.57	6.01***
SV* Frequent visitors ^a vs Less Frequent Visitors ^b -> RI	1.83	1.26
SV* More Times ^a vs Fewer Times ^b -> RI	0.68	1.70

Notes: Significant levels ***p < 0.001; FV: Functional Value; HV: Hedonic Value; SV: Social Value
RI: Recommendation Intention

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to develop and test a model that examines the impact of the customer value framework on recommendation intention and how the perceived value influences different customer segments to recommend OTCs. Three main hypotheses were proposed and tested for the multi-group analyses. The three hypotheses were related to the structural model, while the multi-group analyses examined how different customer segments respond to the customer value framework and its effect on their recommendation intention. Thus, functional value, hedonic value and social value showed positive relationships with recommendation intention. Value is at the fabric of consumers' relationships with service providers and destinations; as such, services or places that are perceived to offer value will ultimately be recommended [12]. Additionally, functional value demonstrated the strongest relationship with recommendation intention compared to social and hedonic value. This finding also corroborates [4, p. 462], who contended that 'the stronger the functional motive, the greater were all the various aspects of participation—frequency of visits, duration of visits, exposure to others' eWOM and contribution to knowledge.' The study also found that, while males were impacted more by functional value to recommend the platform, the relationship between functional value and recommendation intention had less effect on older users than it did on younger users. Similarly, frequent visitors perceived that hedonic value demonstrated a greater effect on recommendation intention than did infrequent visitors. This finding also aligns with extant studies [15], which, in the context of mobile applications, have found that hedonic benefits affect recommendation intention. Finally, the link between social value and recommendation intention was positive for frequent visitors. As argued by [5], individuals with weak social ties will perceive more pleasure in online communities; thus, they will visit online communities more frequently than others.

5.1 Implications

Practically, this study contributes to the OTC literature by developing a model that tests the role of the customer value framework on recommendation intention. Firms spend large sums of money on advertising to recruit new customers annually, even though customer recommendation remains one of the most potent weapons for recruiting new customers [1; 15]. Accordingly, our study makes a novel contribution by explicating how the typologies of the customer value framework influence recommendation intention. Furthermore, the variables of customer characteristics introduce a new perspective to the OTC literature by highlighting how different customer segments perceive the customer value framework and its effect on recommendation intention. Extant studies

[11; 4] have explained the interrelationships of these variables on general social media. To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to test different customer characteristics in the customer value framework regarding recommendation intention.

From a practical perspective, the core contribution of this study is that functional value has the strongest effect on recommendation intention. This implies that OTCs that promote information that facilitate members' travel decisions are likely to receive positive recommendation by members. Additionally, our conceptual framework offers managers and administrators of OTCs critical insights on how existing customers can valorize their platforms by recommending them to non-members. For company-owned OTCs, platform managers, such as hotel OTCs, should regularly post information on various services, particularly newly created ones, such as for cuisine, sporting activities, new luxury cars and fishing trips. OTCs can target specific customer segments. Our findings highlight that younger consumers are more susceptible to these services. Thus, focusing on this customer segment as well as peer influence, which is more dominant among young consumers, will help generate a large following on the platform. Similarly, independent OTCs should encourage the posting of vital information from different hospitality and tourism services to aid members in their travel decisions. To increase social and hedonic value, managers should regularly organise offline activities and embed entertainment and pleasure-fulfilling content on their platforms as well as primarily target frequent visitors.

5.2 Limitations and future research direction

One of the limitations of our study is that certain scales were dropped from the measurements because they could not meet the threshold. This could have implications on our results. In addition, because our sample was obtained from members of MTurk, many of them were motivated to participate in the study due to pecuniary interests. It is likely that a neutral sample could have a different result. Despite these limitations, we believe that our study offers an interesting perspective to managers and extends the OTC literature by introducing the interrelationships between the customer value framework, recommendation intention and customer characteristics.

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