BEYOND A 'LIKE'

Building parasocial relationships with baby boomers on Facebook

Baby boomers are a crucial cohort for hospitality marketing as they have more money to spend and more time on their hands than younger cohorts. However, reaching them on social media is harder. There is one social media platform popular with baby boomers: Facebook. Dr. YunYing Zhong and Dr. Valeriya Shapoval at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, together with their collaborator, have combined their different areas of expertise to analyze the effectiveness of social media marketing directed at baby boomers from an unusual angle: the illusionary and imaginary relationships we build with fictional characters.

Baby boomers are a boon for the hospitality sector, especially in the U.S.A. While younger cohorts struggle with the rigors of growing up and the financial burdens and time restraints of raising families, 'boomers' have more leisure time, a higher disposable income, and can travel more frequently. However, reaching them with digital marketing is challenging—as they are generally considered to interact with more traditional marketing methods. Given how much they value remaining in contact with friends and relatives, this makes Facebook an attractive avenue for hospitality brands to reach out to this highly valuable cohort. To date, studies in such social media marketing have largely followed classical theories. A team led by researchers at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management have taken things into a new direction.

Dr. YunYing Zhong has a strong academic interest in hospitality services for older people and helped found the College's Bachelor of Science degree in Senior Living Management. Her colleague Dr. Valeriya Shapoval uses data analytics to steer strategy within the sector. Together with Prof. James Busser from the Department of Hospitality, William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, University of Nevada, they make a formidable team and when they wanted to get a clearer idea of how the sector could connect with older people through social media, they thought it best to consider how people feel about their favorite fictional characters.

A PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP
Social media is a rich hunting ground for marketing research. It synchronizes various technologies, including text, visual, and audio, thus generating significant data and multiple routes to follow that data. Most research in social media marketing embraces classical theories that examine a bilateral relationship between consumers and a brand, focusing on issues such as the formation of trust and commitment. However, there's growing interest in reviewing a more immersive relationship between consumers and a brand—as a parasocial relationship.

The term 'parasocial relationship' is usually applied to mass electronic media, such as T.V., radio, and films, and refers to the long-term sense of friendship and intimacy that audiences have with media characters. A perfect example is a viewer feeling strongly associated with a popular T.V. series character. The relationship is obviously one-sided; it is also illusionary and imaginary. However, the emotional intensity for the viewer is real—it is comparable to that of an interpersonal relationship—and this is where the interest lies in marketing research: imagine the marketing potential if consumers develop a parasocial relationship with a brand. Hence, the focus for the researchers on social media.

While mass marketing has tools to generate an emotional reaction in consumers, it lacks the intimacy of one-to-one marketing. Look beyond the 'likes' for a brand's marketing messages on its Facebook page, and there's an opportunity to connect with consumers in a more intense and immersive way. Importantly, such a connection can exist beyond the actual interaction on social media, becoming a longer-term relationship. Such a relationship is achievable through carefully crafting textual, visual, and multimedia communication, and, according to the research team, its success may rely on certain factors.

HAVING A GOOD TIME
The researchers started their study by hypothesizing that baby boomers' likelihood to develop a parasocial relationship with a hospitality brand through social media depended on the nature of the engagement—how open and interactive it was—and the value it provided, both in its utility and enjoyment.

> *IMAGINE THE MARKETING POTENTIAL IF CONSUMERS DEVELOP A PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH A BRAND.*
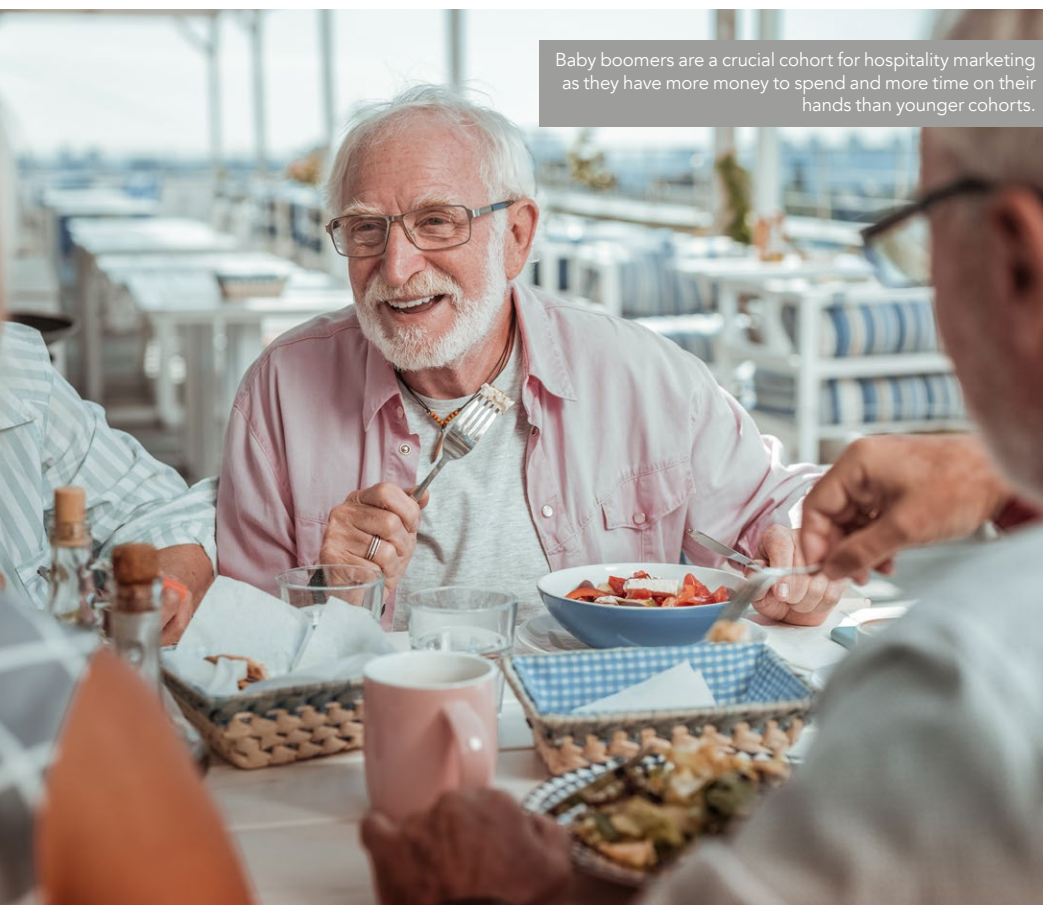
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The ideal is a brand interacting with consumers on social media in a way that the consumers think that, instead of a disembodied marketing department disgorging promotional content, they are talking to an honest, open, lively person engaged with their conversation. This way, they become emotionally and cognitively immersed in the brand and emerge as active advocates, even offline—they're not just clicking a 'like' button.

The researchers designed an online survey directed at baby boomers who had interacted with at least one hospitality brand on Facebook in the past three months. The respondents—mostly female, caucasian, between 50 and 69 years old—first answered questions about the frequency of the interaction, their experience, and, in general, how much they used Facebook. They then ranked statements on a seven-point Likert scale that measured seven related key constructs: the level of interactivity and its seeming openness of the brand; the utilitarian and hedonistic benefits of its content; the parasocial nature of the interaction; how much they engage with the brand; and how loyal they are to it. Examples of statements included, on interactivity, 'I felt like that the brand listened to what I had to say on Facebook,' and, on a possible parasocial relationship, 'I can relate to this brand in many ways on Facebook.'

Results from the study showed that while boomers valued promotions and sales offers and useful, up-to-date content from a hospitality brand's Facebook page, the perceived hedonistic benefits in the engagement were the most effective predictor for their establishing a parasocial relationship with that brand. Essentially, baby boomers reacted cognitively and emotionally with a hospitality brand when interacting with pleasant, fun, and entertaining text and multimedia content on its brand Facebook page and felt part of a community. Saving money through promotional offers was less important than being entertained and listened to. Drs. Zhong, Shapoval, and their collaborator believe that baby boomers likely prefer more conventional communication channels, such as mail and telephone, over social media for brand information.

MAKING THEM FEEL GOOD
One of the more intriguing outcomes of the study was that perceived openness

Careful content development can help the hospitality sector connect with older people through social media.

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and interactivity on social media didn't seem that important to baby boomers. This outcome differs from previous studies that suggest consumers generally react more positively towards a brand they consider open and interactive. The results of this study indicate that, for baby boomers, the honesty and interactive nature of a brand wasn't as important in developing a parasocial relationship as how good it made them

feel—perhaps, feeling good made them feel more youthful, and being part of a community meant they didn't feel alone. Importantly, the research team's study provided strong empirical evidence that baby boomers who felt this way were likelier to engage with and be more loyal to a brand.

Such an outcome shines a new light on social media marketing and how to study

Drs. Zhong and Shapoval apply parasocial relationship theory to understand the hospitality brand relationship with baby boomer consumers on social media.

it. By approaching from the angle of parasocial relationships, the researchers have encouraged a reframing of how hospitality brands should engage with consumers on social media, especially valued baby boomers. Content development is crucial, and marketers shouldn't think this cohort is just about saving pennies; they want to have a good time and feel good about themselves. Hospitality brand marketers should also interpret such 'enjoyableness' and 'informativeness' from the eyes of baby boomers—who like to see themselves as younger and more active than their chronological age—rather than from their own perspective. Having said that, when it comes to the essence of what a brand offers, baby boomers may prefer the more traditional route of picking up the phone and calling or sending an email for customer support, so brands should keep those details clearly viewable on social media platforms.

We mustn't lose sight of the fact that, in hospitality, baby boomers are a consumer cohort of their own. They have the money and the time to spend, but they are unabashed with their need to have a good time and to feel good about themselves. They are also active on social media, simply in a way that's different from younger consumers. As Drs. Zhong, Shapoval, and their collaborator have shown, hospitality brands willing to reach out to baby boomers on social media and dedicate a little more time to ensuring content makes them feel good and active and part of a community are more likely to secure a long-term loyalty that has far more value than the metric of a simple 'like.'

RESEARCHERS
IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Drs. YunYing Zhong and Valeriya Shapoval apply parasocial relationship theory to understand the hospitality brand relationship with baby boomer consumers on social media.

REFERENCES

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

Based on what you've learned, what is the most significant way that traditional social media marketing directed at baby boomers is getting things wrong, and why?

Social media marketing is often carried out by younger marketing professionals, who may treat consumers of all ages as a homogenous group or completely overlook older consumers in the social media space. In addition, the effectiveness of social media marketing is mostly assessed by simple quantitative measures such as the number of likes, shares, and comments. Our study shows that baby boomer consumers are worth of unique attention in designing a targeted social media marketing campaign. They can develop a parasocial relationship with a hospitality brand when interacting with pleasant, fun, and entertaining text and multimedia content on its brand Facebook page. As compared to online engagement indicators such as numbers of likes, parasocial relationship—a qualitative measure—is a much stronger predictor of baby boomer consumer's offline brand support and loyalty behaviors.

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