



# Research on the Impact of Social Media Relationship Strategies on Customer Trust——Based on Smartpls

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**Abstract.** With the widespread use of social media, online interaction between enterprises and customers of social media has become an important way for enterprises to maintain the customer relationship. We develop a dual-process model to explore the mechanism of the company's online customer relationship maintenance strategies and customer trust. Hypothesis were tested using data from 163 customers of high-end boutiques by PLS method and Smartpls software. PLS method is used to test the effectiveness and hypothesis of measurement, and Smartpls software is used to establish the structural equation model for empirical analysis. We found that online prosocial relationship maintenance strategy including positivity and supportiveness significantly improves customers cognitive trust and emotional trust. While antisocial strategy including fraud and avoidance strategies reduces the customer's cognitive trust and emotional trust. Social influence dual-process including internalization and identification exactly play a mediator role. Consumer's perceived authenticity and value congruence mediate the relationship between relationship maintenance strategy and customer trust. Finally, this paper illustrates the practical implications on companies' relationship maintenance strategies to improve customer trust and performance.

**Keywords:** Relationship maintenance strategy · perceived authenticity · value congruence · cognition-based trust · affect-based trust

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays, Social marketing is increasingly adopted by enterprises to develop and maintain the relationship with their customers [1]. Consequently, the question of how to build up and maintain a better relationship with customers in the booming age of social media has aroused much interest among researchers.

The idea of maintaining a long-term relationship with customers in relationship marketing has reached a general agreement both theoretically and practically. Yet, customers' perception of different contexts may differ a lot, due to the contrast between online and

offline commercial activities, and particularly the contrast between social presence and electric presence [2, 3]. The specific role that online relationship maintenance strategies play requires further discussion. Therefore, this study examines which one of the online strategies exerts the dominant influence on customer trust and investigates which one of the strategies is the most effective in being taken in customer management, this is the first innovation of this paper.

Despite the wide acceptance of the trust commitment mediator model supported by the social exchange theory, few studies of the social influence theory were conducted. As social influence would change people’s attitude and shake their belief [4], the aim of establishing boundary customer relationship is to change customers’ formal expression and transform deal-based relationship to affect-based one. Based on the Social Influence Theory and taking the perspective of the identification and internalization of social influence, this study has proposed and then tested a dual-process model in order to explore its internal working mechanism and reveal specific paths of relationship marketing activities, this is the second innovation of this paper.

Finally, the conclusion of this paper can help enterprise personnel choose appropriate relationship marketing strategies, provide specific directions for establishing customer trust, and improve customer trust and sales performance.

## 2 The Concept Model and Research Hypothesis

### 2.1 Conceptual Model

There are five main approaches to the study of trust, namely, economic (or calculative) trust school, knowledge-based trust school, personality school of trust, institutional trust school and cognitive trust school [5]. According to the knowledge-based school, trust is gained with the passage of time through an individual’s interaction with the other side. Such a view is the starting point of the present research. For customers, enterprise personnel are naturally stereotyped as mechanical, for example, profit-oriented and neglecting customers’ interest. However, such an impression may be changed by social influence and guidance purposefully exerted by enterprise personnel. On basis of the Social Influence Theory, a model of relationship strategy, social influence and customer trust is formulated, as is shown in Fig. 1.

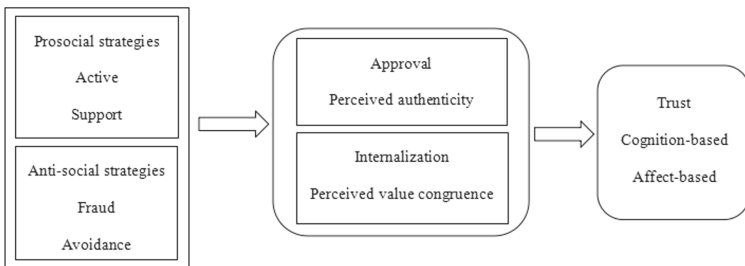


Fig. 1. The Concept Model

## 2.2 Hypothesis Formulation

Pro-social strategy guaranteed by positive emotion and relationship is rather crucial. When one party applies for positive strategies, the other will sense being experienced and approved of in person, thus verifying the authenticity. With the implementation of supportive strategies, similarly, one will feel the efforts made by the implementer to help him out of difficulty and appreciate what the implementer has done for him. That means he will psychologically accept and approve of the strategy implementer and individual verification of authenticity get increased [6]. With the above considerations, the researcher formulates the following research hypotheses:

H1a: Positive relationship maintenance strategies exert positive effects on customers' perceived authenticity.

H2a: Supportive relationship maintenance strategies exert positive effects on customers' perceived authenticity.

In the same way, the implementation of positive strategies provides customers with the perception that certain views and ideas of both parties coincide, particularly the views about self-image. Approval received from enterprise staff gives customers a feel of value congruence of both parties. Supportive strategies are implemented when customers in need of help receive support from enterprise staff. Sincere support from enterprise staff will make customers feel indebted and thus spur them into identification behavior. In addition, positive strategies and supportive strategies can avoid social exclusion as they both conform to social approval principle and group norms [7]. As a follow, within-group identification occurs naturally. Therefore, we formulated two hypotheses:

H1b: Positive relationship maintenance strategies exert positive effects on customers' perceived authenticity.

H2b: Supportive relationship maintenance strategies exert positive effects on customers' perception of value congruence.

The effect of anti-social strategies can't last long and destroys mutual relationship of both sides in a long run. Anti-social strategy implementation is believed to stimulate customers' cognitive process and bring about negative emotional response. Therefore, they are disadvantageous for positive self-image building. Avoidance as a strategy is implemented when some delay is maliciously caused. With the cognitive process invoked, customers begin to harbor the doubt in care and kindness received from enterprise staff. Meanwhile, customers' willingness to maintain interaction on social media shows that they are willing to keep in contact. However, there is a big gap between that willingness and the expectations indicated by avoidance. Avoidance in nature is viewed as a neglect of the relationship or disapproval of the other party. Therefore, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H3a: Avoidance as a relationship maintenance strategy exerts negative effects on customers' perceived authenticity.

H3b: Avoidance as a relationship maintenance strategy exerts negative effects on customers' perception of value congruence.

Once the implementation of deception strategies is seen through, the judgement on authenticity will be badly influenced. Customers, via cognitive process, will socially classify the deception implementer into a group different from theirs. And the deception strategy implementer as an individual will be immediately rejected by members of the customer's social group. Therefore, the following two hypotheses are formulated:

H4a: Deception as a relationship maintenance strategy exerts negative effects on customers' perceived authenticity.

H4b: Deception as a relationship maintenance strategy exerts negative effects on customers' perception of value congruence.

Trust is the confidence that one has in the other, namely the belief that he will by no means suffer losses. Once people have no sense of the information delivered by the other party, they will dub what the other party said as empty words [8]. To lower the risk of being doubted or mistrusted, enterprise staff have to make sure that the information they send is true and in accordance with their long-established image. If the intentions and behaviors of the enterprise staff are judged to be true by customers in person, validity and reliability of the enterprise get increased. This means the emergence of a sense of identity for enterprise boundary personnel. It has been reported that authentic leadership help improves subordinates' adherence and establishes good relationship [9]. Consequently, the following two hypotheses are formulated:

H5a: Customers' perceived authenticity positively correlates with cognition-based trust.

H5b: Customers' perceived authenticity positively correlates with affect-based trust.

H5a: Customers' perceived authenticity positively correlates with cognition-based trust.

H5b: Customers' perceived authenticity positively correlates with affect-based trust.

Value consistency has an important impact on trust and customer loyalty [10]. Customers make cognitive judgement in their interaction with shopping guides. In other words, customers decide whether their beliefs and values coincide with the shopping guides'. Customers' sympathy will be aroused if they coincide [9]. As familiarity makes customers feel safe, they are emotionally happy to approachable for the salesman [11]. As there is a positive correlation between trust and "fondness", customers are more likely to experience and predict shopping guides' intention and behavior when they realize there are common values between them, customers' trust builds up as a consequence of increasingly decreasing risk perceived. Therefore, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H6a: Value congruence positively correlates to cognition-based trust.

H6b: Value congruence positively correlates to affect-based trust.

### 3 Empirical Test

#### 3.1 Data Collection

Wechat is selected as the sampling frame in the study, Since social medias vary from one to each other, selecting Wechat as the only sampling frame is for validity consideration

[12]. After all, Wechat has been in wide use, and has strong user stickiness [13]. Customers who have the experience of Wechat interaction with up-scale clothes shopping guides were taken as the sampling crowd. Wechat interactions investigated in the present study are not confined to one specific way, for example, one-to-one interaction, friend circle or Wechat group. That is, customers make response to any of them can be viewed as an involvement in the relationship maintenance strategy carried out.

The survey was carried out in the major business circle of Xi'an, including Wangfujing Department Store, Minsheng Department Store, Wanda Shopping Mall and Century Ginwa Retail Holdings Limited from April to May in 2015. Being frequently-visited by high-grade goods consumers, those shopping malls own high average consumer spending. Measures were taken to ensure the effectiveness of questionnaires. On the one hand, a field survey was conducted on customers who had Wechat interaction with shopping guides. It also helped collect genuine information. On the other hand, electric questionnaires made by 'so jump' were handed out to customers by shopping guides. Finally, we have collected 163 valid ones, effective response rate reaching 81.9%.

**3.2 The Measurement of Variables**

Questionnaires used in the present study were designed on the base of related studies published in international journals with high impact factor. Scales for reference include the Scale of Relationship Strategy, the Scale of Perceptive Authenticity [14], the Scale of Values Congruence [15], the scale of Cognition-based Trust and the Scale of Affect-based Trust [16]. A seven-scale Likert questionnaire was adopted, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly agree. Detailed information is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** DESCRIPTIVE DATA OF THE SAMPLE

	Sample size	Ratio (%)		Sample size	Ratio (%)
Gender			<i>Age</i>		
Male	24	14.72	21–30	65	39.88
Female	139	85.28	31–40	55	33.74
			41–50	38	23.31
			50-	5	3.07
Education level			<i>Annual income</i>		
Junior middle school	6	3.68	less than 60,000	39	23.93
Senior middle School/technicalsecondary school	15	9.20	60,000–80,000	29	17.79

(continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

	Sample size	Ratio (%)		Sample size	Ratio (%)
Institutions of higher education	44	26.99	80,000–10,000	44	26.99
University graduates	83	50.92	10,000–12,000	31	19.02
Postgraduates and above	15	9.20	More than 12,000	20	12.27

**Table 2.** RESULTS OF CORRELATION MATRIX, RELIABILITY AND AVE

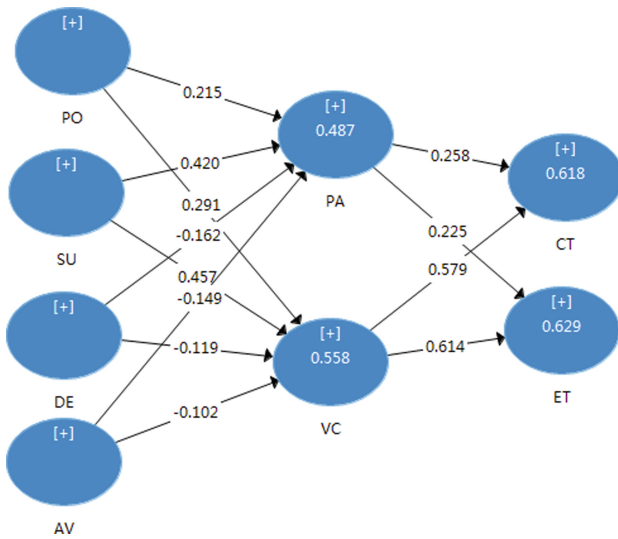
	A	AVE	PO	SU	DE	AV	PA	VC	CT	ET
PO	0.782	0.599	0.774							
SU	0.833	0.600	0.565	0.774						
DE	0.716	0.545	-0.353	-0.212	0.738					
AV	0.786	0.604	-0.219	-0.155	0.561	0.777				
PA	0.823	0.738	0.542	0.599	-0.411	-0.352	0.854			
VC	0.918	0.803	0.614	0.663	-0.377	-0.304	0.725	0.896		
CT	0.877	0.670	0.589	0.545	-0.445	-0.326	0.678	0.766	0.819	
ET	0.896	0.763	0.580	0.673	-0.347	-0.240	0.671	0.778	0.774	0.874

Notes: PO represents active strategies; SU represents supportive strategies; DE represents deception strategies; AV represents avoidance strategies; PA represents perceptive authenticity; VC represents perceptive value congruence; CT represents cognition-based trust; ET represents affect-based trust.

## 4 Discussion and Results

### 4.1 Reliability and Validity

PLS was adopted to test the validity of measurement and the hypotheses. As model estimation of components, it doesn't impose strict requirements on sample size or residual distribution, and fits studies with small sample size (less than 200). Two methods were used to estimate convergent validity and discriminate validity: (1) Each item of the questionnaire is supposed to have higher loading of its corresponding variable than that of other variables; (2) the square root of each variable's AVE (diagonal bold numbers) are supposed to be higher than its correlation coefficient with other variables [17]. All items in the questionnaire underwent testing of reliability and validity, with mean value of AVE of variables higher than 0.500 [17] and Cronbach  $\alpha$  higher than 0.700. It showed a good consistency between observed variables and latent variables, thus fitting for further analysis, as shown in Table 2.



**Fig. 2.** Path Coefficient of the Model

**Table 3.** RESULTS OF HYPOTHESIS-TESTING

Hypothesis	Path	Standard path coefficient	t-value	Accepted or rejected
H1a	active—perceptive authenticity	0.215	3.012	accepted
H1b	active—perceptive value congruence	0.291	4.319	accepted
H2a	supportive—perceptive authenticity	0.420	6.668	accepted
H2b	supportive—perceptive value congruence	0.457	6.158	accepted
H3a	deception—perceptive authenticity	-0.162	2.115	accepted
H3b	deception—perceptive value congruence	-0.119	1.872	rejected
H4a	avoidance—perceptive authenticity	-0.149	2.012	accepted
H4b	avoidance—perceptive value congruence	-0.102	1.732	rejected
H5a	Perceptive authenticity—cognition-based trust	0.258	3.219	accepted

(continued)

**Table 3.** (continued)

Hypothesis	Path	Standard path coefficient	t-value	Accepted or rejected
H5b	Perceptive authenticity— <i>affect-based trust</i>	0.225	2.634	Accepted
H6a	Perceptive value Congruence-cognition-based trust	0.579	8.155	accepted
H6b	Perceptive value congruence— <i>affect-based trust</i>	0.614	8.619	accepted

## 4.2 Hypothesis Testing

The structural equation model formulated in the study was tested by SmartPls 3.0. As shown in Fig. 2, model fitting was in good condition, with the explanatory degree of customers' *perceptive authenticity*, *value congruence*, *cognition-based trust* and *affect-based trust* reaching 48.7%, 55.8%, 61.8% and 62.9% respectively. According to the standard that whether t-value reaches 1.96, hypotheses except H3b and H4b were accepted. Detailed results of hypothesis-testing are shown in Table 3.

## 5 Conclusions and Suggestions

### 5.1 Conclusions

Based on social influence theory, this paper has formulated a dual-process model, including the process of social influence internalization and the process of identification, to explore the working mechanism by which social media relationship maintenance strategies exert effect on customers' trust. It has been revealed that relationship maintenance strategies exert significant effect on customers' trust. Prosocial strategies, including active strategies and supportive strategies, make a reliable prediction for customers' *cognition-based trust* and *affect-based trust*, whereas antisocial strategies decrease consumers' *cognition-based trust* and *affect-based trust*.

Secondly, we have formulated a mediation model of the dual-process of social influence. The model being tested confirms the mediating role that the dual-process of social influence play, namely, customers' trust on salesmen increases only if they obtain a high degree of *perceptive authenticity* or *value congruence*. Prosocial strategies, including active strategies and supportive strategies, exert effect on customers' trust via *authenticity* and *value congruence*. Antisocial strategies, including deception and avoidance, exert effect on customers' trust through *authenticity* only.

### 5.2 Theoretical Contribution and Practical Significance

Trust is a key element in network marketing. Previous studies focused on offline relationship maintenance strategies. This paper, which has conducted an empirical study



of the effects that online relationship maintenance strategies exert on customers' trust, broadens the application area of relationship maintenance strategies. Prosocial strategies play an active role in relationship maintenance, online and offline. For enterprise staff, the implementation of online strategies improves customers' trust on them and increases fondness and acceptance of them. Yet, there is some difference between online and offline prosocial strategies studies with regard to the results of data analysis. It has been reported that, active strategies exert more effective than supportive ones in terms of athlete-coach relationship [18]. On the contrary, we have found that the role that supportive strategies play is better than that of active strategies. That is in consistent with conclusions drawn from studies based on facebook data [19]. In contrast with pure experience of good things, enterprise staffs take active measures to share customers' negative experience, put forward coping strategies and show customer orientation. To think for customers and send them sincere care can build up cognition-based trust in commercial relationship. In the virtual online relationship building, supportive strategies that give rise to tangible help are more effective.

Besides prosocial strategies, we have examined the effect exerted by antisocial relationship maintenance strategies. Antisocial strategies decrease customers' trust as customers would feel highly risky once they detected the deception or false information. Avoidance also harms customers' trust due to the fact that long-time waiting at the age of instant communication makes customers feel neglected. After all, instant responses would provide customers with more attention and importance attachment. The negative influence of antisocial strategies, however, is on authenticity rather than on value congruence. One possible reason for the rejection of H3b and H4b is that deception and avoidance bring negative emotions to customers and thus interfere their judgement of cognition [20]. Besides, as frauds are very common in electric business activities [21], there will not be a significantly negative correlation between antisocial strategies and value congruence when deception becomes a subjective norm.

Secondly, the dual-process model formulated on base of the social influence theory in the present paper provides a new perspective on the working path of relationship maintenance strategies. In contrast with the reciprocity principle of social exchange theory, one conclusion of the study is that customers' perceptive authenticity and value congruence improve their trust. According to the social exchange theory, trust is a mediating variable in relationship maintenance, yet the working mechanism of trust yielding is of little discussion. Special-used asset investment is obsessive to some degree, whereas authenticity and value congruence are identification and acceptance. Therefore, they provide direct goal for trust building and maintenance.

Findings in the present paper carry certain implications and instructions for customer interaction and customer relationship management via social media. Firstly, proper social media interactive strategies are helpful [22]. Active strategies and supportive strategies promote customer trust. They encourage later interaction and purchase. Supportive strategies in particular provide customers with care by offering help and support. Secondly, the final goal of customer service is wining their trust, yet the direct goal of interactive activities is to send them an authentic image so as to realize the value congruence. Value congruence in particular is a reflection of compatibility between enterprise staff and customers. The compatibility in turn brings about mutual appreciation and

understanding [11], makes prediction about later behaviors and related risks, so as to build up greater trust.

### 5.3 Limitations and Implications

Despite the findings revealed in the paper, there are still many questions in need of further study. Suggestions for later studies are as follows. Firstly, data collected from both sales personnel and customers may be used for analysis so as to improve external validity. Secondly, other regulated variables may be taken into consideration, such as the individual style of attachment, social awareness within a group (Wechat group), content of information. Those are important variables and may exert great impact on the use of different relationship maintenance strategies. Thirdly, experiments may be carried out in future studies, so as to accurately report customer behavior and the dynamic process. Finally, the difference between online relationship and offline one needs further research as well.

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