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# Managing the concept of hospitality to stimulate behavioural loyalty – a post-pandemic challenge for hotel managers in the luxury sector

*Gérer le concept d'hospitalité pour stimuler la fidélité comportementale – un défi postpandémique pour les gestionnaires d'hôtels dans le secteur du luxe*

**Leila OTHMANI, Jessica LICHY, Haykel BEN KHELIL and Nedra BAHRI**

## Summary ■

Based on a survey (n=350) in luxury hotels, this paper develops an explanatory model of the impact of hospitality on behavioural loyalty. Set in Tunisia, the findings show that brand loyalty and proselytism are influenced by hospitality through customer satisfaction and brand attachment. The study is relevant for hoteliers developing a marketing strategy to promote the concept of hospitality for establishing and maintaining customer loyalty. The results support the conceptual model and significance of introducing the affective component. The study explains the mechanisms of hospitality and behavioural loyalty in luxury hotels, and therefore has resonance for other regions of MENA. Implications are developed to offer insights into hospitality on the post-pandemic era.

■ **Keywords:** *hospitality, brand loyalty, satisfaction, attachment, proselytism, emerging countries (MENA).*

## ■ Résumé

Basé sur une enquête (n=350) dans les hôtels de luxe, cet article développe un modèle explicatif de l'impact de l'hospitalité sur la fidélité comportementale. En Tunisie, les résultats montrent que la fidélité à la marque et le prosélytisme sont influencés par l'hospitalité à travers la satisfaction du client et l'attachement à la marque. L'étude est pertinente pour les hôteliers qui développent une stratégie de marketing pour promouvoir le concept d'hospitalité afin d'établir et de maintenir la fidélisation de la clientèle. Les résultats appuient le modèle conceptuel et l'importance de l'introduction de la composante affective. L'étude explique les mécanismes de l'hospitalité et de la fidélité comportementale dans les hôtels de luxe, et elle a par conséquent une résonance pour d'autres zones de la région MENA. Les implications sont développées pour offrir un aperçu de l'hospitalité dans l'ère postpandémique.

■ **Mots-clés :** *hospitalité, fidélité à la marque, satisfaction, attachement, prosélytisme, pays émergents (MENA).*

## INTRODUCTION

An emerging stream of literature explores how the Covid-19 pandemic has forced hotel managers to rethink their business model in order to ensure continuity of business activity (Tiong et al., 2021; Milwood & Crick, 2021). This study analyses how luxury hotel managers in Tunisia are responding to the criticisms that *“the industry has been a major agent in its own undoing, helping spread Covid-19 through the unwitting travel and over-tourism patterns of people, the blatantly poor decisions made by some authorities refusing to close destinations, and the refusal of some travelers, such as infamous spring breakers, to ignore social distancing and ‘stay at home’ guidelines”* (Benjamin, Dillette & Alderman, 2020, p. 477).

Over the past quarter century, much scholarly research attention has focused attention on furthering the understanding of the concept of hospitality (Lashley & Morrison, 2000; Montandon, 2004; Lashley, 2007; Kucukusta, Heung & Hui, 2014; Lichy & McLeay, 2018; Ladhari & Souiden, 2020). For the purpose of this study, *hospitality* is understood as a business activity based on the notion of social exchange (Coulson et al., 2014) between a hotelier and customers. Accordingly, Pizam (2020, p. 432) defines hospitality as an organizational culture of *“shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and expectations whose ultimate goal is to provide exceptional service and memorable satisfactory experiences to all the organizations’ stakeholders”*. Until recently, there has been great interest in how hotel managers can co-create value with customers (Lichy & McLeay, 2018; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019) and how they can enhance the customer experience, particularly in the luxury sector (Buehring & Mahony, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2020; Zhang, Xiong & Lee, 2020). Since the outbreak of the pandemic, however, there has been a groundswell of informed interest that supports the need for hotel managers to rethink their business model, in order to ensure greater resilience in the face of future unforeseen circumstances.

There have been mounting calls for hotel managers to be more sustainable and equitable (Bramwell & Lane, 2014; Devine & Ojeda, 2017) in response to rising concerns about the destructive effects of hedonic models of consumption that are typical of late capitalist societies (Espinet-Rius et al., 2018; Caruana, Glozer & Eckhardt, 2020). Hotel managers are encouraged *“to limit plastics, increase recycling, and provide counter-narratives and experiences”* (Benjamin et al., 2020, p. 479). To this list, the

authors would add the need for renewed emphasis on hospitality – as this study will demonstrate.

Prior studies confirm that consumption is not only for satisfying utilitarian and functional needs, but also for enjoying a responsible consumer experience of sensation and pleasure (Montandon, 2004; Fornerino et al., 2005; Lichy & McLeay, 2018). More recently, Caruana et al. (2020) show how consumers attempt to reconcile both morality and pleasure concurrently, in the form of *“alternative hedonism”*. It is essential for hotel managers to have an awareness of the emotional dimension of consumer behaviour (Abbes, Bouslama & Zemni, 2019). The hospitality sector relies on attracting customers, putting them at ease and making them feel welcome (Mani, 2010); it is a human quality, an invitation, a sense of belonging and openness towards others (Telfer, 2000; Mani, 2010), and a vital element of customer retention (Lichy & McLeay, 2018).

For the hotel sector, hospitality is a multifaceted concept that reflects both the corporate identity of the establishment and the management policies in place (Montandon, 2004; Gouirand, 2008; Martínez, Pérez & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2013). The hotel sector provides a fertile context for examining the relationship between hospitality and luxury services. It is driven not only by the consumer-service relationship but also by the creation of meaningful partnerships with customers, more commonly referred to as *“guests”* (Cetin & Walls, 2016), based on sharing beliefs and emotions, and meeting customer expectations (Abbes, Bouslama & Zemni, 2019).

Hospitality, customer satisfaction and attachment are defining factors of loyalty and proselytism to a brand (Terrasse, 2006; Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). Customer satisfaction is often defined as a judgment based on one or a series of consumer service interactions (Yi & Zeithaml, 1990). Proselytism describes activities carried out with the intention of changing, altering, replacing, convincing or modifying one’s belief to another belief or norm. In the travel and tourism literature, proselytism is an under-researched area (Decrop et al., 2018), particularly in the MENA region (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). To fill the research gap, our objective is to examine the concept of hospitality in facilitating loyalty in the luxury hotel sector, by means of a quantitative survey with customers in luxury hotels in Tunisia.

Consistent with Telfer (2000) and Muehling et al. (2014), loyalty is manifested by the pleasure of consuming, feeling comfort, security and pride in the consumption of luxury services. Luxury hotels can build long-lasting meaningful relationships with customers who seek personalized, secure and

comforting relationships (Sirgy, 2015). The body of literature that explores relationship marketing is based almost entirely on the relationship between the client and the company, largely overlooking the role of hospitality. In the highly competitive luxury hotel sector, hotel managers must constantly find novel ways to attract customers and build loyalty (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). The success of a hotel is largely dependent on the ability to meet and exceed customer expectations, with a view to establishing long-term relationships to facilitate loyalty (Ostrom et al., 2010). Hospitality and loyalty play a key role in establishing and maintaining long-lasting relationships between the brand and the customer (Bolton et al., 2000; Ostrom et al., 2010; Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). There also needs to be a certain level of satisfaction, trust and loyalty to enable the transition from simple transaction to behavioural loyalty. There is a gap in knowledge however regarding how this equilibrium can be brought about. This study provides insights for hotel managers that can assist their decision-making for marketing luxury services, in terms of building customer relationships in the hotel sector in the MENA region. To this end, we set out to address the following research question: *in the post-pandemic era, how can managers of luxury hotels in Tunisia use the concept of hospitality to enhance customer loyalty?*

There now follows a review of literature, presentation of methodology, results and discussion, management implications, followed by concluding comments.

## 1. Literature review

It is worth noting that the travel and tourism infrastructure in Tunisia is a relatively new phenomenon. The sector is marked by the ongoing challenges faced by hotel managers, including the post-uprising authorities that have failed to deliver on the demands for social justice that triggered the Arab Spring protests (Paciello, 2013), and by the global threat of terrorist attacks (Andersen & Brym, 2017).

Ben Aissa and Goaid (2017) argue that Tunisian tourism destinations have to develop commodities, tourism monuments, leisure activities, and other para-tourism activities to attract more tourists or to improve their length of stay. One way in which hotel managers can compensate for such shortcomings is to focus on developing and integrating the concept of hospitality, particularly in the luxury market. As such, the literature review is divided into sections, each focusing on a different aspect of hospitality, and each leading to a hypothesis, which will be tested.

### 1.1. Relationship between Hospitality and Customer Satisfaction

Research in the hotel industry has explored the effect of hospitality on customer satisfaction, based on the well-established theory of Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) (Vesel & Zabkar, 2009). The literature suggests that the atmosphere of a hospitality environment can encourage (re)booking intention, as well as revisiting and intention to recommend, stemming from tourists' emotions (Nanu et al., 2020). Accordingly, the hospitality offered by hotel staff can improve the level of customer satisfaction (Sweeney & Swait, 2008; Lichy & McLeay, 2018). The evaluation of experiences with a product generates a state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (cognitive dissonance). Hotel managers strive to improve the quality of service delivery to ensure customer satisfaction and profitability (Hollebeek, 2011), and ultimately to enhance customer loyalty by creating behavioural intentions (Yu & Ramanathan, 2012). Marketing scholars have shown that satisfaction is a direct result of the perceived quality and therefore a central element of hospitality (Anderson et al., 1994; Noordhoff, Pauwels & Odekerken-Schrder, 2004). In this respect, Vanhamme (2002) and Lichy and McLeay (2018) state that hospitality is a key antecedent of customer satisfaction. Thus, we put forward the following hypothesis:

**H1: Hospitality positively influences customer satisfaction.**

### 1.2. Hospitality / Loyalty

Researchers have also studied the link between hospitality and loyalty, suggesting that customers who are emotionally committed to a brand will exhibit loyal behaviours (Bove & Johnson, 2006; Han & Back, 2007). The variables of hospitality and loyalty are the result of the relationship between the consumer and the company (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This relationship presupposes that loyalty is a direct consequence of hospitality (Vesel & Zabkar, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011) – and that the higher the perceived level of hospitality, the greater the intensity of loyalty to the brand. Accordingly, we put forward the second hypothesis: **H2: Customer hospitality positively influences customer loyalty.**

### 1.3. Satisfaction / Loyalty

Satisfaction is interpreted as an assessment that depends on the general customer experience with a hotel (Spreng, MacKenzie & Olshavsky, 1996). It is a measure of the overall gap between customer expect-

tations and what is actually obtained after consuming the service (Torsten, Rams & Schindler, 2001). Loyalty is an extension of the commitment that aims to maintain long-term business relationships by establishing a sustainable history with the client (Mills, 1998). Furthermore, Noordhoff et al. (2004) show that customer satisfaction has a significant effect on loyalty. Recognising that ensuring customer satisfaction and loyalty in the service industry is a requirement for a sustainable business model, Lichy and McLeay (2018) demonstrate the role of emotions, particularly of enjoyment, in customer satisfaction and loyalty in hedonic services such as winter sports' travel and tourism. Thus, we propose a hypothesis that examines the impact of customer satisfaction on brand loyalty:

**H3: Customer satisfaction positively influences customer loyalty.**

#### 1.4. Satisfaction / Attachment

Satisfaction and attachment can be understood as a consequence of the relationship between the consumer and the hotel (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). The theory of Satisfaction-Attachment developed by Foster, Punjaisri and Cheng (2010) brings to light the inter-relationship that exists between the customer and the brand. For some consumers, this relationship may develop into "brand love", which is described as the link between motivation towards a brand and commitment and loyalty (Lee, Bai & Busser, 2019). While satisfaction is a major element in forming attachment to a brand, long-term attachment is an arbitrary notion of satisfaction (Ganesan, 1994) since consumer satisfaction can result from either positive or negative emotional responses and cognitive dissonance. Generally speaking, however, when a consumer is satisfied with a brand, he/she is more inclined to form a relationship with the brand (Jalilvand et al., 2017). This relationship suggests that satisfaction is a direct determinant of attachment (Gurviez, 2002); the higher the satisfaction, the greater the intensity of the attachment to the brand. As such, the fourth hypothesis reads as follows:

**H4: Consumer satisfaction positively influences attachment to the brand.**

#### 1.5. Attachment / Proselytism

Proselytism describes the active response from a customer who informs others of his/her satisfactory experience. The majority of research dealing with the relationship between attachment and proselytism focuses on the positive influence of emotional

engagement on positive word-of-mouth (Ostrom et al., 2010). The relationship between the two variables deserves closer attention, as they are two fundamental concepts that affect the emotional aspect of behaviour (Cristau, 2001). Scholars have demonstrated that attachment to a brand supports the concept of proselytism (Japutra et al., 2014; Ben Khelil & Bouslama, 2014; Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). The relation between these constructs indicates that a customer's attachment to a service or product is the genesis of positive word-of-mouth marketing (Ghose & Lowengart, 2013; Lichy & McLeay, 2018). Thus, we put forward the fifth hypothesis:

**H5: Attachment positively affects proselytism.**

#### 1.6. Satisfaction / Proselytism

Satisfaction impacts positively on the consumer's disposition to act in the interest of the relationship. Furthermore, there is a link between the satisfaction and the client's disposition to convey positive word-of-mouth (Telfer, 2000; Mani, 2010). Few studies have demonstrated the role of satisfaction in developing recommendations for positive word-of-mouth or proselytizing. Similar to publicity, proselytizing is a free promotional tool for the company (Silverman, 1997). Customers who have had a positive experience with the brand will generally be satisfied (Silverman, 1997) – in which case, word-of-mouth will be a logical reaction following a series of positive experiences with a product or service (Mittal, Ross & Baldasare, 1998). Studies suggest that satisfaction will lead to proselytism (Anderson, Fornell & Lehmann, 1994). Consequently, the next hypothesis reads as follows:

**H6: Customer satisfaction positively influences proselytism.**

#### 1.7. Loyalty / Proselytism

Proselytism describes an active response from the customer, informing others of their positive experience of a brand (Cristau, 2003). The majority of research exploring the relationship between the loyalty and proselytism focuses on the positive influence of commitment on proselytism. For instance, N'Goala and Cisse (2009) affirm that the more customers engage in proselytism, the more they are committed to a brand. According to Brown et al. (2005), commitment and loyalty are the basis of proselytism. In other words, consumers who are loyal to a brand will convey their commitment to others. However, consumers may stay connected with a brand in order to avoid the cost of brand switch-

ing. The benefits of this relationship are principally recommendation. Thus, the final hypothesis is:

**H7: Customer loyalty positively influences the proselytism.**

## 2. The conceptual model

The different relationships between variables are represented by an explanatory conceptual model (below) that describes how hospitality influences proselytizing through relational variables (satisfaction, commitment and loyalty) – see Figure 1.

## 3. Methodology

The empirical study was carried out in the luxury service sector in Tunisia immediately prior to the pandemic lockdown. Data were collected at five luxury hotels during the recent summer season. The target population for the study were hotel guests who had experienced luxury accommodation within the past months. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used, in line with similar research studies in marketing, consumer behaviour and hospitality, as independent random sampling is almost impossible in such fields (Jeaheng, Al-Ansi & Han, 2019). A questionnaire was designed and pre-tested with 35 guests (10% of the sample) during their check-out from a luxury hotel, to verify the comprehension of the questions.

In total, 393 questionnaires were administered to guests checking-out of luxury hotels, yielding 350 usable responses after excluding incomplete questionnaires, and indicating 89% response rate from those who agreed to participate.

In a second phase of data collection following the re-opening of the travel and tourism services post-pandemic, five hotel managers were inter-

viewed to collect up-to-date information on how they intend to meet the challenges of the ‘new normal’.

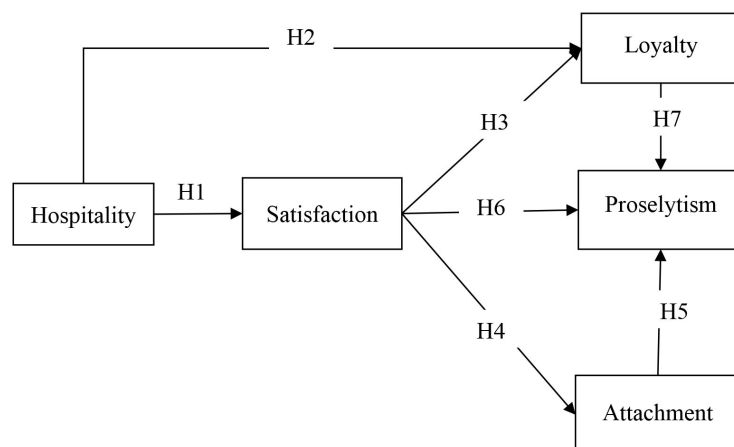
## 4. Results

Some 44% of respondents were male (n=154) and 56% female (n=196). The majority of respondents were under 30 years old (57.5%); 35.3% were aged between 30-45 years old; 7.2% were aged over 44 years. The majority of respondents were executives (70.9%), 25% were students and 4.1% were employees.

To test the hypotheses, the study evaluated the overall structural model with AMOS 20. Table 3 displays the results of the analysis. The results of the structural model analysis showed that hospitality has a positive and significant effect (0,496,  $p=0,000$ ) on satisfaction as well as on the C.R (7,050) which is greater than 1, 96. Thus, H1 is supported. The results showed that the hospitality positively and significantly influences loyalty (0,505,  $p=0,000$ ). Hence, H2 is supported. The impact of satisfaction on attachment was identified (0,577,  $p=0,000$ ). Thus, H3 is fully supported. A significant and positive relationship was found between satisfaction and proselytism (0,535,  $p=0,000$ ) providing support for H4. Furthermore, proselytism was found to be positively and significantly influenced by brand attachment (0,380,  $p=0,000$ ). Thus, H5 is supported. A significant and positive relationship was found between loyalty and proselytism (0,206,  $p=0,006$ ). Then, H6 is supported.

The second phase of data collection, which took place after the re-opening of the travel and tourism services post-pandemic, involved interviewing hotel managers to gain insights into how they intend to meet the challenges of the “new normal”, based on their experience (see Table below).

Figure 1: Conceptual model



**Table 1:** Selection of verbatim excerpts from hotel managers interviewed

Questions	Verbatim excerpts	Profile of hotel managers
What steps are you taking to protect guests from Covid-19 while maintaining the luxury services offered by the hotel?	<i>"In my opinion, it's the bedding that I'm most afraid of, it's a real breeding ground for germs, not to mention the rest!"</i>	male, 45 years old, 9 years' experience
	<i>"I'd like to stress the importance of respecting social distancing and implementing tried and tested security measures to avoid infection spreading, by reducing any direct contact between tourists and staff, as well as applying the usual health protocols in every service."</i>	male, 54 years old, 17 years' experience
	<i>"We need to ensure intensive cleaning of every room, a temperature test at the hotel entrance and keeping bookings to a reduced rate of just 50% to respect the social distancing measures."</i>	male, 55 years old, 19 years' experience
	<i>"We've applied the recommended health protocol for managing in this situation, taking everyone's temperature, personal protective equipment for all staff, social distancing, thorough cleaning of rooms... there's nothing more we can do!"</i>	female, 47 years old, 12 years' experience
	<i>"We trained the staff on safety measures and how to maintain friendly but distanced relationships with our guests. We've developed a complete in-house health protocol for maximum safety."</i>	male, 35 years old, 5 years' experience
How do you envisage maintaining hospitality and friendliness during the post-pandemic period?	<i>"It's not business-as-usual but we're aiming to deliver optimum common-sense and to show goodwill, both of which will pay off as far as the hotel business is concerned... and especially in the 'luxury' hotel business, which is still very much just emerging in our country. As for the more physical leisure services, like the luxury spa, that's going to have to wait!"</i>	female, 41 years old, 8 years' experience
	<i>"We're setting out to perfect and improve the quality of the services we offer... by respecting the human spirit of our guests and listening to them... we hope to be able to make their time with us special, while keeping a safe distance."</i>	male, 44 years old, 11 years' experience
	<i>"We've designed a series of training activities that inform everyone about how to limit the spread of infection... it's important to have effective communication about safety so that everyone knows how to keep themselves safe and the people around them too. SO far, our guests seem to appreciate the safety measures we've taken."</i>	male, 58 years old, 29 years' experience
	<i>"It's a question of making our guests very aware of the importance of preventing the spread of the disease... we're also looking into tailoring promotional offers to improve the perceived quality of the stay."</i>	female, 55 years old, 30 years' experience
	<i>"In a nutshell, the only way forward it to reduce the perceived risks and reassure our guests that their well-being is at the centre of everything we do."</i>	male, 49 years old, 18 years' experience

## 5. Discussion

The findings are in line with existing studies that show how hotel managers can use hospitality to stimulate service delivery, loyalty and repeat buying behaviour (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016; Lichy & McLeay, 2018).

Our study set out to demonstrate the effects of hospitality in the luxury hotel sector on behavioural loyalty and proselytism through variables including customer satisfaction and brand attachment. The findings indicate that hospitality clearly explains the behavioural loyalty of consumers, since it contributes to establishing and maintaining a meaningful relationship in terms of repeat buying behaviour. The findings also show that customer satisfaction, commitment and loyalty can generate positive word-of-mouth, consistent with Gouteron (2006) who shows that a loyal customer not only consumes the product or service, but will disclose his/her satisfaction to peers and encourage them to use the same product or service. This notion concurs with the analysis of Roux (2014) and Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) who confirm that hospitality is a determining factor of the proselytism and a direct antecedent of the behavioural loyalty of consumers. It can therefore be interpreted as a source of publicity for the business, which is why managers need to focus on improving the quality of service through hospitality.

The selection of comments raised by the hotel managers (see table) provides evidence of the extent to which efforts are underway to adhere to government health measures. It is a key priority to protect everyone, employees and guests alike.

## 6. Theoretical implications

From a theoretical point of view, this research is based on a mining model (i.e., the grouping of variables) that, to the best of our knowledge, are examined for the first time in the specific context of luxury hotels in Tunisia. The originality lies in our attempt to present a conceptual model that examines the relationship between hospitality, proselytism and behavioural loyalty within the luxury hotel sector, supplemented by post-pandemic interview data from hotel managers. The findings reinforce the relationship marketing tenets of the need to establish and maintain customer relationships by identifying customer desires and by providing valuable services that meet their needs and wants (Lichy & McLeay, 2018). Finally, our research underscores

the importance of customer service for developing behavioural loyalty in the luxury hotel sector in Tunisia where the trend is emerging. Owing to its complexity and diversity, hospitality remains a difficult concept to grasp. Indeed, hospitality, by its multidisciplinary nature, is displayed under a multitude of definitions and conceptualizations. It is precisely in this spirit that we make a novel contribution to furthering understanding.

## 7. Managerial implications

By drawing attention to the concept of proselytism and behavioural loyalty, this study examines the role played by hospitality in establishing and maintaining a relationship with consumers of luxury hotels in Tunisia. We identify determinants of loyalty, and provide a guide for understanding the concept of proselytism as a direct result of brand loyalty and as a vector for positive word-of-mouth communication. The findings provide a strong argument for luxury hotel managers to develop a marketing strategy based on the satisfaction, attachment and proselytism as a means of contributing to loyal customer behaviour. We demonstrate that hospitality plays an important role in explaining how consumers become attached to luxury hotels. As customer well-being is of utmost importance, hotel managers are advised to provide a range of services that can make the customer feel valued, otherwise they can experience discomfort and ill-being (Abbes, Bouslama & Zemni, 2019). Negative emotions can disrupt customer retention and give rise to negative word-of-mouth (Nguyen & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). For this reason, and in the light of our findings, hotel managers are advised to re-examine their marketing efforts for attracting and retaining customers, in addition to ensuring well-being during the post-pandemic era.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Evidence from our study shows that hospitality is a relevant factor for consumers when engaging with luxury hotel services. It is important for managers to take into consideration the strategic role of this variable and to develop actions accordingly. In particular, managers need to be able to leverage technology for improving marketing outreach, for example, *via* social media platforms, interactive collaboration and online brand communities (Lichy & McLeay, 2018).

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