The Implications of Social Media in Hospitality Research

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become a major buzzword in personal, social and business contexts. The number of adult users on social networking sites has increased from 8% to 35% between 2005 and 2009 (Geiger, 2009). Madden and Zickuhr (2011) estimated that 50% of all US adults now use social networking sites and 43% of online adults use social networking sites daily. With social media generating such a significant amount of traffic, clearly this has become an effective vehicle for companies to utilize in to reach their target audience. Although academics have recognized the increasing importance of social media in the business community, research involving social media in the hospitality field is rather limited.

This article first develops a social media research framework on the basis of communication theory. It then reviews related studies on the application of social media in hospitality based on the proposed research framework and identifies the gaps in the knowledge base. Finally, it suggests future research opportunities and direction for social media within the hospitality industry context.

BACKGROUND

The communication theory has been used to develop a framework of social media applications in the hospitality area. An interactive model of the communication process (Weiner, 1988) emphasized four key elements: sender, message, receiver, and feedback.

The emergence of social media has affected the traditional communication process dramatically. Thackeray and Neiger (2009) stated that the communication process has evolved from a unidirectional to a multidirectional process. That is, consumers receive messages from both traditional media channels (mass media) and new media channels (social media). Thus, the communication process model considers both traditional company marketers and consumers who develop and share messages through social media as senders.

The multidirectional communication model suggests that there are three communication processes interacting amongst the three components: the business, the creator, and the receiver. Both the business and creator act as senders. Consumers can be both senders and receivers. The three communication processes among three components form a triangular framework of social media (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. also describes significant social media applications in the hospitality area. Consumers who have used a product or service offered by hospitality businesses receive messages about their experiences and then post information (such as pictures, content, comments, videos, etc.) on social media outlets. In this sense, consumers act as creators. The material they post is accessible by businesses as feedback. Consumers who haven't used a product or service, named as receiver, receive information from both businesses and creators. The creators send messages to the receivers, known as word-of-mouth information about the product or service. Information from the creators and the businesses both appear to affect receivers' decisions. Based on the information, the receiver may form a specific perception

Figure 1. Framework of social media research in hospitality
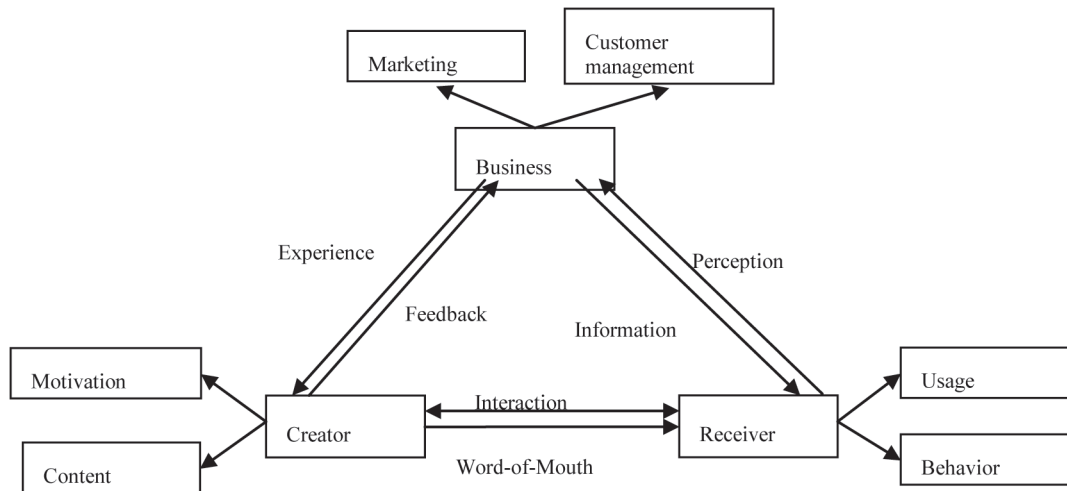
of a business. The receivers may also share messages and generate customer-to-customer interactions on social media, resulting in feedback to the creators, strengthening the word-of-mouth effects. Based on these communication processes, social media can be used by businesses for marketing, customer management, and customer relationship building and service recovery. As shown in the framework, the use of social media is not a one way street, but a cycle that involves many interactions among consumers and businesses.

METHODOLOGY

Since the research on social media in the hospitality field is very limited and no leading journal primarily focuses on this topic, the authors used online databases to acquire relevant articles. The online databases used included Academic Search Premier, ABI/INFORM, ProQuest, Sage Journals Online, and ScienceDirect. The keywords used for article identification were "social media," "social network," "user-generated content," "social media marketing." Articles that appeared under the search were reviewed for relevancy to hospitality. Articles that were not related to the hospitality business were eliminated. The articles were then reviewed in relation to the three perspectives discussed in the conceptual framework by content analysis. The topical area(s) of the articles were first classified into the three perspectives and then classified into six major subareas in the proposed social media research framework.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review addresses the three perspectives discussed in the conceptual framework above, namely: business perspective, creator perspective, and receiver perspective.

Business Perspective

Hospitality businesses have changed drastically with the advent of social media. This section attempts to understand the changes that have occurred in the recent years in hospitality marketing and customer management, and how these were influenced by social media.

Marketing

Social media marketing is a process that allows individuals to present their own Web sites, products, or services through online social channels to communicate and listen to a wide community (Weinberg, 2009, 3). Social media marketing differs from traditional marketing approaches in the way consumers interact with the company (Mabry & Porter, 2010). Social media can convert consumers into advertisers so consumers act not only as message receivers, but also as content creators in social media marketing (Akara & Topçu, 2011). Social media is also an effective tool to reach a large audience at a minimal cost because of its substantial number of users and user-generated content (Paridon & Carraher, 2009). An increasing number of

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