University of South Carolina

Scholar Commons

Summer 2019

The Importance of Twitter to Destination Marketing Organizations

Tatiana Allgeyer

THE IMPORTANCE OF TWITTER TO DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANIZATIONS

by

Tatiana Allgeyer

Bachelor of Science
University of South Carolina, 2017

_____

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of International Hospitality and Tourism Management in

International Hospitality and Tourism Management

College of Hospitality, Retail and Sport Management

University of South Carolina

2019

Accepted by:

Simon Hudson, Director of Thesis

Kevin So, Reader

Nicholas Watanabe, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

Social media has experienced quick and expansive growth since its beginnings. While the initial users were individuals, social media has become a melting pot of businesses, brands, and celebrities all vying for engagement from followers in the hopes of increasing likes, engagement levels and sales.

Destination marketing organizations (DMO's) have been slow to adopt social media platforms and integrate them into their marketing strategies. The goal of this study is to analyze what kinds of social media content produces the highest levels of engagement in order to make specific social media strategy recommendations to the Columbia DMO, Experience Columbia. An empirical analysis of data from DMO Twitter accounts was done to determine what types of content achieved the highest engagement levels, while an observational analysis was performed to determine characteristics of successful accounts. The findings showed that tweets with media had the highest engagement levels, while tweets solely containing URL links decreased engagement levels. These results showed that engagement levels are affected by the types of content posted as well as several other subjective factors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, social media has experienced rapid growth to the point where it is practically a household commodity. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines social media as "forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content" (2012). Social media, while certainly useful to the individual, also enables online relationship building by collecting and sharing information to specific or unspecific people, either individually or through groups with similar interests (Kwon & Wen, 2010). This has allowed people to connect with people that they might never have met in person and develop unique bonds with other online users.

One of the first social media sites to exist was Six Degrees, which was rudimentary but allowed users to create a profile and add friends (Hendricks, 2013). LinkedIn launched in 2002, and MySpace began in 2003, creating a space for users to connect and network. After Facebook began in 2004 and Twitter launched in 2006, social media usage doubled from 8% of adults in the United States in 2005 to 16% in 2006 (Statistica, 2018). Instagram then began in 2010 and Snapchat was activated in 2011. Even with all of the social media options available today, Facebook reigns most popular with an estimated 169 million users. ("Most popular mobile social networking apps",

2018). Instagram comes in second, with 117 million users, and Twitter third with 70 million ("Most popular mobile social networking apps", 2018).

The social media climate has changed dramatically over the past decade. Within the past ten years businesses have realized the true marketing potential of social media platforms, given the vast number of users these applications have (Deans & Tretola, 2018). IBM was the first to coin the term "social business", which describes the integration of social media platforms into companies marketing strategy (2018). Facebook began allowing businesses to purchase ads that could target consumers based on demographics, likes, and interests. Nearly every social media platform is now flooded with advertisements that are tailored to each individual user based on information gathered about past internet searches, content the user has interacted with while using the platform, and types of products that algorithms predict the user may like.

Destination marketing has transformed over the years from print media and travel agents to massive digital marketing plans that are now possible because of social media (Ruzic and Bilos, 2010). Modern travelers are looking to use the internet throughout the entire planning period as well as the travel experience itself, which has given destinations the unique opportunity to attract potential visitors (Ruzic and Bilos, 2010). Sites such as Booking.com, Kayak, and Expedia help destinations market to a much wider base by allowing travelers to book trips online. An entire trip, including flights, hotel stays, rental vehicles, and excursions can be booked online by the traveler without assistance from a travel agent. Sites like TripAdvisor and HotelChatter allow travelers to leave reviews and descriptions of their experience, which can be both useful and harmful depending on the review.

The growth of social media also led to the rise of the social media "influencer". Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg described social media influencers as third-party endorsers who use media such as blogs, tweets, and other types of online posts to shape audience attitudes (2011). They are considered opinion leaders and affect the information they transmit to others (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Businesses have found influencer marketing useful for expanding their reach among different audiences and geographic locations.

A study by Harrigan, Evers, Miles and Daley revealed that a consumer's involvement is a predictor of engagement with tourism brands on social media (2016). Twitter was chosen for this study for several reasons. First, with the recent leak of personal information, Facebook and Instagram now block researchers from scraping data, making it extremely difficult to collect and analyze. Second, Twitter it is one of the most popular platforms utilized by DMO's (Hays, Page, Buhalis 2010). The barrier to entry is low, and there is very little cost associated with running a Twitter account, making it an appealing option to DMO's on a budget. The city of Columbia was chosen based on the author's location and the ability to partner with the Columbia DMO and gather experimental data.

While reviewing the literature, it was found that influencers are almost exclusively referenced as people or individuals who have large social media followings. Preliminary data collection suggested that the most important influencers on Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO's) were not necessarily individual people, but the local businesses that interacted with the DMO accounts. To the author's knowledge, limited research has been done on businesses as social media influencers for tourism. By

uncovering the relationship between destinations and businesses as influencers, DMO's will be able to more effectively use their social media and drive engagement. Likewise, Popesku stated that examination of the use of social media by tourism DMO's is one of the gaps in the existing literature (2014). Little information has been collected on the social media strategies DMO's use and whether or not they are effective in terms of connecting with potential consumers.

Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What kinds of Twitter content produce the highest levels of engagement?

RQ2. Who engages the most with DMO Twitter accounts?

RQ3. What strategies should the Columbia DMO, Experience Columbia, implement on Twitter to increase follower engagement?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS AND PRACTICES

The increasing popularity and adoption of social media platforms has allowed for a wide range of markets to be reached in new and creative ways. Not only are the coveted millennials and generation z groups reached through social media, but baby boomers have begun to integrate social media into their daily lives. As of January 2018, 65% of baby boomers were using Facebook while 21-26% were using Instagram, LinkedIn and Pinterest (Statista, 2018). A study by Google found that boomers were spending more time online than they were on TV or print media, and that immediacy and trust were the key value drivers (Google, 2013). Throughout the growth and development of these platforms, several trends have emerged both in general and within the realm of social media marketing.

When social media sites were first introduced, the intention was for individual users to connect with others by collecting and sharing information to specific or unspecific people, either individually or through groups with similar interests (Kwon & Wen, 2010). Sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Instagram began with such intentions. However, it seems as if this is no longer the case as social media has transformed from solely personal use to heavy brand and marketing usage as well. In fact, a study showed that social media networks were more commonly used by businesses to

connect with their customers or prospects than Google (The eMarketer, 2011). U.S.

business spent 19.3 billion dollars on social network advertising in 2018 alone, with

projected continued growth through 2023 (Statista, 2018). The shift in social media's

purpose as well as the redirection of marketing dollars by companies has resulted in a

transformation in the way both individuals and brands look at and use social media

channels.

Although many studies have been conducted on the effects of social media in

business, it can be generally agreed upon that social media provides a channel of

communication from firms to customers as well as an opportunity to build relationships

with customers, employees, communities and other stakeholders (Felix, Rauschnabel &

Hinsch, 2017). Social media marketing fits into the broader and established theory of

relationship marketing, which involves building relationships with customers through

interactions, two-way communications, and added value (Achen, 2017; Gronroos, 2004).

Social media essentially provides companies with a unique means to connect directly and

personally with consumers.

The ease of use, wide reach and effectiveness of social media is challenging

existing marketing and promotional processes within the tourism industry (Zeng &

Gerritsen, 2014). The emergence of the "social customer" has affected traditional

marketing processes. Greenberg defines social customers as web and mobile connected,

with an expectation of immediate information access, transparency and authenticity,

connection to the company and a reward for their efforts on behalf of the company

(2010). The relationship between a social customer and a company is primarily reliant on

trust (Greenberg, 2010). The concept of social customer relationship management merges

the idea of traditional customer relationship management (CRM) with a more collaborative, interactive, and network-focused approach to managing customer relationships (Greenberg, 2010, Trainor et. al 2014). Marketers define social CRM as "the integration of customer-facing activities, including processes, systems, and technologies, with emergent social media applications to engage customers in collaborative conversations and enhance customer relationships" (Trainor, 2012). Focusing on the relationship between business and customer has become a critical aspect of social media marketing as social customers are no longer just recipients, but active participants in the relationships they have with companies (Greenberg, 2010).

One of the biggest social media trends is an expectation of customization and personalization of digital content from users. The execution of personalization is wide-ranging and can include promotion, segmentation, social media, loyalty programs, geo-tracking, and the collection of data (Phillips, 2017). With the amount of data easily available, companies are easily able to gain insights into how a customer wants to interact with the company (Greenberg, 2010). Micro-segmentation, a more detailed method of segmentation, allows for an understanding of a customers' style, preferences and selection choices so future behaviors can be predicted and managed more effectively (Greenberg, 2010). However, personalization should not come at the expense of the guest. Dan Phillips argues that personalization which requires forcing the guest to interact with the technology hospitality industries have is likely to fail (2017). Rather, he states that the goal of personalization strategies should be to connect with guests emotionally (2017).

Social media monitoring tools such as Hootsuite and Brandwatch allow companies to track the direct mentions of their brands on social media channels as well as mentions in user generated content (Ducange, Fazzolari, Petrocchi, Vecchio, 2018). This allows marketing managers to keep track of the conversations happening around the brand, collect feedback on marketing campaigns, and quickly mitigate negative responses or experiences. In this way marketers can determine what kind of content their audience is interested in and create more appealing posts and experiences.

With the sheer amount of data out there, it would be nearly impossible for a single person to sort through it all and pick out what is relevant and important. Social media listening is one of the methods by which businesses gain and sort through detailed information about existing and potential customers. It is defined as a strategic activity allowing for the extraction of useful insights and valuable inputs from social media (Balduini et al., 2013; Schweidel and Moe, 2014; Rao and Rao, 2016). To that end, social media listening performs quantitative, qualitative, and contextual analyses of topics and keywords while tracking specific conversation topics. It combines this information to find business opportunities, marketing campaigns, and improve the customer experience. This type of data analysis is more in depth than the engagement metrics provided for free by platforms themselves, such as those from Twitter or Facebook, and allows for more specific targeting and customization (Ducange, Fazzolari, Petrocchi, Vecchio, 2018).

2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

In the late 2000's celebrity endorsement became a significant element of destination advertising campaigns (van der Veen, 2008). Companies selected celebrities

based on desirable characteristics that related to their target market. According to McCracken, endorsement was considered successful when the properties of the celebrity were transferred to the endorsed product (1989). Research suggests that celebrity endorsers were most successful when a product had high social, financial, and psychological risk, such as a selecting an annual holiday destination where there is a complex decision-making process (van der Veen, 2008).

A study by van der Veen suggested that although celebrities might have positive effect on consumer attitudes towards a product, endorsement was not directly linked to intent to purchase and did not work for all types of products or markets (2008). While socially risky products, such as tourism products, benefitted from celebrity endorsement, consumers tended to react negatively if they suspected the endorsement was not authentic (2008). Authenticity and trust are the core drivers of intent to purchase as well as a positive business to consumer relationship (Greenberg, 2010).

When social media usage began to dramatically uptake, there were certain users of these platforms who experienced dramatic growth of their own personal pages. The people that caught onto trends early and were active on their platforms quickly amassed large amounts of followers. These people are now called "social media influencers" and they represent a type of third-party endorser that shapes audience attitudes through social media use (Frebeg *et. al*, 2011).

2.3 INFLUENCERS AND BRAND VALUE

Since consumers are spending increasing amounts of time on social media and communicating through various platforms, this means that more brand related

communications are able to take place on social media (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt & Fuller, 2013). Merz et al argue that brand value is "co-created through network relationships and social interactions among the ecosystem of all the stakeholders", which puts equal power into the hands of consumers (2009). Consumers are now easily able to ask for and offer recommendations for products and services from other users. Social media platforms also allow users to directly link or "tag" brands in their posts, increasing the potential value of a positive social media presence for businesses. According to Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt & Fuller, purchase decisions are increasingly influenced by social media interactions, which provides new challenges as well as opportunities for businesses to take advantage of (2013). Companies of all kinds have recognized the importance of social media marketing and are now regularly engaging in influencer marketing campaigns (Quach, 2017).

2.4 INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Users and Gratifications Theory

The Users and Gratifications (U&G) theory helps explain people's media choices and how the gratification they receive from using them fulfills specific needs (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005). This theory was first introduced in the 1940's, where it was used to examine relationships between audiences and mass media (Quan-Hasse, 2012). While most researchers agree upon the benefits and uses of the U&G theory, there are some that have questioned its validity. McLeod and Becker argued that it was hard to measure, inconsistent, and unreliable because of a lack of stability and guidelines for measurement

(1979). Swanson believed that it lacked foundational grounding and was too vague to be used for accurate analysis (1979).

However, these individuals seem to go against the general consensus that the U&G theory has many useful applications. Quan-Haase concluded after testing the U&G theory on Facebook, that the U&G approach played an important role in examining what kinds of social media are adopted by segments of the population and what gratifications are obtained from the use of different media platforms (2012). Chen studied needs and gratifications from Twitter use and found that Twitter is a medium through which active users satisfy the psychological and social need to connect with others (2011). Ye et al. used the U&G theory to support the idea that user gender has an impact on social media needs and therefore hashtag use (2018). After examining these studies, it can show that the U&G theory is useful for explaining media usage, specifically social media sites.

Social Influence Theory

Social influence is defined as the degree to which a person believes that people who are important to him or her want that person to perform a particular behavior (Venkatesh, Speir, & Morris, 2002). Kelman fist proposed the theory of social influence and determined the three processes of social influence to be compliance, identification and internalization (1958). The social influence theory has been used to explain how an individual's emotions or behaviors are affected by others (Leung & Jiang, 2017).

Hospitality experts have combined social influence theory with other theories to gain a better understanding of customers and travelers. Kang and Schuett looked at social media users who shared their travel experience for personally meaningful and rewarding

goals (2013). The findings revealed that both identification and internalization positively impacted travel-experience sharing behavior on social media as mediated by perceived enjoyment (Leung & Jiang, 2017). Further studies revealed that identification, internalization and compliance were all determining factors in hotel guest's attitudes towards hotel Facebook pages (Leung & Baloglu's (2015); Leung & Tanford's (2016)). Leung and Tanford's study also suggested that compliance had a negative impact on attitude. Based on a study on both the planned behavior model and social influence theory, Leung and Jiang concluded that the social influence of a Facebook page has a significant direct impact on Facebook fans' future visit intentions to a destination (2017). Social influence, therefore, is determined to be an important factor in the intentions and actions of travelers.

Self-Concept & Self-Congruity

Self-concept is defined as "the totality of individuals' thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg,1979), and has been shown to affect consumer purchases and behavior. At its core, self-congruity is a continuation of self-concept, and refers to the similarity between consumers and a specific brand or product. It is believed that consumers tend to favor products that match their self-images, or brands they feel they align with. Xu and Pratt used self-congruence in their study to evaluate endorsement effectiveness between social media influencers (SMI's) and potential tourists (2017). They found that higher congruence between destinations and SMI's led to a more positive view of the destination advertisements from potential tourists (2017).

2.3 THE EMERGENCE OF MICRO-INFLUENCERS

In an effort to create relatability, brands began to look for spokespeople to represent their products or services. In the late 2000's celebrity endorsement became a significant element of destination advertising campaigns (van der Veen, 2008). Rather than celebrities, DMO's have turned to social media influencers to act as spokespeople for their cities. Research suggests that celebrity endorsers were most successful when a product had high social, financial, and psychological risk, such as a selecting an annual holiday destination where there is a complex decision-making process (van der Veen, 2008). For this reason, DMO's have paid for influencers to come to their cities for a weekend as tourists and post about it on their personal accounts. DMO's target these influencers based on style, following demographics and the specific niche that the influencer appeals to. The belief is that if an influencer highlights the best restaurants, hotels and aspects of a city it will not only bring exposure, but it might motivate followers to visit that city.

A recent marketing trend is focusing on the individual customer relationship and cultivating a loyal, lifetime customer for your brand. This is where micro-influencers, a sub-category of influencers, have become especially valuable to business. Disha Dinesh describes a micro-influencer as someone who is connected to your target market on social channels, reasonably active on the right forums, and can affect desired change for you on social media ("Why Micro-Influencers", 2017). These people tend to be previous happy customers and enthusiastic social media fans with between 1,000-10,000 followers that get significantly more engagement than those with larger accounts ("Why Micro-Influencers", 2017). However, many other studies categorize micro-influencers as those

with 100,000 followers or less. There is no definitive follower count that defines a micro-influencer, but it is generally agreed upon that micro-influencers have between 1,000 and 100,000 followers.

It was found that micro-influencers recommend products 22.2 times more than the average consumer, and 74% of influencers directly encourage someone to buy or try a product (Langan, 2018). Micro-influencer recommendations are valuable because consumers are 9% more likely to follow their recommendation rather than an average person (Langan, 2018). Even though micro-influencers have a smaller audience, they have higher engagement levels. Dinesh found that micro-influencers with 1,000 followers get 4% more engagement than those with 10,000 followers (2017). Although large scale influencers have a broader reach, micro-influencers are more likely to connect and build relationships with their followers. This leads to a higher degree of confidence in the micro-influencer's recommendations, making consumers more likely to purchase.

2.4 DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANIZATIONS'S AND SOCIAL MEDIA

A review of the literature by Leung *et al* (2013) revealed that the hospitality and tourism industry has been slow to take advantage of the opportunities social media marketing offers. Research showed that 84% of leisure travelers used the internet while planning a trip and social media content came up 10% of the time in search results (Leung *et al*, 2013). That means that destinations who are not taking full advantage of social media marketing are missing out on a significant portion of potential consumers.

Tourism products are naturally higher risk for consumers, so travelers are more likely to do extensive research before booking trips. Tourism products and services are

intangible and inseparable, meaning that customer cannot experience the trip before purchasing. This can make it difficult for travelers to decide on a trip, and therefore they rely on other experiences and descriptions from past visitors to make their choices. Sites such as TripAdvisor have become an essential part of the traveler's decision-making process and have begun to undermine the credibility of tourism operator's websites (Ruzic and Bilos, 2010). This has only made a positive and transparent presence on social media even more critical for destinations.

A study by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) confirmed not only the growth of social media as a source of online travel information, but predicted that sites like TripAdvisor would grow to become the primary source of online travel information for potential visitors. They observed that other social media platforms, especially blogs, were taking over the traditional channels of destination marketing and becoming more influential (2010). They argued that destination marketers need to understand social media and how to effectively get online travelers to access their sites. Using keywords, search engine optimization (SEO) and integrating social media platforms into current marketing strategies were suggested ways for destination marketers to grow using social media.

Despite this research, few destinations have been quick to take advantage of business opportunities created from social media marketing (Leung *et. al*, 2013). The travel experience now not only surrounds the hotel stay, but by the other services and experience that a destination offers (Ruzic and Bilos, 2010). Destinations that are able to highlight all of the museums, restaurants, culture and entertainment that their location provides are likely to have more successful tourist stays (Ruzic and Bilos, 2010). Social media allows prospective visitors a no risk way to see what a city offers before fully

committing to a trip and might service to convince travelers who were on the fence to visit.

Twitter is seen as a micro-blogging platform that is useful for spreading news about current events (Hay, 2010). Users can send "tweets" with 180-character limit, so most posts are short and to the point. It was found that Twitter is best at providing immediate updates and a constant stream of information (2010). Since users feed could change dramatically within five minutes, it was found that frequent updates were most important to a successful account (2010). A study by Antoniadis, Vrana and Zafiropoulos was conducted on Twitter usage and tourism performance of 38 European countries (2014). The study found that in general, Twitter performance is strongly associated with tourism performance of the countries. While Twitter performance was not necessarily found to be the driver of tourism success, it was surmised that its effect was not neutral, and that it did serve to promote the image of the destination (Antoniadis, Vrana and Zafiropoulos, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to analyze destination marketing organization's (DMO's) Twitter content to determine what kinds of content achieve the highest levels of engagement, and who is engaging with their posts. Based upon these findings, social media strategy recommendations will be made to Experience Columbia to enhance their Twitter content. Twitter was chosen for this study for its relative ease of access to data, its ability to measure engagement with relative ease, and because according to Hays, Page & Buhalis (2010) Twitter is one of the most popular platforms utilized by DMO's.

This study will seek to answer the following questions:

RQ1. What kinds of Twitter content produce the highest levels of engagement?

RQ2. Who engages the most with DMO Twitter accounts?

RQ3. What strategies should the Columbia DMO, Experience Columbia,
implement on Twitter to increase follower engagement?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

DMO's were chosen for analysis based on three factors: demographic information, recommendations provided by Experience Columbia, and cities that have colleges or universities. Demographic information was collected through www.bestplaces.net/compare-cities/. Categories such as population, median income, median age, average home price, and cost of living were used for comparison.

Cities analyzed were broken into two groups: comparable cities and goal cities. Comparable cities were those considered similar to Columbia, based on the factors above. Goal cities were those that had larger Twitter followings than Columbia and were what the Columbia DMO considered a "goal" in terms of social media strategy. The comparable cities chosen for analysis were Chattanooga (TN), Gainesville (FL), Savannah (GA), Knoxville (TN), Greenville (SC), and Tallahassee (FL). Table 3.1 lists information about each account, including the number of followers, the number of accounts they follow, and the total number of tweets.

Table 3.1 Comparable Cities Information

City	Handle	Followers	Following	# of Tweets
Chattanooga, TN	chattanoogafun	74,764	15,610	8,914
Columbia, SC	ColumbiaSC	69,512	10,507	22,907
Gainesville, FL	gainesville	7,026	1,239	6,449
Greenville, SC	greenville_sc	61,147	8,089	28,714
Knoxville, TN	visitknoxville	33,680	2,986	31,112
Savannah, GA	savannahmetro	4,734	317	1,329
Tallahassee, FL	visit_tally	13,001	916	19,348

The goal cities chosen were Charleston (SC), Columbus (OH), Durham (NC), Lexington (KY), Louisville (KY), Minneapolis (MN), and Nashville (TN). Table 3.2 lists information about the goal cities.

Table 3.2 Goal Cities Information

City	Handle	Followers	Following	# of Tweets
Charleston, SC	explorechs	48,593	458	31,710
Columbia, SC	ColumbiaSC	69,512	10,507	22,907
Columbus, OH	expcols	106,306	5,431	35,277
Durham, NC	durhamnc	18,063	1,180	9,477
Lexington, KY	visitlex	16,948	1,388	9,680
Louisville, KY	gotolouisville	24,873	6,700	16,973
Minneapolis, MN	meetminneapolis	40,741	2,774	52,029
Nashville, TN	visitmusiccity	288,593	1,913	31,665

Data from Twitter was scraped using NodeXL, from Twitter API. The most recent 3,200 tweets were collected from each DMO, and tweets range in date from 2015 to 2019, depending on how often each DMO tweeted. The attributes of the data collected for each tweet were tweet date, number of favorites, number of retweets, any URL's linked in the tweet, any media used in the tweet, hashtags used, content of tweet, replies to other users, retweet ID's, and user ID's.

The empirical analysis examined the relationship between types of Twitter content, such as use of hashtags, media, URL's and plain text and the engagement levels of the tweet. An observational analysis was done to determine common themes within popular twitter content and successful DMO Twitter accounts.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After analysis, the data for comparable cities showed that tweets with hashtags and media increased engagement levels, while URL usage decreased engagement. Specifically, hashtags increased retweets by an average of 27% and favorites by an average of 17%, while media increased retweets by an average of 78% and favorites by an average of 99.5%. The exceptions to this were Columbia and Tallahassee, where favorites decreased with hashtag usage. This may be due to several factors, including the choice of hashtags and tweet content. URL links in tweets had a negative impact on engagement, decreasing retweets by an average of 40% and favorites by an average of 52%. Figures comparing

The findings from the data for goal cities were similar, although it yielded different results. Hashtags were found to have a mixed effect, where retweets increased by an average of 4% and favorites decreased by an average of 3%. The use of media, however, still increased engagement, with retweets increasing by an average of 75% and favorites increasing by an average of 69%. The use of URL's like in the comparable cities, also dramatically decreased engagement. Retweets decreased by an average of 58% and favorites by an average of 69%.

Through an observational analysis, it was found that DMO twitter accounts with high engagement levels tweeted original copy and content at least 3-5 times per day on

average. They also used popular and appropriate hashtags while creating content that was on par with current trends, making it more relevant and appealing to their audience. Successful accounts also showed involvement with the community and represented the city's brand. They tweeted about the local schools, local businesses and events that were happening in the community. It was also observed that individuals and local businesses interacted the most with the DMO twitter accounts.

These findings confirm what many social media strategists already know, and also reveal some surprising results. Twitter is no longer just a micro-blogging platform, as it was when it originally launched. The use of media in tweets has becoming important to engagement levels and connecting with an audience. In the cases of both the comparable cities and goal cities, media in tweets markedly increased engagement by nearly 70% or more for both favorites and retweets. This implies that visuals are still a critical marketing factor, which is why photo sharing platforms such as Instagram are so popular.

It was also found that having a large number of followers does not necessarily lead to high engagement levels. For example, as shown in Table 3.2, Columbus' DMO account had 106,306 followers while Durham's DMO account had 18,063, less than 20% of Columbus' following. However, Durham averaged 19.74 retweets and 72.78 favorites per tweet, while Columbus only averaged 2.21 retweets and 6.50 favorites per tweet. Durham showed a strong connection with their city brand, they were highly engaged with the local community, they responded quickly to all engagements, and they accurately and quickly stayed on top of trending topics. For this reason, Durham had the highest engagement levels of all the goal cities despite having the fewest followers.

Based on the findings of this study, Experience Columbia should continue to use relevant hashtags and media to promote content because it was shown that they had a positive effect on engagement. However, they should limit the posting of content that only links to another webpage, as those tweets were shown to have the least overall engagement, even compared to plain text tweets. Post frequency should also be increased, as the more successful accounts were the ones that posted at least 3-5 times per day.

Experience Columbia should also focus on engaging with their audience through interaction on the platform. The Users & Gratifications theory explains that people use certain types of media to receive gratification and fulfill specific needs (Ko, Cho & Roberts, 2005). If individuals are logging on to Twitter and interacting with your DMO account, they may be looking to have a specific need fulfilled. Replying in a timely manner and interacting with that individual may satisfy their need to connect with someone, and then trust can be established. This will strengthen the bond between the DMO and their audience, perhaps positively affecting tourism and future visit intentions.

Another recommendation is to further develop and maintain a positive brand identity. Accounts with the strongest brand identity, such as Nashville or Durham, had the highest levels of engagement overall. According to Leung & Jiang (2018), a Facebook page that consumers could identify with emotionally impacted their future visit intentions. Likewise, Experience Columbia should post content that their audience can identify with in order to boost engagement and potentially influence desire to visit.

 Finally, choosing influencers that the target audience and the current community identify with will be important to increasing engagement and promoting tourism. Xu &

Pratt (2017) showed that strong self-congruence between social media influencers and potential tourists did impact visit intentions. It is recommended that Experience Columbia continues to choose influencers that align with the brand and destination goals, but those that are also viewed positively by residents and accurately reflect the city.

CHAPTER 5

LIMITATONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of this research was the number of cities analyzed. For the purpose of this study, a limited quantity of accounts were chosen to see if any trends emerged without receiving an overwhelming amount of data. Another limitation was that 12 of the 14 cities chosen are in the southeastern portion of the United States. Future research should look to compare a broader range and larger number of DMO twitter accounts to more accurately see the overall trend.

Availability of social media data for collection presented another limitation. After the recent Facebook privacy hack, data on social media has become more difficult to collect. This presented a challenge when designing the research questions and methodology because it limited the available options. A suggestion for future research is working with a larger data collection company who has access to more information.

Another limitation was the size and profile of each city when comparing data. For example, Lexington is markedly smaller than Nashville not just in terms of population, but also twitter followers. While the case of Durham showed that population size and follower count does not always matter in comparison to engagement levels, future research should look to compare cities of similar sizes to gain a more accurate perspective.

This study did not consider sentiment as a factor that affects engagement. Future studies should consider analyzing tweets for sentiment to determine how it affects engagement, and which types of followers (individuals, local businesses, other DMO's) are more likely to engage with tweets based on types of sentiment expressed.

Timing of tweets was another factor that was not considered for this study. Future research should analyze the time tweets are posted as well as how long it takes for DMO accounts to reply to engagements to see if timing has a positive or negative effect on engagement levels.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Social media will become progressively more important to the growth of the tourism industry. As destinations compete for the attention of potential visitors, understanding how to effectively harness social media to increase travel intentions will be an important aspect to destination marketing.

Twitter has evolved and become more than simply a micro-blogging platform. As demonstrated though this study, the integration of written and visual content has been shown to boost engagement levels. Learning new ways to effectively engage with potential tourists and the target audience is something that destinations will need to continually work towards in order to increase tourism. Traditional channels, such as commercials or magazine ads are no longer the only effective way to market to tourists. Newer, more creative methods must be examined and considered, especially when looking to attract a younger market.

REFERENCES

Achen, R. M. (2017). Measuring social media marketing: moving towards a relationship-

marketing approach. Managing Sport & Leisure, 22(1), 33–53.

https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2017.1379883

Antoniadis, K., Vrana, V. and Zafiropoulos, K. (2014), "Promoting European countries'

destination image through Twitter", European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and

Recreation, Vol. 5 No. 1,pp. 85-103.

Balduini, Marco & Della Valle, Emanuele & Dell'Aglio, Daniele & Tsytsarau, Mikalai &

Palpanas, Themis & Confalonieri, Cristian. (2013). Social Listening of City Scale

Events Using the Streaming Linked Data Framework. 1-16. 10.1007/978-3-642-

41338-4_1.

Candace Deans, P., & Miller Tretola, B. J. (2018). The evolution of social media and its

impact on organizations and leaders. Journal of Organizational Computing &

Electronic Commerce, 28(3), 173–192.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10919392.2018.1484597

Chen, G. M. (2011). Tweet this: A uses and gratifications perspective on how active

twitter use gratifies a need to connect with others. *Computers in Human

Behavior*, *27*(2), 755–762. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.10.023

DINESH, D., WRITER, C., & MEDIA, G. (2017). Why Micro-Influencers Are a Social

    Media Marketing Imperative for 2017. *EContent*, *40*(3), 14–15. Retrieved from

    https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?d

    irect=true&db=ccm&AN=122805273&site=ehost-live

Ducange, P. pietro. ducange@uniecampus. i., Fazzolari, M. m. fazzolari@iit. cnr. i.,

    Petrocchi, M. m. petrocchi@iit. cnr. i., & Vecchio, M. mvecchio@fbk. e. (2019).

    An effective Decision Support System for social media listening based on cross-

    source sentiment analysis models. *Engineering Applications of Artificial*

    Intelligence, *78*, 71–85. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.engappai.2018.10.014

Felix, R., Rauschnabel, P. A., & Hinsch, C. (2017). Elements of strategic social media

    marketing: A holistic framework. Journal of Business Research, 70, 118–126.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.05.001

Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social

    media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations*

    Review, *37*(1), 90–92. https://doi-

    org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001

Greenberg, P. (2010). The impact of CRM 2.0 on customer insight. *Journal of Business*

    & Industrial Marketing, *25*(6), 410–419.

    https://doi.org/10.1108/08858621011066008

Grönroos, C. (2004). The relationship marketing process: communication, interaction,

    dialogue, value. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *19*(2), 99–113.

    https://doi.org/10.1108/08858620410523981

Harrigan, P., Evers, U., Miles, M., & Daly, T. (2017). Customer engagement with

    tourism social media brands. *Tourism Management*, *59*, 597–609. https://doi-

    org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.09.015

Hays, S., Page, S. J., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool:

    its use by national tourism organizations. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *16*(3), 211–

    239. https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1080/13683500.2012.662215

Hendricks, D. (2013, May 06). Complete History of Social Media: Then And Now.

    Retrieved January 17, 2019, from https://smallbiztrends.com/2013/05/the-

    complete-history-of-social-media-infographic.html

Hutter, K., Hautz, J., Dennhardt, S., & Füller, J. (2013). The impact of user interactions

    in social media on brand awareness and purchase intention: the case of MINI on

    Facebook. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 22(5/6), 342–351.

    https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-05-2013-0299

Kelman, H. C. . (1958). compliance, identification, and internalization three processes of

    attitude change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *2*(1), 51–60.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275800200106

Ko, H., Cho, C.-H., & Roberts, M. S. (2005). Internet Uses and Gratifications. *Journal of*

    Advertising, *34*(2), 57–70. Retrieved from

    http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bft&AN=510435495&sit

    e=ehost-live

Kwon, O., & Wen, Y. (2010). An empirical study of the factors affecting social network service use. Computers in Human Behavior, 26(2), 254–263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2009.04.011

Langan, H. (2018, August 07). New Research Shows the Real Value of Micro-Influencers | Experticity. Retrieved January 13, 2019, from https://www.expertvoice.com/blog/new-research-shows-micro-influencers-drive-consumer-buying-behavior-much-higher-rates-previously-thought/

Leung, D., Law, R., Hoof, H.V. and Buhalis, D. (2013), "Social media in tourism and hospitality: a literature review", Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, Vol. 30 Nos 1/2, pp. 3-22.

Leung, Xi & Tanford, Sarah. (2015). What Drives Facebook Fans to "Like" Hotel Pages: A Comparison of Three Competing Models. Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management. 150403105443002. 10.1080/19368623.2015.1014125.

Leung, Xi & Baloglu, Seyhmus. (2015). Hotel Facebook marketing: an integrated model. Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes. 7. 266-282. 10.1108/WHATT-03-2015-0011.

Leung, X. Y., Bai, B., & Stahura, K. A. (2015). The Marketing Effectiveness of Social Media in the Hotel Industry: A Comparison of Facebook and Twitter. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, *39*(2), 147–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348012471381

Leung, X. Y., & Jiang, L. (2018). How do destination Facebook pages work? An

    extended TPB model of fans' visit intention. Journal of Hospitality and Tourism

    Technology, 9(3), 397-416. doi:10.1108/jhtt-09-2017-0088

McCracken, G. (1989). Who Is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the

    Endorsement Process. Journal of Consumer Research, 16(3), 310–321. Retrieved

    from

    https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?d

    irect=true&db=bth&AN=4662189&site=ehost-live

McLeod, J. M., & Becker, L. (1981). The uses and gratifications approach. In D. Nimmo

    & K. Sanders (Eds.), Handbook of political communication (pp. 67–100). Beverly

    Hills, CA: Sage.

Merz, M. A., Yi He, & Vargo, S. L. (2009). The evolving brand logic: a service-dominant

    logic perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *37*(3), 328–344.

    https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1007/s11747-009-0143-3

Phillips, D. (2017). Who Are You? Who, Who. *Hospitality Upgrade*, 142. Retrieved

    from

    http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=oih&AN=124006042&sit

    e=ehost-live

Popesku, J. (2014). Social Media as a Tool of Destination Marketing Organizations.

    Singidunum Journal of Applied Sciences, 715–721. https://doi-

    org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.15308/SInteZa-2014-715-721

Quach, J. (2017). Social Media Marketing in the Hotel Industry: Trends and

    Opportunities in 2017. *HVS Global Hospitality Report*, 13–19. Retrieved from

    https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?d

    irect=true&db=hjh&AN=124410568&site=ehost-live

Quan-Haase, A. aquan@uwo. c., & Young, A. L. . (2010). Uses and Gratifications of

    Social Media: A Comparison of Facebook and Instant Messaging. *Bulletin of

    Science, Technology & Society*, *30*(5), 350–361.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610380009

Rao, N.R., Rao, N.R., 2016. Social eMedia Listening and Monitoring for Business Applications,

    first ed. IGI Global, Hershey, PA, USA.

Rosenberg, M., & Rosenberg, M. (1979). *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*. New York, NY.

    Retrieved from

    http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hpi&AN=HaPI-

    288998&site=ehost-live

RUŽIĆ, D., & BILOŠ, A. (2010). SOCIAL MEDIA IN DESTINATION MARKETING

    ORGANISATIONS (DMOs). *Faculty of Tourism & Hospitality Management in

    Opatija. Biennial International Congress. Tourism & Hospitality Industry*, 178–

    190. Retrieved from

    https://login.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?d

    irect=true&db=hjh&AN=99110666&site=ehost-liveSocial Media. (2019,

    February 10). Retrieved January 13, 2019, from https://www.merriam-

    webster.com/dictionary/social media

Schweidel, D. A., & Moe, W. W. (2014). Listening in on Social Media: A Joint Model of Sentiment and Venue Format Choice. Journal of Marketing Research, 51(4), 387–402. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.12.0424

Social Media. (n.d.). Retrieved February 23, 2019, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social media?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld

Swanson, D. L. (1977). The uses and misuses of uses and gratifications. *Human Communication Research*, *3*(3), 214–221. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1977.tb00519.x

Top U.S. mobile social apps by users 2018 | Statistic. (2018, October). Retrieved January 13, 2019, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/248074/most-popular-us-social-networking-apps-ranked-by-audience/

Trainor, K. J. (2012). Relating Social Media Technologies to Performance: A Capabilities-Based Perspective. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *32*(3), 317–331. https://doi.org/10.2753/PSS0885-3134320303

Trainor, K. J., Andzulis, J. (Mick), Rapp, A., & Agnihotri, R. (2014). Social media technology usage and customer relationship performance: A capabilities-based examination of social CRM. *Journal of Business Research*, *67*(6), 1201–1208. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.05.002

Uzunoğlu, E. ebru. uzunoglu@ieu. edu. t., & Kip, S. M. sema. misci@ieu. edu. t. (2014). Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger

engagement. International Journal of Information Management, 34(5), 592–602.

https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2014.04.007

Van Der Veen, R. (2008). Analysis of the Implementation of Celebrity Endorsement as a

Destination Marketing Instrument. *Journal of Travel & Tourism*

Marketing, *24*(2/3), 213–222. https://doi-

org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1080/10548400802092841

Venkatesh, V., & Morris, M. G. (2000). Why Don't Men Ever Stop to Ask for

Directions? Gender, Social Influence, and Their Role in Technology Acceptance

and Usage Behavior. *MIS Quarterly*, *24*(1), 115–139.

https://doi.org/10.2307/3250981

Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information

search. *Tourism Management*, *31*(2), 179–188. https://doi-

org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1016/j.tourman.2009.02.016

Xu, R. X., & Pratt, S. (2018). Social media influencers as endorsers to promote travel

destinations: an application of self-congruence theory to the Chinese Generation

Y. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *35*(7), 958–972. Retrieved from

http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=131257633&si

te=ehost-live

Ye, Z., Hashim, N. H., Baghirov, F., & Murphy, J. (2018). Gender Differences in

Instagram Hashtag Use. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, *27*(4),

386. https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2018.1382415

Zeng, B., & Gerritsen, B. (2014). What do we know about social media in tourism? A

    review. Tourism Management Perspective, 10, 27-36