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## INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL MEDIA SPECIAL ISSUE

One of the advantages of having two guest editors from two different parts of world, and two very different ages (!), is that we were able to review all the submitted papers from very different perspectives, but with the same rigorous standards, and this is reflected in the papers we selected. Recognizing the enormity of influence from social media, the aim of this special issue was to assess the current and likely future influence of social media on both consumers and business. In particular, the rationale underpinning the idea behind this special issue was to consider social media's impact on tourism, culture, and communication.

Trends and new applications change so rapidly; it seems that there is always something new. An exemplar case highlighting this is social media platform Pinterest. At the time of writing this special issue, Pinterest was the fastest growing social platform. Launched only in March 2010, it gained popularity quickly and in August 2011 was written up in *Time* as being among the 50 best websites (McCracken, 2011). Less than 2 years after its launch, Pinterest had become the 10th largest social media site (Sloan, 2011). With its 11.7 million unique users, Pinterest became the fastest site in history to break the 10 million unique visit level (Constine, 2012).

Over the past 60 years, the speed in the adoption of new technology and their platforms has been amazing; just think how long it took television, the home phone, or even the internet to become almost universal, and today the speed of adoption of the various forms of social media has been truly amazing. Given how quickly social media are changing, it makes understanding the phenomenon a constant challenge. This creates a problem for researchers

and practitioners. Given the lag between writing and publishing, the social media scene will undoubtedly be different, when this is being read by the Journal's readership, from what it is now. However, despite this, it is essential to capture the scene in order to fully understand it, and therefore it was seen as critical to consider the topic and explore the negative and positive perspectives from across the world.

Whether people see social media as being a negative or a positive part of their life, or if businesses wonder if social media can really form part of their marketing mix, it is undoubtedly a key part of today's social communication and business marketing activities. This is especially the case for tourism businesses, where tourists, unfamiliar with the increasing wider array of options and choices, are referring to various forms of social media to gather information and help with their decisions. It serves almost as a support mechanism, as many tourists seem to lack confidence in their own judgment. Social media can also reduce the risk of making a disappointing choice. It could be argued that social media are now being used as a means of minimizing disappointment and taking the risk out of personal decisions.

Although social media are still seen by many as new, this area has in fact reached maturity, evidenced by the stabilization of growth figures seen across most social media platforms. It could also be argued that social media are no more than a technical version of the most effective method of marketing, namely, "word of mouth," but with a much larger base to draw upon. There has also been a tremendous growth in knowledge in the field the past few years. There are now so many social media books

that the "best of" lists have grown to the "25 best." The aim of this special issue was to draw together some of this knowledge by calling for research papers across the broad category of social media. In particular, papers that discussed the applications by industry were encouraged.

The expressions of interest to contribute to this special issue were as fascinating as they were diverse. As guest editors, one of the things we were particularly excited about was to ensure the invitation to contribute to the special issue included emerging researchers. As such, the call for articles was made that invited full papers as well as research notes from higher degree (HDR) students to outline work in progress. The rationale for the opportunity for HDR students was to highlight some of the interesting work being undertaken by emerging researchers that the discipline would be able to look forward to seeing in the near future. In the final sequence of reviewing, five articles were selected: four full articles and one research notes. Reflecting the international nature of tourism and the universality of the social media, the articles were drawn from around the world (Netherlands, US, Brazil, and Australia) and different research methods, including using social media as a research methodology.

The first article focused on Flickr and came from the US. Titled "A Flash of Culinary Tourism: Understanding the Influences of Online Food Photography on People's Travel Planning Process on Flickr," the article investigated the profile of Flickr users who enjoy online food photography during travel. The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and results from both sets of methodologies highlighted that food images influenced travel choices. The findings provide useful information for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism practitioners, who may find benefits in capitalizing more on visual images of food and tapping into other types of social media such as Flickr than they otherwise may typically consider. Operators will typically select some or all of the social media options of Facebook, Twitter, and blogs in their social media strategies. However, as we seem to be moving from a text-based world to a visual-based world, it could be that other options such as Flickr may be more beneficial than other forms of what

could even be described as "traditional" social media outlets.

The second article explored a range of social media platforms used by an Australian winery and was titled "The Acceptance or Rejection of Social Media: A Case Study of Rochford Winery Estate in Victoria, Australia." The authors used a case study of Rochford Winery Estate in the Yarra Valley (about 50 km east of Victoria's capital city Melbourne) to examine seven social media platforms. Using in-depth interviews, the authors sought to understand whether personnel from the winery felt that any of the social media platforms could lead to financial benefits. The article's conclusions suggest that four of the seven platforms had potential to increase revenue (referrals, user-generated content, member profiles, and social networking), whereas the other three (blogs, ratings and reviews, and forums) were viewed more helpful in assisting with brand awareness rather than generating increased sales.

The third article was also from Australia, titled "Student Tourism and Destination Choice: Exploring the Influence of Traditional, New, and Social Media: An Australian Case Study." The article explored how social media platforms influence international destination choices of university students. The study found that the students interviewed all had some sort of apprehension regarding the reliability of information obtained online, but particularly through social media platforms. The wider implications from this study suggest that even the young are becoming, if not skeptical, at least wary of solely relying on social media for information and that they still trust their friends and relatives for travel advice.

An investigation of the role of social media during crises was the focus of the fourth article titled "The Social Media Capital of the Universe: What Does This Mean for Brazilian Tourists to the US?" Examining the role social media can have for tourists during a crises, the article focused on Brazilian travelers to the US. The aim of the study was to examine the factors that influence utilization of social media for information on crises when traveling. The study found that although social media were not among the most preferred forms of information about a crisis, it was seen as effective and trustworthy if the information was provided by official services, such as the police and rescue services,

rather than official DMOs. As such, it may present as a useful additional tool for organizations to use. Given the extraordinarily high growth rate that social media have had over the past few years, the role it can play in assisting information dissemination in a crisis situation can only grow.

The final article in this special issue comes from the Netherlands and was the research note that was considered of high quality to include in this issue. The article, "Let's Talk Destination: Exploring Social Media (and) Marketing Strategies for the Destination Marketing Organization VVV Hof van Twente, the Netherlands," examined how social media were developed and managed by the DMO Hof van Twente. The article highlights that DMOs struggle with the social media dilemma; as changes are so rapid, it can be difficult to keep up, and they often lack the staff, skills, and resources. The study revealed that there were two groups of users ("inactives" and "actives"). The inactives group looked at social media sites but did not contribute or participate in the forums for reasons of privacy matters, perceived lack of need, and lack of time.

Overall, all these studies showed that social media are powerful tools that no company can afford to ignore. The platforms continue to change and grow and it seems that just as the business world begins to fathom the social media options, a new "must use" platform seems to appear. There have been some interesting cases on how social media have been used to create change in even large companies.

Although most of the articles in this special issue focused on consumers or small organizations, large companies can also struggle with social media, and neglecting social media in their marketing strategy has caused some of them to lose positions, although at the same time "it's helped to change the fortunes of several companies on the brink of solvency" (Smith, 2012). Social media allow consumers to directly communicate with companies and put forward opinions and ideas. As a result, social media have changed the way people see brands and that "companies don't own brands, the people who love them do" (Vinjamuri, 2012). This shows that no matter the strength of the brand, if the product is weak, it will not appeal to customers.

Lessons have also been learned by the power of social media to drive movement through David Carroll's song uploaded onto YouTube. David Carroll

was traveling on a United Airlines flight when his guitar was damaged by baggage handlers. When United Airlines refused to compensate Carroll for his loss, he resorted to social media to rectify the situation. Carroll's song "United Breaks Guitars" was uploaded onto YouTube and quickly went viral, and has attracted in excess of 13 million views at the time of writing this introduction. Interest was so high Carroll has now released a book called *United Breaks Guitars: The Power of One Voice in the Age of Social Media*. This example shows that negative messages in social media can damage a brand and that companies need to be careful, as social media have shifted the ownership of the brand from the organization to the individual.

If those cases are not enough evidence of the power of social media, one of the most powerful marketing campaigns in social media to date has been Tourism Queensland's "Best Job in the World." To apply for the best job in the world, people had to upload a 60-second video of why they should get the job. The aim of that campaign was to attract 400,000 new visitors to its website in a 12-month period. This goal was exceeded within 30 hours, and on the second day of the campaign, Tourism Queensland had a million visits to its website. With campaign expectations exceeded, the website crashed less than 2 days after the campaign was launched. The campaign led to an estimated 1,100 television placements, and at one stage during the campaign, the official campaign website was receiving 4,000 hits per second. It continues to be used as a case example of the power of social media (Scott, 2011).

Universal Studios also showed a preference for social media when it launched its Wizarding World of Harry Potter Theme Park. Instead of having a traditional expensive public relations campaign, they simply told seven people. Those seven people were carefully selected Harry Potter fans who were dedicated fans on various social media sites. Within 24 hours of telling just seven people, 350 million people had heard of the new attraction. Money could not buy this level of marketing awareness.

Although not every experience launching products and services via social media will be a success, these cases together with the cases brought forward by the authors in this special issue are an important reminder of the power of social media. It is hoped



that this special issue assists in raising an understanding of the types of social media as well as the means in which social media can be useful.

Tourism is truly a global business, and for the tourism business and consumers across the world there is a real need to recognize that social media have shifted power from organizations to individuals. For all the different forms of marketing activity, there is still nothing so powerful as word of mouth; social media are just a new way of communicating, a reflection of this transference of power. We hope you enjoy reading the articles in this special issue as much as we have in selecting the articles.

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