AN ANALYSIS OF THE USAGE OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER AS A MARKETING TOOL IN HOTELS[1]

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ABSTRACT

Social media provides a unique online platform for communication and information exchange where consumers are becoming the producers and consumers of the content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Saperstein and Hastings, 2010; Wigmo and Wikström, 2010). Social media creates opportunities for businesses to run successful social media marketing campaigns. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the impact of social networking sites (SNS) on information gathering and tourists' attitudes towards hotels. The study received 255 fully completed responses. The results showed that about 70% of study participants use SNS to obtain hotel information and that information posted on SNS affects a hotel choice of about 64% of respondents.

Keywords: *Social Media, Social Networking Sites (SNS), Facebook, Twitter, Hotels*

TWİTTER VE FACEBOOK'UN OTELLERDE BİR PAZARLAMA ARACI OLARAK KULLANILMASINA İLİŞKİN BİR ANALİZ

ÖZET

Sosyal medya, tüketicilerin içeriğin hem üreticisi hem de tüketicisi olmaya başladıkları dönemde iletişim ve bilgi alışverişi için eşsiz bir platform sunmaktadır (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Saperstein and Hastings, 2010; Wigmo and Wikström, 2010). Sosyal medya işletmelere başarılı sosyal medya pazarlaması kampanyaları yürütebilmeleri için fırsatlar yaratmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı sosyal iletişim sitelerinin turistlerin otellere yönelik

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tutumlarına ve bilgi toplama alışkanlıklarına etkilerini değerlendirmektir. Çalışmada 225 yanıta ulaşılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları katılımcıların %70'inin oteller ile ilgili bilgi toplarken sosyal iletişim sitelerine başvurduklarını ve bu sitelerde yer alan bilgilerin katılımcıların %64'ünün otel seçimini etkilediğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Sosyal Medya, Sosyal İletişim Siteleri, Facebook, Twitter, Oteller*

INTRODUCTION

The advent of Web 2.0 technology provides the development of a unique platform, called as social media, for communication and information exchange (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Saperstein and Hastings, 2010; Wigmo and Wikström, 2010). By the increasing power of social media, consumers are becoming the producers and consumers of the content. This evolution provides a new type of consumers known as "prosumers" (Hearn, Foth and Gray, 2009: 49). Since tourism is an information-based sector, it is important to understand the information exchange among tourists on the social media platforms (Buhalis, 2003; Sheldon, 1997; Werthner and Klein, 1999; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). However, there is limited research that investigated the impact of social networking sites on tourists' perception of tourism products, mainly the hotels. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to evaluate the impacts of social networking sites (SNS) on the tourists' perception of tourism products and the attitudes of tourists towards the hotels.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Weinberg (2009: 3) social media marketing is defined as "a process that empowers individuals to promote their websites, products, or services through online social channels and to communicate with and tap into a much larger community that may not have been available via traditional advertising channels". Social media platforms such like Facebook, Twitter, Digg, YouTube and many others achieved to make a revolution in the concept of marketing, advertising and promotion (Hanna et al., 2011). The communication barriers between the companies and their consumers have started to disappear by the increasing power of social media (Vocus, 2009).

The emergence of social networking sites (SNS) and quick adaptation of consumers to these SNS are the most significant advances of consumer based information technology (Cobanoglu, 2010). SNS such

as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Bebo have attracted millions of internet users since their introduction (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Mayfield, 2008). Membership in SNS enables tourism companies to reach potential customers in a cost-effective way without the need of additional hardware or software (Kasavana et al., 2010). According to the Marketing Leadership Council (2008: 6) successful use of SNS in marketing activities provides the following benefits: improve customer understanding, promote issues of social concern, promote products and services, facilitating internal knowledge sharing and increase brand awareness.

The review of relevant literature revealed that the usage of social networking sites in the marketing of hotels tend to be more common by the increasing power and popularity of social media. Based on this, the researchers would like to investigate and answer the following research questions: (1) Do tourists obtain information about hotel businesses from social networking sites? (2) Do social networking sites affect opinions of tourists about hotel businesses? (3) Do social networking sites affect the choice of hotel businesses of tourists? (4) What factors impact tourist intention to use SNS as an information gathering tool?

METHOD

The data was gathered via the web by means of a self-administered online survey (written in Turkish). The survey is designed by the studies of Cahill (2008), Khan (2010), Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Desiderio Gutiérrez-Taño and Díaz-Armas (2011), Hagel and Armstrong (1997), Wang and Fesenmaier (2004), Jeong (2008), Yoo and Gretzel (2008), Batson, Ahmad and Tsang (2002), Wasko and Faraj (2005), Torkzadeh and Lee (2003), Chen (2006), Govani (2005), Gross and Acquisti (2005). Online surveys distributed through Facebook and Twitter to the tourists who use social networking sites. The distribution process of the online surveys started through the networks of the researchers on these SNS and spread through the networks of their friends. The total number of initially distributed online surveys was 350 tourists. The data was collected from April 2011 to June 2011.

FINDINGS

Out of the 350 initially distributed questionnaires, 255 complete and usable responses were gathered. Among 255 tourism consumers, who participated in the study, 139 (54.5%) were female and 116 (45.5%) were male. Majority of the respondents were aged from 21 to 30 (73.7%), and by education, 62.4% of the respondents completed their bachelor's degree and 24.7% of the respondents completed their master's degree. Majority of respondents had an account on Facebook (99.2%), 42.7% of the respondents had a Twitter account. Furthermore, respondents visit SNS usually 1-2 times (33.3%) and 3-5 (31%) times per day. Respondents reported to spend 1-2 hours (40%), less than an hour (29.4%) and 3-5 hours (27%) on SNS per day.

RQ1. Do tourists obtain information about hotel businesses from social networking sites?

More than a half of the tourists (132 respondents, 51.8%), who participated in the survey, agreed that they obtain information about hotel businesses from social networking sites while 46 tourism consumers (18%) strongly agree on this question.

RQ2. Do social networking sites affect opinions of tourists about hotel businesses?

132 tourism consumers (51.8%) agreed and 34 tourism consumers (13.3%) strongly agreed that social networking sites affect opinions of tourism consumers about hotel businesses.

RQ3. Do social networking sites affect the choice of hotel businesses of tourists?

127 tourism consumers (49.8%) agreed that social networking sites affect the choice of hotel businesses of tourism consumers while 36 tourism consumers (14.1%) strongly agreed to this statement.

The findings of the study confirm that tourism consumers use social networking sites to get information about the tourism products such as hotel businesses. In addition to this, respondents agree that social networking sites affect the perceptions of tourism consumers especially during their travel decision process.

RQ4. What factors impact tourist intention to use SNS as information gathering tool?

Factor analysis was used to condense the information contained in

these attributes and to confirm the notion that distinct dimensions existed. The value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) found in this study was 0.92. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity value was significant at p=0.001. The factor analysis identified 5 factors with variables which have meaningful factor loadings. These factors showed the following dimensions of tourism consumers' perceptions of SNS usage: information gathering; sharing; interaction and trust; usefulness; and usage. The reliability of the sample was checked by Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (CAC). CAC for each of the factors exceeded 0.75 therefore were considered to be reliable. CAC for all the independent variables was 0.94.

To determine the impact of each factor to the intention to use SNS to gather information about tourism products, a multiple regression analysis was performed. The results of regression analysis showed that all factors (information gathering in SNS, sharing information, interaction and trust, usefulness, and usage) impacted intention to use SNS to gather information about tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated users' intention to use SNS to gather information about tourism products. The results showed that about 70% of study participants use SNS to obtain hotel information. In addition to that, information gathering in SNS, sharing information, interaction and trust, usefulness and usage factors impacted the intention to use SNS to gather information about tourism products. Future studies may be able to identify the types of information that tourism consumers want to obtain on the social networking sites. It would be useful to evaluate the level of SNS usage for the hotel businesses in reaching to the consumers. Thus researches could perform a comparative analysis between the expectations of tourism consumers about social networking sites and the level of response of hotel businesses to those expectations. In this way, useful recommendations about more effective usage of social networking sites in the marketing of hotel businesses could be made.

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