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SYNERGIES FOR REDUCING THE BARRIERS TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND ENHANCING LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Although tourism businesses are increasingly tweeting, posting and blogging, many experience barriers that limit the effective use of these and other new technologies. The main barriers to active usage of social media include a lack of skill, knowledge, time and resources. With limited research into how businesses can overcome these barriers, this exploratory study proposes an approach for involving synergistic relationships between tourism-related business owners/managers and university students. This approach assisted participating owners/managers to gain skills and information while simultaneously providing students with real world experiences. This approach offers tourism business owners and managers a point of entry to understanding and utilising social media. Results also revealed additional network connections for knowledge and information sharing were extended beyond the classroom.

Keywords: barriers to social media use, regional tourism, collaborative learning, networks

INTRODUCTION

Utilising social media is an essential strategy for businesses to market tourism products and to communicate and connect with consumers. There are numerous e-courses, e-tools, workshops, books and blogs to assist business owners and managers to gain information regarding the use of social media. For example, Tourism Queensland has an online e-kit that is an informative tool for tourism operators (Tourism Queensland, 2012). However, there is so much information it can be difficult for prospective users to navigate and determine which are most helpful to them, creating barriers to effective usage. Using social media demands new ways of thinking (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) but a lack of knowledge, expertise and the financial capacity to invest in specialists to develop and maintain social media accounts is also a significant barrier to uptake (Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2011; Phippen, 2010; Thompson, Williams, Thomas & Packham, 2010).

Nielsen (2012) surveyed more than 28,000 global consumers with Internet access and found 70% explored social media at least once a month to hear about others' experiences, 65% participated to learn more about brands, products and services and 50% to express concerns or complaints (Nielsen, 2012). In 2012, Facebook had 11 million small/medium business pages (Darwell, 2012), predictions suggest business spending on social media will reach approximately \$AU3 billion by 2014 (Lacho & Marinello, 2010). Social media networks are particularly under-utilised for marketing, purchasing and managing customer relations (Antlova, 2009) with just 10% of Australian small businesses utilising social media (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). As small/medium businesses, many of which are directly or indirectly connected to tourism, are considered to be technology late adopters (Darwell, 2012). It is therefore, increasingly important to join the conversation.

Travelling for business, leisure and tourism is all about the experiences. Social media, considered by some to be an essential part of their lives, allows people to directly share these experiences via photos and stories with others through electronic word of mouth (Akehurst, 2009). One study found that almost 50% of pleasure people post travel pictures on social networking sites (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). At present, Tourism Australia has the largest Facebook page in Australia and destination page in the world with 4,196,140 LIKES, reflecting that "people are passionate about travel and love to share their holiday experiences via social media" (Tourism Australia, 2013). Social

media tools and technologies have changed the way people communicate. Peer-to-peer communication has meant information about tourism products and services is no longer solely in the hands of businesses (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) reducing the level of control owners/managers have over the conversation, the available product information and images (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013). Content and comment is created by consumers in response to a multitude of external stimuli.

Tourism is a service based industry facing numerous global challenges: political, economic, social, technical, legal and environmental. The internet has facilitated possibilities for single operator businesses in remote regions to compete alongside larger, city based businesses and on the global stage. Social media is considered the technological innovation that has substantially impacted the travel and tourism (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) with widespread uptake by consumers influencing traveller decision making (Yoo, Gretzel & Zach, 2011). These tools constitute a considerable part of the online tourism domain, playing an integral role when consumers (travellers) are planning their trips as they increasingly consider this an important information source (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) with the most popular online purchases involving travel goods (56%) (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2010).

Consumer demand for real time information means tourism businesses must be ready and able to respond quickly to factors that could affect demand and supply. Interaction with online feedback and comments to consumer-generated online reviews has been found to regularly influence individual travel purchase decisions (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However, few business owners/managers seem able to effectively engage in this domain for example, as few as 7% of hotel managers respond to online reviews even though 71% of people indicated managerial responses were important (Sparks, Perkins & Buckley, 2013). A good understanding of the mechanisms for communicating online can aid tourism operators (Buhalis, 1998). Further, the effective utilisation of online tools and resources such as social media can inform managerial decision making (Miguéns, Baggio & Costa, 2008).

This issue is the need for tourism businesses to be actively, efficiently and effectively engaging with social media. An opportunity for work integrated learning, industry projects within a university setting offered by universities was proposed as a possible solution and raised the question: *What impact will the application of student based, work integrated learning projects have on reducing the barriers to social media usage by tourism-related businesses?*

Synergistic possibilities

A trusted facilitator who possesses the knowledge and skill to effectively navigate and negotiate the complexity of the internet can be a catalyst for ICT adoption (Doiron & Fleet, n.d.; Fleet, 2012). Further, business owners/managers have been found to prefer learning from experience or through 'action-learning' with one-to-one mentoring providing individualised intervention (Laister, 2012). Key users and personal assistance offers support that can result in continuous attainment of social media initiatives (Zeiller & Schauer, 2011). The process is further augmented as existing knowledge is built upon with each individual's personal use of social media increasing outcomes (Gligorijevic & Leong, 2011). Research suggests that younger individuals should be incorporated into a business's management structure as they have a greater propensity for adopting social media technology (Fosso Wamba & Carter, 2013). This can be boosted further when tourism-related business owners/managers include their employees in learning opportunities.

Brown (2006, p. 115) states that "successful learning takes place when learners solve contextual real life problems through active engagement in problem-solving activities and extensive networking,

communication and collaboration". Students and business owners/managers often prefer learning from experience where mentoring can take place (Laister, 2012). By encouraging students to explain concepts and technology usage to others they can enhance their own learning while gaining confidence and the satisfaction of knowing they are teaching new and useful skills to others. There is a reciprocal relationship as business owners/managers in turn explain managerial issues and express their desired usage of the technologies. This reinforces the learning outcomes being experienced. With careful planning and support, both parties can learn about new technologies (social media), how to use them in innovative ways, and enhance their own knowledge and skill by passing this knowledge on to others. This type of cooperative learning enables the accomplishment of specific goals as people work together.

The pedagogy around work integrated learning (WIL) is based on experiential learning and industry engagement. Students who undertake WIL during their course of study are more likely to reflect positively on their university experience and achieve employment within their chosen field (Harvey, Moon, Geall & Bower, 1997). Student-industry engagement helps develop well-rounded, empowered and competent professionals (Millican & Bourner, 2011) who can positively contribute to industry, in this instance, the tourism industry. WIL projects involve various levels of community engagement that stimulate the development of networks for learning (Harvey et al., 1997; Orrell, 2004).

Education and learning is shifting from reproductive to productive learning, from reactionary learning to a more proactive approach. This discourages regurgitation of what has been taught and encourages contribution to learning and knowledge development (Brown, 2006). Within a constructivist paradigm, knowledge is created in the process of understanding (Driscoll, 2000) in an attempt to actively create meaning (Siemens, 2004). Knowledge is constructed and shared, and meaning is developed when we interact with others (Nussbaum et al., 2009).

Today's students have been raised in the "always on world of interactive media, the Internet, and digital messaging technologies" (Baird & Fisher, 2005, p. 5). Many have a rich appreciation of social media for personal use but fewer have an understanding of how to use these tools for business. The application of social media within assessment tasks allows students to use their individual life experiences and to work in collaborative environments with multiple stakeholders (Baird & Fisher, 2005).

The socio-constructivist paradigm postulates that giving students an opportunity to purposefully apply and extend their knowledge and actively engage in dialogue with other students, academics, community and industry representatives (reciprocal teaching) is beneficial to learning (Birch & Volkov, 2007). The exchanges and interactions students have with "others inside and outside the institution are important" (Bean, 2005, p. 227). Further, students are more likely to complete difficult tasks while working with other like-minded individuals facing similar challenges (Roberts & Styron, 2008). Synergistically, this can be extended to business owners/managers as they are experiencing problems that students can assist to solve.

METHODOLOGY

As this was an exploratory study, questionnaires were developed to assess specific aspects to describe the relationships and outcomes of participant learning and involvement. A small pilot questionnaire informed further questionnaire development. Overall, questions sought to ascertain: current social media usage; barriers to use; the benefits and usefulness of working cooperatively in a WIL project using social media; whether participants were able to share and gain knowledge and skill; the network

opportunities created and enhanced; if and with whom tourist-related businesses shared information gained; and what additional activities evolved.

Participants consisted of the course co-ordinator, Australian and International university students and regional tourism-related business owners/managers. A WIL based project embedded in assessment allowed students to work in small groups with a designated tourism business. In 2010 and 2011, participating students and tourism-related businesses were invited by email to complete online questionnaires comprising qualitative and quantitative (five point scales strongly agree-disagree) questions. Online questionnaires also collected data from participating businesses in 2012 and 2013. In total, 55% of students (96) and 85% (65) of the tourism-related businesses chose to complete the online surveys. In addition, secondary sources, observations and communications were evaluated to validate and triangulate responses. From 2010 to 2013, the course co-ordinator recorded (reflective journal) the individuals and groups directly connected to course activities and those activities that resulted directly from the course.

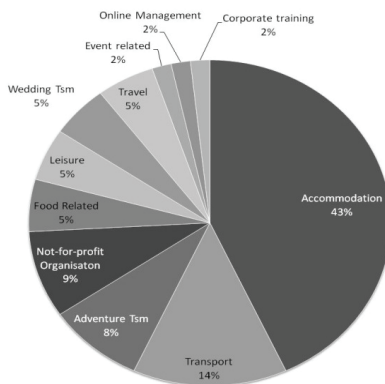
RESULTS

The results report on three key aspects: the responses by tourism businesses and students and the results related to the learning network.

Participating tourism business responses

Although from a variety of tourism-related businesses, the respondents were predominantly accommodation providers (43%), followed by transportation (14%) and not-for-profit community-based organisations (9%) (Figure 1). The majority had less than ten employees (98%).

Figure 1: Profile of Business Respondents



In 2010, 43% of respondents had not applied any of the three social media tools offered (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) for business purposes, in 2011 this decreased to 22% of respondents. By 2012, all respondents had at least attempted to use one or more of the three social media tools. Respondents who had not previously used these social media tools indicated that prior to the project they had not created or maintained social media sites due to a lack of knowledge or skill (50%), time (27%) and/or

uncertainty (15%). Despite there being various industry developed resources for tourism businesses, respondents indicated a lack of knowledge as the most frequent barrier. Open ended comments revealed many had tried to use social media for themselves but were “*not sure how to use the tool once I got it started*”, “*I only have a basic knowledge of social media*” and had “*limited knowledge about how to actually use it for business*”.

Following their involvement, respondents stated that working with the students introduced them to a new viewpoint and showed them how to make more effective use of their time on social media. Tourism-related business respondents became more aware of the importance of social media and the need to continually investigate what these tools and technologies have to offer. All business respondents moderately to strongly agreed that the project outcomes were useful to their tourism business (average 4.5/5 point scale) and that they felt more confident using social media after being involved in the project. When asked what the best part of participating in the project was, respondent themes focused on the gaining of confidence (64%) “*to be part of a changing world*”, time saving benefits (57%), the learning experiences (31%) and the exposure to “*fresh viewpoints and ideas*” (19%). Furthermore, the synergistic relationship with students gave the business respondents an additional sense of confidence as they were able to “*assist the students with their learning*” and provide “*opportunities for the next generation to hone their skills in a practical way*”. More than half (57%) of the tourism business respondents indicated the barriers to use were reduced following their involvement in the project.

Participating business owners/managers were asked to indicate if they had gained additional information and knowledge after being involved in the industry project (Table 1). The majority of tourism businesses (76%) said they gained new information and knowledge. When asked more specifically what they had learned regarding social media, the majority stated it was how to use social media more effectively (40%), how to set up a social media site or page (20%), more about content management (19%), measuring responses, tips and tricks, and the existence of other new tools and technologies (17% respectively).

Table 1: Tourism Business Responses Regarding Information and Knowledge Gained

Statement	Responses % Agree to Strongly Agree
Did you gain additional information and knowledge from being involved in the industry project	92%
Did you share this information and knowledge with others	81%

Post-project, business respondents stated their attitude towards social media was a positive one. Respondents revealed a variety of positive outcomes including improved communication with customers (22%), increased avenues for marketing (19%) and access to new markets (15%) (Figure 1). The only negative aspect highlighted was that social media is very time consuming (35%).

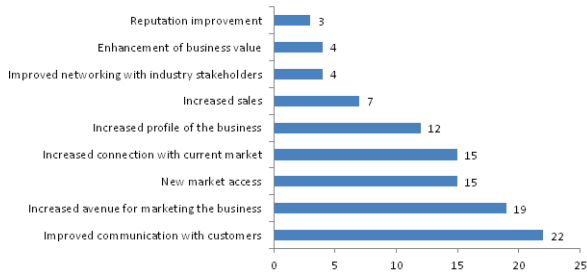


Figure 1: Positive Outcomes from Using Social Media (%)

Finally, 41% of respondents said they shared their new knowledge; some of the tourism businesses with whom information was shared became involved in subsequent course offerings, in University-based internship projects and work experience activities. Overall, respondents agreed or strongly agreed that being involved in the student-based social media project assisted them in learning more about the use of social media while reducing usability barriers.

Student responses

It is important to gain an appreciation of the outcomes for students. A positive or negative experience by students may impact those by participating businesses.

All student respondents somewhat to strongly agreed that being able to work with a real business influenced their desire to continue studying at the host University and that this opportunity enriched their overall University experience. Student responses suggest the learning outcomes were enhanced with the majority of students strongly agreeing they had learned more about the use of social media within a tourism-related business (Table 2). In addition, students highlighted that their networks and industry contacts increased and were perceived to positively influence their ability to gain future employment.

Table 2: Student Responses Highlighting Outcomes of Participation

Statement	Av score (5pt scale)
The use of social media was useful to my ability to learn about social media in tourism	4.8
The ability to apply a real world tool enhanced my learning in the course	4.8
Being able to work with a local tourism-related business enhanced my learning	4.8
The use of innovative technology increased my satisfaction level of this course	4.6
Being able to work with a tourism-related business enhanced my networking opportunities	4.5
Using a real-world internet tool in assessment tasks is an innovative approach to learning	4.5
I am now a competent user of social media in a tourism-related business context	4.4
Being able to apply a social media tool helped me appreciate some of the challenges tourism businesses face with this type of technology	4.3
This course helped me to link with the tourism industry and increased my network of contacts	3.9

Further support for information and knowledge being shared was assessed by asking students if they were able to share their knowledge of tourism management and social media with the business owner/manager. Responding students (41%) moderately to strongly agreed they were able to share relevant knowledge with the owner/manager (average 4.3/5pt scale).

Network 'extension'

The results revealed the various stakeholders involved shared information, knowledge and skill beyond the classroom. A simple assessment of the evolving network revealed 391 nodes (individuals or groups) and 726 ties (one way or reciprocal) over the four years. It would be expected that a network of information and knowledge sharing would develop between the course co-ordinator and students. As it incorporates WIL, it was also likely that this would extend to participating tourism business owners/managers. This was the case but results also demonstrated the network extended beyond these relationships (Figure 3). The resulting connections included other intra-university staff, university staff from interstate and overseas, a regional innovation centre, other tourism and non-tourism related businesses (regional and intra-state), business and not-for-profit community groups, government agencies and tourism industry organisations, the media and University based interns. High levels of interest from tourism businesses wishing to take part in the project resulted in an externally run community workshop being offered specifically aimed at tourism business to further their knowledge regarding social media usage. The research and teaching outcomes were shared with other universities both nationally and internationally via presentations and conferences.

Business respondents indicated they shared information gained and skills developed, from being involved in the social media project, with between two and six other people including other students (52%), staff and colleagues (71%), other tourism business contacts (42%), and friends and family (14%). Respondents also sought information regarding social media from others outside the project including their staff and colleagues (57%), other business contacts (tourism and non-tourism related) (28%), tourism industry groups, friends, family and others (10% respectively). Further network extension occurred with two businesses revealing they shared their new knowledge with other tourism-related businesses within semi-formal, group meeting settings. Additionally, 56% of respondents stated they made more connections with other local tourism businesses, other businesses outside of their local area (12%), with tourism industry-related stakeholders (11%) and with government (9%). Forty-one per cent attended tourism industry or local government hosted courses and workshops.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The positive practical outcomes for tourism businesses of being involved in student based, work integrated learning projects for reducing the barriers to social media usage are clear. The advent of IT and WEB 2.0 technology requires new ways of thinking and strategy design for both teaching and in tourism business. Overall, the results suggest the information exchanged, and the knowledge and skills shared contributed to learning. Linking tourism business owners and managers with university students within a structured learning environment highlighted how the use of social media can break down the barriers to use, contribute to the formation of networks that enhance learning outcomes, and enrich the experience for students and tourism business owners/managers. A number of studies have discussed the various advantages of using social media including the building of networking opportunities (Culnan, McHugh & Zubillaga, 2010; Gligorijevic & Leong, 2011; Michaelidou et al., 2011). This synergistic relationship extended the networks that facilitate learning and instilled confidence as information was shared between students, businesses and others.

Research into IT adoption and use is driven by the need to identify predicating factors leading to successful application (El-Gohary, 2010; Lynn, Lipp, Akgün, & Cortez, 2002). Research and the results of this exploratory study suggest the barriers to uptake and effective use of social media include a lack of knowledge, skill, time and money (Mehrtens, Cragg & Mills, 2001; Street & Meister, 2004). Whilst it is clear tourism businesses can benefit from the use of technology when used effectively (Wielicki & Arendt, 2010), there has been limited research on how to overcome adoption barriers caused by a lack of knowledge, understanding or expertise. This study provided some insights into an innovative approach for tourism businesses to address these issues.

Dewey (1938, p. 25) stated that “all genuine education comes about through experience”. Although experiential learning theory has its critics, it is one of the most influential and widely applied theories of learning (Kayes, 2002; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The benefit to students of WIL is clear and well researched. The incorporation of social media has added additional value by improving learning outcomes, providing a real world experience and assisting the students with the application of tourism theory. The underlying premise of projects that feature collaborative contribution is that joint efforts by various contributors can generate better outcomes. These experiences involve a partnership among students, educational institutions and tourism businesses, with specified responsibilities for each party (Fleming & Martin, 2007).

The growth in use of social media for personal, organisational and business purposes has been unprecedented (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010). The pervasive nature of social media is evident within the university setting as social media is influencing how students engage, communicate, collaborate and learn. This is mirrored in the businesses community.

Student learning in the 21st century requires innovation, the use of new technology, opportunities for students to work with industry and flexible learning approaches. By embedding social media within assessment tasks, a collaborative cycle of learning was created. The utilisation of younger people in the learning process as mentors facilitated advantages not only for themselves but the businesses. In this way, information and knowledge transfer provided a cost effective approach for building co-operative relationships to enhance business’s skill sets while enriching student experiences.

Contributions have been made to practice by providing additional understanding of how synergistic learning relationships can provide participant. Tourism is an industry that features high volumes of online transactions and highly important communication channels based on internet and social media tools and technologies (Werthner & Ricci, 2004). The applied approach was innovative, enhanced learning and extended learning beyond the classroom. Ongoing benefits from the projects have been realised including the establishment of cooperative working relationships between tourism and the host University; the opportunity for tourism business owners/managers to evaluate potential employees and students to engage with future employers; participation in the preparation of future tourism industry professionals; increased awareness of new and innovative ideas in the tourism field; the gaining of assistance and expertise in related projects, and the development and/or creation of new programs, projects and possibilities.

This exploratory study is in the context of tourism and social media, the opportunity to work with students to reduce the ICT barriers through the building of knowledge and skill, in a cost and time effective manner. Learning networks provide opportunities for participants to develop their knowledge by sharing, communicating and collaborating. Learning networks are described as network(s) “formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge” (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001, p. 88). The purposeful creation of networks for learning provided a system of knowledge sharing and opportunities for communication extended to participating tourism business owners/managers and beyond as respondents shared what they had learned with others. Mapping

these networks is a way to demonstrate the connections associated with WIL projects focused on learning and engagement. Future social network research may provide a greater understanding and extend practice benefits.

With more people gaining new skills and knowledge there is the potential to enhance the capabilities of the regional tourism industry. It is suggested in the results of this study that the increased levels of knowledge and skill gained and shared with non-participating businesses by participating owners/managers may have improved the capacity of tourism in the regional area. Additional research into the possible benefits related to capacity building and skill development within the tourism industry will contribute further to theory and practice.

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