

## Social media: A conduit for increasing knowledge and skill for capacity building

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### Abstract

**Purpose-** *The purpose of this paper is to report on research investigating the outcomes associated with a network for learning that was developed from a student based project involving the application and management of social media for business.*

**Design/methodology/approach-** *Questionnaires were used to gather responses from tourism, leisure and event-related regional business owners/managers who participated in a student based project from 2010-2012. Unsolicited feedback and communications, secondary sources, observations and communications were used to validate responses. Pre- and post-project social media usage and usage barriers; knowledge and skill gained and/or shared and with whom TLE-related businesses shared the information gained; and an examination of the network for learning.*

**Findings:** *A dynamic, network was developed to share and exchange information. Outcomes included: the strengthening of cooperative working relationships between regional tourism businesses and the host institution; increased awareness between stakeholders of new and innovative ideas in the tourism field; the acquisition of expertise by participating businesses in the use of social media; and the enhancement of tourism in the regional area. Results of this study show that increased levels of knowledge and skill were gained by participating businesses and then shared with non-participating businesses to enhance the capacity of TLE-related stakeholders in the regional area. This process amplified learning, knowledge creation and understanding and facilitation of collaborative networks for learning.*

**Implications:** *This study furthers current knowledge on ways to create capacity within small tourism businesses by integrating social media within a student-based project that enhance participant skill and knowledge development.*

**Key words:** social media; capacity building; small business; connectivism; networks for learning.

JEL Classification: M31

PsycINFO Classification: 3550 ; 3920

FoR Code: 1506

ERA Journal ID#: 123340

## Introduction

Faster internet speeds, free Wi-Fi in public spaces throughout many destinations and multi-functional smartphones have dramatically impacted tourism and travel. Users engage with multiple devices with mobile technology usage continues to increase. Social media enables dynamic networks to be created for a multitude of purposes that primarily focus on communication and information sharing. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.61) describe social media as 'a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allows the creation and exchange of User Generated Content'.

In the past decade, social media has become part of our everyday lives. By mid-2015, Facebook® had 1.49 billion active monthly users (Statista, nd (a)), LinkedIn® some 364 million members (Statista, nd (b)) and Twitter®, approximately 316 million monthly users (Twitter Inc, 2015). Thirty eight percent (n=132) of travellers use smartphones to view social media sites for example, 80% of Twitter® users do so via mobile technologies (Twitter Inc, 2015). Three quarters of users (77%; n=268) engage with social media to gain travel inspiration in their spare moments (e.g. waiting and commuting) (Google Travel Study, 2014). Business usage of social media has also increased. Social media enables managers to measure engagement, create dialogue with consumers and is integral to a business's marketing and operations strategy (McCabe, Jennings, Weissenberg and Murali, 2015). With large and increasing numbers of active users, business managers who disregard social media may be missing opportunities to effectively engage with current and potential consumers.

Although many tourism businesses have adopted online media, usage is still unsophisticated (McCabe, et al., 2015). More than 50% of travel executives believe their companies are lagging behind the competition with respect to digital media presence (McCabe, et al., 2015) while Drury (2008, p.275) recognises 'the rise of social media as an influential marketing channel has caught many in the industry off guard'. Social media is considered to 'be easily set up at no cost', and simple to use (Fischer and Reuber, 2011) and, as such, 'offer a significant opportunity for small businesses that are in competition with large enterprises to promote and sell their products or services on the Internet' (Feng-Kwei Wang and Zha, 2014, p.226; Stockdale Ahmed and Scheepers, 2012; Zeiller and Schauer, 2011). This may be correct but, in reality, there are staff related costs associated with managing and monitoring web based sites which can be challenging to effectively manage, or even understood, particularly in a business context.

Challenges and concerns associated with social media application in business include inappropriate and negative comments from consumers, the high degree of site maintenance (daily engagement by businesses), the need to develop a strategy, and the additional resources to effectively engage in social media marketing (Business.gov.au, nd). Barriers to the effective use of social media include a lack of knowledge, skill, time and money (Mehrtens, et al., 2001; Street and Meister, 2004). Whilst it is clear that tourism businesses can benefit from the use of technology (Wielicki and Arendt, 2010), there has been limited research into how to overcome the challenges to the adoption of social media. This study details an approach for businesses that provides opportunities for learning about social media usage, the networks for learning that can be created, and how this can lead to the building of individual and industry capacity and support their efforts to achieve more effective use of social media.

## Literature Review

On a global scale small and medium sized (SME) businesses are essential for socio-economic development, employment (Wolcott, Kamal and Qureshi, 2008) and economic growth (Fosso Wamba and Carter, 2013). SMEs accounted for 65% of new jobs created in the USA between 1993 and 2009, (Small Business Advisory Office of Advocacy, 2012). Similarly, 95% of all actively trading businesses in Australia are SMEs (Connolly, Norman and West, 2012). In a rapidly changing world, access to tools and technologies such as social media, is essential for businesses. However, despite actively engaging in social media, many businesses are challenged as they try to adapt to an increasingly diverse technological landscape.

Social media tools and technologies can be used to create personal and business profiles to share content including information and opinions (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Social media has facilitated new market access, reduced transaction costs and improved communication (Abid, Rahim, and Scheepers, 2011), the potential to enhance value (Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga, 2010), and customer and business relationships. Sixty-five percent of global consumers, in a 2012 survey, explored social media to learn more about brands, products and services, while approximately 50% visited social media to express concerns or to complain (Nielsen, 2012). Within one survey, 92% of marketers indicated that social media is important for their business (Social Media Examiner, 2014).

Previously, much of the information shared by businesses was uni-directional, controlled by the sender. This is no longer the case as social media relies on, and provides a platform for, user-generated content. This has reduced the level of control over the information shared about a business's products and services (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Businesses therefore must have sufficient ability to effectively respond in an environment where people can speak freely (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) and who trust information provided by online 'friends' who consist of known and unknown fellow consumers, peers and random reviewers (Weinberg and Berger, 2011). This raises the question: where can businesses learn new skills and gain knowledge about social media usage for their businesses?

Learning is defined as 'a persisting change in human performance or performance potential' which evolves from 'the learner's experience and interaction with the world' (Driscoll, 2000, p.11). Vygotsky (1978) stresses that learning occurs through imitation. Learners influence and learn from each another as they engage in their community of practice or with people with whom a common interest or practice is shared (Wenger, 1998). Further, learning networks are described as 'network(s) formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge' (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001, p.88). Networks stimulate the flow of knowledge and skill sharing thus extending intellectual and applied capacity building.

Human capacity building incorporates a 'country's human, scientific, technological, organisational, institutional and resource capabilities' (UNCED, 1992) and has, at its core, formal and non-formal education to help direct efforts to proliferate knowledge, skills and understandings (Crowder, 1996). The building and development of individual human capabilities is vital for supporting a skilled and productive workforce (Pritchett et al., 2012). Human capacity development involves 'the process by which individuals, groups, organisations, institutions, and societies develop their abilities - both individually and collectively - to set and achieve objectives, perform functions, solve problems and to develop the means and conditions required to enable this process' (UNDP, 1997 in FAO, 2004, p.2). In this research, human capacity building was a process by which participants learn and share ideas, knowledge and resources with peers, academic staff and business owners/managers. This is a reciprocal process as business owners/managers not only learn but also share what they know with students, academic staff and non-project participants. This reinforces the philosophy that learning is a social activity.

The importance of social and human capital in supporting businesses is becoming more apparent (Guenther and Langworthy, 2010). Howe and Cleary (2001) suggest capacity building focuses on education and increased connectedness. Social capital requires networks and social relations of co-operation, trust, reciprocity and civic engagement to achieve collaboration. These, in turn, improve information diffusion, the creation of knowledge and the fostering of innovative ideas (Productivity Commission 2003, p.iii). Networks are formed by the connections between individuals and groups to facilitate action and, when established and working effectively, can build human capacity and social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2002) and enhance learning. When technology is incorporated in this process, networks of learning can be explored through connectivism.

Connectivism (Siemens, 2005) refers to learning with technology whereby learning is defined as a process of connecting to specialised information resources and organisations that possess knowledge (Sie et al., 2013). Connectivism 'is the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories' and acknowledges that learning is more than an internal, individualistic activity (Siemens, 2005, p.5). Connectivism is an ever-shifting learning environment focused on connecting information sets and the influences that

enable learning to take place: an approach that is relevant in our highly connected world (Shriram and Warner 2010; Siemens, 2005). Connectivism includes network principles that permit further defining of knowledge in the learning process (Siemens, 2008). The starting point of connectivism is the individual, from whom a network consisting of information is derived to create a cycle of learning that is not solely focused on the individual (Siemens, 2005). Within connectivism, the network is the central metaphor for learning. Learning environments for SMEs can provide potential opportunities for skill and knowledge enhancement. Limited time and fiscal resources, a dynamic industry, rapidly evolving technologies and inter- and intra-competitiveness are ever present challenges for tourism and other SMEs. Tourism operators invest in education, training and capacity building as a way of contributing to local development (Meyer, Ashley and Poultney, 2004).

Social media technologies have multiple uses such as: conduits for learning; information provision; aids for sorting, presenting and organising the available information to generate solutions for business-related problems (Shriram and Warner, 2010). Utilising these tools and technologies to assist in the building of connections between businesses and other stakeholders aids in facilitating the building of capacity within individuals, industry and communities. Siemens (2005) states that when learners interact a learning network can result. Networked learning focusses on interconnections between learners (Steeple and Jones, 2002) and, when successful, initiates and amplifies learning, knowledge creation and understanding (Siemens, 2005). These reciprocal relationships generate positive outcomes and help to development well rounded, empowered and skilled professionals (Bourner and Millican, 2011; Dlouha, et al., 2012). This process guides learners through complex tasks and encourages the attainment of competencies and complex skills (Dlouha, et al., 2012).

Previous research illustrates the prominence and importance of social media for not-for-profit and profit driven businesses and organisations (Qualman, 2012), the value to public relations (Nah and Saxton, 2013; Vaast and Kaganer, 2013), intra-organisational efficiency, and knowledge sharing and socialisation (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). Social media technologies are a means of establishing and developing networks and, when applied within assessment tasks, allows students and participating business owner/managers to acquire knowledge in innovative and creative ways. Within a student-based project, business owners and managers were able to utilise these technologies to achieve greater understanding of how to use social media technologies as effective business tools.

In the contexts of learning, research has focused on social media as a way to motivate, connect, communicate and engage learners (Baird and Fisher, 2006). Social media can assist with learning (Väljataga and Fiedler, 2009) by encouraging users to draw on their personal life experiences and to work in a collaborative team with multiple stakeholders to further skill and knowledge (Baird and Fisher, 2006). The hypothesis behind this research was that *student-based project outcomes extend beyond the classroom to offer networks for learning to reduce barriers to usage and enhance skill and knowledge of social media by small-medium [tourism-related] businesses.*

## Method

This study involved the use of social media tools embedded within assessment tasks that required undergraduate students to setup, manage and monitor social media sites directed at regional tourism, leisure and event-related (TLE) businesses. The projects were part of a third year university course delivered annually at a regional Australian University.

Questionnaires were administered face-to face or online at two points: before participants joined the projects and after participants had taken part in the projects. This paper focuses on the businesses who participated in the student-based projects in 2010, 2011 and 2012. The issues explored and reported in this paper focus on: social media usage including barriers to usage and attitudes towards social media as tools for business reasons for participation and whether participating owners/managers gained knowledge and skill from participating in the projects and other participation outcomes. Networks for learning were also explored focused on the information about social media that was sought and/or shared by participants. Specific questions are provided in the results section to facilitate and support comprehension.

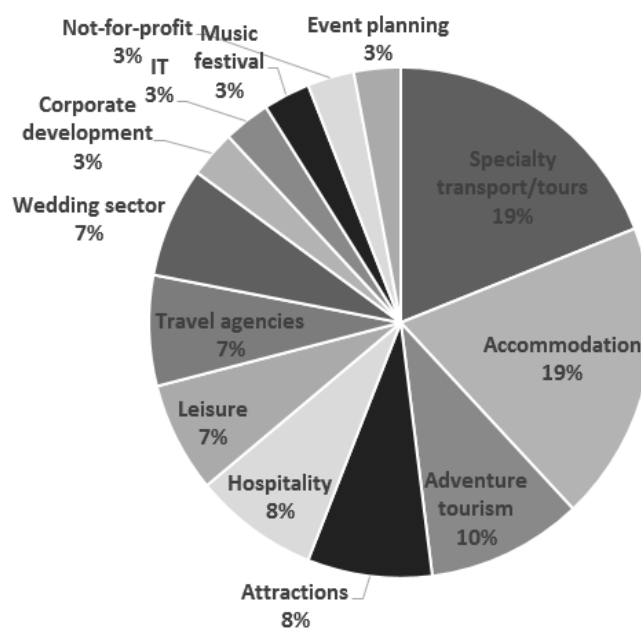
In addition to survey responses, project related unsolicited feedback and communications, secondary sources, observations and communications were used to triangulate and validate responses. The paper employed predominantly qualitative data collection and analysis. Quantitative responses were collected based on 5 point scales using the categories of strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5). Descriptive statistics offer a synopsis of the sample, data and the analysis (Trochim, 2006). The results reported were derived from verbal and written responses (qualitative) to aid examination of the phenomena under investigation. Further, to explore the network components, qualitative responses informed an understanding of the connection between people along which information flowed (Kilduff and Tsai, 2003). NVivo, qualitative data analysis software, was used to investigate participant responses, identify themes and highlight relevant quotes.

## Results

### Participant characteristics

These results relate to the responses provided by two-thirds (63; 65%) of the 103 participating businesses. These TLE-related businesses were small to medium with the majority having less than ten employees (98%). Most of the businesses were within the sub-divisions of accommodation (19%) (e.g. B&Bs, mid-sized resorts, apartments) and specialty transport/tours (19%) (e.g. cruise vessels, canal cruisers, tour buses and other tour providers) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
*Participant industry sub-divisions*



### Understanding social media usage prior to participation

To understand social media usage prior to taking part in the project, participating businesses were asked: (i) *what social media tools had already been applied*; (ii) *which social media tool they wanted to focus on [within the project]*; (iii) *what were the barriers to social media use*; (iv) *why they wanted to take part in the project*; and (v) *what was their attitude towards social media for business*.

There was an increase in the number of participating businesses who had started to use social media tools/technologies prior to taking part in the student-based project. Usage

increased from 57% in 2010 to 100% of participants who had attempted to use one or more social media tools/technologies for business purposes by 2012 (Table 1).

**Table 1:**

*Social media use by participation businesses prior to engaging in the student-based project*

Social media application prior to participation	Year		
	2010	2011	2012
Had attempted to apply social media	57%	78%	100%
Had not attempted to apply social media	43%	22%	0%
*Social media tool applied prior to participation (% of those who had applied prior to participation)	2010	2011	2012
Facebook®	92%	93%	98%
Twitter®	9%	16%	27%
LinkedIn®	0%	1%	2%
Blogging	0%	0%	1%

\*Multiple choices possible

Facebook® was the tool most used by businesses prior to participation in the project. Similarly, most of the participating businesses chose to learn more about this social media tool each year the project was run (2010 - 98%; 2011 - 92%; 2012 - 87%). In 2011 and 2012, participating businesses extended this choice by seeking to learn more about other social media tools/technologies: LinkedIn® and Twitter® (in 2011 and 2012) and Blogging (in 2012).

### Barriers to social media usage prior to participation

Participants repeatedly referred to their lack of confidence as a major barrier to the usage of social media in their businesses. This was further explored to reveal the barriers to creating and then maintaining social media for business: a lack of skill (59%), lack of knowledge (58%), lack of time (44%), fear and uncertainty (15%), and/or financial resourcing (13%) (multiple responses possible). Open ended responses reiterated this with participants stating they were *'not sure how to use the tool once I got it started'*, *'only [have] a basic knowledge of social media'* and although they had a personal social media page/site they had *'limited knowledge about how to actually use it for business'*.

### Reasons for project participation

Barriers had led to the desire to gain greater understanding of social media tools/technologies. Participants said they chose to partake in the project in order to *'gain a better understanding of the benefits of Facebook® for my business'*, *'to find out how to increase our social media profile'*, *'to get up to date on social media trends'* and to *'learn more about how to use [social media]'*.

### Attitude to social media

Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statement: *I have a positive attitude towards social media as a tool for business*. A 5 point scale was used (strongly disagree=1, strongly agree=5). Before the project commenced, business participant attitudes toward social media for business were mixed, however, 85% provided scores of 1-3 on the 5pt scale. This was reinforced with an average response of 2.4 (StDev 1.14) which is suggestive of negative attitudes towards social media as a tool for business. Open-ended responses revealed the main reason was *'not really knowing enough about it [social media]'*.

## Exploring post-participation outcomes

To understand the outcomes of participation in the student-based project by the owner/managers of regional TLE businesses several questions were asked once the projects had been completed. One key question was *with regards to the barriers to social media usage identified in the earlier survey [prior to the commencement of the project], have these barriers been reduced?*

Additional quantitative statements (5pt scale) were also posed:

*My involvement in the student-based project assisted me to learn more about the use of social media;*

*Additional knowledge and skills about social media for business were gained from my participation in the student-based project;*

*My involvement in the student-based project assisted me to reduce barriers to the usage of social media in my business;*

Followed by:

*What were the positive aspects of being part of the student based project? and*

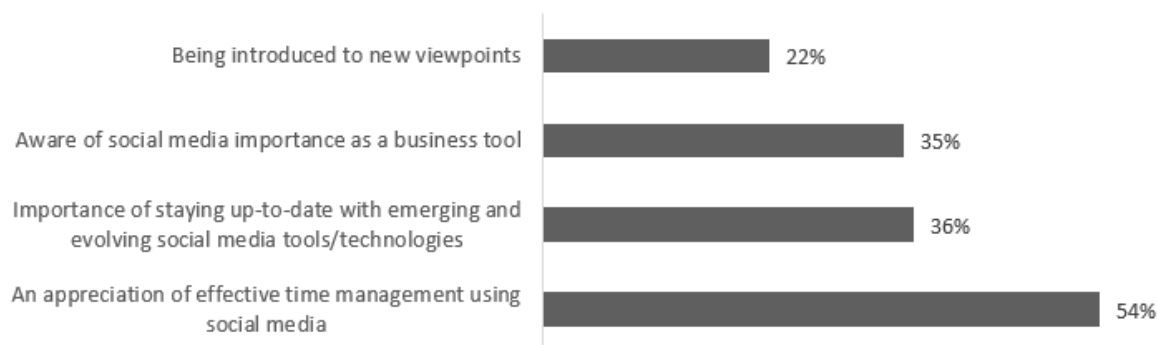
*What were the negative aspects of being part of the student based project?*

## Changes to barriers to social media usage post-participation

Over half of the participants indicated barriers to use were reduced following their involvement in the project (59%). Pre-project, business owner/managers repeatedly stated a lack of confidence as a key barrier to social media usage. In contrast, confidence with using social media for business had improved post-project for almost two-thirds of participants (62%). Four key themes from open-ended comments were revealed (Figure 2) with the appreciation of how to effectively manage their time when using social media for business, a key response (54%).

**Figure 2:**

*Reasons for increased confidence*

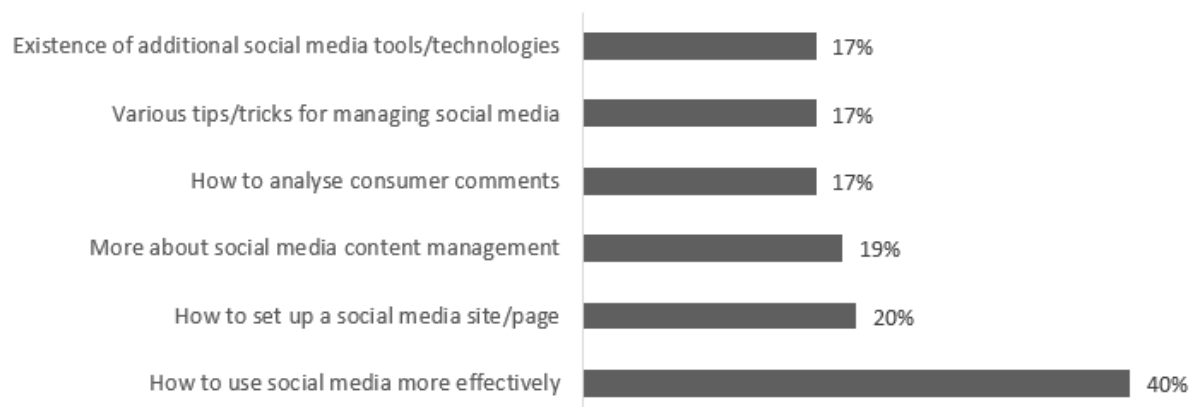


Open-ended comments also highlight an increase in confidence: *'whilst I learnt so much from the students, I have now learnt so much more following the inspiration they gave me and have put that new, professional knowledge to use'* and participation aided in my *'gaining confidence to be part of a changing world'*.

In terms of the barriers created by a lack of time, participants said students assisted them to make real and rapid progress towards managing and monitoring the social media tool as they were *'able to invest the time that small business operators are so short on'* and that having a *'Facebook page set up for our business saved me a lot of time'*.

Participants were asked if they had gained any new knowledge and/or skill with regards to social media usage by being part of the student-based project (Figure 3). New information and knowledge about social media usage was gained by 92% of participants with the key area being how to use social media more effectively for business (40%) (Figure 3). All participants agreed or strongly agreed (av. 4.4) 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.

Figure 3:  
Themes relating to the new knowledge and/or skill gained



Participants indicated that involvement in the student-based social media project was a positive experience with one participant stating '*I had been thinking of adding Facebook and the opportunity to do it with the assistance of Uni students provided a perfect chance to assist both of us*'. When asked if the project outcomes were useful to their businesses, 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the project outcomes were useful to their TLE-related business (av 4.5; StDev 0.68).

Participants were again asked to indicate their agreement with the statement: *I have a positive attitude towards social media as a tool for business*. In contrast to the negative responses provided before the commencement of the project, all business participants stated their attitude towards social media for business was more positive. Post-project, business participant's attitudes toward social media for business were mixed but overall, positive. Eighty-eight percent of responses featured scores of 4 or 5 (5pt scale). This was reinforced with an average response of 4.5 (StDev 0.79).

The synergistic relationship with students was reported to have given many participants 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*'. Participating businesses stated that having a '*young person's perspective*' was very useful and '*inspired thoughts and directions*'.

Furthermore, participants identified additional positive outcomes including improved communication with customers (22%), increased avenues for marketing (19%), and access to new markets (15%). Additionally, after learning more about the use of social media for business, participants stated they made more connections with other local tourism businesses (56%), other businesses outside of their local area (12%), with tourism industry-related stakeholders (11%) and local and state government (9%).

Open-ended responses suggest the key negative aspect (cited by 39%) was that social media is very time consuming to use.

### Exploring networks for learning

Networks function on the premise that people, groups or systems can connect to create an integrated and dynamic whole. As the network is formed, information begins to flow from one person to another. This can be uni-directional (one way from one person/group to another) or bi-directional (two way or reciprocal). Networks for learning between course academic staff and



students could be expected to develop, even if only temporarily to achieve course outcomes. An additional outcome of this research is network extension: the links for learning that go beyond the classroom. The links explored were those developed as participants shared the information they had gained with other participants and others in the broader industry and community.

By examining information flow, it was evident that a network for learning featured predominantly two-way connections. Connections created within the classroom facilitated a core network (i.e. between course lecturer, students and businesses participating in the projects). Connections were extended beyond the core network as participants shared and/or sought information regarding social media for business from others outside the project.

When asked with whom participating business owner/managers sought additional information (n=59), the main sources were: staff and colleagues (61%; n=36), other business contacts both TLE and non-TLE related (32%; n=18), tourism industry groups (10%; n=6), friends (10%), family (9%; n=5) and individuals outside the tourism industry (9%).

In addition, when asked with whom participating business owner/managers shared information, it was found that more than one third (41%; n=26) of participants shared their new knowledge with others. Participants indicated that information was shared with between two and six other people including TLE business contacts and staff (56%; n=14) and friends and family (59%; n=15).

Network extension, by which the information gained was further shared, was facilitated within semi-formal, group meetings hosted by two participants, as well as at tourism industry or local government hosted courses and workshops. High levels of interest from businesses wishing to take part in the student-based project resulted in a community workshop hosted by the focal University. This workshop focussed on assisting attendees to gain additional insight into social media usage in business.

Similar to communities of practice, networks created for a specific purpose may be disbanded when the original aims and objectives are completed (Servin, 2005). The course lecturer (ego) remained the same throughout whereas some businesses were involved for one or two of the three years under investigation. Some participants changed their roles in the process such as one student who on graduating become a business supervisor/mentors while some business supervisors left the project but engaged with other university courses such as internship projects based on developing social media for business purposes. As information and knowledge continued to be shared, students gained employment, others referred other business owners/managers to the course, internships, work experience and/or served as volunteers. The number of network nodes fluctuated but overall, grew from 119 in 2010 to 392 in 2012.

## Discussion

WEB 2.0 has meant that information and ideas can be shared rapidly throughout much of the world. American Society of Training and Documentation (ASTD) (Khatibi and Fouladchang, 2015) suggests that 'half of what is known today was not known 10 years ago and the amount of knowledge in the world ..... is doubling every 18 months.' This further reiterating the importance of learning as a means of businesses navigating the rapidly evolving technological landscapes and keeping in touch with current and potential customers. Partnering with universities in student-based projects provides industry with methods of learning about current social media usage and developments that will be beneficial to the businesses.

Several studies have discussed the advantages of employing social media for customer communication and engagement as well as brand development (Culnan, et al., 2010; Gligorijevic and Leong, 2011; Michaelidou, et al., 2011). Social media profiles can assist businesses to engage with current customers and attract new customers and 'gain a deeper appreciation of their wants and needs and to conduct market research and implement promotions' (Mirzoyan, 2013, p.1). Nakara, et al., (2012) found social media use by SMEs is often unplanned and frequently reactive which can result in 'a loss of control or a decrease in e-reputation' despite recognising social media as an 'efficient marketing tools' (Nakara, et al., 2012, p.401). Significant amounts of money and time are directed towards setting up, maintaining and managing a social media

presence (Williamson, 2009) and thus cost effective ways to gain knowledge and skill in the effective use of in the application of these sites/tools is essential.

This research indicated that leaning focused on social media was a conduit for developing a network for learning and provided opportunities to share information and increase knowledge and skill beyond the classroom. The practical outcomes of the participation by tourism businesses were demonstrated as a learning environment enabled a cost-effective way for businesses to engage with students in reducing the barriers to usage of social media and increasing participant knowledge and skill. This led to the formation of networks that enhanced learning outcomes and enriched the experience for students and tourism business owner/managers.

The pervasive nature of social media is evident in all aspects of modern society. Within the tourism industry, social media has had a widespread influence on stakeholder engagement, communication, decision making, and for enhancing traveller experiences. The incorporation of social media in project work featuring co-creation in which participants held specified responsibilities (Fleming and Martin, 2007) that aided in building individual and collective capacity through collaborative learning.

## Conclusion

This research provides an understanding of how synergistic learning relationships can link academic institutions with business and provides participants with new learning opportunities. Networks for learning and capacity building were developed as knowledge sharing extended from the university to the students, businesses and the wider community. Social media research suggests that 85% of marketers do not know what social media tools are best or understood how to use it to target customers (83%) (Social Media Examiner, 2014). The networks described in this paper provided participants with the opportunity to develop their knowledge by sharing, communicating and collaborating and, although designed for the primary purpose of supporting student learning (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001, p.88), resulted in aiding learning of participating business and others within the regional tourism industry and community. This study showed that the increased levels of knowledge and skill gained by participating businesses were then shared with non-participating businesses and others to enhance the capacity of tourism-related stakeholders in the regional area.

The applied approach adopted, whereby regional, small to medium sized tourism related businesses can gain knowledge and skills, partake in opportunities to gain and share knowledge and thus facilitate the building of human and industry capacity, was innovative, enhanced learning and extended the experience beyond the classroom. Continuing benefits from the projects have been demonstrated including: (i) the strengthening of cooperative working relationships between regional tourism and the host institution; (ii) the opportunity for tourism business owners/managers to evaluate potential employees; the provision of support to future tourism industry professionals; (iii) increased awareness of new and innovative ideas in the tourism field; and (iv) the attainment of expertise and skills in the use of social media by both students and businesses. Further research related to networks for learning, capacity building and skill development within the tourism industry as a result of partnering with universities, will have great benefits to research and industry development.

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