



The Effect of Social Media as an e-Word of Mouth on the Travel Agents Marketing

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Abstract

Social media as an E-marketing tool is very important to the tourism industry, since tourism is an information-intense industry; therefore, marketers should understand the changes in technologies and consumer behavior as well. Nowadays, tourism marketing practice directs too much attention on utilizing social media, in order to create positive image and e-word of mouth for tourism businesses. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the benefits and the Return on Investment (ROI) while using social media to market the Travel Agents. The study employed quantitative method through distributing questionnaire to Travel Agents (n=320). Chi-square was used as an analytical, statistical tool in order to measure the research results. The analysis of research results showed that social media increase trust, which takes long time to build but can disappear in few seconds. This study confirms that some of the surveyed Travel Agents (n= 182) are aware of these new marketing channels and try to find potential customers and make fruitful relations with them, but others (n= 138) didn't have any idea concerning the benefits of social media. Most of Travel Agents focused mainly on blogs, Facebook and Twitter in marketing their products and communicating with their customers. Steps for starting social media and Success factors of using social media in marketing Travel Agents are mentioned.

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Key Words Social media, Travel Agents, e-Marketing, ROI, Social media forms

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1. Introduction:

The last decade of the twentieth century was really a revolutionary period of time in communications as well as information technologies that lead to the rapid improvement in various economical, social and industrial aspects of all human communities. As information and knowledge can be exchange and spread through the internet (Al Sarayreh et al., 2011). Internet scores high on its relative advantage as it's time-independent, available all the time as well as for any user and flexible in delivery. It provides the opportunities for information seeking (Susskind and Stefanone, 2010), and the way customer plan for and consumes travel (Buhalis and law, 2008). It is a major and trusted source of travel information for the major markets worldwide (W.T.O., 2010).

Tourism is one of the industries that adapt quickly to the internet technology, especially marketing discipline. As the adoption of e-marketing and new technologies (e.g. mobile services, mobile web and web 2.0) are extremely important areas in tourism. Despite these different new marketing channels, tourism service providers still need to understand the customer and create suitable products. Whereas, the communications between customers and marketers are very important as they can discover what their customers really need. Therefore, Marketers can offer the expected service and build a good image for their Travel Agents (Jakosuo, 2011).

During the last decades, social media has become increasingly popular with hundreds of users all over the world. As it allows all people with great knowledge or with no special knowledge to post and share content with the world instantly (Mayfield, 2008). Social media has changed the world marketing; it can be used as an integral part of an online marketing campaign. It facilitates the interactions between online consumers and service providers (Strokes, 2010; Xiang and Grezel, 2010). Whereas, it includes various applications which allow consumers to "post", "tag", "dig" or "blog" on the internet. Subsequently, these social media represents a source of online information that are created, circulated, initiated and used by consumers in order to educate each other about products, brands, services and issues (Blackshow and Nazzaro, 2006).

Nowadays, travelers are turning to their peers' opinions and recommendation as a valued source of information. Consumer -generated content; the maximum of fact and opinions, impression and sentiment, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences and even rumor, has a vital role in increasing the online travel sales as consumers find CGC more credible than professional reviews or information from travel agencies. Moreover, most of consumers do support a brand with reference to consumer-generated reviews (Blackshow, 2006).



The major questions to be answered regarding to what extent the Travel Agents depend on social media in marketing their products and communicate with their customers? what are the social media tools that used by Travel Agents? who is allowed to use social media for business purposes? and What kind of benefits can Travel Agents achieve from using social media?

Therefore, this study aims at investigating the advantages and the Return On Investment (ROI) of using social media in marketing Travel Agents in order to provide useful insights for online tourism marketing, and give directive steps, especially for companies that don't know how to enhance their business through social media, while it is already huge amongst private persons.

2. Research background

With the enormous amount of information potentially available to travelers, the Internet constitutes an important platform for information exchange between the consumer and industry suppliers (e.g., hotels, transportation sectors, attractions), intermediaries (e.g., Travel Agents), controllers (e.g., governments and administrative bodies) (Xiang et al., 2008). The growth of internet usage has resulted in declining distribution of traditional media: television, radio, newspapers and magazines (Strokes, 2010; Okazaki and Hirose, 2009; Lexhagen, 2009)

Many studies have highlighted the relationship between the internet and tourism industry as tourism products have some characteristics well suited to e-marketing; intangible, heterogeneous, high risk and high priced. Internet has become a vital channel of distribution whereas tourism providers are competitors (Victor, 2008). But there is a lack of empirical data concerning the role of social media in online marketing, despite the increasingly role in the online tourism marketing (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

In travel and tourism, past research has focused attention on the socio-psychological aspects of social media use. Whereas, travel-related virtual communities attracted the attention of tourism researchers (Kim, et al., 2004). Virtual tourist communities such as LonelyPlanet and IGoUGo, where tourists can exchange opinions and experiences on topics of common interests, which in turn have a vital role in the context of travel (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006).

2.1 Concept of Social media

While there is a lack of a formal definition, social media can be generally understood as internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses "media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for



easy access by other impressionable consumers ". This includes a variety of applications in the technical sense which allow consumers to "post", "tag", "digg", or "blog" (Blackshaw, 2006; Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008).

Social media can be defined as "any kind of information we share with our social network using social networking websites or services". Examples are blogs, forums, photos, audio, profiles and status updates, text chat, wikis and IM (instant message). These new websites have an essential role in marketing place. A place where the customers set the rules and word of mouth makes or breaks the products. Marketing via social media is a two-way communication, rather than the traditional marketing that used just one-way communication (Gehi, 2006; Warr, 2008; Eley and Tilley, 2009). The following table demonstrates the differences between social media and traditional media

Table (1): Differences between social media and traditional media

Social media	Traditional media
Instantly updatable	Fixed, unchangeable
Unlimited real-time commentary	Commentary limited and not real time
Instant popularity gauge	Limited, time-delayed best seller lists
Archives accessible	Archives poorly accessible
All media can be mixed	Limited media mix
Infinite	Finite
Sharing and participation encouraged	Sharing not encouraged
Freedom	Control

Ref: (Wigmo and Wikstrom, 2010).

2.2 Social media forms

Social media comes in many forms, and examples of the most popular are blogs, microblogs (e.g; Twitter), social networks (e.g.; Facebook, LinkedIn), media-sharing sites (e.g.; YouTube, Flickr), social bookmarking and voting sites (e.g.; Digg, Reddit), review social websites, and virtual worlds (e.g.; Second Life)(Schmallegger & Carson, 2008).

a) Social networking:

Social networking is all about using the internet tools to connect and build relationships with others. In the online sense, this refers to a type of website model, where individual members become part of a broader virtual community. Social networking sites such as Facebook(www.facebook.com); is an online



social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them, (Clarke, 2011) it is the biggest social network at the moment have over 845 million active users at the end of November (Facebook, 2011).

Myspace (www.myspace.com), and linkedIn (www.linkedin.com), allow users to create their personal profiles and then interact with others through sharing media, sending messages and blogging. Subsequently, the networks advertisers make use of the users' demographics information (such as age, gender and location) and the lists of likes and dislikes. Marketers are able to target their adverts to a particular audience (Strokes, 2010).

b) Social media websites

The social media websites can be defined as "those websites that make it possible for people to form online communities and share user created contents" (Kim et al., 2009). Those meant websites can help consumers to post and share travel related comments, opinions, and personal experiences, which could be a solid source of information for other consumers who have more power in selecting their products through access the internet. Accordingly, tourists use these social media sites to portray, reconstruct and relieve their trip. The top 10 unique social media websites for tourism are: TripAdvisor.com, Virtualtourist.com, Igougo.com, Mytravelguide.com, Travelpost.com, Meetup.com, Insiderpages.com, Yellowbot.com, Blogspot.com, Yelp.com (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009).

c) Blogs:

Is a type of websites that allow users (bloggers) to post entries on different topics and often allow readers to comment on these posts. Blog posts are archived and can be accessed through navigation on the front page. Nowadays, Consumers share their experience and opinions about product, and greatly influence others buying decision (Mack et al., 2008; Strokes, 2010). Hence, it is very important to monitor and be involved in those channels, and to respond if necessary. Blogs also provide chance for product feedback and building positive consumer relations (Cass, 2007; Pan et al., 2007).

Corporate blogging is definitely a great way to improve the provided service. As customers can submit questions and the company can answer them. Product updates can be easily published and broadly shared. Customers will consider company blogs as commitment to good customer service. Outreach to other blogs enables the Travel Agents to gain the opportunity to converse with a wide number of blogs in the blogging community, whose audience is exactly the audience that the company wants to reach (Gehi, 2006; Wigmo and Wikstrom, 2010).



d) Micro-blogging

Is a "tool that combines the elements of blogging with instant messaging and social networking" (Mayfield, 2008). With these short messages, usually limited to 140 characters, quick updates can be made, even on the run, and share them with everyone else. The most popular microblog service is Twitter; it was launched in July 2006. On Twitter, posts called tweets. Twitter has become more popular due to its immediacy. It now has over 200 million accounts worldwide (Bosker, 2011).

e) Multimedia sharing

It means video, photos, podcasting, etc, represented by Websites such as YouTube and Flickr has attracted tourism researchers by generating interests in understanding the role of this type of social media content in transforming travel experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009).

f) Social Bookmarking

It is saving the web address of a web page or website, so that it may be easily referred to. Bookmarks can be managed with a browser or with an online tool. It allows like minded people to share interesting and relevant content with others easily. Content submitted to bookmarking can increase traffic to a website and recommend this site for others (Strokes, 2010).

2.3 The marketing benefits of social media to marketers

Online tourism marketers face severe competition from social media because the search via the internet can lead millions of consumers to highly-relevant social media content pages that can influence attention, awareness, trial and loyalty levels (Blackshow and Nazzaro, 2006; Kim et al., 2009). So marketers must be qualified to manage their social media existence throughout offering attractive, persuasive and professional programs online, and perfectly deal with both negative and positive feedback besides consumer-generated content in several social media websites, real benefits could be accomplished (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

According to strokes (2010), the benefits of using social media in marketing products and services are as follows:-

- a) People are finding social media easier than traditional advertising such as T.V and radio. It gives brands the chance to interact with consumers.
- b) Social media allows users to share content with their communities if they like it.
- c)
- d)



- e) Social media allows companies to communicate with an online community and allows the marketers to connect their brand to the appropriate consumers.
- f) Social media gives marketers the ability to monitor as well as trace the negative opinions of the brand. While Xiang and Gretzel (2010) stated the following benefits:-
- g) It is a networking with no borders that allows accessing a community with similar interests to the product.
- h) The several interactions allow the marketers to gather feedback from the communities.
- i) Feedback from social media sites improves both future business as well as marketing strategies.
- j) It allows marketers to spread their messages often at very low costs.
- k) It helps marketers to build direct personal contact with their customers.
- l) It plays a vital role in viral marketing, due to the large, connected consumers; in online reputation management (ORM); and in web public relation.

m) 2.4 Social media and return on investment (ROI)

- n) The most important thing to show business value and return on investment (ROI) for social media marketing campaigns is how much money is contributing to the business. To calculate the actual ROI from Travel Agents' efforts, simply deduct the cost of social media work (include monetary and time investments) from the income generated. If the result is a positive number, the investment has been profitable; if not, the marketers must revisit their campaigns to see what is working and what is not. Also, pay attention to which sites are generating the most value. Not all businesses can beneficially engage all types of social media; focus on the ones that work successfully. Effective measurement is key to improving satisfaction and loyalty rates and revenue (Wigmo and Wikstrom, 2010).
- o) There are measuring metrics that indicate how many engaged people to the site. Most analytics software allows Travel Agents to measure engagement metrics. The two easiest engagement metrics are time on-site and page views per visit. The longer a visitor spends on travel agent's site, or the more pages read, the deeper the relationship is building. ROI is frequently used to measure managerial effectiveness within Travel Agents. The ROI formula (Zarella, 2010):

$$ROI = \frac{\text{Gain from Investment} - \text{Cost of Investment}}{\text{Cost of Investment}}$$



- p) The problem with trying to determine ROI for social media is representing the human interactivity and not something that is traditionally defined or measured with numbers (Armstrong & Kotler, 2006). Nüüd (2011) defined a new term for measuring social media usage: Return on Engagement (ROE). It will not measure the economic numbers, as ROI, but the customers' engagement for the company on the web, for example, the amount of comments, questions and everything else that enriches the dialog. ROE can be used to measure the company's social profit, the dialog that in the end increase the travel agent's economic profit, the ROI. Better ROE can be stretched towards ROI, and can be used to predict the travel agent's future.

q) 3. Methodology

This research applied the quantitative method to measure as well as analyze data. Many researchers view quantitative research design as the best approach for scientific research, because it offers precise measurement and analysis (Creswell, 2009). To collect the empiric data, a field study approach used including questionnaires. Hopefully, this instrument gives a good foundation to create a best practice on the benefits of using social media in marketing Travel Agents.

A questionnaire (as given in Annexure 1) was developed after an extensive review of the relevant literature and was used for collecting data through personal interaction or e-mails. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part included questions related to the identification of respondent, such as travel agent name, e-mail address, the Travel Agents' category A or B or C, and the number of employees. The second part involved the main questions on the use of social media in communicating with customers, and what is the main purpose of using social media tools. The third part concerned the benefits of using social media tools in marketing the Travel Agents products and service. In the last question (no. 16) develop five-point Likert-type scales, in which items ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree— was used to measure the most important benefits of relying on social media tools in marketing.

3.1 Sampling and data collection

In total, 450 questionnaires were distributed, and 400 questionnaires received, only 370 questionnaires were found to be suitable for statistical analysis. Data has been collected through distributing the questionnaires to Travel Agents in Greater Cairo and Alexandria. The survey was carried out over 6 month's period



3.2 Statistical analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version (17) was used to analyze the research findings. To check the wording and reliability of the question items, the questionnaire was pretested with 50 potential respondents. The responses from the pretest were analyzed to test reliability and validity of the measurement items. The questionnaire revision was based on the reliability and validity tests; accordingly the final version of the questionnaire was not developed, as the pre-test didn't indicate any problems.

Validity

Validity refers to how well the measurement captures what is designed to measure (Kim, 2002). The validity of the measurement instrument was assessed by allowing the experts and academics to examine and revise. The validity for the three sections of the questionnaire was (0.648, 0.775, 0.677).

Reliability

Reliability deals with how consistently similar measures produce similar results (Kim, 2002). The reliability of these processes is assessed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The value was 0.225 (the Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized item value is 0.041 and the split-half value was 0.663). As for the former, the results considered sufficiently supportive of consistency. Accordingly, the survey instrument was distributed to the respondents.



4. Results

The results of the research indicated the following:

The surveyed Travel Agents represented (106) Category A, (73) Category B, (141) and Category C.%

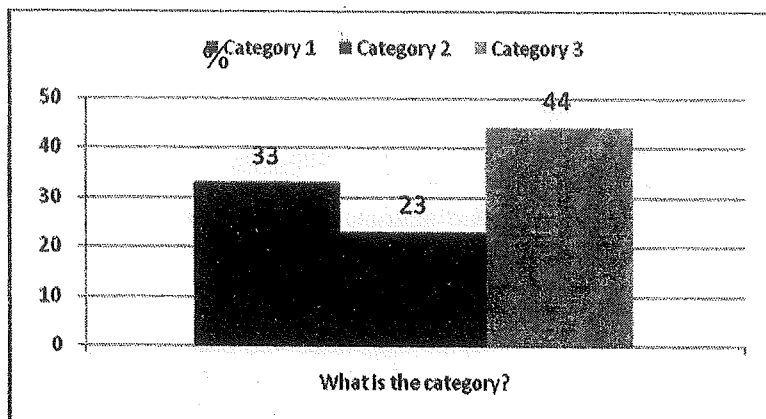


Figure (1): The Travel Agents' category

Concerning the main markets that the surveyed Travel Agents dealing with, 20% of the total sample specialized in both inbound and outbound tourism, and 18% was working with incoming tourists, while the Travel Agents which deal with domestic tourists represented 61%.

When investigating to what extent the Travel Agents use social media in communicating with their customers 182 (57%) assured that they used social media tools, while 138 (43%) of the total sample mentioned that they didn't ever use them. Accordingly, the previous 138 Travel Agents didn't continue the survey, so the sample was 182 Travel Agents.

The chi square analysis indicated that there was a highly significant difference between the usage of the social media tools; blogs, micro-blogging (i.e. Twitter), Social Networking (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn), Video Sharing (i.e. YouTube), and others ($\chi^2=54.29$ with confidence level 95%, degree of confidence=4). The following figure demonstrates the social media tools that used by each category.

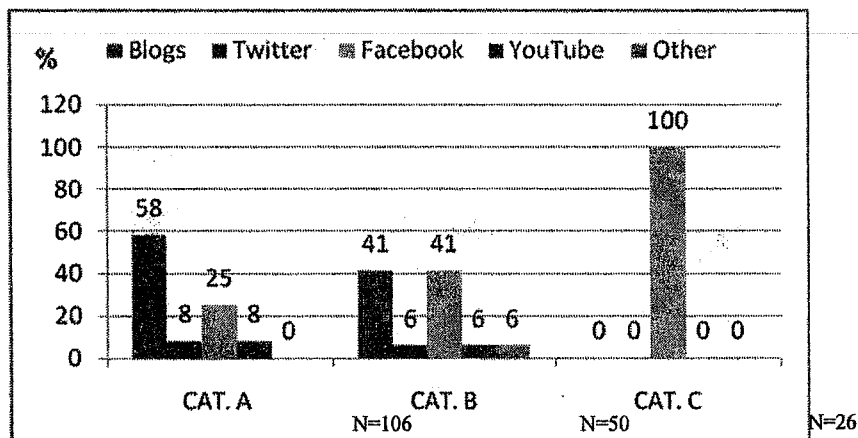


Figure 2:- The specific social media tools used by Travel Agents

Moreover, the results indicated that there is 40% of the respondents used social media tools between 1: 2 years, and 24% from more than 2 years, while the rest (35%) used it recently for less than one year.

With reference to the allowed persons to deal with social media for work related purposes, the chi square analysis indicated that there was a highly significant difference between the respondents ($\chi^2=20.548$ with confidence level 95%, degree of confidence=2). As 58% of the respondents mentioned that all staff had this authority, while 31% stated that only managers who allowed using it and 11% of the respondents chose other which referred to marketers and specialized employees in dealing with social media.

The following figure demonstrates the percentages of the responsible persons in each category. As in category A, all staff represented 67%, and 70% of the category B respondents mentioned all staff had the ability to connect, but all of the category C respondents assured that only the managers who had this responsibility.

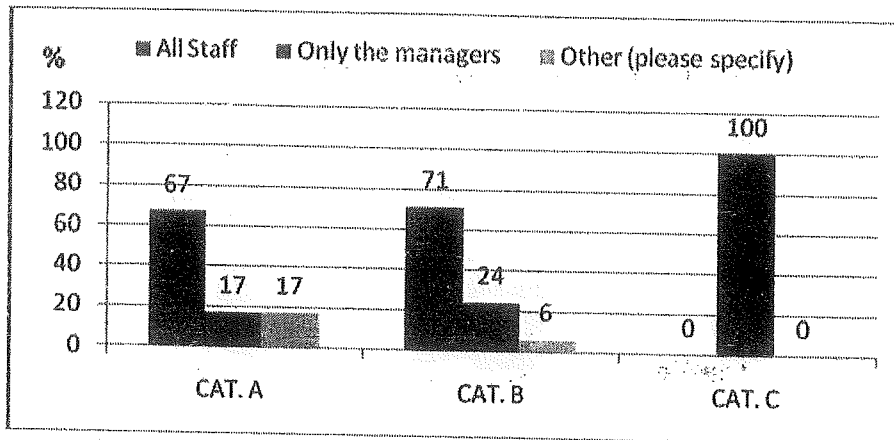


Figure (3):- Who is allowed to use Social Media for work related Purposed at Travel Agents

Table 2 indicates the usage of social media for marketing ranked the first, as 37% of all respondents assured that, followed by communication and customer service achieved 19 and 18%. While community involvement represented 2%, but the rest of respondents who used social media for external knowledge sharing/creation and Community Involvement represented (13% and 11%). While the respondents didn't mention other tools such as Virtual World or Photo Sharing.

Table (2): The social media tools

Social media tools	Frequency	Percent
Marketing	68	37
Communication	35	19
Customer Service	32	18
External Knowledge Sharing/Creation (i.e. through blogs, internal wikis)	23	13
Consumer Feedback	21	11
Community Involvement	3	2
Other (please specify)	0	0



The following figure demonstrates the purposes of using social media in each category.

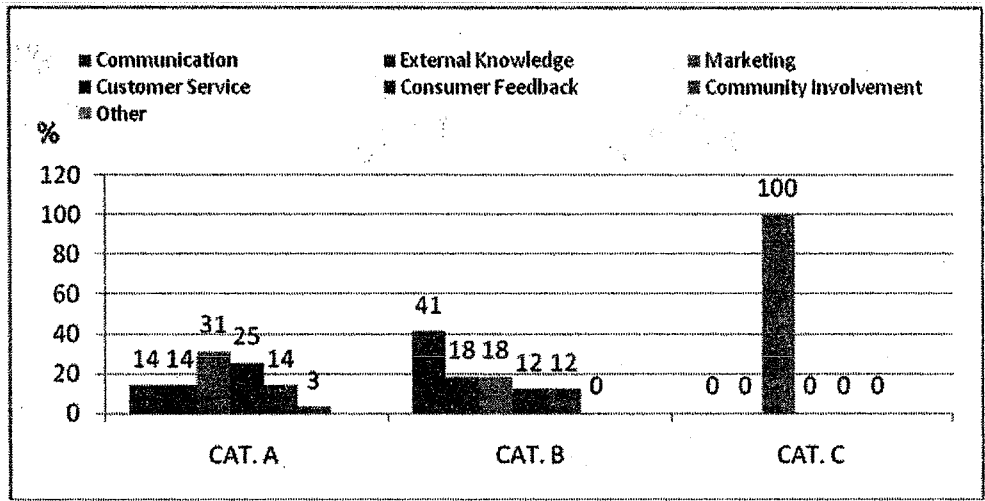


Figure (4): the purposes of used social media for each category

Regarding a dedicated department to manage communication via social media, there was a significant difference between the respondents ($\chi^2=5.226$ with confidence level 95%, degree of confidence=1). Whereas, 65% of all respondents stated that they didn't have, but the other 35% mentioned that they have department communicate via social media.

The surveyed respondents that have department to deal with social media tools represented about (85%) of Travel Agents category (A), 70% of category (B), and category (c) scored 60%. Additionally, the results indicated that about 70% of respondents (category A), and about 78% of respondents (category B) used social media daily. On the other hand, all of respondents (category C) used social media monthly.

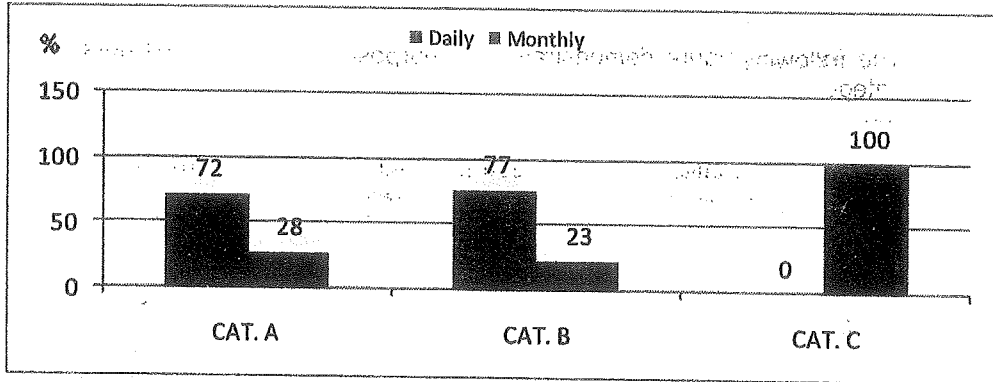


Figure (5): When social media used for each category

The study found that there was a highly significant difference between all respondents concerning that advantages achieved from social media ($X^2=50.581$ with confidence level 95%, degree of confidence=1). As (95%) of all surveyed respondents identified some business merits from using social media.

Moreover, the results revealed that there was a highly significant difference between the surveyed Travel Agents concerning the utilization of social media for promotional purposes; Chi square estimated 20.903 (with confidence level 95%, degree of confidence=1). As almost respondents 79% assured that, while the other percent (21) didn't use it for promotion.

Table (3): The use of social media for promotional purposes

Response	Frequency	Percent	Chi-Square
Yes	144	79	20.903
No	38	21	

Also, the Chi- square showed that there was a significant difference between the respondents ($X^2=5.226$ with confidence level 95%, degree of confidence=1). As 65% of all respondents identified that they gave a great concern to what kind of social network which used by their customers, while 35% didn't ask them. The following figure identifies the response of each category concerning that.

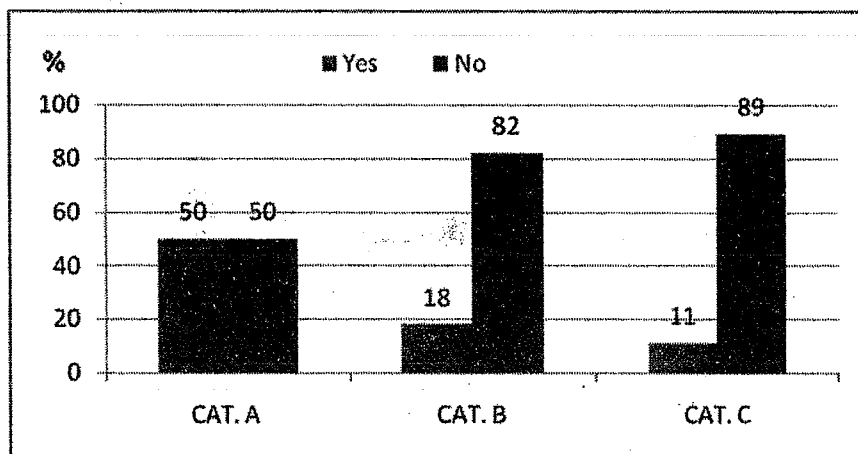


Figure (6): Did the Travel Agents ask their customer about what kind of social network they use

Results in table (4) demonstrated that the goals of using social media in getting new customers as it ranked the first (34%), followed by build credibility, get feedback, and target the right audience (with 26%, 18%, and 16%).

Table (4): The goals of using social media

Goals	Frequency	Percent
Get new customers	62	34
Build credibility	47	26
Get feedback	32	18
Target the right audience	29	16
Drive sales	12	6
Other comments	0	0

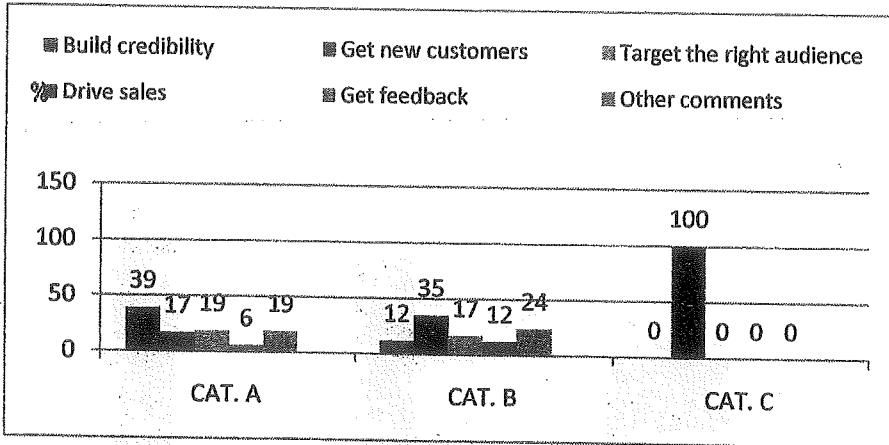


Figure (7) identifies the goals of using social media for each category

The following table indicates that the statistical mean of the social media benefits that can be achieved, the surveyed Travel Agents strongly agree with the following statements: "Helped me to know more about competitors", "Generated exposure for my business", "Generated qualified leads". While the following statements "Reduced my overall marketing expenses", "Increased the traffic / subscribers in list", "Helped us rise in the search rankings", "Resulted in new business partnerships" the respondents agreed with the previous benefits.

Table (5): the statistical mean of social media benefits

Social media benefits (no. of Respondents 182)	Mean
Helped me to know more about competitors	4.726
Generated exposure for my business	4.532
Generated qualified leads	4.129
Reduced my overall marketing expenses	3.726
Increased my traffic / subscribers in list	3.645
Helped us rise in the search rankings	3.452
Resulted in new business partnerships	3.387
All Attributes	3.942

5. Limitation

Before considering the implications of the findings, it is important to address the limitation of the research. As I couldn't distribute the questionnaire to all actual Travel Agents that use social media tools. Subsequently, the study did not verify the actual social media users.



6. Discussion and Conclusion:

The purpose of this research was to "explore how Travel Agents could use social media to promote themselves and improve their business through consumer relationship, this is in order to develop a general set of recommendations". The researcher concluded from both theoretical and empirical study that Social media is like ordinary analogue viral marketing, buzz and word of mouth but on the web and is much faster. Social media improves brand awareness and reputation, and can improve the business to consumer relations.

Social media investments are difficult to measure in terms of ROI. Often the Travel Agents want to measure the revenue, in money, but social media is really just about communication, attitude, participation and relations. How much is a dialogue worth? Intangible values must be measured differently than tangibles. Maybe it is not measurable, or maybe it is. Return On Investment (ROI) should not be the primary target, a good relation will eventually influence the ROI positively anyway. When measuring social media, Travel Agents should focus on the activity and the engagement, the Return On Engagement (ROE).

Q1: To what extent the Travel Agents depend on social media in marketing their products and communicate to their customers.

About half of the studied population depends on social media in marketing their products and communicating with their customers via social media tools. Despite, the vital role of social media in allowing consumers to share their experiences in different ways, ranging from posting their stories, their comments, to even their pictures and movie clips, there are many studied Travel Agents, estimated 43% of all respondents, don't realize the importance of social media in communicating with customers as they don't use social media at all.

Q2: What are the social media tools that used by Travel Agents?

Almost all the surveyed Travel Agents, especially category A and B often focus mainly on blogs, Facebook and Twitter in marketing their products and communicating with their customers, even though there are a lot more useful social media tools such as Virtual Worlds (i.e. SecondLife), photo sharing (i.e. Flickr) and social news (i.e. Digg), as the former play an important role within the context of e-Marketing using social media.

Q3: Who is allowed to use social media for business purposes?

The results also revealed that almost all the surveyed Travel Agents allow all staff to access the social networking which has some disadvantages when the



users have no enough authority to take their own decisions, and act like an intermediary (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Most of studied population still has deficiency in using social media successfully, as they don't have a specialized or qualified employees concerned the social media.

Q4: What kind of benefits can Travel Agents achieve from using social media?

Noticeably, Social media used for marketing, promotional purposes, and customer's feedback while it has a lot of other utilizations that studied Travel Agents don't give a great concern to them yet; such as gaining external knowledge and serving customers, this is in return, will help these companies to provide adequate service in order to achieve their customers' satisfaction and exceed their expectations. When using social media as a marketing tool, Travel Agents get the ability to talk with their customers. If they talk friendly and generously to customers and consumers, this will improve their customer relations and maybe give companies free marketing, through word of mouth. The population was strongly agreed with following benefits that they achieved throughout using social media; helping them to know more about competitors, generating exposure for their business, generating qualified leads. On the other hand, they agreed with the further benefits; reducing their overall marketing expenses, increasing their traffic / subscribers in list, helping them rise in the search rankings, resulting in new business partnerships.

Steps for starting social media:

The following steps are very important for the Travel Agents when they first start using social media for marketing, in the correct order:

- a) Listen to people's opinion about the product instead of carrying out expensive surveys, the best information is often right for free. Then the company discovered how their customers think, what they want, what their problems and complaints, throughout their online comments.
- b) Join: a social network, to be involved in the discussions. Join communities' enabled companies to find their customers and searching for new potentials.
- c) Participate: In the communities throughout replying, posting online. The company can build its online brand, people will start to respect the company as a valuable contributor to the community. Subsequently, others will promote the product.
- d) Create own content as the company has audience to share. In order to be valuable for the community, make beneficial contributions. So

e)



- f) people will want to know about the offered product and service (Puhringer and Taylor, 2008; Eley and Tilley, 2009).

Success factors of using social media in marketing Travel Agents:-

The following factors are very essential for Travel Agents that already deal with social media, in order to communicate with their customers and promote their products and services.

- a) Companies should closely monitor their brand, to find consumers' opinions.
- b) The company should not act as a salesman, but as a brand builder, trying to improve the brand awareness and reputation, creating relations and networking.
- c) To connect appropriate consumers, the company needs to learn and to listen to social media in order to manage the online reputation (Wigmo and Wikstrom, 2010).
- d) Travel Agents need a plan, a strategy on how to communicate with their customers and consumers. The five P's of marketing (Product, Price, Place, Public Relations and Position) is one example that could be applied.
- e) The companies must decide which social media tool best suits their objectives.
- f) The companies must create good will through listening and helping their customers and then actions are highly important for responding to the clients (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

7. Recommendations for social media usage

1. Determine whether your target market is using the social network.
2. Formulate goals for what Travel Agents want to accomplish with their social media usage.
3. Develop a strategy on how to reach your goals.
 - a. Start with traditional marketing/communication strategies that may already be present.
 - b. Develop a set of guidelines for social media usage.
4. Choose which social media you are going to use. The choice should be based on the Travel Agents' goals, strategy and target demographics.
 - a. Twitter is quick, blogs are powerful, and Facebook is a mainstream.



- b. Blogs are probably the easiest to start with, due to less usage restrictions.
- c. Have a purpose with every service that you use.
- 4. Transparency and honesty are important in using social networking for marketing
- 5. Marketers must put in their minds that they deal with a dangerous marketing tool. Whereas, good stories as well as bad stories widely spread and affect the users' opinions.



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**Annexure (1)
Questionnaire
Developed by**

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This questionnaire is a part of a scientific research concerning " **The Effect of Social Media as an e-Word of Mouth on the Travel Agents Marketing**". Social media can be generally understood as internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses "media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared on line for easy access by other impressionable consumers ". Social media can be defined as "any kind of information we share with our social network using social networking websites or services" Social media comes in many forms, and examples of the most popular are blogs, microblogs (e.g; Twitter), social networks (e.g.; Facebook, LinkedIn), media-sharing sites (e.g.; YouTube, Flickr), social bookmarking and voting sites (e.g.; Digg, Reddit), review social websites, and virtual worlds (e.g.; Second Life).

This research aims at investigating the advantages and the Return On Investment (ROI) of using social media in marketing Travel Agents in order to provide useful insights for online tourism marketing, and give directive steps, especially for companies that don't know how to enhance their business through social media, while it is already huge amongst private persons.

Your answers will be strictly confidential and help the researcher to achieve the objectives of the research.

Thank you



Questionnaire

Section 1 - Identification of Respondent

1. Identification of Respondent

Company name

Email address

2. What is the category?

A

B

C

3- How many employees work at your company?

5 to 25

26 to 46

47 to 67

68 to 88

89 and over

4. What's the main market you deal with?

Section 2 - Use of Social Media

5. Does your organization use social media in communicating with the customers?

Before answering this question, please take a moment to go through the list of Social Media provided in the question below

Yes

No



6. What specific Social Media tool(s) are you using? Tick all that apply.

*(*list adapted from Wikipedia)*

- Blogs
- Microblogging (i.e. Twitter)
- Social Networking (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn)
- Video Sharing (i.e. YouTube)
- Other (please specify)

7. How long have you been using these Social Media tools?

- Less than one year
- Between 1 and 2 years
- More than 2 years

8. Who is allowed to use Social Media for work related purposes at your organization?

- All Staff
- Only the managers
- Other (please specify)

9. What do you use these tools for?

Communication

External Knowledge Sharing/Creation (i.e. through blogs, internal wikis)

Marketing



Customer Service

Consumer Feedback

Community Involvement

Other (please specify) _____

10- Does the organization you work for have a dedicated department to manage communication via social media?

Yes

No

11-Using social media for marketing your products

Daily

Monthly

Please determine how many hours _____

Section 3: Social media benefits.

12- Have you identified any business advantage from using Social Media?

Yes

No

13- Does your organization make use of social media for promotional purposes?

Yes

14- Did you ask your customers what kind of social network do they use?

Yes

No

15 - Which of the following is the goal of the social media usage?



Build credibility

Get new customers

Target the right audience

Drive sales

Get feedback

Other comments

16- What are the benefits of using social media?

Strongly agree	Agree	Average	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Attributes	Degree
Generated exposure for my business	
Increased my traffic / subscribers in list	
Resulted in new business partnerships	
Helped us rise in the search rankings	
Generated qualified leads	
Reduced my overall marketing expenses	
Helped me to know more about competitors	

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.