Investigating Social Media Marketing in the Hospitality Industry: Facebook and European Hotels

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Abstract Social media have changed the way people interact with each other and with companies. In fact, recent research confirms that user-generated content is a key element in the decision-making process of customers who travel. The hotel business is now taking advantage of the introduction of social media into their marketing programmes, trying to create a customized relationship with consumers. The aim of this study is to investigate the use of social media among European hotels. Quantitative and qualitative research methods have been combined to identify a group of items useful to comprehend how hotels interact with customers on social media. The results show that European hotels are still in the first stages of developing social media strategies that present a moderate level of integration among different media. They are considered a useful instrument to promote the hotel brand but the potentiality of customer engagement is still undervalued.

Keywords Social media · Facebook · Hospitality · Hotels

1 Introduction

The influence of social media on purchasing decisions is growing across all regions around the world (Nielsen 2012a), changing customers' behaviour (Leung et al. 2013). Recent research shows that nearly 70 % of customers look at the experiences of other consumers before purchasing a product (Nielsen 2012b).

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Modern consumers are more demanding and willing advocates for the brands they love. They are looking for engaging experiences with other customers and with brands. Social media give marketers this opportunity and are becoming an important channel for customer care (Nielsen 2012b).

The proliferation of social media sites is a phenomenon, even if Facebook and Twitter continue to be the most popular social networks (PhoCusWright 2012). Facebook especially is the most used social network for number of visitors and total minutes spent, and for "social care", also in comparison with the rest of the web (PhoCusWright 2012). Moreover, the proliferation of mobile devices, used more and more to access social media (PhoCusWright 2013), is further changing customers' habits. In fact, with widespread connectivity, consumers have more freedom to use social media wherever and whenever they want (Nielsen 2012b). The future trend for social media marketing will move from the current brand marketing to conversions and sales (PhocusWright 2012). Even if at present social media are mainly marketing and communication tools rather than separate retail channels (PwC 2013), engaging customers by means of social media could increase customer loyalty and electronic word of mouth (Litvin et al. 2008), and consequently have important effects on corporate sales and revenues (Dellarocas 2003; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Dellarocas and Zhang 2007). These changes affect, in particular, the tourism and travel sector where social media are widely adopted by travellers to gather information, plan their travel, decide where to stay, purchase and share experiences (Buhalis and Law 2008; Cox et al. 2009; Gretzel and Yoo 2008; O'Connor 2008; Xiang and Gretzel 2010; Inversini et al. 2010; Anderson 2012; Yoo and Gretzel 2012; Leung et al. 2013; Mauri and Minazzi 2013).

Considering these trends and, consequently, the even more significant power to drive conversations with companies that social media give to customers, it is becoming more and more important to synchronize companies with "social" consumers' expectations (Minazzi 2012). Travel companies should therefore understand the appropriate ways to use social media and the key elements of a successful integrated marketing strategy.

This study seeks to understand how widespread the use of social media is in the hotel business. The aim of the study is twofold: on the one hand to explore how top European hotel companies employ social networks and understand the dimensions that influence their use, and on the other hand to identify which are the ways used by hotel brands to interact with customers by means of social networks, identifying best practices in the hotel business. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part provides a literature review of the topic of social media in hospitality and identifies research questions. In the second part, the research methodology is described. In the third part, the results of the analysis are discussed and managerial implications are considered.

2 Theoretical Framework

The development of social media can have various impacts on hospitality management; some of them could be an opportunity that a company should catch while some others could be threats that a company has to face. As a result, many hotels are insecure regarding their use of social media (Lagrosen and Josefsson 2011). The creation of a direct relationship with customers by means of social media could generate the following benefits for a hotel company:

- Improving customer knowledge and segmentation with consequent appropriate product differentiation (Lovett 2011).
- Increasing and stimulating room sales through a direct relationship between the social media page and the booking engine of the hotel website (Christou and Nella 2012).
- Decreasing the amount of commission to be paid to online travel agencies (OTAs) and other costs of distribution (Noone et al. 2011), giving back, at least partially, to the hotel control of its distribution decisions.
- Giving the possibility to increase hotel rates if able to achieve good social media metrics (TripAdvisor ranking, etc.) that can be considered indicators of quality.
- Giving the opportunity to increase word of mouth (Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Godes and Mayzlin 2009).

On the other hand, "social media metrics", which quantify interactions between brands, customers and other consumers, further complicate the comparison with competitors (Lovett 2011). Moreover, pricing transparency and dynamism generated by the development of IT and social media could force a company to continuously and dynamically align its rates to those of its competitors.

Therefore, considering these opportunities and threats, which are the antecedents that lead hotel companies to adopt Web 2.0 strategies? A first stream of research noted that an antecedent of IT usage by hotel companies is brand affiliation. Therefore, hotels belonging to a hotel chain are more likely to adopt and develop web technologies than independent hotels (Wang and Qualls 2007; Scaglione et al. 2005). This is not only caused by the greater financial or human resources available for hotel chains, but may also depend on hotel managers' perception of the benefits that these instruments can realize for a company (Leung et al. 2011). As social media is often seen as a way of strengthening a company's brand (Lagrosen and Josefsson 2011), it is logical that hotels with more focus on their brands should be more eager to use social media. Moreover, hotel managers rarely integrate IT into their company's business strategy because they generally consider it only as an instrument to reach customers (Law and Jogaratnam 2005; Law et al. 2008). Another stream of research studied how IT (mainly the websites) is used by hotels to interact with customers. The main finding of these studies is the existing connection between a company's dimensions (size) and its development of online strategies and interactions (Sigala 2001; Gilbert and Powell-Perry 2002; Bai et al. 2006; Romenti et al. 2011). Smaller companies sometimes use web

solutions in creative and more personalised ways (Lagrosen 2005). Other studies were mainly focused on the connection between a company's quality level and their adoption of IT and the orientation of their website towards online interactions. However, in this case the results show conflicting positions: some scholars confirm the relationship between the quality level and the website development (Scaglione et al. 2005) and its relationship orientation (Sigala 2001; Schegg et al. 2002; Romenti et al. 2011) while others found that sometimes budget hotels demonstrate greater interest in creating online customer relationships (Essawy 2005).

Therefore, it could be interesting to address the following research objectives, concentrating on social media rather than on general IT use:

- To explore how top European hotels brands use social media strategically;
- To understand which are the factors that influence the use of social media in European hotels;
- To explore the level of integration among social media and the the website;
- To study the social media posts published by the hotel brand (quantity and content analysis).

3 Research Methodology

In light of the results of the literature review, this paper will especially address the study towards the use of social media by top European hotels. This could be considered a pilot study aimed at verifying the methodology before its application to a larger number of cases of international hotel companies. Moreover, it could be useful to the development of future hypotheses of research on the topic.

Research methodology combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. A group of items has been developed to explore how hotels interact with customers by means of social media. The study was conducted in the period March–April 2013 and followed two steps: the first step consisted of processing items as a result of various semi-structured interviews with head managers of international hotel chains; the second step was concerned with the analysis of the Facebook pages of 15 top European hotel groups brands by means of the items identified. The hotel brands were selected from the ranking of the top ten European hotel groups. Analysing the website of each single hotel group, we first made an inventory of the existing hotel brands for each group. This first selection was then compared with the world ranking of the top 50 hotel brands. Only the ones that were present in this ranking were included in the third step of selection, which also excluded other companies, that considered the following features: hotel brands that have a Facebook page but only connected to a single event; hotel brands that are not present in the European countries; hotel brands that mainly offer an extended-stay service.

The Facebook pages of European hotel brands were analysed by means of 14 items that can be grouped into five categories: accessibility, information, call to action, connections and performance. The first aspect, "accessibility", is analysed in questions 1–4: is it easy to find the Facebook page of the hotel brand by searching via Facebook's search engine? (question 1); is there a connection to the website of the hotel brand and also from the website of the hotel brand? (questions 2–4). The second issue, "Information", concerns the study of the kinds of information included on the Facebook page (questions 5, 5.1). "Call to action" is analysed by verifying whether it is possible to check availability and rates directly on the Facebook page (question 6). The section "connections" refers to the possibility for users to connect to a company's profile on other social media (TripAdvisor, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) and to their mobile application (app) (questions 7, 7.1, 8). "Performance" is measured by means of the following counting metrics (Lovett 2011): number of "likes", number of people "talking about this" and number of people that "were here" (questions 9–11). Hotel brand posts are analysed in questions 12–14, which have the objective of quantifying the number of posts published by the brand in 2012, studying their frequency during the year. Is there a continuous relationship with the customer or the posts are mainly connected to events concentrated in certain specific periods of the year? Finally, a content analysis of all the posts published in 2012 is undertaken on the basis of the items included in question 14 (from 14.1 to 14.25), aimed at quantifying the number of posts for each content category. The list of categories has been adapted to the case of the hotel business from a study of Hays et al. (2012), which analysed the use of Facebook and Twitter by destination management organizations.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Counting Metrics

The list of 15 brands selected are here analysed through trying to answer the research questions set in the first part of this paper. Table 1 shows the Facebook statistics gathered during the analysis. Holiday Inn and Intercontinental Hotels and Resorts are early adopters of Facebook (2008). The longevity of the Facebook page does not necessarily seem to influence the number of "likes" and the number of people "talking about this". Moreover, the date of creating a Facebook page does not seem to depend on the size and the quality level of the hotel brand. However, we found that the top five hotel brands when considering the metric "talking about this" have all been Facebook members since 2009. This could be a hint of a possible relationship between longevity and the community level of activity (people talking about this).

Hilton Hotels and Resorts and Best Western are the hotel brands with the highest metrics when considering both the number of "likes" and of people

Table 1 Hotel brands' Facebook statistics (order according to the world ranking)

Brand (FB year)	Rank/quality[a]	No. rooms 2012	Likes	Talking about this	Were here	No. posts	Activity index (%)
Best Western (2009)	1/M	311,894	687,308	25,837	59,294	565	3.76
Holiday Inn (2008)	2/M	225,328	452,395	5,092	N/A	354	1.13
Holiday Inn Express (2012)	4/E	196,666	23,238	536	N/A	23	2.31
Hilton Hotels and Resorts (2009)	5/U	196,151	1,010,608	11,817	4,621,541	182	1.17
Hampton (2009)	6/M	181,087	312,754	13,107	N/A	484	4.19
Ibis Hotels (2011)	15/E	113,077	103,308	1,235	176,024	152	1.20
Crowne Plaza (2011)	16/U	105,104	80,440	936	N/A	249	1.16
Radisson (2011)	20/M	94,436	77,159	545	N/A	371	0.71
Novotel (2012)	24/M	74,117	38,010	489	236,298	104	1.29
DoubleTree (2009)	27/U	70,793	203,655	5,320	686,754	336	2.61
IHG (2008)	32/U	57,598	38,654	493	N/A	69	1.28
NH Hoteles (2010)	35/M	51,898	34,662	247	1,697	623	0.71
Premier Inn (2010)	38/M	48,725	67,602	650	N/A	136	0.96
Riu Hotels and Resorts (2009)	44/U	39,823	271,445	6,139	N/A	199	2.26
Melia Hotels and Resorts (2010)	47/U	34,324	227,261	1,623	52,213	134	0.71

[a] World Rank/quality level: *U* upscale, *M* Mid-range, *E* economy

The date close to the name of the hotel brand represents the year of first publication of the Facebook page. N/A means "not available"

"talking about this". Already in the first two positions of the ranking we notice that the number of "likes" and the number of people "talking about this" often do not correspond but that a high gap is generally present. In fact, Hilton, for example, which is the first brand for number of "likes" (more than 1 million), moves from first to third position if we consider the number of people "talking about this" (11,817). There are a lot of people who like the page but who then do not interact with it. Hampton, Best Western and DoubleTree are the hotel brands that present the highest "index of activity" (people talking about this/likes). On the contrary, NH Hoteles, for example, has 34,662 "like" but only 247 people interacting with its Facebook page. This confirms that the number of "likes" (previously "fans") is probably not the most suitable metric to evaluate the success of a corporate Facebook page (O'Neill 2011). The "like" option is more related to a single initial action whereas "talking about this" is an indicator that can actually measure people who interact with a Facebook page (posts, comments, shares, post likes, etc.) and actively participate in the "life" of the page. It can really express the community volume of activity. We also see in Table 1 that counting metrics seem unconnected with the quality level and the size of the hotel brand. In particular, if we concentrate on the number of people "talking about this", which in

our approach is considered the most appropriate metric to measure the level of interaction created with users on a Facebook page, we notice that the top five is composed of very different hotel brands, considering their size, quality level, hotel group, geographical origin of the company and even the brand strategy used (unique brand/multi-branding). Therefore, regarding the debate in research as to whether there is a relationship between quality level and website interactivity, as proposed by Scaglione et al. (2005), our study does not confirm such a relationship. Neither does it support the findings of Essawy (2005) that budget hotels are more effective in creating social media interaction. In addition, the connection between brand affiliation and social media activity seen in some earlier studies (Wang and Qualls 2007; Scaglione et al. 2005) was not seen in our results. Rather, we found no relationship between social media interactivity and quality level, size or brand affiliation. It is probable that more organizational and/or personal factors determine the level of commitment to social media marketing. This is something that should be explored in further in-depth studies.

Shifting to the third metric "were here", only 45. 8 % of brands display this metric on their Facebook page. This could depend on what kind of Facebook page they are using. Among the hotel brands analysed, the one that presents the highest number of people using mobile devices to check in at a the place are Hilton, DoubleTree and Novotel. In these cases, the number of people who "were here" is sometimes four or five times greater than the number of "likes", demonstrating the importance of these new devices in the hotel sector. Furthermore, this could be an indicator of customer loyalty. For example, in Foursquare if you check in at the same place/company you become a frequent user and obtain more points, not considering the continuous and free word of mouth generated towards your friends and other people who are not in the same place.

Finally, it is useful to consider the number of posts. We focused on the posts published in 2012 for each month. Our results showed that the total amount of posts does not influence the number of "likes" and people "talking about this". In fact, hotel brands presenting the highest number of posts published on their Facebook page often do not excel in other counting metrics. For example, NH Hoteles published more than 600 posts during 2012 but does not hold first position in the rankings for the number of "likes" and people "talking about this". This could underline the importance of a post's content rather than the quantity. In fact, in the case of Hilton, which has first position for the number of "likes" and third for the number of people "talking about this", we found a lower number of posts published in comparison with other brands.

4.2 Facebook Page Features

The results of questions 1–4 give us information about "accessibility". All the Facebook pages of the hotel brands analysed can be easily found in the first seven results of Facebook's search box. In almost all the cases, there is a clear

connection from a hotel's Facebook page to its brand website and, conversely, from a hotel's website to its Facebook page. Nearly 27 % of the hotel brands' Facebook pages also have a connection to the company's loyalty scheme.

Concerning the questions on "information", hotel brands' Facebook pages give general information describing the hotel brand (86.6 %), the mission (60 %) and the brand history (86.6 %). Only 40 % of the hotel brands analysed give users information about corporate contacts (telephone number, email, Skype, etc.). This may be because the connection is created directly on their Facebook page.

"Call to action" was investigated by assessing the presence or not of the "book now" function on the FB page: 80 % of the brands analysed offer this function. This propensity to recognize a Facebook page as a channel that can increase sales could be a great opportunity for hotel companies to overcome OTAs, thus decreasing the amount of commissions to be paid.

Questions 7 and 8 aimed to study the level of "connection" of the Facebook page with other social media. Only 33 % of the brands do not have connections with other social media. They are generally brands that present a low level of interaction with customers on their Facebook pages (low number of people "talking about this"). In the case of Holiday Inn Express, this could be because of its recent opening of its Facebook page in 2012, compared with other brands. Considering only the brands studied that present a connection with other social media, the most commonly used are Twitter (53 %) and YouTube (46.7 %). Only three brands also have a connection with Pinterest, which is the fastest developing social media according to recent statistics (Nielsen 2012b). Hilton, DoubleTree and Riu Hotels and Resorts are some of the brands that use the highest number of social media. NH Hoteles is mainly focused on video (YouTube) and pictures (Flickr, Pinterest). None of the Facebook pages studied has a connection with Google+ or TripAdvisor, in the last case probably because the study is focused on the Facebook page of the brand as a whole (the global corporate page), whereas TripAdvisor contains the reviews of customers of single hotels. Of the 15 brands analysed, 86 % have a mobile application but only 20 % promote it with a specific link on their Facebook page. Only two hotel chains (Riu Hotels and Resorts and Premier Inn) do not have a mobile application. Therefore, the hotel companies researched realize the potential of mobile technologies and applications but only a few manage it in integration with other social media. These last two results related to "connection" seem to indicate that the majority of hotel chains are in the first stages of developing an integrated social media strategy that so far has mainly focused on Facebook.

4.3 Hotels' Posting Frequency and Content Analysis

The last part of the study had the objective of analysing the frequency and the content of hotel brands' posts. Our starting point was to count the number of posts published in 2012 for each month, as a way to understand whether a Facebook

Fig. 1 Combined frequency of posts during 2012
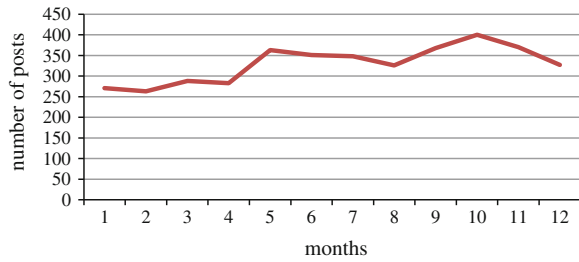
page is managed continuously. As shown in Fig. 1, if we consider the brands selected in this study (excluding Holiday Inn Express, which opened its page in 2012 and started publishing posts that October), we notice that there is a relatively stable pattern, with an increase during the spring and summer seasons. However, obviously, observing the pattern of each brand we found differences. For example, the brands with the most stable patterns, i.e. a balance in the distribution of posts during the year, are Holiday Inn, Crowne Plaza, Novotel and Melià Hotels and Resorts. On the contrary, other brands present a two or even three-peak pattern. DoubleTree and Best Western show the most irregular patterns. Therefore, if we look again at Table 1, our study does not find a connection between counting indicators and posting frequency and seasonality. Namely, brands with very high metrics ("likes" and "people talking about this") do not always present continuous management of their Facebook page throughout the year (i.e. Best Western, Double Tree). On the contrary, other brands with fewer "likes" and people "talking about this" present more balanced patterns.

Moving to the content analysis of the posts published in 2012 by the hotel brands investigated (Fig. 2), we found that only 5 % of posts give advice or comment on something (different to a specific hotel of the brand) and 60. 4 % of the posts include a link to another website (sometimes also the company website). This could be annoying for users who generally want to remain on Facebook interacting with friends and the brand. Moreover, these results could be a signal of the time the hotel brands spend implementing and managing post content. Obviously, it is easier to publish posts with a title, maybe a picture and then a link, but it is not what social media users generally appreciate. Moving people to another website interrupts their interaction with users and, consequently, the opportunity of engagement. Pictures (photos) are the preferred content included in posts (55 %) and nearly 48 % are promotion-related. Among them, hotel brands particularly promote specific hotels (29 %) and destinations (28 %). Only 16 % of posts are contest-related. In fact, observing posts, the impression is that the majority come from the hotel brand itself, rather than from users, and that mainly pictures are used to promote a chain's hotels. This behaviour is more similar to traditional marketing than social media marketing and does not exploit the opportunity provided by social networks. Moreover, the focus is often on the promotion of the hotel's structures, internal services and events rather than the integrated mix of services offered by the destinations. A greater use of information about destinations, such as attractions,

Fig. 2 Post content
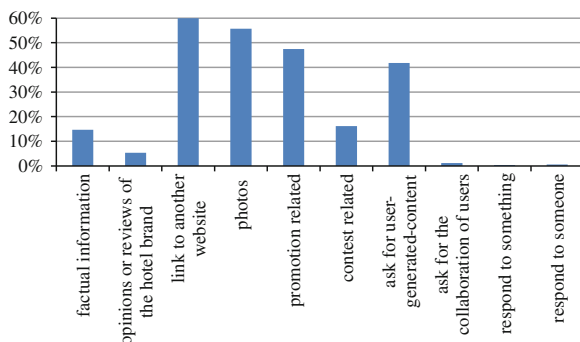
events, traditions, culture, etc., could help hotel companies to find valuable content more easily for customers on Facebook.

Questions 14.8–14.25 studied the level of interaction with users. Here, 42 % of posts ask for user-generated content, especially to answer a question and to give an opinion (92 %), for example, asking users which picture they prefer, etc. The other items connected with interaction are generally undervalued. In fact, only 1 % of posts ask users to collaborate (different to giving their opinion), such as, for example, asking them to help the company create a slogan or similar. Moreover, only 1 % of hotel brands respond in the posts to something or to someone.

5 Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to understand how widespread the use of social media is in the hotel business. In particular we focused on the case of some leading European hotel brands, analysing the strategies used on their Facebook pages. The study confirms that in the hotel sector Facebook is the most used social media. It is considered an instrument to promote the hotel brands and create sales, as demonstrated by the content analysis and the presence of the "book now" function in almost all the brands analysed. Their attempt is to convert social networking and sharing among customers into sales (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Dellarocas 2003). What has so far been undervalued is the potentiality of engagement that could increase customer loyalty, electronic word of mouth and ultimately sales. Sometimes the hotel brands themselves move users' attention away from their Facebook page by high use of links to other websites. This could be easier from a page management point of view (less time spent on the creation of content) but could also interrupt interaction and annoy users, whose habit is to interact directly on the Facebook page. The content analysis also confirms a high propensity to use posts to promote the hotels or the destinations where they are located and a low concentration on potentiality offered by interactions with users.

From the side of social counting metrics the findings seem to confirm our initial approach, which considers people "talking about this" to be a better metric in comparison with the number of "likes". In fact, the first indicator could be more suitable for measuring people who actually interact with the Facebook page (posts, comments, shares, post likes, etc.) and actively participate in the "life" of the page. Facebook metrics do not seem to be connected to a company's size and quality level.

Another interesting result worthy of comment is the moderate level of connection with other social media. Despite the actual trend being the development of new devices (smartphones, tablets, etc.) along with increased connectivity, hotel brands do not seem to be latching on to the importance of this phenomenon. To be precise, a large majority of the hotel brands analysed have a mobile application but this is not properly promoted on their Facebook page or even sometimes on their website. It seems they are considered as separate rather than an integrated tool for a coordinated strategy. This could simply mean the gradual development of a social media strategy that is already in its first stages and that presents a moderate level of integration.

From the perspective of implications for management, hotel brands could develop strategies aimed at creating more interaction with users through replying to their posts and asking for their collaboration and experience. This could create a higher level of engagement that could influence customer loyalty, word of mouth and sales. Therefore, hotel brands should develop an integrated communication strategy that includes social media and traditional marketing, in alignment with the rest of their corporate strategies.

This study has some limitations. First, a more comprehensive analysis of social media usage by hotel brands could be developed, enlarging the sample and considering a wider period (more than one year). In particular, extending the period of observation could give interesting insights into the frequency patterns of posts. Second, the content analysis of posts is analysed here only following a combined approach. That means that results are not observed for each hotel brand. The next step of research could also consider the differences of content among various brands. Third, the frequency analysis of posts for each hotel brand could be studied in more depth to identify possible specific patterns. Fourth, the study mainly considers the social counting indicators from a customer perspective, that is, the metrics that the user can see on the Facebook page and that could influence their perception. It could be interesting to match these results with other metrics that are provided by Facebook Insights for companies. Finally, during the study we realized some adaptation was necessary to improve the analysis. For example, the wording and the order of questions could be changed slightly to facilitate the analysis and the connection among the questions. Future research could study post content in more depth to try to understand the level of interaction reached by the hotel brands. Other possible paths of research could investigate the relationship between the longevity of a Facebook page and the community level of activity (people talking about this), the possible interpretation of the indicator "were here", and possible antecedents of users' engagement. Are hotel brands with an "older" Facebook page more capable of interacting with users? Could people who check in at a place be considered loyal or potentially loyal customers?

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