

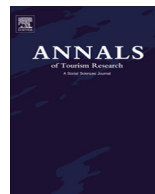


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Social media affordances: Enabling customer engagement



Francesca Cabiddu ^{a,*}, Manuela De Carlo ^{b,1}, Gabriele Piccoli ^{c,2}

^a University of Cagliari, Italy

^b IULM University, Italy

^c University of Pavia, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Despite the acknowledged importance of social media for customer engagement, our understanding of this phenomenon is limited and new theories can help shed further light on the unique features of social media in the tourism context. Our work contributes to the literature by adopting an affordance perspective that leads us to identify three distinctive social media affordances for customer engagement in tourism: persistent engagement, customized engagement, and triggered engagement. Our work also extends prior research on customer engagement by examining the process of recognition (proprioception, exteroception and copercception) through which organizations engage customers in social media.

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Introduction

Social media are a “group of Internet-based applications which build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thus, social media are browser or mobile-based applications that allow users to easily create, edit, access and link to content and/or to other individuals. Examples include blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, and electronic social networks, as well as user-generated content

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 070 6753382; fax: +39 070 6753374.

E-mail addresses: fcabiddu@unica.it (F. Cabiddu), manuela.decarlo@iulm.it (M.D. Carlo), gabriele.piccoli@unipv.it (G. Piccoli).

¹ Tel.: +39 02891412815; fax: +39 02891412770.

² Tel.: +39 0382 986219.

aggregators, such as Yelp and TripAdvisor, and location-based applications such, as Foursquare or MyCityWay.

More than one third of online travelers are somewhat influenced by social media, with Facebook referring more than 15.2 million visitors to tourism websites in 2010 (PhoCusWright., 2011). TripAdvisor-branded sites comprise the largest travel community in the world, with more than 200 million unique monthly visitors and more than 100 million reviews and opinions for 2.5 million accommodations, restaurants, and attractions worldwide (Google, 2013). As a testament to their growing importance, the literature includes a proliferation of studies that focus on social media in tourism (Banyai, 2012; Bronner & De Hoog, 2010; Bynum Boley, Magnini, & Tuten, 2013; Hvass & Munar, 2012; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Månsson, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media represent a critical innovation for the tourism industry not only because they allow informational exchanges among tourists (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and affect potential tourists' experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009) but also because of their ability to spur further innovation (Hjalager, 2010). The proliferation of social media platforms has changed how organizations communicate with customers, thus allowing tourism service providers to pursue a variety of customer engagement strategies (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). Customer engagement is "a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object within specific service relationships" (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011, p. 258). Despite the acknowledged importance of social media for customer engagement in the tourism context (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Park & Allen, 2013; Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013), our understanding remains limited and theorists call for new approaches to exploring the unique features of social media (Majchrzak, 2009; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). This need is particularly evident in the tourism context (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Hudson & Thal, 2013), where social media introduce new interactive channels between providers and tourists (Hjalager, 2010). Our work contributes to the literature utilizing affordance theory, thus considering the symbiotic relationship between human activities and technological capabilities in the tourism context (Majchrzak & Markus, 2012). By treating the interplay of humans and technology as a single unit of analysis, rather than examining each separately, the affordance perspective provides a language with which to examine the broader impacts of social media on tourism and tourism specific innovations. In this study we focus specifically on the implications of social media affordances for customer engagement. First, we explore the process of recognition through which tourism organizations conceptualize of engaging customers through social media. We identify three distinctive social media affordances that support customer engagement in a tourism domain: persistent engagement, customized engagement, and triggered engagement. Then, we explore the differences between hotels with high and low customer engagement performance with respect to the recognition and exploitation of the three affordances. The value of our research lies mainly in exploratory theory building and early theory testing about specific social media affordances in the context of customer engagement in a tourism domain.

Theoretical approaches to the study of social media engagement

A number of engagement-based concepts have been proposed in different bodies of literature, including tourism, such as customer engagement behavior (Van Doorn et al., 2010), user-generated hotel reviews (Wei et al., 2013), customer brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011), online consumer engagement (Mollen & Wilson, 2010), the customer engagement cycle (Sashi, 2012), customer engagement value (Kumar et al., 2010), community engagement (Hamilton & Alexander, 2013), and co-creation as a customer engagement behavior (Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012, Cabiddu, Lui, Piccoli, 2013). Some studies define engagement in terms of a psychological state (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2010), while others focus on its behavioral manifestations toward a company or a brand (Hollebeek, 2011; Kumar et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010). The advent of social media led to an explosion of interest in customer engagement, given the opportunities presented by these media to facilitate close relationships with customers (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011; Hudson & Thal, 2013). Engagement includes: browsing and consuming consumer-generated media contents, content contribution, active participation (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), levels of participation in online tourist

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