International Journal of Hospitality Management 42 (2014) 126–136

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Hospitality Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijhosman

When tradition meets the new technology: An examination of the antecedents of attitudes and intentions to use mobile devices in private clubs☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Mobile commerce
Technology adoption
Subjective norms
Facilitating conditions
Private club industry

ABSTRACT

Mobile technology increasingly permeates the social fabric of the contemporary society and the business models of hospitality organizations, including the private club industry. Using data from a nationwide sample of members of private clubs in the United States, this research examined the manner in which system beliefs (i.e., usefulness, ease of use), subjective norms, and facilitating conditions influence club members' attitudes and intentions to use mobile devices to make reservations for activities/facilities in private clubs. It was found that usefulness and subjective norms have an impact in developing attitudes, which in turn influence club members' intentions to use mobile devices in clubs. Being the first study to examine the development of attitudes and intentions toward mobile technology in a club context, this study brings important theoretical and practical contributions.

1. Introduction

In an era dominated by an increased use of mobile devices in all aspects of the hospitality experience (Wang et al., 2011), mobile commerce (m-commerce) induces irreversible structural changes to the industry and new consumer behaviors (Knutson et al., 2013). Such an orientation is rooted in the characteristics of m-commerce (e.g., ubiquity, personalization, familiarity), which make the relationships between the hospitality businesses and their consumers increasingly symbiotic (Morosan, 2014). There is, however, one segment of the hospitality industry that has not immersed into m-commerce to the extent as its counterparts: the private club industry. The club industry in the U.S. mainly consists of country clubs that provide amenities such as golf, tennis, and dining. However, city and athletic clubs, especially concentrated in downtown areas or central business districts of U.S. cities, are increasingly prevalent within the club industry. To a lower extent, niche types of clubs exist as well, such as yacht clubs located in areas situated in the proximity of bodies of water, and clubs whose members belong to a common profession (e.g., military, faculty). Given the club industry's structure, with the majority of the clubs being private, member-owned, having nonprofit tax status, and with a legacy of service personalization, the traditional view used to be that there is no need for further technology. However, given today's club members' younger demographics and the high penetration of mobile devices in all society strata, club members' expectations vis-à-vis technology are changing (Ready, 2012).

The contemporary club industry landscape provides only sporadic examples of m-commerce applications in clubs. Generally, today's m-commerce applications in clubs gravitate around members' use of mobile devices to directly access club websites or member-only online resources provided by clubs, and to a very low extent, to using dedicated club-related mobile applications (apps). The main types of tasks remains making reservations and, to an extent, communicating with the club. Yet, such practices already represent promising foundations of a vigorous m-commerce presence within club operations (Boothe, personal communication, October 2013). Given the accelerated growth (approximately 500 percent) in mobile device use over the past decade (Berkus, 2013), m-commerce will inevitably become an integral part of the clubs' general business practices. In this context, by adapting their business models to accommodate m-commerce practices, clubs can take advantage of the creativity of m-commerce and poise themselves to provide superior services and benefits to their members.

The benefits for members and clubs that m-commerce provides are multiple. First, clubs members can manage reservations more efficiently, as making such reservations is no longer

☆ This research has been conducted with the support of Hospitality and Financial Technology Professionals (HFTP).

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2014.06.009
0278-4319/

constrained by the existence of a computer connected to the Internet or the availability of a staff member to answer reservation calls. Today's club reservations are not limited to golf tee times, but include reservations for sporting courts/equipment, dining facilities, special occasions or family events, or even charity functions. Without having to talk to an actual staff member or logging on to a club's website, members can secure desired reservation spots efficiently using mobile devices. Relatedly, cost savings could be significant for clubs, as many of the processes traditionally requiring staff no longer need it. Second, the efficiency of member-club communication can also be increased using m-commerce. For example, relevant commercial messages that are tailored to the interests and preferences of the members can be delivered directly to their mobile devices without the members having to access their traditional mail protocols. In addition, similarly to other industries, m-commerce can facilitate the purchasing of ancillary products/services in clubs as a result of persuasive communications (Morosan, 2014). Third, members can achieve superior levels of convenience, as they are likely to carry a mobile device connected to the Internet with them most of the time. In sum, clubs can provide a superior value proposition to their members by using mobile technology, with important implications for developing and sustaining competitive advantages and enhancing their strategic positioning (Bilgihan et al., 2011). In this context, it becomes critical to investigate the manner in which the club industry is adapting to the use of mobile technologies and how club members develop attitudes and intentions to use mobile devices in commercial contexts in clubs.

Despite the critical need to understand the potential of m-commerce for the club industry, to date, no conceptual or empirical study was found to examine the role of information technology (IT) in clubs. Moreover, there is a critical void in the literature; that is, no recent study was found to examine the perceptions or behaviors of club members, arguably due to the elusive, private character of club membership and the associated difficulty of collecting primary data from them. Thus, filling this void in the hospitality knowledge base, this research developed a model rooted in Davis' (1989) Technology Accepted Model (TAM) and classic (Ajzen, 1985; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and more recent attitudinal-behavioral theories (Venkatesh et al., 2003), to examine the manner in which club members develop attitudes and intentions to use mobile technologies for m-commerce tasks in clubs. The model was validated empirically using data from actual U.S. club members. To accomplish its purpose, this research followed two specific objectives: (1) understanding the influence of the most important factors leading to club members' attitudes and intentions to use of mobile devices, and (2) estimating the optimal balance between system beliefs (usefulness, ease of use), convenience factors (personalization), and the club's organizational environment (subjective norms, facilitating conditions) that facilitate the development of attitudes and intentions toward using mobile devices in clubs.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Evolution of IT in clubs

The club industry recently began relying on IT, including mobile technology (Northstar, 2014). This reliance on IT has been associated with the optimization of business processes that eventually converge toward delivering a superior value proposition to members (Hunter, 2013). The initial deployment of IT in the club industry started in the late 1980s, when minicomputers from IBM, NCR, and Unisys created centralization within the accounting departments (Boothe, 2008). By 2008, clubs deployed IT in areas such as customer relationship management and business intelligence, while integrated systems brought clubs' websites into the forefront as main communication tools. Industry analysts seem to suggest that clubs would eventually embark on initiatives proven to be valuable in other industries (e.g., cloud computing, software as a service) and to facilitate critical functions within the enterprise (e.g., data security, data backups, digital signage) (Boothe and Warren, 2010).

The benefits of IT for both the organizations and their constituents have been recognized within the club industry. For example, the National Club Association and Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals partnered to create a task force and identify the top technology challenges for clubs. The results showed four main challenges in the following areas: (1) electronic communications (e.g., websites, email, social networking, and text messaging), (2) software, (3) IT management, and (4) hardware (Venegas et al., 2011). It was also found that large percentages of club members used clubs' websites for checking the club's calendar (91 percent), their accounts and statements (75 percent), membership rosters (49 percent), and searching general information (48 percent) (Venegas et al., 2011). Recent data seem to support that clubs are becoming increasingly interested in IT: 98 percent of clubs have a website, 72 percent extract trends from their traffic, while 37 percent make daily updates to their online content (Boothe, 2012).

Currently, driven by competition and consequently by a desire to create competitive advantages, clubs are moving rapidly in the direction of automating some of their enterprise processes and customer relationship functions (Boothe, 2009). On the supply side, the number of vendors producing solutions designed specifically for the club industry is also increasing. Some vendors are providing more personalized technologies (e.g., websites, apps) than ever before. For example, technology firms such as IBS provide responsive website designs where the website adapts to the user's device platform (Smyth, personal communication, 2014). Most importantly, there is interest toward mobile platforms. User convenience is continuously being incorporated into application design, that is, information is being duplicated across platforms so that users can switch from among platforms while keeping the information formatting intact. Despite the challenges (e.g., lack of trained staff, unclear ROI proposition) (Boothe, 2009), the clubs industry analysts remain optimistic about the role of IT, especially that of relatively newer technologies such as social networking (Gillis, 2010) and mobile technology (Boothe, 2009).

2.2. Theoretical foundations

The technology adoption literature is rich in conceptualizations of technology adoption, attributing the development of attitudes, intentions, and actual behavioral responses to system-beliefs (Moody et al., 2010). Given their parsimony and robustness, such theoretical frameworks based on belief-attitudinal-behavioral paths became relatively popular, which encouraged a plethora of scholars to use them as bases for their studies (Shilke and Wirtz, 2012), thus providing broad empirical validation (Shin, 2009). Among more than 80 theories explicating technology adoption, a particular one – the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) – remains arguably the most influential and widely used, due to a number of advantages over rival theories (Moody et al., 2010; Straub and Burton-Jones, 2007), such as: (1) nativity to the disciplinary context of information systems, and thus including technology-specific artifacts (e.g., usefulness, ease of use) (Straub, 2012); (2) parsimony (Lin, 2007); (3) strong empirical support in hospitality (Morosan and Jeong, 2008) and in a variety of industrial and technology contexts (Shin, 2009), including in m-commerce (Morosan, 2014). Thus, the TAM was used in this research as the core theoretical foundation.

All reconceptualizations of the TAM in various technology/industry contexts took into consideration the conceptual differences stemming from the innate characteristics of such