

# 1 Definition and functionality of social media

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## Introduction

Online users' behaviors significantly changed after Web 2.0 was introduced, and this change forced companies to interact with their customers via new tools, called social media. After the shift from personal, static and view-only web sites to collaborative, dynamic and interactive platforms, traditional communication and sale steps are no longer acceptable (Chan & Guillet, 2011: 345). Therefore, starting from the 2000s, social media has become an essential instrument for marketing (Aydin, 2020: 1). Accordingly, some of the social media tools, such as online review sites and consumer-created content become the main information sources for the hospitality and tourism industry and its stakeholders (Moro & Rita, 2018: 344).

Unlike traditional media, where the information flows one-way from the company to individuals, social media allows interactive and interconnected communication among individuals, companies, and other stakeholders. Companies and services have been closely following the current development of social media to take the advantage of this cost-effective tool. Social media also provides a variety of opportunities for small and/or local companies, whose budgets are too limited to be a part of traditional media through advertising or professional marketing activities. From individual entrepreneurs to million-dollar companies, social media now offers a great opportunity that provides similar chances of market success, regardless of the promotion and communication budgets.

Among different social media tools, the most common and popular ones are blogs, microblogs (Twitter), social networks (LinkedIn and Facebook),

media sharing domains (YouTube), review sites (Yelp, TripAdvisor), and forums (Zarrella, 2009: 3). All these platforms provide countless opportunities to companies, customers, and stakeholders for information search and marketing. Social media now provide opportunities in these platforms to communicate, create, join, collaborate, socialize, share, play, buy and sell, and learn (Tuten, 2020: 5) for both individuals and organizations.

The hospitality and tourism field is no exception. The concept of social media can be defined as an 'equalizer' (Zarrella, 2009: 7) for both small and local businesses, and national and international brands. Big companies use social media to support their professional marketing activities for integrated marketing communication; small companies have now the chance to reach out to their current or potential users, since both have similar opportunities via social media platforms. Local restaurants, destinations, and events are actively engaging with their customers and utilizing their reviews as trustable testimony.

Social media also equalizes different demographic groups as they share similar usage rates; women (68%) and men (62%); Whites (65%), Hispanics (65%) and African Americans (56%); rural (58%), suburban (68%), and urban (64%) residents utilize social media in similar numbers (Perrin, 2015: 3). This similarity among different sizes of companies and different demographic groups forms the power of social media to reach out to a variety of customers with different types of services. The power of social media also makes it attractive to learn more for both academia and industry.

This chapter of the book mainly focuses on the definition of social media, the functions and the social media usage in the hospitality and tourism industry, together with the future directions of social media use in the field.

## Literature review

The influence of communication and interaction among people, via Word of Mouth (WOM), is one of the most important means of getting information. This influence is even more important if the product is intangible, and trial and evaluation is not possible before the actual consumption (Litvin *et al.*, 2008: 458). The transformation of the Internet and technology has led the shift of the Internet from a static tool for digital publishing allowing only limited one-to-many communication, to interactive collaboration platform that allows many-to-many communication (Kiráľová & Pavlíčka, 2015: 364). The Internet also transformed the nature of WOM. The new format is a digitally accessible form of WOM, known as Electronic Word

of Mouth (EWOM). Accordingly, the influence of one consumer on other customers has been transformed as well (Litvin *et al.*, 2008: 469) and has become technology-based.

As the Internet becomes more common for not only finding information or shopping but also for sharing experiences, WOM also shifted to the electronic version. While the traditional word of mouth (WOM) is defined as type of communication between customers about the products, services, or companies without commercial purposes (Litvin *et al.*, 2008: 465); electronic word of mouth (EWOM) is expressed as the form of communication among customers and businesses that is available on the Internet (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004: 39). EWOM is now the major element of social media and the most critical source of information for consumers' decision-making processes (Litvin *et al.*, 2008: 461; Živković *et al.*, 2014: 758), because while WOM is a critical way of obtaining information, the electronic version, EWOM, allows users to generate and form their own content via the Internet. This content that is available to large group of people in different versions of technology and electronic devices is known as User Generated Content (UGC) (Chu *et al.*, 2020: 3419; Doğan *et al.*, 2020: 1506). In short, today's Internet users can globally exchange their travel-related information by being a part of EWOM through User Generated Content (Chu *et al.*, 2020: 3419).

Due to the development of technology, customers are now capable of creating their own domains or sharing their content on the well-established domains. User generated content, therefore, is the way that customers add their opinion and share it with others at low or no cost (American Marketing Association, 2017). This user generated content is now shared on Internet platforms through posting, discussions, and blogging, allowing the other users or the business and companies to be a part of the process, and these platforms are called social media (American Marketing Association, 2017; Blackshaw, 2006: 179).

Easy and convenient access to connected devices such as personal computers, smart phones, and even wearable devices such as smart watches, lead customers to live in a virtuality and create and share content regardless of their location, making the Internet the *backbone* of the society (Tuten, 2020: 4). In addition, today's consumers have a large number of options to choose from and limited time to devote to make choices (Kiráľová & Pavlíček, 2015: 359), which increases the need for utilizing some previous experience of others. Therefore, the two groups, the first one that needs information and experience of others, and the second group that helps

others by sharing their experience voluntarily, are able to meet in a platform where they can communicate, interact, and exchange information. The platform that brings these two groups together is social media. The platform extends customer engagement and involvement both in hospitality and other fields (Harrigan *et al.*, 2017: 607).

### **Social media and Web 2.0**

To explain and define what social media is, it is essential to clearly define what social media is not. It is vital to emphasize that although the terms are used interchangeably, social media is different from Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 60). The relationship, however, can be summarized as Web 2.0 platforms currently serve as platforms for social media services, and user generated content fuels social media. Therefore, groups and individuals create their own content by utilizing tools that are provided by social media (Obar & Wildman, 2015: 746,747). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) define user generated content as a broader term, and propose that the different ways people utilize social media form user generated content.

For individuals to clearly understand the relationship among social media, user generated content, and web technologies, the latter should be explained first. The world wide web can be viewed in three groups: Web 1.0, the web of cognition; Web 2.0, the web of human communication; and Web 3.0, the web of co-operation. The classification is not only based on the technical aspects but also based on the social dynamics and processes (Fuchs *et al.*, 2010: 43). More specifically, Web 1.0 is a network of connected information, in a static environment where web-users were passively and simply the consumers of the information. Web 2.0 provided a major shift of the platform from the network of information to the network of people and information, providing more control and freedom to the users in a more dynamic and active way. The next step, Web 3.0 will allow an interaction not only among people and groups but also between people and machines (Tuten, 2020: 11). Among these, Web 2.0 could be defined as the tool that allows social media evolution (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 61).

Specifically in the tourism industry, the recent development and extensive use of Web 2.0 brings an essential use of social media in different areas (Sotiriadis, 2017: 216). Accordingly, the term Web 2.0 is revised and called *Travel 2.0*, referring to the application of travel-related technological tools (Del Chiappa, 2011: 331). Philip C. Wolf is credited as the first using the term *Travel 2.0*, which is accepted as the tailored term of Web 2.0 for the