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SOCIAL MEDIA AND HOTEL E-MARKETING IN IRAN: THE CASE OF PARSIAN INTERNATIONAL HOTELS

Abstract: With a quantitative study, this research has aimed to investigate the role of social media in Iranian hotels' electronic marketing. A questionnaire technique was used on a sample of 140 marketers who work in the Parsian International Hotels' marketing department. For data evaluation an SPSS program was used. Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Cochran, Regression, Non-standardized coefficients and Standard coefficient tests were carried out. Based on the findings, we can state that social media are still not an important marketing tool for Iranian hotels. Facebook and YouTube are the media which are most used for marketing purposes as videos and photos can be used on these sites more than others. The results show that the marketing abilities of Parsian Hotels improve with the increasing use of social media, but the hotel marketing sector has failed to fully utilize internet opportunity as a marketing tool.

Keywords: electronic marketing, Parsian Hotels, Iran, internet, hotel marketing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies has impacted on all the processes of value chains in the tourism, hospitality and catering industries (BUHALIS 2003, YOO & LEE 2015). The internet has changed all aspects of tourism marketing, distribution, and consumption (GRETZEL, YUAN & FESEN-MAIER 2000). One of the consequences of the emergence of the internet is the growth of social media which has revolutionized the way businesses attract and interact with their customers (LEE & HONG 2016, LEUNG, BAI & STAHURA 2015). That is why marketers started to focus more on social media to drive customers' behavior towards booking a room (GIBBS, MACDONALD & MACKAY 2015, KIM, LIM & BRYMER 2015). Marketing on social networks must be an intelligent and systematic strategy (HUOTARI & NYBERG 2012) which will create a positive image of a brand (SHANEA 2011).

Thus, travel companies must understand the best ways of using social media and the key elements of a successful integrated marketing strategy (BAGGIO *et al.* 2013b). The internet has been aggressively adopted by

hospitality enterprises as a marketing tool (LIM 2010) and has become the most important channel of marketing for these businesses (BUHALIS 1998). They use more and more online marketing in comparison to other types (HUDSON, HUANG, ROTH & MADDEN 2016). Social media marketing is playing an increasingly important role in the hospitality and tourism field and has changed traditional ways of marketing (HSU 2012, PARK & OH 2012).

Iran was the second country in the Middle East to provide access to the internet after Israel in 1993 and nowadays is ranked 14th in the world in terms of internet users (SALAVATI & HASHIM 2015). Among 16 Middle Eastern countries, Iran has the highest number (47 million) which is more than one third of all users in the region (Internet World Stats 2015). Around 53% of Iranians are registered to a social media site in spite of the blockade of most of these websites by the Iranian authorities (JAFARI 2016). However, the use of e-marketing has also increased in recent years in Iran and there are more than 1,300 online shops operating in Tehran alone (*Iranian internet infrastructure and policy report,*

2014). Social media are also very popular in Iran. In a study conducted in 2016, 8 out of 10 Iranians used Facebook, one third of them via their smart phones (*Liking Facebook in Tehran: Social networking in Iran*, 2016). These statistics show the opportunity for the internet, and in particular, social media for Iran's businesses to find and attract their customers. But Iran's hotel sector suffers from a range of issues including poor management especially in Tehran (SOHRABI *et al.* 2012). Despite the popularity of using the social media as a marketing tool in developed countries, this medium is still a new phenomenon in some developing countries like Iran.

So far, no studies have been conducted in Iran focusing on the role of social media in the development of electronic marketing in the hotel industry (KHEIRI *et al.* 2015). This study, therefore, aims to investigate the role of social media in the electronic marketing of Parsian International Hotels in Iran (Table 1). This company was founded in 1995 and with 22 five, four and three-star hotels (*Parsian International Hotel* 2015) is the biggest hotel chain in Iran.

Table 1. Information about Parsian International Hotels

No	Name/City	Number of rooms	Stars
1	Azadi/Tehran	475	5
2	Esteghlal/Tehran	504	5
3	Parsian/Kermanshah	242	5
4	Khazar/Mazandaran	164	5
5	Kosar/Isfahan	166	5
6	Safaiyeh/Yazd	146	5
7	Enghelab/Tehran	246	4
8	Evin/Tehran	150	4
9	Kosar/Tehran	139	4
10	Aliqapu/Isfahan	112	4
11	Tourist/Mashhad	132	4
12	Azadi/Abadan	111	4
13	Buali/Hamedan	36	4
14	Parsian/Hamedan	45	4
15	Parsian/Bam	89	4
16	Parsian/Yasuj	55	4
17	Azadi/Shahrkord	53	4
18	Parsian/Shiraz	61	4
19	Azadi/Ramsar	152	4
20	Parsian/Yazd	32	3
21	Parsian/Isfahan	48	3
22	Azadi/Gachsar	23	3
Overall rooms		3,181	x

Source: own compilation.

Table 2. Previous study in literature

Author/s	Year	Topic	Main findings
V.H. NGUYEN & Z. WANG	2011	Practice of online marketing with social media in tourism destination marketing.	Online marketing has a key role on tourists' perception of a destination. So it must be taken seriously by DMO.
C.K. STANLEY	2011	The role of social media as a marketing tool for tourism in Kenya. Case study: Kenya safari and tours.	Kenya's tourism organizations must have a specific plan for each social network. For example, introducing the company on Wikipedia and marketing plans on Facebook.
C. HECHELMANN	2012	Social media engagement on a dedicated Facebook channel: an analysis of relations to emotional attachment, self-brand connection and brand commitment towards sports sponsoring brands.	10 factors have been provided which can help marketing plans on social media to make an emotional connection between customer and brand.
W.G. KIM, H. LIM & R.A. BRYMER	2015	The effectiveness of managing social media on hotel performance.	Online reviews on social media, specifically overall rating and response to negative comments, should be managed as a critical part of hotel marketing.
N. CHUNG & C. KOO	2015	The use of social media for travel information searches.	The way users think about information validities on social media affects their use of these networks. The marketer should create valuable information on social networks.
J. LEE & I.B. HONG	2016	Predicting positive user responses to social media advertising: the roles of emotional appeal, informativeness and creativity.	Informativeness and advertising creativity is very important in marketing on social media.

Source: own compilation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been conducted in the past decade on the importance of electronic marketing in tourism and hospitality (BAGGIO *et al.* 2013a). In a comprehensive study, N.L. CHAN & B.D. GUILLET (2011) investigated the marketing performance of 67 hotels in Hong Kong on 23 social media and the results showed that Hong Kong hotels suffer from a poor performance there. The authors suggest that an independent department for hotels should be created to formulate and implement a detailed plan for managing the social media. ALAMEDDINE (2013) argues that a key objective for companies when using social media should be interaction with consumers. J. MIGUÉNS, R. BAGGIO & C. COSTA (2008) analyzed consumer generated content (CGC) on hotels in Lisbon on TripAdvisor with results showing that 74% of generated content is about the hotels. In another study, E.E.K. KIM, A.S. MATTILA & S. BALOGLU (2011) attempted to show how the use of images and video clips on a website could have positive effects on marketing. They analyzed these from six dimensions: *public relations, beauty, customization, reliability, human virtual interaction* and *flexibility*. By examining electronic tourism, innovation and growth in South Korea they found that designing a website that includes the above capabilities can motivate users to shop online and increase their satisfaction from their purchase (KIM, CHUNG & LEE 2011). According to the findings of this study, the internet has revolutionized tourism information dissemination and sale. This study shows that Korean SMEs in tourism – by using innovative and well developed websites – can access international tourism markets more effectively. Table 2 shows the results of important research undertaken in this field of study.

From this research we can conclude that choosing social media is one of the most important decisions for a hotel in the field of electronic marketing.

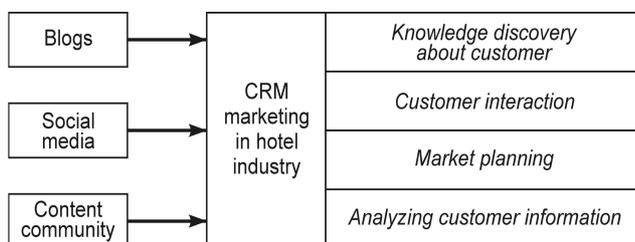


Fig. 1. Typology of investigated social networks (DESMOND 2013)

Based on the literature review, this study explores the relationships between four elements of CRM marketing of electronic tourism within three types of social networking sites (Social Media, Content

Community, Blogs). A set of four hypotheses are as follows:

- H₁: The use of social media by the hotels is positively related to knowledge discovery about customers.
- H₂: The use of media by the hotels is positively related to customer interaction.
- H₃: The use of media by the hotels is positively related to marketing planning.
- H₄: The use of media by the hotels is positively related to the analysis of customers' information.

3. METHODOLOGY

Nowadays, there are different experimental and academic methods for studying the efficiency of social media. For our research we had a special interest in the AIDA model (ROBERTS 2010) that focuses on the cognitive stages of individuals in the buying process of services since it can help to identify the effectiveness of social media in marketing for Iran's hotel industry. The AIDA model's structure describes a purchasing funnel where buyers go through each stage, and where social media support them in making the final purchase.

The special case of social media lies in the fact that in this environment there is no longer a simple relationship between the buyer and the company. Thus, when companies use social media, the different steps in this purchasing funnel, reflected in the AIDA model, are strongly influenced by the information added by other customers through social media and their communities.

The AIDA model includes four factors to be considered: *awareness, interest, desire* and *action* (LIN & HUANG 2006). Some other researchers have also added a fifth, *retention*, according to (HASSAN, NADZIM & SHIRATUDDIN 2015). Here we explain the five factors:

- *Awareness*: The moment when customers start to get to know the brand, product or service.
- *Interest*: The customer has been informed of the benefits of a product or service and, if he/she recognizes it is important, time will be devoted to research and finding more information.
- *Desire*: The customer has started to make a connection emotionally with the product/service and has a great desire to possess it.
- *Action*: In this stage the customer starts to buy the product or service.
- *Retention*: Successful companies try to maintain their customers for a long time (SINGAIAH & LASKAR 2015).

The authors have decided to use this model to analyze the impact of using blogs, social media, communities and sharing content on the electronic

marketing of Iran's hotels to determine the share of each new medium in the development of this kind of marketing.

To assess the hypotheses and test them by regression analysis, researchers combined quantitative method data collecting with a survey of marketing department members of the Parsian Hotels Corp in January 2016. The authors went to the marketers' offices in cities like Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan and Kish to collect the data by using questionnaires. Previously a literature research to design the framework for our study and to identify similar studies with data related to the variables of the questionnaire had been undertaken.

The questions were divided into four main parts and a Likert 5-point scale was used. The first part was 'Knowledge discovery about the customer' and we asked the study sample some questions such as "which social networking sites do you use more for the purpose of marketing?", "how helpful are these social networks?" etc. The second part was 'Customer interaction'. The questions in this part included "what is the effect of customer interaction through social media on their trust?", "does interaction with customers affect their satisfaction?" and so on. The third part of the questionnaire was about 'market planning' where marketers were asked about "the importance of social media for the market planning of Parsian Hotels". The last part was about whether marketers analyze the customer information which is provided on social networks or not.

Such expert opinion was used to determine the validity of the questionnaire. On the other hand, we used Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the reliability of the research. The result of the Cronbach test was 0.896 which means the questionnaire is reliable.

The population of this study includes all Parsian Hotels experts who work in the marketing department of the hotel. A sample size of 140 individuals was obtained with the Cochran formula. Through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test we determined the normality of the hypotheses and Pearson correlation and multivariate regressions have been used to determine the contribution of each of these social media to predict the development of electronic marketing on Parsian Hotel performance. The expected outcome is a general framework on the use of social media in marketing by the Iranian hotel sector.

4. RESULTS

In the analysis referring to the frequency of use of social media, the results (Table 3) showed that *Facebook* is the most popular website for Parsian Hotel's marketing, since only the 6% of respondents do not

use it, and more than 68% use it more than 10 hours. With very little difference *YouTube* is the second most popular media used by respondents. More than 66% of marketers use *YouTube* for more than 10 hours. *Personal blogs* are the least-used and about one third of marketers do not use them at all. More than 70% use *Business blogs* for 1 to 5 hours while 14% of them use them for more than 10 hours; only 9% do not use *Media blogs* while 34% use them for more than 10. According to the results for social media, *Facebook* is the most popular.

Table 3. Responses based on the use of social media

Type of media	Rate of usage (hours)	No.	Percentage	Cumulative %
Social media (Facebook)	Never	15	6.0	6.0
	1-5 h	22	8.8	14.8
	6-10 h	41	16.4	31.2
	+10 h	172	68.8	100.0
Content community (YouTube)	Never	28	11.2	11.2
	1-5 h	18	7.2	18.4
	6-10 h	37	14.8	33.2
	+10 h	167	66.8	100.0
Personal blogs	Never	33	13.2	13.2
	1-5 h	56	22.4	35.6
	6-10 h	87	34.8	70.4
	+10 h	74	29.6	100.0
Business Blogs	Never	27	10.8	10.8
	1-5 h	71	28.4	39.2
	6-10 h	116	46.4	85.6
	+10 h	36	14.4	100.0
Media blogs	Never	24	9.6	9.6
	1-5 h	42	16.8	26.4
	6-10 h	99	39.6	66.0
	+10 h	85	34.0	100.0

Source Figs 3-8: authors, based on the own researches.

Table 4. Testing significance of knowledge discovery about hotel customers

Knowledge discovery about the customer	R	Significance level	Result
Social media	0.244	0.000	Significant relationship
Content community	0.102	0.107	No relationship
Blogs	0.050	0.435	No relationship

Regarding the relationship between the different variables there is a significant relationship between *use of social media* and *discovery knowledge about customers* of Parsian hotels. The *use of social media* has a direct impact on *discovery of knowledge about customers*. This means that with the increasing use of social media, discovery of knowledge of the customer will increase as well.

On the other hand, as shown in Table 3, there is no significant relationship between the *use of content communities* and *discovery knowledge about customers*. Also, there is no significant relationship among *use of blogs* and *discovery knowledge about customers*.

According to Table 4, there is a significant relationship between *using the social media* in electronic marketing and *customer interaction*. Thus, *customer interaction* increases by *using social media*. Based on the significance level, there is a significant relationship between *using content communities* and *customer interaction* in the electronic marketing of Parsian Hotels. However there is also a significant relationship between *use of blogs* and *customer interaction* but it has only a medium impact on engagement with customers though *increased usage of blogs* by the hotels will also increase *interactions with customers*.

As is shown in Table 5, there is also a significant relationship between *use of social media, blogs and community content* on the one hand, and *market planning in the electronic marketing* of Parsian Hotels on the other. It means using these new tools has a direct and positive influence on the *hotel's market planning*. So with the increasing *use of these tools, market planning awareness* improves.

Table 5. Testing the significance of interaction with customers

Customer interaction	R	Significance level	Result
Social media	0.277	0.000	Significant relationship
Content community	0.000	0.714	No relationship
Blogs	0.512	0.000	Significant relationship

Table 6. Testing significance of market planning in electronic marketing

Market planning	R	Significance level	Result
Social media	0.153	0.015	Significant relationship
Content community	0.027	0.139	No relationship
Blogs	0.020	0.147	No relationship

As shown in Table 6, there is no significant relationship between *use of social media* and *customer data analysis* as a means to attract them. Though there is a significant relationship between *using community content* and *customer data analysis* to attract them. Marketers take advantage of the use of *content community websites* to analyze *customer information*. On the other hand, there is no significant relationship

between *use of blogs* and *analysis of customer data* to attract them to the hotels.

From the results, we can state that the second and third hypotheses have been validated but the first and fourth ones have not. That is:

- H₁: The use of social media by the hotels is **positively related** to knowledge discovery about customer.
- H₂: The use of media by the hotels is **positively related** to customer interaction.
- H₃: The use of media by the hotels is **not positively related** to marketing planning.
- H₄: The use of media by the hotels is **not positively related** to the analysis of customer's information.

Finally, in Table 7 we explain the dependent variable (electronic marketing) by using a simultaneous multiple regression equation. In multivariate regression, we first conducted a preliminary analysis to make sure that there is no deviation from the normality, linearity and equality of remain variances and for non-linear of independent variables. Regression assumptions can be used after checking their accuracy. In this study, all assumptions were correct.

Table 7. Testing significance of customer information analysis and their attraction by electronic marketing

Customer information analysis	R	Significance level	Result
Social media	0.387	0.055	No relationship
Content community	0.000	0.232	Significant relationship
Blogs	0.151	0.091	No relationship

Table 8. Correlation of variables in the equation with dependent variables for predicting hotel electronic marketing

Variable name	B	Beta	T	Significance level
Social media	1.065	0.409	6.297	0.000
Content community	1.052	0.436	6.600	0.000
Blogs	0.428	0.214	3.384	0.001

As can be seen in Table 8, the model's variables could explain 24.4% ($R^2 = 0.244$) of dependent variable variance in the sample and 23.5% ($R^2 = 0.235$) of the dependent variable variance in the statistical population. Due to the beta values, all variables are related to each other. The variables *use of social media, use of content communities* and *use of blogs* have a direct and positive relationship with the *dependent variables* (electronic marketing). Among the variables, *using social media* has been able to explain *most of the variances in electronic marketing*. So we can conclude

that *use of social media* is the most influential variable in Parsian Hotel *electronic marketing*. The high value of $F = 26/45$ and significance level of 0.000 confirmed the model with $P < 0.001$ confidence interval.

5. CONCLUSION

Social media refer to those websites and tools which have been developed and have grown in popularity in the environment created by modern media such as communication networks, the internet and smart phones (MIRALBELL 2015). In today's competitive era, this type of marketing can help Iranian companies as a competitive advantage in sales growth and increasing domestic and foreign market share (DIAZ-CHAO, MIRALBELL-IZARD, & TORRENT-SELLENS 2015). The results of this research are similar to the research of KIM *et al.* (2011) who studied images and video clips from six dimensions: public relations, beauty, customization, reliability, virtual human interaction and flexibility. They concluded that designing a website with these capabilities can increase a user's desire for online shopping and increase their post-purchase satisfaction. Sharing photos, videos, chat, album, tag and circle of friends are the features that attract audiences and hotel marketers can define a much better marketing plan by using those facilities and finally make a more qualified relationship with their customers. This reflects the vital role of new media in their ability to attract audiences.

Based on the results of the three social media channels which have been studied here, only 23.5% of the variance of Parsian Hotels' electronic marketing could be explained from the study sample. 76% of the variables are explained by other variables than those in this study. This indicates that the Iranian hotel sector has failed to fully utilize these opportunities. Traditional media do not act in the same way in this field and this is due to the different characteristics of marketing communication in the new media.

One of the most important reasons for this situation could be the filtering of social media in Iran. Social networking sites like *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* are blocked there and people use VPN to reach these websites. Although a huge number of Iranians are members of these websites, official companies such as hotels have limitations on their use because the government says using these websites is against the law.

Internet speed and price are other problems. According to Net Index (2015) Iran ranked 97 out of 114 countries with one of the lowest internet speeds in the world. It is also one of the most expensive. This is an important barrier for these companies to upload videos and also for their customers to watch them.

This study probably suffers from the fact that it has been conducted on a specific hotel group and one which includes many hotels. Therefore the results may not be extended to smaller groups.

Since the use of smartphones in Iran has one of the highest growth rates in the world, the impact of this new platform, along with mobile applications on its hotel industry can be subjects for future research. There is also a need to research lower star hotels in Iran on their approach to social media marketing.

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