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THE USE OF TWITTER IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING: EVIDENCE FROM HOTELS IN ASIA

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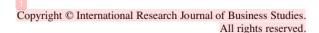
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore hotels' social media marketing practices in terms of how they manage online conversation as well as represent themselves using the Twitter platform. The API method was used to crawl and gather Twitter data from hotels in Asia. After that, content analysis was applied to 5438 'tweets' created by 50 official hotel Twitter accounts. The findings revealed that Twitter was used mostly for introducing and explaining information regarding the products and services of the hotels, while less likely to be used as a medium for handling complaints, creating sales promotions, and sharing light conversation. Managerial implication from this study towards filling the gap in exploring what kind of post that hotels published on their official Twitter accounts.



SARI PATI

Tujuan dari artikel ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi praktik pemasaran media sosial di hotel serta bagaimana hotel mengelola percakapan online serta mempresentasikan usaha mereka dengan menggunakan platform Twitter. Metode API digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data Twitter dari hotel-hotel di Asia. Setelah itu, analisis konten diterapkan pada 5438 cuitan/ tweet yang dibuat oleh 50 akun Twitter resmi hotel di Asia. Dari hasil studi terungkap bahwa Twitter digunakan sebagian besar untuk memperkenalkan dan menjelaskan informasi mengenai produk dan layanan yang diberikan oleh hotel, hanya sebagian kesil saja hotel yang menggunakannya sebagai media untuk menangani keluhan, membuat promosi penjualan, dan berbagi percakapan ringan. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi manajerial dalam mengeksplorasi jenis postingan yang dipublikasikan hotel di akun Twitter resmi mereka.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media presents an opportunity for businesses, by allowing them to develop direct relationships with consumers, handle customer service issues, capture innovative ideas, and engage more with customers (Jung et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2012). From the global perspective, Asia countries such as Saudi Arabia (32%) and India (31%) and other Asia

countries are among the top who have the highest annual growth of social media users (Chaffey, 2018). Due to the potential of Asia, this study focuses on the usage of social media by Asian's hotel on Twitter. Between all social media apps in Asia, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram are the most accessed social media apps (Statcounter, 2018). There are numerous studies on the usage of social media, especially Facebook and Twitter from the traveller's point of views such as by Atadil *et al.* (2010), Leung (2012), Leung and Bai (2013), Koch and Dikmen (2015), Leung, Bai and Stahura (2015) Leung and Tanford (2016) Alansari, Velikova and Jai (2018). However, studies that focus on social media usage in the hospitality industry from the company point of view have been rare.

In the highly competitive hotel industry, microblogging sites have an essential role in building brand image (Wen et al., 2016). Microblogging has a free format of messages and easy accessibility which has produced millions of contents that can be used for marketing studies (Pak & Paroubek, 2010). Twitter as a popular microblogging site has enabling companies to broadcast messages and creates communication with users, customers, and stakeholders (Sevin, 2013). This study presents a descriptive analysis of how Asia's hotels official Twitter accounts are used in hotel marketing with the emphasize of branding activities. This study focuses on what kind of content that hotel official account on Twitter post publicly. This paper aims to analyse the one-way communication side of official hotels Twitter accounts by analysing the content of the tweets. The findings can be used to plan communication content on Twitter for marketing activities by hotel companies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Twitter as Microblogging Sites for Marketing Activities

Among the various social media sites, Twitter is one of the most popular in terms of website traffic. It is a microblogging site founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey (NMIncite, 2012). Along with Facebook and company websites, Twitter is one of the most widely used channels people use to comment on and request information about companies' products and services (Nielsen, 2012). Twitter allows users to publish, reply, and forward posts (known as 'tweets') in the form of short sentences (Minazzi, 2015). Twitter is also considered a social sharing site, which means companies may use it to communicate directly with target audiences.

The informality of Twitter allows companies to be perceived as real people, rather than anonymous brands, products or organizations (Charlesworth, 2015). Twitter combines elements of social network sites and blogs, with some differences. In Twitter, user profiles are connected through networks. Users can follow other users and see their tweets, but do not need to reciprocate. Twitter accounts show tweets in reverse chronological order (Boyd et al., 2010). The format allows customers to convey messages instantly, meaning brands can not only be stored more permanently in customers' minds but also perceived as more transparent and accessible (Moseley, 2015).

2. Twitter Conversation

The main feature of Twitter is the aforementioned stream of tweets, posted by users (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Twitter's tweets can be used as a broadcast medium to send messages to target audiences with content such as news, events, products and services information, promotional information, and special offers. Due to the very short lengths of

the posts, Twitter users usually include attachments such as hyperlinks, videos, pictures, etc. to provide additional information on the topic at hand (Leung et al., 2015; Minazzi, 2015). With more than 50 million tweets per day worldwide, hashtags are an important means by which information on Twitter is organized. A hashtag is a tag, designated by the 'hash' symbol (#), and embedded in a post, that helps describe a tweet and aids searching. They help organize discussions on specific topics or events. By using hashtags, tweets can be sent to a wider audience worldwide (Small, 2011). Putting a hashtag in a tweet reportedly boosts retweets by 16% (Charlesworth, 2015). With the advantages that hashtags can provide, hotel management must be careful to use them effectively.

3. Marketing Activities on Social Media Pages

Hotel companies can publish various content on their Twitter accounts. The study by Yoo and Lee (2017) concluded that the most hotels published topics about corporate information or news (31.6%) and marketing-related messages (30.6%) with some embedded links on their social media sites. Marketing post itself can be more specific into a post related with sales promotion (Sevin, 2013), introducing product and services (Sevin, 2013; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014), or handling complaints related to products and services (Howison et al., 2014; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Sales promotion refers to a program that can influence customer's perception about cost of the product and it usually emerged in the form of incentives that provide extra motives for customers to buy the products/services (Christou, 2011). Sales promotion prizes include discounts, coupons, premiums, gifts or other tools used to attract customers' attention in the short term (Armstrong et al., 2016). In addition, offering a point reward in the hotel loyalty programs is also a popular sales promotion program that runs regularly by hotels (Christou, 2011). This study examines the extent of content that hotel's official Twitter account published online. While most of the content analysis studies on social media post by official hotels accounts were derived from Facebook (Yoo & Lee, 2017), this study focuses on the public posts from official hotel's account.

METHODS

Tweet Sample

This study used a list of Asia's countries to select the hotel's samples for the research. From the total 47 countries in all Asia, 50 active hotel's official Twitter accounts who used English as the language were found and they need to have at least one post per week. A sample of 5438 tweets was taken from the Twitter feeds. They were transferred from the public timelines of the hotels to Twitter API using private software. Twitter API is a method that can be used to access users' Twitter data. Twitter API allows researchers to gain publicly published data at no cost. To take the data from Twitter, the researcher needs to use an application and register it on Twitter to access the API. After the application request is granted by Twitter, the researcher will be able to crawl and collect data from Twitter (Kumar et al., 2013). This research used a privately-owned application to crawl the Twitter API and retrieve information from it. The types of data retrieved were tweets, retweets, replies and quotes published through users' public timelines. After the data were retrieved, they were exported to Microsoft Excel where they were cleaned and organized (Watkins & Lee, 2016). The data provide valuable insight into the prevalence of a variety of Twitter practices.

Coding Development

Following the social media content classification by Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014), this research divided content found on Twitter into five main criteria: (1) promotion, (2) introducing products or services, (3) giving advice related to life, (4) daily communication, (5) handling complaints. Promotion activities are related to giving incentives and rewards for customers to buy the products (Sevin, 2013). Introducing products or services by giving hints, details, and information such as prices, characteristics, and how to obtain the product. This kind of content aims to sell specific services or products to users (Sevin, 2013; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Giving advice, wisdom, or useful information related to life may include information about places, events, tips, and activities that can be done around a city, or other subjects (Sevin, 2013; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Making simple daily conversation with users includes messages such as "Good morning," "Have a good day," or asking people how they feel or what they plan to do over the weekend (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). By offering simple greetings to users, the company tries to invite two-way dialogue with customers and create active online interaction with them (Howison et al., 2014). Handling complaints related to products or services are included collecting feedback from customers (Howison et al., 2014; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). After the initial analysis of 100 tweets by coders, the categories 'giving useful information related to life' and 'making simple daily conversation' were hard to differentiate. Therefore, they were merged into a single category: 'conversation that mentions information not related to the hotel'.

Table 1. Coding Instrument

Table 1. Coding Ins	trument	
Category	Priority	Criteria
Creating a sales promotion	1	Main keywords: prize(s), discount(s), coupon(s), premium(s), gift(s), reward(s). Purpose of the tweet to reward potential or existing users for buying hotel products/services
Introducing products or services	2	Main keywords: room(s), room rate(s), wedding, restaurant, spa, reservation, online reservation, check-in, payment, facility(ies), location, map, meeting, packages, more information, contact, swimming Purpose of the tweet to introduce new or existing products/services at the hotel
Giving useful information related to life	3	Main keywords: place(s), activity(ies), tourist, tips, attraction Purpose of the tweet to share information with users Communication method one-way
Making simple daily conversation	4	Main keywords: Good morning, Good afternoon, Good evening, Greetings, Hello Purpose of the tweet to encourage users to reply
Handling complaints	n/a	Main keywords: complaint, issue(s), bad experience, suggestion(s), feedback Purpose of the tweet to answer complaint or obtain feedback from customer

Sources: adapted from Sevin (2013), Howison, Finger and Hauschka (2014), Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014), Armstrong, Kotler and Opresnik (2016)

Data Analysis

To address the first research question, a quantitative content analysis of Twitter textual data was used to categorize the tweets, retweets, replies, and quotes. Content analysis is a common technique utilized in e-commerce research (Merwe and Bekker, 2003). It allows data sets to be systematically analysed and categorized in an objective manner (Watkins & Lee, 2016), such that specified characteristics of the research objects can be identified and inferences drawn (Lai & W., 2015). In this research, the content analysis was used to categorize the tweets, retweets, replies, and quotes into five kinds of content.

The steps used were as follows: (1) All words in the sample tweets were sorted based on how many times they appeared in total. (2) Several relevant words were identified as keywords for each category. (3) The coder categorized the tweets based on the keywords. Each tweet was placed into one category only. The categorization was implemented in order of priority, with Category 1 (Promotions) having the priority, and so on. The only exception to this was the complaint and feedback category which was not included in the order of priorities due to its very distinct characteristic. (4) For dubious tweets (that could not be categorized using the keywords), the coder applied second criteria which are based on understanding the purpose of the tweet.

This research calculated the intercoder reliability when coders categorize each tweet. Intercoder reliability is a widely used term to express that independent coders evaluate message characteristics and reach the same conclusion (Lombard, 2005). Intercoder reliability is an indispensable criterion for research using content analysis (Freelon, 2010). This research employed two coders to categorize each tweet. The coders were trained jointly using 100 tweets made by one of the hotels in the sample so that they would gain a similar understanding of the categorization process. The average score for intercoder reliability in each category was 93.63%. This means that 6.37% of the Twitter conversations were coded differently by the two coders. Thus, we can assume that most Twitter conversations were coded similarly by the two coders in this research. In the coding analysis, most of the Twitter conversation could not be categorized simply by using keywords. It was mainly only the sales promotion conversations that could be coded directly in this way, using keywords such as 'discount'. For the rest of the conversation types, the coder typically needed to understand the meaning of the tweet to categorize it into one of the categories provided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Hotel characteristics

Table 2. Hotel Characteristics (N=50)

Sample Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Star Rating		
Five-star hotel	35	70%
Four-star hotel	12	24%
Three-star hotel	3	6%
Chain or Independent hotel brand		
Chain hotel	32	64%
Independent hotel	18	36%

From Table 2, most of the sample hotels came from the five-star category (70%) and most belonged to chains (64%). From the data sample, it appears that it was quite hard to crawl official Twitter accounts with a frequently updated page. In the first survey, this research found that most of the sample hotels with an active Twitter feed updated every week were four- or five-star hotels.

2. Twitter Contents

Table 3 Twitter Conversation

Category	Frequency	Percentage	
Conversation			
Tweet	4743	87.23%	
Retweet	482	8.86%	
Reply	173	3.18%	
Quote	40	0.73%	
Total	5438	100%	
Hashtags			
With hashtag	3062	56.31%	
Without hashtag	2376	43.69%	
Total	5438	100%	

From Table 3, it can be concluded that the format of conversation the hotel Twitter accounts used the most was the tweet (87.23%). As suggested by Marwick & Boyd (2011), tweeting is the feature of Twitter that is used the most by users. The users in this research are the hotels' official Twitter account pages. It is also interesting to note that the conversations using hashtags made up more than half of all conversations. As suggested by Charlesworth (2015), using hashtags is advantageous for users since the conversation will be sent to larger audiences and encourage more retweets by other users. In addition, a hashtag will make it easier, especially for travellers, to seek online information about accommodation.

Table 4. Embedded Content in Conversations

Content	Frequency	Percentage
Picture	3780	69.51%
Link to other sites	640	11.76%
Link to Facebook	617	11.34%
Link to Instagram	223	4.10%
Video	147	2.70%
Link to hotel website	111	2.04%
Link to YouTube	32	0.58%
GIF picture format	22	0.40%

From Table 4, it can be seen that almost all of the Twitter conversations in the sample had some embedded content attached, whether pictures (69.5%), videos (2.7%), or hyperlinks (ranging from 11.8% for links to any sites to 0.6% for links to YouTube accounts). As suggested by Leung et al. (2015) and Minazzi (2015), users tend to add attachments to their Twitter posts so that they can upload more information to their audiences.

The result also follows research by Yoo and Lee (2017) who found that multimedia presentations such as photo and video can foster more user attention into the content. Therefore, in this research, most tweets contained a multimedia attachment, either embedded in the tweets or acted as hyperlinks to other sites, especially video sites such as YouTube.

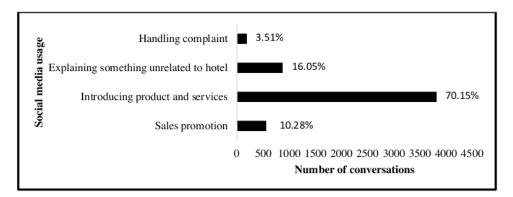


Figure 1. Hotel Twitter Usage

Figure 1 shows the frequency of tweets on different topics by hotels in Asia. Twitter was utilized mostly for introducing or explaining products, services, or events occurring in the hotels (70.15%). As suggested by Sevin (2013), it is important to inform audiences of hotel products and services in detail to attract potential customers. Product knowledge is important for customers during the evaluation process that goes on before buying a product (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). After that, Twitter was used mostly to provide useful information about life in general, not directly related to hotel activities (16.05%), and after that to disseminate sales information to the users (10.28%). For the hotel management, it is important to invite users to be more involved in the brand. By instigating conversation not directly related to the product or service, it is expected that online interaction with users may be boosted (Howison et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it is surprising to see that disseminating sales information came in only third across the conversation types. Hotel management should tweet more sales information, to attract customers to visit and purchase the hotel's products and services (Armstrong et al., 2016). Handling complaints came in last with 3.51%, which means Twitter is rarely used by users or travellers for directing complaints about product or services.

Figure 2 illustrates the number of conversations in the hotels' official Twitter accounts that were related to products and services. It can be seen that most hotels had tried to provide information regarding their food and beverages (F&B), venues (such as rooms, swimming pool, ballroom, etc.), and facilities provided at their hotels, with these categories making up 94.35% of these tweets. Informing customers about F&B, rooms, and facilities provided in the hotel is important since satisfaction with these things has been widely found to increase customer loyalty in the hospitality industry (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2003).

Besides writing about products, services, and facilities, hotels were also found to carry out conversations related to the awards that they had received (2.84%) and any staff members (2.32%) who had made extraordinary achievements, such as winning a 'great chef' award

or 'best employee of the year'. As suggested by Callan (1990), an award represents a recognition of the service quality provided by hoteliers. Awards have also proved to offer promotional value to customers, who believe they are a guarantee of quality offered by the hotel's management (Callan, 1989). As suggested by Bagdare (2016), employee performance has a positive impact on customer loyalty. Therefore, it is important to promote a hotel's employees' performance and positive attitude since they have direct contact with the customers.

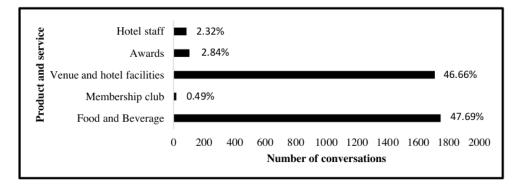


Figure 2. Product and Service

However, hotels only occasionally promoted their club memberships (0.49%), although this too would be a good opportunity for them to increase customer loyalty. Membership systems in hotel loyalty programs have, to some extent, been found to raise sales and purchase repetition by customers (Xie & Chen, 2014). Hotels should increase the number of tweets they make about club membership to promote their loyalty programs to their customers.

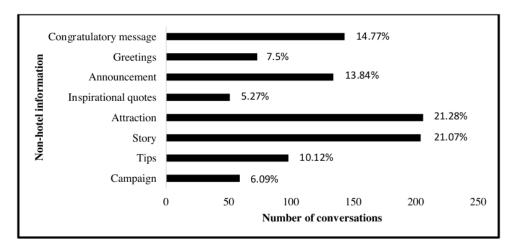


Figure 3. Twitter Used for Explaining Something Unrelated to Hotel

From Figure 3, it can be concluded that Twitter was also commonly used to share non-hotel-related information that might be useful to users. Information such as congratulatory messages (14.77%), greetings to users (7.5%), important announcements (13.84%),

inspirational quotes from famous people (9.4%), attractions in the city (21.28%), stories (21.07%), tips on life (10.12%), and campaigns (10.12%) were all commonly shared by hotels' Twitter accounts.

A congratulatory message is one of the tools that can be used to engage more deeply with audiences (Hays et al., 2013). Hotels sent congratulatory messages related to monthly celebrations such as the Chinese New Year in January, Valentine's day in February, Holi in March (for hotels in India), and Easter in April. As suggested by Howison, Finger, & Hauschka (2014), a greeting is an effort by a hotel to engage in two-way communication with its audience. Most of the greetings observed in the data came in the form of light questions or statements, such as:

'Have a lovely Friday!' and 'Bonjour Mabuhay! We hope everyone's having a great Monday morning...' (Swisshotel Istanbul, Turkey).

Twitter was also used by the hotels in the sample to make important announcements such as award votes, the dates of rainy seasons, their city's ranking, and many others. As suggested by Sevin (2013), an announcement is created to spread important information to an audience that may benefit from it. Most of the quotes tweeted by the hotels were associated with products or services they provided. For example:

'To create something exceptional, your mindset must be relentlessly focused on the smallest details' (Armani Hotel, Dubai, UEA).

As suggested by Hays, Page, & Buhalis (2013), Twitter is commonly used to spread information regarding attractions at tourism destinations. In the hotel context, hotels tweet about local attractions that can be visited by their guests. As for tweets about stories, they contained mostly history related to the hotel, the city, or an attraction in the surrounding area. For instance:

'Did you know that the #era from the 1930s to the 1950s is often called as the #goldenage of #jazz in India? #Jazz awaits you at #LunaNudo' (St. Regis Mumbai, India).

As suggested by Sevin (2013), tips are a common form of information dispersed using Twitter. Hotels create tips related to travel or other things related to their products and services, such as the following tweet by Cambodiana Hotel, Pnom Penh, Cambodia: '16 Things You Didn't Know About Jet Lag...'.

As for the campaign tweets, most of the hotels shared positive campaign messages to persuade people to do a positive attitude. For example, climate change support during the earth hours campaign for people to switch off lights and electricity on one specific date.

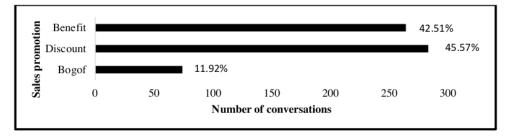


Figure 4. Twitter Used for Sales Promotion

From Figure 4, it can be seen that the promotional method that hotels used most often was giving discounts on products and services (45.57%), granting benefits to customers (42.51%), and bundling products strategies such as buy one get one free (BOGOF) (11.92%). As suggested by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre (2011), Twitter is commonly used to share discount information to potential customers. Sharing information related to product or service discounts might persuade customers to book the hotel if their travel dates match the discount period. As for benefits, the hotels mostly offered these in the form of gifts or upgraded facilities at the hotels. As suggested by Juhee (2011), benefits positively influence the participation of audiences on social media sites. In this case, hotels that offer benefits will likely gain more active participation from Twitter users. For the BOGOF category, as suggested by Garcia (2014), products and services that utilize BOGOF as a sales promotion method are often perceived as cheap. As most of the hotels in this study had four or five stars, this promotion type was the one least often found on Twitter. BOGOF might damage the image of a brand that focuses on delivering quality services and products.

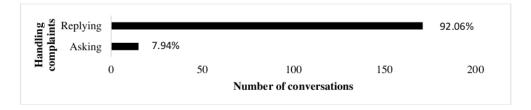


Figure 5 Twitter Used for Handling Customer Complaint

From figure 5, in terms of direct communication with customers, the hotels' Twitter pages mostly replied to complaints and comments from users (92.06%) while they rarely asked questions (7.94%), especially regarding complaints from the customers. Replying to question or complaint is very important since it will affect a company's reputation, especially in the hotel industry whose products are intangible (Dijkmans et al., 2015). Avoiding answering customers' questions, complaints, and feedback might negatively affect a hotel's reputation in the long term, as social media is an uncontrollable arena, where the company has little control over the information circulated.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

Hotels are expected to gain additional benefits from presenting themselves on social media, in this case Twitter (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Several benefits have been presented by the previous research on companies' social media presence, such as enhanced relationships with customers through better engagement (Sashi, 2012), increased sales (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014), and easier spreading of information to wider audiences (Ver Steeg & Galstyan, 2012). By putting information related to product and services and sales promotions on Twitter regularly, these hotels clearly do intend to reach more potential customers, especially those using Twitter daily. By tweeting information related to wedding packages or room rates, for example, it is expected that at least the followers of the hotels will receive the information.

Hotels also regularly spread their sales promotion contents through Twitter. In this research, it was common to see hotels provide information related to discounts or benefits to their followers. Hotels promote updated content such as a discount on dinner in the restaurant, or on room rates, that differs based on the season. For example, in February, the discount will be related to Valentine's day, while in April hotels provide discounts on chocolate products to celebrate Easter. In addition, this study found that hotels try to increase sales by socializing their sales promotion according to appropriate occasions months. These results are supported by Tsimonis & Dimitriadis (2014), who stated that hotels use social media to gain more sales on the internet.

The hotels were also found to engage in conversations not directly related to their products and services. Content such as that celebrating 'earth hours' by encouraging people to switch off all lights, congratulations messages on women's day, or simple greetings asking what users planned to do on the weekend, were all found on the Twitter pages. These kinds of conversations represent brand development efforts by the managers, aimed at engaging more with users by creating interactions, not only by sharing content related to products and services but other items that a user might find interesting. Hotels are making a good effort by creating content aimed at increasing engagement with users (Sashi, 2012), particularly since users might unfollow their page if they only received promotional content related to products and services.

It is interesting to note that F&B-related information accounts for 32.12% of the total conversation created on the Twitter pages. The information related to F&B concerned the hotels' restaurants, bars, and F&B products, and the tweets contained multiple items of information about these aspects. Promotions on F&B were also occasionally combined with the events celebrated in the hotels, especially with bar or restaurant promotions. Another example of combined promotion of F&B was related to events celebrated in the hotels. For instance, the promotion of chocolate made in the hotel was combined with information on the celebration of Valentine's day in the hotel. Revenue streams from F&B products and restaurants are important, especially during periods of low demand. Discounts on F&B may bring more local customers into the restaurants and they may also stay to sample the recreational facilities of the hotel (Kimes & Anderson, K, 2011)...

CONCLUSION

There are various types of Twitter conversation that can be engaged in by hotel managers, namely creating sales promotions, introducing products and services, creating conversations not related to products and services, and handling customer complaints. Taking samples from 50 hotel Twitter accounts across Asia, mostly from four- and five-star hotels, this research found that Twitter pages were used most often for introducing and explaining a hotel's products and services, with nearly 70% of conversations containing information on aspects such as room, food and beverages, pool facilities, awards attained by the hotel, or membership and loyalty programs. This finding confirms that most hotels ascribe to the view espoused by Tsimonis & Dimitriadis (2014), that product knowledge is important for the customer as the basis of the pre-purchase process of evaluating the hotel's products and services.

The rest of the conversation content on Twitter was related to handling complaints (7.29%), daily and light conversation not directly related to the hotel (12.12%), and sales promotions (10.28%). From this research, it is interesting to note that Twitter was rarely used for informing customers of sales promotions such as discounts, benefits, or other kinds of promotion that are often used in marketing. Sales promotion tweets accounted for only around 10% of the total conversation on the hotel Twitter accounts. This result confirms Garcia (2014)'s notions that products that are the subject of some promotional methods, such as buy one get one free, can be perceived as cheap.

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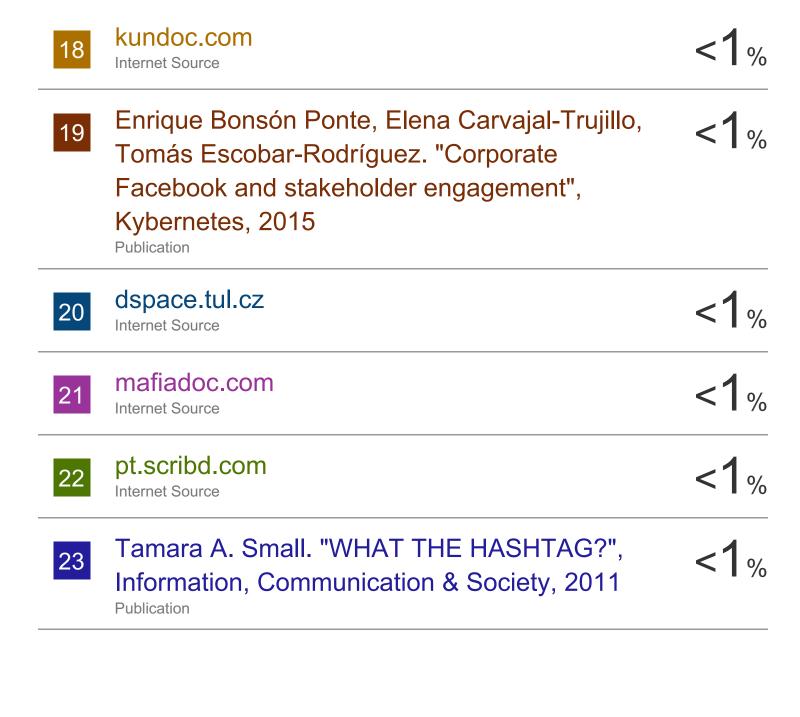
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