

**Tweets, trends, and travel:
How is social media changing communications
in the travel industry in Vancouver, British Columbia?**

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Abstract

In the past several years, businesses have enthusiastically adopted social media as a part of their corporate communications and marketing strategy to meet the needs of consumers. This study focuses on the tourism industry's online participation and the impact that this participation has had on the work of destination marketing offices, hotels, and local attractions in Vancouver, British Columbia. Interviews were conducted with twelve marketing and communications professionals who have experience managing social media platforms for organizations in the tourism sector. They shared their insights and experiences about using social media in a business context, evaluating the effectiveness of the platforms, engaging audiences in various ways, and predicting future trends. The study found that social media participation is critical for tourism businesses and is quickly becoming the primary way to connect with today's customers. On average, organizations oversee eight different channels, each with a slightly different community and culture. The options for which channels to maintain and manage are endless, but Facebook and Twitter are the leading platforms, with Instagram following closely behind. In the past few years, social media has proven to be an effective way to distribute content on a regular basis to travellers and visitors. The most valuable metric for these businesses is the level of engagement and, in order to retain the attention and interest of diverse audiences, social media professionals are experimenting with creative strategies and tactics. Looking forward, there is much room for growth as technology and customer preferences continue to evolve.

Keywords: Social media, web 2.0, social networking, tourism, travel, destination marketing, hotel, hospitality, theory of social presence, uses and gratification theory.

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I. Introduction

At the forefront of technology innovation, social media has substantially affected the tourism industry in the past few years (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The ubiquity and convenience of mobile devices are catalysts for this phenomenon, as information is quickly and constantly being exchanged amongst fellow travellers and travel service providers. These conversations that used to take place one-on-one, are now publicly broadcasted to anyone who wants to tune in or participate on a variety of social networks. As a result, businesses are meeting consumer needs and actively participating on platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Google+. This involves monitoring, measuring, and managing these channels on a daily basis, as well as understanding what kinds of content readers value and enjoy. These new ways in which consumers acquire information, share their experiences, review hotels, make recommendations, and leave comments online are worth an estimated \$10 billion a year (Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus & Cobanoglu, 2013).

This particular study examines the tourism industry in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). Over 8.3 million tourists stayed overnight during their visit to the city in 2012, making it one of the most popular destinations in Canada (Tourism Vancouver, 2012). Vancouver has been named the top city in Canada in *Travel + Leisure* magazine's 2014 World's Best Awards as well as the Top Destination in Canada in TripAdvisor's 2014 Travelers' Choice Awards. These prestigious recognitions make Vancouver's travel industry an interesting and dynamic study. Twelve travel professionals working in marketing and communications capacities were interviewed to gain a better understanding of how social media has affected tourism in this location.

A. Research questions

This study examines how social media has affected the tourism industry in Vancouver, BC, across three sectors: destination marketing offices, hotels, and local attractions. The research is organized into four main inquiries:

- How do organizations in the tourism industry use social media?
- Is social media effective in creating a sense of community for audiences across different platforms?
- What are the most important metrics for analyzing social media activity for tourism organizations?
- How do marketers think social media might affect the tourism industry in the future?

II. Theoretical Framework

The two guiding theories that are used to provide a framework for better understanding the research topic are the theory of social presence, and the uses and gratification theory. Both can be applied to study the motivations and patterns for human connection and the use of new media technologies.

A. Theory of social presence

The theory of social presence was originally developed by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976 to understand computer-mediated communication. It refers to “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). This theory claims that the more socializing that a technology supports, the more presence one would have while using that technology. For instance, video is a richer medium that results in higher social presence than audio. Media that have higher social presence are believed to be more warm and personal (Short et al., 1976).

There is a general understanding of what social presence means, however the definition is not agreed upon amongst researchers. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) defined it as how people “project themselves socially and emotionally as ‘real’ people” (p. 94), while Tu and McIsaac (2002) defined it as “the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction of being connected by computer-mediated communication” (p. 140). Lombard and Ditton (1997) expanded on the notion of presence and described six facets: (a) the richness of social interaction; (b) the visual realism of environments; (c) a sense of being immersed with the real world closed off and the medium transparent; (d)

participation as social actors rather than passive viewers; (e) geographical awareness and movement; and (f) the sense that the medium itself (the computer) is also a social actor.

The research about this theory began with telecommunications, but the proliferation of technology has added mobile communications, virtual environments, and social networking among other communication systems to the landscape. Because people who participate in social networking can carry out communication in a style that is similar to in-person communication, there is a sense of deeper engagement. For businesses, this means that customers will have the same expectations with social media communications as they do with face-to-face interactions— feedback should be instant, helpful, and professional. Meanwhile, organizations that know how to effectively maximize the usage of multi-media (images, audio, and video) will humanize the online experience, and reap the rewards of having engaged audiences.

B. Uses and gratification theory

Another popular theory used to understand communication is Blumler and Katz's (1974) uses and gratification theory. It focuses on the individual use and choice of media and explains why people choose one medium over another. The theory posits that media users take an active role in the communication process, are goal-oriented in their behaviour, and choose media that fulfills their needs. It credits the audience as being motivated and discerning in their use of media, and looks at how people use their chosen medium (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

Uses and gratification theory was originally developed to look at traditional media such as newspaper and television, but it has been applied to new media in recent years. New media offers interactivity, blurs the line between producers and consumers, and

gives the audience control over content (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Cheung and Lee (2009) expanded on the uses and gratification theory to explain why people participate in virtual communities. Their research outlined five key values of users: purposive value, self-discovery, interpersonal connectivity, social enhancement, and entertainment value. Purposive value refers to the value people get from accomplishing an informational or instrumental purpose. Self-discovery is a personal experience in which people get a deeper understanding of themselves through social interactions. Interpersonal connectivity considers the social benefits like social support, friendship, and intimacy. Social enhancement refers to acceptance and approval of the community as well as the enhancement of one's social status. Finally, entertainment value refers to the relaxation and enjoyment gained from interacting with others. These values can be drawn on to understand why people participate in online communities and they paint a picture of some of the motivations of today's media users.

The users and gratification theory is useful in coming to understand the mindset of travellers. They select and interact with social media based on their needs, and seek to gratify psychological motives that align with their values. There are travellers who use it purely for information gathering (e.g. using Twitter's search for places to stay in a certain city or using Instagram to find coffee shops), while others may enjoy the social interaction among the community (e.g. sharing travel tips in a Facebook community group). Different social media channels will appeal to different users, but they all offer varying degrees of purposive value, self-discovery, interpersonal connectivity, social enhancement, and entertainment value.

III. Literature Review

This literature review examines existing research that focuses on social media usage in the tourism industry. Social media has made an increasingly significant impact since its adoption and the new media landscape is continuously shifting. To study this evolution and understand the current context, the literature referenced in this section spans the previous five years, from 2008 – 2013. Across the research, key topics of inquiry and discussion include the growing popularity of social media, the tourism industry's online participation, knowledge sharing, community building, the establishment of trust, consumer decision-making processes, and generational differences of travellers. The literature search included the following keywords: social media, web 2.0, social networking, tourism, travel, destination marketing, hotel, and hospitality. The most highly relevant studies were published in *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *Computers in Human Behaviour*, *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, *Information Technology & Tourism*, and *Tourism Management*.

The literature search reveals that there have been studies that examine various aspects of tourism and the impact social media has had on the industry in recent history; however, there are few studies that investigate the Canadian context of this topic.

A. The growth of social media

The growth of social media in the past decade has been tremendous. Early social networking websites like LiveJournal (1999), Blogger (1999), and Friendster (2002) paved the way for competitors to enter the market. Platforms including LinkedIn (2003), Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005), Facebook (2006), and Twitter (2006) subsequently joined the landscape, each offering a different experience for their users. Social media

empowers people to write articles, circulate links, post photos, and share videos. By enabling participation and broadcasting, social media allows people to openly contribute to conversations and connect with existing communities or build new ones.

It may be useful to draw on some key concepts from social network analysis to understand the rapid growth and popularity of social media. Charles Kadushin (2012) wrote extensively about human networks in his book *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings*. From small groups to global systems, he asserts, “we have been networkers for millennia” (Kadushin, 2012, p. 3). It is human nature to connect. The Internet and social media platforms have simply aided this connection process between various nodes, which include people, organizations, and places. Network analysis suggests that nodes form connections as a result of homophily—people with like characteristics and influence, people who have an effect on one another (Kadushin, 2012). The digital revolution and the plethora of social media applications have allowed numerous conduits for networks to flourish. Across platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest, there are clusters of fans, followers, and subscribers that form around topics of interest.

Social networking has changed the way users participate and engage online. Today, individuals can be information hubs and media outlets—anything can be posted—and search engines can retrieve the online content at any time. This alters the traditional flow of information, as much of the content online is user-generated. From a business perspective, this transformation has brought about significant changes in communications at every level—business-to-business, business-to-customer, and customer-to-customer

(Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Specifically, it places more bargaining power into the hands of consumers.

The popularity of social media as a communications tool has been steadily increasing. Over 67% of Canadians on the Internet access sites including Facebook and Twitter (Statistics Canada, 2013a). Across the country, BC has the highest rate of household access to the Internet at 86% (Statistics Canada, 2013b). According to Kaplan and Haenlein in their 2010 opinion piece, social media literacy is prevalent in BC and anyone with a computer or mobile device and Internet connection can actively participate in the generation of content including posting photos, writing reviews, giving recommendations, and advocating for products and services. Evolution in communications and technology affects every industry, and tourism is no exception.

B. The tourism industry's participation with social media

There has been an increase in literature about the various uses of social media in the tourism industry over the past five years. In their literature review of social media use in tourism and hospitality, Leung, Law, van Hoof, and Buhalis (2013) found that searching, organizing, sharing, and annotating experiences have been widely adopted by the travel community. Social media can provide unprecedented up-to-date information to travel consumers in a variety of formats. These formats include but are not limited to blogging, microblogging, social bookmarking, writing reviews, commenting on forums, and posting photos and videos. The research articles that Leung et al. describe reveal that travellers who are constantly seeking information about flights, accommodations, attractions, restaurants, and other details need timely and accurate information.

According to Kaplan and Haelein (2010), social media allows organizations to engage in timely and direct consumer contact at lower cost and higher levels of efficiency than with traditional communication tools. In their 2008 online survey of 1,682 U.S. research panelists who had traveled for pleasure in the twelve months prior to the study, Yoo and Gretzel (2011) found that rich formats, including text, images, audio and video, provide travellers with comprehensive knowledge on destinations and travel products. Results of their research also reveal that beyond the communication that occurs between consumers and organizations, social media also allows travellers to access local inhabitants and other visitors beyond their immediate social circle.

At a North American travel conference in 2010, Google Travel reported that more than 84% of leisure travellers were using the Internet as their primary planning resource (Torres, 2010). Content from social media makes up more than one-tenth of search results; therefore it plays a paramount role during the information gathering stage (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Over the years, the travel planning process has been increasingly influenced by electronic word-of-mouth, which is perceived to be a highly credible source. As Caslo, Flavian, and Guinaliu (2011) discovered in their research, travellers consider word-of-mouth information to be trustworthy as there is often a lack of commercial self-interest. They focused on the Spanish speaking market, gathering 456 web surveys from popular online travel communities, and revealed that travelers prefer to visit these online communities for unbiased information. Tourism and hospitality products cannot be evaluated before they are consumed; therefore detailed, experiential information from others is influential and highly sought after.

Technology and new media has enabled easy sharing of experiential information. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier conducted a study in 2011 where they examined how shared videos online mediated tourist experiences. They used a purposive sampling process to select 120 YouTube clips pertaining to touristic activities in New York City, and then utilized a content analysis study to examine the video sequences, scenes, shots, and frames. They found that consumers would develop purchase intention if they perceived the outcome of consumption to be similar to past positive experiences. Travelling is high-priced and high-involvement so people tend to review many options in order to minimize the risk as much as possible (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008).

During their trip, many travellers continue to stay connected online. The World Travel Market Industry Report (2013) indicated that 43% of travellers use social media while they are on vacation, despite roaming charges. Nearly half of the travellers polled in the report claim that they would be more inclined to use their mobile devices to call, text, or use data if roaming charges were decreased while travelling abroad.

Conversations that take place on websites like Virtualtourist, TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Yelp can reveal valuable insight about consumer preferences. In a web 2.0 environment, user-generated content surrounding brands and search engine rankings are vital, and can be correlated with online sales. Businesses can now track actions on their websites and intentionally adjust marketing strategy and product offerings accordingly.

C. Knowledge sharing

Social media offers a diversity of platforms for travellers to share experiences, spread ideas, and influence behaviour. But how do we explain why people engage in this form of travel experience sharing?

Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) took a closer look at member participation within the online travel community in their research. They gathered data from members of a virtual travel community operated by a large American-based travel company with over 150,000 members. A survey was conducted whereby 322 survey responses were obtained. They concluded that participating and contributing knowledge to the online travel community has functional, social, psychological, and hedonic benefits. Functional benefits are enjoyed when people fulfill specific tasks online including the buying and selling of products and services or gathering relevant information on travel destinations. Social benefits are defined by the community and include “providing help and support, socializing informally, discussing and exchanging ideas, and forming relationships” (p. 711). At the root of these social activities is a sense of trust amongst the members. Positive psychological benefits of travel-experience sharing include “a sense of belonging, identity expression, and a sense of affiliation with other members in the community” (p. 712). There are also personal motivations of joining online travel communities, which are addressed by the hedonic benefits. Wang and Fesenmaier asserted, “consumers are pleasure seekers engaged in activities which elicit enjoyment, entertainment, amusement, and fun” (p. 712). These environments allow for exploration and role-playing where anything seems possible, and as a result, there is a positive correlation between knowledge sharing and feeling good.

Kang and Schuett (2013) also examined why travelers share their experiences on social media. They collected data online using a research firm's domestic leisure travel panel between July 10 and 20, 2009. Respondents must have taken at minimum of one trip in the past year for vacation, pleasure, or personal purposes within the United States that was more than 50 miles from home. The study used 543 responses from participants who were social media users. Their results showed that shared travel experiences on social media play a key role as a marketing information source. By quickly and conveniently engaging online, social media users experienced both identification (a sense of belonging) and internalization (behaviors are congruent with their own values). These determinants were shown to have a positive impact on travel-experience sharing on social media.

Over the years, the Internet is increasingly mediating tourism experiences because social media networks allow travellers to portray, reconstruct, and relive their trips (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Overall, the literature associates knowledge sharing—whether through text, photos or videos—as a positive experience for the travel community.

D. Building community

Community is a key theme in the research literature about social media and the travel industry. Qu and Lee (2011) investigated travel members' social identification through their online community experience and its positive behavioural outcomes. They gathered data from 352 respondents from members of online travel communities. According to their study, the engagement of the members is primarily based on either community-related behaviours like sharing travel knowledge and word-of-mouth, or

product-related behaviours like travel product purchases and advice. Participants feel a sense of belonging through active, voluntary participation, and the community thrives with the participants' psychological attachment to it.

In their survey-based research, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) noted that the community using social media networks has redefined the tourism industry by opening direct channels of communication between themselves, potential travelers, and travel organizations. In this environment, user-generated information and shared experiences are important, timely, and influential. Similar to Kang and Schuett's (2013) conclusions, also survey-based, their results identified that members become increasingly willing to spend more time sharing their thoughts with regular participation in travel communities. Over time, the community has influence over travelers' decision-making and buying behaviour.

Given that people were discussing their opinions and preferences, travel-related businesses quickly realized they could benefit from having a presence in the social arena as well, whether to build, contribute, or lead communities. In the era of social media, "customer engagement is critical to the mutual communication via social media" (Chan & Guillet, 2011). Facebook is the most popular network for the tourism industry, followed by Twitter. Both serve business needs by allowing fans and followers to get the latest news, ask questions, share photos, and provide feedback. There needs to be genuine interaction between consumers and organizations for a healthy community to exist, and social media provides many avenues to facilitate that.

E. Trust and credibility

More than a decade ago, Dellarocas (2003) examined how online feedback mechanisms have harnessed the two-way communication capabilities of the Internet to “engineer large-scale, word-of mouth networks” (p. 1,407). In his analysis of studies that evaluated feedback mechanisms on the evolving web, he identified the ability of technology to build trust and foster cooperation between businesses and consumers. Social media allows for these feedback mechanisms, and there are both possibilities and challenges faced by organizations.

Assessment of the credibility and trustworthiness of online content can be a challenge, especially when it is difficult to identify the message source. As Blackshaw and Nazzaro noted in a Nielsen BuzzMetric White Paper in 2006, with the mixture of facts, opinions, impressions, sentiments, experiences, and rumours on the Internet, differentiating and filtering the information can be challenge. While online word-of-mouth is owned and controlled by consumers, “it often carries far higher credibility and trust than traditional media” (p. 1). Most of the researchers cited in this review agree that user-generated information is influential—but one wonders what makes travellers trust it?

With intangible and experiential products like tourism, recommendations from other consumers are important to prospective buyers (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). To illustrate this, an online survey of 1,500 Tripadvisor users directed by Gretzel (2007) revealed that travel reviews highly affected trip-planning behaviour. It was noted that looking at consumers' comments on review sites was the most frequently used source of information. User-generated content was considered more trustworthy and credible than

information from the commercial provider, as it was perceived to be less biased (Kang & Schuett, 2013).

Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, and Fesenmaier (2010) conducted a study involving 1,170 individuals in the USA to learn about their perceptions and utilization of user-generated content for travel planning. They found that media generated by consumers is widespread, and trust depends on the website on which the content is posted. Overall, there is a strong sense of perceived expertise and trustworthiness of user-generated content creators. The content they offer appears to be an important way to reduce risk and uncertainty for other travellers.

Nusair et al. (2013) focused their research on Generation Y travellers and their commitment to online social networks. An online questionnaire was sent to a systematic random sample of 12,000 students at six American universities. A total of 513 respondents participated in the study. The results suggest that affective commitment is positively associated with loyalty, which indicates that when people are psychologically attached to a travel-related social media network, they are likely to maintain the relationship with the network and be loyal to the relationship. Trust is positively related to affective commitment, therefore “travel-related online social networks should utilize opportunities to build trust” to boost the commitment of Gen Y travellers (p. 19).

F. Decision-making phases of consumers

Many of the sources in this review of the literature referenced the decision-making process of travellers and the level of influence that social media has on consumer behaviour. Various different models have been used to help understand the stages that buyers experience before making purchases. In a study about American and Canadian

tourists' perspectives, Choi, Lehto, and O'Leary (2007) conducted a survey with 2,470 travellers with Internet access. They based their research on a decision-making model that has five stages from pre-trip to post-trip: needs recognition, information consumption, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. Their findings revealed different patterns across the various stages of travel planning. For example, search engines and airline sites were used frequently in the initial stage; core decisions such as destination, budget, and transportation are made at early stages; and map and weather sites are visited at the later stage of the information search.

Court, Elzinga, Mulder, and Vetvik (2009) developed a model based on a study of purchase decisions of nearly 20,000 consumers. They identified four stages: consider, evaluate, buy, and enjoy/advocate. Hudson and Thal (2013) applied this consumer decision model to tourism and social media engagement. They see social media playing a key role in the evaluation and advocacy stages. In some cases, social media can be vital at the buying stage—for instance, a timely Facebook deal could urge consumers to act quickly. The post-purchase timeframe is also a key window for organizations to encourage deeper brand connection as consumers interact with products and the new online touch points.

Many researchers who have conducted studies in this area agree that social media plays the most critical role in the research and phase (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens, 2009; Leung et al., 2013; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). More than 84% of leisure travelers use the Internet to plan their travels (Leung et al., 2013). As Xiang & Gretzel (2010) indicate in their research, search engines are drawing on social media content and linking travellers directly to it. This makes it challenging for

organizations as user-generated content could rank higher in search results than the organization's own marketing content.

G. Generational differences in travel consumption

People of all ages enjoy travelling, but their consumption habits vary across generations. In their research, Li, Li and Hudson (2013) applied generational theory to tourism consumer behaviour to understand the differences between people's values, beliefs, interests, and expectations every 20 – 25 years. They looked at the four categories: the Silent Generation (born prior to 1945), Baby Boomers (born from 1946 – 1964), Generation X (born from 1965 – 1980), and Generation Y (1981 – 1990), noting key differences as well as similarities across the four categories. Their study showed that Baby Boomers and Generation X consider online sources to be essential. The Silent Generation relied on online sources the least of the four groups, and defaulted to using professional advice to make travel plans. In general, the results showed that traditional, paid advertising had little influence across all generations. The rise in social media means, “customers are increasingly relying on other customers' recommendations and opinions” (p. 161).

College students are considered a major market for travel, and social media use is prevalent among this audience. Kim, Choi, and Kim (2013) focused on 212 college students in the United States who are considered Generation Ys and have taken a trip within the past 12 months to understand how they use social media when they need travel-related information. Their research revealed that there are four motivations that fuel participation on social media: self-expression, commenting, participating in a community forum, and information seeking. Organizations can attain loyalty and

retention from this group by encouraging user-generated content submissions. Kim, Choi, and Kim concluded that affective, emotion-based, commitment develops when consumers are engaged and believe that companies value their input on social media networks.

H. Literature review summary

Social networking has grown tremendously over the past decade, and the tourism industry has kept up with consumer demands to have a presence in the online environment. It has changed the way people interact, make decisions, and share opinions around trip planning.

Overall, the research projects in the area of travel, tourism, and social media use online surveys as the primary method of data gathering. The corpus of research projects in this area can be organized into consumer-centric and organization-centric studies. From the consumer perspective, common themes in the research include decision-making throughout the travel process, experience sharing, social media usage, and online community participation. From the service provider viewpoint, common themes include managing social media networks, consumer usage habits, promotional strategies, and establishing trust. Examining the research through both lenses offers insight into the importance of social media in a competitive market.

The literature reveals a number of common conclusions. Recent industry reports acknowledge that social media usage in the tourism context is increasing worldwide, and active participation is prevalent with travellers and businesses (Google Travel, 2010; World Travel Market Industry Report, 2013). It is becoming critical for organizations to not only have a presence on social media platforms, but also to interact regularly, respond

in a timely manner, and provide valuable, engaging content. The diversity of ways knowledge is being shared is ever increasing – from forums, blogs, and review websites to tweets, posts, and video clips. Organizations must strive to understand how to effectively monitor and manage what travellers are saying about the products and services they provide. Organizations must recognize what kinds of information are sought after at particular points in time. Researchers agree that user-generated content plays the most significant role during the research and information gathering stage. In addition, establishing trust through social media interactions between consumers and tourism providers is vital (Caslo et al., 2011; Nusair et al., 2003). Finally, trust is the basis for word-of-mouth recommendations, community building, and brand loyalty.

While there is some existing research in the field of tourism and social media, it is a landscape that is ever-changing and new research is always needed. One of the weaknesses identified is the lack of Canadian context, as much of the research has been conducted in the United States. Also, there are few studies that use a qualitative approach to gather feelings, impressions, and viewpoints from tourism organizations. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by using a qualitative method, semi-structured interviews, to explore the tourism industry in one of Canada's most popular travel destinations, Vancouver, BC.

IV. Methodology

For the purposes of this exploratory research, communications professionals from three different tourism sectors were selected to make up the sample population: destination marketing organizations, hotels, and local attractions. Destination marketing offices (such as convention and visitor bureaus, tourism boards, or tourism authorities) promote a town, city, province, or country to prospective visitors. They represent the destination, help create long-term travel strategies, and encourage economic development in that region. An example of a destination marketing office would be Tourism Vancouver. Those in the second study sector, hotels, provide paid accommodations on a short-term basis. There is a standard star rating system to classify hotels according to their quality (from one star to five stars). Examples include Four Seasons Hotel, Fairmont Hotel, and Holiday Inn. Local attractions, the third sector, are popular places of interest for tourists, often known for their cultural value, historical significance, natural beauty, or amusement. Examples include a well-known museum, gallery, or park. By including these three sectors in the study, there was a wealth of credible data for an in-depth discussion on this research topic.

A. Research design

The methodology used to gather data was in-person, semi-structured interviews. Taking a qualitative approach allowed participants to provide in-depth responses to the interview questions. The interview schedule consisted of twelve predetermined questions, which were a mix of open- and closed-ended questions (Appendix C). The average length of each interview session was 40 minutes (the shortest was 25 minutes and the longest was 65 minutes). The interviews were conducted in a personal and casual manner to

establish a collegial, trustworthy relationship. This technique allowed participants to feel comfortable discussing their perspective and insights about their work. With a semi-structured approach, participants were welcome to take as long as they liked to answer each question, ask for clarification at any point, and expand on areas they felt were relevant to the research topic.

To obtain information regarding the range of practices and organizational goals, it was important to conduct a variety of interviews from across the industry. A wide range of perspectives makes overarching trends more apparent and helps compensate for any weaknesses. And because this research project was focused on discovery and exploration, it was felt that qualitative interviews could provide a rich understanding of how the adoption of social media has affected tourism in Vancouver over the past few years.

B. Purposive sampling

A purposive sampling method, also called a judgment sample, was used to select the most knowledgeable and appropriate people to interview. There were twelve interviewees across the three sectors of destination marketing organizations, hotels, and local attractions. Four participants per sector were interviewed to obtain sufficient information that might be indicative of that sector. The key qualifications to being selected as part of the sample were: (a) participants must be a communications and marketing professional; (b) they must manage or coordinate their organization's social media channels as a part of their role; and (c) their organization must be based in Vancouver.

Based on these qualifications, specific participants were targeted, as is appropriate in a purposive sample. Purposive sampling is an effective research method when the goal

is to gain a deeper understanding of a specific type of case, rather than to generalize to a larger population (Neuman, 1997). The selection process included researching which organizations were actively participating on social media, reaching out to communications or marketing personnel of those organizations on LinkedIn, Twitter, or email, and following up with an introductory letter via email if they demonstrated interest in participating (Appendix A). At times, both the key informant and snowball recruitment strategies were employed to establish contact with possible participants. The referrals and contacts that were provided by interviewees along the way were an effective method to connect with participants who fit the qualifications. When that occurred, the original information letter was forwarded to specific people on my behalf, and those interested in participating had the choice to respond.

The professional experience of the interviewees ranged from five to fifteen years in the fields of communications, marketing, public relations, web development, event planning, and business operations. Job titles of the interviewees included communications director, marketing and sales director, publicist, marketing manager, social media manager, social media producer, and community manager. They were all early adopters of social media and managed multiple accounts, personal as well as professional ones. They possessed a high level of comfort and competence with social media, online communities, and technology.

C. Data collection

The interviews were conducted in person and the audio was recorded on a digital voice-recording device to capture all the data. The interview schedule, which was followed consistently, included a standard introduction, the interview questions, and

concluding remarks about the project. The audio recordings were saved on a password-secured computer and transcribed in full. Any identifiable markers were deleted from the transcriptions to ensure anonymity, including references to the participant's name and workplace. The interviews were conducted over an eight-week period from March 28 to May 23, 2014.

D. Data analysis

After the twelve interviews were transcribed, the transcripts underwent a process of unitization and categorization in preparation for content analysis (Merrigan, Huston & Johnston, 2012). Key sentences and phrases were highlighted and organized into major themes that became apparent. From there, small units of text were grouped with similar claims and examined as a series (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). From this process, answers to the twelve interview questions were thematically organized into four major categories: (a) organizational use of social media, (b) effectiveness of social media, (c) audience engagement, and (d) future trends.

E. Reliability and validity

In this study, validity was maximized with rigorous feedback on the interview questions from the academic supervisor, and from a communications and marketing manager with over 15 years of experience in the tourism industry. The questions were refined through pilot interviews with three test subjects prior to official data collection. The interviews were conducted with consistency and neutrality to uphold trustworthiness and credibility of the study. The purposive sample population consisted of the maximum number possible, considering the time and resource constraints of the study. All participants had highly relevant, in-depth knowledge to contribute to the research topic.

With four participants in each of the three categories, there was built-in replication to increase sample reliability and validity. While these measures were taken, qualitative research involves interpretation and construction of a reality; so absolute reliability and validity cannot be assured.

G. Ethical considerations

The University of Alberta's Ethics Board approved this study. Confidentiality was emphasized before meeting the participants and again at the beginning of each interview. The process was communicated clearly in the information letter (Appendix B). Throughout the research process, procedures to protect individual's privacy were adhered to for audio transcriptions, file management, and any related discussions. The voluntary interviews were conducted respectfully without enforcing bias perspectives or asking leading questions. Participants had the freedom to answer each question the way they liked, skip questions, and ask for clarification at any time.

V. Findings

Background information about the participants provides context to the results, so a brief description of their position, experience, and social media audience size as of June 1, 2014 is given below. The sectors are organized in the following way:

- Respondents #1 – #4: Destination marketing organizations
- Respondents #5 – #8: Hotels
- Respondents #9 – #12: Tourist attractions

Respondent #1 has five years of experience in the tourism industry, and has been the social media producer at a locally based destination marketing office for the past two years. The respondent's team has three people overseeing social media across a broad geographic region. The number of people connected to the organization's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, Flickr, and Google+ accounts exceeds 601,000.

Respondent #2 has three years of experience working in destination marketing and is currently one of two employees who manage the social media channels in the organization. The number of people connected to the organization's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, and Pinterest accounts exceeds 217,500.

Respondent #3 has worked in tourism for over ten years and is solely responsible for all of the digital communications and social media for a destination marketing office. The number of people connected to the organization's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, Flickr, and Google+ accounts exceeds 122,700.

Respondent #4 has ten years of general experience in the tourism industry, with the most recent four years dedicated to a destination marketing agency. This respondent's

role as online community manager involves generating content and engagement for cities and towns. While the agency manages a variety of social media channels for their clients, the organization itself has 11,659 followers across Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Respondent #5 has five years of experience and is a social media manager for the Vancouver property of a five-star luxury global hotel chain. This respondent collaborates with an external contractor for digital strategies, but is the one to implement those strategies on a day-to-day basis. Across the organization's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Google+ accounts, they have amassed over 17,700 followers.

Respondent #6 has thirteen years of hotel experience in various roles, and is currently the marketing and public relations manager of a well-known four-star Vancouver hotel. The total number of followers of this hotel's social media accounts amounts to nearly 17,000 across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and YouTube.

Respondent #7 has four years of experience and is a public relations manager for the Vancouver property of a five-star luxury global hotel chain. This respondent oversees the social media activities, but the general manager, chef, concierge, and events coordinator all contribute content as well. At the time the interviews were conducted, the organization had over 15,300 followers across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Google+.

Respondent #8 is an independent contractor with eight years of media relations experience in the tourism industry. This respondent has an ongoing client who requires public relations and social media support—a local three-star boutique hotel in Vancouver.

The hotel has just over 2,200 people connected to their Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Google+ accounts.

Respondent #9 is an experienced communications professional with five years of history at a popular local attraction. As the communications director of a small team, this respondent provides leadership for strategic planning, media relations, education, and digital initiatives. The organization's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Google+, YouTube, Flickr, and LinkedIn accounts have over 44,600 followers collectively.

Respondent #10 has twenty years of experience working at this particular local attraction, in roles such as front-of-house management, business development, sales, and marketing (including overseeing social media). Their combined audience across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and LinkedIn accounts is over 28,600.

Respondent #11 has thirteen years of experience in communications, marketing, and publishing. For the past five months, he has been covering for an employee on maternity leave from a local attraction. As the marketing officer, this respondent is in charge of maintaining the organization's social media feeds. There is a collective audience of over 22,400 across the organization's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, and LinkedIn accounts.

Respondent #12 has spent the past five years working as the communications manager at a landmark Vancouver facility that attracts many visitors every year. A team of three people oversees the communications activities. The organization's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn accounts have attracted 14,700 followers.

A. Organizational use of social media

Participant responses to questions 2, 3, 4, 9, and 10 fell within one theme that investigated the organizational use of social media. The questions examined their approach to social media and the impact of social media within the organization.

Question 2: Which social media networks does your organization use?

The three most popular networks that all twelve of the organizations utilize are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These networks have the strongest participation and the largest audiences. The data reveals inconsistent usage of other social media networks. Referring only to business-category accounts, not personal, seven of the organizations have blogs, seven have YouTube, seven have Flickr, six have Pinterest, and six have LinkedIn accounts. In addition, seven of the organizations have a Google+ account, but of that seven, five commented that it was not actively managed or monitored. Three organizations mentioned Foursquare as there is an online presence for some companies, but the content is user-generated (i.e., check-ins, photos, tips, etc., are all posted by the community), so this source is not discussed further within the study.

There are trends within each of the three sectors to note. The destination marketing organizations have the largest social media network audiences. They manage an average of nine networks, a larger number than the hotels (five), and the tourist attractions (eight). All participants in this category emphasized the importance of using compelling imagery and film for their social media posts, regardless of whether their scope was municipal, provincial, or national. As a result, image-oriented networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are highly valued. Although Twitter is text-

oriented, it is still a strong network for these organizations as well, allowing them to feature specific information about the places they are marketing.

Of the four hotels, three of them are part of global chains, and one is an independent boutique hotel. The Vancouver properties work with internationally based corporate offices to keep their branding and messaging consistent across social media networks, while the boutique hotel is managed independently. Two trends stood out in this sector. First, the hotel respondents are not as diverse in their usage of social media networks as destination marketing offices or tourist attractions. They manage an average of five networks, versus eight for the more active organizations. Second, the hotel respondents were the only ones who mentioned following user review websites such as Tripadvisor (www.tripadvisor.ca), Yelp (www.yelp.ca), Foodspotting (www.foodspotting.com), and Urbanspoon (www.urbanspoon.com) in the suite of social media networks they monitor.

The tourist attractions are very active on social media, averaging eight social media networks. Their strongest channels, Facebook and Twitter, have between 6,500 and 20,200 followers per account. Different from the hotels, all four of the tourist attractions have an active YouTube account that is populated with 45 – 199 videos per channel.

Question 3: How are they [social media networks] used?

A common theme that emerged from the answers to this question was the emphasis that there are different audiences participating in each channel. Eight of the twelve respondents noted that the various channels have distinctly different experiences for the end user and that each message required crafting some level of customization to

fit the medium before posting online. Facebook has many different types of media (text, images, and video, with a plethora of ads) so a strategy mentioned by three respondents was to target the posts by demographics or psychographics to get the best response. No matter the platform, the overarching goal is to “create good content... and then put that in front of as many qualified eyeballs as possible,” said respondent #3. Other informative comments on this topic were:

Instagram is just for photos and it is almost 100% user generated content [for us]. That’s how we launched that channel—to repost photos from people using our hashtag. Facebook and Twitter is more of a mix with 50% user generated content. (Respondent #2)

With Facebook, we can target specific people. For example, we can create an ad that targets craft beer lovers who live in [specific] cities, between 20 – 50 years old, and send them to our website. That’s the main reason many destination marketing offices use it. Twitter is customer service focused and extremely valuable as a listening and monitoring tool. In my experience with Instagram, people are looking for landscapes, even more so than food. Landscapes resonate with people. (Respondent #4)

Question 4: Which ones [social media networks] would you say are used most extensively?

Across all twelve respondents, the most popular and effective networks are Facebook and Twitter. Instagram is ranked as the third most popular network overall with its rapid growth in recent years. One respondent highlighted these three as “the most real time” channels. Many respondents discussed social media accounts that they are consciously expanding networks like Google+ and Pinterest. The reasons for respondents’ most used networks are best explained by the following quotes:

Facebook is our big priority, because we are venturing into paid advertising. Once you get to a certain level, you plateau as a business. Facebook is always revising their algorithms so it’s important to stay on top of it. Twitter is much more organic [in its growth]. (Respondent #7)

We focus a lot on Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, but have started playing more with Pinterest and Instagram, which seem to be gaining traction in hospitality. Though Google+ has been slow to build engagement, it has great search engine optimization opportunities and I see it becoming a bigger contender in the near future. (Respondent #6)

Question 9: How important is social media to the organization's marketing and communications plan?

As might be expected considering their job responsibilities, there was complete consensus among all twelve respondents that social media plays a significant role in the organization's marketing and communications plan. Half of the respondents commented on how management of social media has been added to their growing list of other responsibilities over the years, while the other half are in fairly new positions where their sole focus is on social media, digital communications, and/or community engagement. Many tourism organizations are either public or not-for-profit; therefore, the organizations rely heavily on this avenue of free public relations in which they are not relying on news copy initiated by journalists in more traditional media, and in which they have more control regarding this information they contribute. The following quotes are typical of those made by respondents about the importance of social media:

You can't have a good discussion these days without an element of social media included. You have to think about how to leverage it in your platforms. From the get-go, we're getting things designed and formatted for social. It's a part of the dialogue in all our marketing meetings. (Respondent #7)

"Social media has an ever-increasing importance in our marketing and communications plan, but will always be mixed with a combination of traditional advertising and outreach efforts. That said, the main factors in deciding which tools to use to promote an exhibition or event varies depending on the demographic we think it appeals most to." (Respondent #11)

Question 10: Can you talk about some of the impacts of using social media on your organization that you see, either positive or negative?

The most common response to this question, mentioned by ten out of twelve respondents, was concern about the impact on time and resources. Overall, respondents seem to view social media as highly positive, with challenges (rather than negatives) that may arise with participation. The ever-changing technology landscape demands that communications and marketing professionals need to remain up-to-date with consumer trends and audience preferences, while ensuring that brand standards are maintained. Two respondents commented that there is pressure to be on every social media network, but also noted that having an account with no activity is not a good practice either. Overall, tourism is a cheerful topic of conversation, so “99% of [social media content] is positive” (Respondent #1). For the 1% that is negative, the open conversation allows for an opportunity to address it, and the key is to be prepared to do so. Organizations are cognizant of the fact that “there is a sense of entitlement for an immediate answer” when it comes to social media participation (Respondent 12). Some of the other challenges noted by respondents are included in the following comments:

Everyone has a voice. Brands are no longer about what they say you are, it’s what other people say you are. Social is a very transparent platform. (Respondent #4)

People feel free to say whatever they want with a bit of anonymity and others are very quick to respond to posts that may be inaccurate, irrational, biased, or poorly researched. It’s hard sometimes as an organization to respond to untrue or inflammatory comments without making the situation worse. It’s hard to gauge when to engage and when to let it go. (Respondent #6)

B. Effectiveness of social media

Interview questions 5, 6 and 11 investigated the effectiveness of social media for the organization. Included are probing questions about the return on investment and how these engagement efforts are measured.

Question 5: Can you tell me the impact that social media has had on creating a sense of community for your audiences?

This question generated an abundance of rich responses about social media and community, with one respondent actually characterizing social media as her organization's "community engagement tool". While all the organizations managed multiple social media networks, respondents mostly referenced Facebook and Twitter in their responses, the channels with the most followers and sophisticated tools to share event invitations, photos, videos, and more. Most respondents (ten out of twelve) felt a definite sense of audience community, but two commented that this community spirit was challenging to measure. People are passionate about the places they have lived and visited; therefore having them express and share that is sometimes as easy as a simple prompt. One respondent regularly asks questions like, "*if you could go anywhere tomorrow, where would you go?*", which will generate thousands of comments from passionate travellers.

Five respondents commented about photo sharing as a key success factor for engaging their communities. Other expressions of community engagement were evident to respondents when people answered questions posted by organizations, shared Facebook invitations, "liked" posts, or retweeted messages. As one respondent phrased it, "our goal [with social media] is to be woven into their lifestyle" while another said their goal was to "tell [people] stories that validate why we're here." Other comments very germane to the topic of community building were:

Twitter has really allowed our guests to reach out to us on a very personal level and to share their experiences with us. It allows for easy access to the hotel. I don't think travelers are interested in traditional marketing anymore... they want to hear from other travelers. They want to connect to the area in an authentic way

- and social media makes all of this possible. (Respondent #6)

First of all, I think in this day and age, if you [are a business] and you don't have a Facebook page or a Twitter handle or Instagram account... you seem like you don't care about feedback, and you don't care about what potential and current guests think. You're not giving them an avenue of communications that they want. So social media [helps us] demonstrate to people that we are part of our local community... that we have an insider's perspective. (Respondent #8)

Question 6: Can you tell me the impact that social media has had on influencing people's decision to visit Vancouver/stay at your hotel/visit your attraction?

Nine of twelve respondents responded to this question with some degree of uncertainty evidenced in comments such as, "I don't know, that's a hard question," "that's always the magical question," "that's the million dollar question," and, "how do you track that?" In contrast, the other three were certain that social media has indeed had an impact on customer behaviour. Brand awareness was a reoccurring goal for organizations—the goal is not about seeing results quickly, but "bringing people down the sales funnel" (Respondent #4).

Many respondents felt that quantifying a return on investment (ROI) was a challenge, noting the difficulties of pinpointing exactly which specific social media channel is responsible for bringing in certain revenues and numbers of tourists. However, they did note that some evidence could be inferred from comments, feedback, visits, bookings, and event ticket sales. One local attraction used conversational tweets for an advertising campaign around *Twitter-monials* that captured a lot of attention. Further observations on this issue are:

We get a lot of comments along the lines of, *I want to go here and where should I stay?* And people tag their friends in the posts a lot. There's evidence of people moving towards that active consideration part of the cycle. We're not so much

about trying to close the sale as really keeping this destination top of mind. (Respondent #2)

That's not just a question we want to answer – every industry and business wonders about ROI from social media. We know that if you keep putting a message in front of people, it will be top of mind to them and at some point, they will react to that message. Social media, like videos and commercials, keeps the destination top of mind for people. There's no doubt in my mind that it has an impact. (Respondent #3)

Question 11: What measurements are valuable to your organization? What tools do you use to measure social media impact?

There were a variety of responses to this question, with much overlap between the organizations. Everyone valued social media analytics and measured their initiatives through these analytics on a regular basis, noting key performance indicators. For example:

Analytics are a big part of my role in and my life. I look at them every single day. I compare them to the same day last year. I watch as I publish articles and I monitor them hour-by-hour to see the spikes. For the entire organization, anything that anyone does gets tracked. Regular reporting is constant. (Respondent #3)

Respondents reported that they tracked various elements including number of followers, comments, page likes, replies, mentions, and sentiments. Click-throughs (the act of someone clicking on a hyperlink) were identified as an important measurement of success as was conversion (the act of converting visitors into paying customers), although the latter was noted as difficult to calculate. Respondent #9 noted that after reviewing the analytics for years, she has identified the most highly effective times to schedule tweets for maximizing readership (7:30 am – 9:30 am, 1:00 pm – 3:00 pm, and 9:30 pm – 11:00 pm). Another respondent described measurement this way:

Followers, circles, likes, comments, [and] shares are all tracked. From the digital point of view, we [try to] understand how many unique visitors are coming to the

website. When we're working with publications and bloggers, we want to know how many unique visitors they have and how many impressions they generate. We just try to understand where our guests go most, how long are they there for, if they plan on having dinner on site, etc. (Respondent #15)

Several respondents noted that the number of followers was not as important as the level of engagement. Engagement demonstrates awareness, which “amplifies the message” and “builds genuine interest.” For them, engagement is more valuable in the long-term than an immediate sale:

When we first started with social media, it was all about followers and likes. What we've all come to realize is that engagement is far more important. It's a lot harder to get people to interact with you – and that's more valuable than a simple follow or like. (Respondent #8)

The measurement tools that organizations used spanned a wide range. There were twelve different platforms mentioned in the responses. All participants used more than one tool to measure social media activity. The top two responses (mentioned by seven of twelve respondents) were Google Analytics (www.google.ca/analytics) for website traffic, and Hootsuite (www.hootsuite.com) for social media channels. The third most popular was Facebook's native analytics tool, Page Insights (five out of twelve). Simply Measured (www.simplymeasured.com) was used by two organizations to examine audience insights, campaign performances, and competitive analysis. Other tools that were mentioned once included: Shoutlet, an enterprise social relationship platform (www.shoutlet.com); Cision, a content marketing platform (www.cision.com); Tailwind, a Pinterest analytics tool (www.tailwindapp.com); Iconosquare, an Instagram analytics tool (www.iconosquare.com); Trustyou, an online reputation management tool for hotels, restaurants, and destinations; and Revinate, a hotel review management and guest survey solution (www.revinate.com).

C. Audience engagement

Questions 7 and 8 were themed around audience engagement. Interviewees discussed the ways in which their audience was encouraged to participate, and the extent to which social media channels are used around the globe.

Question 7: What have you done to enable your audience to share more user-generated content?

Respondents discussed various strategies and tactics that they have implemented to encourage audiences to share content on their social media channels. Many cited contests and photo sharing as ways to grow audiences and increase engagement. One respondent noted that using user-generated photos was much more effective and authentic than using professionally shot ones. Also noted by respondents was the fact that using hashtags helps aggregate posts, tweets, photos, and videos that relate to the same campaign or initiative.

Engaging audiences means organizations are asking them to take action to participate in some form. One respondent explained the hierarchy of participation simply: “getting people to click a button is easy; posting a comment is a little tougher, sharing a photo is even harder, and creating a video is way up there.” How successful engagement is could also depend on the culture of the community. A respondent who monitors global social media feeds commented that British Columbians tend to be more private, versus residents from a region like California. In general, the international contests offered by this respondent’s organization garner far more responses from the USA than from Canada.

Notably, the four destination marketing offices attracted the highest level of participation with the least amount of effort. Respondent #2 captured the sentiments of this group of respondents when she commented that travel and tourism is a perfect fit with social media. People are in a positive state of mind when they are travelling or thinking about their next destination, and often share a lot of content before, during, and after their trip. In contrast, hotels and attractions do not have the same message life span: people may post while they are physically there, but not before or after. Further information about encouraging more user-generated content is revealed in the following responses:

On Instagram, for example, we simply ask in the bio to tag their photos with a specific hashtag to give us permission to repost. For Facebook, we have Fan Photo Friday where we choose the best photo that has been submitted to the page and share it. If people are inspired by what they see, the page starts to manage itself and people submit content [to us]. (Respondent #4)

One thing we do is *Guest-a-grammer of the week*. We feature one Instagrammer on our account and they post a photo every day of the week. There's usually a specific theme like mountains, summertime, Vancouver Island beaches for example. People are reaching out to us now and asking to participate, so that's worked out really well and helped us build our audience. (Respondent #2)

Question 8: Do you have a strategy to reach international markets?

The marketing strategies of each organization were based on the target audiences they wanted to attract. The local Vancouver and Canadian markets were the primary focus for the smaller destination marketing offices (Respondents #2 and #3), the boutique hotel (Respondent #8), and three of the local attractions (Respondents #9, #11, and #12). With these organizations, marketing internationally was not a priority and there were no strategies to increase their reach. The other respondents included international audiences in their marketing strategies in various ways.

Respondent #1 had a larger scope compared to other destination marketing offices; therefore, his team had specific approaches to attracting visitors from different countries:

In each market, we do things that work for them. A lot of it is based on the demographics and the way they interact on social [media]. For example, Germans love animals, so we post a lot of wildlife images [to attract them to visit]. They are more private so selfies and dinner photos are not popular. India is a mature market - they use social media a lot, and they like to express themselves with a lot of emotion in their posts. We use a lot of exclamation marks when communicating with that market, whereas it would seem odd in our Canada, UK, or Australia markets. In China, we have a Weibo account, because that's the most popular social network there. (Respondent #1)

Respondents #5, #6, and #7 are part of global hotel chains in which international markets are important to the corporate office. They approach international marketing in a similar fashion—the Vancouver properties mainly focus on their own local audiences, and the corporate channels draw on the content as necessary:

I actively look at [our] other properties and I'll comment as the Vancouver representative. There are direct flights to Vancouver from Toronto, Maui, and LA, so we're really playful with those cities. We've really utilized Facebook ads that geotag our targets. In December, the data shows that our top room bookings are coming from within BC, Toronto, California, and Texas, so I might build a campaign around those destinations. (Respondent #5)

There are many initiatives on a corporate level that allow individual hotels to connect to a much larger global audience, through things like hashtags. We do invest in targeted display advertising across social media platforms as well. (Respondent #6)

One tourist attraction Respondent, #10, recently started experimenting with marketing to visitors from China. In the past two years, they have set up a Chinese website for special exhibitions and set up a Weibo account, both of which have proved to be successful.

D. Future trends

The final two questions, 12 and 13, posed questions about the future of social media and what the next three years may hold. Participants shared their thoughts about upcoming trends, and who they think is doing a remarkable job with social media efforts.

Question 12: In the next three years, how do you think social media will be used? What are the upcoming trends?

The responses to this question were lengthy and detailed with a diversity of perspectives about what the future may hold. Many felt that social media integration with everyday life will continue to increase and intensify over the next three years. With regard to overall communications and marketing, some respondents felt that spending funds on an entirely print-based media campaign was becoming more difficult to justify, and that an integrated strategy involving digital and social media was now essential:

Social is going to be more and more a part of our lives. Technology is the key to everything. Everything we do now is mobile first—email, social, texting, etc. Social apps will evolve. They will have to be really easy to use, really responsive, and really intuitive. I think reading and writing is going to deteriorate because people love sound bites. People want sound bites. (Respondent #5)

Two respondents predict that video will be in high demand moving forward, despite the high cost of production and the time it takes to do it well. They explained further that this medium has the best potential to tell impactful stories. Respondent #12 commented that today's audience "wants to see the product, not just read reviews about it."

Five respondents noted the growing popularity of Instagram, and three speculated that Twitter will be a customer service tool for businesses. Respondent #3 felt strongly

that Twitter will be more intertwined with news and television in particular, acting as a “second stream” for watching broadcasts and shows.

While Facebook is currently the strongest network across the organizations, three respondents commented that it might decline over the next few years. But they tempered this prediction with the view that while younger generations may distance themselves from it, older audiences will still use it to connect with people and organizations. Marketers should continue to participate on Facebook as the older audiences have more buying power. This respondent best expressed the general views about the future of social media:

There is a huge shift in the travel industry overall. People are planning, experiencing, and reviewing their trips after the fact in very different ways than before. It's up to the companies to catch up with that. People are sharing things all the time, at every step of the travel process... from first thinking, to *I'm there*, to *I'm back*, to *Throw Back Thursday* posts of *I was there last year*. [There is sharing] again, and again, and again. We're trying to figure out how to get involved in the process, how to meet the consumer there rather than standing somewhere yelling at them to read a travel brochure. I think you'll see a lot of organizations moving resources and shifting their priorities towards social and online. (Respondent #2)

Question 13. Where or who do you look to stay ahead of the [social media] curve?

The responses to this question included a mix of business accounts, special interest blogs, and individual accounts. Within the responses, Canadian Tourism Commission was mentioned by six respondents as an organization that was doing a phenomenal job. According to the respondents, the Commission hosts ‘influencer tours’ regularly, where they invite popular social media personalities to take trips or attend events. The collective audience of these influencers is often wider than that of traditional

media outlets, and the content these media personalities produce is a reflection of their authentic experience.

Three respondents mentioned Tourism Australia as a high achiever. Their Facebook account alone has garnered 5.8 million likes, and their audience engagement is high. As well, their creative campaigns have attracted a lot of attention.

Other organizations cited as staying ahead of the social media curve included Tourism Alberta, Tourism New Zealand, WestJet, Hilton, Mercedes-Benz, Burberry, Hershel, Skittles, McDonald's, Cereal Magazine, and Mashable.

VI. Discussion

The results from this study build on the repository of knowledge from the literature review, adding a specific focus on the Vancouver context. The interviewees have provided their insights into the habits, perspectives, and trends that pertain to the tourism industry in this location. Overall, the twelve organizations that employed the respondents who participated in the study are utilizing social media in different ways to converse with consumers on multiple platforms. This active engagement offers depth and richness to the study, and allows for a broad discussion on the research topic.

A. Social media is integral for tourism

While social media participation is not vital across every industry, it is highly valued, perhaps vital, to the tourism industry in Vancouver. Respondents from destination marketing offices, hotels, and local attractions unanimously agreed that social media has become a critical part of their organization's communications and marketing plan and increasingly is being integrated into strategic decisions. Social media is now an effective mainstream communications avenue that needs to be closely monitored and managed, and much like traditional channels, the content needs to be consistent with the corporate brand. Several respondents noted that the array of social media platforms should be viewed as distinctly separate channels that require different approaches. The audiences differ across channels so messages require customization to fit each culture and community.

The tourism professionals in this study are convinced that travel and experience sharing now go hand-in-hand. Travel is generally a positive experience and consumers enjoy sharing those moments in which they can reflect themselves in a positive light. The

results of this study echo the findings of researchers Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) as well as Kang and Schuett (2013), who connected social media participation with psychological and hedonic benefits.

B. The popularity of different platforms

This research clearly revealed that from an organizational standpoint, great emphasis is placed on Facebook and Twitter as the main platforms because these two have the largest audiences and the most active followers. Four respondents spoke about the power and potential of Facebook and its ability to target messages to specific audiences. In its advertising model, Facebook allows businesses to tailor their messages to audiences according to their geographic locations, demographics, and psychographics. This tailoring capability is valuable to the tourism sector as agencies can choose to communicate specifically to those who have indicated some level of interest in specific destinations, activities, or attractions. Respondents reported that more and more advertising funds have been reallocated from traditional media buys (newspapers, magazines, radio, etc.) to Facebook advertising (promoted posts, sponsored posts, etc.)

Five respondents alluded to the rising strength over the past two years of Instagram, a popular photo sharing application that was purchased by Facebook in 2012 for one billion dollars. The community of users on Instagram is over 200 million strong and there were more than 20 billion images shared as of early 2014 (Instagram today, 2014). This growing popularity of Instagram is consistent with evolving user preferences on social media. As Yoo and Gretzel (2011) found, compelling imagery is key for tourism, and Instagram simplifies posts to just that. For the travel industry in particular, respondents noted that inspiring images of landscapes, skylines, wildlife, food, and

cultural details capture attention and often result in some form of engagement (likes, comments, shares, etc.)

Video is also popular for the tourism sector—motion pictures can tell compelling stories of the destination, hotel, or attraction for perspective customers. Eight of the twelve respondents have YouTube channels and growing subscription numbers.

However, as Respondent #10 noted, professional quality video content is expensive and time consuming to produce. While YouTube channels are actively being used by tourism professionals in this study, this social media network is not utilized as frequently as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

C. An effective channel for content distribution

The results of this study reveal that social media plays a significant role in bringing travel content to the forefront of readers' attention. Seven respondents regularly post current news, upcoming events, inspiring imagery, video footage, and other relevant content on their blogs, while using social media channels to drive traffic to those blogs. The analytics that the respondents check reveal that use of social media is an effective strategy to increase website traffic and to disperse messages to current and prospective travellers. Proof of its effectiveness was cited in examples such as successfully breaking news on social media rather than through traditional press releases, and hosting sold-out events at a local attraction for which the only promotional vehicle was Facebook and Twitter. As Respondent #9 noted, having strong social media channels allows for more control over messaging and less reliance on journalists. This research revealed a strong sense of democratization through the use of social media, because anyone who has access

to a computer has the ability to produce and share content, a result also revealed by Quan-Haase and Young (2010).

Respondents in this study described a world in which information is not merely being transmitted between tourism organizations and consumers, but one in which there is a plethora of user-generated content being shared among travellers in the form of status updates, reviews, recommendations, and forum discussions. Confirming the findings of Gretzel (2007), these respondents believe that what people say about their experience is more valued than what organizations say about themselves. In this study, the hotel group in particular emphasized the importance of following user review websites (such as Tripadvisor, Yelp, and Foodspotting) in their routine monitoring of social media. Travellers have many options for accommodations and the hotel market is highly competitive; positive reviews are considered to be critical to the success of their business, a conclusion drawn previously in the research of Chan and Guillet (2011).

D. Community engagement is the most valuable measurement

All respondents commented on the importance of measuring social media activity and analyzing audience behaviour. While factors like the size of the audience on each platform is examined month-to-month (fans, followers, subscribers, etc.), the majority of respondents reported that the most important measurement for them is the level of engagement with their community. Analytics that pertain to engagement measure the number of interactions with posted content, such as people amplifying the message by sharing it; submitting comments, photos, and videos; and taking advantage of promotional deals by buying tickets or booking flights. These are all expressions of active

engagement and genuine interest that respondents highly valued. These metrics are also reassurances that there is a return on investment.

Some of the engagement strategies that respondents have found to be successful in motivating users to take action include offering contests, hashtagging tweets and photos, and showcasing user-generated content on organizational channels. These initiatives show the audience that their contributions and conversations matter to businesses. Echoing the research conclusions of Qu and Lee (2011), having audiences actively participate on social media networks and voluntarily sharing knowledge are key factors for building strong communities online.

Organizations are also doing more within the capabilities of particular social media platforms to increase engagement. The respondents from destination marketing offices and hotels discussed their message-targeting tactics to garner higher engagement levels. These tactics include understanding what customers want and providing that to them in a way that they enjoy. Respondent #1 detailed how different aspects of Vancouver attract various travellers around the world. For example, Australians and British travellers love mountain activities, while Germans love wildlife imagery. Knowing these preferences allows providers to tailor the content to these different markets.

E. Social media trends

As the technological landscape continues to shift, businesses are observing carefully and striving to stay in touch with what travellers want. One of the most significant changes that organizations are considering is for mobile to be the primary format for information, rather than the desktop format. As Respondents #5 and #7 noted

during the interview, social media participation and content consumption by travellers are primarily taking place on smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices. Organizations need to think about how the information they want to communicate (including promotions, travel tips, customer service, etc.) is going to be viewed by their customers. This consideration includes factors like load times for media files, compelling images, and succinct copy.

Overall, respondents said that Facebook and Twitter are the most effective way to communicate with their audiences, at this point in time. However, while social media participation per se does not come at a financial cost, there is a rising trend towards paying for targeted advertising (on Facebook in particular) to communicate customized messages to specific audience groups. This is expected to increase as the number of fans and followers grow, to ensure that the content being shared by businesses is relevant to the diverse audiences.

Another trend that emerged from the interview data is the keen interest in Instagram from the consumer and business perspective. The platform is incredibly visual and simple to use, which is fitting for today's generation of smartphone photographers who enjoy social networking. Respondent #2 noted that travellers are sharing images on Instagram at every stage of their travel experience—before, during, and after. Organizations represented in this study are finding that travel-related Instagram posts receive high engagement and positive comments.

While organizations continue to establish best practices with social media usage, many are curious about the potential and future of Google+. The majority of respondents have set up a Google+ account, but the activity on their streams is quite limited.

Organizations react to the demands of users—and audiences are currently not actively engaging in that space. It appears from these research results that the investment of time and energy to grow Google+ may come at a later point.

Aside from the popularity of particular accounts, organizations are experimenting with creative social media strategies to obtain more user-generated content, and to grow their presence online. Five of the twelve respondents admired the recent work of the Canadian Tourism Commission, who coordinates “influencer tours”. They strategically invite social media super users (those who have a strong following, popular blog, and/or are talented photographers) to take all-expense paid trips to specific destinations that they want to market. By hosting these tours, they build new partnerships, generate buzz about destinations, collect images from enthusiastic travellers, and organically grow their social media audiences. This approach generates more public relations attention than traditional advertising methods. Recognizing that not all organizations are able to execute this strategy, similar initiatives can be carried out on a smaller scale. For example, Respondent #9 is considering hosting local social media influencers and bloggers for a one-night event, which could include free entrance to the attraction and a discussion about future exhibitions and features.

F. Room for growth

The respondents who participated in the study unanimously reported that social media is highly important in the organization’s overarching communications and marketing plan. Moving forward, this translates to staffing increases to help manage the channels and budget reallocations to support activities. The respondents felt that there is much room for growth—from creating more marketing-oriented content for consumers,

to finding new ways to engage them through campaigns and promotions. There are four platforms that were mentioned (including Google+ and Pinterest) that respondents have not been actively focusing on, but can be further developed.

Many tourism organizations are recognizing that social media can be used as a source of strategic information collecting. In this study, the hotel sector respondents noted the potential to use social media to track annual patterns in room bookings, satisfaction of overnight stays, and customer feedback. In the future, it can be expected that organizations will take a closer look at how to integrate social media participation with provision of better travel products and services. Litvin et al. (2008) noted this same relationship in their research—monitoring electronic word-of-mouth communications offers valuable opportunities for enhancing visitor satisfaction through product improvement, understanding visitor experiences and expectations through the traveller's lens, solving problems to create better experiences, analyzing strategies from competitors, and monitoring the company's brand and reputation online.

Finally, this research revealed that growth in social media use will likely be spurred by greater expectations from consumers. Respondents noted that social media interactions (both positive and negative) take place throughout day and night, so there is a growing demand for immediate responses. The results of this study reveal the importance of organizations establishing clear expectations so trust can be built, and authentic engagement can take place in a transparent and timely way.

VII. Limitations

There are several limitations with this study. For the purposes of exploratory research, the population size was limited to twelve participants, selected on the basis of the researcher's best judgment. Because of this small sample size, the findings cannot be assumed to be representative of the sectors from which the interviewees were drawn. The small population revealed insights and perspectives from destination marketing offices, hotels, and local attractions, but the tourism sector extends far beyond these categories to include, for example, travel agencies, recreation, entertainment, transportation, food and beverage. In light of these limitations, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire tourism industry. Other sectors may have different realities when it comes to their usage of social media. A broader cross-section of sectors would enrich the study's findings and provide a more holistic perspective of the entire industry. Additionally, these findings cannot be used to generalize how social media is perceived or handled in other markets as they may differ in consumer behaviour and technology adoption.

It is important to note that technology is constantly changing, therefore the relevance and lifespan of research in this area is relatively short as users and audiences evolve social media preferences and usage patterns. This study, along with other technology-based research, investigates a snapshot in time: what is relevant today may be informative, but may not be relevant twelve months in the future.

VIII. Conclusions and Future Research

This study provides detailed insight into how social media has impacted the 2014 tourism industry in Vancouver. The research relies heavily on the rich and generous comments of the twelve interview respondents who describe so aptly their experiences, opinions, and concerns. These respondents have embraced social media and are keeping a close eye on the changing needs and values of travel consumers. With the growing popularity of social media and the volume of content being shared on these networks, organizations have to find innovative ways to engage their audiences and provide value, but not exploit fans and followers in the process.

The two theories discussed earlier in the paper shed light on the mindset of travellers, an aspect which organizations should note. According to the theory of social presence, customers connect with businesses on social media with the expectation of a humanizing and authentic interaction, much like they would face-to-face. The second theory, uses and gratification theory, is helpful to draw on to understand why customers are using social media—for example, some may be interested in the social value that participation brings, while others may be motivated by its entertainment value. Both theories would provide solid foundations for future social media research.

Since the purposive sample in this study is limited to three sectors, future research should explore other areas of tourism, including transportation, food and beverage, and guided tour experiences. Doing so would paint a more complete and nuanced picture of how social media has impacted the industry as a whole. In addition, further investigation into social media use by travel professionals located in other domestic destinations would be valuable to add depth and breadth to the Canadian context. Considering how quickly

social media and technology preferences change amongst users, future research should consider qualitative content analysis of industry reports and credible blogs to reveal best practices and trends, because these data sources are published much more frequently than academic journals and can provide signposts for the social media initiatives of travel organizations. Lastly, future research should include a repeat of this study in five or ten years, to capture another snapshot of this exciting and rapidly changing world of social media and travel.

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X. Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of initial contact

Dear [Name]:

My name is Sylvia Tuason [nee Tan] and I'm a graduate student in University of Alberta's Masters of Communications & Technology Program at the University of Alberta. I'm working on my final research project as a requirement to complete my graduate studies.

My research project looks at how social media is changing communications in the travel industry in Vancouver, British Columbia. It will look at how travel service providers in three sectors (tourism commissions, travel agents, and tourist attractions) are using social media networks including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram to connect with and engage audiences. It will also point out some of the positive and negative effects of its usage.

With your role at [company name], you would have a lot of valuable opinions and insights on this topic. Would you be willing to meet with me for 35-40 minutes for an interview in the next three weeks to talk about social media and the travel industry? If so, please contact me so I can send you more information about my research study and we can arrange an interview during a time convenient for you.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sylvia Tuason
Graduate Student
Masters of Communication and Technology, University of Alberta
604.762.2375
emailsylviatan@gmail.com

Appendix B: Information letter & Consent Form

Study Title

Tweets, trends, and travel:

Is social media changing communications in the travel industry in Vancouver, BC?

Research Investigator:

Sylvia Tuason [nee Tan]
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Faculty of Extension
100 West 49th Avenue
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Supervisor:

Dr. Ann Curry
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(780) 248-1110

Background

This research project is investigating how social media is changing communications in the travel industry. You are being invited to be part of this study because you are a knowledgeable professional in the field with direct and valuable experience. I got your contact information from [complete sentence]. The results of this study will be used to support my major project required to complete my MA in Communications & Technology at University of Alberta.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to obtain a better understanding of social media's impact on communication in the travel industry in Vancouver, British Columbia. It will look at how travel service providers in three sectors (tourism commissions, travel agents, and tourist attractions) are using social media networks including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram to connect with and engage audiences. It will also point out some of the positive and negative effects of its usage.

Study Procedures

For this study, I will be interviewing 12 travel industry professionals who work in three sectors: government, commercial agencies, and local attractions (four participants per category). You must work in communications and marketing roles within your organization, and manage or participate in the management of the company's social media channels. The interview will take approximately 35-40 minutes and our discussion will be taped and transcribed digitally so I can analyze the findings. The research paper will not contain your name or contact number. Once the paper has been submitted and approved, the digital files will be sent back to University of Alberta for safekeeping.

Benefits

You will not receive compensation for participating in this research, but I hope the information I gather from this study will help us understand more about how social media is being used across sectors in Vancouver. Social media is constantly evolving - this study will only give a pulse for online engagement for this moment in time, and provide some groundwork for further research. Once the study is complete, I will send an executive summary that you can share with your colleagues, plus an online link which will allow you to access the full report.

Risk

There may be risks to being in this study that are not known. If I learn anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, I will tell you right away.

Voluntary Participation

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable with during the interview. Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time. If you wish to withdraw after the interview, please notify me by email or phone by [date]. If that happens, I will discard the data and not use it in the research paper.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The final report will be made publicly available in University of Alberta library's online collection, but your name and contact information will be kept confidential and the report will contain no identifying information. All the digital files related to this paper will be stored on my password-protected hard drive for five years after the completion of the project, and a copy of the data collected will be sent to the University of Alberta in the Masters of Communication & Technology office for storage in a locked cabinet. After five years, the raw files will be deleted.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at 604.762.2375 or email.sylviatan@gmail.com. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

I'm a student at University of Alberta's Masters of Communications and Technology program. For my final research paper, I'm looking at how social media is being used in the travel industry to market Vancouver, British Columbia as a travel destination. The questions in this interview look at your professional experience managing your organization's social media channels. The interview is confidential and no one's name will be mentioned in the final report. Do you mind if I tape the interview for the analysis?

1. First off, let's establish a common understanding of what social media means. It refers to Internet and mobile technology based channels of communication in which people can post and share content. Applications include Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, Pinterest, and Flickr, and blogs. Does that sound okay?
2. Which social media tools does your organization use?
3. How are they used? (What information do you post where)
4. Which ones would you say are used most extensively?
5. Can you tell me the impact that social media has had on creating a sense of community for your audiences?
6. Can you tell me the impact that social media has had on influencing their decision to visit the city/hotel/attraction?
7. What have you done to enable your audience to share more user-generated content?
8. Do you have a strategy to reach international markets?
9. How important is social media to the company's marketing and communications plan?
10. Can you talk about some of the impacts of using social media on your organization that you see, either positive or negative?
11. What measurements are valuable to your organization? (Click-throughs, views, followers, etc.) What tools you use to measure social media impact?
12. In the next three years, how do you think social media will be used? What are the upcoming trends?
13. Where or who do you look to stay ahead of the curve?