

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ACCOMMODATION INDUSTRY: A CLUSTER ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In today's technologically driven and revolutionised era of digital communication, numerous people combine a complex collection of social media platforms and technology to connect them to the world and people around them. The online participation of consumers has forced companies to embrace social media marketing efforts. The continuous advancements in marketing mediums have a major influence on the success and growth of companies, particularly within the tourism and hospitality industry, as increasingly more travellers are using social media as a means of communicating and seeking information. The purpose of this research study was therefore to explore if users of social media as a promotional mix element could be clustered into different groups based on characteristics they possess. A web-based self-administered questionnaire was distributed to accommodation establishments located in the Western Cape province of South Africa and a total of 361 useable responses were received. A four-step cluster analysis was performed in order to identify similar groups of respondents in their use of social media as a promotional mix element. The findings presented four distinct users of social media in the accommodation industry based on six variables identified from the literature.

Keywords: Social Media, Marketing, Usage, Accommodation Establishments, Promotional Mix Elements, Cluster Analysis, South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's technology driven world, billions of people combine a multifaceted collection of social media platforms and technology to connect them to the world and several other people (Hansen, Shneiderman & Smith, 2010). The immense participation on social media platforms have a profound effect in the way in which people search for information and make buying decisions (Ernst & Young, 2011). The advent of social media and increasing use of social media, by individuals and companies, has led to profound and novel means of conducting business in all sectors and industries (Hatter, 2015). The way companies have done business has therefore changed considerably – social media has changed from being a platform to merely keep in touch with friends and family, to a place where consumers can learn more about companies, products, services and brands (Paquette, 2013).

The landscape of marketing has transformed substantially in the last era, as traditional marketing methods, such as print and broadcast media, has made way for a new wave of media platforms. These new media platforms, for instance social media, blogs, forums and videos, have an influence on the marketing performance of organisations as well as on the success of their business (Higuera, 2011; Stephen & Galak, 2010). As social media became an avenue where companies can extend their marketing campaign to a wider range of customers (Paquette, 2013), companies started incorporating social media platforms in their marketing strategies (Pradiptarini, 2011). In an effort to reach potential customers and reinforce current relationships with consumers,

companies were obligated to become accustomed to the new trends of social media (Perdue, 2010). Nowadays, companies are more focused on building online relationships and networks with potential and current customers (Mustonen, 2009).

This is no different for the accommodation or hospitality industry, for which social media represents a golden opportunity to constantly communicate with their customers and to forge long-term relationships (Withiam, nd). Minazzi (2015:69) pointed out that there are various studies identifying the profiles of social media users, mainly based on the behaviours and usage from the consumer's point of view. The main purpose of this research study was therefore to explore the use of social media as a promotional mix element, and if users could be clustered into different groups based on their characteristics from the establishment's point of view. The study endeavoured to obtain a better understanding of the types of users of social media in the accommodation industry and how these establishments could potentially implement social media effectively.

2. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH STUDY

This article endeavours to essentially fulfil the gaps in the literature, and broaden the knowledge base regarding the use of social media as a promotional mix element in accommodation establishments, specifically operating in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Paquette (2013) argues that research on social media in the past decade has focused mainly on defining social media as the concepts that make up its foundation and exploring the impact of

social media on consumer behaviour. Social media usage in accommodation establishments are relatively new, according to Leue, Jung and Knowles (nd), with a limited number of studies focusing on this phenomenon. The research study therefore took on a business-centred approach in an attempt to explore if users of social media as a promotional mix element could be clustered into different groups based on their characteristic, which has, up until now, received little attention in academic literature (Minazzi, 2015).

The hospitality and accommodation industry has become a competitive market and the presence of social media and the internet is regarded as being central to the success of the industry. The Western Cape Province was specifically chosen for the purpose of this study because this province is a leading tourism destination with a wide variety of attractions for business and leisure travellers (Western Cape Business, 2011). The researcher is of the opinion that the perception and usage of these establishments would provide a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge to similar accommodation establishments.

3. THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Social media has been explained by various authors as an internet-based application (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), allowing user-generated content to be created by individuals and the general public (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008; Haataja, 2010). It entails the conversation between people; the sharing of opinions, experiences, content, and information for making a better or more informed decision (Jerving, 2009; Madia & Borgese, 2010; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

Empirical literature provides countless justification of the usage and effectiveness of social media by individuals worldwide. In South Africa, Facebook is the most popular choice of internet activity that has grown by 8%, from 12-million to 13-million users; while Twitter increased from 6.6-million to 7.4-million users, a 12% increase. YouTube, the video sharing platform, increased its users marginally from 7.2-million to 8.28-million users. The biggest growth however, has come from Instagram, which rose a massive 133%. Research found that 7.9-million South Africans (77%) use a smartphone to access social media platforms, while 1.6-million use basic feature phones to do so (World Wide Worx, 2016). As companies are becoming more comfortable with social media, they become effective at using them as marketing and positioning platforms (World Wide Worx, 2016). The increasing use of social media platforms in South Africa has revealed that 95% of major brands in South Africa utilise Twitter as a marketing platform, while 93% utilise Facebook. Fifty-one per cent of South Africa's biggest brands indicated that they intend to increase the social media marketing endeavours and budgets, and intend to focus their attention on content marketing (73%) and multimedia content (60%) (World Wide Worx, 2015). These statistics serve as proof that social media has gone mainstream in South Africa, among both individuals and businesses.

3.1. The accommodation industry

Marketing in the accommodation, or hospitality, industry has always been a fundamental element in driving sales. However, since the advent of digital technology, the hospitality industry had to adapt their approach to reap the benefits digital technology has to offer (Ckettmann, 2012). Social media has rapidly become an essential channel of marketing and has a major influence on the general public when communicating brand messages and leveraging promotions to generate revenue (Ckettmann, 2012).

Social media offers numerous platforms and tools that can be used in the accommodation industry, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube (Assenov & Khurana, 2012; Lim, 2010). TripAdvisor has become a popular customer review website frequently used in the accommodation industry, which allows customers to share and gather travel related information that is posted autonomously by other travellers (Miguéns, Baggio & Costa, 2008). Peer-review websites, such as TripAdvisor, have given rise to conversations and assessments of accommodation establishments, restaurants and other services on a broad scale (Assenov & Khurana, 2012). These social media sites have provided a platform for a rating system that can be used to generate, monitor and evaluate the reputation and image of the establishment (Seth, 2012). Websites that allow for public expression have left many establishments scrambling to regain control of their products and brand images (Windels, 2013).

The hospitality and accommodation industry can make use of social media to engage and communicate with customers and potential clients in order to recognise and satisfy their needs and wants. Social media tools allow establishments to interact with customers before, during and after their stay at the establishment (Lim, 2010). Assenov and Khurana (2012:327) state that social media tools can be utilised in accommodation establishments to serve as a 'cost cutter', as social media is a low cost medium used to communicate, more directly and efficiently, with customers and stakeholders. Social media offers the hospitality industry an abundance of advantages, such as being affordable and it has the potential to spread brand awareness rapidly and broadly, and it is said to be able to create attention and increase traffic to their website (Lim, 2010). Leue et al. (nd) argue that social media platforms are important for potential guests to review the comments and recommendations of other guests, and perhaps even view pictures or videos in order to reach the truth about how the establishment is actually like.

Accommodation establishments dread the use of social media, as they consider it to be detrimental to employee productivity and fear that social media has the potential to tarnish their reputation (Lim, 2010). Social media, although essential to the brand and communication of a company, can also be deleterious if implemented inappropriately. However, Lim (2010) suggests the implementation of a social media policy, which can be used to educate and provide a better understanding for employees to keep within a certain parameter and the implications of their participation. Nevertheless, there is a need

to explore and determine if social media can become the new platform for effective marketing (Lim, 2010).

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

It is stated in the literature that the use of social media in accommodation establishments can be useful and beneficial if implemented correctly. This gave rise to the question: Who are the users of social media amongst accommodation establishments and how are they utilising social media to be successful? The aim of the research study was therefore to explore if users of social media as a promotional mix element could be clustered into different groups based on the characteristics they possess.

For the purpose of this research study, the researcher opted to follow an exploratory research approach. In order to explore potential users of social media as a promotional mix element in accommodation establishments, a web-based (Survey Monkey) self-administered questionnaire was distributed to accommodation establishments located in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. The study focused solely on the Western Cape for the purpose of this study, as this province is a leading tourism destination with a wide variety of attractions for business and leisure travellers (Western Cape Business, 2011). The sampling method utilised for this study was simple random sampling in order for the researcher to substitute the non-responses from the list available. The questionnaire was administered to accommodation establishments, operating in the Western Cape, and a total of 361 useable responses were received.

Quantitative data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics V22. The data was checked, coded, corrected and descriptive statistics (frequency counts) were used to describe the general findings of this study. A four-step cluster analysis was performed in order to identify similar groups of respondents in their use of social media as a promotional mix element. Cluster analysis groups individuals or objects into clusters so that objects in the same cluster are more similar to one another than they are to objects in others clusters (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). Clusters were determined by analysing six variables which represented various aspects of respondent's involvement and perception of social media as a promotional mix element. The research findings and interpretation of the empirical study will be discussed in the next section.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

A summary of the profile of the respondents who participated in the research study will be provided, followed by a discussion of the six variables utilised in order to establish the cluster analysis. This section will conclude with the clusters identified from the six variables representing the various aspects of respondent's involvement and perception of social media as a promotional mix element.

5.1. Profile of respondents

A summary of the profile of respondents who participated in the survey is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of respondents

Type of accommodation establishment			
Formal service accommodation	10.8%	Camping, caravanning & backpackers	3.1%
Guest	51.8%	Other	6.6%
Self-catering	27.7%		
Position held in establishment			
Manager	26.5%	Owner	61.3%
Marketing manager	3.9%	Front desk/receptionist	1.8%
Sales	1.1%	Other	5.4%
Permanent employees at establishment			
Less than 5	61.6%	101-150	0.7%
5-10	24.7%	151-200	1.1%
11-50	10.0%	More than 200	0%
51-100	1.8%		
Travellers primarily targeted			
Leisure	37.3%	Local markets	9.0%
Business	3.6%	International markets	9.0%
Both leisure and business	59.1%	Both local and international	82.1%

Table 1 show that respondents mainly encompassed guest accommodation establishments (51.8%), which consist of B&B establishments, guest houses and country houses. Respondents who answered the research survey were mostly the owner (61.3%) or the manager (26.5%) of the establishment and the majority employ less than five employees (61.6%). These establishments aimed to target leisure and business travellers (59.1%) as well as local and international travellers (82.1%).

5.2. Cluster analysis

Cluster analysis was conducted in order to explore if users of social media as a promotional mix element could be clustered into different groups based on the characteristics they possess. Cluster analysis is the multivariate, exploratory technique designed to reveal natural groupings that may exist in the data itself (Marsili, 2007). It is therefore a group of statistical algorithms used to classify objects on the basis of their similarity with regard to a set of attributes (Jupp, 2006). Cluster analysis was conducted to divide the data collected from respondents into meaningful and manageable groups, so as to explore the different groups of social media users in accommodation establishments.

For the purpose of this study, non-hierarchical clustering was used where cases were joined together and regrouped until the final cluster was analysed. A K-means cluster analysis was performed using six variables that represent various aspects of respondent's involvement and their perception of social media as a promotional mix element. These six variables included:

- Familiarity with the term 'social media'
- The use of social media for business purposes
- The use of social media for marketing purposes
- Perceived effectiveness of the use of social media
- Social media marketing efforts

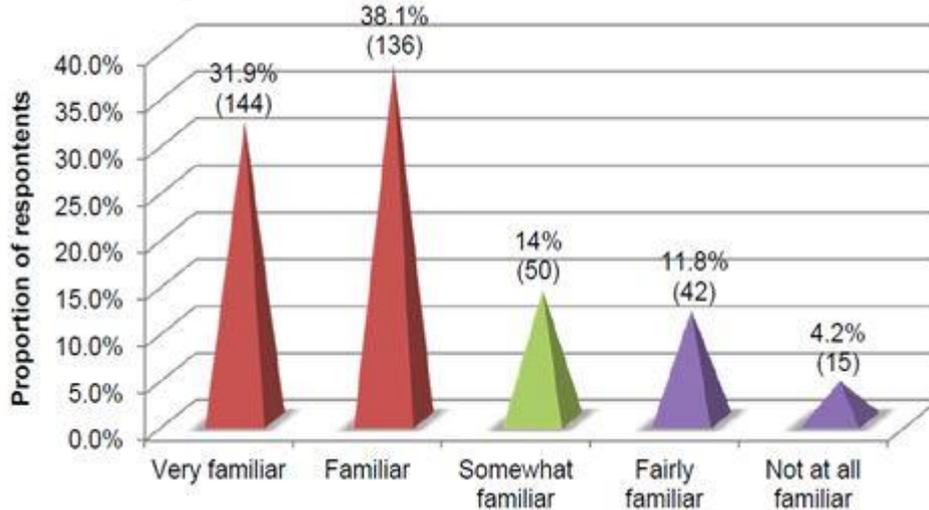
- The perceived benefits of using social media as a promotional mix element
The six variables are briefly discussed below.

5.2.1 Familiarity with the term 'social media'

Respondents were asked to indicate their familiarity with the term 'social media'. Figure 1 show that a total of 280 respondents (70%) were familiar with

the term 'social media'. This indicates that social media is a concept that is well-known among accommodation establishments and respondents related easily to the questions posed in the survey. Taking into consideration the rapid growth of social media over the past few years, it is interesting to note that 15 respondents (4.2%) were not familiar with the term 'social media'.

Figure 1. Familiarity with the term 'social media' (n=357)

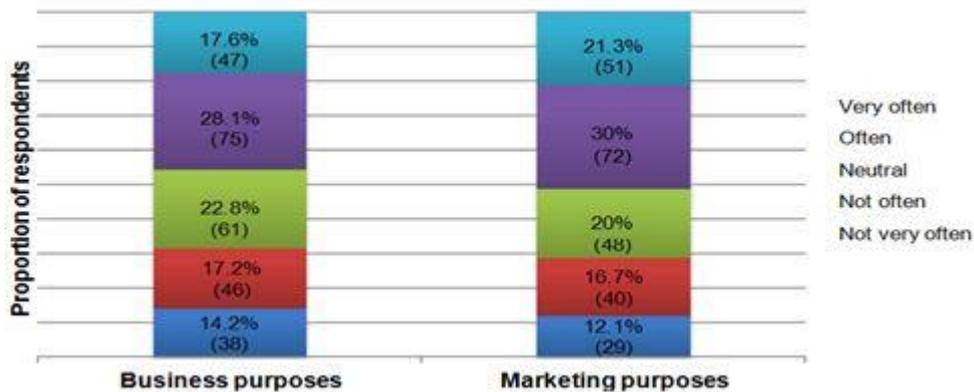


5.2.2. Use of social media for business and marketing purposes

Respondents were furthermore asked to indicate, on average, how often they used social media for business as well as marketing purposes. Business purposes included aspects such as conducting

market research or booking reservations via social media portals, while marketing purposes included aspects such as advertising specials or announcing competitions or sweepstakes. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Use of social media for business and marketing purposes

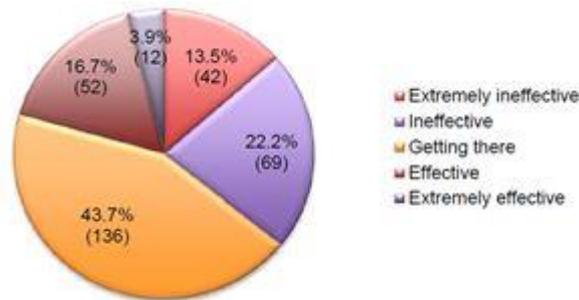


From the figure above, it is evident the majority of respondents utilise social media for the purpose of conducting business (75 or 28.1%) as well as for marketing purposes (72 or 30%). The findings show that respondents used social media for business and marketing purposes in a very similar manner, as the distribution of responses are similar. As a result, it can be assumed that, on average, the respondents displayed similar patterns of social media usage for both business as well as marketing purposes.

5.2.3. Perceived effectiveness of the use of social media

Figure 3 indicates respondent's perceived effectiveness of the use of social media in accommodation establishments.

Apparent from figure 3 is that 52 respondents (16.7%) felt that their establishment's use of social media was effective, while 136 respondents (43.7%) felt they were getting there, but were not effective yet.

Figure 3. Perceived effectiveness of the use of social media (n = 311)

Although 64 respondents (20.6%) perceived their marketing efforts as effective or extremely effective, the results suggest that the majority of respondents (247 or 79.4%) lacked the knowledge of effectively implementing social media in their establishments in order to benefit from it. Accommodation establishments should therefore consider attending training and development initiatives to improve their knowledge of employing social media effectively to benefit from it.

5.2.4. Social media marketing efforts

Respondents agreed that their social media marketing efforts had improved their overall sales figures (97 or 31.6%), increased their exposure to the general public, local and international customers, businesses and industry professionals (139 or 45.3%) and increased traffic to their own home web page (117 or 38.1%). Although 207 respondents (67.4%) indicated that their social media marketing efforts had increased their exposure, 75 respondents (24.5%) stated that their social media efforts had not reduced their marketing expenses. The findings would suggest that respondents' social media marketing efforts generally had a positive outcome on their establishments. To further improve their social media activities, establishments could consider training initiatives or employing permanent staff members who are responsible solely for social media endeavours. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for this question was 0.932, which indicated excellent internal consistency.

5.2.5. Perceived benefits of using social media as a promotional mix element

The majority of respondents (197 or 68.9%) agreed that, in order to benefit from using social media as a promotional mix element, it should expand their existing markets. A further 192 respondents (67.1%) agreed that social media should increase awareness of their establishment's offerings. Equally, 189 respondents (66.1%) agreed that social media should increase traffic to their website as well as provide a more favourable perception of their establishment's offering. It is clear from these results that

respondents would consider or would continue using social media mainly if they could attract more customers and increase customers' awareness of the establishment's product offerings.

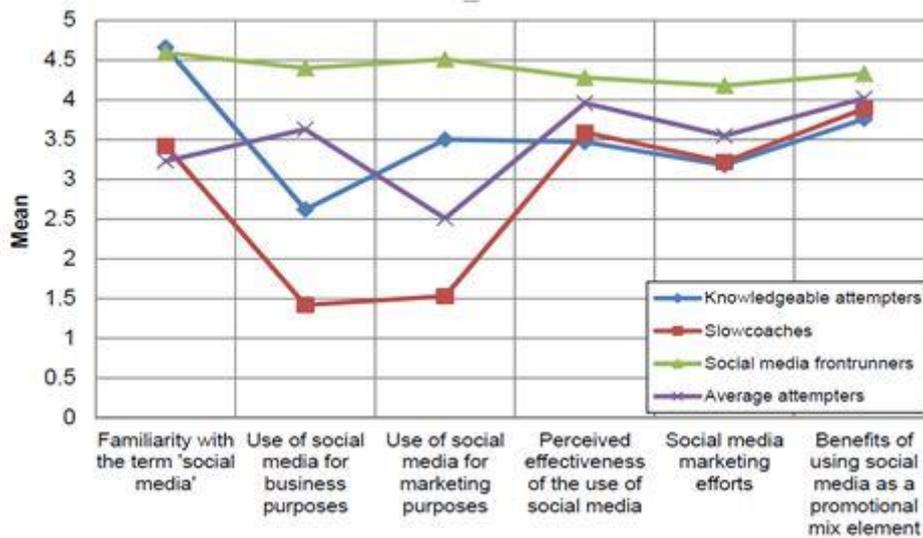
The large proportion of respondents that agreed with the statements concerning the benefits that social media should offer, confirm their awareness of the usefulness of social media as a promotional mix element and what their expectations were. It can therefore be agreed that social media should comply with all of these statements in order to be beneficial to accommodation establishments. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for this question was 0.953, which indicated excellent internal consistency.

5.3. Clusters

After numerous groups emerged from the statistical cluster analysis, the four-cluster solution proved to be indicative of the most identifiable characteristic groups, which was used for this study. Respondents were grouped into four clusters (or groups) based on their involvement initiatives and perception of social media (six variables). The results of the four-cluster analysis are shown in Table 2 and Figure 4.

Table 2. Four-cluster solution variables

Variables	Clusters				Overall mean
	1	2	3	4	
Familiarity with the term 'social media'	4.66	3.42	4.59	3.23	3.82
Use of social media for business purposes	2.62	1.42	4.40	3.63	1.23
Use of social media for marketing purposes	3.50	1.53	4.51	2.51	3.18
Perceived effectiveness of the use of social media	3.47	3.59	4.28	3.96	3.32
Social media marketing efforts	3.18	3.22	4.18	3.55	3.67
Benefits of using social media as a promotional mix element	3.76	3.89	4.33	4.02	3.48

Figure 4. Four-cluster means scores

From Figure 4, four distinguished clusters or groups of respondents emerged regarding their involvement and perception of social media in their accommodation establishments. The following four clusters of respondents were identified. The first cluster group were labelled 'knowledge attempters' (cluster 1). These respondents were extremely knowledgeable when it came to social media; however, these respondents are still aiming to improve their efforts.

These respondents were very familiar with the term 'social media' ($M=4.66$), considered their use as reasonably effective ($M=3.47$) and perceived social media to be a beneficial promotional mix element ($M=3.76$). However, this cluster of respondents tended to use social media somewhat for marketing purposes ($M=3.50$), but much less for business purposes ($M=2.62$). On average, the frequency with which all variables were used was either lower than those of the overall group or lower than those of the respondents in the third cluster (social media frontrunners).

The second cluster identified in the analysis was the 'slowcoaches' (cluster 2). Slowcoaches included respondents who were not very active in the social media endeavours and were not up to date with the latest trends in the online marketing of accommodation establishments. The respondents in this cluster were reasonably familiar with the term 'social media' ($M=3.42$), considered their use of social media to be effective ($M=3.59$) and perceived the use of social media as a promotional mix element as beneficial ($M=3.89$). Although respondents in this cluster perceived the use of social media as a promotional mix element to be beneficial, they tended not to use social media for business ($M=1.42$) and marketing purposes ($M=1.53$). On average, the frequency with which all variables were used was either lower than the overall group average or lower than the average of the respondents in cluster 1 (knowledgeable attempters) and cluster 4 (average attempters).

The next cluster group which was identified were grouped as 'social media frontrunners' (cluster 3) as these respondents were the most knowledgeable and active users of social media as

they were the group who perceived social media to be a viable promotional mix element. This cluster group demonstrated, on average, a tendency to score high on all aspects of involvement with social media. The average usage frequency for all variables was higher than that of the respondents in all other clusters as well as the mean frequency for the group as a whole.

The fourth, and last cluster that emerged from the analysis of the six variables, was the 'average attempters' (cluster 4). These respondents were impartial towards the use of social media as a promotional mix element. Respondents who fall within this group were not familiar with the concept of social media ($M=3.23$), but perceived their use of social media to be very effective ($M=3.96$) as also perceived social media as a promotional mix element to be beneficial to accommodation establishments ($M=4.02$). These respondents tended to use social media for business purposes ($M=3.63$), but demonstrated limited use of it for marketing purposes ($M=2.51$). On average, the frequency with which all variables were used was either lower than that of the overall group or lower than that of the respondents in the 'social media frontrunner' cluster.

From Table 3, it can be seen that the majority of the respondents (75 or 38.3%) can be considered to be social media frontrunners, followed by the knowledgeable attempters (50 or 25.5%).

Table 3. Four-cluster solution

Cluster	Frequency count (n)	Percentage (%)
Knowledgeable attempters	50	25.5
Slowcoaches	36	18.3
Social media frontrunners	75	38.3
Average attempters	35	17.9
Total	196	100.0

These findings would suggest that social media is a well-known concept among accommodation establishments, is perceived to be an effective promotional mix element and is used for both

business and marketing purposes. The findings also suggest that respondents perceived their social media marketing efforts to be beneficial and that social media could be considered a viable promotional mix element.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this research study was to explore if users of social media as a promotional mix element could be clustered into different groups based on the characteristics they possess. The findings revealed four distinct categories, namely 'knowledgeable attempters', 'slowcoaches', 'social media frontrunners' and 'average attempters'. These findings suggest that social media is a well-known concept among accommodation establishments, they perceive it to be an effective promotional mix element and they utilise social media for both business and marketing purposes. The findings also suggest that respondents perceived their social media marketing efforts to be beneficial and that social media could be considered a viable promotional mix element.

It is highly recommended that the emphasis be placed on respondents from cluster 4 (average attempters), as these respondents were not very familiar with the term 'social media', but they were well aware of the benefits. This group of respondents should consider consulting an expert in the field of social media marketing or they should attend workshops or online training to gain the essential understanding of utilising social media as a promotional mix element.

The accommodation industry, according to Lim (2010), is cautious towards the implementation of new technology and is reputed to be reluctant to adopt technology advances. The industry has therefore not leveraged the advantages of social media and integrates it with their marketing activities. With the increasing use of social media platforms among consumers, it is recommended that accommodation establishments should turn to social media such as Facebook, Twitter, TripAdvisor and many more, as a means of reaching out to their target market.

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