

# **Examining the Role of Social Media within the Destination Marketing Framework Designed by Pike and Page (2014)**

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## **Abstract**

This exploratory research provides valuable insight into social media's role and applicability within the Destination Marketing Framework (DMF), posited originally by Pike and Page (2014). A thematic analysis was conducted of the data gathered following in-depth interviews with Social Media Managers from a variety of DMOs from Europe, North America, and Australia, as well as an online survey of Social Media Managers of city, state, and national DMOs around the world.

This research note is amended from the original full-paper submission to ENTER as it focuses solely on the impacts of social media on the DMF as outlined above, taking into consideration not only the comments of the reviewers, but also in order to satisfy the maximum page allowance for research notes. Furthermore, the title of the paper has been amended to also reflect this change.

**Keywords:** Social media, destination marketing organisations, destination marketing framework, strategy.

## **1 Introduction**

Social media has become ubiquitous and omnipresent, and has changed the world in which we live and various aspects of our lives (Theunissen 2015). Of the circa 7.2 billion individuals that make up the world's population, over 3 billion of these (42%) are internet users and just over 2 billion are active social media users (29%) (We Are Social 2015). The tourism industry in particular stands to benefit significantly from social media through the culmination of positive word-of-mouth among consumers as well as brand awareness and the formation of brand-advocating communities. Social media platforms continue to garner both scholastic attention and that of business practitioners. The aim of this study is to examine the role and applicability of social media platforms specifically within the Destination Marketing Framework (DMF) designed by Pike and Page (2014).

## **2 Theory/Issues**

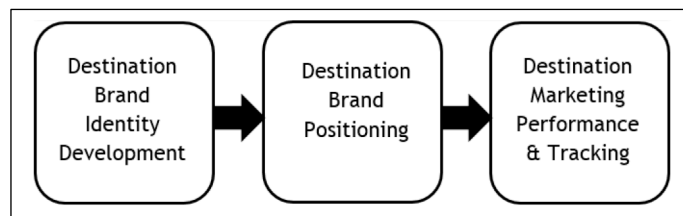
Increased globalisation toward the end of the 20th century resulted in the marketing of places becoming a much more sophisticated area, attracting special interest from practitioners (Baker & Cameron 2008). Kiráľová and Pavlíček (2015) also cite globalisation as changing the nature of travellers' needs and attitudes and contributing to an increase in the volume of information that destinations now have to analyse in order to remain competitive. Luo and Zhong (2015) cite the worldwide upsurge in destination marketing as a "significant symbol" of Web 2.0 and the boom in the use of social media.

Standing *et al.* (2014) describe how there has been a substantial increase in the number of publications in academic journals surrounding the area of internet use in tourism, while Pike and Page (2014) pinpoint the year 1973 as the point of origin of the destination marketing field, while also noting how *current* academic research in the area of DMO strategy development “appears to be scant” at present.

Previous researchers have also highlighted the existence of gaps in the current literature regarding specifically the use of social media by tourism DMOs; little research has been conducted to examine how tourism entities are evolving with the internet and employing social media in a bid to market and promote tourism destinations and to engage with current and potential customers (Hays *et al.* 2013; Morosan 2015). Ratchford (2015) outlines the need for further research on marketing in the presence of social media, as social media’s marketing implications still remain unclear. Pike and Page (2014) note the lack of studies examining the relationship between advertising and sales within the marketing literature, and state how this has spread to also include destination marketing literature specifically.

The conceptual framework for this study, as previously mentioned, is based on the DMF posited by Pike and Page (2014) within their narrative analysis of destination marketing literature published since 1973. The authors of the article themselves state the aim of their literature review was to attempt to ascertain the extent of which a DMO is ultimately responsible for the competitiveness of a tourism destination. The authors also sought to graphically represent the culminating internal and external factors pivotal in sustaining destination competitiveness. In particular, the effectiveness of activities seeking to achieve and maintain a leadership market position are highlighted within the theoretical model, displayed in Figure 1.

**Fig. 1: External Marketing Activities of DMOs (for full version, please see Pike & Page 2014)**



While the model serves as an accurate representation of a DMO’s marketing endeavours, it does not address the area of social media specifically. It is the aim of this study to alleviate this discrepancy and discuss implications of social media specifically on the framework. The discussion will look at the how social media plays a part in the marketing activities of DMOs, with the aims being to establish and develop a brand identity, achieve a competitive market position across multiple regions of the world, while also being able to continuously monitor the performance of their social media endeavours.

### **3 Methods/Procedures**

Upon analysing the methodologies of previously published authors present within the literature, it was determined that a mixed-methods approach would be most suitable for the present study. Quantitative data was gathered via an online survey that was conducted in the summer of 2014, receiving a total of 63 national DMO respondents, with three respondents completing follow-up, more qualitative, questionnaires.

Further, a total of nine social media managers were interviewed in this study, from a diverse range of DMOs spanning three continents. All conducted interviews were recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis (QDA) software.

This data was subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis so as to decipher the relevant themes, opinions and perceptions in order to satisfy the research objective in accordance with the method set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” The authors’ methodology sets out a six-stage structure composed of phases involving the researcher familiarising themselves with the data, along with various coding phases before finally deciphering the prominent themes throughout the data.

### **4 Discussion**

#### **4.1: Implications for the Destination Marketing Framework (Pike & Page 2014)**

This exploratory study looked to examine and discuss social media’s role within the DMF. The authors detail how “Sustained Destination Competitiveness” subsumes all other aims and objectives at a time whereby potential travellers are spoilt for choice in the availability and accessibility of destinations. The model comprehensively illustrates the various internal and external operations and activities undertaken by effective DMOs in their endeavours to maximise their destination’s competitiveness, described by the authors as the “quintessential goal of all DMOs” (*ibid*). The following discussion examines how social media platforms may play a role in the three external marketing activities undertaken by DMOs, as depicting in the DMF and illustrated in Figure 1.

#### **4.2: Destination Brand Identity Development**

Some of the challenges as raised by participants in this study would include the ability of the DMO to reshape the identity of the destination as has already been established and embedded within the mind of the consumer, whether via prior personal experience or external information sources. One of the study’s participants discussed how their destination’s brand identity has remained consistent through time, and it has always been one of positivity, particularly in relation to the welcoming locals. The participant further emphasised how, currently, there remains limited scope in fundamentally changing the destination’s image in order to either appeal to a different demographic or type of tourist, or indeed in order to move along with current trends.

Another participant, conversely, described how their destination struggles with outside perception issues due to its housing of the federal government. Its current status as a domestic destination has further infringed on its attractiveness to the indigenous population due to these connotations which have seen locals label it as an unattractive place to visit. Due to a destination's status as a living location prior to the establishment of any tourism entities, attractions, amenities etc., any subsequent stakeholders who set up a business reliant on tourism for success also inherit the external perception of the destination and must take this into account when seeking to develop and shape its own brand identity.

Where social media can aid in this endeavour is through the DMO's engagement with the platforms and its audience. The DMO must first develop a suitable, relevant brand identity of its destination, one which will serve to resonate positively in the eyes of the local stakeholders, as well as potential visitors, but one which is also reflective of the current perception of the destination, providing it's one of positivity. This should serve to bolster the already conceived notion of the destination in the eyes of the tourist, but will also give the DMO the opportunity to put a modern spin on the destination's image, with the possibility of reflecting on what the destination has to offer tourists today which it may not have 20 years ago.

#### **4.3: Destination Brand Positioning**

Social media, once again, provide the ideal platforms on which to develop and enhance the positioning of a destination's brand within the ever-expanding tourism market. Custom targeted campaigns may be launched, catering to very specific areas of a DMO's target market, in order to maximise visibility of the destination in the eyes of the appropriate consumer. Pike and Page (2014) state that it is the responsibility of the DMO to identify and evaluate stories and narratives regarding their destination and to identify patterns in the anecdotes of visitors in order to achieve consistency and effective brand positioning.

In terms of slogans and methods of promotional differentiation, participants in this study emphasised the use of hashtags within their marketing content with the aim being that further use of said hashtag would amplify the visibility and reach of the brand, and cement its presence within the forefront of consumer minds. While content may differ among various target markets to accommodate the varying reasons and motivations for travelling, designing one all-encompassing hashtag that captures the spirit of the destination and inspires action on the part of the online community to participate and contribute must be seen as an important aspect of any contemporary digital campaign. Participants in the present study further described how they use their own brand hashtags, such as #austnatcoll (Australian National Collection), #makeitPHL (Philadelphia), #lifeelevated (Utah), and #thisisliving (Ireland) as ways of ensuring their brand stands out from the rest through the use of unique hashtags which will ensure social media users will link those hashtags to those specific destinations.

#### **4.4: Destination Marketing Performance Measurement & Tracking**

Pike and Page (2014) also emphasize the challenge in achieving and maintaining long-term competitiveness, citing multiple studies highlighting cases in Eastern Europe, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, while also noting a lack of a widely-accepted causal model of destination competitiveness. Such analysis of the difficulty in measuring success has clearly been transferred to social media marketing, given that the findings of this study did reveal the ambiguity that exists within DMOs regarding effective measurement of their social media activities measurement, and the wide deviation among DMOs in terms of the rigor of their social media measurement.

Pike and Page (2014) make specific mention to the EAV (equivalent advertising value) formula as being a popular means for DMOs to “argue the case for marketing funding”. The authors describe the formula as “simplistic”, with shortcomings. The present study uncovered such a formula being in place in one particular DMO, with the traditional EAV formula being adapted to incorporate the various forms and nuances of engagement on social media platforms, with the metric being labelled SEAV, or Social Equivalent Advertising Value.

While Pike and Page highlight the fact that evaluation techniques related to online operations remains a new line of academic inquisition, it remains a very small part of DMO operations, particularly pertaining to their social media efforts. Due to the relatively small scale of the social media operations within the organisations in this study, it seems to have prevented the implementation of a rigorous evaluative procedure for social media. While many social media KPIs are currently in existence, from the quantitative platform metrics such as likes (or reactions), shares, and comments, to the more complex qualitative metrics such as sentiment and influence. What still remains to be seen is how these metrics can quantifiably and categorically be attributed to tourism arrivals and prosperity in a region, which should guide further study.

In conclusion, this short research note has further demonstrated the proliferation of social media platforms in our everyday lives, as well as within a business environment. While there is undoubtedly a steady rise in the number of social-media centric studies being carried out by researchers all over the world, there seems to be an uneven adoption and usage rate among DMOs. Many of the challenges faced by conventional organisations in social media, such as public scrutiny, community management, and effectively measuring ROI, continue to be faced by DMOs also. However, DMOs, have the added advantage of being able to channel the ever-increasing rates of UGC publication through multiple media-specific platforms such as YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram, as well as the more all-encompassing major networks Facebook and Twitter, in furtherance of their brand and community building endeavours.

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