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SMTE’s use of SoMe and Sustainability

Andersen, Ida Marie Visbech

*Lillebelt Academy of Applied Science, Denmark, idav@eal.dk*

**Key words:** SoMe, Small medium sized tourism enterprises (SMTE’s), Sustainability, Tourism.

**Introduction**

Social media (SoMe) is one of the most powerful online networking tools and has been integrated into both social and economic aspects of society (Zeng, 2013). The growth of SoMe have seen a large increase in recent years. The number of active Facebook uses have doubled in just 5 years from 1 billion in 2013 to more than 2 billion in 2018 (Statista, 2018a). The most visited sites online are search engines like google and social networking sites like Facebook (Statista, 2018b). Research in the area of SoMe is still limited and academic research has not been able to keep track with the exponential growth in the use of SoMe in the tourism industry (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2103; Lu, Chen, & Law, 2018; Zeng, 2013). However, research into the role of SoMe holds great promise for tourism scholars who seek to advance the theoretical understanding of SoMe use in the tourism industry (Cabiddu, De Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014). Research has been conducted in various areas of SoMe from either a supplier perspective (Du, Yalcinkaya, & Bstieler, 2016; Moro & Rita, 2018; Roy, Maxwell, & Carson, 2014) or a consumer perspective (Amaro, Duarte, & Henriques, 2016; Cabiddu et al., 2014; Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2017; Kim, Kim, & Heo, 2016)). SoMe plays a very important role in the tourism industry (Zeng, 2013) yet an extensive academic exploration of how SoMe can be a driver for other business areas such as sustainability remains impartial.

**Aim**

The aim of this research is determine the use of SoMe in small medium sized tourism enterprises (SMTE’s). The research seeks to determine how SMTE’s use SoMe, to what extent
and discovering how the use of SoMe are connected with the company’s orientation towards sustainability. A majority of business believes that integrating sustainability into their business models is of great importance, including satisfying social needs and reducing environmental impact (Du et al., 2016). Despite the widespread academic discourse about sustainability there is still limited understanding of how sustainability contributes to business performances (Cabiddu et al., 2014; Du et al., 2016). This research therefor seeks to deepen the understanding of SMTE’s use of SoMe and the interconnections to sustainability as a key business area.

**Methodology**

The research is conducted as part of the development project Digital Growth (DG). DG aims at delivering competencies within digitalisation and SoMe to SMTE’s in Southern Denmark. The 18 case companies in this research are selected based on their participation in the DG project. The research is divided into two phases:

1. During the first phase data about the 18 case companies are collected through SoMe platforms and the project. The first phase is to determine the use of SoMe in the case companies and gain an understanding of the topic and the companies.
2. In phase two the theoretical framework will be developed based on the preliminary findings from phase one. The second phase seeks to understand the connections between SoMe and the sustainable orientation of the companies by conducting in-depth interviews with the SMTE’s in the project and data reports delivered as part of the project.

This abstract covers the first phase of the research.

**Findings**

A literature review suggest that research in SoMe has largely been undertaken from a consumer point of view, app. 66% of research between 2004 and 2014 (Lu et al., 2018). From the suppliers perspective the majority of articles centred on marketing and management (Lu et al., 2018). Literature review also suggest that research about SoMe use has been done mainly in the context of especially four- or five star hotels but other accommodation types (e.g. hostels and middle class hotels) and sub-sectors of the tourism industry like golf and gaming remains
unexplored (Lu et al., 2018). SoMe research has largely focused on analysing online reviews and a substantial part has evolved around content methodologies (Lu et al., 2018). Current research indicates that some businesses view SoMe as a positive and useful tool for their business (Roy et al., 2014). Interestingly, King & Lee (2016) studied the role of SoMe as an internal communication enhancer to build social capital among hospitality employees, an area linked with corporate social responsibility (Jha & Cox, 2015). Traditional websites still play a significant role in influencing customers (Moro & Rita, 2018), however, the growth of web 2.0 and SoMe platforms are now a dominate player in the tourism industry (Zeng, 2013). The four most popular SoMe platforms for small medium sized enterprises are LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook and the use of these four most popular SoMe can be linked to various industries including tourism (Roy, et al., 2014).

One of the key areas where sustainability and SoMe has been linked is in communication. Research indicates that companies on the SoMe sustainability index use mainly Facebook and Twitter to communicate about sustainability issues (Doleac, 2015).

The constant debate about how and where to talk to consumers about sustainability means SoMe channels are now playing a central role (Doleac, 2015). Through SoMe consumers and communities share their opinions and judgments about companies online and demand more information about corporate sustainability and responsibility than ever before (Doleac, 2015). Furthermore, research supports to the claim that sustainability can indeed contribute to a firm’s competitive advantage by linking new product development and innovation with a company’s sustainable orientation (Du et al., 2016).

Preliminary findings from the 18 case companies suggest that the main SoMe platform are Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn (see Table 1) supporting previous research. The case companies are represented by 5 different categories: Hotel (6), Hostel (3), Campsite (4), Activity (3) and Attraction (2). Findings from the 18 case companies also suggest that they have a limited knowledge level and understanding of how to collect and use data generated from SoMe channels. This implies that many of the companies have no clear goal in using SoMe perhaps other than for marketing purposes.
Development and Marketing of Sustainable Tourism Products

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Table 1: Overview of the case companies

Conclusion

Research into SoMe is still limited despite its increasing use by travellers and the importance of understanding the role of SoMe in hospitality and tourism. (Lu et al., 2018). Literature review shows that SoMe appear to be a strategic tool playing an important role in tourism and hospitality management particularly in promotion, business management, and research functions (Leung et al., 2013, Lu et al., 2018). Furthermore, sustainability and SoMe remains an area researched very limited despite the growing influence of SoMe and the acknowledgement that sustainability can contribute to a firm’s competitive advantage. The preliminary findings from the case companies confirms existing research, identifying Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn as the most used SoMe platforms and that the main use of SoMe is for promotion and marketing functions.

Further research into the case companies and their sustainable orientation and use of SoMe will help broaden the understanding of how SoMe and sustainability are interconnected. This
abstract is part of current research process and limitations are therefore evident as the key findings and data collection is only in its early stages.

References


