

FUNDAÇÃO GETÚLIO VARGAS  
ESCOLA DE ADMINISTRAÇÃO DE EMPRESAS DE SÃO PAULO

JEAN-BENOIT PIERRE JOEL VINCENT VERSTRAETEN

**PRACTICES IN SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE TRAVEL EDUCATION BUSINESS**

**SÃO PAULO**  
**2014**

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Dissertação apresentada à Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas, como requisito para obtenção do título de Mestre Profissional em Gestão Internacional.

Campo do Conhecimento:  
Gestão e Competitividade em Empresas Globais

Orientador Prof. Dr. MAURICIO  
GERBAUDO MORGADO

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## ABSTRACT

Practices in Social media refers to the view or perception of a brand not only based on its offerings and services, but also on its values and culture as perceived primarily by consumers. Organizations may utilize brand image to accomplish its goals or objectives by structuring an image that is interesting and acceptable to customers. In recent years, one of the ways that organizations consistently market or advertise their brand involves social media. The objective of this research study is to explore what are the practices in social media in the travel education business. To obtain data, the researcher interviewed people from 6 travel education firms and collated information about the topic from existing primary and secondary sources. The researcher conducted the research to determine practices in social media marketing as they apply in the tourism and education sectors. Based on the data obtained by the researcher, practices in social media marketing include the utilization of social media platforms with a widespread international reach such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Another strategy is to constantly post updates that are not only interesting but also informational about the products and services offered by a brand or organisation. Companies or organizations must also interact with customers or clients online in order to maintain the latter's interests in the former's offerings and services. Customer engagement is one of the reasons why customers opt to follow firms online through social media. The research study also reveals other advantages and benefits of social media that constitute best practices such as the conversion of non-customers to customers, increased media presence to boost popularity, the effective communication of organisational goals and objectives, and the formation of a good relationship with customers. Organisations may also use tourist created content (TCC) and other types of user-generated content to guide decision-making in product development.

**KEY WORDS:** Marketing, Social Media, Travel Education, Millennial Marketing.

## RESUMO

Práticas na mídia social se refere a vista ou a percepção de uma marca não só com base em suas ofertas e serviços, mas também sobre seus valores e cultura como percebido principalmente pelos consumidores. As organizações podem utilizar a imagem que é interessante e aceitável para os clientes. Nos últimos anos, uma das formas que as organizações de forma consistente comercializar ou publicitar a sua marca envolve mídias sociais. O objetivo deste estudo é explorar quais são as práticas de mídia social no negócio de educação de viagens. Para obter os dados, a pesquisadora entrevistou pessoas de seis empresas de educação de viagens e coletadas informações sobre o tema a partir de fontes primárias e secundárias existentes. O pesquisador conduziu a pesquisa para determinar práticas de marketing de mídia social em que se aplicam nos setores do turismo e educação. Com base nos dados obtidos pelo pesquisador, as práticas de marketing de mídia social incluem a utilização de plataformas de mídia social com um alcance internacional generalizada tipo Facebook, Twitter, Instagram e YouTube. Outra estratégia é para postar constantemente as atualizações que não são apenas interessante, mas também informativo sobre os produtos e serviços oferecidos por uma marca ou organização. As empresas ou organizações devem também interagir com os clientes ou clientes on-line, a fim de manter os interesses deste último em ofertas e serviços da ex. O envolvimento do cliente é uma das razões por que os clientes optam por seguir as empresas on-line através da mídia social. A pesquisa também revela outras vantagens e benefícios da mídia social que constituem as melhores práticas, tais como a conversão de não-clientes para os clientes, o aumento da presença da mídia para aumentar a popularidade, a comunicação eficaz das metas e objetivos organizacionais, bem como a formação de um bom relacionamento com os clientes. As organizações também podem usar turístico criado conteúdo (TCC) e outros tipos de conteúdo para orientar a tomada de decisão no desenvolvimento do produto gerado pelo usuário.

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** Marketing, Mídia Social, Educação de Viagem, Marketing Millennial.

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## 1. Introduction

*“Why use Social Media?”*

*Marketing is no longer about the stuff that you make, but about the stories you tell”*(Seth Godin).

In today’s world, it is not enough for businesses or companies to apply traditional branding and image management practices. While the marketplace environment continues to evolve, especially due to technological developments, it is highly important that businesses or companies learn to cope with their possible customers. Hence, when it comes to social media, businesses may adopt new strategies and practices. One of novel strategies that emerged due to technological developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the use or application of social media. Essentially, social media refers to online platforms that enable individuals to network with one another in cyberspace. Examples of social media platforms include networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Throughout the years, the population of social media users increased significantly. Based on “the Guardian”(Jemima K., 2012), users of social networking site Facebook alone reached billion. The large population of social media users reflect the wide reach of platforms to people locally and internationally. Consequently, the reach of social media platforms creates opportunities for people and groups such as businesses to tap into the population of online users as customers. Due to strengths and advantages of social media, particularly in reaching billions of online users, it could be an effective tool or instrument in marketing and advertising. Businesses may use social media to promote their brands and to develop customer loyalty. Businesses may do so by taking advantage of social media and integrating it to brand image management practices. Considering the context of this discussion,

the research study will focus on identifying what are the practices in social media. To narrow down the research study, it would primarily focus on the context of travel education business.

The main objective of this thesis is to study the practices in social media in the travel education business. The research is important because of its relevance in current practices and discussions about the aforementioned aspect of marketing and advertising. Social media's widespread influence is palpable not only in the field of marketing and advertising but also in other fields and disciplines. Due to the rapid development of technology and the growing need and importance of networking, various sectors and industries adopted social media as a means to advertise and promote their brands. For this reason, conducting research about social media in the field of marketing and branding seems both necessary and relevant because social media branding has become a trend.

Furthermore, it is important to study social media branding because like other marketing and advertising strategies, the success of strategies depend on practices and implementation. Some brands succeed in social media branding because they employ unique and efficient strategies that allow them to maximize or take lead of the advantages, benefits, and contributions of social media networks and applications. For this reason, determining practices in social media would allow to identify efficient social media strategies, which the travel education sector may adopt to successfully promote their brands through networking.

## **1.2 Research Objective and Questions**

The primary objective of conducting this research is to exploit practices in social media in the travel education business applies in the travel education services sector. Aside from the research objective, the research questions will also guide the research process since the study focuses on addressing these questions and meeting the research objective. The research questions in the study include the following:

1. What are the practices in social media in the travel education business?

## **1.3 Significance of Research**

Determining practices in social media in the travel education business is highly important to determine practices and strategies that work efficiently as data obtained in research this would help improve business practices and strategies and branding, and consequently contribute to organizational success. Furthermore, business practices continue to evolve due to changes in the marketplace environment. Technological development, for instance, is introducing numerous ways for people to do work and accomplish tasks in the same way that it is transforming branding practices. Many people use social media frequently. Businesses may take advantage of this opportunity to reach billions of customers through social media platforms. Overall, considering the expected outcomes of research, the study is highly significant because it aims to contribute to improvements in organizational practices, particularly the brand image management.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

As formerly noted, the primary objective of this research is to find the practices in social media in the travel education business. Prior to obtaining research data and analysing it to address the research objective and questions, one must establish a background not only of the travel education services industry, but also related topics such as branding, social media and travel education business. Furthermore, the literature review would also cover trends in social media use that may be used in brand's image management. The literature review integrates collated primary and secondary sources, particularly reputable books and journal articles or peer-reviewed articles published by trusted journal publications. The literature review would then be used to analyse and interpret outcomes of research, specifically the data or information gleaned in the research process, and support findings of research.

### **2.2 The Consumer Behaviour Framework**

One of the foundations of this research study is the process of consumption. Essentially, the process of consumption involves the consumer, the product or good and services offered to consumers, and the businesses or organisations that produce these goods and services. The completion of the consumption process highly depends on the consumers' attachment to particular products or goods and services. On the part of businesses organisations, they implement strategies and various practices to draw consumer interest. It is then the responsibility of the consumers to select products or goods and services based on their interests and preferences. Consequently, various factors affect consumers' decision-making when it comes to

consumption including the strategies of businesses and organisations such as branding strategies.

Figure 1 below illustrates the consumer behaviour framework.

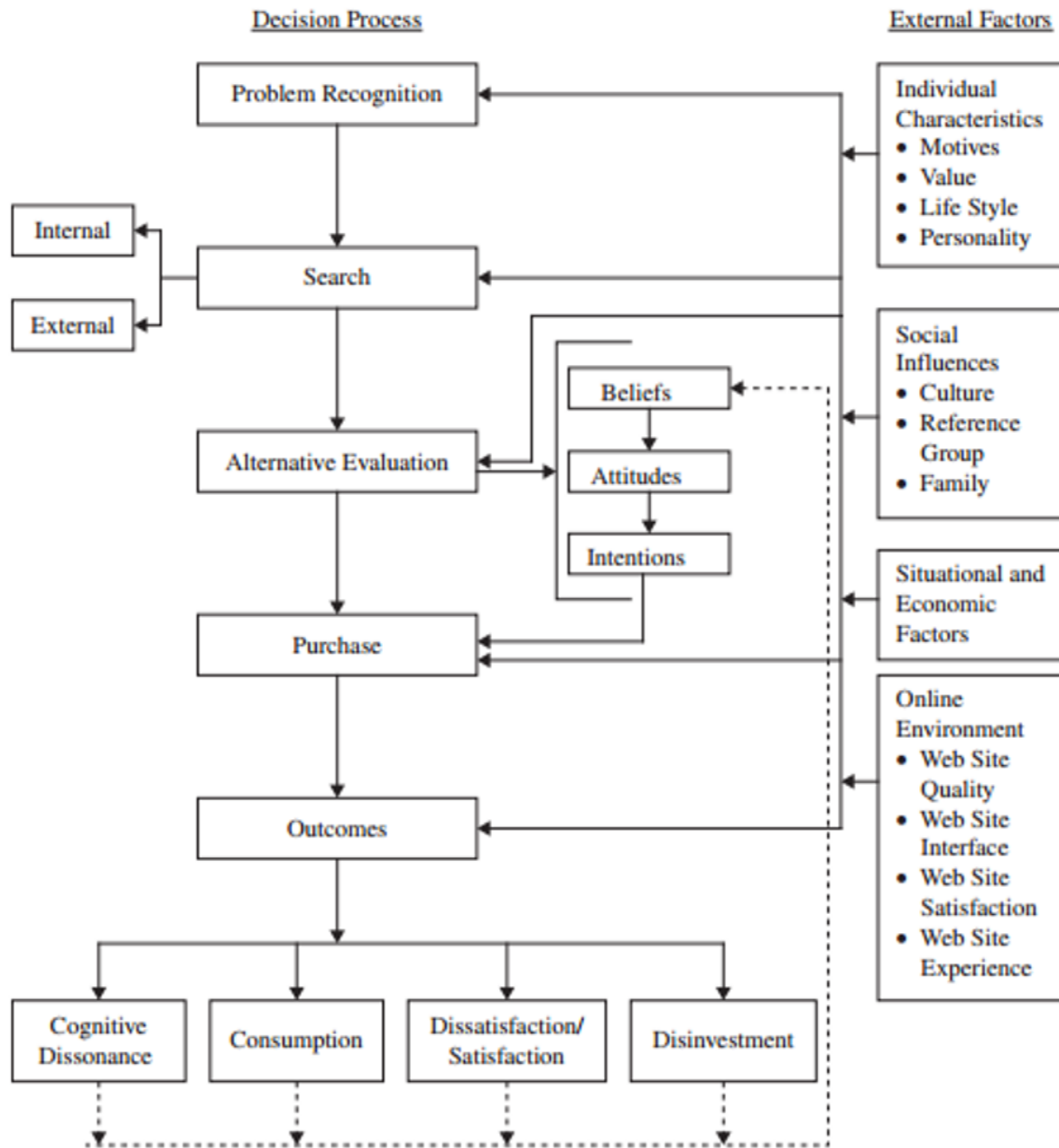


Figure 1. The Consumer Behaviour Framework

Source: Engel, Miniard, and Blackwell, 1986

The consumer behaviour framework constitutes the foundation of the research project because it shows how consumers think and behave. More importantly, the framework illustrates

the significant impact of external factors such as marketing and branding capabilities on the decisions of customers. Based on the framework, customers initially make purchasing decisions to solve problems. Hence, in the beginning, customers identify problems they need to address through purchasing goods or services. After identifying problems or needs, customers try to select goods and services from current commodities to address their problem. Customers can then evaluate alternatives during the selection process in order to ensure that they choose the best possible product when making purchases. After making a decision, the customer proceeds to purchase the product. Outcomes follow the process of purchasing goods. Specific outcomes include cognitive dissonance, consumption, dissatisfaction or satisfaction, and disinvestment on the product and the brand. Throughout these processes, external factors including branding hold significant impact on consumers' decisions, behaviour, preferences, and ways of thinking.

Considering the above-mentioned process of consumer behaviour framework, we may then establish that branding directly relates to consumers. Essentially, branding may mean the development of the brand's identity or reputation to represent or communicate what it stands for as detailed in the brand's mission, vision, philosophy, and objectives. Nonetheless, in practices, branding is primarily motivated by a business or organisation's need to relate with its customers, specifically its target market segments. Although the primary goal of branding is to seemingly encapsulate the essence of the brand, another important objective is to appeal to these market segments. Hence, effective branding is expected to appeal to market segments such as establish loyalty among existing customers and reach out to potential customers to widen the business or organisation's consumer base. Ultimately, these outcomes contribute to organisational success because they ascertain increased and steady revenue and therefore, growth for the business.

## 2.3 Travel Education Business

Travel education—and the business that encompasses travel education—exists for the people who travel with the incentive to learn. For these individuals, travel is a way to have an educational experience during their vacation or travel time. Consumers may travel because of many reasons, but the wealth of information available to them when they travel makes the travel experience an educational one (Joliffe, 2004).

Young people are the demographic that often travels with an educational experience in mind. This is becoming more frequent, especially in places that utilize “study abroad” programs in their tertiary institutions; these places are likely to have individuals who are used to the idea of traveling abroad for an educational experience, like an internship or a cultural exchange (Joliffe, 2004). Many countries even have visas available for students or young people who want to travel briefly and work during their time in the host country; this is another side to leisure travel, but it is certainly different from leisure travel in purpose and scope (van Klooster et al., 2008).

Travel education may take many forms. It could come in the form of an internship or volunteer work at an NGO; it could also come in the form of a cultural exchange. One of the more popular forms of educational tourism that can be found today is the idea of environmental tourism, which is a type of educational tourism in which people learn about the various environmental issues that plague different locales (Joliffe, 2004). These people are often environmentalists, concerned with preserving the many different ecosystems that exist throughout the world.

Despite the many different forms that educational tourism takes, there are a few underlying concepts that remain the same. First, the purpose of the trip is not necessarily for leisure; it is for a differential travel experience that the individual cannot have in his or her own

country (Joliffe, 2004). There is also an element of purpose that comes with educational tourism. The educational tourist has a purpose in his or her travels, and wants to come away from the trip with some kind of knowledge or understanding of the experience that he or she did not have prior to the trip (van Klooster et al., 2008).

Travel education may come in different forms. According to Kozak and Decrop (2009), sources of information for travel education include: (a) traditional travel advertisements and promotional materials such as pamphlets, (b) travel brochures and other materials such as magazines and articles, (c) celebrity endorsements; (d) articles and reports about the destination, (e) inclusion of information on the news or the television, among others, (f) through word of mouth, (g) asking or consulting with people who knew some valuable information about the target destination, (h) and information about travelling based on the researchers' previous experiences (Kozak & Decrop). Aside from these various sources, consumers may also use the Internet to source information (Kozak & Decrop). "The Internet provides the perfect opportunity for travel and tourism organisations and marketers to reach travel and tourism consumers with the information they need to make pre-travel decisions and purchases" (Jordan, 2008, p. 5).

Overall, it is highly important for brands to take advantage of travel education to develop or establish their business or companies because information could influence the way that consumers behave or think. Hence, if a brand is interested in drawing the interest of consumers, then it has to provide adequate information about a target destination that would help the latter make informed decisions. Sulzmaier's (2001) discussion on the issue illustrate different types of information that brands may use to develop a following or establish customer loyalty. When it comes to choosing travel planning, for instance, specifically the process of choosing an airline, consumers may use different types of information to make a decisions. General information



involves data or information about the region where the airport is located. Other decisive information about choosing airlines include the availability of services such as additional baggage weight limit, the availability of lounges in airports, among others. Aside from general information, consumers may also rely on travel information. Travel information include other things that may relate to decision-making such as the cost of goods and services. Consumers may use travel information to look for discount coupons or vouchers, or to compare cost or prices of airline tickets to choose the most affordable or most convenient. Another type of information that affects consumers' decisions is the kind and scope of communication services, and entertainment or wellness among others (Sulzmaier, 2001).

### ***2.3.1 Travel Education and Destination Branding***

Travel education relates to destination branding because in a way, the kind of information spread about travel destinations and experiences is one way of not only branding the destination but also the establishments and businesses in this particular destination. This is because “the brand's existence is dependent on the image formation of the destination” (Munar, 2011, p. 293). Hence, destination branding through travel education is highly important because the outcomes of branding also affect the image or reputation of brands. Hence, for businesses in the travel and tourism sector to succeed, destination branding should be done appropriately to draw the interest of travellers and tourists. One way that businesses and destinations may employ branding is through travel education. Consequently, travel education could be done through social media.

Using social media as a means to accomplish branding objectives is highly important because of the increasing use of technology and the Internet. As of today, there are billions of Internet users around the world. Hence, majority of the entire world population uses the Internet.

According to Munar (2011), the number of online users prove that there is a need for brands to look into opportunities for branding, particularly by digitising tourism experiences. Munar identified various opportunities for brands to employ branding through social media. Tourist created content (TCC) is a valuable tool that brands can utilise for brand image management. The nature of TCC and its impact will be discussed later on in the literature review.

Saraniemi (2011) conducted a study about destination image building in contrast with identity-based branding. The researcher employed qualitative research, particularly the case study method, to obtain data to support the research. Based on Saraniemi's research, image building or product-bound branding have become less efficient than identity-based branding. In image building, a brand is expected to conduct self-analysis, which would then be used later on to position the target market. Since the brand would know the interest and preferences of other people, it would be able to make efficient decisions that positions a business or company appropriately.

Examples of businesses and companies that would benefit from destination branding include travel service providers such as airlines, hotels, travel agencies, and tour operators, among others. Even other types of stores such as restaurants would also benefit from destination branding. With tight competition in the market, travel service providers need to look for various ways and implement different strategies to draw the interest and preferences of consumers. One strategy is to control the cost of goods and services. "Travel service providers and online travel agencies trying to attract more online purchasers should emphasise their ability to provide travel accommodations at the lowest prices" (Mills & Law, 2013, p. 60). In recent years, due to the popularity of travel and tourism online, discount traveling has become one of the more common trends or practices. Aside from the popularity of travel and tourism, the mark-down of the cost of

airline tickets and hotel room accommodations have increased the interest of consumers in visiting various tourist destinations. Another factor that contribute to this trend is the increasing number of young millennials that utilize social media and other online tools to draw inspiration and influence their decisions and plans in life (Mills & Law).

Since the target population is highly diverse, brands must ensure that they work towards targeting a specific market. Brands, for instance, need to make sure that information communicated to consumers through travel education are accurate and represent the vision not only of the brand but also of the destination in general. Alignment of content and message of travel education information for consumers is highly important to communicate a consistent message that represents the destination in an authentic manner. Braun (2012) conducted a study to determine the application of branding in a city, and consequently, to determine how city branding helps establish the brand of the destination, as well as tourist services in a particular city. In the research study, Braun identified eight factors that affect city branding and its impact or influence on tourist services. First, the leadership in target destinations set the pace and message of branding because they make decisions for the tourist destination that is part of their political jurisdiction. Hence, the message of travel education for a particular destination is often a result of the views and priorities of the local government. Second, the commitment of the local government to tourism leads to positive outcomes for branding. Long-term plans are essential to ensure that a destination would move towards target developments and objectives. Travel education needs not only to address potential consumers today but also look into issues in the future that could be addressed through proper branding. If a country, for instance, will host a worldwide event such as the World Cup in the coming years, the local government must push initiatives and remain committed to these throughout to maintain the image of the destination and

draw attention of consumers, even years before the World Cup. Third, clear roles of the leadership are important to ensure that the local government would invest in initiatives that promote successful branding. Fourth and fifth takeaways from the research emphasises the role of stakeholders in contributing to branding, as well as the importance of making branding authentic or genuine to convince consumers. Sixth, combined branding initiatives for different sectors of travel and tourism is highly necessary. Hotels, airlines, restaurants, tour operators, and other businesses in the travel and tourism sector must work together towards a unified branding goal. Seventh, co-branding along with successful brands is necessary to draw attention to the destination. Using celebrities as endorsers, for instance, is one way of drawing consumers' attention to the brand. Eighth, branding must be comprehensive, such that it not only addresses the promotion of one aspect of the travel and tourism sector but the entire sector (Braun, 2011).

## **2.4 Brand Image Management**

Essentially, a brand refers to the name of a line of goods and services for consumers, or signs, symbols, and labels that identify this line among consumers. A more accurate definition of a brand, which relates to the research topic of travel education, is as follows.

*A name, symbol, logo and word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998, p. 103).*

If a business or organisation develops a brand, the next step would be to establish a following for the brand. The ultimate goal of businesses in branding remains to be the main goal

of business – to earn revenue. Hence, businesses develop their brands to establish a good image and reputation, draw the interest of consumers, and ultimately gain a significant percentage of the market share. According to Shaw (2012), one of the most valuable aspects of any business is the brand. Essentially, the brand, specifically its reputation or image, influence the behaviour of consumers. Simply put, a good reputation draws the attention and interest of consumers, while a bad image or reputation pushes consumers away. Hence, businesses work towards branding in a way that would earn their brands a good reputation, and allow their brands to gain brand equity. In brand equity, popularity is the goal and therefore, the introduction of the brand to a large population of a target or potential market.

Shaw also studied important aspects of a brand. One aspect is brand identity, which is “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain” (2012, p. 1265). Coca-Cola adopted the image of Santa Claus in its advertisements, for instance, to develop the brand identity that relates to family. On the contrary, Pepsi hires young and popular icons for their advertisements to target the young population. Certain elements such as colour, icons, and people, music, or other images used in advertisements contribute to a company’s brand identity. One of the objectives of branding is to gain brand loyalty. As formerly noted, a brand’s image or reputation affects consumer behaviour and responses towards a brand. A brand with a good reputation would earn brand loyalty, which “consists of a consumer’s commitment to repurchase the brand and can be demonstrated by repeated buying of a product or service, or other positive behaviours such as word of mouth advocacy” (Shaw, 2012, p. 1266). In this way, brand loyalty directly translates to sales and revenue, and consequently, a percentage of the market share.

Although one aspect of drawing consumers and establishing brand loyalty among consumers is to work on a positive, good, and appealing image or reputation, another factor that affects branding and its outcomes include external factors in the environment. Changes or transformation in the external environment affect branding. Populations and cultures emerge over time, for instance. If in the past, a brand may easily target a specific population such as teenagers or adolescents, when they grow up, their interests would change. This change would then force brands to change tactics and adjust to the interests of the upcoming generation. Other changes that affect branding practices and strategies includes technological development. The prevalent use of the Internet, for instance, creates opportunities for businesses to apply branding using strategies that are entirely different from traditional practices. Nowadays, consumer behaviour changes partly because of technological development. More people has access to the Internet and their use of online services has changed the way they consume, and therefore, similarly shifted their behaviour, preferences, and interests, primarily because of the wealth of information they gain online. “As consumers become better informed, more ethical, more sceptical, they are less ready to be persuaded by brands to buy things, and are much more interested in using brands to do things” (Guest, 2012, p. 77). Consumers obtain information online and as they become more well-informed, they also become exposed to the truth. Consequently, they would more likely look for or demand authenticity, particularly when it comes to marketing, promotions, and branding because they know how the system works. Due to the changes brought about by technology, businesses or companies must learn to cope with these changes or transformations and similarly adopt new practices in branding that match the interests and preferences of consumers.

For branding to be successful, it must be strategic, such that the goals and objectives of branding target essential issues that would make a brand appealing for consumers. Balakrishnan (2009) developed a framework that focuses on strategic branding of destinations. He studied the existing literature about destination and strategic branding to determine the most effective ways to accomplish strategic branding of destinations. According to him, it is highly important that in branding, practitioners determine and acknowledge the nature of tourism and destination branding, which include the following:

- (a) macro-environmental factors such as politics, healthy issues, safety issues such as those related to tourism, and economic growth affect tourism rate in a particular destination or country;
- (b) geographical features, such as weather and resources, among others, may affect access to the destination;
- (c) pre-established notions or preconceptions about destinations affect the preference of consumers when selecting travel destinations;
- (d) stakeholders, such as the government that develops and implements travel and tourism policies, influence branding and the conditions of the travel and tourism industry;
- (e) targeting consumers is difficult because the market population is highly diverse not only with different cultural backgrounds but also priorities, experiences, and preferences or interests;
- (f) the appeal of destinations depend on the kind and quality of services available within this location, such as the kinds of tourist spots, the accessibility of transportation, the kind of food restaurants in the area serve, etc.; and

(g) public opinion highly affects the image or reputation of a destination.

Considering Balakrishnan's (2009) findings in the research, perhaps the last factor is the most important one when considering strategic branding. The last one also relates to the value of social media in travel education as a means to brand destinations, and consequently, travel services. As formerly noted, brands in the travel and tourism sector do not have any control over the image or reputation of their businesses or companies because they are primarily influenced by public opinion, based on consumer experiences. The content of travel blogs, for instance, is out of the hands of brands. Hence, if a travel blogger has something negative to say about a destination, or airlines and hotels, brands cannot control or prevent the publication of this material. The same principle applies to online review sites. Reviewers share insight views, and experiences about tourist services or brands. Brands cannot control the influence of these blogs or reviews on other consumers. If social media affects the reputation of brands in the travel and tourism industry, these brands might as well utilise social media themselves to improve their image and reputation. Table 1 below illustrates the strategies that Balakrishnan formed utilising different sources about the topic.

**Table 1**

Conceptual Framework of Strategic Branding for Destinations

Component	Sub-Categories
<i>Vision</i>	<p>Vision represents the mission, philosophy, culture, and values of brands, which must be communicated to consumers to impress upon them the goals and objectives of the brand</p> <p>For destinations, vision represent the brand or image of a place.</p> <p>Examples of a vision when it comes to destination branding is the public perception of safety in other countries (ex. Iraq is not an</p>



<p><i>Stakeholders</i></p>	<p>appealing destination because of terrorism and safety or security concerns; hence tourist services would not thrive in this country)</p> <p>Stakeholders refer to people and resources that help brands continue operations. Stakeholders may also refer to the strengths and capabilities of the organisation that would affect its operations and performance. It is important that in branding, brands emphasise their good relationships with people or other organisations, the availability and access to resources, and its strengths and capabilities that allow it to offer in demand and valuable goods or services to consumers.</p>
<p><i>Target market</i></p>	<p>Targeting the market means identifying appropriate target market and attracting capable human capital. In social media, for instance, brands would be able to target millennials. Brands must also attract capable human capital to ensure that they would be able to meet the demands of the workplace. In branding, for instance, using social media, a brand's human capital must be able to determine how best to market or promote the brand online to a particular population.</p>
<p><i>Marketing mix</i></p>	<p>The marketing mix refers to different factors that affect operations and production of goods or services such as the people in the organisation, the place where goods or services are produced, the production of these goods and services, and pricing for these products and services. By identifying these, a brand may be able to establish its image and reputation. If goods or products are sold online, consumers would see the brand as accommodating to the need of consumers for convenience. If the brand employs highly responsive people, then the brand would be able to gain an image of being responsive and accommodating to consumers. If a brand's pricing is affordable to low- and mid-income classes, then the brand would be seen as accommodating to these social classes.</p>
<p><i>Positioning</i></p>	<p>Positioning refers to the establishment of the brand's culture or image, as well as the kind and quality of goods and services that the brand</p>

<p><i>Differentiation</i></p>	<p>provides, which consequently affects public perception about it.</p> <p>Differentiation refers to strategies that allow a brand to communicate its unique value proposition that other brands do not offer consumers. In this way, the brand establishes its value for consumers. Branding the brand as something unique for instance would attract the attention of consumers.</p>
<p><i>Communication</i></p>	<p>The communication mix refers to the way that a brand communicates with consumers. Is the brand being honest about its values and position? Does the brand communicate with consumers in a sincere manner? Research studies on the matter prove that authenticity is important in drawing the attention of consumers.</p> <p>In addition, communication also involves decision-making when it comes to selecting communication channels. Will the brand depend on word of mouth? Utilise the experiences of consumers? Take advantage of social media?</p>
<p><i>Feedback</i></p>	<p>Feedback refers to responses of the market. Marketing intelligence reports also provide feedback that would help brands make decisions when it comes to branding. Marketing intelligence reports, for instance, help determine the preferences and interests of consumers.</p>

Source: Balakrishnan, 2009, p. 614

Overall, Balakrishnan's (2009) conceptual framework in Table 1 illustrates the traditional branding strategy. All of the components are important in developing the brand's image and reputation as they all contribute to the kinds and quality of services that the brand provides, as well as the kind of consumer experiences. Although the conceptual framework applies to traditional branding, it should also apply to brand image management through social media.

## **2.5 What is Social Media**

Social media networking tools are tools that are specific to the computer, and allow users to create and share content via the Internet. These tools may be more simplistic tools, but they also may be the more complex tools of Web 2.0 that allow for users to create user-generated content and then present that content to the wider world (Dutta, n.d.). The introduction of social media induced the idea of viral media; user-created content can, for the first time, become viral with the advent of social media.

Social media is an incredibly powerful tool for businesses insofar as marketing is concerned (Djukic, 2011). Marketing has changed with the introduction of social media, because now brands are much more available to the customer than ever before. Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook require that brands not only be available to the customer, but also receptive to the multitude of requests and comments that these consumers make on the brand (Djukic, 2011). This can be a double-edged sword for the brand, as a customer can create positive reviews for the brand, or the customer can post negative reviews for the brand. Social media also offers the potential for viral marketing. There have been a number of companies who have done viral marketing in an extremely successful manner; the introduction of video and other multimedia technology into marketing campaigns often makes a social media marketing campaign more successful (Djukic, 2011). Brands that can mobilize social media have been shown to be more effective in creating brand recognition and brand loyalty from their customers over the long term (Dutta, n.d.).

## **2.6 Social Media and Branding for Travel and Tourism**

One of the most recent trends in branding strategy is the use of technology, particularly the use of social media (Singh, 2012). Using social media through the Internet is highly important because in several studies, the availability of travel and tourism services online positively affects the behaviour of consumers. Consequently, positive and responsive behaviour among consumers set important implications for travel agencies and other businesses or companies in the travel education services sector. In a study conducted by Lang (2000), the researcher explored the effect of the Internet on travel consumers, particularly on their purchasing behaviour, including the implications of these effects on travel agencies. Although the availability of travel services online threatens the position of travel agents due to the dependence of consumers on the Internet or the World Wide Web, the convenience of online services and its access to the global population makes it more viable and useful for travel agencies and other businesses in the sector, albeit the contrasting information about this topic in earlier research. Lang's research, for instance, suggests that "while travel consumers are increasingly turning to the Internet, many are still hesitant to book on line" (2000, p. 368).

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) conducted research about the role of social media in online travel information search. To gather data, Xiang and Gretzel assessed how users that participated in the research used search engines online to look for information about destinations and other travel related data such as schedule and cost of flights and hotel room accommodations. Through a content analysis, Xiang and Gretzel discovered that the results of searches online were outcomes of social media use, such that when consumers use online search engines to look for travel information, they are redirected to social media sites, particularly the official social network sites of brands – Facebook pages, Twitter pages, and blogs among others. Hence, the Internet creates an interconnected network that links consumers to tourist service providers.

Brands, for instance, that offer goods and services in travel and tourism may get in touch with target consumers that are interested in these through search engines. Anyone searching for specific goods and services offered by a brand would be able to get in touch with businesses or companies that match his or her needs through search engines. Consequently, search engines such as Google utilise mechanisms to redirect consumers to social media pages of brands (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Lang's (2000) research was conducted at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century before the popularity of online websites about travel and tourism. Hence, the results of Lang's research were not compelling enough to convince people about the importance of the Internet when it comes to marketing and promotions in the travel and tourism sector. Nonetheless, Lang similarly pointed out the benefits and advantages of using the Internet for consumers. Advantages of Internet use for travel consumers include the convenient and instant access to travel and tourism services, access to updated information about travel, reduced cost of availing tourism services online due to the elimination of a middle man, and the reduced cost of direct booking and purchase of travel and tourism services online, thus, eliminating fees and payment of booking with a travel agency (Lang, 2000).

To gain data to address Lang's (2000) research objectives and questions, the researcher conducted surveys among consumers living in Seattle in the United States. Lang worked with 200 adult travel consumers to gather data through a survey. Lang designed the survey to determine consumers' purchasing behaviour. Outcomes of research prove that 93 percent of the consumers prefer to pre-book their travel over booking late. Another relevant outcome of Lang's research is that two thirds of the population of the participants uses the Internet to look for information about travel. Consequently, 34 percent of the remaining one third stated that they

expect they would be using the Internet in the future to look for travel information. Hence, the results of research study prove the growing interest of travel consumers in using the Internet to look for information about travel and tourism.

Lang (2000) also designed the research survey to determine what consumers thought the advantages of using the Internet was when looking for travel and tourism information. The respondents that formerly used the Internet to look for travel and tourism information responded to this part of the survey. First, the participants identified how they commonly used the Internet for travel-related activities. Second, the participants shared the advantages of using the Internet to look for travel and tourism related information. Tables 2 and 3 below illustrate the responses of the participants and the recurring themes in their responses.

**Table 2**

Participants' Utilisation of the Internet for Travel Purposes

<b>Internet used for the following purpose</b>	<i>No. of People</i>	<i>Percentage of Users</i>
Search for information about a destination	118	90
Check air fares and flight schedules	104	79
Check for information about hotels	79	60
e-mail a quote request for my travel arrangements	26	20
make an online booking or reservation	44	34
search for last-minute or online specials	50	38
obtain information before I go to a travel agent	61	47
communicate with other travellers online	10	8

Source: Lang, 2000, p. 375

Table 2 above shows that one of the most common uses of the Internet when it comes to travel is the collation of pertinent information about travel and tourism. Based on data obtained by Lang (2000), travel consumers rely on the Internet due to the widespread information about destinations. When consumers book with travel agents, they would often rely on the knowledge

of the agent or the agency, which could be limited or influenced by marketing and promotions strategies, such that agents would make recommendations based on what their respective agencies market or promote to consumers. Most consumers prefer looking for information online because they would be able to access a wide breadth of information, whether they relay positive or negative reviews or comments about particular destinations. Apart from using the Internet to gather travel information, majority of consumers also do so to check flights and accommodations. Airlines, hotels, and other hospitality businesses tie up with various sites online and allow consumers to review information regarding ticketing or booking. In this way, consumers would know more about plane seat or room availability.

Aside from using the Internet to gather information or to look for booking information, consumers also rely on the Internet to look for airplane ticket or hotel accommodation deals. While consumers may avail of discounts by booking directly with airlines or hotels or relying on travel agencies, they may also do so by looking for deals online from sites that provide vouchers, discounts, and coupons to consumers. Consumers also utilise the Internet to finalise booking and accommodations through reservations.

**Table 3**

Advantages of Internet Use for Travel Consumers

Advantages as listed by consumers who had used it to search for travel information	<i>Number of People</i>	<i>Percentage of Users</i>
--	-------------------------	----------------------------

Easy-to-use, 'user-friendly' medium	17	13.0
Ability for consumers to obtain information	28	21.4
Easily accessible, detailed and up-to-date information	42	32.1
Convenient and instant access for availability enquiries and bookings	86	65.6
Cost advantage for consumers	38	29.0
Avoidance of travel agent and fees and charges	4	3.1
Time	44	33.6
Easy to compare prices	44	33.6
More options	37	28.2
Personal control over booking	13	9.9
Finding like-minded host country contacts or travellers	1	0.8
No sales pressures to make instant decisions	13	9.9
Earn more frequent-flyer points booking direct online	1	0.8

Source: Lang, 2000, p. 375

While Table 2 relates how travel consumers usually utilise the Internet for travel purposes, Table 3 shows the consumers responses when they identified the advantages of Internet use. Based on the responses of the participants as presented in the table, consumers believe that the primary advantage of using the Internet for travel purposes is that it is more convenient. By using the Internet, consumers need not leave their own homes or arrange schedules, with a travel agency or agent, consumers only need to go online and look for the kind of information they need using search engines. Moreover, drawing information online is easy because consumers access information in a timely manner. Other primary advantages of using the Internet based on the responses of the consumers in the research study is the detailed and up-to-date information they glean online, doing so saves time, and it is easy to compare prices. Information online is up-to-date because many users publish and delivery online content every



day. One of the main sources of travel information include blogs and review sites. Online users update these blogs and sites daily. Hence, travel consumers gain up-to-date information that would therefore provide accurate information about destinations and actual travel experiences. Moreover, it is easy to compare prices when looking for information online. When consumers rely on travel agents or agencies, they would only gain access to the prices offered by the agents or agencies they consult. If consumers want to compare prices, then they would have to personally visit the agencies and agents or the airlines and hotels when booking directly. The process would take a long time. Using the Internet, on the other hand, make it easier and less time-consuming for consumers to compare prices. Comparing prices online is also possible because there are sites that even compare all costs for consumers. Hence, consumers only need to look at one set of information (Lang, 2000).

While Lang's (2000) research focused on the views and experiences of consumers in using the Internet for travel related purposes, Yang and Chen's (2012) study focuses on the perspective of travel agencies. Furthermore, the latter's research is more recent, which means that the researchers considered the current conditions of social media for branding, marketing, or promotions. Yang and Chen's study focused on the contributions and importance of the Internet for travel agencies. To obtain data to address the research objective, Yang and Chen collected data from travel agencies based in Taiwan. After collecting data through surveys, the researchers applied factor analysis to interpret data. In the past, travel agencies seemed to have raised their concern about the increasing use of the Internet for travel related concerns and activities, as noted in Lang's research study. Nonetheless, in recent years, travel agencies have adopted and thus, began utilising the Internet for their benefit (Yang & Chen, 2012).

One of the first issues that Yang and Chen (2012) addressed in the study was the common use of website services among consumers. Travel agencies, particularly those that make use of website services, ranked service attributes based on their consumers' interests and frequency of use. Table 4 below illustrates the results of the participants' ranking of service attributes.

**Table 4**

Ranking of Website Service Attributes based on Tourists' Preferences and Frequency of Use

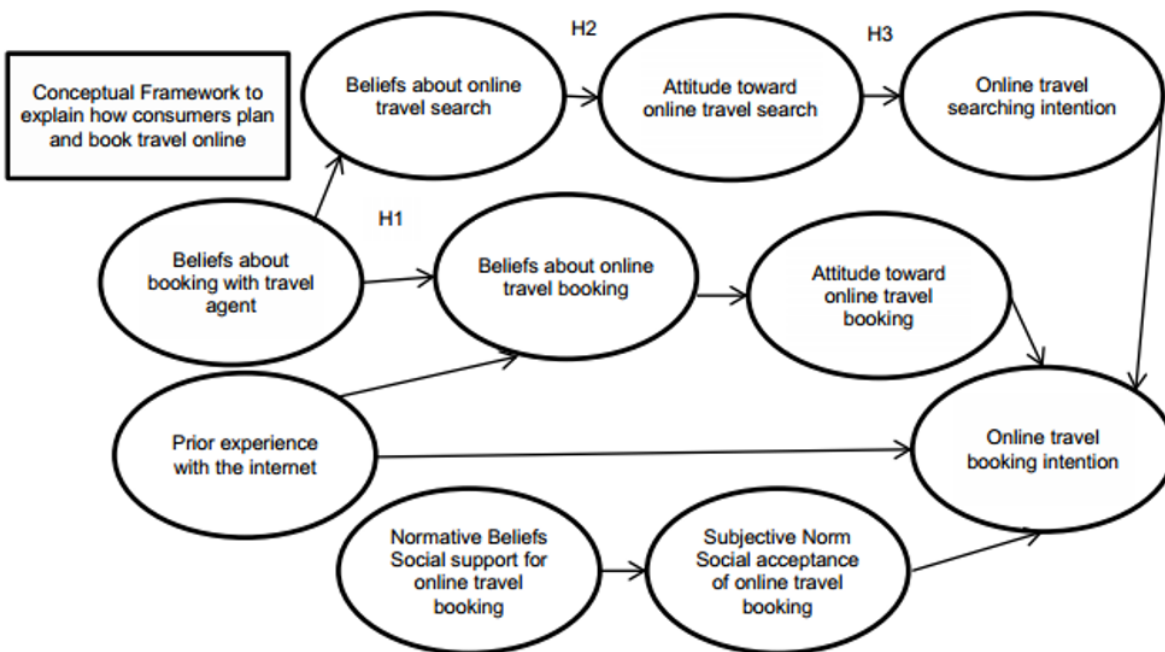
<b>Website Service Attributes</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Price comparison (plane, ticket, hotel, and so on)	1
Itinerary information	2
Information about the different tourist destinations	3
Online reservations (ticket and room reservation)	4
Calendars/events information	5
Information about the special discounts for members	6
Information database to offer research services	6
Offering contact information	8
Checking transaction data	9
Information about the tours offered	10
Information about tourist destinations' famous products	11
Offering interactive functions	12
Information about other special products	13
Information about the latest website news	14
Links to related websites	14
Visual information (photographs, map, and so on)	16
Offering a function to update members' account details	17
Online travel-related products sold (maps, magazines, and so on)	18
Customer survey (questionnaire or e-mail)	19
Customised shopping plan	20
Offering a function for member registration	21

Source: Yang & Chen, 2012, p. 238

Table 4 above shows that consumers utilise the Internet for various reasons, the primary reason being to compare prices or costs of travel services such as plane tickets, hotel accommodations, and tours, among others. Another reason why consumers utilise the Internet for travel related purposes is to look for and develop an itinerary plan for a specific destination. The Internet also serves as a platform for travel education services because consumers visit online websites in order to gain information about specific destinations. After considering information obtained online, consumers are now prepared to book tickets and accommodations (Yang & Chen, 2012). After identifying the use of website services for travel agencies, Yang and Chen argued that these businesses take advantage of the Internet because of the existing market online. Since many consumers or tourists use online services for various reasons, travel agencies take advantage of this opportunity to target consumers. Travel agencies then base the kind of services they offer on the interests of consumers. “The five most important attributes of website services in travel agencies as perceived by tourists are price comparison, itinerary information, information about the different tourist destinations, online reservations, and calendars/events information” (Yang & Chen, 2012, p. 242). Consequently, Yang and Chen identified the contributions of website services from the perspectives of travel agencies and discovered that the “five underlying factors of all service attributes... [includes] transaction service, travel information service, promotional information service, interactive service, and membership service” (Yang & Chen, 2012, p. 242).

Conyette (2012) also studied patterns or trends in consumers' use of online services for travel related purposes, particularly in booking travel. Conyette sought to develop a conceptual framework that illustrates the link or relationship between variables. These variables that Conyette introduced in the research study include “online searching” and “planning and booking

of leisure travel products” (2012, p. 57). Figure 1 below illustrates Conyette’s conceptual framework.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework of Consumer Behaviour in Planning and Booking Travel Online (Conyetti’s, 2012)

Figure 1 above illustrates Conyetti’s (2012) conceptual framework, which traces the behaviour of consumers when planning and booking travel online. In the beginning stages, consumers utilise the Internet to plan and book their travel depending on their beliefs about online travel search. Often, consumers would rely on the Internet if they believe that online services would help them glean important information that they need to make decisions. Beliefs are not only based on what consumers think about the Internet and online search, planning, or booking, but also on their experiences. If consumers have had positive experiences in online planning and booking of travel, then they would more likely return. Another factor that affects consumers’ perceptions of Internet use is their previous experience with travel agents. If

consumers have had negative and unsatisfying experiences with travel agencies and agents, then they would more likely resort to online services.

If consumers gain a positive view or perspective about online services based on experiences and beliefs, then they would now utilise the Internet. Consumers would then intend to search online for the purpose of looking for information about planned destinations, and consequently plan an itinerary or book airline tickets or hotel room accommodations. Overall, Conyetti's (2012) conceptual framework prove that the primary reasons why consumers rely on the Internet is because of their beliefs, and experiences that either encourage or convince them to rely on online services or to remain traditional and book directly or with travel agencies. Conyette's research, therefore, establishes the importance of developing a culture of online dependence among consumers. Brands may do so by offering good and satisfying goods and services so consumers would more likely return and plan or book travel online (Conyette).

While Conyette (2012) particularly focused on the experiences of consumers when it came to influencing their interest to utilise the Internet to plan and book their travels, Peterson, Balasubramanian, and Bronnenberg (1997) studied other factors that affect consumers' interest in online services. According to the researchers, a consumers' decision begins with his or her brand preference. If a consumer, for instance, wants to avail of travel goods and services of a particular company, then the consumer may choose various channels to do so. Hence, if the brand is present online, then the consumer would more likely access goods and services online to save time and effort of visiting physical travel agencies. At this point, the consumer would utilise the Internet to plan and book for their travel. Consumers would then use online services to gather information about their intended destination including tourist spots, hotel room accommodations, and available airline seats. The decisions and activities of consumers in this stage not only affect

their would-be experiences during travel, but also influence retailers, manufacturers, and other intermediaries. Table 5 below illustrates the result of Peterson, Balasubramanian, and Bronnenberg's research study.

**Table 5**

Decisions of Internet Market Participants

<b>Consumers</b>	<p>Search strategies</p> <p>Joint use of the Internet/conventional retail channels</p> <p>Aggregation of buying power</p>
<b>Retailers</b>	<p>Decision on on-line transaction vs. on-line information provision</p> <p>Coordination of Internet with traditional retail channel</p> <p>Facilitation/obstruction of consumer coordination between the two channels</p> <p>Stocking policies (exclusive/multiproduct)</p> <p>Pricing decisions and price-matching promises</p> <p>Depth and pattern of information presentation to consumers</p> <p>Nature of contractual relationships with manufacturer</p> <p>Nature of contractual relationship with (possible) information brokers</p>
<b>Manufacturers</b>	<p>Degree of vertical and horizontal product or service differentiation</p> <p>Degree of vertical channel integration (sell directly to customer/use independent retailer)</p> <p>Nature of contracting relationships with retailer</p> <p>Pricing policy to retailers</p> <p>Coordination of information, product availability and pricing between Internet and conventional retail channels</p> <p>Nature of contractual relationship with (possible) information brokers</p>
<b>Other</b>	<p>Information brokers; decision on charging consumers, retailers or</p>

<b>intermediaries</b>	<p>manufacturers (or a combination of these participants) for information provided</p> <p>Decision on pricing structure for information: payment for purchases made or for information provided</p> <p>Decision on who operates information brokerages: consumer associations, retailers, or manufacturers</p>
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Source: Peterson, Balasubramanian, & Bronnenberg, 1997, p. 341

One of the reasons why exploring online opportunities for branding such as social media is necessary is because of its established impact on people. Peterson, Balasubramanian, and Bronnenberg (1997) conducted research to explore the implications of the Internet for consumer marketing. The researchers initially discussed the characteristics of the Internet to determine positive implications that businesses or companies may find useful, particularly in achieving their goals and objectives in marketing. According to Peterson, Balasubramanian, and Bronnenberg, the follow Internet characteristics make the online platform an effective marketing tool:

- (a) The ability to inexpensively store vast amounts of information at different virtual locations;
- (b) The availability of powerful and inexpensive means of searching, organizing, and disseminating such information;
- (c) Interactivity and the ability to provide information on demand;
- (d) The ability to provide perceptual experiences that are far superior to print catalogue, although not as rich as personal inspection;
- (e) The ability to serve as at transaction medium;

(f) The ability to serve as a physical distribution medium for certain goods (e.g. software);  
and

(g) Relatively low entry and establishment costs for sellers.

Source: Peterson, Balasubramanian, & Bronnenberg (1997, p. 333)

### ***2.6.1 Branding through Social Media***

Recent research studies prove that social media is an invaluable tool for brand image management. Yan (2011) conducted research to determine how social media fulfils the purpose of branding. The researcher worked in the social media sector for a while and because of his experience, he decided to study the implications of social media sites or platforms such as Facebook and Twitter on branding. During the last decade, the development of the Web 2.0 has opened up social media opportunities. Through Web 2.0, developers were able to create various platforms for networking such as social media sites. Since then, the Internet has played an important role in various fields and disciplines, including branding. The Internet has been a decisive factor not only in the branding of businesses or companies but also of people. For one, Barack Obama's presence online and his campaign team's prevalent use of social media has significantly contributed to his presidential win in the past election.

When social media network platforms such as Facebook and Twitter emerged during the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, people and organisations saw how these tools or instruments may be used for various objectives, particularly in influencing consumer behaviour and decisions, among others. Consequently, investors found a way to commercialise social media platforms because their impact on consumer behaviour. Facebook, for instance, merely started as a social networking tool for students at Harvard University where creator Mark Zuckerberg attended. At



that time, university students used Facebook to create profiles and share information about themselves and one another. As more users joined the site, Facebook expanded to include even other students and people outside Harvard. After years of polishing the Facebook platform, Zuckerberg and his team reintroduced Facebook as a social networking tool for all. Through Facebook, online users may create their own profiles where they can post their pictures, daily status updates of whatever they wanted to say, comment on other people's posts, and communicate with their friends through the messaging system. Eventually, Facebook users reached millions and it was then that Zuckerberg and other investors realised the value of social media in advertising.

Consequently, Facebook faced several restructuring to accommodate the business aspect of social media. One example of this was the construction of Facebook Pages. Through the Facebook Pages, various businesses or companies, not only from the travel sector but from other sectors as well, create their own spaces online where they post marketing and promotional content. Facebook users may then follow or "like" these pages. In this way, businesses may reach Facebook's billions of users. In recent years, Facebook also adopted various strategies to improve the capacity of businesses to target consumers through marketing and promotions. Facebook has since streamlined advertising on the website such that Facebook users are constantly exposed to marketing and promotional content online, which has become more visible due to Facebook updates.

Aside from Facebook, another successful social media platform is Twitter. Twitter is a microblogging site that allows online users to post their views and opinions in 140 characters. Twitter users only create their own profiles by posting a picture and a brief information about themselves. Aside from allowing users to air or post their views, opinions, concerns, and daily

activities, Twitter also allows users to create a space for their interests. Twitter users may “follow” not only their family and friends but also other people they share interests with or are interested in, including celebrities, politicians, and businesses or brands, among others. Twitter posts of the people or organisations users follow stream on their timeline, and they may choose to interact by replying through Tweets. Twitter also allows users to send direct messages to specific users. Another feature of Twitter is that it allows users to build a following. Other users may “follow” them and interact with them through tweets.

According to Yan (2011), social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter work not only as marketing or advertising tools but also as branding tools because these platforms “are helpful in revealing the thinking of the people behind the brands... [and] satisfy a need: the desire of engagement with a brand they wish to be associated with, or... to feel ‘one’ with the brand” (p. 690).

Businesses, organisations, or brands utilise social media to promote a particular vision of the brand – corporate citizenship. As argued by Yan (2011), “their motives are connected to the idea of corporate citizenship and how successful brands promote their ideas” (p. 690). Consequently, consumers respond well to these businesses, organisations, or brands because they feel engaged or valued when the latter share information about their enterprise. Businesses, organisations, and brands then take advantage of consumer thinking or behaviour by looking for ways to engage with them and make them feel valued. For one, brands use social media not only to share updates and other information about their businesses or companies, but also to engage with consumers by involving them in the decision-making process. Branding and promotional strategies include voting activities where consumers engage in voting for goods or services to help businesses or companies make decisions, and contests where brands ask online users to

create content for them in exchange of prices, such as posters and artwork. In this way, brands build a close relationship with consumers because businesses and companies include them in major activities and decision-making. “Companies need to collaborate with consumers not just for [research and development], but for everyday marketing purposes” (Yan, 2011, p. 691). Hence, “the brand is strengthened through participation, allowing external audiences to identify with it, and become involved in it” (Yan, 2011, p. 691).

We may, therefore, argue based on Yan’s (2011) discussions and arguments that social media platforms work as branding tools and instruments because they create a relationship between brands and consumers. Furthermore, social media platforms eliminate the gap between them because social media presents various opportunities for brands and consumers to constantly communicate and talk about shared vision, preferences, and interests. Another reason why social media is an important networking and branding tool for businesses and companies is because brands gain access to a large market online. To this date, Facebook has amassed billions of users from hundreds of countries around the world, which makes it valuable for brands because of the existing and potential global market online. With a massive market, brands may work towards brand equity to popularise their brand around the world.

According to Yan (2011), brands often set nine different goals for social media branding:

- (a) Build a sense of membership or citizenship with the organisation;
- (b) Encourage the acceptance and communication of brand values;
- (c) Encourage the audience to engage in dialogue and promote the brand;
- (d) Help the organisation find and maintain a competitive advantage;
- (e) Inform the vision behind the brand and build differentiation for it;

- (f) Act as a check on whether the brand is being properly communication and understood by the audiences;
- (g) Build positive brand associations;
- (h) Build the perceived quality of the brand; and
- (i) Build greater awareness of the brand to audiences that it has not yet reached.

Source: Yan, 2011, p. 692

Based on the foregoing nine goals of social media branding, brands carefully structure and implement branding activities and strategies to draw the interest and support of consumers. Brands utilise social media because it is the quickest platform for them to establish a network. As formerly noted, brands may utilise social media to establish corporate citizenship by building relationships with consumers through communication channels in social media with online users. Consequently, brands encourage consumers to accept brand values by constantly exposing them to content that communicated these values to consumers. For instance, if a brand has launched a program or project for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), particularly through the implementation of “green” practices, such as the use of reusable bags, the brand may communicate its commitment to environmental sustainability by posting a picture or a video of this project on its Facebook or Twitter profile for consumers to see. In this way, the brand reaffirms its values and allows consumers to share these values through their interaction with the brands. Online users on Facebook and Twitter may re-post or re-tweet the link, or also leave positive comments about the brand that their family and friends online would pick up on (Yan, 2011).

Brands also utilise social media for branding by taking advantage of opportunities to gain relevant knowledge, information, or ideas that would help the brand maintain competitive advantage. One of the ways for brands to gain competitive advantage is to offer consumers unique goods and services that no other brands offer. Hence, the business or company would gain a significant percentage of the market. To develop unique and in-demand products, brands may use social media by asking consumers to participate in research and product development. Brands would often ask consumers about their views and opinions about existing goods and products, and consequently share their ideas for new goods or services. Businesses then go through consumers' comments and then use this information to make important decisions, particularly about product development. Aside from utilising social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to gather information, brands may also use other platforms such as blog and review sites to know more about their consumers and what they think about their goods and services. "By going to blogs and social networks, people can understand the personalities behind the scenes" (Yan, 2011, p. 691). Moreover, social media "allows [the organisation] to grasp the prevailing mood of the public" (Yan, 2011, p. 691). The latter is particularly true when brands utilise review sites. Through review sites, consumers that used goods or availed of services offered by a business or company may freely leave a review of his or her experience as a consumer.

Considering the nine goals of social media branding and years of research studies about the topic, Yan (2011) developed some considerations that should help brands efficiently develop social branding strategies and initiatives. Table 6 below shows Yan's recommendations for effective social media branding.

**Table 6**

## Social Media Branding Considerations and Strategies

<b>Social Media Branding Considerations</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Use social media to establish transparency</i>	<p>Organisations need to make decisions about social media branding, in relation to transparency. Some of the decisions that brands need to make include the frequency of social media use for the brand, the type of content that would be shared with consumers, and the overall structure of the brand's social media use.</p> <p>According to Yan (2011), "ideally, [brands] will need to ensure that it is their voice and not one that has been too sanitised by communications" (p. 693). In this way, the brand's message would be authentic and therefore, transparent. Consequently, consumers would buy into the brand's message because of their transparency and authenticity.</p>
<i>Use social media to conduct research about the target audience, and existing or potential market</i>	<p>The purpose of doing so is for the brand to determine whether social media would be an efficient tool for branding, marketing, and overall promotion of the brand. If the brand caters to the elderly, for instance, then social media may not be the only platform for branding since based on existing literature, only a small percentage of the elderly population utilise social media. As argued by Yan (2011), "some business might not need [social media] because their audiences are not connected online: those targeting elderly audiences might find conventional media to be more useful" (p.</p>

<p><i>Extend the rule in brand usage to new media</i></p>	<p>263).</p> <p>Extending the rule for brand usage is important because the brand needs to determine whether social media platforms for the brand needs to be official or not. Blog posts or reviews about the brand, for instance, need not be official because it must come from the consumer. On the contrary, pages or accounts of brands on Facebook or Twitter must be official so consumers would discern authentic information from those that come from bogus sites or pages.</p>
<p><i>Measure the success of branding</i></p>	<p>During and after the implementation of social media branding, brands need to measure or assess the success of branding. In this way, the brand would know whether it needs to improve its strategies or if it is targeting the appropriate audience and sending good content to consumers.</p>

Source: Yan, 2011

### ***2.6.2 Social Media Tools and Platforms for Branding***

Huang, Yung, and Yang (2011) also conducted a study to determine how travel agencies gain competitive advantage through social media, particularly using a travel blog as a marketing channel. Huang, Yung, and Yang's research study is relevant because the researchers focused on assessing the external environment of travel agencies to determine the factors or conditions that affect operations and performance, and consequently increase the importance of technology, particularly the Internet and social media, in marketing, promotions, branding, and other

disciplines or activities. As formerly noted, two of the most popular social media sites used by billions of people include Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Nonetheless, there are other social media platforms such as blogs. Blogs are webpages or websites that allows the online user – the blogger – to post different content such as pictures, videos, and audio clips, among others, but texts primarily, to talk about people, places, or things. People who frequently travel may develop travel blogs on their own where they share pictures of their trip, write about their experiences, and encourage others to travel themselves. One of the advantages of blogs is that consumers would more likely trust bloggers since the latter would share their experiences and offer honest reviews and comments about their previous destination (Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011).

Within the context of a business' external environment, marketing, promotion, and branding outside the internal environment of a brand is possible. Often, brands focus on what their business or company should do to implement branding strategies not realising that they may also do so externally. Blogs, particularly those dedicated to travel and tourism help businesses in the travel education services sector to accomplish branding objectives for the brand. In recent years, blogs have played an important role in branding travel education services. With the increasing number of travel blogs, consumers have consistently relied on these social media platforms to look for travel information. Hence, blogs play an important role in travel education. Consequently, consumers' reliance on travel blogs made travel and tourism "hot topics" in the online community. "Travel and tourism are among the most popular subjects on the World Wide Web, and it is likely that they are also popular subjects in the blogosphere" (Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011, p. 140).

Focusing on branding and promotions in the external environment is highly important especially so that brands may achieve competitive advantage considering the tight competition in



the marketplace environment. One of the factors in a business' external environment that affect operations and performance include the economy. Although the recession began in 2008 and the global economy has since recovered, economic growth has been slow even in developed countries such as the United States. For this reason, businesses or companies were forced to cut back on spending, including spending on marketing, advertising, and branding initiatives. Considering the internal shortcomings of businesses due to the economy, brands may then take advantage of factors or elements in the external environment to maximise branding efforts. One of the strategies is to rely on social media, particularly travel blogs. Since blogs are owned by personal online users, brands need not pay for bloggers' services, although this may happen, especially when it comes to review sites. "From a tourist's perspective, blogs allow the sharing of opinions that can be the basis on which trip decisions are made" (Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011, p. 140). Brands may pay online users to post positive reviews about destinations and brands. Nonetheless, if brands are looking for branding opportunities for free, travel blogs are significant opportunities for them.

Due to the popularity of travel blogs, brands may then become motivated to invest on this platform for branding. Hence, travel blogs offer opportunities for brands to measure the efficiency of travel blogs, particularly when it comes to contributing to marketing and promotions. When it comes to assessing the impact of travel blogs on brands' sales or revenue, brands may utilise tools online to determine direct sales that resulted from travel blog posts. For one, brands may check page visits of their websites and determine where the "clicks" to their website came from. Brands may see if these "clicks" originated from a particular blog, meaning if consumers read the blog and decided to visit the brand's website and purchase goods and services from them online. If blogs draw brands significant traffic, then they may decide to

capitalise on travel blogs, which would not require much funds from the brand. Brands may utilise blogs “with very little and very inexpensive editorial content, yet are capable of exerting extraordinary influence” (Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011, p. 141). In some cases, brands assess the performance of travel blogs by measuring traffic in the form of page visits, “clicks”, comments, and number of “shares” or reposts to other sites or social media platforms. Some brands that find travel blogs, which draw significant traffic, choose to capitalise on these blogs by offering goods and services to bloggers in exchange for their promotion and marketing of the brand.

Aside from capitalising on a successful travel blog to market, promote, and brand goods and services, brands may also utilise travel blog channels to implement differentiated strategies. Travel blogs will help brands differentiate their strategies because these blogs create unique user experiences. Travel blogs differ from other marketing, promotion, and branding tools, such that consumers are able to interact with bloggers and view their comments and experiences from an authentic perspective. Most consumers get the impression that since travel bloggers are usually independent, businesses or companies do not influence what they share on their blogs. Hence, bloggers’ views are authentic. Furthermore, travel blogs create a dynamic and interactive platform for promotion. In this case, consumers do not merely assume the role of the receiver of marketing or promotional material as in traditional methods of advertising. On the contrary, consumers may engage within travel blogs by leaving comments, asking questions for the bloggers, and interacting with other blog readers to gain more insight about specific destinations, airlines, and hotels, among others (Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011).

Huang, Yung, and Yang (2011) also explored other aspects of a business’ external environment that would affect its marketing or promotional strategies. Table 7 below illustrates

the various dimensions in a business or company's external environment along with the factors that establish travel blog marketing as a viable strategy for various brands.

**Table 7**

Travel Blog Marketing Channel Model

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Factor</b>
<i>External environmental forces</i>	Increasing blog users Threat of substitute channels Competitive intensity from industry incumbents Bargaining power of buyers
<i>Internal motivations for investment</i>	Increasing customer relationship Strengthening promotion effectiveness Expanding distribution channels Improving external censorship Reducing R& Cost
<i>Developing differentiated strategy</i>	Building a brand image Offering a superior product Exploring customer-specific solutions Developing new products
<i>Seizing the expected performance</i>	Generating buzz and interest Increasing sales Encouraging repeat visits to the blog and associated websites Improving ranks with the major search engines

Source: Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011

Table 7 above illustrates the external environment dimensions that contribute to the viability of travel blogs as branding and marketing tools for brands. Essentially, the results of Huang, Yung, and Yang's (2011) research study prove that travel blogs present various

opportunities for brands to market, promote, and brand or develop a positive image among consumers. As formerly noted, travel blogs help brands target existing and potential consumers without spending on promotions. “Through a travel blog, a travel agency’s marketing managers or sales team can quickly target customers as the key to gaining a competitive advantage” (Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011, p. 145). Consumers visit travel blogs because they are interested in traveling. Hence, utilising travel blogs as a medium to target a specific audience – travel consumers – would be effective and bring about positive outcomes for a brand, particularly in branding and promotion.

Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012) explored other social media platforms for branding. In their research study, Lim, Chung, and Weaver sought to determine the impact of social media on destination branding. The researchers focused on specific platforms and compared the impact of consumer-generated and marketer-generated videos. Videos are social media tools because they may be used to share information about a brand. If there is an existing video about a brand that advertises or promotes it, online users may share it through various social media platforms. One of the best outcomes of taking advantage of social media for branding is that there is a potential for content such as videos to become “viral” or popular as a result of the number of views. Consequently, the number of views equates to the brand’s success in branding since it would have managed to introduce its brand to millions or billions of users around the world. To gather data, the researchers collated several consumer-generated and marketer-generated video clips related to travel. Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012) then analysed the clips not only based on the content but also the total number of views, the average number of views, number of hits, and number of comments. Based on the outcomes of analysis, consumer-generated video clips had more views, comments, and hits online.

To determine the reasons of viewers' different responses to consumer-generated and marketer-generated video clips, Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012) collated information about the content of the videos. The researchers watched the video clips under the two different groups and noted themes or images seen in the video. Based on the themes and images in these videos, the primary difference between consumer-generated and marketer-generated is that themes in the former are more relatable and appeal to the emotion compared to the latter, which is more impersonal. Examples of themes or images in consumer-generated videos include "love", "funny", "people", "good", "nice", "best", "music", and "happy". On the other hand, themes or images in marketer-generated videos include "love", "great", "playing", "hot", "cool", and "wrong" (Lim, Chung, and Weaver, 2012, p. 202). After analysing the content of consumer-generated and marketer-generated videos, the researchers then studied online users' comments on these videos to determine their perceptions about the videos, particularly how these developed destination branding.

Further analysis of Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012) focused on the rationale of increased viewer interest in consumer-generated videos. Based on existing literature about the psychology of consumption, Lim, Chung, and Weaver argued that more consumers are interested in consumer-generated videos because they trust consumer reviews more than marketer-generated content. Over the past decades, marketers have gained a negative image because of the way that they marketed brands before. One of the primary issues that consumers had on traditional marketing content is the discrepancy in the advertised goods and services and the conditions of these in real life. In the travel and tourism sector, for instance, hotels may publish good and polished photos of their rooms for marketing and advertising purposes. Nonetheless, when consumers book room accommodations in these hotels, the actual rooms do not look exactly as

they were photographed or hotels do not provide promised services to consumers. For this reason, we may assume that consumers demand authenticity. Hence, they prefer to watch consumer-generated videos about destinations because they know that consumers would be honest about their experiences. As argued by Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012), traditional advertisements have less trustfulness than opinions by peers to consumers. Also, individuals are more likely to look up peer posts than postings by an online news site. Therefore, reviews on specific products and services posted in social media are more popular... It seems that consumer-generated content attracts more people than marketer-generated content (p. 205).

Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012) research study is highly important in establishing the ideal characteristic for effective social media branding. Studies that related to the psychology of consumer behaviour and responses prove that consumers more likely respond to honest and authentic content compared to those manufactured by marketers. Considering this information, brands may take advantage of this by utilising social media to market, promote, and establish the brand. If brands take advantage of consumer- or user-controlled platforms such as blogs, videos on YouTube and other streaming sites, then these businesses or companies would be able to take advantage of the growing interest of consumers in consumer-generated content Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012).

Munar's (2010) supports the discussion and arguments of Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012). In a research study, Munar sought to explore the impact of tourist-created content on destination branding. To obtain data in the research, the researcher conducted field research by gathering data about social media sites, particularly the way that brands use these for destination branding. To analyse data, Munar employed content analysis. One of the primary findings of the research is that tourists create content for destination branding. Hence, consumer-generated

content is comparable to marketer-generated content online. Consumer-generated content, also known as user generated content (UGC) has gained traction over the past years due to consumers' growing distrust of marketer-generated content. Munar used UGC to collate all user-generated content on the Internet. Some of the most popular websites with user-generated content include Couchsurfing, a network for travellers around the world who are looking for or are offering affordable or free accommodations, Lonely Planet, which features activities and experiences in different destinations, Trip Advisor, which is a review site for all aspects of travel such as hotels and destinations, and of course Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, where people can share their travel experiences through posts, tweets, or videos (Munar).

According to Munar (2010), tourist created content (TCC) is one of the most effective ways to establish a brand. TCC “provides valuable insights into the ways in which tourists contribute to image formation” (Munar, 2010, p. 299). Hence, brands may not only use TCCs to promote or market their brands for free. Brands may also use TCC to determine trends in the market and identify dominant consumer behaviours. Consequently, brands can develop and implement effective strategies or practices to improve the image or reputation of their brands. To take advantage of TCCs, Munar recommended that companies should follow five different stages – corporation, emancipation, animation, repatriation, and incorporation. Corporation refers to the stage where a brand determines its components as well as decision-making on the part of the consumer. In this stage, the brand attempts to influence the behaviour and preferences of consumers through various branding strategies. After corporation, brands similarly market to the tourist population through emancipation. Emancipation is the stage where tourists physically travel to their target destination.

Animation, the third stage in TCC, refers to duration of a tourist' stay or exploration of a destination. In this stage, the tourist gains valuable experiences, which he or she would later on use to create advertising or marketing content. Repatriation, on the other hand, refers to the tourist's return at home. At this stage, the tourist then ponders or thinks about his or her previous experiences. In the last stage, which is incorporation, the tourist then translates his or her experiences, views, and opinions about the destination in text or other forms such as songs or video, which he or she then later uploads online. When content becomes live online, consumers are free to access this content and consequently use it to make valuable decisions about their own travels (Munar, 2010). The stages of TCC is highly important because it illustrates that travel not only refers to the tourist's experiences in the target destination but also involves the situation even during the planning stage and until after the tourist returns home. Hence, Munar suggests that travel brands should take care to ensure that the tourist enjoys his or her experiences in all stages of travel. In this way, the tourist would gain positive impressions and experiences, which he or she would then share online. Consequently, the tourist's positive blog or post about the destination would help shape its image or reputation.

Aside from studying the application of social media in corporate or business branding, brands may also learn from social media branding within the context of personal branding. One of the most notable results of Wetsch's (2012) research study is that brands should take advantage of social media because there is an existing market online, specifically millennials. According to Wetsch's, "millennials are the first 'always on' generation with a high level of expectation about their access to leading edge technology in the workplace" (p. 30). In a way, using social media allows brands to tap into the emerging and dominant market of millennials



that consistently use social media. Hence, using social media helps brands narrow down their target market.

Wetsch (2012) also discussed different social media tools and instruments such as Google AdWords and Social Search. Google AdWords is “a cost-per-click (CPC) advertising program that allows advertisers to displace relative and targeted text ads above and (sometimes) to the side of organic search results through a Google Search” (Wetsch, 2012, p. 32). Businesses or companies can take advantage of Google AdWords to target specific consumer populations because the ads published through Google is capable of targeting specific users based on their interests and preferences. Google is able to identify these preferences and interests because of its other services such as the Google search engine. Google utilises user searches to establish the interests and preferences of users. Consequently, Google uses results of searches to determine what kind of topics, and therefore, goods and services, consumers would take interest in. Google then selects advertisements posted on their site that matches the interests and preferences of consumers (Wetsch).

### ***2.6.3 Efficient Practices in Social Media***

Since the advent of social media, many businesses and organisations adopted various social media platforms in their daily operations in order to improve marketing and advertising. As part of the review of existing literature, it is important to determine successful social media practices that apply in real organisations. According to Geskey (2010), the most important aspect of marketing or advertising is the purpose of the organisation. When it comes to branding through social media, Geskey asserted that organisations should prioritise engagement as the end result or outcome of branding practices. Social media is a tool for creating social networks.

Consequently, social networks survive because people engage and interact within these networks. Without these people interacting, networks will not persist and there would be no need for social media. To accomplish this goal or objective, social media platforms should offer features or various services that allow people to engage. Social media platforms have public and private messaging, comment boxes, stickers, emoticons, or emojis, and various buttons to allow people to do so. On the part of businesses, they may facilitate engagement through the development of appealing content. Therefore, efficient social media practices include engaging content that would pique the interest of the readers. Examples of engaging content include those that are attention-grabbing or interesting, worth sharing, and elicits responses from online users. Most social media content that become viral are those that spark conversation or debate.

Aside from creating appealing content to bring about engagement, another strategy is to know when and where to post content. Social media platforms differ depending on the structure and purpose. Facebook, for instance, is for communicating with family and friends, following pages, and viewing content on one's timeline. Twitter, on the other hand, is for posting thoughts, comments or responses, and links. Instagram allows users to share photos. Other social media accounts such as LinkedIn allow users to network professionally and post their credentials or qualifications. For this reason, it is important that businesses or organisations understand the uses of social media platforms to know which platform to use. Most businesses or organisations own multiple accounts in order to capitalise on users in each social media platform. Some businesses sign up for Facebook and Twitter pages, and Pinterest or Instagram accounts and post on these platforms depending on content. Businesses also sign up for video-sharing accounts on YouTube or Vimeo through which they upload videos. After posting videos on these sites, they share links on Facebook and Twitter, as well as snippets of the videos on Instagram and Pinterest.

Businesses also do the same for photos and other content. When it comes to choosing when to post content, businesses must also take into consideration the purpose of doing so. If branding strategies involve advertising for promotional events, then the business should choose to post content months before the event and regularly. Social media content changes rapidly. We may observe this by looking at trends online. These trends easily change depending on what most people talk about online. Hence, it is important to post content constantly in order to maintain interest in the brand and the message being conveyed through advertising.

Another effective strategy is to engage directly with customers. One of the reasons why businesses or organisations need to utilise social media is because they need to engage directly with customers. Through the Internet, populations have become more connected than before. In addition, people have also become vocal when it comes to issues and activities including consumption. People find it useful to utilise social media as a means to follow and support brands they love or make complaints or send suggestions to brands. Positive or negative responses from customers fill social media pages of businesses and organisations. It is for this reason that businesses that efficiently use social media do so to engage with customers. Businesses not only improve customer service relations but also create or establish an approachable brand by making themselves available to consumers.

Efficient strategies in social media also involve cooperation with customers to create content. Aside from communicating or engaging directly with customers, businesses may use social media to increase their following by asking people to help them create content. This may come in the form of contests or other similar events. Examples include photo contests where businesses ask customers to participate. In this way, customers become increasingly engaged or involved in the process.

Table 8 below summarizes the research findings from the review of related literature.

**Table 8. Summary of Findings**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Brief Explanation of Construct</b>	<b>Author</b>
Consumer behaviour framework	Various factors affect the decision-making process of consumers	Engel, Miniard, and Blackwell, 1986
User generated content (UGC) or tourist created content (TCC)	TCC refers to ideas and information in the form of reviews and feedback of tourism goods or products and services from consumers – travellers, tourists, or guests.	Munar, 2011
Destination marketing	Businesses and organisations in the travel education industry should focus on marketing their goods or products and services by featuring not only what makes them stand out from others but what they offer to consumers	Mills & Law, 2013
Brand image	Brand is essential in establishing the reputation and the consumer base of a business or organisation	Shaw, 2012
Strategic branding of destinations	Businesses or organisations must take into consideration various elements such as macro-environmental factors, geographical features, pre-established notions or preconceptions about destinations, stakeholders, cultural backgrounds, the kind and quality of services available within this location, and public opinion  Components of strategic branding of destinations include vision, stakeholders,	Balakrishnan, 2009

	target market, marketing mix, positioning, differentiation, communication, and feedback	
Internet and social media for the travel industry	Prevalent use and dependence on the Internet makes it a viable tool for businesses or organisations in the travel industry including those under the travel education sector	Lang, 2000; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010
Conceptual framework of consumer behaviour planning and booking travel online	Consumers utilise the Internet throughout the process of decision-making when it comes to travel	Conyetti, 2012
Social media branding	Nine goals for social media branding include building a sense of citizenship with the organisation, encourage the acceptance of brand values, encourage the audience to engage in promotion, help the organisation maintain competitive advantage, inform the vision behind the brand, act as a check, build positive brand associations, build the quality of the brand, and build greater awareness of the brand	Yan, 2011

## 2.7 Summary of Literature Review

The foregoing literature review offers a comprehensive discussion of the issues or topics that relate to the research study. As previously established, the objective in conducting the research is to find out the practice in social media in the travel education business. Based on existing literature, the use of technology is one of the most recent trends in branding. Many brands, nowadays, utilise social media in order to communicate brand values, image or identity. Although using technology is different from traditional branding strategies, existing literature also proves that brands must still employ the traditional concepts in branding strategies when using social media because the platform may be different but the goal or objective of branding remains the same. This is especially true when branding in the travel and tourism industry. As in traditional branding, brands need to look into the target market, existing resources, and the market conditions, among others, to develop and implement responsive and efficient branding strategies. Another notable outcome of the literature review is that the travel and tourism industry cannot control its image or reputation because public perception is the most important factor that influences brands. Hence, one of the strategies that could improve branding in this sector is the improvement of goods and services, which add to the experience of consumers, and consequently, influence their views of their experiences with a brand. Moreover, social media is being prevalently used by brands in the sector to target the population of millennials, which frequently uses technology in their daily activities. Brands may integrate services to millennials' lifestyle and look for ways to market in such a way that adjusts or accommodates the patterns of social media use and behaviour of travel consumers.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The objective in conducting research about social media branding is to determine current practices in social media in the travel education business. As formerly noted, the main goal of branding is to structure or establish the image of a brand that cements its image or identity, communicates meaning to the public, and increases awareness and loyalty to the brand. To fulfil this research objective, there is a need to explore and identify practices in social media that work in organisations. Since the research study focuses on the travel education sector, the researcher selected organisations from this industry. The researcher used the Internet to look for different firms from the travel education sector worldwide with existing contact information available on their websites. Prior to collecting data, the researcher consulted managers and representatives at these various firms, informed them about the nature of the research, and asked them to answer a questionnaire. Six representatives responded and agreed to participate in the research study. The succeeding discussion details the methodology employed by the researcher to collect and analyse data.

### **3.2 Qualitative exploratory**

In terms of methodology, the researcher employed qualitative research to conduct the study. As formerly noted, the primary objective of conducting the research study is to determine current practices in social media that applies to the travel education sector. Since it is a qualitative research, the researcher employed methods and strategies to collect non-numerical

data that describes the research topic – social media branding strategies. Qualitative data in this research study include the responses of the participants from the questionnaire.

To collect data, the researcher selected an appropriate method in conducting qualitative data – Questionnaire. Essentially, the method involves the use of questions to gather data by eliciting responses from the research participants. It is highly important that the questions match not only the goals or objectives of the research but also the intended outcomes of the methodology. For this reason, conducting a review of existing literature about social media was essential to determine important issues that the researcher may raise during the questionnaire. Aside from using information from existing literature, the researcher also used the research objectives to construct the questions in the questionnaire. Towards the end of the literature review and construction of the research objectives, the researcher was able to construct well-phrased questions that sought to determine the social media marketing and branding practices employed within the research participants' respective firms or organisations.

To gather data, the researcher selected travel education firms online and sent them information about the research. Within two weeks, the researcher received responses from six different firms expressing their willingness to participate in the research study. The six firms are located in six different countries - France, Belgium, China, USA, Hong Kong, and Brazil. After receiving affirmative responses from the participants, the researcher sent the questionnaires to the participants. The participants were given one week to return the questionnaires bearing their responses to the questions. The research participants answered ten questions in the questionnaire (See Appendix A).

In collecting data, the researcher chose individuals working in different travel education services because they are highly aware of the practices or strategies employed in within their



own firms. Moreover, the research participants work for firms under the travel education sector. The research participants' knowledge and experience are therefore contextual, such that their responses would provide a clear picture of social media marketing practice in this particular sector.

To analyse data obtained through the questionnaire, the researcher employed the coding method to categorise the research participants' responses. Coding essentially refers to the labelling and organisation of data or information to identify similar or recurring ideas and concepts. Through coding, the researcher would be able to categorise data to determine repetitive patterns or trends that establish intended outcomes. To label and categorise data, the researcher utilised Microsoft Excel. After collecting the research questionnaires from the research participants, the researcher plotted the responses on Microsoft Excel. Coding follows a series of stages wherein the researcher labels and puts together like or similar responses and arrives at a condensed yet accurate analysis, conclusion, and generalisation of the research participants' responses. The succeeding discussion summarises the research participants' responses to the questions in the questionnaire, and the interpretation and analysis of their ideas, knowledge, and experiences.

**Table 9: Participant Profile**

Country	Name	Services given
France	Loisirs Culturels A l'Etranger (LEC)	LEC helps prepare these foreign students for their stay abroad by teaching them not only about the French language or the host language in other countries but also about the local culture. LEC's services constitute matching host families in France with foreign students, mostly in the United States, that will be staying in the country while they study or go on vacation with their peers or families.

Belgium	Unnamed; n/a	Compared to other organisations interviewed in the research, WEP's scope of operation and network is greater and it can arrange programs in different countries. When asked about the services of the company, the participant said that WEP organises exchange, and study and work abroad programs for European students. Hence, the company's target market include students in Europe that are interested in studying or working abroad to gain educational and professional experience
Hong Kong	Education First Hong-Kong	. Education First is part of the travel education sector because the company establishes partnership with schools or offices to provide language education to students for the purpose of travelling to learn. Education First also specialises in language education innovation. Education First also developed an interactive language learning laboratory to complement learning in schools but also to establish online learning for students around the globe.
United States	World Education Program (WEP)	Compared to other organisations interviewed in the research, WEP's scope of operation and network is greater and it can arrange programs in different countries. When asked about the services of the company, the participant said that WEP organises exchange, and study and work abroad programs for European students. Hence, the company's target market include students in Europe that are interested in studying or working abroad to gain educational and professional experience
China	Internship Network Asia	Primarily, the company caters to university students especially those in senior year looking for opportunities to expand their learning and training, and consequently to improve their chances of entering choice companies. To advertise its services and offerings, the company visits university to discuss its programs with students. Often, the company communicates the advantages and benefits of internship programs. The company is also active on Facebook and has an updated website.
Brazil	Student Travel Bureau (STB)	STB helps Brazilian students not only learn English or other target languages but also to apply for scholarships and other educational opportunities abroad. Hence, STB's target population includes students in primary and secondary school.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Interviews Findings**

#### **A. Participant A**

The first research participant works for a French firm, *Loisirs Culturels A l'Etranger* (LEC). LEC is under the travel education sector because the company helps students of different nationalities learn new languages so they can attend schools or take vacation with their families in other countries. LEC also has other branches or subsidiaries in other countries but the main agency is located in Paris. The main office in Paris targets incoming foreign students from other countries. In France, some foreign students attend French schools. LEC helps prepare these foreign students for their stay abroad by teaching them not only about the French language or the host language in other countries but also about the local culture. LEC expects that most of the students hosted by the company will stay with a family living in the locality while they are vacationing or studying in France. Hence, according to the participant, LEC's services constitute matching host families in France with foreign students, mostly in the United States, that will be staying in the country while they study or go on vacation with their peers or families. Based on the participants description of LEC's services and offerings, the company's target market segments, therefore, include foreign students in high school, particularly from America, that are interested in exploring French culture and learning from their interactions with locals.

In terms of LEC's marketing or advertising strategies using social media, the company has established online presence through various platforms. LEC, for instance, has developed a Facebook page that is accessible to the company's target market segment, specifically high school students from France. LEC's Facebook page is active and has a large following with 16,198 "likes" or followers. LEC also updates its Facebook page regularly with its most recent

status posted on August 6, 2014. LEC's branches or subsidiaries in other countries also developed Facebook pages for local followers. At present time, LEC Indianapolis-Chicago has 135 likes. LEC updates the Facebook page often with the most recent post updated on July 30, 2014. Based on the company's description, LEC also builds partnership with host families in the US, particularly in Indianapolis and Chicago for French high schools students that plan to study or take a vacation in America.

Aside from LEC's Facebook page, the company also developed a comprehensive website, albeit in French, that introduces the company's services and offerings to prospective clients in the US or other countries and vice versa. The website is primarily in the French language but online users have the option to choose other common languages to explore the site including English. LEC also has a blog that includes different types of posts not only about living in France and the US but also other potential locations for foreign students such as transportation maps, pictures of different locations in these countries, ingredients and recipe of local food offerings, list of places to visit in different host countries, and other types of information about traveling to other countries. LEC's blog has different types of content that students and their parents would find useful when planning for studying abroad or vacations. LEC is also active on Yelp and this site's counterpart in France called Societe.

Since LEC's online presence is more prevalent, the former's investment on social media advertising or marketing is greater. The participant confirmed this by stating that LEC does invest on social media advertising and marketing initiatives. Moreover, the participant noted that about 80 percent of LEC's advertising and marketing strategies are done online not only through social media sites but also other platforms such as blogs, review sites, and website hosts. The participant also reiterated that social media advertising and marketing remain advantageous for

LEC because most high school students around the world are using social media based on experts and researchers in the field or discipline of marketing or branding through the Internet.

According to the participant, social media has significantly contributed to LEC's success, particularly in targeting its market segments. Social media has been useful over the years in introducing LEC to its target market. Based on an analysis of LEC's Facebook page activity, even if one student gets acquainted with LEC and follows the Facebook page, this consequently creates a network of followers because the student's circle of friends on Facebook with similar interests also become exposed to the company. This is one of the reasons why LEC has gained around 16,000 followers online, which consequently contributed to an increase in the company's number of clients especially in the past three years.

LEC also collects Tourist Created Content (TCC) in order to determine patterns or trends in tourism, which the company may use to make decisions or create and develop new products and services. LEC does this by taking note of comments, feedback, and reviews online on the company's social media sites. Some employees do this manually by going over online content but not regularly. Furthermore, LEC collects TCC by having clients answer brief survey questionnaires via email or while clients are in LEC's office premises. To avail of LEC's services, clients need to visit the company's office. Nonetheless, its offerings are available online for users to peruse and explore.

In terms of ideas and messages that LEC aims to communicate to the clients on social media, the participant expressed uncertainty in terms of the exact idea or message being communicated. Nonetheless, the participant mentioned that similar to the goals of other organisations, LEC primarily aims to keep in touch with their clients online. Content posted online is mostly to inform clients about LEC's offerings and to draw online users' attention to

the company. According to the participant, if online users take it upon themselves to share LEC's content, then that would be a welcome outcome to the company's use of social media.

## **B. Participant B**

The second participant is the manager of Education First Hong-Kong, a UK based firm that specialises in international education. Education First is part of the travel education sector because the company establishes partnership with schools or offices to provide language education to students for the purpose of travelling to learn. Education First also specialises in language education innovation. The company has published different materials for language education such as books and reading materials for students, some of which focus on travel-related issues or content. Education First also developed an interactive language learning laboratory to complement learning in schools but also to establish online learning for students around the globe. The company's services are also more comprehensive because it invests in research. Education First works not only with language teachers but also professionals or experts in the field of cognitive science, education, and linguistics. It has various branches in different countries including China, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

In terms of target market, Education First not only targets students but also teachers and other professionals in related fields. While the company aims to draw a significant number of students, it also aims to draw the attention of professionals to improve its services and offerings to clients. For this reason, Education First also provides training services to professionals and continuous support for researchers that study language teaching and learning. The company's research firm focuses on studies and initiatives that improve upon existing or current strategies and techniques in language teaching or learning. To target these market segments, Education

First uses its website to introduce its offerings for students and professionals alike. For students, the company offers various learning opportunities, including opportunities for travel education. For one, the website is professional looking, which is therefore, appealing to experts or practitioners in fields related to language learning and teaching. Furthermore, the website presents comprehensive information about available programs for both students and professionals. In general, Education First relies on its presentation of adequate information on its website to draw the interest of prospective clients from its target market segments.

Education First Hong-Kong is also on different social media platforms including Facebook. The company has two Facebook pages. The first page is an Education First community page with 9,302 members. The community page contains direct links to the company's website. Education First did not post any status updates but many online users are leaving messages on the page. Education First other page on Facebook is for its partnership with the *Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales* (AIESEC). AIESEC is responsible for developing leadership development programs and exercises. Education First benefits from AIESEC's programs by integrating leadership opportunities and learning. Education First's Facebook page has 3,402 likes. Online followers of the page also check into the company online. The company also regularly updates its Facebook page with its latest post updated on August 20, 2014.

According to the participant, Education First invests around 15% of its marketing and advertising resources to social media marketing. The company maintains its Facebook page through its social media marketing resources and also manages its website to ensure that information are recent and accurate. Social media marketing for Education First is content-focused, as described by the participant. As formerly noted, the company's website contains

comprehensive information about what Education First offers for students and professionals alike. In the company's Facebook page, Education First Hong-Kong also posts relevant information and content that its followers would find useful. Hence, the company uses social media marketing as means to become relevant among existing and potential clients by focusing on targeted content.

According to the participant, social media marketing has contributed to the company's brand image by allowing online users to know more about what Education First offers for its clients. Hence, branding through social media marketing within this context focuses on the development of Education First's brand as an expert in language and travel education. Social media has contributed to the organisation's goal as it serves as a platform for sharing relevant content with users. The participant also shared that using social media is advantageous because Education First can communicate and reach out to various clients locally and abroad.

The participant mentioned that Education First regularly checks social media for online posts or comments. Education First also uses search engines to see if former and current clients posted something about the company through their own social media accounts and other spaces such as blogs. Although information gleaned through these processes are considered consumer-generated content, the participant said that Education First does not formally generate TCC. The participant said that all types of information they can gather to guide decision-making are collected for the company. The participant also mentioned that Education First aims to communicate an image of professionalism and expertise. Hence, the company aims to accomplish this objective by creating and structuring online content that communicates the aforementioned message. Education First offers services online such as applications and content for users but to access the company's primary services, clients need to visit main offices.



### **C. Participant C**

The third participant works at a language school based in Brazil, the Student Travel Bureau (STB). STB helps Brazilian students not only learn English or other target languages but also to apply for scholarships and other educational opportunities abroad. Hence, STB's target population includes students in primary and secondary school. Aside from helping students learn language or to seek high school scholarships and opportunities as well as higher education locally and internationally, STB also sells air tickets for travel that are more affordable for students. For this type of service, STB similarly targets other students that also need assistance in purchasing air tickets and arranging their travel abroad. Specifically, STB targets students from the upper class as they are the ones that can afford language education classes as well as studies and traveling abroad.

STB primarily applies traditional marketing and advertising strategies. The company, for instance, visits actual schools – academic or language – and colleges or universities. STB then communicates with their target students and introduces their services and offerings. Through several partnerships with other companies in the same sector, STB applies different promotional strategies such as special discounts for students that willingly sign up for the company's services. Since STB primarily relies on traditional marketing and advertising strategies, the participant admitted that it only allows 10% of its budget for branding activities to social media practices.

STB's social media practice merely involves activity through the social networking platform Facebook. STB's activity online is limited. According to the participant, the company only uses Facebook to post pictures of their students while in class. STB also uses its Facebook account to post or update their followers about the company's offerings, special deals and promotions. To keep STB's Facebook feed interesting, the company also posts various

information about studying and traveling abroad that its target market segments might find interesting.

One of the reasons why STB does not invest in social media marketing is that the company did not observe any increase or improvement in sales due to its presence online. The participant argued that STB's social media presence did not alter sales or revenue in the follow months and years upon launching its Facebook page. For this reason, the participant reiterated that the social media marketing is not advantageous to the company. The only advantage to the company is that STB can update students or its clients that study or travel abroad with pictures and other content. If their friends see the updates, then they would be acquainted with STB's services and offerings.

STB does not employ a formal means of collecting TCC. According to the participant, STB does not include the collection of TCC in its social media use. Based on the participant's response, it appears that the company does not value social media much because of its business model. Hence, it is quite impossible to determine how STB uses social media to communicate a message or idea that illustrate STB's goals and objectives as a brand and organisation. Nonetheless, the participant reiterated that STB uses social media in order to allow their clients locally and internationally to post their experiences online. Hence, this may mean that STB indirectly collects TCC in a manner that allows users to share their own experiences with one another and other aspiring exchange students. Primarily, STB works with customers or clients by offering their services at their office in Brazil.

#### **D. Participant D**

Participant D works for a travel education organisation called the World Education Program (WEP), which arranges exchange student programs in various countries including the US, Australia and New Zealand, and other countries in Europe such as Belgium, Italy, and France. Compared to other organisations interviewed in the research, WEP's scope of operation and network is greater and it can arrange programs in different countries. When asked about the services of the company, the participant said that WEP organises exchange, and study and work abroad programs for European students. Hence, the company's target market include students in Europe that are interested in studying or working abroad to gain educational and professional experience. Host countries include the US and other countries in South America.

According to the participant, the company benefits from social media because it allows them to target the company's main audience. The company has a website that introduces its services and offerings to customers. WEP also has various Facebook pages in different locations for various audiences. In this way, the company is able to target local audiences and adopt strategies on the characteristics of students in different countries. Different Facebook pages allows WEP to use various languages in order to communicate with students from various countries. Students in Europe can therefore access and view WEP services available in their locality.

When asked about the advantages and contributions of social media, the participant stated that WEP benefits from its Facebook pages because it allows the organisation to reach out to students and potential customers in various locations. Since the company benefits greatly from its social media exposure, the participant said that it probably uses social media and invests in this type of marketing by an estimate of 25 percent. The company is actively involved in obtaining or collecting TCC although the participant mentioned that they call TCC user-

generated content. It is important for the company to review and collate user-generated content directly from the students they work with so they would obtain information about their experiences. To do so, the company reviews social media feedback as well as interview or engage students in survey forms to talk about their pre- and post-experiences under study and work abroad programs.

In terms of the company's use of social media, the participant said that they aim to communicate the company's reliability, proficiency, and experience in arranging study and work programs for students. Furthermore, WEP aims to communicate its influence in terms of the scope of its network and access to various opportunities for students. The company manages to accomplish this objective by posting ample information about its services on its website and other content including photos of students following the program in their social media accounts.

#### **E. Participant E**

Participant E works for a company that organises travel and tours for various market segments including students. Prior to answering the survey questionnaire, the participant requested that the company's information remain confidential in the research study. The company is essentially a travel agency but it has been working over the past decade to put together meaningful travel and tours for students, particularly for those in primary school. The company, which is based in Belgium, believes that quality education necessitates students' exposure to the outside world. For this reason, the company aims to work with primary schools in Belgium in order to arrange quality tours or trips that are aligned with the school curriculum, learning goals and objectives, and the needs of the students.

To appeal to the company's target market, it arranges visits to primary schools to introduce their offerings and services to principals and school staff. Sometimes, the staff arranges talks where the company communicates its plans and programs to students and parents and the latter make decisions on educational tours or trips with the school. The company also advertises online using social media. It has a website that offers a glimpse of the company's services, including packages not only for students but for its other market segments. At present time, the company only operates local tours but according to the participant, the company plans to expand its services to international tours.

When asked about the company's investments in social media marketing, the participant estimated that it invests 20 percent of its budget for social media and online marketing. The company spends the rest of the budget to fund for personal appearances in schools. According to the participant, the company uses social media to post pictures of tours at the approval of schools and their parents. The company posts pictures of sites visited by their student customers. In this way, other schools would be able to see the kind of places and the tours that the company is able to organise for students. The participant claims that in some instances, its posts attracts the attention of its market segments. Some schools contact them directly to inquire. The participant considers the company's exposure through social media as a means to attract new customers.

According to the participant, the company is heavily involved in generating TCC. Since the company offers travel services, it makes sure that its services and offerings meet the needs of consumers. TCC helps the company make informed decisions. The company does this by asking their clients to fill in surveys and feedback forms after taking part in trips or tours. The company also encourages its clients to post feedback online and to share their photos. In terms of social media marketing and activities, the company even employs the services of other companies such

as those that create content to put together video clips of trips as promotional content. Through social media, the company aims to communicate that it is capable of meeting the quality standards of school when it comes to offering educational tours for students. The participant said that clients may contact the company online but they need to complete transactions by visiting its main office.

#### **F. Participant F**

Participant F is a company called Internship Network Asia is based in Asia and it essentially arranges student internship programs in Asia. The participant said that internship student programs often run from 3 months to a year. Primarily, the company caters to university students especially those in senior year looking for opportunities to expand their learning and training, and consequently to improve their chances of entering choice companies. To advertise its services and offerings, the company visits university to discuss its programs with students. Often, the company communicates the advantages and benefits of internship programs. The company is also active on Facebook and has an updated website. In terms of percentage, the participant said that it does not depend much on social media unless it is communicating with universities and students in Asia. For this purpose, the company uses Facebook. Investment in social media marketing reaches about 30 to 40 percent. Hence, the company uses social media to advertise its services not only to local but also foreign clients.

According to the participant, social media contributed to the development of the brand's image or reputation because its accounts show the type and quality of services that it may offer to schools and the students. During the company's interactions with students, they communicate its commitment to meet learning goals and objectives by offering competitive internship

programs for students. In terms of TCC, the participant also said that the company collates testimony from former and current students doing internship. Testimonies serve as TCC for the company.

Using social media, the company aims to communicate the importance of internship programs for learning growth and development. Moreover, the company aims to highlight the importance of internship for career and professional growth, and to emphasise the company's role in facilitating these outcomes for students in Asia.

**Table 10: Main findings from participants**

Q	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Participant E	Participant F
Q1	Our company offers language lessons for students. We teach English and French primarily. Sometimes students have sessions with their family and friends so they can learn their language of choice together.	1) Language lessons for those who want to study abroad. 2) Language learning materials like books. 3) Learning innovation and development of facilities for efficient language learning. 4) Research and development in language learning and teaching.	Student Travel Bureau (STB) helps Brazilian students learn to speak in English and apply for scholarships	Arrangement of work and study abroad programs for students in Europe to host countries in North and South America as well as in Australia and New Zealand.	The company aims to work with primary schools in Belgium in order to arrange quality tours or trips that are aligned with the school curriculum, learning goals and objectives, and the needs of the students	Our company arranges Internship programs for university students Asia, such as Singapore and Japan, China
Q2	Our usual students plan to study abroad. They are in high school and they want to either spend some time of their senior year in another country or study abroad in foreign universities.	Students and professionals that want to study abroad. Education First trains professionals (teachers) for efficient language teaching.	Students in grade school and high school (private, exclusive schools; usually from high income families).	European students that are interested in working or studying abroad.	Arranges visits to primary schools to introduce their offerings and services to principals and school staff	Our company arranges Internship programs for University students, with primary focus on those in senior year.
Q3	Sometimes we go to schools and hold short programs where we introduce our company and let old students talk about their experiences. LEC is also on Facebook.	Education First website, Facebook page	Combination of old and new advertising mediums. STB visits schools to promote services and use SM	Affiliation with other organizations that offer work and study abroad offerings and programs.	We post sample work online and describe how we go about creating marketing and advertising content for our clients.	We visit high schools, university and use social media.
Q4	80 percent, give or take.	15%	10 %; the rest is allocated for other adv mediums	At 25 percent.	I would say about 20 percent	The company distributes 30 to 40 percent

Q5	The one that manages our Facebook page posts updates about our programs like photos and videos, LEC announcements, and other types of info.	1) Customer engagement or service, and communication. 2) Updates and announcements. 3) Offerings and services.	STB posts pictures of students while in class, and new services and deals.	Putting up various social media websites for WEP branches local and abroad to widen reach to specific audiences.	We use social media not only to attract clients but also to make decisions and conceptualize marketing and advertising content for our clients.	Students use SM to share their experiences through testimonials that are published on SM and the company's website.
Q6	I would say social media contributes to "branding" LEC because people get to know about the company and what it has to offer to students.	Social media contributes to branding by allowing Education First to address the needs of students and professionals through constant communication online.	STB uses Facebook to post about new deals for followers or information about study abroad options.	Some companies including schools contact us directly to inquire and later on, book services.	Social media has allowed the company to showcase our people's talent and skills in advertising and promotions.	Social media contributes to the company's mission and objectives by providing a platform through which people may get to know the company and our services.
Q7	I would say that social media makes it easy for students to introduce LEC to their family and friends online. For example, we have new "likes" on Facebook after our students share our Facebook page link.	1) Inform online users about EF's products and offerings, 2) Share significant information with users. 3) Reach out and communicate with clients locally and internationally	STB takes advantage of Facebook to interact with younger generations.	Exposure to potential customers including other schools the company has not visited.	same as my previous answer. Social media has been advantageous in allowing us to showcase what the company can do, thereby, attracting companies to hire our workers.	One advantage is that students find it easier to share their own stories through social media because they are active online..
Q8	Someone from marketing manages our SM accounts and sometimes reviews online users' feedback, and creates a compilation of information.	EF collects information online by noting comments by users and using search engines to see if former and current clients posted/wrote something about us on their SM	STB does not collect TCC. Students only use Facebook to post their pictures or other content.	Survey and feedback forms for customers; viewing online comments and reviews.	TCC helps. We ask their clients to fill in surveys and feedback forms after taking part in trips or tours. The company encourages its clients to post feedback online, to share photos	We may consider students' testimonials as TCC.
Q9	I am uncertain about the exact message but I think that like any other organisation out there using social media, LEC aims to create a bridge of communication with online users. If users, however, share LEC's content, then that would be an advantage for the company.	1) Education First collects information as mentioned previously but the company does not consider it as TCC. 2) Education First aims to establish its image in terms of professionalism and expertise in the field.	STB does not rely on social media to communicate a message. Facebook is merely a means for students to post their content with one another and the audience.	The company aims to communicate its expertise when it comes to arranging study and work abroad programs because of its wide networks abroad.	I guess our company is reliable and we are experienced. When we post our work, we show schools that our people are highly capable. employs the services of other companies that create content to put together video clips of trips as promotional content	Our aim is to communicate the importance of student exchange programs online so people may understand why our services are valuable, particularly to students' career growth and opportunities.
Q10	Yes, our clients need to visit our office but we post our products and services online for online users and followers.	1) Education First offers some services online but clients need to visit main offices to experience the company's primary services.	Clients need to visit the STB main office.	May contact online but transactions are conducted within the establishment.	Our clients can transact with us online or at our office.	Our company conducts business directly with students, parents, and university locally and internationally.



## **5. Conclusion**

As seen in the literature review, social media has now become one of the main marketing tools for companies to manage their brand image. Moreover social media is important for companies that aim to expand their consumer base to include local and international customers. In the interviews, the interviewees discussed the role that social media played in establishing their own brands. Essentially, the selected brands' use or application of social media is mixed because some rely on it more than others when it comes to marketing and branding. Nonetheless, most of the participants agreed that social media is useful in their marketing or advertising efforts and initiatives except participant C, which doesn't really see the advantage of using social media. The information got in the literature review, the comprehensive results of the interview and the information gleaned from the participants' knowledge and experience of social media marketing and branding will be discussed in the succeeding sections.

The foregoing data now allows us to address the research questions and the main goals or objectives of the research study. As formerly noted, the two primary questions that guide the research are as follows:

1. How do companies in the travel education service industry benefit from social media in branding and perception management?
2. What are current practices in brand image perception management?

### **5.1 Social Media Benefit**

Based on the responses of the participants, companies in the travel education service industry benefit from social media primarily because it allows them to reach out to their customers and communicate intended message or content to current and potential market

segments. As argued by Jordan (2008), social media is the perfect venue for marketing and advertising because the Internet has access to billions of people worldwide. For this reason, organisations in the travel education industry that caters to various populations would benefit greatly from social media because they can communicate with students and customers locally and abroad (Jordan, 2008). The responses of the participants substantiates this argument.

Participant E illustrated this point by discussing how an company working with travel education service institutions uses social media to make informed decisions. Through social media, Participant E's company is able to collate information based on user-generated content and then design advertising and promotional content to appeal to existing and potential customers.

Participant D's responses to the interview questions also substantiate Participant E's claims or discussions about the benefits, advantages, and contributions of social media.

## **5.2 Social Media Facilitate the flow of Information**

Participant D stated that social media content is useful to the company because information communicated by users online allows people to know more about WEP's offerings and services. Hence, social media essentially facilitates the flow or transfer of information, which schools and students primarily find useful in making decisions when it comes to signing up for work and study abroad programs. For this reason, Participant D's strategy is efficient because the company uses social media to guide decision making. According to Lang (2000), customers respond to brands better when they have ample information to make better decisions. Hence, best practices in social media marketing and advertising involves the publication of information to guide decision-making. Education First and WEP employs this best practice because they publish all relevant information about their company especially those that establish their reputation and expertise to convince customers to avail of their services.

### **5.3 Social Media Contributes to Branding**

Apart from guiding decision making, however, social media also contributes to branding in companies. Although some of the participants failed to articulate how social media contributes to branding, their responses illustrate how social media practices communicate their respective companies' brand image and reputation, as well as mission, goals and objectives. For Participant A, social media contributes to branding and perception management because it enables the company to communicate directly with students. In this way, the exchange of communication allows the company to communicate its message, particularly what it stands for by articulating its services and the quality of its offerings for professionals and students. Participant B, on the other hand, reiterates that social media contributes to branding because it allows companies to establish their reputation of their commitment to bridge communication gaps and spur customer engagement. Having social media accounts, as argued by Participant B, allows companies to show and prove to people that they are committed to listening to the comments and feedback of their clients. Consequently, addressing these comments or feedbacks allows companies to establish their brands as responsive to the needs of customers (Munar, 2011). Participant B also substantiates Participant A's claim that social media builds brands through the exchange and flow of information, which then shapes the image and reputation of organisations.

### **5.4 Tourist Created Content (TCC)**

Information gleaned from customers are called Tourist Created Content (TCC). As formerly noted, some companies collect TCC. Some organisations, such as Education First, use TCC to assess their services and programs, while others such as WEP use TCC to make decisions when it comes to product development in order to make improvements in services. Both organisations make use of social media efficiently because TCC should guide decision-

making in organisations. According to Munar (2011), TCC is useful content for branding and image or perception management because it allows organisations to respond to the needs and demands of customers based on feedback and reviews as a means to build their brands.

### **5.5 Social Media Helps the interaction with one another**

Participant C's company does not heavily rely on social media. Nonetheless, Participant C mentions that the company's social media account is primarily for allowing students to communicate with one another. Within this context, this may contribute to the company's brand by fostering communication and networks among its clients. When the company's clients share information online, they then interact with one another, thereby creating social and professional networks that would benefit them in the long run. In this way, the company would be able to establish its image or reputation as a networking hub that allows its users to get to know other students or professionals in similar fields and disciplines. This aspect of WEP's marketing and advertising also supports Munar's (2011) arguments about the importance of TCC in branding and image or perception management.

### **5.6 Social Media Establish the Company Reputation**

According to Participant D, social media contributes to branding because it allows the company to establish its reputation online by showing its affiliation with other reputable agencies that offer work and study abroad programs, as well as the breadth of its network local and international. In the process, the company is able to build its reputation based on the number of students WEP services annually and the quality of experiences that these students go through while abroad, which they then communicate through online reviews and feedback. Participant D's practices constitute best practices in social media branding because they use social networks

to share information about their services and to establish their brand through the quality of their reputation and professionalism or experience. According to Kozak and Decrop (2009) source of information are essential, particularly in the travel industry, because information enables people or consumers to make informed decisions. People seek information and when they are well-informed, they would more likely make consumption decisions based on information. Hence, considering this aspect of consumption, Participant D's strategy is efficient because they provide ample information about their services. Consequently, consumers are able to determine their needs and choose services based on their preference and make better decisions (Sulzmaier, 2001).

### **5.7 Offering and Services Through Social Media**

Overall, most of the participants' responses illustrate how social media contributes to branding by allowing companies to share information about their businesses, particularly about offerings and services to users. Kozak and Decrop (2009) discussed essential information that are useful for consumers particularly in travel education. Essential information include not only advertisements but also various information about services, the destination, and the information shared by previous clients. Providing these information are made easy through social media, which substantiates the efficiency of social media use among businesses in the travel education sector including the research participants. Consequently, the availability and the flow of information online make it easier for people to take advantage of and make decisions when it comes to purchasing content. Furthermore, it is important to note that the companies all agree in the use of social media in allowing companies to reach out to their various market segments. All these constitute destination branding, a strategy that organisations may employ in order to appeal to a particular market segment. Munar (2011) stated that destination branding may employ social

media to establish a destination to match the needs of market segments. Using specific information through social media, such as Participant D's use of different social media accounts to target a specific audience, allows companies to adopt destination branding.

## **5.8 Social Media Trends**

The participants' responses also establish important trends in social media branding. Participant A, for instance, reiterated that most companies or organisations use social media to reach out to customers. Through social media accounts such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as specific sites that collate feedback and reviews from customers, companies are able to determine and glean information about the experiences of customers. Companies may then use this information to assess and make improvements in their services and offerings. Saraniemi (2011) reiterated the importance of assessment when it comes to branding because it enables organisations to obtain information about its current status and resources and consequently make a marketing plan based on its capabilities and points for improvement. Apart from using social media, companies may also collate feedback and reviews through email or survey questionnaires and feedback forms. Participant B's services also show that social media branding trends include the use of social networks to build the image of brands. By advertising the company's affiliation for instance, with a well-known company, it is able to establish the quality of its services and the degree of professionalism that it observes when transacting and working with students and professionals. For this reason, branding through social media has become a trend because of its contributions to companies' image and reputation (Saraniemi, 2011).

Participant C, on the other hand, discussed social media branding as a trend in terms of appealing to a wider market segment, particularly to the younger generations. Hence, as a trend, social media branding allows companies to expand their market segments. Most people are on

social media, especially teenagers and young adults that constitute the population of millennials (Mills & Law, 2013). Companies that are looking to expand their services by appealing to a younger audience would do well by using social media.

As formerly noted, Participant D and F uses social media to collect information about customers to know more about their experiences abroad. Consequently, they use this information to structure work and study abroad programs towards the goal of improving them for the benefit of students. It is WEP's way of meeting the needs and demands of students that plan to work and study abroad for career development. Considering this role of social media, we may then assume that social media branding trends involve the use of user-generated content to guide decision-making (Munar, 2011). It used to be that market researchers conducted surveys or observed the patterns of consumption among consumers. Nonetheless, in today's world, companies including Participant D's organisation may use social media to collate necessary information to guide product development. As a trend, social media may then work as a data mining tool for marketers and promoters alike. It is also important to note that the companies primarily use Facebook as a means to promote their business. It is therefore important to acknowledge the role of Facebook as a social network in enabling companies to communicate their vision and find ways to use social media to build their brands. Aside from Facebook, companies also use microblogging site Twitter, YouTube or Vimeo, and build their own websites to communicate comprehensive information about their respective businesses and brands. It is highly important for companies to do so because the population of millennials is increasing and majority of this population constitute social media users (Mills & Law, 2013). Overall, the use of social media is recommended for organisations because of the breadth of its reach (Mills & Law, 2013).

## 6. Managerial Application

Based on the data and information collected on this research, a company that wants to optimize practices in social media in the travel education business could follow the guideline.

Complementing websites, social media is the virtual face of the company. It presents multiple ways to deliver rich content and interact on a personal level with current, potential and past customers. It has also fundamentally changed the job responsibilities of marketers, requiring them to engage customers much more regularly. Hence, it is very important for brands to create social media websites and pages that are not only attractive but also informative and encouraging to customers. Education First and WEP's websites are good examples of good marketing and advertising using social media. The company's website is also linked to its social media pages. Education First's website has attracted thousands of students and teachers because it offers comprehensive information about what the company offers for its clients. Moreover, Education First provides resources through its website, particularly on travel education, which students and teachers may find useful in their personal and professional lives. For this reason, the first principle might be to make content relevant. Users are overwhelmed with social media content everyday from friends, celebrities and businesses. The best way to ensure that their interest in the specific company grows is to focus on only delivering content that is relevant to them; this might require a good understanding of who the target audience is and what kind of content they might want to receive. If it's not helpful, interesting or valuable, users may easily get annoyed with the company and unsubscribe from their channel.

Second, channels could remain consistently active. LEC, for instance, maintains its Facebook page and has since reached 16,000 followers online. Companies may learn from LEC. People might have only one opportunity to create a first impression about their brand image.



Inactive channels communicate either apathy or incompetence, neither of which is desirable for a firm. Therefore, if a channel is not going to be used, it should not exist. Beyond frequency of posting, consistency in terms of the style of communication used might be important because it could directly affect subscribers' brand image; if the tone and style of communication changes, brand image changes, and this may or may not be favourable for the company. Therefore, it is nowadays recommended that the firm build a set of policies governing how to communicate with the public over social media.

Third, social media was developed around the concept of interaction and allows multiple means for individuals to engage other accounts (such as through comments, wall posts or private messages on Facebook). Each time a user reaches out, it could be an opportunity to improve its image. These customer service opportunities could be seized, showing customers that they matter as individuals.

Fourth, most social media platforms are highly customizable. Therefore efforts might be made to make these pages reflect the brand and attributes that want to be communicated (e.g. profile pictures and cover photos). Changing these features on a regular basis could be another way to display account activity.

Finally, overlapping your information through different social media platforms in order to increase the reach of each post might be more effective.

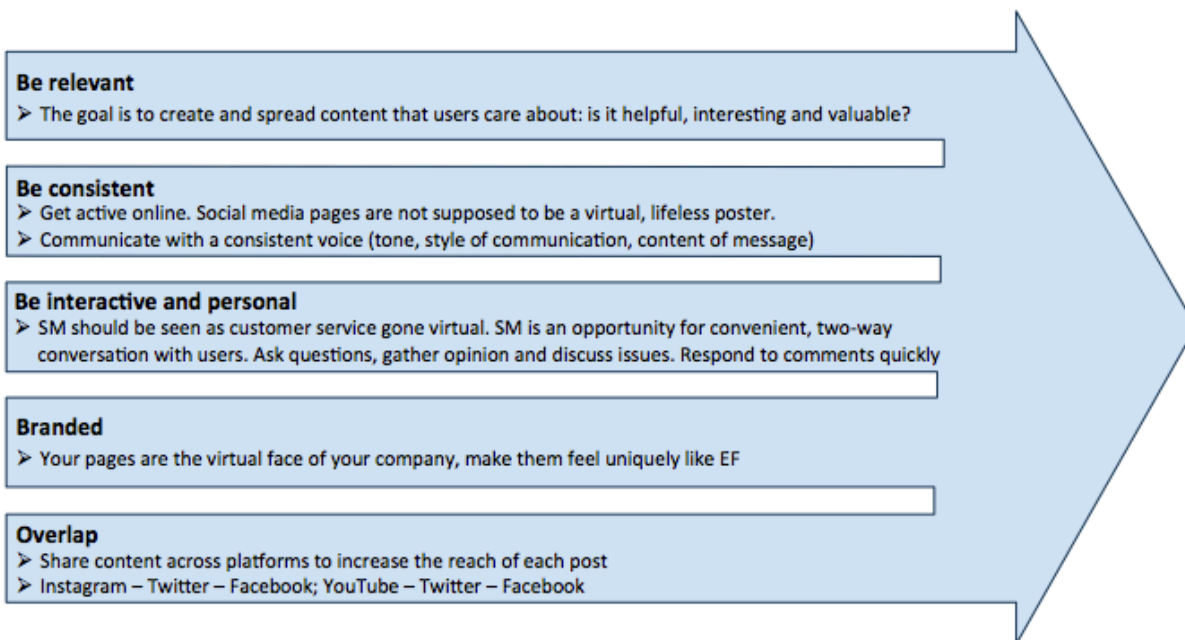


Table made by me

### 6.1 Managerial application could be implement in certain platforms

Social media strategy could apply the guiding principles defined above to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram; Google+ is not widely or actively used (time spent in Q4-2013 was 6.5 minutes/month, versus 170 for Twitter and 257 for Instagram (Brandwatch, 2014)) and therefore, is still irrelevant while writing this research paper for the marketing in general. These four major platforms dominate the social media space and engage users through a variety of media types, all of which can be useful. Implementing the strategy below might help improve brand image cost effectively and by extension, improve market share. It might be important to keep the company's value and ensure that they are communicated regularly through social media channels. However, attention should also be paid to engaging users in a fun and entertaining way.





Integrating social media strategy across different channels and traditional media and link with website of your company can create competitive advantage for your firm		
1	2	3
Facebook	YouTube	Twitter
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <u>Center of marketing plan</u></li> <li>➤ Communicate your brand value and image</li> <li>➤ Regular updates</li> <li>➤ Information about company, employees, product, services</li> <li>➤ Respond to enquiries</li> <li>➤ Refrain from overwhelming</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Engaging, interactive videos</li> <li>➤ Make users want to have the same services or products as seen in the video and join the company community</li> <li>➤ Regular updates</li> <li>➤ Company stories, interviews and teasers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Advertise products or services, upcoming events and competitions</li> <li>➤ increasing the reach of other SM channels</li> </ul> 
		4
		Instagram
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Used by people who appreciate visual appeal</li> <li>➤ Regular posts of photos</li> <li>➤ Photo contest</li> </ul> 

Table made by me

Nowadays, Facebook may be the center of social media marketing efforts for any company since they have 1.28 billion active users every month (www.statistica.com). Companies should focus on maintaining post frequency (minimum once per week) and relevance (product, service ads). Moreover it is essential to humanize the brand (e.g. posting pictures of the company inside) regularly asking questions, encouraging subscriber discussion and content contribution. Furthermore, encouraging user sharing or overlapping its social media efforts.

YouTube channel is one of the least used by companies since you can only post videos. Therefore companies might have a lot of room for improvements. The emphasis could be on creating many, high quality and engaging videos that specifically address a consumer point of interest. The goal is to share videos that make users want to have that specific product or experience that specific services as seen in the video they are currently watching.

Twitter could be the major avenue companies use to communicate concisely with the public, in real-time. Therefore, it could be the most active social media channel of the company: advertising products, services, upcoming events and competitions or increasing the reach of Facebook, Instagram and YouTube content. Twitter is also well known for its ability to spread negative public relation (PR). Therefore, the marketing segment of the firm could pay close attention to any Twitter mentions their brand in order to address customer concerns if they arise on this public platform.

Instagram is a unique social platform that is actively used by people who appreciate visual appeal. Though it might be a relatively new platform, over 25% of Fortune 500 companies use Instagram to engage customers and 43% of Top 100 brands post on Instagram on a daily basis (Digital Marketing Rambings, 2014). Anytime the company posts a photo or runs a photo contest, Instagram could be the go-to platform. From here, photos can be shared out to Twitter and Facebook as well.

## **7. Study limitations**

Due to nature of the sample collection the results cannot be generalized. With only 6 participants willing to answer my questionnaire, the data collected might be too small to find significant relationships from them. Moreover the participants are from different countries with culture that differ. Furthermore, the measure used to collect the data might have inhibited my ability to conduct a thorough analysis of the results. Some questions could have been added to the questionnaire for example. Therefore it is important for future research in that kind of field, where the research could concern the entire world, to revise the specific method for the

questionnaire to be done as well as the way to gather the data. It might be better to narrow down as much as you can in order to make your interviews easier and more precise.

## **8. Future Research**

To address the limitations or inadequacies of this research and existing literature, future research may explore other issues related to the application of social media in brand marketing. Recommendations for future research include the exploration of existing social media platforms, particularly Facebook, in generating buzz or publicity for brands. Although existing literature is rife with information about Facebook within the context of advertising and marketing, it is important to continue research about this service because it constantly evolves as the Facebook team introduces numerous changes in the platform. Consequently, Facebook's offering not only to users but also to brands also change. Therefore, tracking the impact or effect of Facebook's changes on advertising and marketing strategies is highly important, which may be done through research. In this way, scholars would be able to determine upcoming trends in social media advertising and marketing and consequently apply it in practice and yield better outcomes for brands or organizations.

Recent reports reveal that social marketing trends and practices change often. DeMers (2014) recently explored social media marketing trends in 2014, which are entirely different from trends in previous years. The differences between past and present trends prove that social media use changes over time and that the efficiency of social media practices depend on the way that practitioners use it for advertising and marketing. Current trends for 2014 include the brands or businesses' reallocation of greater funds for social media marketing. It appears that brands in 2014 relies on social media marketing more than traditional marketing through print and digital

platforms. Since brands allocate significant amount of resources on social media marketing, this practice also involves an assessment of return on investment (ROI), which allows them to measure the impact of their advertising and marketing initiatives. Assessing ROI also allows brands to determine the efficiency of social media marketing, and consequently make informed decisions about planning and implementing practices (DeMers, 2014).

Other current trends in social media marketing include the growing popularity of image-centric social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest (DeMers, 2014). In previous years, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter drew millions of users. Nonetheless, predictions about social media use show that interest in these platforms will decrease while users will shift their interest to image-centric platforms. For this reason, practitioners must also look into image-centric platforms to determine how the shift in interest towards these social media networks would affect marketing and advertising practices. Aside from the growing interest in sharing images, many online users are also beginning to take interest in sharing videos online. In recent years, video-sharing platforms such as Instagram and Vine drew more users compared to its initial number of users in their early years. Predictions in social media marketing illustrate the possibility of video-sharing platforms' increased role in advertising and marketing. Similarly, practitioners or scholars in the field should look into video-sharing as a social media marketing platform to determine its potential impact or influence on these practices, particularly in terms of efficiency.

Garst (2014) also explored different trends in social media marketing that will be observed in 2014 and 2015. Based on current practices and predictions, Facebook will continue to dominate social media marketing as the company continues to improve and offer new services to brands and organizations. In fact, Facebook draws 90 percent of its revenue from advertising and

marketing initiatives. Aside from Facebook, other social media platforms that allow users to create and share video-based content will also dominate marketing and advertising practices. Research into video-based content sharing show that it has increasingly drawn users over the past two years and online users are more interested in watching video-based content over other types of content such as texts or images. For this reason, it is important to continue research studies into the topic to determine trends and points of interests that would help companies identify consumer interests.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions**

1. As part of the travel education sector, what types of products or services do you offer customers?
2. What is your company's target market segments?
3. What kinds of marketing or advertising strategies do you implement to target these segments?
4. What percentage of your marketing or advertising strategies and practices constitute social media practices?
5. How do you use social media for marketing or advertising?
6. How has social media contributed to the development of your brand's image or reputation?
7. What are the advantages and contributions of social media to your company's social media marketing or advertising initiatives?
8. Do you try to get Tourist Created Content (TCC) from your clients? And do you use publish them through social media?
9. What are you trying to sell through Social Media? Do you encourage the audience to engage in promotion?
10. Do your clients can buy or purchase something from your company online or do they need to come at the office to do so?