

Choosing the Right Social Media Influencer for Hotel: The Perspective of Consumers

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Abstract: COVID-19 has spurred online marketing across sectors while the hotel industry is not an exception. Hoteliers are increasingly reliant on social media to promote and sell their rooms while social media influencer marketing prevails. To maximize their return on high investment on influencer marketing, marketers need to choose the right person. As limited implications can be drawn from the existing literature, this study adds knowledge to the scholarship by unveiling consumers' views on an influencer who is suitable for hotels and whom they are willing to take the advice. By conducting ten in-depth interviews, we revealed that hotel consumers expect the social media influencer to be physically appealing, experienced in travelling, having numerous followers, proficient in photography, able to suggest unique attractions in the property, good at providing discount information, and unbiased in his/her recommendations. The findings not only provide useful implications for hoteliers who want to pursue influencer marketing on social media, but also pave the knowledge ground for future research to investigate this marketing trend.

Keywords: Hospitality, Influencer Marketing, Key Opinion Leader, Social Media, Tourism

Introduction

Social media has been widely used to promote a brand and induce consumers to make purchase (Johansen & Guldvik, 2017). Advertising banners and posts on social media have been the major contents in social media promotion. However, these approaches are unlikely to imbed a deep impression in consumers' memory as a large volume of posts are being exposed to users. The users quickly browse the posts without deeply processing the content. Given this issue, recent years have experienced marketers' growing use of influencers to promote their products on social media. Influencer marketing makes use of people who are neither artists nor celebrities but have numerous followers on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Xiaohongshu (RED). Companies hire influencers to mention, review, or promote their products through their social media accounts with the aim of encouraging followers to "follow" their lead and purchase the products. Data show that 61% of consumers engage with an

influencer once per day, while 35% of consumers engage with influencers multiple times per day (Rakuten Marketing, 2019). Furthermore, 80% of consumers purchase products recommended to them from an influencer (Rakuten Marketing, 2019). Compared with traditional marketing, influencer marketing increases return-on-investment by \$5.20 for every dollar spent (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018). Social media influencer marketing is currently a highly prevalent online marketing method in Mainland China. To attract Mainland Chinese tourists, Macao hotels started to promote their rooms with the help of social media influencers. However, as this marketing method is still at its infant stage, it is important to offer more implications for hoteliers.

Influencer marketing is not something new. However, literature related to influencer marketing in tourism and hospitality only started to emerge in recent years. One of the earliest articles articulates some examples of influencer marketing in travel and tourism (Gretzel, 2018). Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2020) emphasize the importance of adopting influencer marketing by destination management organizations. Ong and Ito (2019) reveal that social media influencer marketing is effective in changing destination image. Zhang and Huang (2021) found that an influencer can arouse people's interest in travelling. Jang et al. (2020) found that travel social media influencers' number of followers and level of engagement determines their ability in influencing the followers. Although the implications from these previous articles are useful, they have not deeply investigated the kind of effective influencers. Moreover, none of these studies focused on the hotel sector. Given these observations, the current research investigates the kind of social media influencers who are suitable for promoting a hotel from consumers' perspective.

Literature Review

Influencer Marketing

According to Sammis et al. (2016), influencer marketing refers to 'the art and science of engaging people who are influential online to share brand messaging with their audiences in the form of sponsored content' (p. 1). The principle of influencer marketing is akin to electronic word of mouth insofar as consumers tend to believe and follow the opinions and suggestions of sources which they find credible (Zietek, 2016). At the same time, influencers represent 'a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media' (Magno & Cassia, 2018, p. 1). Influencers are not necessarily celebrities or artists but, compared with the general public, maintain significant numbers of followers on social media platforms, thereby allowing them to affect others' decisions, actions, and points of view (Johansen & Guldvik, 2017; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). The higher the number of follower's influencers have, the more attractive they are perceived to be (Utz, 2010). Aside from numbers of followers, influencers need to frequently upload social media content in order to remain active and keep engaging their followers (Nonprofit Business Advisor, 2015). Furthermore, influencers should be

knowledgeable and trendy. That is, they should be perceived by their followers to have more professional knowledge or first-hand information about specific fields than the general population (Egger, 2016). When these criteria are met, followers will trust the influencer and follow their lead and opinions about certain decision making.

Transformation of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is not a new strategy. According to Ehrhardt (2017), influencer marketing has undergone three stages of transformation. In the first stage, marketers aim to associate their product with consumers' emotions in order to increase sales. Often, this would involve creating characters. Santa Claus in Coca-Cola advertising is the classic example of this stage. Coca-Cola took advantage of Santa Claus's red outfit to create an association in consumer's minds. Moreover, Coca-Cola crafted the Santa Claus character with different traits in different plots. For instance, in one campaign, they removed Santa Claus's wedding ring. This leads consumers to engage with and develop stronger feelings for the brand by asking questions about Mrs. Claus (Campbell, 2003).

The second stage of influencer marketing is celebrity endorsement, which was developed as marketers changed from a product-centric approach to a consumer-centric approach (Ehrhardt, 2017). According to Khatri (2006), celebrity endorsement works for three reasons. First, advertisements are more impressive and memorable when their products are associated with a celebrity. Second, consumers correlate celebrity with high-quality products. That is, consumers believe in the credentials of celebrities because of their high social status and fame. Lastly, consumers seek to emulate celebrities by buying and using the products those celebrities recommend (Stibel, 2017).

The third stage of influencer marketing emerged due to the high penetration rates made possible by social media and smartphones. Social media allow people to create their own content and share their views, and smartphones have enhanced the ability for users to access social media more frequently. Posting comments, updating profiles, and sharing photos and videos daily are how people now maintain their social activity and identity (Tsay-Vogel, 2016). In 2017, 67% of individuals logged into their social media account at least one time per day, and half of individuals aged 16 to 74 engaged with online social networks (Moshin, 2019). In 2018, over 90% of millennials were active social media users (Moshin, 2019). This demographic grew up in an environment rich in online social interaction and information sharing (Kotler et al., 2019). These factors were catalysts for "influencers" and "followers", and influencers became highly influential while attracting large numbers of followers. At this stage, influencers' role in affecting consumer behavior had been elevated greatly (Hansen, 2018). Because of the way that social media serves as an important online platform for travelers and facilitates travel-related Internet searches, marketers are recommended to take advantage of social media to interact with consumers while advertising their products (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Effective Social Media Influencer

Choosing the right social media influencer is a challenging task. According to Brorsson and Plotnikova (2017), the success of influencer marketing rests upon three factors: generality, activity, and integrity. Generality refers to demographic characteristics, such as age and gender, as well as external characteristics, such as appearance. Activity refers to the habits of influencers on social media, such as their frequency of posts and engagement with their followers. Integrity refers to the extent that influencers are willing to share their real life on social media.

Based on the type of content in their social media posts, influencers can be further distinguished into two types. Informers, on the one hand, are seen as information providers who mainly focus on releasing new product information and providing advice to their followers. Meformers, on the other hand, are those who mainly share information about themselves and their daily lives (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Because integrity is a determinant of influencer marketing success, being a meformer is an important factor. The ability to have direct, two-way interaction with influencers is valuable to followers. It allows followers to think they are special and connected to the influencer. Thus, these interactions help to further enhance the emotional attachment between followers and influencers as well as the brand which influencers are promoting (Jun & Yi, 2020).

Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) have suggested four major criteria in the selection of effective influencers: (1) image consistency, (2) popularity, (3) common interest, and (4) credibility. For image consistency, the more consistent between the images of influencer and brand, the higher the chance that the brand can reach their target audience through the influencer. Popularity of an influencer is reflected in his/her high number of followers, large personal network and high potential to convey the brand to large number of audience. Common interest refers to persuasiveness of an influencer being reliant on the number of common interests between him/her and the followers. Finally, regarding credibility, an influencer who is perceived as credible can better persuade the followers to purchase a brand.

Moynihan (2008) describes influencers as “thought leader” and “sales people”. They noted that influencers should aim to be perceived as innovative and inspirational, and that they should be able to persuade others to try new product and service. Hence, influencers should be the first mover and present their message in a creative and original way to enhance their persuasiveness, as a result to influence consumers buying decision. Following this rationale, influencers should be “sensitive to the trend” (Lee et al., 2004, p. 1). Moreover, they should provide topics or information which will arouse interest of and facilitate discussion among general public (Lee et al., 2004). Magno and Cassia (2018) found that the quality of information provided by an influencer and perceived trustworthiness of the influencer are two significant factors that affect followers’ willingness to take travel advices.

In a study by Tengblad-Kreft et al. (2017), participants expressed that they deem influencers inspirational even if the information provided by an influencer

may not be useful. This is because the information nevertheless allows followers to imagine their ideal self. If the brand image is aligned with the influencer's traits, the influencer can better stimulate the imagination of the consumer about using that brand. The study also showed that if the brand image matches the influencers' traits, this alignment can help to form brand personification. According to Brown and Hayes (2008), communities of people are unique. Hence, influencer marketing can utilize commonalities among people within a community to affect consumer decisions, deliver company messaging, and establish brand images for particular groups of people (Byrne et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Li et al. (2010) found that such alignment fosters connectivity among the consumer, the brand, and the influencer. Eklöf et al. (2018) suggest that the image, values, and beliefs of influencers should be matched with those of the brand in order for consumers to deem the information they receive credible. A popular influencer can also help to establish trust in a brand by associating the brand with conditions that consumers already associate with positive feelings (Christou, 2015). If consumers cannot relate to the influencer, they will distrust and dislike the information or product recommended by the influencer (Eklöf et al., 2018).

The above literature review indicates that choosing a suitable social media influencer for a brand is a complicated decision. To the best understanding of us, the criteria of an effective social media influencer for hotel remains unexplored, leaving a gap for this study to fill.

Method

This study unveils consumers' perspective on the kind of social media influencers who are suitable for promoting a hotel. To achieve this research goal, we adopted a qualitative approach, specifically in-depth interview to reveal their perspectives on different aspects. Interviewees were recruited through personal network. Both convenient and snowball sampling approaches were adopted. Therefore, interviewees were asked to recommend their friends to participate in this research. All interviewees were Chinese and had experience in staying in hotels. Eventually, ten face-to-face interviews were completed because data saturation was achieved. The interviews cover six major aspects: (1) reasons for adopting social media influencer's recommendations when making choice of hotel, (2) desired information received from the influencers, (3) criteria of a convincing influencer, and (4) traits of a trustworthy influencer. Given these aspects, the following questions were asked:

- When you are planning your trip and searching information about accommodation, is information provided by social media influencers one of your references? Why?
- From a hotel consumer's perspective, what kind of information do you want to obtain from social media influencers?
- From a hotel consumer's perspective, what should a convincing social media influencer have or do?

- From a hotel consumer’s perspective, what traits do you think a trustworthy social media influencer should have?

Before the end of each interview, interviewees’ demographic information was collected. Content analysis was performed to extract the key findings. The reliability of analysis was ensured by cross-validation between two investigators of this paper.

Results

The interviewee profiles are outlined in Table 1. Among the ten interviewees, 70% of interviewees are female, and 30% of interviewees are male. Most were between ages 25–34 (80%), while the rest (20 %) were between 18 and 24 or above 34. All of them held a Bachelor’s degree. A majority of them (70%) earned MOP25,001–35,000 per month; 20% of them earned MOP\$15,000–25,000, and only 10% of them earned MOP35,001 or above. The majority of interviewees (nine out of then) responded that they use recommendations from social media influencers for travel information references.

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees (N=10)

		Count	Count N %
Gender	Male	3	30%
	Female	7	70%
Age Range	18 – 24	1	10%
	25 – 34	8	80%
	35 or above	1	10%
Educational Level	Bachelor’s degree or above	10	100%
Monthly Income	MOP15000 - 25000	2	20%
	MOP25001 - 35000	7	70%
	MOP35001 or above	1	10%
Adopting social media Influencer’s recommendation as travelling information reference	Yes	9	90%
	No	1	10%

Interviewees who use influencer recommendations as reference for making hotel choice because they believe influencers to be more experienced in travel than themselves. Reducing risk and avoiding disappointment are also important reasons. Interviewees expressed that because they may have never been to a given destination, they would need credible opinions and suggestions about aspects such as accommodation and dining arrangements.

Reasons for Adopting Influencer's Recommendations when Making Choice of Hotel

In addition to the above reasons, the personal experiences provided by influencers are crucial to consumers insofar as that information is closer to their own point of view. They suggested that the information on official hotel websites, or information provided by travel agencies, is too factual and less useful. Finally, discount and promotional details are another reason that consumers tend to follow influencer recommendations.

Nevertheless, a few interviewees did not believe influencer opinions and recommendations. These interviewees believe that most influencers are paid to promote the products and that, therefore, the influencers are dishonest and only speak on behalf of the hotel.

Desired Information Received from the Influencers

The most desirable information to consumers is price-related, for examples, promotions, discounts, and special offers. As previously mentioned, consumers believe that influencers can help them lower risk and avoid disappointment. Honest, unbiased comments and even negative comments about travelling experiences, services, and product offerings are also crucial for consumers.

Some consumers believe that influencers have more experience when it comes to travel. Because of this, they believe that influencer recommendations can help them better compare the level of comfort and service of different hotels. Furthermore, consumers are eager to gain understanding about interesting attractions in the hotel property. Examples could include restaurants with secret menus, scenic spots for photographs, or components which are rarely mentioned or known by others.

Criteria of a Convincing and Trustworthy Influencer

The majority of interviewees (70%) expect that content delivered by a trustworthy social media influencer will not be commercialized or, at least, should have a disclaimer about paid advertisements or affiliations. While consumers understand that influencers may not be able to turn down all opportunities for paid advertisements or joint promotions with merchants, they nevertheless believe that influencers should not recommend anything of poor quality or exaggerate the merits of a hotel. Consumers look for influencers who provide both pros and cons as well as unbiased commentary.

Influencers are considered trustworthy when they demonstrate one or more of the following traits: having a positive image, being physically attractive, being persuasive, being sincere, and having a significant number of trustworthy followers. Some interviewees noted that they will check an influencer's number of followers before evaluating whether that influencer's commentary and experiences are similar to their own. If there is a large discrepancy, or if the influencer only mentions the merits, consumers may suspect them to be unreliable.

Interviewees expressed that they follow influencers based on their style and the quality of their content including but not limited to photos, videos and text. Interviewees explained that if an influencer's content is creative, interesting, and informative, they will deem the influencer to be well prepared and sincere. They also noted that the photos and videos shared by the influencer should be of high-quality and it is better if the influencer is proficient in photography. Then, they would be willing to follow this influencer. Also, an influencer's number of followers is an important factor that affects consumers' selection.

Third-party information, such as other users' generated content and opinions, are important comparative measurements for consumers. Consumers read and compare both users' and influencers' comments to see if there exist large discrepancies. Discrepancies lead consumers to believe that an influencer is not trustworthy. Moreover, the emphasis on paid advertisements to share their daily life and content quality are jointly considered by interviewees when determining whether influencers are convincing and trustworthy.

Conclusion & Implications

Discussion of Findings

This study aims to unveil consumers' perspective on social media influencers who are suitable for promoting a hotel. It revealed the influencers' attributes and the contents shared by influencers that are convincing to consumers.

The results drawn from ten in-depth interviews support the argument that appealing influencers with a large number of followers are trustworthy (Utz, 2010). The number of followers is an objective and important indicator for consumers when evaluating the popularity, attractiveness, and credibility of an influencer. However, the number of followers is not the single factor that is considered by the consumers. They also refer to third party information, such as other users' generated content and negative comments, when evaluating the reliability of an influencer.

In line with the findings in previous studies, effective influencers should be knowledgeable and trendy, their information should be up-to-date, and they should always try something new in order to minimize the risk concern of followers (Egger, 2016; Lee et al., 2004). Because reducing risk and avoiding disappointment are the foremost reasons for consumers to pursue recommendations from influencers, the credibility of an influencer is paramount. This is especially important for consumers who have never been to the hotel before.

The results suggest that to appear persuasive and credible, influencers should provide clear disclaimers regarding paid content and advertisement. Consumers understand that influencers need to earn a living. However, an effective influencer should be able to strike a balance between the hotel and consumer. They should understand the needs and wants of consumers when delivering information.

Influencers should be able to demonstrate to followers that they are experienced travelers, that their opinions are in line with consumers' points of view, and that they are free from interference by service providers. Authentic travel experiences shared by influencers as well as hotel discounts and promotional codes are relatively more important. This finding is consistent with a previous study done by Chatzigeorgiou (2017). Besides influencer personality and their number of followers, authenticity of travel experiences shared is another factor which can establish or undermine trust in the influencer. These results imply that authentic experiences and discounts are motivational factors for attracting new consumers. If an influencer is able to provide content in their own distinctive style, it may motivate first-time consumers to make purchase decisions based on the perception that the experiences shared by the influencer are authentic. Also, surrounding facilities and food and beverage outlets may serve as another motivational factor that appeals to new consumers. If an influencer can recommend—as a bonus—worthwhile places to visit nearby the resort, this may motivate consumers to book with that resort for the first time.

Egger (2016) advocates that influencers should be perceived as having more professional knowledge. This study provides more insight into what “professional knowledge” means to the consumer. The findings show that professional influencers should have good photography skill and be able to share high quality photos and videos with their followers. Prior research suggested that influencers should have interests in common with their followers in order to be more persuasive (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). However, in this study, common interest was not mentioned by the interviewees.

Implications

This study contributes to the literature by providing more insights into what ‘professional knowledge’ means from the consumer perspective. Effective influencers should have professional or high-quality photography skills and be able to share photos and videos with their followers. Also, the influencers should be able to show that they are frequent, experienced travelers and are free from interference by service providers in delivering information to their followers. These identified criteria should be incorporated in future research which examines the effectiveness of social media influencer.

While previous influencer marketing research focuses on the beauty and retail industry, knowledge that is related to hotel industry has yet to be accumulated. The findings in this study set the stage for additional research in tourism and hospitality.

COVID-19 has powered the prevalence of online promotion and purchase. Alongside the boom of social media, social media influencer marketing activities have been growing. Choosing the right influencer for a brand is crucial as recruiting an influencer is costly so that the brand needs to maximize its return. Influencer marketing is not limited to retail industry. Hoteliers are also utilizing it to increase their sales. This study which focuses on consumers' perspective on a

convincing and trustworthy influencer provides important implications for hoteliers.

According to our findings, influencers help to reduce the decision risk of consumers. Hoteliers should recruit a social media influencer who is experienced in travelling. The influencer should be able to share his/her personal travel experience and provide discount information in a fair manner as consumers generally perceive that the influencer is working for the hotel. The influencer should not just highlight the positive side of the hotel. He/she should also note the downside in order to showcase an unbiased stance. The influencer should be able to recommend something unique or new as he/she is perceived as someone trendy.

Regarding the personal traits of influencers, they should be physically appealing, sincere, and trustworthy. The ideal influencer is someone who has large number of followers, but hoteliers need to be alert that the cost increases with number of followers. Hoteliers better look for someone who is a professional photographer and able to share high-quality photos on social media.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, as snowball sampling was adopted. The interviewees may share common interests and preferences, which threaten the representativeness of findings. Future study is recommended to collect interviewees' interests and preferences in order to diversify their individual differences. Second, all interviewees were Chinese. Generalization of implications to non-Chinese consumers has to be cautious. Therefore, future research is suggested to interview non-Chinese consumers. Third, the implications are relevant to hotel in general, while hotel class has not been considered. Future studies can examine if suitability of social media influencers varies with hotel class.

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