

THE USE OF SINA WEIBO AND TWITTER BY INTERNATIONAL LUXURY HOTELS

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Social media is a valuable marketing tool in the hospitality and tourism industry. Microblogging sites (social media sites comprised of concise, frequent posts) have allowed customers to discuss brands online with other customers across the globe. Focusing on the international luxury hotel segment, this article compares Twitter in the US and Sina Weibo in China. We collected data from both sites using content analysis and analyzed it using independent chi-square tests. The results suggest that luxury hotels communicated their messages and brand images differently through Twitter and Sina Weibo and provided additional promotion activities on Sina Weibo to attract customers in China.

Key words: Microblogs; Sina Weibo; Twitter; International luxury hotels; Marketing strategy

Introduction

With the development of the Internet, information can spread widely and quickly to a multitude of online users, subverting a linear one-way communication process. Communication is not limited to producer-to-consumer, but can occur consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-producer, as well as many-to-one, one-to-many, one-to-one, or many-to-many (Buhalis, 2003). Social media communications afford an opportunity to build relationships and engage with customers online (Linnes, Kowalski, Lema, Lam, & Agrusa, 2014). This differs from the traditional model, in which marketers encode and send social media messages through social media

sites, and customers receive and decode the messages (Kunal, Brown, & Milne, 2014).

Rapid growth in social media users has attracted the attention of service industry marketers seeking to increase online exposure with consumers and improve brand loyalty (Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2009). Among all social media sites that allow people to connect, engage, and share with others based on common interests (Stankov, Lazić, & Dragičević, 2010), microblogging sites have become one of the most popular sites. It is a new form of social media site comprising short posts distributed by instant message, mobile phone, e-mail, or the web (Java, Finin, Song, & Tseng, 2007).

1 The travel industry in China benefits both from
2 social media use and the gradually rising living con-
3 ditions in China, whereby the Chinese middle class
4 now has more time to travel. In 2013, 97 million
5 Chinese tourists traveled abroad (Hedrick-Wong &
6 Choong, 2015). The booming tourist market in
7 China has brought changes to international hotel
8 segments; various international hotel chains have
9 tailor-made packages to serve the unique prefer-
10 ences of Chinese travelers. For example, IHG
11 developed a new five-star hotel brand especially
12 for the mainland market (Y. Yang, 2011).

13 In the highly competitive hotel industry, micro-
14 blog sites such as Twitter and Sina Weibo play
15 an important role in building brand image and
16 loyalty, while targeting potentially different mar-
17 kets. This underscores the importance of tailoring
18 international social media marketing strategies to
19 different countries' contexts, as social media is an
20 outcome of technology, media, and creative users
21 (X. Yang & Wang, 2015). With Twitter banned in
22 China, we can examine international luxury hotel
23 brands' social media marketing strategies targeted
24 for the Chinese market by comparing Sina Weibo
25 and Twitter. This study aims to observe and com-
26 pare the characteristics of Sina Weibo and Twitter
27 in international luxury hotels, exploring whether
28 international luxury hotels adopt distinct mar-
29 keting communication strategies for microblogs
30 depending on the market: Sina Weibo for Chinese
31 or Twitter for outside of China.

32 Background and Hypotheses

33 *Microblogging and Luxury Hotels*

34 Microblogs are widely adapted in the ser-
35 vice industry in order to promote communication
36 exchanges between the service providers and their
37 customers. Primary uses include sharing compli-
38 ments and general information about the company,
39 as well as asking questions and providing personal
40 updates (Sreenivasan, Lee, & Goh, 2012).

41 The largest microblogging site, Twitter, was
42 founded in 2006 and reports 316 million active
43 users posting 500 million tweets per day ([https://
44 about.twitter.com/company](https://about.twitter.com/company)). It is now used (under
45 various regulations) in nearly every country in the
46 world, with the exception of a few, including China.

Social media in China suffers from active censor-
ship through Internet provider blocking of foreign
websites and search engine filtering (Bamman,
O'Connor, & Smith, 2012). Facebook, Twitter,
Instagram, Flickr, to name a few, are blocked in
China, and the government deletes any posted
messages. In this context, global hotel brands
have to find social media platforms to communi-
cate to Chinese travelers, whom have now become
one of the principal market segments for any
international travel enterprise (Hedrick-Wong &
Choong, 2015).

Microblogging is relatively new to Chinese users;
yet, it is the most popular social media channel in
China (State of the media, 2012). Microblogs like
Reren (www.reren.com), Sina Weibo ([us.weibo.
com/gb](http://us.weibo.com/gb)), and Tencent Weibo (t.qq.com) together
capture about 91% of Internet users and are used
for governmental, personal, and business purposes
in mainland China (Go-Globe.com, 2013).

Sina Weibo is the most popular microblogging
platform in China according to the most recent stud-
ies conducted by China Internet Network Informa-
tion Center (2014). It includes web links, hashtags,
tags, and the ability to attach images, video, and
audio files to posts. Founded in 2009, Sina Weibo
has more than 167 million active users per month
(Jianrui, 2014) and generates large volumes of data,
representing significant consumer insights (Cheng
& Edwards, 2015).

Compared to traditional marketing outlets, social
media sites, including microblogging sites such
as Twitter and Sina Weibo, allow hotels to expe-
rience two-way communication (Taylor, Barber,
& Deale, 2015). This two-way communication
affects the travel industry, such as when travelers
use social media to share their personal reviews
of hotels and obtain information from other users
(Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), which has dynamically
changed the way that travelers make hotel-choice
decisions (McCarthy, Stock, & Verma, 2010). A
positive word-of-mouth reputation can result from
improved customer-to-business interactions and
customer participation via social media (Kim &
Hardin, 2010).

Considering the variety of available social media
sites, companies should learn about each plat-
form's different functionality to make an informed
decision about which to utilize for marketing

purposes (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). As for Twitter, users can interact with others, anywhere at any time, in the form of a tweet, retweet, or reply. Tweets can include pictures, videos, audio clips, and links for extending the content. In addition, marketers can design their Twitter profiles to uniquely identify their brand image. Interestingly, some guests are more likely to think a luxury hotel is unsuccessful if the hotel lacks a Twitter account (Tselepidakis, 2013). Thus, Twitter should be taken into account for luxury hotel's brand strategy in digital marketplaces.

In an interview with Felicia Yukich, manager of social media marketing for Four Seasons Hotels, she offered the following:

We found that guests use social media, notably Twitter, to comment on their satisfaction during a stay. Because of this, we have incorporated Twitter into our service delivery, so we are able to address issues, anticipate needs and generally surprise and delight the guest, using information they have shared publicly as well. (Mogelousky, 2011).

Brand Image Strategy and Marketing Approaches

Building a favorable brand image can be even more important for luxury hotels than for other segments of the hotel industry, and social media can significantly shape a brand image (Cervellon & Galipienzon, 2015). The success of social media communications for brands depends in part on how well their users engage with and share messages about the brand (Berger & Milkman, 2012). A positive social media experience leads to a positive attitude toward the brand's social media account and the hotel brand more generally (Leung, Bai, & Stahura, 2015). As such, Twitter accounts are widely used for improving customer service by tourism bureaus and international hotel chains: they use it as a way to find future guests and a gateway for resolving problems (Kessler, 2010). For example, Hyatt International and Premier Inn launched a Twitter concierge program in 2009 (Kessler, 2010), and upscale hotel brands are increasingly using this platform to communicate about the quality of experience as a part of their brand awareness strategy (Xu & Chan, 2010).

Luxury hotels utilize social media sites to communicate traditional promotional strategies as well.

For example, tweets are widely used in aid to hotels' promotional efforts, including to offer followers sales, discounts, and special rates (Taylor et al., 2015). In this dual manner, Twitter can quickly share information and news with followers and anyone interested in the company's products and services, which provides an opportunity to build relationships and engage with customers (Linnes et al., 2014).

Yet, a multitude of research suggests that tourism and hospitality organizations struggle to formulate timely and effective marketing communication strategies on newer social media platforms (Hays et al., 2013; X. Yang & Wang, 2015). As such, our current research examines international luxury hotels' use of different marketing communication strategies on Twitter and Sina Weibo when encoding posts to motivate their Chinese and US customers. We also investigated the use of luxury international hotels' company image, user's image, and product/service image in Twitter and Sina Weibo. We evaluate additional brand identifiers such as links, tags, and hashtags for their effectiveness on hotel communications with site users.

Methods

Data

This study is divided into two parts; the first part describes the content of Twitter and Sina Weibo posts by the international luxury hotel brands, aiming to understand how they affect their target consumers. The second part analyzes how these hotels use different communication strategies across these contexts in view of the distinctions between US and Chinese consumer markets.

Sites like Twitter and Sina Weibo are real-time engagement tools; the news feed updates very quickly, and posts do not appear for long due to the vast amount of real-time information posted on these platforms. For a small-scale exploratory research, we decided to conduct a cross-sectional data collection for a 1-week timeframe. The data were collected from March 23, 2015 to March 29, 2015 on international luxury hotel brands identified by Walker (2012). According to the Smith Travel Research's SHARE center (2014), the luxury hotel class account for 909,754 rooms and 5,703

properties globally. The average daily rate for a typical luxury hotel is \$270.24, and it ranges from \$259 to \$659 according to Walker (2012). Out of 90 global luxury hotel chains, there were only 15 luxury hotels that have both Twitter and Sina Weibo accounts. All the posts on Twitter and Sina Weibo from these 15 hotels were captured and assessed using content analysis. This yielded 117 posts generated by the hotels' official Sina Weibo accounts, and 427 posts generated by their Twitter accounts. Table 1 shows the breakdown of Sina Weibo posts and Twitter posts for international luxury hotel brands. There were 3.7 times more Twitter posts during the time period. Finally, chi-square tests were performed to examine how each content are communicated via these platforms to the Chinese in contrast to US market.

Content Analysis and Chi-Square Tests

Every post, including images, videos, tags, hashtags, links, and other information, was coded in this study. Each post was categorized into a specific theme, such as the topic of the post, the type of content, the type of users' response to the hotels' advertising, sales promotion, brand image strategy, interactivity with users, message appeal, etc. The results aim to provide an overview of international luxury hotels' use of microblogging sites. A content

analysis is the most appropriate research method, because it is fundamentally exploratory, concerned with real phenomena, and predictive in intent (Krippendorf, 1980). Sometimes, a post comprised only a few words, making it difficult to determine the appropriate topic category. In that case, the picture or link was used to determine the topic. The content analysis yielded eight underlying themes extracted from messages communicated on two microblog sites, namely advertising, sales promotions, company image, user image, product and service image, links, hashtags, and tags (see Table 2). Using the identified categories, researchers performed a series of chi-square tests of independence to examine marketing communication strategies in two types of microblogging platforms: Twitter and Sina Weibo.

Findings and Analysis

Figure 1 shows topics published by luxury hotels on Twitter and Sina Weibo. Overall, luxury hotels post mostly unique content on each site; only 10% of the posts are similar on Twitter and Sina Weibo, and the majority of Twitter posts are shorter than those on Sina Weibo, which implies there are salient variances in the two microblog sites for Chinese and non-Chinese market. To mention a few examples, luxury hotels are more likely

Table 1
Total Number of International Luxury Hotel Posts on Twitter and Sina Weibo

Hotel	Twitter Username (Date)	Weibo Username (Date)	Twitter Posts	Weibo Posts
Accor	@Accorhotels (June 2009)	@雅高酒店 (April 2012)	48	13
Best Western International	@BestWestern (Feb. 2009)	@贝斯特韦斯特酒店集团 (Mar. 2011)	18	0
DoubleTree by Hilton	@doubletree (Jan. 2009)	@希尔顿逸林 (July 2012)	12	13
Fairmont	@FairmontHotels (Aug. 2008)	@费尔蒙酒店 (May 2011)	24	13
Four Seasons	@FourSeasons (Dec. 2008)	@四季酒店 FOURSEASONS (Aug. 2011)	19	14
Hyatt	@HyattTweets (July 2009)	@凯悦酒店集团HYATT (Feb. 2012)	31	6
InterContinental Hotels Group	@IHG (Jan. 2009)	@IHGRewardsClub-优悦会 (Dec. 2011)	2	15
Kempinski Hotels	@Kempinski (Sept. 2009)	@凯宾斯基酒店集团 (Jan. 2011)	9	5
Le Meridien Hotels & Resorts	@LeMeridien (June 2009)	@艾美酒店及度假村 (Feb. 2012)	4	3
Marriott International	@MarriottIntl (March 2008)	@万豪酒店及度假酒店 (Oct. 2012)	29	8
Ritz-Carlton	@RitzCarlton (April 2008)	@丽思卡尔顿酒店 (Aug. 2013)	161	8
St Regis	@stregishotels (Feb. 2014)	@瑞吉酒店及度假村St Regis (Aug. 2012)	7	3
Westin	@Westin (June 2009)	@威斯汀Westin (Oct. 2011)	5	1
W Hotel	@WHotels (June 2009)	@W酒店 (Oct. 2011)	43	1
Waldorf Astoria	@WaldorfAstoria (April 2011)	@华尔道夫酒店与度假村 (May 2013)	15	14
Total			427	117

Table 2
Content Categories From Twitter and Sina Weibo

Type of Content	Description	Noted Content Examples
Advertising	Post introduces facility, food, or service to users.	Yes, that's your own private diving platform at #Novotel Inle #Myanmar (Instagram: @accor) #ThisIsAccor
Sales promotion	Post provides discount information.	We're giving away free room nights & cash prizes all month to deserving moms. MOMinate one today! http://staybw.co/YTGH
Company images/user images/product and service images	Post includes some images or videos about company, product/service, or hotel consumers.	#优越分享#知行而停, 大金球棒棒哒!  (This figure is a company image of InterContinental Hotels Group in Hangzhou, China.)
Links, hashtags, and tags	Post includes website links, hashtags (# symbol), or tags (@symbol).	#Djibouti #Palace @Kempinski is an oasis #luxury where you can feel like a real sultan #hotel http://luxatic.com/djibouti-palace-kempinski-premier-hotel-horn-africa/

to post information such as relevant news stories or personal interest topics on Twitter and to publish interactive activities such as contests or games on Sina Weibo. As seen in Figure 1, the most common topics on both sites include nearby attractions. Luxury hotels tend to recommend nearby scenery or landscapes, particularly in tourist destinations.

Another common topic concerns the actual hotel facility: the bed, terrace, chandelier, pool, lobby, spa, and other amenities.

As Table 3 shows, different data types are communicated on the two microblog sites. It is noticeable that links and tags appears more on Twitter, and photos appear more on Sina Weibo in a comparable

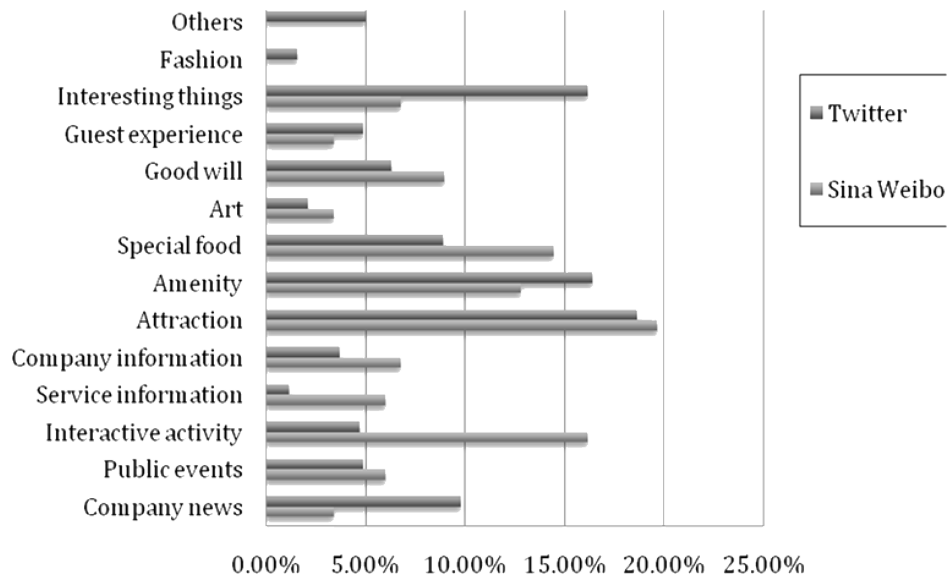


Figure 1. Topics published by luxury hotels on Twitter and Sina Weibo.

Table 3
Data Types in Twitter and Sina Weibo Posts

Content	Twitter		Sina Weibo	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Links	265	62.3	37	31.6
Photos	341	79.9	114	97.4
Videos	7	1.6	2	1.7
Tags	264	61.8	35	29.9
Hashtags	271	63.5	62	56.4

proportion. The percentage of links that appeared on hotels' Twitter accounts was 62.3%; on Sina Weibo accounts it was 31.6%. The percentage of tags that appeared on Twitter accounts was 61.8%; on Sina Weibo accounts it was 29.9%. Even though the percentages of hashtags (Twitter = 63.5%, Sina Weibo = 56.4%) are close, hashtags are still used more on Twitter, with typically two or more hashtags per tweet. Almost all of Sina Weibo messages (97.4 %) were accompanied with pictures.

The best social media marketing outcome for luxury hotels is that they spark engaging interactions with consumers, meaning they receive more than 50 replies, favorites, retweets, and so on. Figure 2 demonstrates that Twitter users engage with the information hotels provide. The most prevalent forms of this engagement are favorites (96.0%) and retweets (94.1%). On Sina Weibo, the percentage of "likes," a way for users to express interest in a post (similar to favorite), was 74.4% and "comments," which are similar to "replies," was 65%. Interestingly, Sina Weibo users are less apt to forward or retweet the hotel brands' posts.

A chi-square test of independence was utilized to examine if advertising, sales promotion, company image, product/service image, user's image, links, hashtags, and tags are equally used in two types of microblogging platforms. There were significant relationships between the type of microblogging sites and five marketing communication strategies. Advertising ($\chi^2 = 54.64$, $p < 0.001$), sales promotion ($\chi^2 = 79.94$, $p < 0.001$), product/service image

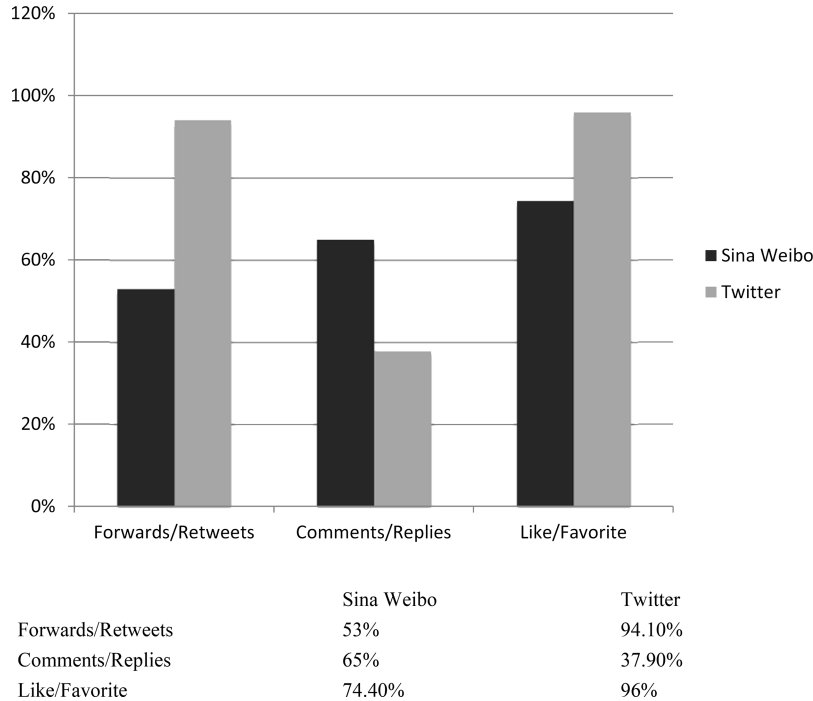


Figure 2. Users' responses to Twitter and Sina Weibo posts by hotel brands. Forwards/Retweets: Sina Weibo 53%, Twitter 94.10%; Comments/Replies: Sina Weibo 65%, Twitter 37.90%; Like/Favorite: Sina Weibo 74.40%, Twitter 96%.

($\chi^2 = 9.59$, $p < 0.01$), links ($\chi^2 = 35.01$, $p < 0.001$), and tags ($\chi^2 = 37.78$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly different in their appearance on Twitter and Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo was more likely to be used by the international luxury hotel brands to communicate advertising (40.2% vs. 11.0%), sales promotions (30.8% vs. 4.0%), and product/service images (93.2% vs. 81.3%). The same hotel brand chose Twitter as the medium of marketing communication when sharing links (62.3% vs. 31.6%) and tags (61.8% vs. 29.9%). Table 4 shows the results of these chi-square tests.

Conclusion

Cultural difference is a critical component in understanding what response actions will be taken in a communication process. Previous studies have shown that customers with different cultural backgrounds may have different preferences on what is important (DeFranco, Wortman, Lam, & Countryman, 2005). In this study, data were collected and analyzed to determine if the differences between Twitter and Sina Weibo consumer markets justify the use of distinct communication strategies. The results contend that luxury hotels encode posts differently on Twitter and Sina Weibo to motivate both Americans and Chinese customers to engage with their messages. On their Sina Weibo postings, hotel brands seem to take a traditional approaches of sales promotion and advertising with company/service information. The nature of the communication is highly informational and one-way. On Twitter, information is generally more conversational

than promotional, a type of engaging content that, compared to more traditional advertising content, is a highly effective way to enhance brand image. Links, tags, and hashtags are more frequently shared. The current study supports the finding that luxury hotels use Twitter more frequently in the US market to promote via word of mouth and customer service. This takes into consideration the idea that the people in China might not be comfortable with offering personal feelings and opinions due to cultural and government restriction of cyber space.

The other finding was intriguing: Although Twitter posts a high percentage of company images, there appears to be no statistically significant difference in user images between the two platforms. Both Twitter and Sina Weibo evidence a high presence of product and service images. This finding suggests that luxury hotels want to build their brand image using both platforms (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Finally, the biggest difference found between the two platforms is how messages are encoded. Twitter posts had a higher percentage of links and tags than Sina Weibo. Apparently, luxury hotels did not decide to join Twitter to increase sales; rather, they use it as a word-of-mouth and story-sharing platform.

Other findings from the content analysis were that hotels used these microblogging platforms to build high-quality relationships with their customers, and more than half of the posts on Twitter and Sina Weibo used emotional appeals. In addition, public events are becoming an important content focus for luxury hotels on microblogging platforms.

Twitter and Sina Weibo are still increasing in use by the hotel industry. The current study results suggest that luxury hotels might underutilize the potential of Sina Weibo as the data indicate that 87% (13 of 15) of the Sina Weibo accounts post only once a day. The frequency of hotels' posts should be one important element of their strategies, and hotel marketers should evolve with changing consumer preferences and social media tools.

Limitations and Further Research

The data have a few drawbacks. The main drawback is that the sample period is short: March 23–29, 2015. Therefore, this study provides an initial baseline to facilitate tracking the changing role of microblogging in the hospitality industry.

Table 4
Result of Chi-square Tests

Marketing Communication Strategy	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> -Value
Advertising**	54.64	1	0.000
Sales promotion**	79.94	1	0.000
Company image	0.34	1	0.562
Product/service image*	9.59	1	0.002
User's image	0.34	1	0.562
Links**	35.01	1	0.000
Tags**	37.78	1	0.000
Hashtags	1.94	1	0.164

*Statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

**Significant at the 0.001 level.

Multiple raters were used to develop the coding scheme, and a consensus model was used to reach agreement on the classification of the posts, thus strengthening the accuracy of our findings. Nevertheless, our results should be interpreted with caution given the short sample period. One important limitation is that there were only 15 international luxury hotel brands that have both Twitter and Sina Weibo accounts; future research should perhaps be extended to include other hotel segments or compare different hotel segments. With a larger dataset, marketers can identify audience's needs and responses to the marketing messages. For example, a large data analysis can provide dynamic views of brand images using visualization technique.

A further understanding of the usage of Twitter and Sina Weibo should investigate the platform users and should interview the hotel social media managers. In addition, the content analyzed was limited to Twitter and Sina Weibo posts; in order to understand how the social media marketing evolves, newer social media platforms need to be considered, such as Instagram and Google Plus. Additionally, more complex models could be developed. This will certainly benefit hotel managers or managers in other industries that utilize social media to connect with their target market.

Implications

These conclusions are significant for both researchers and hospitality managers. Hospitality managers are aware of social media, but they have not fully recognized the power of microblogging in influencing both business and leisure tourists' behaviors. Twitter and Sina Weibo offer real-time information powered by people all around the world. Many travelers turn to information found on microblogs, which shapes their ever-changing expectations. Findings suggest that hospitality managers should appoint a person to be specifically responsible for monitoring the online brand reputation and replying to comments that tourists post online. Brand managers need to have a stake in consumers' highly involved decision of finding accommodations in the digital environment. By addressing the needs and motivations of Twitter and Weibo users, the hospitality industry can reach broader audiences with more narrowly

targeted messages, and thus help achieve microblogging profitability. Managers need to consider microblogging strategies, so they can more easily increase consumer attention. Offering additional discounts on Weibo can help improve the likelihood that Chinese consumers will develop positive attitudes toward the brand. In addition, increased use of images and hashtags can improve consumer attitude toward the brand for American consumers.

This study also contributes to the research field of tourism online representation, providing evidence to the importance of online conversations shaped in a microblogging platform. The microblogging platform Sina Weibo has become a particularly effective tool for reaching the mainland Chinese population. This study contributes to a theoretical understanding of the success factors for microblogging and how these factors influence consumers in China and the US. We identified the correlations between marketing (advertising and sales promotions), pictorial posts (images), and other elements (links, tags, and hashtags).

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