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What is This?
The takeoff of social media in tourism

Kristian A Hvass and Ana M Munar
Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Abstract
Over the years, online marketing has grown in importance in the tourism industry. This media space offers companies throughout the tourism value system numerous marketing tools, one of the most recent being social media. Social media allows companies to interact directly with customers via various Internet platforms and monitor and interact with customer opinions and evaluations of services. This exploratory article studies the travel portion of the tourism experience through airlines’ use of social media on two social media platforms for a 6-month time period. The social media content posted by airlines is analyzed and categorized according to the promotional marketing mix. In addition, the authors propose four categories to describe the overall communicative behavior. Among the results, it is shown that there is a lack of strategic perspective among airlines’ utilization of social media as it is being used with limited uniformity. These findings may aid marketing departments in their marketing and social media communication strategies, while complementing current marketing research.

Keywords
airline marketing, marketing strategies, online marketing, social media

Introduction
Company communication with stakeholders is a necessity, which has become both easier and more complex with the integration of information communication technologies (ICTs). ICT, in the form of the Internet, has increased the ease of and transformed the nature of communication, including that of marketing. The latest evolution and dynamics of the Internet have facilitated an Internet increasingly based on the contributions of its users. An example of this interactive Internet is the expansion of user-generated content (UGC) and social media platforms, which is fast becoming an integral part of companies’ marketing strategy.

The phenomenon of social networks and UGC in the tourism industry is not new and has been explored in several studies (World Tourism Organization, 2008) and within various contexts, such as videos (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009), profile of blog posters and content (Wenger, 2008), and the growing importance of social media sites to online travel information search (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). The field of ICT has found application within the airline industry (Airline Business, 2008, Buhalis 1998, 2004; Buhalis and Law, 2008) and UGC is no exception (Airline Business, 2009; Clark, 2009; Field, 2008). However, integration and exploitation of Internet platforms that rely on UGC have been inconsistent.

This article is a mapping of the technological mediation that UGC Internet platforms represent for airline marketing and shows that airline use of UGC is inconsistent on various social media platforms with a high propensity of traditional advertisement and limited collaboration with users. Common patterns of behavior and usage among platforms are identified along with discussions of implications for promotional marketing strategies. The promotional marketing mix (PMM) provides the theoretical framework for
the research, which relies on content analysis of airline posts. While UGC and social network sites allow for a communicative relationship between firm and user and between user and user (Lin and Goh, 2011; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011), this exploratory article investigates the firm’s communicative content to users; future research can be extended to study other communicative relationships.

**Transforming communication through social media**

Marketing is the process of satisfying customer needs, and it is continuous throughout the product’s life cycle, while being a two-way level of communication (Kotler et al., 1996). Kotler et al. (1996) broadly define marketing as a social process through which individuals fulfill their needs by creating and exchanging value with others. These are the same processes that are being transformed by social media. An empowered Internet can be understood as a social construct and as a context that facilitates the examination of the creation and evolution of social and economic structures (Markham, 2004) via interconnectivity with users.

Social media describe an Internet which is “...increasingly influenced by intelligent Web services that enable users to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating and distributing Internet content and customizing Internet applications” (Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent, 2007: 7). It reflects a mix of different types of ICT tools, including wikis, podcasts, messaging applications, or blogs (Stillman and McGrath, 2008). The main characteristic of this new Internet is that it enhances the collaboration and sharing of information online, and it is built around social software, which makes it possible for individuals to communicate and form communities using their computers (Cooke and Buckley, 2008; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). This development is often coined Web 2.0 to signify the progression from earlier Internet applications.

Social media is also transforming the ways in which the relationship and communication with customers takes place (Airline Business, 2009). A popular viewpoint among analysts of Web 2.0 maintains that the increased possibility of interaction between the users and the Internet opens a new era of participation and transparency (Qualman, 2009). This development is explained as the beginning of a new digital revolution that shifts a technology based on “command-and-control” to a technology based on engaging and empowering individuals (ATW, 2005; Shih, 2009). This shift has profound consequences in the way businesses approach customers’ needs and wants through their marketing strategies.

**Theory to meet a social world**

The PMM, a specification of the traditional four Ps (product, price, place, and promotion) first proposed by Edmund Jerome McCarthy in the 1960s (Perreault, 2006; Van Waterschoot and Van den Bulte, 1992), provides the framework to analyze firms’ social media content and its impact on their marketing promotion.

The promotion field often concerns communication; however, this field is under transformation due to UGC. Mangold and Faulds (2009) highlight the impact social media is having on the PMM and stress that it should be incorporated as a hybrid element, while Chaffey and Smith (2008) have adapted the PMM to suit the online arena. According to Chaffey and Smith, the PMM has 10 elements; however, the authors of this article have reduced this to 8 in their attempt to reflect the specifics of UGC. Three elements were removed from the PMM: exhibitions, merchandizing, and packaging. Exhibitions were deemed not relevant for transportation services, while merchandizing- and packaging-related activities were not found in the data set. The authors added one element, social activity, to the PMM to make it more representative of UGC platforms. This activity relates to content that is purely social in nature and has a purpose of initiating dialog or kindness. It takes into consideration that social media platforms are characterized by “techspersive” features and provide pleasure, emotional experiences, and social affirmation (Kozinets, 2009). The UGC promotional mix allows researchers to classify content according to their intended purposes. The elements and their definitions are shown in Table 1.

UGC can be defined as the aggregation and leveraging of users’ content on the Internet. It is related to the digital transformation of objects: written text, sounds, and images (Poster, 2005). Content is neither the graphical user interface nor the commands and text given by the administrators of the site. Rather, it is created and uploaded by users of the platform, and users can be either organizations or individuals. UGC is the foundation of social media and knowledge related to posts in the form of who, why, where, and what is increasingly relevant to tourism firms.
(Bronner and De Hoog, 2011). Content can be written text, audio, or visual; however, this article investigates written text exclusively (Munar, 2011). Social media sites offer new tools that contribute to a larger complexity of sociotechnical systems. These platforms can be placed on a continuum. At one extreme are sites that promote self-biographical expressions and focus on the making of virtual identities and personal profiles (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn) and on the opposite pole are those that enhance a communitarian effort and a dilution of individuality in the “commons” focusing on a product or the content of the site (e.g. Wikipedia) (Munar, 2010). This article focuses on the former.

Online communities or virtual communities are one of the main elements of Web 2.0 and of its broader contribution systems (Illum et al., 2010). Communities can be defined as networks of interpersonal ties. Online communities are websites where user relationships develop, and their main assets are a combination of UGC and easy-to-use tools and applications. They are technological platforms with relationship tools that allow users to communicate with their network in new ways, changing the cost of interaction and relationship maintenance and increasing people’s network capacity (Shih, 2009). Recent publications have examined the impact of social media and web communities, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter, on both society and the market place (Li and Bernoff, 2008; Qualman, 2009; Weber, 2009; Weinberg, 2009). This article investigates airline use of social media on two popular online communities: Facebook and Twitter. However, the method could be applied to a wide array of social media sites. The social networking sites selected for this study have distinctive rules and establish different forms of interactions among their users (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011), and they invite individuals and companies to participate in diverse ways.

**Social media platforms**

The social network of Facebook is characterized by password-protection and member-only use. Personal content has a limited circulation, and it is not accessible to the broad public. This raises specific ethical issues to the use of the content of this site for research purposes. However, companies are allowed to use the network to create a profile and groups, and access to participate in group activities does not require acceptance from the group administrator. These group members are called “fans” in Facebook terminology. The social interaction that takes place in these groups is of public nature when compared to content in personal pages of individuals in this network; therefore, the authors did not seek consent nor informed the participants of the observation. The site announced that it had reached 400 million members in February 2010 (Helft and Stone, 2010).

The Twitter network is also characterized by password-protection and member-only use. Twitter is primarily text-based and driven by posts, referred to as “tweets,” that are 140 characters or less. Personal content can only be viewed by other members that the originator has accepted as a follower; however, companies are able to create an account where followers are automatically accepted. As with Facebook, the authors did not seek consent nor inform

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**Table 1. User-generated content promotional marketing mix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UGC PMM</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Product/service description or explanation, either at airline’s initiative or as a response to a question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling</td>
<td>Airline provides a link to purchase a product/service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales promotion</td>
<td>Description and/or link to specific promotions or partner companies, also may be affiliated with frequent flyer program; no selling is involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>An airline’s general response to a question not worded as an advertisement; for example, providing general information, soliciting for contributions from customers, or a challenge/game for customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>Information about an airline sponsored event or initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct mail</td>
<td>Real-time or pertinent information to travelers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-of-mouth</td>
<td>Promoting content uploaded by other users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social activity</td>
<td>Initiating a dialog without specific information about the company; for example, wishing happy holidays</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adopted from Chaffey and Smith (2008).

UGC: user-generated content; PMM: promotional marketing mix.
participants of observation due to the public nature of the content. Twitter can be more conversational in nature than Facebook, and posts are often direct responses to other, unseen tweets, which can distort the message; it is akin to only hearing one person in a phone conversation. At the end of 2009, Twitter had approximately 75 million user accounts (Gaudin, 2010).

**Methods**

This article is based on the netnography method developed for online ethnographic research by Kozinets (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2008) and content analysis of textual data. Kozinets (1998) describes this methodology as an online evolution of ethnography and defines it as an application of methods of cultural anthropology to online cyber culture. It consists of participative observation and examination of one or several virtual communities. Ethnography’s concern is mainly the study of cultural and social norms through observation of events as they unfold, which requires copresence with the people observed under the study (Haldrup and Larsen, 2010). Netnography applies this presence to the virtual world. The researcher acts as an active member of the community and studies the processes of interactivity with the rest of the community members, the specific settings and possibilities of the architecture of the sites, and the main characteristics of the content available.

The digitalization of the object of study means that it is a very specific type of cultural and social communication that can be traced by this method. It is recorded and uploaded digital content and therefore differs greatly from other types of observation of social behavior because there is a transformation of the space in which these interactions take place. In this case, there are no “natural settings” where the social act takes place, the setting is a virtual platform of communication, which is another type of social construct based on specific technological cultures.

An important difference of netnography when compared to the ethnographic method is that it is often possible for the researcher to return to the communication studied as it is recorded, stored, and displayed by these platforms. However, content may in cases be owned by the managers of the site rather than the contributors, and there are cases in which data have been removed or modified by site administrators. There is a danger that past content may be changed, and therefore, the data used for this analysis were printed in hard copy. Additionally, there are several challenges to the method related to the nature of the Internet. The sites that lay the foundation for this analysis are developing and changing at a high speed. Additionally, the rapid change in the patterns of use, the fragmentation, and massive amount of data associated with the object of analysis represents an additional challenge to the study of the Internet; however, it does not make it less relevant. Netnography is a multimethod approach where historical analysis, semiotic analysis, and different observation methods, among others, can be applied. This study uses content analysis based on participant observation.

Content analysis allows researchers to study written, visual, or aural data to understand what they mean to people and what information is conveyed (Krippendorff, 2004). This method is not new in the analysis of social media or travel. Wenger (2008) analyzed the content of blog postings related to Austrian tourism, and Xiang and Gretzel (2010) used the method to study social media and its role as information travel search. The authors categorized the textual content according to the PMM framework. Pictures, video, and sound are part of social media; however, this content was not part of the analysis; future studies may wish to incorporate these elements. Half of the sample group content was investigated collectively by the authors to ensure a common categorization understanding. The remaining content was categorized individually by each author. Those posts whose categorization the authors doubted were reviewed collectively.

**Airline data set**

The data set was constructed in a four-step process. First, by limiting the number of airlines according to size based on operating revenue and profit and by segmenting the initial data set by business model type, full-service carrier (FSC) and low-cost carrier (LCC), using the 2008 rankings by *Air Transport World* (ATW, 2009a, 2009b). *Air Transport World* rankings list nearly 300 commercial airlines, and by limiting the data set to the largest airlines made this list more manageable. There are two initial assumptions that the authors made. First, larger airlines are more likely to have the resources to be present on social media platforms. Second, there may be a distinction in online behavior by incumbent FSCs compared to younger LCCs. The segmentation by business model allowed the authors to analyze this comparison. The criterion for FSCs
was US$2 billion in revenue, and for LCCs, it was US$1 billion\(^1\) in revenue. In total, the list included the 29 highest FSC earners and 20 highest LCC earners.

Second, the authors searched for these 49 airlines on the chosen platforms via their private Facebook and Twitter accounts, where they became fans and followers, respectively, of all the airlines selected in the initial data set. Membership was limited to the official sites of the airlines as a number of unofficial sites have been created. Occasionally, airlines have created numerous official sites, for example, segmented by geography or customer segments; in these cases, the authors became fans or followers of the main sites of the airlines. This generated a total data set of 42 unique airlines: 33 airlines represented on Facebook and 25 on Twitter. The majority of airlines had a presence on both platforms, while 11 were only present on a single platform.

Third, it was decided that the time frame of study would be 6 months, from August 2009 to January 2010, to limit the size of content data. The number of posts in this 6-month time period was the criteria to select the airlines for the study. The final step involved segmenting the airlines according to business model type, the number of posts, and platform type. The airline with the lowest number of posts, closest to the mean number of posts, and the highest number of posts was selected for further research, respectively, for the two business models and platforms. Japan Airlines had the lowest number of posts (1) in the 6-month time frame for FSCs on Twitter, and therefore, it was decided to replace the airline with Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) that had the third lowest number of posts (30) in the time frame. Table 2 shows the airlines that were chosen for the detailed study.

### Categorizing communicative behavior

Based on the review of social media literature and the communicative behavior of airline posts, the authors propose four overall broad categories that describe firms’ use of social media: tone, authority, anonymity, and recipient. Tone refers to the style of language that is used in the post, which can be informal or formal (Baeza-Yates and Rello, 2011; Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2011; Munar, 2010), similar to the definition employed by Mary et al. (2004) that analyzed rhetoric tone, within the context of personalness and formality, among 350 university websites in 20 countries. Their results suggest a convergence of tone in the online realm; however, they recognize that cultural expectations among recipients must not be neglected. The informal style is a colloquial style that tries to imitate that of friends or colleagues typically addressing participants of UGC platforms in the second person and is far from other types of more formal communication. For example, the uses of honorifics such as Mr, Mrs, or Dr are avoided. Also, the informal tone in social media resembles face-to-face communication, “... showing emotion, expressing closeness and availability” (Baym, 2010: 51).

Authority is the level of content control that is exhibited by a firm. Firms can choose to publish and promote more unofficial content, for example, promote content created by customers or employees, while at the other end of the spectrum, it can be highly controlling of the content displayed and communicate only official content, such as those found in official promotional campaigns. An authoritative use of social media has a top-down approach, known as command-and-control (Shih, 2009), while a less authoritative use is

### Table 2. Sample group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FB</th>
<th>No. of FB posts(^a)</th>
<th>No. of FB fans(^b)</th>
<th>TW</th>
<th>No. of TW posts(^a)</th>
<th>No. of TW followers(^b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FSC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Air Canada</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12,251</td>
<td>SAS</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Qantas</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>13,462</td>
<td>British Airways</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>21,644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>American Airlines</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>47,015</td>
<td>Air New Zealand</td>
<td>1252</td>
<td>11,987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LCC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Air Berlin</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5550</td>
<td>Air Berlin</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Frontier</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>5379</td>
<td>Virgin America</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>AirAsia</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>160,775</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>1015</td>
<td>1,031,898</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FB: Facebook; TW: Twitter; FSC: full-service carrier; LCC: low-cost carrier; SAS: Scandinavian Airlines System.
\(^a\)August 2009–January 2010.
\(^b\)As of 25 February 2010.
a bottom-up perspective, coined interactivity. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) recommend interactivity behavior while on social media, using the term unprofessional, which may help build rapport with users. Also, marketing strategies recommend high interactivity combined with an approachable style of communication for firms that want to engage in social media sites such as Twitter (Zarella, 2010).

Anonymity describes the level of transparency of the firm’s poster. Israel (2009) discusses the impact of firms’ anonymity while posting on social media platforms. Making fans or followers aware of the name and background of a firm poster can result in stronger ties with a firm and a connection on a personal level; however, a personal connection can be hard to replace if a transparent poster can no longer post. Anonymity is an important internal decision firms must take when choosing to be present in the social media realm. Firms choose to make fans and followers aware of the identity of the employee responsible for posting on behalf of the firm or not to disclose the identity of the poster. These poles are referred to as opaque and transparent. Choosing their level of transparency, firms manipulate the amount of social cues available to the user. Also, more transparent strategies increase user’s feeling of interacting with an authentic person in virtual communication (Baym, 2010). The authors regard these three categories as complementary and having a direct relationship to one another.

The final category, recipient, refers to the intended reader of the firm’s posts. Although the content is displayed in a public forum, not all content posted on platforms is directed exclusively toward external users. Content sometimes concerns internal, company-related aspects directed to employees. Firms such as Nokia and Adobe Systems use social media platforms, both open and closed systems, as a communication channel for employees (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The two extremes of this category are internal versus external. All four categories are to be regarded as a continuum and not as dichotomies. Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) refer to this as the traditional versus emergent approaches, although these are overall descriptions of use and not specific as those used by the article’s authors.

**Traditionalists in a social media world**

This analysis attempts to highlight similarities among low-, average-, and high-posting airlines in relation to the use of social media. When similarities are platform specific, it is indicated. Although the platforms are based on UGC, the overall tone of airline-posted content leans toward formal, official, and authoritative, rather than informal, which can be referred to as a traditional marketing approach according to Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011). However, many social activity posts take on more of an informal tone, especially Twitter, which is often cited as a platform that is more conversational in nature (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2011; Israel, 2009). There is only one airline, Air Berlin, that was present in both platform analyses. Here the tone did not change across the platforms and was formal across both. A formal tone may limit the interactivity between posters, a defining characteristic of Web 2.0, as research suggests that users of social media platforms emulate the original poster (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2011) and users tend to mirror established communicative cultures (Zarella, 2010). The authoritative tone of the platforms by airlines is deemed to be command-and-control rather than interactive (Shih, 2009). Airlines have a propensity to communicate official messages rather than benefiting from the fluidity and uniqueness made possible via the platforms. One explanation may be the reliance on anonymous posting by airlines. All airline posters from the sample group are anonymous; fans and followers of these companies are unable to determine the name or department where the airline poster is from. This indicates a low level of social cues and emotional engagement (Baym, 2010) in airline communication. Also, Israel (2009) states that anonymous posting may lead followers to be less inclined to engage in informal and relationship-building conversations. Anonymity may explain the formal tones found among airline content on UGC platforms as posting official content is easier when airline posters may change; an informal tone can be difficult to emulate and maintain consistency. There is an opportunity for strengthening and building relationships with current and potential customers on social media platforms; however, a great deal of content focuses instead on official advertisement content.

While much of the content of the UGC platforms is directed toward customers, it does appear that some content is directed toward internal employees. In other words, a public platform is used to disseminate internal information. For example, Virgin America’s (2010) post, “Thanks to all VX teammates for helping raise funds for Haiti- we’re
matching you: http://bit.ly/HelpUnite." This Twitter post is directed toward internal airline employees with a link to an internal fundraising initiative; however, it is shown publicly to customers as well. Although the airline has nearly 80,000 followers (as of May 2010), it is not known how many are company employees. Many times posted content is to recognize an employee’s unique achievements within the company or beyond, recognition of an employee-of-the-month, or similar gesture. This type of content can enhance customer perception of an airline and allow for customer recognition of an airline’s internal culture. However, there is a threat that such content may dilute other important information or overload fans and followers with too much content that they lose interest altogether. Air New Zealand has approached this challenge on Twitter by establishing numerous accounts that are specific in nature, for example, AirNZ_Deals, for special promotions. When appropriate, other accounts link to AirNZ_Deals, thereby reducing the risk of information saturation on one account.

Based on the analysis of the firms’ communicative behavior in the two platforms, Facebook and Twitter, a summary of the categories is displayed in Table 3. Although they are regarded as a continuum, the analysis does not capture this precision. In addition, no discernable difference in behavior was identified in relation to the business model. Therefore, the table is not segmented accordingly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Summary of categorical characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use of social media platforms

It is found that airline use of UGC platforms is heavily advertising focused. Nearly half of the content on Facebook lies within this category, and both business models advertise to a large extent via the platform. Twitter, on the other hand, shows greater disparity. Advertising is frequently in the form of static content; messages are often merely statements regarding new products or destinations. This type of advertisement fails to exploit the interactivity and development with customers, as evident by the authoritative characteristic of command-and-control rather than customer interactivity (Shih, 2009). It also fails to promote engagement, social affirmation, affection, or emotional attachment among users (Baym, 2010).

Selling is a feature of an airline’s presence on UGC platforms, more so on Facebook than Twitter, however not the most important. Among the entire Facebook sample, this type of content is ranked fourth, while it is second to third among the LCC sample. Selling posts contain a direct link to purchase travel; however, there appear to be limited synergies between advertising and selling. The link provided is often to the airline’s home page rather than an exclusive site or pre-completed search page, in other words, there is limited integration between the UGC platform, advertising, and online sales channels. With such a strong focus on advertising in general, airlines are failing to drive sales via the UGC platforms. While airlines could choose to use social media primarily as a relationship-building tool, their prolific abundance of advertising suggests that they view the media as a complementary sales channel. In addition, there is limited customer segmentation in relation to social media users and sales (Tian and Ren, 2011). Few selling posts are directed at UGC platform users exclusively. Airlines adhere to traditional selling tools, and as in the case of advertisement, command-and-control is evident. UGC platforms allow airlines to customize and turn a sale into a relationship (Crisp, 2006); however, this is happening to a limited extent.

While advertising and selling are apparent on the UGC platforms, information dissemination via social activity and public relations are represented, especially via Twitter. Social activity is content that is not directly related to the provision of air service. It is conversational content that can be used to elicit a response from fans or followers or relationship building. For example, Southwest’s Twitter post, “Can anyone spot the @Southwestair HDQ twins in this pic? I see them every night when I leave work! http://twitpic.com/fdy1h” (Southwestair, 2009). This post links to a picture of two cats outside a building. Such content may allow followers of Southwest to feel a closer connection to the airline and the poster and can help build a relationship and loyalty with the company. Anonymous airline posters may have difficulty in creating such relationships as followers can be challenged to relate
to unknown posters. This type of content, the cornerstone of UGC platforms, conflicts with the general command-and-control characteristic followed by airlines.

Many airlines utilize both platforms for disseminating time-sensitive information. This type of content is classified as direct mail in the PMM as it is similar to the content in a mail list. In the event of unforeseen circumstances or relevant, time-sensitive information, airlines have utilized both UGC platforms to distribute information to a large number of fans and followers. Examples of events include weather delays, changes to relevant visa requirements for particular destinations, information regarding incidents and accidents, and pertinent flight status changes. However, there is inconsistency in the use of platforms for direct mail. Some airlines only report pertinent, negative information, such as widespread weather delays, while other airlines disseminate positive information, such as a report that there were no daily delays system wide. The negative information may be useful to only relevant passengers, while the positive information can help to reinforce a positive image of the carrier among all passengers. However, an excessive amount of positive messages may dilute the message and inundate users with posts.

The majority of the content posted by airlines on the platforms is positive. While the Facebook data were filtered to only show the airline posts, the Twitter platform allows the airline account holder to “re-tweet,” or forward, content by others. This too is generally positive in nature. However, re-tweeting allows airlines to post content that is seldom seen marketed by airlines, for example, safety or skills of operational personnel (Loyd, 2011; Schnurman, 2011). For example, a reference to the skill of flight crew at Air New Zealand, “RT MrReasonable Got to marvel at the skills of the pilots at flyairnz getting those planes down in this weather” (flyairnz, 2009). While such re-tweets may praise an airline in various contexts, airlines should recognize the potential pitfalls of re-tweeting messages by followers or fans that may be inappropriate. Table 4 shows the distribution for Facebook and Twitter posts categorized by the PMM.

**Lack of clear marketing strategies**

UGC content is a growing phenomenon on the Internet and Web 2.0 and numerous airlines have chosen to adopt this in their PMM (Airline Business, 2009; Clark, 2009; Field, 2008). Overall, the analyses show that there is a lack of continuity in use of UGC platforms. Airlines would benefit from developing clear strategies for their presence on individual platforms (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). Overall use of Facebook appears to be advertising focused with limited integration to sales channels, while Twitter is used for social activity. However, there is inconsistency in this use as some airlines are prolific advertisers on Twitter.

Airline use of the platforms seems to be highly diverse and exploratory in nature, which raises additional issues. First, airlines and their PMM content tends to be conservative and formal; however, this can conflict with the overall characteristics of UGC (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). If airlines wish to adopt and benefit from their UGC platform presence, they need to evaluate their level of formality and authority. Interactivity with UGC platforms users appears to be stifled by formal structures, which Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) refer to as the traditional approach. Second, the amount of posting activity varies among airlines. Some airline posters appear to respond to nearly all posts concerning the airline, especially on Twitter. This can benefit relationship building, especially with social activity posts (Israel, 2009). However, scalability may be a future concern. The highest number of average monthly posts was 209 for an airline. This level of activity can be expected to grow with the popularity of UGC platforms, which may strain airline resources as they strive to keep pace. Third, there are few examples of airlines capitalizing on the interconnectivity of UGC platforms, which is one of their main assets (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). There are few posts cross-linking to complementing UGC platforms, such as Facebook posts referring to Twitter content, airline blogs, airline YouTube channels, and vice versa. It is precisely this cross-linking that allows airlines to exploit the benefits of UGC platforms and may allow airlines to designate platforms to various PMM categories. Finally, greater capitalization through customer segmentation is possible (Tian and Ren, 2011); however, airlines have yet to implement this fully. Information about social media users seems to be lacking in airlines’ marketing strategies on social media platforms.

Use of the PMM as a theoretical framework provides a useful categorization tool; however, it has some limitations. Much of the content posted on UGC platforms does not populate
numerous PMM categories but appears to rather serve a sole purpose. For example, advertising posts seldom have a link to selling. This simplifies categorization, although does not acknowledge potential content complexity. The expanded and adjusted marketing mix proposed in this article is an attempt to address some gaps of traditional marketing literature in relation to the new digital age. This article also contributes by presenting a theoretical tool based on four categories (i.e. tone, authority, anonymity, and recipient) that allow an increased understanding of the communicative strategies adopted by firms in social media. However, there is a theoretical task that lies ahead. As airlines or firms in general become more complex in their use of social media platforms simplified categorization may not be possible. There are examples of posts that can occupy two or more PMM categories. A “re-tweet” is a form of word-of-mouth, which may, for example, also serve the purpose of social activity and advertising (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). This challenges the use of theoretical framework’s based on closed and dichotomous categories for the analysis of Web 2.0 marketing. The study of marketing and social media is still at its infancy stage; there is a challenge of applying theoretical frameworks from the analog era to the digital era. The proposed changes to the PMM by the authors is but one contribution to this challenge. Further social media research could be strengthened by the development of more complex, fuzzy, and inclusive frameworks.

Recommendations to airline practitioners who wish to be present on social media platforms include greater integration between advertising and selling, greater integration among social media platforms, less anonymity among airline posters to strengthen relationships, and enhanced customer segmentation. An increased focus on using social media platforms as a distribution channel can capitalize on their use as advertising channels. This complementary transition may allow airlines to realize greater returns on investments in social media (Broom et al., 2011; Fisher, 2009; Lin and Goh, 2011). In addition, greater integration among social media platforms will allow airlines to focus their social media marketing strategy. One airline that has a presence on several social media platforms can tailor their use according to the respective platforms. Airlines should consider transitioning from an impersonal and anonymous poster to allowing fans and followers know who the airline poster is. A transparent poster will allow fans and followers to build a personal relationship with the airline, which can fight against the commodization of the service (Rhoades et al., 1998). The final recommendation to airline practitioners is to improve upon customer segmentation on social media platforms. Fans and followers may be seeking different things from airlines via social media interaction, and segmentation will allow airlines to focus their message (Tian

<table>
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<th>Table 4. Facebook and Twitter PMM</th>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Advertising (%)</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Public relations (%)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sponsorship (%)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Direct mail (%)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Word-of-mouth (%)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Social activity (%)</strong></th>
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<td>LCC average</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td><strong>Twitter</strong></td>
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FSC: full-service carrier; LCC: low-cost carrier.
and Ren, 2011). If customer segmentation is achieved, it may reduce the danger of diluting the content’s message and information overload. These recommendations are complementary and should be done holistically by the airline to maximize the benefits.

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**Notes**

1. US LCC Virgin America was included in the data set due to its strong reliance on social media in its online presence. The airline had been in operation since late 2007, and the financial data were limited to the last two quarters of 2008; as such, it was below the financial criteria, however deemed of research interest for the article.

2. The authors experienced the dynamics of the Internet when Southwest airlines shifted from a transparent to anonymous poster. Initially, the name and department of the poster was made available to all fans on Facebook; however, it transitioned to an entirely anonymous poster overnight.

**References**


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Gaudin S (2010) Twitter now has 75M users; most asleep at the mouse. Available at: http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9148878/Twitter_now_has_75M_users_most_a_sleep_at_the_mouse


Southwestair (2009) Can anyone spot the @Southwestair HQ twins in this pic? I see them every night when I leave work! http://twitpic.com/fdyl1h [Twitter post]. Available at: https://twitter.com/SouthwestAir


