



# Examining tourism SMMEs' extent of use of social media technologies to position and market brands

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## Abstract

In view of the growing diversity of stakeholders that emerging, tourism businesses are envisaged to engage with in their businesses, small, micro and medium enterprises' sub-optimal utilisation of social media technology (SMT) for branding and marketing of their products and services is ironic and problematic. Perhaps the persistent inability of such businesses to augment their customer base stems from their dependence on traditional technologies such as television and newspapers for marketing their activities. However, these traditional technologies do not actively increase the visibility of brands to customers and to broader markets the same way SMTs would. To close this gap, this paper examines tourism SMMEs' extent of use of SMTs to position and market brands. A quantitative approach and survey was conducted on 234 tourism SMMEs' owner/managers in the Free State province of South Africa to establish the influence of SMTs on the branding and marketing of their products and services. Only 123 questionnaires were correctly completed, representing a response rate of 53%. The papers' findings revealed that tourism SMMEs in the Free State province utilise social media technologies to position and market their brands and services. It further demonstrated that SMTs are important for branding tourism SMMEs' products/services as customers and prospective customers often engage with the business via these platforms. The study recommends tourism SMMEs to develop an inventory of customers and potential customers' preferred social media platforms to ensure the optimisation of SMT-based branding and marketing.

**Keywords:** social media technologies, branding, marketing, tourism SMMEs.

## Introduction and problem statement

There has been a proliferation in the SMME customers' use of social media technologies. Nadeema, Andreini, Salo and Laukkanen (2015) postulate that consumers are regularly searching for, evaluating and purchasing items via social media platforms. Hence, it can be argued that social media platforms have been seamlessly integrated into the everyday life of the vast majority of the world population (Alsubagh, 2015). The relative ease with which social media technologies are immersed into the commercial lives of customers is attributed to: the customised communication and uncomplicated exchange of ideas among peer groups or communities (Odhiambo, 2012) and the global reach of such communications (Alsubagh, 2015).

There are some substantiated claims that SMT use has become one of the most effective and important business development instruments in the 21st century because of its ability to connect individual consumer with others. For instance, Ioană and Stoica (2014) postulate that social networking gives consumers the power to examine products to label them and criticise them in equal measure. The extant literature posits that the proliferation of SMTs and the widespread adoption of these media tools have brought dramatic changes in the business



environment as they foster unprecedented growth in human interaction in modern times (Chan, Cho & Lee, 2013; Balakrishnan, Dahnil & Yi, 2014). The wide avenues through which SMTs facilitate interaction is through inter alia: sending messages, taking images via webcams, posting comments, sharing files, discussing in groups, blogging, or tweeting friends to give them information (Alsubagh, 2015) about brands available in the market. Thus, tourism SMMEs' capacity to tap into emerging technologies such as SMTs will allow them to capitalise on opportunities in the business environment by responding to the customer questions, comments and opinions about their products and services.

The discomfiting irony is that customers' prominent use of social media is contradicted by SMMEs' erratic, disproportionate and often ambivalent deployment of these technologies. In fact, the most disappointing feature of SMMEs' technology-mediated business operations are their dependence on traditional media technologies such as television, radio and print media. Verheyden and Goeman (2013) concur that in comparison to larger businesses, SMMEs are less likely to implement social media technologies and less motivated to use them intensively. Kohli, Suri and Kapoor (2015) state that the traditional branding pattern continue to involve substantial upfront investments and tightly managing the image via controlled communications with the hope of creating dominant brands that could be leveraged to cultivate loyalty and a long-term, steady stream of profits. This can be interpreted to mean SMMEs' relentless preoccupation with traditional modes of corporate control through the deployment of traditional monolithic communication channels such as television and radio that undermine consumer power and influence in decision making about brands and purchases. Adegbuyi, Akinyele and Akinyele (2015) affirm that although SMTs are envisaged to play a vital role in marketing and creating relationships with customers tourism SMMEs do not necessarily buy in and capitalise on these opportunities. Despite small businesses' emergent use of such technologies to marketing enabled by low barriers to entry (Adegbuyi et al., 2015), there is growing consensus that the lack of a competitive strategy and basic knowledge of SMT tools and applications to leverage business connectivity remain a millstone around the necks of tourism SMMEs (Lim, 2010; Milano, Baggioc, & Piattelli, 2011; Maha, 2015;).

Hudson, Roth, Madden and Hudson (2014) postulate that in this emerging technological era of marketing communication there is a little information about how social media interactions with tourism brands affect how consumers think about those brands and the outcomes of such interactions. Yet Verheyden and Goeman (2013) insist that when properly harnessed, SMTs offer strategic prospects to businesses, such as new grounds for branding and new types of interaction. Hence Brennan and Schafer (2010) highlight that the rapid change and growth in SMTs and its transformation of the Web will continue to revolutionise marketing. What remains speculative is the extent to which tourism SMMEs have tapped into this hype about SMTs especially whether they are exploiting such technologies to brand and market their product/services. The transactive (e.g. sale of products and services, social exchange of marketing skills and networking on business knowledge) and interactive (client sharing of brand information, expert and band ambassador recommendations about products, celebrity social commentary on brands) power of SMTs is considered fundamental to SMMEs' counteracting of negative or positive statements customers may make about their products/services online (Balakrishnan, Dahnil & Yi, 2014). It is in view of the proliferation of SMTs among consumers and their underutilisation by tourism SMMEs for positioning and marketing their brands, that this study seeks to interrogate the extent to which tourism SMMEs utilise SMTs in positioning and marketing of their brands and services.

### **Research question**

To what extent do tourism SMMEs utilise SMTs in the positioning and marketing of their brands?



## **Problem background**

Small businesses play a central role in national economic development, are strong drivers of new innovations which stimulate job creation and economic transformation (Adegbuyi et al., 2015). Tourism SMMEs are no exception as tourism itself is an important economic contributor (Blanco-Gomez, 2013). In spite of this envisaged contribution, tourism SMME remain entrapped in stunted growth and competitive potential due their location in peri-urban and rural areas, where the operational costs are conceived to be lower than those of urban areas.

Cesaroni and Consoli (2015) posit that emerging technologies represent an opportunity for tourism SMMEs to overcome the liability of being small, by encouraging growth and development, developing new products, obtaining new market share and gaining competitiveness. Furthermore, Mosweunyane (2016) affirm that when resource-constrained tourism SMMEs exploit the profound opportunities presented by SMTs to brand and market their products and services as alternatives to the less effective print and electronic media, they are bound to leverage their competitiveness. The exploitation of one-way conventional media such as newspapers, radio, and tourism news channels as marketing tools for local and world tourism is increasing being challenged by the advent of highly interactive, rich text and communicative social media platforms (Mosweunyane, 2016). Brennan and Schafer (2010) concur that consumers want to connect with businesses through social media to learn more about business information, products, and promotions. Tourism SMMEs need to follow this trend by using social media because it is a popular marketing tool that allows direct interaction with potential consumers and provides an incomparable platform for consumers to openly evaluate and share information of products (Nadeema et al., 2015). Yet tourism SMMEs cannot assume that SMTs can be used haphazardly without a coherent competitive strategy. As Brennan and Schafer (2010) advise, social media should first be used to build relationships, which require a balance of relevant information about SMME operations, brand and culture.

In spite of the aforementioned caveats, the business opportunities bestowed by social media technologies cannot be taken for granted but rather SMMEs should capture the economic value generated from SMT users' exploitation of such technologies (Yadav, de Valck, Hennig-Thurau, Hoffman & Spann, 2013). Van der Bank and Van der Bank (2015) insist that the rise and popularity of social media among the customers implies that tourism businesses can no longer rely solely on traditional media for marketing. As Mosweunyane (2016) posits that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are recognised for creating opportunities for SMMEs to interact with their stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, local communities, regulators and financiers. However little is known about how small enterprises use these technologies and in particular social media (Cesaroni & Consoli, 2015) for the positioning and marketing of their brands.

## **Literature review**

### **Social media marketing**

Only recently has SMTs gained their currency and increased used in the tourism sector (Sahin & Sengün, 2015) due to increasing digital competencies of users and communicative affordances of such technologies (Cheung, 2012). Since SMTs render two-way communication between businesses and consumers (Kim & Ko, 2012), tourism SMMEs' proactive of such technologies to market themselves would increase their brand presence and visibility. For instance, Cheung (2012) posits that consumers' increasing use of social media enable them to access travel information without guidance from the traditional travel agent. This signifies the power of social media technologies to popularise marketing of tourism products/services without the need for a middleman in the exchange of business related information. Doodoo and Wu (2015) state that the collaborative nature of SMTs provides marketers with better opportunities to have direct conversations with consumers. Therefore, tourism SMMEs' strategic management of consumer-brand relationship via social media would be instrumental to their improved competitiveness.



## **Social media marketing in tourism**

Owing to the increase in popularity of social media technologies (Balakrishnan, Dahnil, & Yi, 2014; Sahin & Sengün, 2015), many tourism businesses have started using these technologies as one of their marketing strategies (Sahin & Sengün, 2015). The opportunities for direct interaction, instant feedback and open communication with consumers via social media technologies (Dodoo & Wu, 2015) perhaps explains this surging use of these technologies. Aspasia and Ourania, (2014) consider SMTs as the best instrument to reach the customers globally and receive their valuable feedback compared to traditional media, which emphasises one-way communication. Manizzi (2015) further asserts that SMTs play a substantial role in many aspects of tourism, especially in information search, decision-making behaviours, tourism promotion and enhancing interactions with consumers. In spite these laudable promises it remains to be seen whether the uptake of such technologies really impact on marketing, branding and ultimately the competitiveness of businesses. Sahin and Sengün (2015) posit that emerging technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. are closely related to the tourism sector as they assist tourism businesses to render flexible services such as the promotion and sales of tourism products/services which will lead to important developments in the field of tourism marketing and tourism activities. As a consequence, consumers increasingly search for, assess, and buy product/service via social media (Nadeem al., 2015). Naidu and Agrawal (2013) concur with this assertion stating that currently social media technologies are useful tool in purchasing decisions. We infer that tourism businesses stand to influence purchasing decisions of consumers if they were to exploit the networking and interactive affordances of social media technologies. Hence, Neti (2011) states that social media increases the accessibility of products/services of the business to potential consumers by increasing their visibility.

## **Branding**

Given the aggressive competition for the share of tourism market between big corporations and emerging businesses, it is uncontested that SMTs can be exploited as a vehicle for increasing brand presence and brand acceptance within the tourism sector. The importance of SMTs for brands lies in the fact that they constitute a significant means through which brand visibility can be created and maintained thus generating strong relationships between brands and consumers (Trainor, 2012). Since branding plays a central role in the marketplace in establishing the distinctiveness of the business relative to other businesses (Markina & Drogomyretska, 2014) it is logical for tourism customers to make buying decisions about products/services based on their knowledge of brand images portrayed via SMTs. Therefore, tourism SMMEs cannot ignore the perceptions and images portrayed about their brands, products/services via social media if they are to survive their existing and potential well-known competitors such as large tourism enterprises. Kalandides (2011) describes tourism branding as premeditated to improve a business's image by trying to change the perception that people have towards that particular business.

## **Positioning of brands**

Brand positioning plays a role of creating and developing a brand in such a way that it takes a unique image and value in the minds of target customers (Sharma, 2013). Furthermore, Karadeniz (2009) posits that positioning is the development of the image of a product against that of the competitors. In this regard, the lasting impressions about a brand and its easy identification among its competitors therefore, could be tied to the messages that the tourism SMMEs articulate about such brands. Brand positioning should be conceived as something the business does to the mind of potential customers (Karadeniz, 2009). The current authors interpret this to mean practice-based images that are continually invoked and reinforced with a view to exert an impression on the value and quality of a particular brand. Janiszewska and Insch (2012) concur that positioning is the way a business wants customers to perceive, think and feel about its brand as opposed to competitors. These authors further state that brand



positioning describes the brand in question by indicating the differentiating elements in the context of the target group's needs and expectations. Therefore, brand positioning is the foundation for attaining a strategic competitiveness over competitors. Karadeniz (2009) posits that positioning can be formed according to the precise features and also a positioning can be developed as directly counter to the main opponent. The place and contribution of SMTs to brand positioning is a function of the firm's competitive strategy and corporate policy and the intended targets.

Janiszewska and Insch (2012) posits that consumption of tourist products has become a common phenomenon with the commercialisation of tourism in recent times. Janiszewska and Insch (2012) further emphasise that commercialisation is detrimental to the distinguishing of tourism businesses with other businesses many areas of activity and sectors. This is because mass consumption tends to be a response to tourists' mass needs thus differentiation may be based on a consistently implemented concept of brand positioning. Karadeniz (2009) concurs stating that a successful brand positioning is the development of the 'added value' which is improved through a remarkable differentiation from competitors. Such differentiation, however, can be problematic for emerging tourism businesses which are conceived not to offer differentiated products due to their resource constraints. Therefore, while positioning can assist tourism SMMEs to add value to their products/services which will entice customers, this is not always automatic and uncomplicated to do successfully. Sharma (2013) affirms that positioning requires perception of tourists-which is neither uniform, universal nor consistent. Positioning of different target tourism plans requires identifying opportunities for creation of image and differential aspects of one tourism place from rest of tourism place (Sharma, 2013).

### **Social media technologies for branding**

Since strong brands constitute highly valuable assets for businesses (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013). SMTs can serve as the conduits through which brands express their life. Neti (2011) posits that SMTs should be used as instruments that create a persona behind the brand and create contacts that businesses otherwise may never gain. Furthermore, Kiráľová, and Pavlíček (2014) acknowledge that social media play an important role in tourism allowing destinations to interact directly with visitors via various internet platforms and monitor visitors' opinions, reactions and evaluations of services. In view of that, Gensler et al. (2013) state that consumers are now able to share their brand experiences widely through social media technologies. This is a window of opportunities for tourism SMMEs to take advantage and use these social media technologies to brand their businesses.

With the use of new technologies, brands and consumers are allowed to communicate with each other unrestricted in time and place such that the old-fashioned, one-way communication is transformed into interactive two-way direct communication (Kim & Ko, 2012). The interactive nature of social media technologies allows not only brands to share and exchange information with their customers, but customers are also permitted to do the same with one another (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). In view of this, through social media customers can indirectly help businesses in building their brands. This means that even customers can influence prospect customers positively or negatively to use services/products of a particular business. Thus, social media for these businesses represent brand building opportunity that surpasses the traditional middleman and connects businesses directly with consumers (Neti, 2011; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Kim and Cho (2013) posit that these emerging technologies can thus be a key competitive factor in high competitive tourism businesses.

### **Research design**

A quantitative research design was adopted for this paper. The survey instrument was developed to collect quantitative data about the use of social media for the marketing and



branding of tourism SMME products and services. The Tourism Grading Council of South Africa estimated that there were approximately 600 registered tourism SMMEs in the Free State Province. A sample size calculator was used to calculate the sample size and the sample was 234 research elements at a confidence level of 95%. The researchers ensured that each unit of the population had an equal probability of inclusion through the use of simple random sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Of the 234 questionnaires distributed, 123 were correctly completed, representing a response rate of 53%. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study.

### Research instrument and data collection

A questionnaire containing closed-ended, Likert scale questions was developed based on literature that covered social media marketing and branding, and competitiveness. This study reports only on positioning and marketing of branding in tourism SMMEs, though the research instrument was covering a broader range of issues such as level of entrepreneurship and stakeholder management. The instrument was evaluated by experts before being administered to the targeted research subjects. There were four sections in the questionnaires, covering demographic data, social media utilisation, stakeholders and competitiveness.

Questionnaires were distributed by the first author with the help of two trained research assistants. Data collection was deemed complete within two months. The unit of analysis was the owner/manager of the tourism SMMEs.

### Data analysis

De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2011) posit that data is analysed for the purpose of reducing it to a logical and interpretable form and to draw conclusions from the data. Therefore, the researcher coded data and submitted it to the statistician who analysed it using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. The detailed analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics such as frequency tables and inferential statistics e.g. correlation and regression analysis.

### Reliability of data

To address the objectives of this study, preliminary checks were done to determine the validity and reliability of the variables (or constructs) used in the analysis. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to determine whether or not the variables are reliable. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient is used to test whether or not the items used for a variable actually measure that particular construct. See Table 1.1 below.

**Table 1**  
**Cronbach's alpha**

Constructed variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Branding	0.941	5
Marketing	0.956	6

The Table 1 above shows that the construct variables are reliable. A construct is reliable when Cronbach's alpha value is above 0.6. Since the constructs have Cronbach's alpha values above 0.6, they are deemed to be reliable and can be used for analysis (Rahimnia & Raude, 2013).



## Findings

### Demographics data

The demographics data of the tourism SMMEs is illustrated below in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Sample demographics**

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percent
Role in the business	Owner	21	17.1%
	Manager	59	48.0%
	Owner/Manager	18	14.6%
	Other	25	20.3%
Age	21 - 30 years	39	32.0%
	31 - 40 years	38	31.1%
	41 - 50 years	32	26.2%
	Above 50	13	10.7%
Education	High school	42	34.4%
	Tertiary	60	49.2%
	Postgraduate	20	16.4%
Sub-sector of tourism	Accommodation	56	45.5%
	Hospitality & related services	55	44.7%
	Travel distribution services	11	8.9%
	Others	1	0.8%
Years business has been in operation	1 - 5 years	40	33.3%
	6 - 10 years	54	45.0%
	11 - 15 years	15	12.5%
	16 - 20 years	2	1.7%
	Over 20 years	9	7.5%
Number of employees in the business	None	8	6.5%
	1 – 5	63	51.2%
	6 – 9	29	23.6%
	10+	23	18.7%

As indicated in Table 2, about 62.6 percent were managers and only 17 percent were owners. This could be interpreted to mean that the owners of tourism SMMEs (48%) prefer to hire someone to manage their businesses. Furthermore, 63.1% of respondents were between 21 and 40 years old, whereas 36.9% were between 41 years old and over 50. This finding implies that the tourism SMMEs are predominantly owned or managed by the economically active population. Respondents who studied up to tertiary education were in the majority (65.6%) whilst only 34.4 percent studied up to high school level. The prevalence of well-educated owner/managers, perhaps demonstrates the complexity of navigating the tourism sector, which require higher educational attainments and quality training (Fosso-Wamba & Carter, 2014:7).

### The extent of social media utilisation

Table 3 shows the tourism SMMEs' extent of utilisation of social media technologies. The results are summarised below.



**Table 3**  
**Status and utilisation of social media technologies**

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
The business use social media technologies.	Yes	102	82.9%
	No	21	17.1%
How do you rate your social media knowledge?	No knowledge	21	17.1%
	Beginner/Novice	19	15.4%
	Intermediary	55	44.7%
	Advanced	28	22.8%
Which social media technologies does your business use?	None	20	16.3%
	Blogs	2	1.6%
	Social networking site	76	61.8%
	Micro-blogging	11	8.9%
	Collaborative projects	4	3.3%
	Content communities	5	4.1%
	Others	5	4.1%
How often does your business use social media technologies?	Once/more a day	35	28.5%
	Once/more a week	28	22.8%
	Once/more every month	42	34.1%
	Never	18	14.6%
How much time does your staff invest in work-related use of social media technologies?	None	38	31.4%
	Less than 30min	30	24.8%
	30 min - 1 hour	30	24.8%
	1 - 3 hours	20	16.5%
	Over 3 hours	3	2.5%
Who handles the social media technologies in your business?	None	22	18.0%
	Manager/Owner	73	59.8%
	Employees	17	13.9%
	Social media technology specialist	10	8.2%
What are the reasons for your business' use of social media technologies?	Do not use social media	19	15.6%
	Marketing products/service	21	17.2%
	Build credibility	12	9.8%
	Attracting new customers	57	46.7%
	Network	6	4.9%
	Listen to customers	4	3.3%
	Provide feedback	3	2.5%
To what extent does your business consider social media technologies important for its operations.?	Not at all	15	12.2%
	To a little extent	18	14.6%
	Neutral	53	43.1%
	Moderate extent	37	30.1%
How do you rate your staff's knowledge of social media knowledge?	Novice	35	28.5%
	Beginner	20	16.3%
	Intermediary	56	45.5%
	Advanced	12	9.8%
	Existing Customers	81	71.1%



Who are your business trying to reach through social media technologies?	Prospective customers	21	18.4%
	Suppliers	11	9.6%
	Competitors	1	0.9%
Which methods do the business use to communicate with stakeholders?	None	8	6.5%
	Telephone	22	17.9%
	e-mail	70	56.9%
	Letter	4	3.3%
	Social media technologies	19	15.4%

From Table 3 it is evident that majority (82.9%) of respondents use social media technologies, whilst only 17.1% do not use such technologies. This illustrates the significance of these technologies to a day to day operations of tourism SMMEs (Meske & Stieglitz, 2013) and the keenness of these business to have a social media presence. Social networking sites were the most used platform. This is consistent with the high number of Facebook (social network site) utilisation as compared to other social media platforms in South Africa (see Goldstuck, 2016; Snyman, 2016).

About 49.6% of respondents reported that their staff invest not more than one hour in work-related social media per day and only 2.5% of respondents reported investing more than 3 hours per day. Although the majority (82.9%) of tourism SMMEs surveyed use social media, the time invested by staff is inadequate for making a great impact on these enterprises. Furthermore, 59.8 percent of owner/managers handles the social media in the business themselves, whilst only 8.2 percent have hired social media specialist. According to Mosweunyane (2016) tourism SMMEs owner/managers may perceive entrusting a specialist with the duties of positioning and marketing of business on social media as possibly disruptive of their own authority.

Table 3 further illustrates that 46.7% of the respondents use SMTs in order to attract new customers and 17.2% use it to market their products/services while 9.8% use it to position their brands (credibility). Despite the majority (82.9%) of tourism SMMEs utilising social media, only 30.1% of respondents perceive social media technologies as moderately important for business operations whilst 14.6 percent perceive it to be of little importance for their business operations. The findings indicate that regardless of their utilisation of social media, majority of owner/managers do not see social media as important for business operations.

### **Marketing through social media technologies**

Table 4 shows that most (65.9%) of the respondents agree/strongly agree that their business market their product/services through social media technologies. Additionally, 60.5% agreed/strongly agreed that their businesses conduct product/services promotions via social media technologies. This shows that the popularity of social media use for marketing is perhaps influenced by the increasingly presence of consumers on social media platforms (Popescu & Alecsa, 2015; Van der Bank & Van der Bank, 2015). Therefore, it could be tourism businesses' strategic move to use social media platforms to seize hold of the complex audience of SMT users.

**Table 4**  
**Marketing**

Marketing		Frequency distribution					% Agree/Strongly agree	Descriptive	Latent factor - Factor loading	
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree				
The business markets its product/services through social media technologies.	n	7	26	9	48	33	65.8%	3.57	1.27	0.90
	%	5.7%	21.1%	7.3%	39.0%	26.8%				
The business conducts product/services promotions via social media technologies.	n	11	18	18	47	25	60.5%	3.45	1.24	0.91
	%	9.2%	15.1%	15.1%	39.5%	21.0%				
The business extends its market share through its social media campaigns.	n	8	23	26	43	23	53.7%	3.42	1.18	0.92
	%	6.5%	18.7%	21.1%	35.0%	18.7%				
The business attracts customers through advertising on social media technologies.	n	7	19	20	40	37	62.6%	3.64	1.25	0.92
	%	5.7%	15.4%	16.3%	32.5%	30.1%				
Social media technologies has an effect when marketing business brands/services.	n	6	24	18	38	35	60.3%	3.61	1.25	0.91
	%	5.0%	19.8%	14.9%	31.4%	28.9%				
Social media technologies play an important role to business marketing efforts.	n	6	26	16	30	45	61.0%	3.68	1.31	0.88
	%	4.9%	21.1%	13.0%	24.4%	36.6%				

The total of 60.3% of the businesses agreed that social media technologies have an influence when marketing business brands/services and 61% agree that social media technologies play an important role in the businesses' marketing efforts. Table 4 also indicates that 61% of respondents agree that social media technologies play a vital role to business' marketing efforts. These findings are slightly higher than a study by Tiago and Verissimo's (2014) whereby 41 percent of respondents posits that promotion of their business activities on social media as a primary driver improves their marketing efforts.



## Social media branding

Table 5 shows that slightly above half of the respondents (59.3%) agree that their business use social media to introduce a particular brand. The finding is interesting as it indicates that almost half of other respondents do not utilise social media to introduce a particular brand. This can be problematic as tourism SMMEs may lose their potential customers to other businesses as they fail to capture their attention and entice them to purchase their products. A further 59.3% agree that their business use social media technologies to maintain the dominance (positioning) of the brand.

**Table 5**  
**Branding**

Branding	Frequency distribution						Descriptive		Latent factor - Factor loading	
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	% Agree/Strongly agree	Mean	Standard deviation		
The business use social media technologies to introduce a particular brand/services.	n	6	28	16	44	29	59.4%	3.49	1.22	0.89
	%	4.9%	22.8%	13.0%	35.8%	23.6%				
The business uses social media technologies to maintain the dominance of the brands/services.	n	7	22	21	56	17	59.3%	3.42	1.11	0.88
	%	5.7%	17.9%	17.1%	45.5%	13.8%				
The business uses social media technologies to distinguish a brand for its competing products.	n	7	26	11	62	17	64.2%	3.44	1.14	0.90
	%	5.7%	21.1%	8.9%	50.4%	13.8%				
The business uses social media technologies to demonstrate the uniqueness of its brands.	n	6	26	9	56	25	66.4%	3.55	1.18	0.94
	%	4.9%	21.3%	7.4%	45.9%	20.5%				
The business uses social media technologies to communicate their unique brand position in a way that is compelling to customers.	n	6	21	14	59	22	66.4%	3.57	1.12	0.89
	%	4.9%	17.2%	11.5%	48.4%	18.0%				

As illustrated in Table 5, 66.4% of respondents agree that the business uses social media technologies to demonstrate the uniqueness of its brands. A further 66.4% reported that their businesses use social media technologies to communicate their unique brand position in a way that is compelling to customers. Moreover, 64.2% of respondents reported that their business uses social media technologies to distinguish their brands from their competing products. SMTs are one of the preeminent opportunities available to a brand for connecting with potential consumers (Neti, 2011) hence tourism SMMEs are calculative in their exploitation of SMTs to brand their businesses. Perhaps these tourism SMMEs have heeded the advice of Vukasovič (2013) who posits that there is a positive relationship between social media and branding. Therefore, tourism SMMEs are perhaps trying to keep up with technological development and by allowing their brand to follow this development (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014).



## Study conclusion and recommendations

The results point out that the mainstream (69.9) of tourism SMMEs sampled, utilise social media technologies for branding of their product/service. The empirical findings validated that social media technologies are significant for branding tourism SMMEs' products/services as it is where customers and prospective customers often engage with the business. Strong brands enjoy greater customer loyalty, have the potential to generate premium prices, and develop considerable brand power to support the introduction of new product and service (Ghodeswar, 2008). Furthermore, Mosweunyane (2016) adds to this assertion that emerging entrepreneurs are embracing social media to leverage their business operations and marketing of the business brands. However, despite majority of tourism SMMEs using social media for branding only a few (30.1%) consider social media technologies important for their operations. This finding contradicts Fischer and Reuber's (2011) study into Twitter usage which found that reasonable use of social media benefits important business outcomes.

In view of these finding, it can, therefore, be concluded that a significant majority of SMMEs in the Free State province utilise social media technologies in positioning and marketing their brands and services. This conclusion is corroborated by Christou (2015) who reported that tourism SMMEs' use of social media technologies for branding builds stakeholder loyalty. Consistent with this argument, we can conclude that tourism SMMEs have successfully taken advantage of social media technologies.

As illustrated in Table 3 only 8.2% of tourism SMMEs make use of social media specialist in their businesses. This is not progressive view on the popularity of social media amongst marketers and brands. In fact, it can be concluded that perhaps the reason why many tourism SMMEs do not perceive the significance of SMTs could be their failure to use it creatively and innovatively due to the absence of SM specialists who can advise them on the productive use of such technologies. Shortage of resources might be one of the contributing factors to tourism SMMEs' failure to use SM specialists to handle social media use in business. Tourism SMMEs should invest in social media technologies by ensuring that a certain percentage of their total annual budget is allocated to the adoption of the latest technologies such as website development, and additionally consider employment of social media specialists to run the business social networking sites. This can be done by providing funds for training of SMT specialists and through incentives to encourage tourism SMMEs to hire these trained SMTs specialists.

Schroeder (2013) postulate that the explosion of SMTs means that it has become easier to improve weak ties, which can be employed into provide information or assistance, or to market the business. SMTs therefore assist in marketing and positioning the tourism SMMEs brand. However, the effect that SMT will have on tourism SMMEs will be favourable to business if complaints are dealt with, feedback is provided and there is a general engagement with stakeholders. This will positively build the brand of tourism SMMEs. Social media phenomenon signifies ongoing trend where tourism SMMEs stand to gain (Benea, 2014).

## Conclusion and Implications for future research

Given the importance of tourism in the South African economy and the proliferation of tourism SMTs in recent years, this study sought to establish interventions for increasing the positioning and to market brand of tourism SMMEs in such a highly competitive multifaceted globalised sector. Despite majority of sampled tourism SMMEs utilising SMTs, the importance of these technologies is underestimated by these SMMEs. The results from this research show that, although social media is quite common among small businesses, the latter are not always able to use these tools in a truly profitable way. Tourism SMMEs should be encouraged to incorporate social media technologies into their business competitive strategy, marketing and branding and business processes to increase their return of investment. To increase the competitiveness of such firms, social media technologies need to be integrated into the formal



external information strategy of these businesses to improve their international competitiveness of these firms.

The objective of this study was to examine the extent of use of social media technologies by tourism SMMEs to position and market their brands. Consequently, this paper has found that there is a use of social media technologies by tourism SMMEs. However, further studies need to examine the lack of social media policies within SMMEs and despite most business adopting social media technologies, why it is not taken seriously within these businesses is worthy of consideration. Other studies may also examine the adoption of social media and its effect on customer loyalty and thus retention.

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