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Technology Empowered Real-time Service

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Abstract

Real-time service has gained higher importance as part of the digital competitiveness of brands. This has followed the establishment of social media as an engagement mechanism that supports consumer experience by bridging consumer expectations and brand performance in real time. The ubiquity of social media's constant connectivity has led to the increasing demand of instant gratification. Consumers not only demand brands to provide a personalised response, but also expect them to reply instantly 'now'. This exploratory research aims to identify how brands leverage social media and technology to enhance consumer experience in real-time. Data collection was conducted in two research stages. First an in-depth case study of Marriott M Live and then multiple case studies of four best-practice companies. Real-time data monitoring and engagement can support organisations to eliminate problems before they escalate, enhance customer experience and also take advantage of upselling opportunities. This study concludes with a real-time service competitive advantage conceptual framework. The findings suggest that the integration of real-time listening and monitoring in conjunction with highly contextual delivery become crucial tools for enhancing brands competitiveness.

Keywords: real-time, real-time service, social media, ICTs, technology, competitive advantage.

1 Introduction

Technology has revolutionised the way brands communicate with consumers and how they engage (Del Rowe, 2016). The use of technology to enhance consumer experience may include interactive websites, social media channels or mobile applications that are monitored in real-time (Neuhofer, 2014). The emergence of social media and the proliferation of mobile technologies have sparked an increasing demand from well-informed consumers to interact in real time and to engage dynamically before, during and after the trip experience (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Consumer preferences can change in real-time depending on contextual factors such as weather or traffic conditions. Brands are increasingly expected to be able to understand these constant changes in order to be prepared to convey relevant actions to consumers in a timely manner (Del Rowe, 2016).

The dynamic and experiential nature of the travel, tourism and hospitality industries (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012) demand real time services more than other sectors. There is a growing requirement to dynamically focus the service and engagement to

targeted consumers, through contextualised and personalised service offerings based on the real-time intelligence. Contextual information is based both on consumer personal preferences and external factors (such as traffic, season, weather, etc.) (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a).

In the highly competitive environment, only brands that can co-create exceptional consumer experiences can set themselves apart from competitors (McKinsey, 2016). However, only a few studies have attempted to examine how real-time data and agile action, based on contextual information, can create distinct value for all stakeholders and how technology, time and contextual relevancy can assist organisations to cocreate higher value experiences for the digitally savvy consumers in the marketplace (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012). This exploratory study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by exploring how social media and technology can be optimised to enhance consumer experience in real-time. The objectives of this paper are to analyse how brands perform real-time service, using social media and technology; to explore the value of real-time service for all stakeholders; and to conceptualise a comprehensive real-time service competitive advantage framework.

2 Literature Review: Real-time Marketing

Lieb (2014) defined real-time marketing as “*the strategy and practice of responding with immediacy to external events and triggers. It’s arguably the most relevant form of marketing, achieved by listening to and/or anticipating consumer interests and needs*”. Real-time marketing as a concept has been coined in the literature over two decades ago. It has been expanded over a period of time with the basic argument that dynamic timing and flexible service offerings can lead to competitiveness (McKenna, 1995; Oliver, Roland & Sajeew, 1998; Reid, 2014; Rust & Oliver, 2000). Real-time marketing and its close relation with social media as a medium of engagement are widely discussed from a business practice perspective (Del Rowe, 2016; Econsultancy, 2015; Lieb 2014; Scott, 2012). Real-time marketing extends both mass customisation or personalisation (e.g. conquering consumer space by focusing on the uniqueness of individual needs) and relationship marketing (e.g. conquering consumer time by fulfilling those needs as they evolve) (Rust & Oliver, 2000). Oliver, Roland, & Sajeew (1998) argued that brands should provide each consumer with products or services that are customised to their current needs, yet still hold the flexibility to adapt to the changing preferences, as well as continuously engage with each consumer and improve offerings (McKenna, 1997). However, it was not until the proliferation of social media, with Twitter and Facebook in particular, that real-time marketing was practically possible (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2012). The use of social media to perform real-time marketing should be based on the understanding that mere presence and one-way communication (pure marketing message) are not sufficient to gain success (Hamill, Stevenson, & Attard, 2012). It requires dynamic conversation with the right audience, trust from consumers as well as continuous engagement with influential consumers (Yoo & Gretzel, 2010).

2.1 Real-time Motivation and Expectation

Real time marketing is a result of the customer expectation for real time engagement. From a travel and tourism perspective, consumers use social media to be inspired,

obtain and compare information, express themselves, look for products or services features, articulate their travel-related experiences or provide inputs/outputs on their decision-making process (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Fotis, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Some examples related to these motives in the context of real-time service are shown in Table 1. Consumers have various expectations in order to improve their travel experience in different travel stages (Fotis, 2015; Neuhofer, 2014). As a result of the ubiquity of digital devices and the interactive nature of social media, consumers want their needs to be recognised and instant gratified by brands; fulfilling these needs ‘now’ (Patel, 2014). They also expect effortless access to real-time information, personalised suggestions; alternatives on travel consumptions and instant customer service (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). Social media offer a strong tool to deliver or receive messages and facilitate interaction towards instant gratification. They are therefore used by consumers to reach brands, especially during unexpected events and crisis, such as missing of a flight when rearrangements are required or when contextual conditions create disruptions. Consumers expect a timely response or quick service recovery from brands shortly after contacting them through their social channels; often in contrast to overloaded call centres that are nearly impossible to reach.

Table 1 Real-time Social Media Motives and Examples (Adapted from Fotis 2015)

Social Media Motivations	Example of real-time service (consumer-brand) motivation	Travel Stage
Search for information, look for price & availabilities, product / service features	Instead of browsing through complex information in the internet, or waiting on the line for hours on call centres, consumer may reach brand’s social media channels directly to get specific information instantly.	Before, during
Self-expression	When feeling satisfied or disappointed (variety of emotions, both positive and negative), consumers may share their feeling via social media right away, even when the activity is still happening.	Before, during, after
Consumption and Post-consumption evaluation	During or after the consumption of experience, consumers may share a review about their (positive/negative) experience; whether to seek acknowledgement or solution from brands, or to notify other consumers (peer-to-peer) in real-time.	During, after

Consumers increasingly demand brands to have personalities just as people, and they expect brands to be able to connect with consumers authentically, whether by personalising products or services, or by engaging with them in real-time across social platforms at the right moment (Lieb, 2014). They expect that their favourite airline or hotel chain care for them, particular at a time of distress, or acknowledge back a complimentary remark. This is where the brands are expected to have a good sense, show empathy and adopt an adaptive response to a rapid change of consumer needs, in order to be successful (Buhalis, 2003). The rising expectations of consumers, who

increasingly participate in the experience co-creation process, rather than the consumption of a service, provide valuable insights for brands (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2013). It also gives them an opportunity to create or develop service offerings based on consumer's specific needs in real-time, as well as to deliver higher value for consumers (Sashi, 2012).

2.2 Real-time Co-creation

Through service dominant logic the process of value creation is evolving from a product-centric approach to a consumer-centric one. This aims to provide a more personalised consumer experience, where “informed, networked, empowered consumers increasingly co-create value” with brands (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p.5). Co-creation, defined as the “joint creation of value by the company and the customer” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p.8) has become a central notion in experience consumption. In the context of co-creation, it's critical to have direct interactions with consumers. Social media empower brands to co-create directly with, and among, active networked consumers through collective, collaborative and dynamic process of consumer-brand interactions; allowing role unification of both parties (Gensler, Volckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2013). By understanding why, how and where consumers are actively communicating and making a decision to purchase, brands have the ability to produce greater value for consumers and to foster positive engagement with them (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009). While many brands measure consumer engagement as their performance indicator for value (Evergage, 2014); Harrigan, Evers, Miles, Daly (2017) argued that it is crucial for brands to vision consumer engagement as a process, instead of treating it as an outcome. This can lead to a more measurable result, namely: higher value be co-created for all stakeholders, consumer loyalty and satisfaction. Furthermore, brands which are able to implement real-time data-driven strategy may improve their competitive advantage and achieve better outcomes (Forrester, 2017; Lieb, 2014).

2.3 Real-time Competitive Advantage

By having better understanding of expectations and real-time engagement, brands can develop their competitiveness. Brand competitiveness can be achieved by implementing either price strategy (selling at low-cost) or differentiation strategy (selling differentiated products or services at premium prices) (Porter, 1989). In addition to this traditional strategy approach, Hunt (2012) proposed that following resource-advantage theory, sustainable competitive advantage can only be produced by intangible attributes, namely being responsive to consumer's preference and needs, innovative, and service quality. In 2014, Evergage conducted a survey of 114 digital marketers in 18 countries in order to discover the industry perceptions of real-time marketing and its benefit. The result revealed that the highest value of real-time marketing is increasing consumer engagement (81%), followed with enhancing consumer experience (73%) and increasing conversion rates (59%). Another brand study has supported these findings, revealing that real-time service brings brands closer to consumers; hence it deepens engagement and increases consumer satisfaction (Howell, 2014). By leveraging real-time data monitoring, brands can ensure their relevancy from producing and co-creating content or service that are meaningful to consumers when they are most interested, via medium or platform which suits their

behaviour best (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Competitiveness lies in brand's ability to co-create distinctive value with consumers (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 2002) based on their real-time needs. This supersedes the solely price or differentiation competitive advantage, as these empowered consumers are striving for higher value and they are willing to pay higher price in order to obtain that expected value (Darmer & Sundbo 2008; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Consumers demand highly personalised products or services and are only receptive to information which is related to them at the time they require it. Contextual-based offerings are arguably the most relevant way to address these dynamic and ever-changing needs of consumers. Time is a very critical element of context and hence increasingly instant gratification of essence. This strategy provides consumers with service offerings which are highly relevant based on their real-time context or situation. They are also benefitting brands in strengthening their competitiveness (against competitors who do not) maximising revenue, namely through real-time yield management or dynamic pricing (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015).

3 Methodology

To explore the performance of brands in utilising social media and technology to enhance consumer experience in real-time, an exploratory qualitative approach was employed, using an inductive enquiry as the research begins from observation to theory development (Farquhar, 2012). The study started with the pre-research stage, where secondary data, in the form of journal articles, books and best-practice coverage stories from best-practice industry websites and reports, were systematically collected and analysed. This was followed by a twofold data collection process, through a case study approach, in order to enhance the credibility of research findings. Firstly, primary data were collected by conducting an in-depth case study of Marriott's real time social media monitor MLive, through a semi-structured interview and direct observation. Secondly, a multiple case study was conducted from variety of secondary data sources.

3.1 Research Stage 1: In-depth Case Study of Marriott MLive

Case study is a strong method when the scope of study is under-researched or lacks theory, and the research goal is to understand 'why' and 'how' a certain phenomenon occurs. The unique advantage of case study as a methodology is in its capability to deal with a heterogeneity of evidence, namely: interviews, documents, artefacts and observations (Yin, 2014). A single case approach was chosen for the first research stage to gain in-depth knowledge about Marriott's real time social media monitor MLive. This approach benefited from depth, revelatory, insight and unique understanding (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Marriott MLive was chosen by employing a purposive sampling method (Farquhar, 2012). This is because it is a best-practice company that embrace and successfully execute real-time service for consumer experience enhancement. Four main considerations were applied for selecting Marriott's MLive as an appropriate unit of analysis, including: 1) Marriott is one of the leading innovators of real-time service implementation, 2) has a dedicated real-time command centre (MLive) in four countries to actively interact with its global consumers 24/7 in various languages, 3) uses real-

time data with a main focus on ‘Return of Engagement’ and experience enhancement (co-creation), 4) recently won the Gold and Silver Creative Data Lions at the Cannes International Festival of Creativity in the categories of Social Data and Use of Real-time Data, respectively (Marriott, 2017).

A semi-structured, open-ended interview was conducted in August 2017 with two of the most senior Marriott executives, followed by direct observation of the MLive operations at the Marriott Headquarters in London. Direct observation was essential to explore how Marriott is dealing with real events in real-time. The interview transcription process was carried out manually from the iPhone recording application to Microsoft Word document. Preliminary analysis, during the transcription process, helped researchers to highlight important narratives (Farquhar, 2012). Furthermore, an initial analysis of the interview data was conducted once the transcription was completed, in order to highlight emerging subjects before employing an in-depth content analysis (Gribich, 2007). Data analysis was conducted by developing a codebook using Microsoft Excel, where textual data from the interview and the direct observation were examined and filtered. The most prominent patterns from both data collection methods were drawn and analysed further to address research objectives. However, the main weaknesses of single case studies are their credibility and contribution of findings (Yin, 2014). Hence, additional secondary multiple case studies were conducted in research stage 2 to obtain a stronger argument.

3.2 Research Stage 2: Multiple Case Study

Multiple case studies were employed in addition to the in-depth single case study to gain more credible findings from best-practice companies. This enabled to compare and contrast cases and to discover real time service as a phenomenon (Farquhar, 2012). Selecting best-practice companies in tourism and hospitality industry was appropriate as very few brands employ real-time service. A purposive sampling method was chosen, to ensure that the population represent eligible attributes based on the study objectives (Berg, 2004). In order to meet such attributes, selected companies were required to have these characteristics: 1) employ social media and technology as part of brand’s service offerings, 2) actively engage with consumers in real-time using social media, 3) have implemented the immediacy or real-time factor in their service offerings. Four cases were considered sufficient for a cross-case analysis to produce broad understanding of the context (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The selected companies represent different industry sectors, namely: one airline, one hospitality and one gastronomic business. One destination was also analysed to explore the macro level. Table 2 shows the best-practice companies selected, the industry each of them represent and their best-practice application. These criteria were considered sufficient to enable a variety of cases and best possible case variation for the cross-case analysis purpose.

Secondary data was collected from online publications, company websites, annual reports, social media channels and public interviews. In addition, online observation of the social media of these organisations examined the real-time service performance for each company. With multiple sources of secondary data, the researchers took advantage of the *naturally occurring* notion of the data, indicating that there is no interference from the researchers (Silverman, 2014). Data analysis was conducted in two phases:

first, the individual analysis of the four case studies and second, through integrating data from the cross-case synthesis to highlight commonalities and similarities of the cases (Yin, 2014), as well as drawing a holistic understanding of real-time service performance for each brand from a best-practice perspective.

Table 2. Selection of case study companies

Company / Brands	Industry	Real-time best-practice implementation
KLM Dutch Airlines	Airlines	Crisis management, Social media customer service tool
Visit Philadelphia	Destination	Real-time surprise and delight, combination of virtual and physical approach to enhance experience in real-time
Red Roof Inn	Hospitality	Crisis management in real-time, highly contextual and personalised advertisement
Pretzel Crisps	Gastronomic	Real-time listening, surprise and delight using keyword analysis

4 Findings: Data-Driven Real-time Value Co-creation

The findings reveal that personalisation of service goes beyond delivering relevant content for targeted consumers. Brands need to ensure that service delivery fits consumer-specific needs and preferences at that particular moment (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Time is a critical element of the contextual information, both internal and external, for all stakeholders. Real-time insights are used to identify what are the current trends or interests and to capture those opportunities that can be facilitated within a time frame. It was evident from the case studies that flexibility and adaptive approach, to a constantly changing consumer population, are paramount to establish authentic connection, in which consumers not perceive the gesture as merely advertising. Maintaining one-to-one interaction is still the key in dynamic social interaction with consumer (McKenna, 1997). However, brands are also required to explore the context of opportunities holistically. By combining different aspects that consumers expect to co-create with the brand they can provide higher value for them (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). The findings also indicate that the instant gratification value of social media benefit consumers with timely reaction from brands which support cocreation. They also give brands the ability to recognise needs, communicate and interact with consumers in real-time (Yoo & Gretzel, 2010). This quote demonstrates both benefits and opportunities for brands to interact in real-time with consumers:

“Social media give you that instant recognition, instant communication, instant interaction with your customers at the time when they posted something or they wanted to tell you something, so you don’t have to wait till someone sends you something. We can just interact in real time with our customers.” (Jon)

The findings from the second research stage show that all four brands (KLM, Visit Philly, Red Roof Inn and Pretzel Crisps) identify consumer needs proactively and co-create value dynamically. They establish online engagement with their consumers and are in a position to respond in near real time. KLM for example makes a commitment to respond to all consumer social media requests within one hour, 24 hours a day. The

main commonalities between the four cases are that they aim to enhance consumer experience by actively engaging as well as by personalising and contextualising service offerings. Brands are actively reaching out to targeted or relevantly influential consumers, often in an unexpected manner, to enhance their experience.

Visit Philadelphia and Pretzel Crisps use a *surprise and delight* strategy to improve consumers' experience by combining virtual and physical interaction. It is evident from the case studies that real time strategies enable brands to add distinct value in consumer-brand engagement. Real time requires a more human (less corporate) interaction, the act of spontaneity and the brand interest in the individual preferences and circumstances (Lieb, 2014). By integrating the critical knowledge of consumer real-time needs, geo-data, contextual factors as well as mobile search behaviour and targeted queries brands have an excellent understanding of customer needs. Therefore they can manage individual needs and experiences and are able to add more value throughout the traveller journey. They can even convert an external crisis or negative context into a profitable transaction, as evident from the Red Roof Inn case. Although they may not need to establish direct engagement with consumers, real time strategies provide a real-time solution to consumer's demand at the exact time they are looking for it. During crisis situation, consumers also expect brands to be responsive in various channels, either public or private, offline or online, virtual or physical. It was evident from the case of KLM that consumers choose social media channels to reach brands, due to the unsatisfactory reach or response via other channels. Given the fact that call centres are often impossible to reach, communicating reliable and relevant information across social media platforms in real-time can significantly ameliorate crisis situations. Highly contextualised and personalised offerings can be delivered in real-time to precise consumer targets not only via social channels but also via different platforms, such as localised search advertising. Moreover, the research demonstrated that consumers use social media as they appreciate its instant gratification value. Brands are expected to optimise relationship with consumers using their most preferred channels. Flexibility and adaptive behaviour towards consumer demand and online empathy are crucial to maintain engagement with high spending consumers. Value for all stakeholders are drawn based on the evidence from two research stages. Stakeholders are divided into several categories, which consist of brands, consumers and potential consumers (Table 3).

Table 3. Value for each stakeholder

Stakeholders	Value
Brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - positive advocacy / e-WOM / referrals - product and service improvement - increase sales / sales growth - organic engagement - authentic User-Generated Content - real-time complaint management / service recovery - proximity / location-based offerings - yield management or dynamic pricing based on real-time data
Consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - instant gratification - consumer satisfaction & loyalty - enhanced experience - real-time information & recommendation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - dynamic & interactive communications - brand awareness - surprise & delight
Potential consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trustful information source / recommendation - improved brand perception

It is evident that the ability to co-create higher value in real time is increasingly the most significant source of competitive advantage. The findings show that the 'now' factor is becoming paramount for brand competitiveness. It can be developed on consumer's internal and external context and provide high relevancy of service actions (proactive and reactive) that support service value co-creation. Based on data integration from the two research stages, Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework of real-time service competitive advantage that demonstrates how newness contributes to competitiveness.

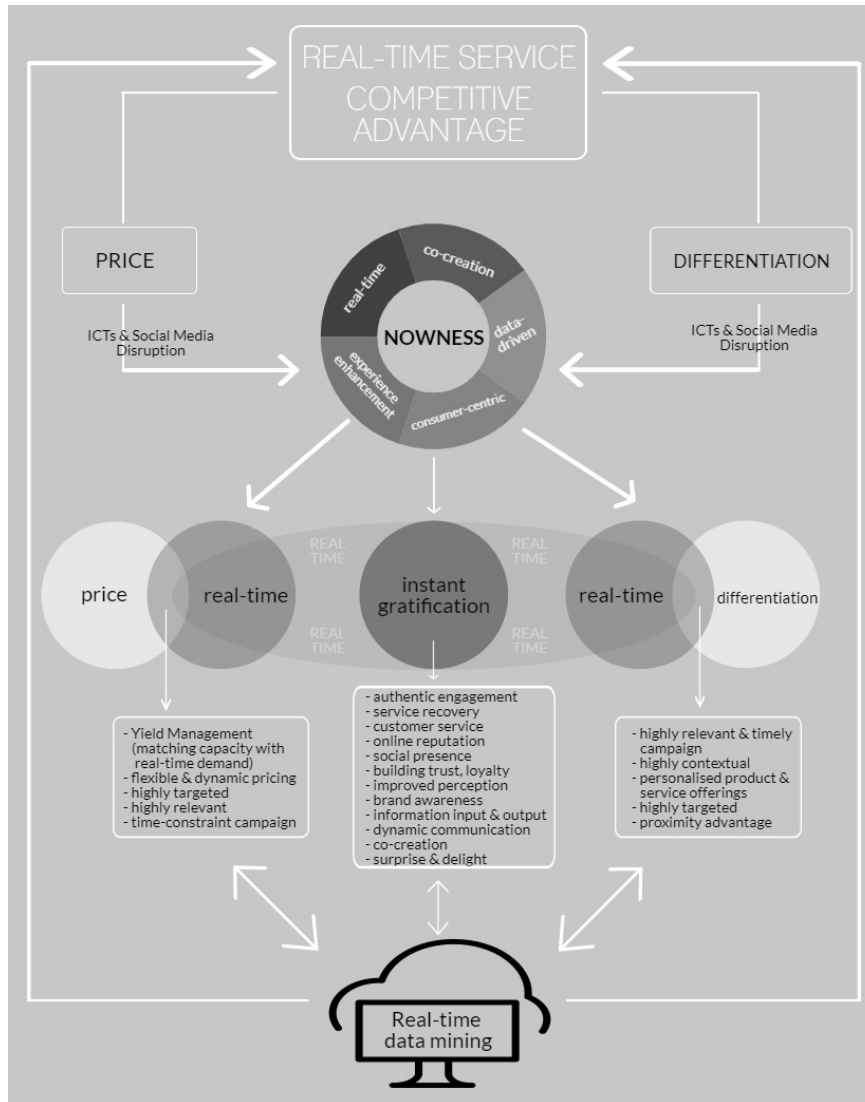


Fig.1. Real-time Service Competitive Advantage Conceptual Framework

The framework shows that the components of real-time service characteristics, namely: contextually relevant *real-time*, *co-creation*, *data-driven*, *consumer-centric*, and *consumer experience enhancement* are catalysts for dynamic, flexible, and responsive performance for both brands and consumers. Beyond the two sources of competitive advantage (price and differentiation), 'real-time' plays a critical role in the experience enhancement process. This is due to its high relevancy with consumer ever-changing needs and expectation of instant gratification. This disruptive behaviour can be catered with the right utilisation of ICTs, where brands are able to analyse and recognise unique

needs of each individual dynamically, and tailor their service through real-time data mining to gain mutually beneficial value.

5 Conclusions and Future Research

This exploratory research shows that real-time service offers a cutting-edge approach to co-create value with consumers, as engagement often happens in real-time, right when consumers are already interacting with brands in their physical space. This study reveals that real-time service adds considerable value to brand's competitiveness by utilising real-time data from consumers, supplemented with contextual information which is relevant for both parties.

Using timely engagement via social media and other technology channels and media, brands can support consumer experience. This ever-increasing capability to dynamically interact and take immediate actions towards triggered data help brands to achieve more effective performance. By having consumers as the centre of the strategy and operations, brands are able to build trust-based relationships as a source of value (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 2002). Dynamic communications and meaningful exchange of real-time information can be used by brands to personalise service offerings based on contextual data (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015).

This study underlines best-practice examples from companies, which are successful in implementing real-time service in order to co-create value for all stakeholders. Future research may look into benchmarking real-time service best-practice performance, as well as analyse weaknesses or failure examples. Additionally, further study can be conducted to empirically analyse real-time service motivations and expectations from a consumer's perspective.

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