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Abstract

There is growing evidence that the interconnectedness of social media and spontaneous volunteerism of individuals have opened up new opportunities for business and governments to engage, promote and deliver their services. In this changing context, the aim of this research is to take a closer look at government use of Facebook (FB) as a platform for citizen engagement, contribution and promotion of tourism experiences. Can FB be used for crowdsourcing travel information and experiences for government tourism institutions? This case study research presents both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the FB page of Tourism Australia and provides an in-depth understanding of citizen participation and contribution in the FB page. Qualitative interview was carried out with the government agency and they provided further statistical behavioural analysis of user participation on the site. Findings show that the page has successfully served as a platform for its audience to share their Australian experience. It is achieving its objective by crowdsourcing travel experiences, by getting both Australians and tourists from all over the world to suggest locations, upload photographs, answer questions and give advice. Although there is no obvious structure to this, and nothing is "official", it is clearly a valuable resource and is achieving the department's aim.

Keywords: Facebook, Crowdsourcing, Tourism, e-Government, Gov 2.0.

1   INTRODUCTION

Government 2.0 is essentially making government information more accessible and usable, allowing more consultative, participatory and transparent government (Richter, Riemer & Brocke, 2011). It is also characterized as citizen-driven (Dimaio, 2009). The first form of Internet known as Web 1.0 has been successfully embraced by the Australian Government; however, Web 1.0 can only facilitate point-to-point communication (DoFD, 2009). Numerous technological tools are available to allow this user content creation as demonstrated by large number of niche groups (collections of friends) who can exchange content of any kind (text, audio, video) and tag, comment, and link to both intra-group and extra-group "pages" (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). In this way, users are not limited to consume but they can also contribute information (Dabbagh & Reo, 2011). To encourage the take up of social media, the Department of Finance and Deregulation (DoFD) has set up a showcase Web site where government departments can describe their successful use of platforms such as wikis, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to engage the public in their activities (DoFD, nd). Against this backdrop, this paper looks at the Australian Government's use of Facebook (FB).

FB is a social network site with largest number of active users reaching over 900 million (Facebook, 2012). Statistics released by Nielsen (nd) show that FB is visited by 54% of the world's Internet population who average 6 hours per month on the site. FB reach within Australia is 63% of active users, averaging 7 hours 45 minutes per month. Such high statistics makes it tempting for government agencies to launch a page in FB; however it needs to be a considered approach. Luke (2009) and Wakeman (2010) warn to evaluate first an organization's strategy and how FB can contribute (or not) to that strategy. This would be similar to a government agency broadcasting media releases, rather than engaging with its community. Luke (2009) advises choice of the site that best suits your company's strategy and matches your customer profile. Moreover transferring social software with their associated benefits to the corporate context requires a good understanding of the associated user phenomena (Richter et al, 2011). It is within this context that this paper is written with the aim of contributing to greater understanding of a successful FB implementation by Australian Government for Tourism purposes.

Australia Tourism Facebook <http://facebook.com/seeaustralia> is an interesting case because of its rapid growth in terms number of fans compared to other Facebook pages run by the Australian Government. Since April 2010, the number of Australian Tourism Facebook page has increased from just over 370,000 to over 938,000 fans (as of November 4, 2010) to 1, 661,993 fans (as of July 1, 2011). As of June 2012 the fan count stands at 3.1 million users. The Australia FB page is created by Tourism Australia to serve as a hub for people who are planning to visit, have visited, or simply have a great love for holidays in Australia (Tourism Australia, nd). It provides general information, tips on travelling to and/or working in Australia, and images and video that represents the Australian experience. This case study research paper presents both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the FB page of Tourism Australia to generate an in-depth understanding of citizen participation and contribution in the FB page. Qualitative interview was also carried out with the government agency and revealed further statistical behavioural analysis of user participation on the site.

The paper is structured as follows: first, the paper looks at FB research for government context; second, the paper articulates the research method and finally the findings are presented followed by discussions and contributions. With such an enormous number of users and the potential it has to offer, is it possible for FB to be used for crowdsourcing tourism information and experiences? This paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of this question.

2   FACEBOOK USE BY GOVERNMENT

Internet social networking research field is not yet mature enough to identify findings that may yield theoretical contributions to the Information Systems (IS) field (Richter et al, 2011, Wilson et al 2012). In their review of literature on social networking sites (SNS), Richter et al (2011) found 97 FB papers altogether. The authors did not mention any studies on FB use by citizens or government with only a

few references to business use of FB. This clearly identifies a gap within literature on government use of SNSs, in particular for FB. In a very recent study, Wilson, Gosling & Graham (2012) conducted a comprehensive literature search on Facebook research identifying 410 relevant articles. They also found that Facebook research uses diverse and fragmented research methods and perspectives but much remains to be done". They sorted FB research papers into five broad categories: Descriptive analysis of users (24%), motivations for using Facebook (19%), identity presentation (12%), the role of Facebook in social interactions (27%), and privacy and information disclosure (18%). Their research also found very limited examples of government use of FB. To fulfil this gap, the aim of this paper is to assess the social interactions of citizens and government to communicate travel experiences for tourism purposes. Research on social interactions (27% of articles) examined the positive and negative effects of Facebook on relationships between groups and among individuals (e.g. students-faculty, employee-management, business-customers, doctors-patients, and between romantic partners). Business and marketing researchers explored models for engaging with customers through Facebook which are relevant for government as well. Other researchers study the overlapping social spheres (e.g. family, friends, and employers) and how this overlap could create tension (Binder et al, 2009). A user whose Facebook friends encompass family members, employers and college friends may have difficulty presenting information that is appropriate across all social spheres simultaneously (Lampinen, Tamminen, & Oulasvirta, 2009 cited in Wilson et al 2012). What about government information sharing practices in FB? There has been no research that looked at implications for government for overlapping social spheres. This research-in-progress paper builds deeper understanding of participation by different social spheres to contribute towards this gap in literature.

Although papers on the use of social media by government do exist (Alam & Lucas 2011, Collins, 2009; Samuel, 2009; Wigand, 2010), there is very limited research (if any) that studied government interactions with citizens through Facebook, in particular for Australian Government context (except Alam & Lucas, 2011; Alam, Campbell & Lucas, 2011; Alam & Diamah, 2011). However there is an influx of non-academic articles and reports. These tend towards covering the corporate and business spheres (Luke, 2009; Buttell, 2010) while discussion on government use of FB originates in blogs and government-specific Web sites (DoFD, nd; Klapper, 2009; Janson Communications, 2010; Thomler, 2010). As mentioned earlier, Samuel (2009) outlines a number of constraints which may make government agencies reluctant to embrace social media. Four roles played by Twitter in government were identified by Wigand (2010). These are: 1) extending the reach of communication; 2) updating and sharing information; 3) building relationships; and 4) collaborating with stakeholders. The same framework can be applied to other social tools such as FB (Alam & Diamah 2011).

Many Australian Government departments and agencies are using FB to engage with the community (DoFD, nd). Recent positive experiences with Queensland floods and natural disasters have gained much attention and regenerated interest in SNS applications such as FB and Twitter (Royal Commission Report, 2011). FB has actively been working with the US Government to help them understand how to make the most of Facebook, launching a best practice government page (Klapper, 2009) and the US Defence and UK Defence have an extensive Facebook footprint (Janson Communication, 2010). Alam et al (2011) found that the Australian Tax Office (ATO) FB page was being used for broadcasting tax compliance information. The ATO case study highlighted the fact that a social media tool should not simply be used because others are using it or for information dissemination purposes (Alam et al, 2011). Alam & Walker (2011) assessed six different Australian Government FB pages that showed how agencies are using FB for recruitment, promoting historical collections, compliance and crowdsourcing. Among the six agencies Tourism Australia is deemed to have been successful. Alam & Diamah (2011) extended the study to understanding communicative practices on Tourism Australia FB page.

In terms of Tourism literature, Sheldon (1997) and Werthner & Klein (1999), cited in Xiang & Gretzel, (2009), argue that tourism is information-intense industry. Hence understanding the role of technology as well as consumer demand and behaviour in disseminating and accessing travel information is very important. Potential travellers normally will look for as much information as possible while they plan their holiday because often they reside far from the holiday destination. According to Beirne and Curry (1999), this quality makes tourism a search product instead of an

experience product. In that sense, searching and perusing tourism-related information helps customers to make judgments and choices. Social media allows consumers to share their travel experience by posting comments, opinions, pictures and videos. These postings can then serve as valuable recommendations for other potential travellers, for example TripAdvisor (Miguens, Baggio & Costa, 2008). Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to examine one exponent of the Travel 2.0 world, government use of FB for disseminating travel information.

3   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used a single case study approach as this enabled an exploratory interpretive investigation into what is a unique situation. In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" and "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 2003). Following Yin (2003), this research uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate in-depth the online Tourism Facebook page, its content, user participation and outcomes.

This research is part of the authors' on-going research into government use of FB since 2010 (Alam & Lucas, 2011; Alam, Campbell & Lucas, 2011; Alam & Diamah, 2011). The data for this research was thus collected between 2010 and 2011. It is a multi-method research:

- Firstly, the research carried out qualitative analysis of the Facebook page content for Australia Tourism page specifically looking at the wall posts and comments as they provide rich empirical material to study the communicative practices of the users. Genre analysis of the online Facebook page and comments left on the wall in November 2010 was carried out and found that majority of the posts were about providing travel experience information and picture uploads, followed by request for information and positive comments. Other than wall posts, discussion boards, notes, video postings and other contents were also studied and analysed to see if the use of Facebook aligns with the purpose of the creation of Facebook page by Tourism Australia. Findings were reported in earlier paper Alam & Diamah (2011).

- Secondly, the research carried out a semi-structured interview with the agency social media and advocacy manager within Tourism Australia who is responsible for managing the FB page in October 2011 and the interview was carried out by one of the authors. The interview was carried out over phone followed by email correspondence. The interview sought to find objectives and goals of the site and how they perceive they have achieved those objectives. The behavioural analytics gathered by the Tourism department on the usage of the page, participation patterns of fans, and statistical analytics of user contributions were provided in an email correspondence with the author. These findings are reported in this paper. Due to page limitations, this paper will present only statistical analytics as charts and tables provided by Tourism Australia but will draw on previous qualitative analysis wherever possible to make conclusions (Alam & Diamah, 2011; Alam & Walker 2011).

- Thirdly, the research will combine the findings from both studies above to provide an account of FB communicative practices of government for tourism purposes. This is still under progress.

4   THE CASE OF AUSTRALIAN TOURISM FACEBOOK

Tourism Australia launched the Facebook page 'Australia' in 2008 https://www.facebook.com/SeeAustralia as part of their Gov 2.0 initiative. The main objective behind building a fan page of a country was to encourage more tourists and travellers to plan their vacations in Australia. The idea is to promote chat about the things fans love about Australia and share their experiences amongst one another. On the information page, the moderator of the Tourism Australia site encourages fans to share the experiences of their visits to Australia with comments, photos and videos. The moderator posts start-up content to begin discussions while the fans jump into the conversation and create the follow ups, adding more relevant photos and videos. The managing director of Tourism Australia says that thousands of fans upload videos, photos, and stories everyday

making it the ultimate holiday slide night every day. Tourists choose spots mostly based on the information they have gathered as well as the experiences that others have shared with them. Social networking sites are most effective in spreading 'word of mouth' (Miguens et al 2008). This is exactly what 'Australia' Facebook page is doing for Tourism Australia. Industries such as tourism that rely on experiential marketing and benefit from platforms like Facebook for promotion as they have an integral role in sharing experiences and information in the most unconventional casual manner possible (Xiang & Greyzel 2010).

The page 'Australia' is an example of government using Facebook to promote tourism in Australia. The Facebook page of Tourism Australia was compared in several aspects with the other platforms for the same Department. Australian Tourism has its presence in other social media tools such as YouTube, Twitter, Google+ etc. Another achievement is the Smartphone Application of Tourism Australia that had more than 20,000 fans made by iPhone and Android Smartphone users in April 2011. However Facebook is the most famous platform for this department. The number of its Facebook fans was more than 1.6 million as at November 2011 and the Tourism Australia Facebook page is ranked as the second most well-known page in Australia and the most well-known Australian Government page. The department proudly commented on their performance: "*we have the largest national tourism presence in the world and the second biggest page in Australia*".

In the next sections of this paper, interview data and statistical analysis of the Australian Tourism Facebook page gathered from phone and email conversations are presented. Further the analysis is broadened by looking at the overall Facebook page structure and design elements based on previous work (Alam & Diamah 2011).

4.1   Facebook page user participation analysis

4.1.1   Gender analysis

Statistics suggest that the gender of the fan base is almost evenly divided between males and females as depicted in Figure 1.
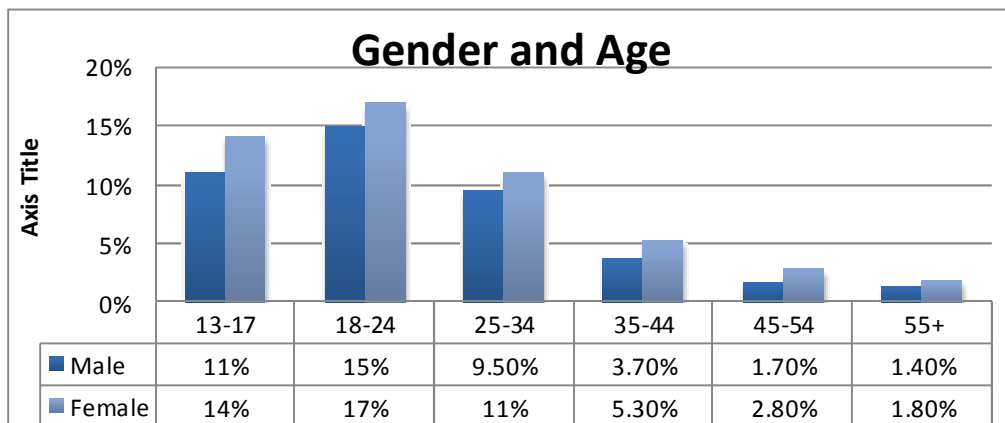

	13-17	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Male	11%	15%	9.50%	3.70%	1.70%	1.40%
Female	14%	17%	11%	5.30%	2.80%	1.80%

Figure 1.   Gender and Age Figures.

4.1.2   Participation of different cultures

One of the biggest achievements of the Facebook page is that it not only encourages Australians but fans from different countries around the world.. Although there is a huge presence of Australians on the page, there are many people from different parts of the world speaking many different languages. Still they come together as one big community and talk about Australia and their intention of coming to Australia or their experience about Australia. Refer to Table 1.

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Countries	# of fans	Cities	# of fans	Languages	# of fans
Australia	860,902	Sydney	307,103	English (US)	983,015
USA	167,400	Melbourne	170,918	English (UK)	408,907
UK	83.929	Brisbane	101,553	German	76,248
Italy	73,341	Perth	63,525	Italian	42,268
Germany	61,847	Adelaide	47,224	French (France)	56,155
India	37,118	Rome	23,469	Spanish	44,026
France	36,842	Jakarta	18,881	Indonesian	17,626

Table 1:   Participation of Different Culture

4.1.3   Categories of Posts

Fans post hundreds of videos, photos of their favourite locations and possible tourist spots of Australia every day showing evidence of information sharing and building relationships through conversations. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the different forms of contributions. It shows that majority contributes by uploading pictures as was found in Alam & Diamah (2011).
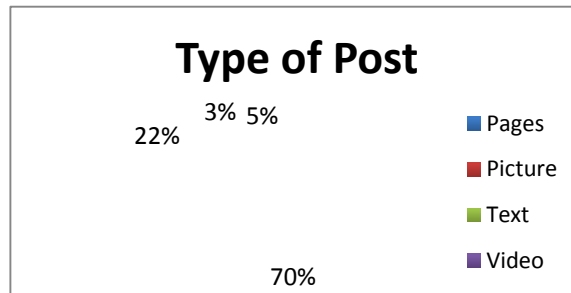

Figure 2:   Type of Post Figure

4.1.4   Reason for Post

There are many reasons why people use the Tourism Australia Facebook page. Tourism Australia had selected four main categories which they represented as distinct (see figure 3). Most of the people use it for sharing their thoughts that may include self-promotion, sharing of information, an intention to visit. This was also found in the qualitative study of the wall posts by the authors in their earlier work (Alam & Diamah 2011). The administration participation is an evidence of two-way relationship, but as can be seen in figure 3 are very limited.
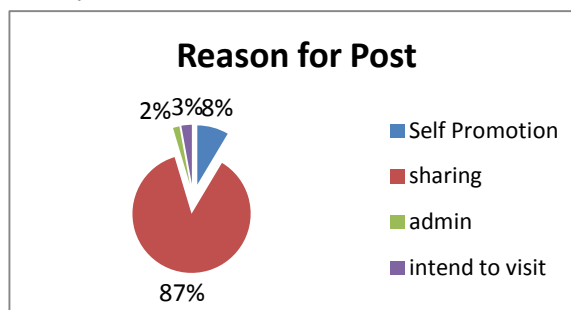

Figure 3:   Reason for Post

4.1.5   Reposting

People share the posts on the Facebook page if they like some post. This means basically that they repost it on their homepage so that their friends and colleagues can view it. Most of the posts shared were from the administrator which demonstrates audience engagement with the page. See Figure 4.
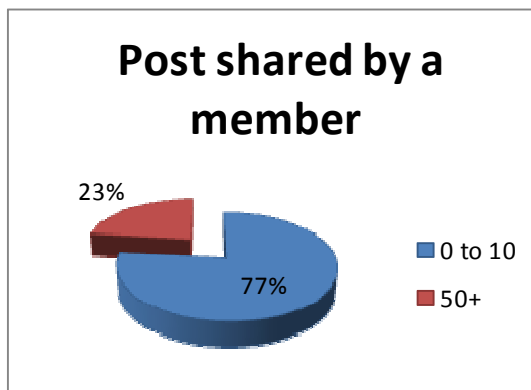

Figure 4:   Posts shared by a member

4.2   Facebook page management

4.2.1   . Terms of and Conditions of participation

The Facebook page is moderated under the terms and conditions of Tourism Australia and these terms can be found on the FB page. The basic purpose of the page is to provide a platform for positive feedback about travel in Australia. Tourism Australia keeps a strict check on the postings made by fans, however, it refrains itself from taking responsibility for postings made by fans on the page. Moreover, the page does take ownership of the photos, however, it clearly states that those who share their photos and videos on the page give Tourism Australia a non-exclusive, royalty free, and worldwide license to use modify, delete, form, add to, or publicly display or reproduce the photos and videos posted with no limitation to the alternative electronic media available as well as multiple other pages, network sides, etc.

4.2.2   Facebook page management and workflow

One of the finding of the study is the open manner in which Tourism Australia administers their Facebook page. The approach of Tourism Australia is different than any other national tourism board in the world. According to the interviewee from the agency, "*Our approach is very different than any other national tourism board in the world. We don't feel we need to have our name on the page. We think people like 'Australia' more than they like 'Tourism Australia*". Tourism Australia has a permanent employee who looks after all the social media engagement for the agency and that person is responsible for the administration of the FB page. However moderation duties are shared between four people at the agency. The Facebook page is monitored every *fifteen* minutes. Different times are allocated to the members of the team throughout the week. Similarly administration and moderation duties are performed in turns on the weekends and public holidays. Content that is against the policy of the Tourism Australia page need to be moderated. As the interviewee commented "*Most of Facebook's filters will pick up 90% of the profanity, the rest we manually have to delete. Same for images*". From July 2010, Tourism Australia regularly creates a weekly album of favourite fan photos. The moderators of the page also post interesting facts and beautiful places to keep the fans engaged with the page. By the end of each week, Tourism Australia posts one complete album with the name 'Friday Fan photos' which consists of favourite fan photos of Australia. The favourites have been selected based on the 'likes' that each of the posted photo receives. Encouraging comments from other

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fans and the regular weekly rating of a favourite by the moderator encourages even more photo uploads.

4.2.3 *Linking with other tourism campaigns*

There are lots of examples of where 'Tourism Australia' features content from certain external tourism operators and link back to their Facebook page. This way Tourism Australia helps other parts of tourism to get promoted.

New6Wonders Foundation has launched a new campaign by the name *New7Wonders of Nature* Campaign, which is a worldwide campaign to find the seven most wonderful natural sites in the world using the public vote. Two of Australian natural spots, Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef, have been nominated for voting (Tourism Australia, 2011). Tourism Australia is using its Facebook fan page 'Australia' towards it advantage by asking its fans and new users to vote for the destination. In order to motivate the fans and people who have never been to the location, they have also posted spectacular videos of the location, while a tweeting option is also available on the page.

The campaign of *Nothing Like Australia* posted on Facebook resulted in over 29,000 entries. This is done by the creation of the site 'nothinglikeAustralia.com.au' and the linking of this Web site to the Facebook page through "Instagram" which is used to see the pictures and under "check out our other pages". It is difficult to determine if this achievement is the outcome of Facebook use alone since Tourism Australia has other campaign media such as Web site http://NothingLikeAustralia.com/. Nevertheless, the posting by the Tourism Australia administrator and the number of fans accessing this page, we can be certain that Australia Facebook Page has a significant proportion of contribution to this campaign success.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Tourism Australia is using the FB page as a tool to announce, inform and involve FB fans. Statistics of participation in terms of types of posts, number of fans liking or commenting on postings, and number of feedbacks suggest that Facebook is an effective tool for these types of engagement. However no evidence of high level collaboration or community formation can be found from the research data. There is no evidence to suggest that the contributions from fans are being incorporated back into the official Tourism Web site. In spite of this, the site could be viewed as a form of collaboration, in which the audience is, in effect, building a resource for the organisation, although the only contribution by the organisation is the platform being used (as also seen in Alam & Diamah 2011). Communication is two-way, with members' queries usually receiving a timely response from administration. The Tourism site is trying to encourage people to come to Australia by promoting potential destinations and giving users advice about what they might find and do, including alerting them to potential problems and how to deal with them. This is addressed in a collaborative manner (crowdsourcing experience), by getting other people who have visited to suggest locations, supply photographs, answer questions and give advice. Another good technique that was used by Tourism Australia on the FB page is to join activities that will help the promotion of the page. This includes opinion polls, voting on pictures and favourite destinations etc. Every Friday, best pictures from the fans are posted and named Friday fan photos. In conclusion, although there is no obvious structure to this, and nothing is "official", the FB page is clearly a valuable resource and achieving the department's aim. This is an indication that Facebook is suitable for promoting, participation, and gathering crowdsourcing experiences. In the words of the moderator, "at the moment we're focused on providing a platform for that positive word of mouth".

As was found earlier in Alam & Diamah (2011), the analysis above confirms that Tourism Australia FB use extended the reach of communication, built relationships, and broadcast and shared information through social networks. Wigand (2010) also identified relationship types between audience and government. For example, short term or long term, occasional or continuing, and impersonal or personal relationship between audience and government. Similarly, Tourism Australia

FB use showed continuing relationship with both short term (e.g. promoting an event) and long term goals (e.g. promoting Australia).

5.1   Research limitations and future research

This research has several limitations. This paper presents both quantitative and qualitative analysis of FB page content. But to make further conclusions, the study needs to follow a more systematic method like qualitative content analysis (QualCA) which involves purposive sampling, an iterative, inductive approach to content coding method, descriptive conclusions and can result in theory building such as typologies (Parker, Saundage & Lee 2011). QualCA can also be used for exploratory research when little is known about the content-based phenomenon such as this FB page use by government where the unit of analysis is participation and interaction. The challenges that needs consideration when doing social media (e.g. FB) research are the time-frames for data collection, whether to collect further data in multiple stages as content changes occur; what constitutes the context and unit of analysis for dynamic content. QualCA is a suitable method for social media research which can handle this ephemeral and voluminous nature of social media websites (Parker et al 2011). This paper did not take into consideration the blurring 'technological boundaries' that may rise due to integration of multiple social media tools (e.g. FB & Twitter) through multiple devices. Future research needs to explore impacts of blurring technological boundaries.

The metrics for participation used in this paper are limited and based on available online wall posts and behavioural statistics. More metrics will be included in future research such as interactions of the administrator or moderator and their impact on participation; more qualitative data about alignment with organisation goals; outcomes and critical success factors. The types of participation activities have been identified based on information on Facebook pages and the Tourism Australia web pages. Further research into this case is in progress to above to provide an account of FB communicative practices of government for tourism purposes, how the contributions are being used by the agency (if at all for other purposes), are these contributions being linked to other tourism sites etc. The research does not take into consideration the barriers to participation and engagement. There is need to extend and build on Tourism models for social media use for government context.

In summary, the key contributions of this study are Threefold. Firstly, the research contributes to gaining a better understanding of government FB phenomenon, in particular for Australian context. Secondly, the research reveals that varied audience and organisational engagement is visible within this site. Thirdly, the reseearch contributes towards understanding government FB use for tourism purposes (e.g. Travel 2.0).

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