

Is Facebook the future channel for marketing communications? A case of Hong Kong's Upstairs Cafés

Abstract

This research investigated the extent to which the inter-relationship between Facebook usage, café culture and reference groups could influence the adoption of Facebook as the main medium for marketing communications with a focus on upstairs cafés in Hong Kong. A total of 103 online questionnaires were collected from consumers and 3 email interviews with upstairs cafe owners were carried out. The key findings suggest that the consumers are inclined to Like, Share and Comment on a business' Facebook activities thus generating eWOM. It was also found that consumers are slightly more active when using smartphones and not inclined to pay attention to advertising on Facebook. From a management perspective, Facebook was perceived as a better channel than a website for most marketing communication tools with the exception of advertising.

Keywords: Facebook, Social Networking, SNS, Lifestyles, eWOM, Marketing Communication, Social Media Marketing, Reference Groups

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Introduction and Objectives

The Food and Health Bureau of Hong Kong refers to 'upstairs shops' as the recent trend of businesses operating in multi-storey buildings formerly used for residential and office purposes. Amongst such businesses, upstairs cafés have existed since 2000 and have gained significant popularity. Shay (2011) has discussed the growth and trend of visiting upstairs cafés in Hong Kong as being due to the lack of space and excessive rental prices of pedestrian level units. They predominantly target young professionals who want a place to hang out and have a few drinks, play card and board games and chat. Although Starbucks and Pacific Coffee are the leading coffee chains in Hong Kong, DeWolf (2010) has suggested that Hongkongers are demanding something with more character thereby contributing to the growth of this sector.

It has been suggested that many upstairs cafe customers have adopted a coffee culture to “hang out” with friends and not for the actual coffee itself and that for this “intrinsically social population, coffee is not just a drink but an overall experience whose culture is thriving” (Patton, 2006). This led to a discussion regarding social networking and the popularity of social media which has seen a rapid rise over the last few years. Given that there were 4.1 million Facebook users in Hong Kong in October 2012 mostly aged 18 to 34 (Socialbakers, 2012), the possibility of focussing on ‘F-Commerce’ for the young café customers is worth an investigation, since "companies can no longer afford to ignore the service as a major marketing channel" (Hansson et al, 2013). Moreover, Phelan et al (2013) suggest there is a gap in literature relating to the effectiveness of using social networking as a marketing tool in the hospitality industry.

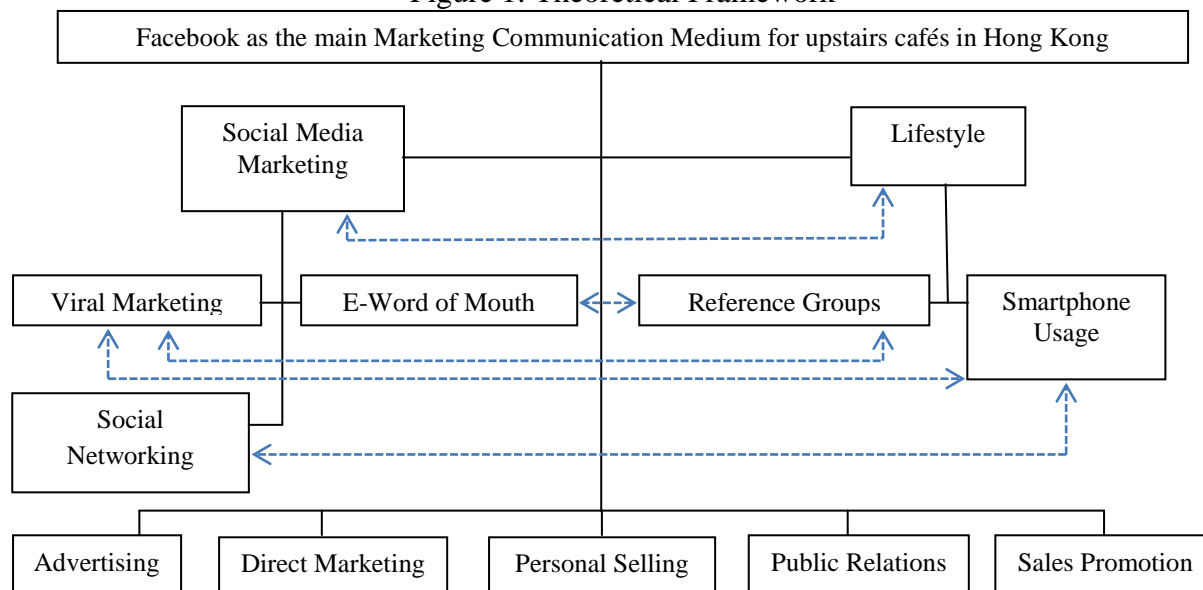
Lifestyle is a key topic that has been explored in this paper as it helps to understand the role it plays in the motivations an individual has for visiting upstairs cafés as well as individuals' commercial related activities on Facebook. With regards to social networking, Bernhardt et al (2012) have identified that the rapid growth of social networking sites (SNSs) and their integration on mobile devices make it easier for marketers to engage larger audiences. In addition, Kahle and Valette-Florence (2012) have demonstrated that contemporary trends and development in social media reflect the importance of lifestyle research in marketing. Reference groups have also briefly been explored in this paper to identify the influences in terms of visiting upstairs cafés and using social networking. Previous research (Palmer and Koenig-Lewis, 2009; Vlachvei et al, 2009) strongly recommends that marketers should participate in social media to strengthen the brand and connect with customers since information sharing and recommendations on Facebook (Hansson et al, 2013) are likely to generate electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM).

The purpose of this research is, therefore, to investigate the extent to which the inter-relationships between lifestyle, Facebook usage of customers and reference groups could influence the use of Facebook as the main medium for marketing communications by upstairs cafes in Hong Kong.

Literature Review

As Figure 1 demonstrates, there exists a complex inter-relationship between different aspects of marketing and consumer behaviour involved in this research.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



Kemp and Lam (2012) suggest social media activities enable businesses to get the attention of the intended audience, which allows them to raise awareness effectively. Logan et al. (2012) have also reported that SNSs are the alternatives for delivering advertising to a mass audience by avoiding the exorbitant cost of using traditional media while Hill and Moran (2011) indicate that the opportunity for advertising on social media enables marketers to target younger generations. It is also worth noting that online advertising is seen to complement traditional advertising (Barreto, 2013) and "banners and ads on Facebook encourage users to click on them, and spend money to buy the companies' products" (Hanson et al, 2013, pp. 113). On the contrary, reports also suggest that the majority of consumers claim to rarely or never paying attention to advertising on social networks (Cooper, 2011; Barreto, 2013). Besides advertising, Palazon and Delgado (2009) have emphasised that sales promotions effectively help target consumers who prefer moderate discounts but not low price and there is also evidence that promotions on social networking sites are successfully replacing traditional promotions to engage audiences (Rothschild, 2011).

Foster (2012) has suggested that the company information on the Facebook page is already content of public relations while publishing or highlighting newsletters on Facebook is seen as a way to enhance direct communication with customers through public relations (Brady, 2010). Similarly, direct conversation and responses to comments and questions that are raised by customers may be considered as personal selling on Facebook. Researchers have also suggested that SNSs are an important success factor for direct marketing (Palmer and Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Erickson's study (2011) demonstrates that the use of Facebook means marketing activities for smaller businesses are more effective than larger companies, while direct and regular communication on Facebook enhances the relationship with frequent and potential customers. In addition, there are strengths and weaknesses of different tools and Fill (2009) has suggested that each component of the marketing communications mix has its distinct capacity to deliver messages and to achieve different objectives. With this in mind, Fill's 4Cs (Figure 2) - Communications, Credibility, Costs, Control - were also investigated in this research to gain a better understanding of the use and opinion of these tools (on a website and on Facebook) by upstairs cafe owners.

Figure 2 – The 4Cs framework (Fill, 2009)

Communication Tools \ Competences	Advertising	Sales Promotion	Public Relations	Personal Selling	Direct Marketing
COMMUNICATIONS					
Ability to deliver a personal message	Low	Low	Low	High	High
Ability to reach a large audience	High	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
Level of interaction	Low	Low	Low	High	High
CREDIBILITY					
Credibility given by target audience	Low	Medium	High	Medium	Medium
COSTS					
Absolute costs	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium
Cost per contact	Low	Medium	Low	High	High
Wastage	High	Medium	High	Low	Low
Size of investment	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium
CONTROL					
Ability to target particular audience	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Management's ability to adjust the deployment of the tool as circumstances change	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High

With reference to lifestyle studies, Scott (2006) argues that visiting upstairs cafés regularly provides a lifestyle identity. As the majority of customers visiting upstairs cafés are university students and young professionals and the most active users of social networking sites are aged 18 to 34, it can be inferred that regular visits to cafés and the usage of social networking are part of young Hongkongers' lifestyle. Moreover, Smartphones and Tablets can be seen as a new lifestyle "tool" (Murphy, 2012) enhancing personal lifestyle through their communication features, leading to the rise of mobile engagement strategy for marketers (Gamble, 2012). For instance, "sharing" and "tagging" enhance the usage of social networking sites on smartphones as posts show up to those who are tagged and their connected users (Witek and Grettano, 2012). Mintel (2012) states that the increasing popularity of social network messaging, especially on Facebook, has led to the establishment of dedicated messaging applications for social networking sites on mobile devices, which encourages the advance usage of social networking on mobile devices. Despite rapid evolution, Unger (2012) has pointed out that the unclear demonstration of the design of social media and mobile marketing model leads to difficulties in achieving the marketing goals. The above discussion led to the development of the following hypotheses:

H₁ – Consumers' Facebook usage frequency will influence their commercial activities on Facebook.

H₂ – Consumers' Café visiting frequency will influence their commercial activities on Facebook.

In addition, reference groups play an important role in influencing consumer decisions as their value structures and standards influence the behaviour of an individual (Boone and Kurtz, 2011). All three types of reference group influences i.e. informational, utilitarian and value-expressive (Lantos, 2010), were briefly explored alongside Facebook usage to identify the referents in terms of visiting upstairs cafés. Moreover, Qing et al. (2012) suggest that the lifestyle group has a positive influence on purchase intention. This suggests that once the culture of visiting upstairs cafés had been established among a certain group of Hongkongers, this pattern of lifestyle could have spread to their friends and peers through different forms of

influence. This could have been through viral marketing since the power of “e-fluentials spreads a message to reach a bigger audience (Palmer and Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

Research indicates that SNSs provide a lot of opportunities for businesses to increase consumers’ likelihood of making a purchase (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) and that word-of-mouth is the most effective method of communication (Vlachvei et al., 2009). This is due to the fact that "Liking" a product or brand on Facebook by a user may then be promoted to their "Friends" via that user's "News feed" (Coulter and Roggeveen, 2012). This is supported by Simmons (2007) who suggests that SNSs comprise a powerful viral marketing tool, which helps the online communication to produce an increase in brand awareness since “personal recommendations are more likely to be observed than commercial ads” (Barreto, 2013). This implies that upstairs cafés could potentially spread eWOM through key influencers on Facebook and thereby generate more awareness. This could lead to a likelihood of intention to purchase, since the 18-34 year olds are also “more likely to value others’ opinions in social media and to feel more important when they provide feedback about the brands or products they use” (Bolton et al, 2013, pp. 249). This discussion led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H₃ – Consumers’ commercial activities on Facebook will affect choice of upstairs cafes through the generation of eWOM.

Method

In order to gather data from consumers, a questionnaire was developed that comprised of 10 multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions. A four point Likert-scale was used as the even-point scale helped to avoid neutral answers with forced choices (Paul and Warner, 2004). The data was collected through Survey Monkey using a non-probability snowball sampling method and a total of 103 usable questionnaires were collected. Measurement included descriptive statistics such as percentage and cross-tabulation, and Spearman’s Rank Correlation and Chi-squares tests were carried out to determine if any significant relationships existed between the variables.

It was also deemed important to consider collecting data from the café owners as they may be able to provide evidence to support the research aim. An e-mail interview questionnaire was therefore designed based on Fill’s 4Cs model to gain a better understanding of the experiences of upstairs café owners regarding the use of marketing communication tools on Facebook compared to a website. Questionnaires were sent out to café owners and three completed questionnaires were received.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows that although a majority of respondents visit an upstairs café less than once a month, more than a fifth of the respondents visit on a weekly basis making this an essential lifestyle identity for this group of respondents (Scott, 2006). In addition, it was also found that a majority of these young Hongkongers visit upstairs cafes primarily to meet up with friends, taking a coffee break during shopping, and to fill up free time between activities (Shay, 2011; Patton, 2006). It is also apparent that most of the respondents are aged 18-34 and very frequent users of Facebook suggesting the possibility of using this media as the main channel for marketing communications for upstairs cafes.

Table 1 – Profile of key lifestyle characteristics

Age	%	Frequency of Facebook use	%	Visited Upstairs cafe	%
18-24 year old	39.8	Daily	79.6	Yes	91.2
25-34 year old	47.6	Few times a week	12.6	No	8.8
35-44 year old	12.6	Once a week	5.8		
		Once every two weeks	0.9		
		Once a month	0.9		
Frequency of visiting upstairs café	%	Reasons for visiting an upstairs cafe	%		
More than once a week	4.9	Meet up friends	87.4		
Once a week	17.5	Coffee break during shopping	44.7		
Once every two weeks	7.8	A place for dining	38.8		
Once every three weeks	3.9	Fill up free time	37.9		
Once a month	9.7	Group meetings for academic work	20.4		
Less than once a month	56.3				

Table 2 demonstrates the correlation test values that were used to test the hypotheses. Correlation analysis demonstrated very weak correlation between Frequency of Facebook usage and individual commercial activities on both computers (first row in each cell) and smartphones (second row in each cell). H_1 is therefore rejected and it can be suggested that the frequency of using Facebook is not likely to influence any commercial activities on Facebook. There is, however, a weak to moderate correlation between Frequency of visiting upstairs cafes and the individual commercial activities on Facebook. There appears to be sufficient evidence to accept H_2 at $p < 0.001$ implying that the more the respondents visit an upstairs café, the more likely they are to participate in such commercial activities on Facebook. This has implications for upstairs cafes’ marketing communication activities. For instance, in order to generate more eWOM, regular customers could be encouraged to “Share” and “Comment” on company events and posts

Table 2 – Values for Spearman’s Correlation (r_s)

	Like a Co. page	Like a Co. event	Click on Co. posts on News Feed	Click on adverts	Share Co. posts on your Timeline	Share Co. events on your Timeline	Comment on Co. posts
Frequency of Facebook usage	0.010 -0.141	0.042 -0.090	0.065 -0.071	-0.088 -0.249	-0.021 -0.079	-0.058 -0.062	-0.150 -0.134
Frequency of visiting up. cafe	0.236 0.377	0.313 0.373	0.337 0.433	0.424 0.460	0.392 0.485	0.432 0.495	0.509 0.581
Like a Co. event	0.702 0.838						
Click on Co. posts on News Feed	0.512 0.727	0.639 0.745					
Click on adverts	0.490 0.356	0.516 0.419	0.558 0.542				
Share Co. posts on your Timeline	0.486 0.625	0.572 0.642	0.516 0.623	0.560 0.486			
Share Co. events on your Timeline	0.482 0.555	0.710 0.671	0.642 0.739	0.643 0.594	0.710 0.799		
Comment on Co. posts	0.489 0.517	0.664 0.610	0.546 0.762	0.687 0.663	0.551 0.672	0.814 0.823	

With reference to lifestyle and the respondents' commercial activities on Facebook, tests revealed moderate to strong correlation (in bold) between all commercial activities on computers and smartphones with stronger correlation between activities on smartphones suggesting that consumers are more commercially active when using their smartphones. This was an unexpected finding but appears to reaffirm that smartphones have become a lifestyle "tool" (Murphy, 2012) and contradicts Unger's (2012) discussion on difficulties in achieving marketing objectives using social media on mobile phones at least where eWOM is concerned.

There is also strong evidence in Table 2 to accept H₃ at p<0.001. These findings support earlier research (Coultier and Rogeeven, 2012; Bolton et al, 2013) and have implications for upstairs cafés' marketing communication activities. The results suggest that consumers are commercially active on Facebook and likely to engage in eWOM regarding companies, their events and their posts. The implication for upstairs café owners is firstly, on getting customers to "Like" the company page and secondly, updating company posts and events on a regular basis so these can then be "shared" and therefore disseminated to other consumers.

In addition, a majority of the respondents were "Likely" or "Very Likely" to "Like" company pages and company events. A majority were also likely to "Share" company posts on their Timeline. These activities suggest a propensity toward eWOM communication on an SNS which may have an impact on the businesses themselves as this could increase the consumers' likelihood of making a purchase (Kaplan and Heanlein, 2010). In essence, "Liking" a company product and its events enables eWOM (Coultier and Rogeeven, 2012). On the contrary, most of the respondents were "Unlikely" or "Very Unlikely" to click on advertising. This finding supports previous research (Cooper, 2011; Barreto, 2013) who report that a majority of consumers rarely or never pay attention to advertising on social networks but contradicts Hanson et al (2013).

Three further questions were asked with reference to smartphones. These dimensions were also found to be strongly correlated (Table 3) and there was also a moderate link between these elements and the frequency of visiting an upstairs café.

Table 3 – Spearman's Correlation (r_s) between Frequency of Visit, Check-in and Tagging

	Frequency of visiting upstairs cafe	Check in your physical location	Tag your friends in the Check-in
Check in your physical location	0.359		
Tag your friends in the Check-in	0.359	0.856	
Being tagged by your friends in the Check-in	0.362	0.786	0.760

This implies that the more likely consumers are to "check-in" to an upstairs café on their smartphones, the more likely they are to "tag" their friends and be "tagged" by their friends upon their "check-in". These findings are consistent with earlier research where smartphones have been seen as enhancing the usage of social networking sites through "Sharing" and "Tagging" (Witek and Grettano, 2012) and thus engaging in eWOM. This also supports the acceptance of H₃ at p<0.001.

Besides the above, the type of reference group influence through social networking was explored to ascertain if it could positively impact a business' use of Facebook as the main marketing communication tool through eWOM. When asked which factors help them decide

which upstairs café to visit, two of the main reasons given related to reference groups reaffirming the findings of Boone and Kurtz (2011) that reference groups influence the behaviour of an individual towards perceived value. A majority of respondents consider recommendations of friends when choosing an upstairs café (72%), which reflects friends are within the informational influential group who provide a useful and credible source (Lantos, 2010). In addition, 36% stated they visit a particular upstairs café because their friends visit the same cafes which may suggest the role of utilitarian influence. However, Chi squared tests (χ^2) were found to be invalid and did not reveal any significant relationships between the frequency of visiting an upstairs café and the type of reference group influences.

Finally, the interviews with café owners highlighted Facebook as being better than a website at Communication with a better ability to deliver a personal message, a better ability to reach a large audience and better at interaction. The responses suggested Communication is more effective in terms of Public Relations, Sales Promotions, Personal Selling and Direct Marketing. These findings further support existing literature (Brady, 2010; Palmer and Koenig-Lewis, 2009) regarding the use and effectiveness of SNSs for marketing communications. In terms of Credibility the owners rated both channels similarly with Facebook being seen as slightly more credible than a website. On the other hand, websites were perceived to be more Cost effective as Facebook was seen to be costly in terms of Absolute cost especially where Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing were concerned. The Cost per contact and Wastage were also considered high for both media especially for Advertising. This was an unexpected and contradictory finding vis-à-vis Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing (Fill, 2009) and Advertising (Logan et al, 2012). Facebook was also seen to be more effective than a website in terms of the Control an organisation has over their marketing communications. In terms of Sales Promotions and Public Relations, Facebook was considered to be more effective where the ability to target a particular audience was concerned which is again consistent with earlier research (Kemp and Lam, 2012; Hill and Moran, 2011).

Managerial Implications, Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This study was carried out to investigate the extent to which the inter-relationships between lifestyle, Facebook usage of customers and reference groups could influence the use of Facebook as the main medium for marketing communications by upstairs cafes in Hong Kong. Results suggest consumers are quite engaged in generating eWOM through Facebook, and quite likely to “Like”, “Share” and “Comment” on a business’ Page, Events, and Posts. These actions are consumer-driven, generating eWOM and can be seen as reaching potential customers. There was also a strong link between specific smartphone activities on Facebook such as “Checking-in” and “Tagging” and being “Tagged” implying that once consumers visit an upstairs café, they are likely to participate in such activities. There was also evidence to suggest that the more these consumers visit a certain café, the more likely they are to participate in such commercial activities.

It appears that Facebook does have the potential to be used as a successful channel for marketing communications since its use and influence was found to be favourable across the younger generation’s lifestyle as it has become an integral part of their daily routines. Facebook can also act as a platform to collect valuable suggestions and opinions from customers, which is very important to enhance direct marketing. All of these indicate a positive sign for small enterprises like upstairs cafes to engage with their customers through Facebook (Erickson, 2011).

Although upstairs cafes may be able to target the younger generation through Facebook (Hill and Moran, 2011), a majority of the consumers rarely pay attention to advertising on Facebook. The café owners also agreed on the prohibitive costs of advertising on Facebook but considered Facebook quite favourably for all other marketing communication tools especially Sales Promotions and Public Relations. This implies that Facebook could potentially replace a website and be used by small businesses to achieve their marketing communication objectives but they may have to consider other forms of media where advertising is concerned. Alternatively, considering the potential of eWOM through Facebook, small businesses may encourage such eWOM rather than engage in formal advertising.

This study was limited in a number of ways. Firstly, the findings are based on a small non-probability sample of consumers and café owners and caution must be applied as the findings may not be generalisable to the population at large. Secondly, the focus of the study was on Facebook commercial activities and lifestyle whilst reference group influence was briefly explored. It would therefore be relevant to explore each type of reference group influence in depth in relation to Facebook activities as this would give the researchers a better understanding of not just the generation of eWOM but also the extent to which this is accepted and the reasoning behind it. Since one of the key findings suggests that Facebook is not considered effective for advertising, a further recommendation would be to investigate what does actually draw consumers' attention to this communication tool on Facebook.

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