2014

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Recommended Citation

Ge, Jing, "Tourism Marketing Communications on a Chinese Social Media Platform" (2014). *Faculty of Business - Papers (Archive)*. 301.
https://ro.uow.edu.au/buspapers/301

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Abstract

Social media have become important communicative platforms for tourism marketers but it is not clear if and how the communicative language of marketerto- consumer is different from consumer-to-consumer. Given the enormous growth of both tourism and social media in China, this paper focuses on patterns in language use by the Chinese tourism marketers on Weibo. Using systemic semiotic approach, it selects and investigates two corpora of communication on Weibo - tourism to consumer and consumer to consumer. This study expects to provide the firm understanding and categorize the patterns in the language used by Chinese social media marketers so that differences to consumer language can be identified and tourism marketers can learn about language conventions apparent in these social media.

Keywords

tourism, platform, media, social, chinese, communications, marketing

Disciplines

Business

Publication Details

Tourism Marketing Communications on a Chinese Social Media Platform

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Social media have become important communicative platforms for tourism marketers but it is not clear if and how the communicative language of marketer-to-consumer is different from consumer-to-consumer. Given the enormous growth of both tourism and social media in China, this paper focuses on patterns in language use by the Chinese tourism marketers on Weibo. Using systemic semiotic approach, it selects and investigates two corpora of communication on Weibo – tourism to consumer and consumer to consumer. This study expects to provide the firm understanding and categorize the patterns in the language used by Chinese social media marketers so that differences to consumer language can be identified and tourism marketers can learn about language conventions apparent in these social media.

Key words: social media marketing; communicative language; Weibo; conversational routines; tourism

Introduction

Tourism is an information intensive industry (Cox et al. 2009). Organizations rely on the communication with tourists through various channels to market their products and build customer relationships (Poon, 1993). Indeed, social media have grown to be one of the most effective means for tourists to seek information and share travelling experiences (Cox et al. 2009; Gretzel 2006; Yoo & Gretzel 2008). Given the prevalence of social media use among tourists, social media become indispensable platforms for tourism marketers (Pantelidis, 2010; Chan & Denizci, 2011; Huang, 2011; Munar, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel 2010). Within tourism marketing, several studies have looked at the use of social media as communicative tools for promoting products or services (Kasavana, Nusair & Teodosic,2010; Lanz, Fischhof & Lee, 2010), creating interactive conversations and building customer relationships (Pantelidis, 2010; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Furthermore, early research has suggested that people use a surprisingly large number of different words to describe the same concept, which makes it difficult to accommodate these varied representations in a system (Furnas et al. 1987). These studies apparently indicate that the language used by marketers and tourism is more than a word. Rather, the semantic content and linguistic style play

substantially important role in increasing conversion rate, indentifying and promoting the most influential product reviews, and stimulating consumers to write powerful reviews (Luewig et al. 2013). Unfortunately, what is missing from the tourism literature is a firm understanding of the language used by marketers as well as by consumers on social media platforms.

When discussing the importance of social media in tourism, China cannot be ignored. China's domestic tourism as well as outbound tourism has been experiencing a rapid growth. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2013), by the end of 2012, the number of domestic tourists reached 2.96 billion, up 12.1% over the previous year. As for outbound travelling, in 2012, Chinese travelers spent $102 billion on overseas travel, more than tourists from any other country (UN World Travel organization, 2013). While preparing travel plans, an increasing number of Chinese tourists rely on social media platforms (Nelson, 2013). By the end of 2012, Weibo gained over 500 million users, up by 50% compared to the same period the previous year (China Internet Watch, 2012). Weibo's great market penetration and high growth suggest tourism marketers need to understand how to build effective and sustainable communications on Chinese social media platform. Against this backdrop, the goal of this proposed research is to understand and categorize patterns in the language used by Chinese social media marketers so that differences to consumer language can be identified and tourism marketers can learn about language conventions apparent in these social media.

Problem definition

Previous studies suggest that a study of convention of communication requires to look at formulaic expressions or conversational routines (Aijmer, 1996). A great deal of attention has been paid to formulaic expressions in language acquisition and language development. The one focusing on marketing communication in tourism remains nascent area. Moreover, previous studies have discussed conventional routines in terms of both spoken and written language. Online communications on social media show that the boundaries between spoken and written interaction are getting blurred (Herring, 1996), making it difficult to

analyze in terms of spoken and writing (Aijmer & Stenstrom, 2005). Lack of simultaneous feedback, missing reaction signals and multiple conversations suggest the 'electronic revolution' will bring about a 'linguistic revolution' (Crystal, 2001). To deal with the foregoing research problems, the following research questions are identified.

Q1: What are the linguistic patterns of marketing communication on social media that are distinct from those have been established for conventional media?
Q2: What are the characteristics of linguistic patterns of marketing communication on social media?
Q3: Are linguistic patterns of marketer-to-consumer communication distinctively different from consumer-to-consumer communication on social media?

Literature review

3.1 Social media marketing

Social media marketing – using a variety of social media channels to promote a company and its products (Barefoot & Zhao, 2010) – has become indispensable to an organization's marketing plan (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). As Yoo and Gretzel (2010) pointed out, it spans all aspects of marketing, including marketing mix (4Ps), customer relationships, marketing research and performance measurement. Engagement with consumers on social media is driven by word of mouth among consumers, in an electronically facilitated extension of traditional word of mouth (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Further, consumers not only have greater access to information and greater command over information consumption than ever before, but can themselves actively create marketing content (Evans, 2008). Marketer cannot dictate communication on social media; instead, they have to engage consumers' interest and participation. Successful marketing in this new conversation space calls for innovative strategies. An engaging conversation on social media requires marketers to understand who is taking to whom – not only markers to consumers, but consumers to each other – and what they are talking about (Gretzel & Yoo, 2013). Though extant literature has discussed the importance and differences of social media marketing, very few marketers have a clear idea how to engage consumers and influence conversations on social media

(Divol, Edel & Sarrazin, 2012). These gaps suggest that marketing literature needs to provide fundamental knowledge about social media marketing, which can serve as guidance for marketers.

3.2 Conversations social media marketing

Description of posts and comments on social media shows that it is a form of 'conversational exchange' (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). Individuals can witness diverse conversations (Yardi & Boyd, 2010), and they may be clearly singled out and engaged in a conversation (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2009). This interpersonal conversations afforded by social media has placed new and interesting semiotic pressure on language, and most studies do not offer a theoretical basis for the description of social media communication as a form of conversation (Zappavigna, 2012). From marketing perspective, relevant research in analysing conversations has been focusing on macro-level analysis, such as online review, information search and online forum engagement (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2010; Quenti, Ravid & Rafaeli, 2004; Ludwig et al. 2013; Pan& Fesenmaier, 2006). Ludwig et al. (2013) employ text mining to extract changes in affective content and linguistic style properties of customer book reviews on Amazon.com, indicating the essential role of language in marketer-to-consumer communications. Fayard and DeSanctis (2010) use Wittgenstein's concept of language games to examine how participants of two online forums construct collective identity and culture through their discursive practices, which highlight the consumer-to-consumer communication. In tourism, Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) compared Semantic Models of Tourists and Information Space. Findings show that the languages used by consumers differ substantially from those found on websites employed for their vacation planning.

3.3 Conversational routines on social media

Conversational routines (CRs) - patterned phrases which are frequently used in a specific situation and with certain participants (Aijmer, 1996) - have been studied on traditional media. The use of social media indicates that communication patterns have shifted from primarily traditional media to significant use of online computer-mediated communication (Zappavigna, 2012). Posts, comments and status update may be used like a real-time conversation, a question inviting a

response or a simply statement to keep individual's network alive (Crawford, 2010). The role of social media profiles as an ongoing conversation in multiple modalities (Boyd & Heer, 2006), which can be generated and influenced by unfolding linguistic patterns. As opposed to CRs that have established on traditional media, a conversation on social media marketing has a number of typical features: (1) it is interactive; (2) it is collaborative; (3) it focuses on written context; (4) more participants (including marketers and consumers) can involve in the same conversation and (5) it is a continuous process. To date, the field of research has primarily studied the communication patterns on social media from computational linguistic perspective. In particular, machine learning has been used for stylistic text classification to distinguish texts on social media. This automated analysis of conversations on social media poses difficulties for human linguistics (Zappavigna, 2012). Given the complexity of conversations on social media, a fine-grained study is needed to look at their specific communication patterns.

Conceptual framework

This study will adopt Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL is described as a functional-semantic approach to language which investigates two essential issues: 1, how people use language in a variety of context; 2, how language is structured for use as a semiotic system (Halliday, 1994). Slade and Eggins (2004) have pointed out two advantages of SFL for conversational analysis. (1) SFL provides researchers an integrated and comprehensive model of language which allows language patterns to be described in different degree of detail. (2) SFL offers a theory to study how people use language in their social life. More specifically, conversations can be analysed as involving different linguistic patterns which underline interpersonal relations. It is fairly to say that these advantages of SFL respond to the features of marketing language on social media: (1) it addresses social dimension; (2) it highlights speech roles, contact and sheerness between interactants.

Methodology

This study will use speech function approach to analyse the communication patterns on social media. Conversations between marketers and consumers on

social media entail the nature of being interactive, collaborative and continuous. The speech function method is a subsystem within SFL and it deals with the grammar of interaction from a semantic perspective (Halliday, 1994). Speech function approach is a comprehensive method to study conversation, and it provides evidence to look at how language has been used. It stresses all kind of conversations must entail certain moves, which are statement, question, offer and command. Further, speech role and commodity choice are focal points of speech function theory. Speech role consists of giving (e.g. would you like borrow my book?) and demanding (e.g. can I borrow your book?). Commodity choice comprises exchanging information. For instance, "who cleaned the house?" "Tom did". It also includes exchanging goods or services. For example, "can I borrow your computer?" "of course, here you are". The use speech function approach allows this study to identify and categorize patterns in the language used by Chinese social media marketers. In terms of sample, this study will choose two corpora, business to consumer and consumer to consumer communications on Weibo – the largest social media platform in China.

Expected outcomes, contributions and implications

This study is expected to identify the communication patterns of marker-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer. It is believed that the results will help tourism marketers to learn about language conventions apparent in Chinese social media landscape. Furthermore, this study may make following contributions: 1, shed light on the increased e-presence in Chinese internet language; 2, provide tourism marketers a firm understanding regarding the social media landscape in China; 3, advance the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics or SFL; 4, adding knowledge of methodological approach in studying pragmatic linguistics on social media platform. From industrial perspective, this study will be able to provide insights about how to fully leverage language and culture to expend tourism market overseas.

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