Do social media effect tourists' behaviour?

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the online travel industry has been undergoing a major change– adapting to new technologies and trends available on the Internet. The emergence of social media is of key importance in this change, which represents different types of user-generated content (UGC) such as blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks, and media files shared on sites like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Flicker. This paper reviews and analyses the research publications focusing on social media in tourism. This paper suggests that social media plays different roles at different stages of a tourist travel plans. Social media serves as a tool for source of inspiration, self expression, communication and entertainment.

Keywords: Social media, tourism, travel , tourist , web 2.0

Introduction

Aristotle has rightly said "man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidently is either beneath our notice or more than human". As man has developed through time, the types of social interactions have evolved with him (http://www.actforlibraries.org). People have deep sense of 'inseparability' feel from various groups; as a result they are deeply involved with each other. In the past two decades, technical devices have brought more collaboration, social interaction, personalization, active participation and communication itself than ever before.

This internet evolution our generation is going through has been termed web 2.0 (Wright and Zdinak, 2008). With the development of web 2.0 and more specifically of social media, user-generated content has grown immensely in the past years (Riegner, 2007). Social media is all about facilitating people to express and share ideas, thoughts and opinions with others. It is also about enabling people to connect with others, like they were doing for the last thousands of years. However, what is of significance is that social media has:

a) removed spatial and time constrains that were inherent in traditional methods of communications;
b) provide online tools that enabled 'one to many' sharing of multimedia content; and
c) facilitated easy to use interfaces that enable even non-specialists to share and connect.

Social media have inspired new ways of socializing, entertaining, and interacting with each other and even shopping (Sabate et al., 2014). Social media is enjoying a phenomenal success. Some of the statistics that show the rising trend of social media are (www.statista.com)

- As of the first quarter of 2016, Facebook had 1.65 billion monthly active users.
- As of the first quarter of 2016, Twitter had an average 310 million monthly active users.
- As of the first quarter of 2016, Instagram had 400 million monthly active accounts.
- The power of social networking is such that, the number of worldwide users is expected to reach some 2.5 billion by 2018, around a third of Earth's entire population.
- During the first quarter of 2016, India ranked fifth with 41 million monthly active YouTube users.

As social media continues to grow, so will the importance of harnessing it as a marketing tool for all the industries. The tourism industry is primed to take advantage of social media outlets, as the industry has long relied on destination reputation, consumer opinion, spread of information and positive word of mouth advertising. TripAdvisor make up the largest travel community in the world, reaching 350 million unique monthly visitors, and 320 million reviews and opinions covering more than 6.2 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions (TripAdvisor 2016). With such usage rates, it seems rather expected that the impact of social media on travel planning has been characterized as "enormous" (Xiang et al., 2015).

Tourism products are experiential: Intangible and composite in nature, inseparable therefore difficult, or even impossible to be physically evaluated before purchase. As a result, their purchases are considered risky, and information intensive in terms of their decision making process (Holloway, 2004; Huang et al., 2010). To reduce the purchase associated risk and cope up with the information intensive decision making, consumers search for information in a variety of sources (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004; Chung and Buhalis, 2008). The Internet's interactivity, customization, and vast information resources provided tailored search and content to users. As a natural consequence, the web soon became one of the most effective means for potential tourists to search for information (Werthner and Klein, 1999). According to Adam et al. (2007), in recent years, user-generated content about travel and tourism has been growing in the social media: from people posting their vacation photographs, to rating the services they have used during the trip in ratings' sites and this has contributed for the concept of travel 2.0 to become widespread. The Internet, and in particular web 2.0, provides to consumers a new communication platform similar to that of word of mouth that also empowers consumers (Pan et al., 2007). Social media, apart from their popularity as generic tools enabling sharing of content and connection with others, are becoming increasingly important also in tourism, since: (a) Potential tourists rely on others' experiences for their decision making due to the experiential nature of tourism products (Litvin et al., 2008), thus in an effort to decrease uncertainty and increase the exchange utility; and (b) social media enable storytelling, a usual post-travel engagement in our travel culture, on a '24/7' basis, not only to a larger audience, but also provide a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities. The wealth of new technological features (e.g. GPS, high definition photo and video cameras, etc.) that modern devices feature will further increase the volume and richness of interaction and content sharing among consumers via social media applications. It becomes apparent that social media and mobile devices fundamentally change travel related consumer behaviour (Xiang et al., 2015).

Web 2.0

The term web 2.0 represents a second generation of the web and was used for the first time in 2004, by Tim O'Reilly. It described the way users started to change the way they used the web on a day-to-day basis, that is, users started to use the internet as a platform where content is continuously modified by any user, instead of being created and published by a sole individual. O'Reilly and Musser (2006) define web 2.0 as: "... a set of economic, social, and technology trends that collectively form the basis for the next generation of the Internet — a more mature, distinctive medium characterized by user participation, openness, and network effects." Constantinides and Fountain (2008) define it as: "a collection of open source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users' networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of content." Users are not only consumers, like in the previous generation of the web, but they are also creators (prosumers) of user-generated content in a virtual community (O'Reilly, 2007). The web pages became more attractive, user-friendly, interactive and accessible to more people. This is the era of social networking: people started writing in blogs, sharing photos and videos, adding and editing wikis, connecting with friends online and so on. In short, web 2.0 has to do with collaborating, content sharing, blogging, user-generated content, online video and social networks and some popular companies of this era include Flickr, Youtube, Facebook, Linkedin, Wikipedia, Blogger, MySpace and so on (O'Reilly, 2007). Web 2.0 explores the possibilties of the web which users are using as tools to review commercial products and services to validate or disapprove organisations for the quality of their offerings (Chung and Buhalis, 2008).

Web 2.0 offers greater information transparency; content generation and publishing through a range of devices and platforms that are easy to use even by non-specialists; possibility for product co-creation and personalization; capacity to sanction or reward brands for product performance but also for their ethical and social responsibilities (Buhalis and O'Connor, 2005; Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). The term web 2.0 has been amended in various sectors and in tourism the term Travel 2.0 is widely used. Web services in the travel and tourism industry where users can collaborate to create and share information is termed as travel 2.0 (Conrady, 2007). Travel 2.0 refers to tourists' usage of the internet, to acquire information about a certain trip, to compare specific services and to share experiences and recommendations through customer ratings and evaluation systems (Adam et al., 2007).

Social media

A review on the literature reveals that there is no yet a unanimous agreement on the terms used to describe social media. This is expected to an extent, given the young age of the concepts involved. According to Kaplan

and Haenlein (2010), web 2.0 is a platform for the evolution of social media, which is "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Safko and Brake (2009) adopt a more generalized approach and propose that social media are: "activities, practises and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios."

In a more recent definition, Hoffman et al. (2013) consider social media as "The set of web-based and mobile tools and applications that allow people to create (consume) content that can be consumed (created) by others and which enables and facilitates connections." The one point that differentiates social media from traditional media is user participation. Like traditional media social media serves as a vehicle to reach out to and inform consumers; however it is only social media that allows consumers to participate and propagate their views. Using all mobile and web-based technologies, social media creates highly interactive platforms by bringing together individuals and creating communities. Internet has a lot of websites; each of them has different functional attributes and caters to different sections of society. Websites like Facebook are for general masses but LinkedIn is focused on professional networking. Media sharing sites (i.e. YouTube, Picassa and Flickr) or blogging platforms (i.e. blogspot) are also members of this ecosystem called social media (Kietzmann et al., 2011).Social media has equipped the organization to establish an direct relationship with the consumers. Both of the organizations and consumers are free to generate content on the web pages, which further leads to conversations and discussion. Organization on one end are provided with an opportunity to share their information with a large base of customers and on the other end consumers are also free to publish any content whether positive or negative regarding the information. According to Mahmood A. Khan (2012) social media has the advantage of

- reaching global audience, even in remote corners of the world;
- immediacy with no time lag;
- easy accessibility by those receiving the communication as long as they can get their hands on a computer keyboard;
- twenty four hours, seven day operations thereby overcoming the time difference; and
- ubiquitous versatility for interactive exchanges.

Social media and tourism

For decades in hospitality management we used to say "you do one thing bad ten people will know by the word of mouth." Social media has changed that proverb overnight as the "word of million mouths." The Internet has redesigned the way information related to travel and tourism is distributed and the way that tourists plan their trips (Buhalis and Law, 2008). Recently, two main trends, which emphasize changes that can impact the tourism system, have emerged on the Internet. Firstly, social media websites have gained popularity in the tourists' use of the Internet (Pan et al., 2007). These social media sites help users in sharing and posting their travel-related experiences, comments and opinions that in turn, serve as an information source for tourists around the world. With this, consumers earn more power in determining the production and delivery of information due to the widespread access of the Internet (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Secondly, due to the large amount of information available, searching has gradually become a dominant mode in tourists' use of the Internet. Hence, search engines have become a potent interface for the access to travel-related information (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), and play a critical role in joining the tourist and the tourism firm (Lange-Faria and Eliot, 2012). Just like the appearance internet and the development of ICTs, the emergence of social media as new actors in the field of travel information exchange has changed the structure of the tourism domain. For that reason, knowledge about the role of social media in the search of travel information is necessary for tourism firms to become more competitive. National and international tourism sector should be able to apply the developments in the field of media to its own marketing activities in order to sustain the benefit, success and profitability. At this point it is important to ensure the efficient use of internet for tourism activities. According to the study conducted by Xiang and Gretzel (2010), social media play an important role in the tourism domain, representing approximately 11% of the search results of travel and tourism related searched in Google. The primary platforms for online tourists to share their experiences are virtual communities, consumer review sites and blogs. Social media should be seen both as an interaction tool (i.e. checking and answering customers' reviews), according to O'Connor (2008), and a "lead generation tool" (i.e. good comments and reviews can boost product and services sales), according to others (Ye et al., 2009; Zhu and Zhang, 2010).

Social media for travellers

"Those who fail to plan, plan to fail" – an old proverb confirms its validity among travellers who do not engage in efficient travel planning. Travel planning is a complex process which requires huge investment in terms of time and money. Travellers without resourceful planning, often find themselves stranded in a foreign land, accept poor quality products and services, or suffer great deal of mental stress (Bonsall, 2004). Existing research on the process of selecting a travel destination has followed the general consumer decision-making model which includes five key stages (Engel et al., 1990).

The five stages illustrated in figure 1 commence with the "pre-trip" need recognition and information search phases, followed by the actual conduct of travel (during trip) and concluding with the post trip (purchase) evaluation phase. It is extremely important for hospitality and tourism organizations to understand how consumers search for and review information at the various stages of their travel decision making process.

Figure 1
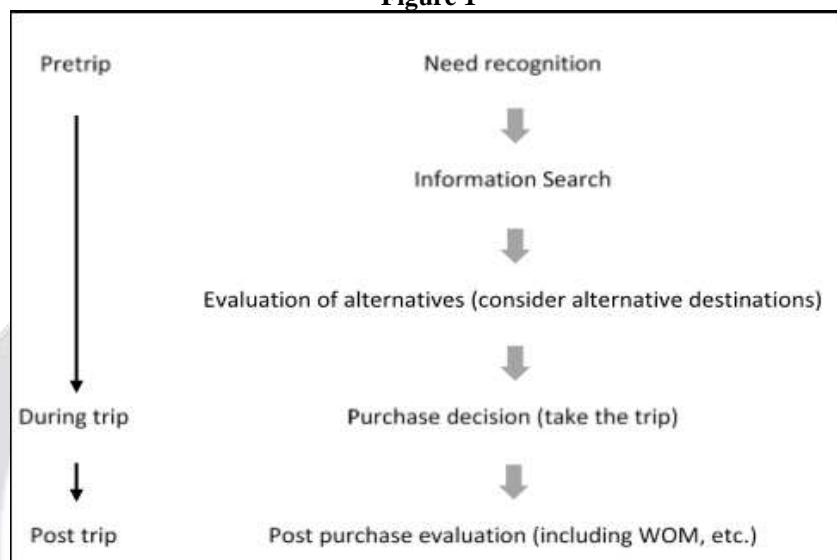
Source : Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (1990)

Pre-trip phase

In probing the likelihood that online travellers come across social media content during a web search process, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) reported that social media constituted more than one-tenth of the search results. A latest research from Google has shown that among leisure travellers, 84% use the internet as a major resource for planning. With the rising popularity of websites that contain content that is generated by travellers, a number of scholars coined the paramount importance of social media in the research phase of the travel planning process (Cox et al., 2009; Tussyadiah et al., 2011).

Cox et al., (2009) found that user-generated content on social media was mainly used at the information search stage of travel planning. Based on a survey of 12,544 respondents among inbound tourists to Australia, Cox et al., (2009) revealed that the percentages of respondents using user-generated content on social media in the evaluation of alternatives stage and the purchase decision stage were 22 and 15% respectively. Huang et al. (2010) even posited that obtaining travel information appeared to be the primary motivation driving the travellers' use of user-generated content and social media. It has long been argued that an important issue in tourism is the lack of direct experience with a tourism product, meaning that the quality and the perceived benefits of tourism and hospitality products can hardly be evaluated before the product is consumed (Schmallegger and Carson, 2008). As the tourism services belong to category of high-priced, high- involving, and well differentiated services, the users are using the e-word-of-mouth in order to reduce the risk of making a wrong decision (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002). Through searching the content on social media, consumers cannot only collect travel information from friends and relatives who are within their social network, but also acquire more extensive information from Internet users around the world. Furthermore, Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2006) argued that user-generated content generated by social media include a variety of new and emerging sources of online information. Thevenot (2007) supplemented that the travel experiences and perspectives of previous consumers could be shared with others through many different formats— including text, image, audio, and video. Given that the information available on social media consist of the collaborative knowledge of people from around the world in various formats, Schmallegger and Carson(2008), as well as Yoo and Gretzel (2011),

noted that social media are more effective in equipping travellers with more comprehensive knowledge on a tourism product or destination than other information sources. User-generated content on social media appears to be acting as an additional source of information which travellers consider as part of their information search process, and social media appear to be ubiquitous in online travel information search (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Howison et al., (2014) highlight that tourism operator-generated content is particularly more important at the point of pre-trip and the challenge is for tourism companies to perceive and capitalise upon the influential audience reach enabled by social media.The recency and variety of user-generated content on social media are also the key determinants affecting the usage of social media by travel consumers in the travel planning process (Salkhordeh, 2011).

During trip phase

User generated content on social media can provide unprecedentedly up-to-date information in diversified formats to the tourist. Howison et al., (2014) strongly emphasise the importance and use of social media by travellers during the travel process. The happening phase can also be perceived as the start of the content sharing, especially on social networks, due to the development of the new technologies (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014).

 The writers added that travellers use the Internet and Facebook to communicate from airports or major bus stations using their mobile devices or free internet access at the airports. Tourists also use free internet access at their destinations and accommodation to send emails, videos, and digital images. They also send text messages containing information about their destinations, arrivals, and departures. Friends and families will then begin to follow them on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media and become recipients and co-creators of user-generated content created by the tourists (Yoo and Gretzel, 2011). Social media influences awareness to destination and subsequent decisions when selecting the destination. It was reported that information on social networking sites greatly influences customers when making their purchase decisions (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009)

 McCarthy et al. (2010) explored the impact of social media on evolving customer preferences in the hotel industry. In another study conducted by Fotis et al. (2012), the authors found that social media have changed the way online Internet users make to their holiday plans. Sparks and Browning (2011) revealed that hotel customers' likeliness of booking is determined by valence, framing, and inclusion of ratings in online reviews. Tussyadiah et al. (2011) claimed that user-generated content on social media helps audiences gain information about a place by recognizing coherence in the story and subsequently generated higher motivation as well as likeliness of choosing the destination. They proposed that the narrative reasoning and narrative comprehension that readers possess have substantial impact on the usage of user-generated content on social media as well as on travellers' subsequent behaviour. In general, the content shared on online communities and blogs are travel stories and experiences that are presented in a narrative format. They posited that stories have the ability to encourage audiences to visualize the consumption of a product or service. Based on the results of a path analysis among 552 undergraduate students, they found that travel consumers would develop purchase intention if they perceive the outcome of consumption to be similar to their past positive consumption experiences. Self identification while reading the travel stories would also lead to intention to consume the product.

After trip phase

The reliving or post-trip phase is mainly dedicated to sharing experience on social media. Social media sites are collaborative and interactive rather than static. All users can actively participate in the generation or enrichment of content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Likewise, travellers today can actively engage in consuming, producing, and diffusing travel information through the Internet (Sparks and Browning, 2011). Luliana et al. (2013) highlight that social media influence the behaviour of the tourist from information acquisition stage to post-purchase behaviour such as patterns of Internet usage and dissatisfaction behaviours or statements. This was supported by Laroche et al. (2012) who state that almost all customers, especially travellers, can participate actively in the generation and enrichment of online travel content.

Drawing on 346 Internet users from Russia and the former Soviet Union republics, Fotis et al. (2011) revealed that social media are predominantly used after holidays for experience sharing. Pan et al. (2007) found that sharing life experience and social interaction are two major factors motivating bloggers to generate user-generated content. In order to understand the antecedents of the tourists' intention to use social media in organizing vacation trips, Parra-López et al. (2011) found that travellers' participation and contribution to social media were attributed to their expected social benefits, hedonic benefits, and functional benefits. This result is in accordance with research by Yoo and Gretzel (2011) who argued that a traveller's personality is an important

determinant in motivating or inhibiting the creation of travel-related user-generated content. Howison et al., (2014) found that social interaction and sharing of life experiences are the two major factors motivating the travellers to create user generated content on social media.

Research gap

Most academic studies focus on the use and impact of social media in the research phase of the travel process (Leung et al., 2013). However, social media seem to have a role also during the trip, as well as in the post-trip stages of the travel process. As a result, emphasis in the study of social media needs to be placed not only in the pre-trip but also during, and in the post-trip stages of the travel process. This research paper focused on reviewing the literature on how social media is used by both travellers in decision making. During the trip research phase, social media provide inspiration to active users; in happening phase, travellers employ social media for self-expression, communication and entertainment; and during the reliving phase active users employ social media for post-trip self expression, to convey outputs from their travel in the form of reviews and feedback. Social media seem to have a predominant role during the trip, as well as in the post-trip stages of the travel process. The importance of social media has dramatically increased but the practitioners still need to discover the art of manipulating it in order to realise the full potential of their tourism businesses.

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