2016-Conference   TTRA Canada

Winter 12-9-2016

#tourism: The Influence of Social Media on Visitor Experiences in Churchill, Manitoba

Katherine Ann Fowler
umfowle4@myumanitoba.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/ttracanada_2016_conference

Part of the Tourism and Travel Commons

#TOURISM: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON VISITOR EXPERIENCES IN CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

Katherine A. Fowler, BA (Ad.)
Master's Candidate
Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management
University of Manitoba
Email: umfowle4@myumanitoba.ca

#TOURISM: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON VISITOR EXPERIENCES IN CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

ABSTRACT   *This student poster presentation examines the influence of viewing social media content during the pre-trip phase of the travel process on visitor experiences at tourist destination areas. Specifically, I am investigating how tourists compare their travel experiences with their initial image of Churchill, Manitoba, - a tourist destination renowned for its wildlife and natural scenery – based on viewing social media content before their trip. Data collection will consist of conducting exit interviews with 20-30 tourists at the Churchill Airport and Churchill train station as travelers are leaving the destination to return home after they have fulfilled their travel experiences. Preliminary findings are forthcoming as data collection will occur in August 2016. The study's background and how the findings can contribute to tourism practice are briefly discussed here.*

Social media has altered society in ways we could have never imagined. Social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have shaped the way we interact with friends, family, and organizations. These sites have also influenced how we spend our leisure time. An advantage of social media is it provides individuals with the ability to stay connected with friends/family and to share personal experiences through photos/status updates, including while on vacation. In effect, social media "has democratized the image creation and dissemination process" (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011, p. 726) in that it can influence destination image and shape expectations of trip experiences that may vary from those promoted by traditional forms of marketing. Given the fact that engagement with social media can take place at any point during the travel experience (pre-trip phase, during the trip, and post-trip phase), "tourism marketers can no longer ignore the role of social media without risking to become irrelevant" (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p. 186).

While there has been growth of academic publications on social media and tourism in recent years, the pre-trip stage and how tourists use social media to plan their trips is primarily considered (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Limited research considers how using social media during one phase of the travel process can influence another phase; specifically, how viewing social media during the pre-trip phase can influence the post-trip phase. Although this information may not appear to be useful from a tourism supplier perspective, as they have already received the financial investment from the traveler, it could potentially have an impact on future business, including customer loyalty.

The purpose of this research, then, is to examine the influence of social media on visitor experiences at tourist destination areas. Specifically, I am investigating how tourists who are beginning their post-trip phase compare their travel experiences with their initial image of Churchill, Manitoba (renowned for its mega fauna such as polar bears and beluga whales, as well as considered a prime destination for viewing the natural phenomenon of aurora borealis/northern lights) based on viewing social media content before their trip. Data collection will consist of conducting 20-30 minute exit interviews, using open-ended questions, with 20-30 tourists at the Churchill Airport and Churchill train station as travelers are leaving the destination to return home after they have fulfilled their travel experiences. I will be interviewing participants who: a) are first-time visitors (as repeat visitors will likely have an image of the destination shaped by previous experience) and; b) viewed social media content of Churchill during the pre-trip phase of the travel experience. Data analysis will broadly consist of preparing and organizing the data (transcripts from audio interviews), coding and reducing the data into meaningful themes and combining the codes into broader categories, and presenting the data in the form of a discussion. Preliminary findings are forthcoming as data collection will occur in August 2016.

Findings from this research will be significant in that they can allow tourism suppliers to better understand travel experiences of tourists who view social media content before traveling, which can help guide tourism marketing efforts. In addition, since travelers share their tourism experiences via word of mouth, it can inform tourism organizations regarding what visitors think about Churchill and its services. This study can also serve as a springboard for future research, including the examination of additional destinations and employing alternative methods of data collection, which can further contribute to our knowledge of the role of social media in tourism.

References

Lo, I. S., McKercher, B., Lo, A., Cheung, C., & Law, R. (2011). Tourism and online photography. *Tourism Management*, *32*(4), 725–731. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2010.06.001

Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, *31*(2), 179–188. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2009.02.016

Zeng, B., & Gerritsen, R. (2014). What do we know about social media in tourism? A review. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *10*, 27-36. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2014.01.001