

Fall 9-2019

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Lever, Michael and Elliot, Dr. Statia, "Residents as Destination Advocates: A Netnographic Exploration of Resident-Generated Advocacy through a Facebook Travel Group" (2019). *TTRA Canada 2019 Conference*. 14.

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Residents as Destination Advocates: A Netnographic Exploration of Resident-Generated Advocacy through a Facebook Travel Group

Like many destinations, Canada began this year with an increase in international visitors (Destination Canada, 2019). An attributing factor to this growth is the phenomenon of social media and, more specifically, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, which emphasize a user's relationships, as supported by their conversations, identity, reputation, and presence (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). SNS are now deeply ingrained in our social and economic lives (Usui, Wei, & Funck, 2018; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), even surpassing traditional marketing channels in terms of importance and effectiveness (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2009; O'Connor, 2008; Soboleva, Burton, Mallik, & Khan, 2017). Of the most popular forms of SNS, Facebook stands out with 1.47 billion daily active users (Facebook, 2019), more than any other type of SNS. Within Facebook are a number of themed groups for users to connect and disseminate on a variety of shared-interest topics, including tourism. Residents are an important representation of the destination within these groups, by offering a more organic image as compared to information provided by destination marketers (Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019). Since tourism can be a high-risk purchase in the sense that it cannot be returned if a tourist is unhappy with it, there is a value to better understanding the determinants of SNS-based advocacy within a tourism lens. To date, few studies have explored the nuances of resident-generated advocacy through Facebook specifically.

The aim is to better understand SNS user's motivations to advocate for their place of residence as a tourist destination using the emergent methodology of netnography. Netnography adapts ethnographic research within an online setting to better understand online cultures through users' content (Mkono & Tribe, 2017) – in this case, travel-related pages within the Facebook platform. For this research, I will look at the Next Departure – Canada's Travel Community Facebook group, which is comprised of 13,500 travel-minded individuals. The membership in this group is comprised largely of Canadian residents, many of whom act as unofficial advocates for Canada to other potential travelers. Advocacy goes beyond word-of-mouth (WOM) by incorporating both intentions and behaviours, and is measured by one's social and physical advocacy, recommending behaviours, approval of others in visiting Canada, and positive WOM (Ghosh, 2018). Postings will be evaluated to identify indicators of advocacy behaviour among these residents, which include their sharing of photos/videos/GIFs, asking for recommendations, arranging get togethers with other travelers, posting about a particular feeling or activity, tagging friends, checking in to locations, starting a group poll, and tagging local events. Prior to engaging with any online content, this qualitative approach will ensure a strict adherence to the recommended ethical guidelines as outlined by the creator of this methodology (Kozinets, 2002). The data analysis process will involve coding the online data using extensive field notes as related to a user's advocacy behaviours until the point of data saturation (Mkono & Tribe, 2017).

This research will advance knowledge by offering new insights into destination advocacy behaviour through SNS. In exploring advocacy, there is a great opportunity to build upon our current understanding of the effectiveness of resident-generated content in driving interest to a destination through digital technologies. In practice, this research will offer destination marketers with a better perspective of their shifting role from information provider to facilitator in today's largely consumer-to-consumer-driven world.

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