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| Authors | Cahyanto, Ignatius;Pennington-Gray, Lori;Mandala, Laura;Schroeder, Ashley |
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The Effects of Social Media Usage on Travel Information Searching and Travel Experience Sharing

Ignatius Cahyanto
Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management
University of Florida

Lori-Pennington Gray
Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management
University of Florida

Laura Mandala
Mandala Research LLC

Ashley Schroeder
Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management
University of Florida

and

Kyriaki Kaplanidou
Department of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management
University of Florida

ABSTRACT

The study examined the different impacts of the use of social media in travel planning and travel experience sharing. Data for this study were generated by surveys to an online panel of respondents. A total of 543 completed surveys were used. The results indicated that different social media have different impacts on both travel planning and travel experience sharing following the trip. This study demonstrated the significance of examining different social media in order to understand its role in constructing travel consumption behaviors. Finally, recommendations are presented.

Key words: Social media, travel planning

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has vitally redesigned the way tourism information is disseminated and the way people consume travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). One of the segments of the Internet that generates significant interest from tourism scholars is social media. Over the past few years tourism scholars have been fascinated with the role of social media in reshaping and influencing how people employ travel (Gretzel, 2006; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crott, 2007). Xian

&Gretzel (2010) for instance argued the importance of social media in dictating travel experiences. Social media is often defined as user-generated content on the Internet through the use of a series of tools (Parra-lopez, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutierrez-Tano, & Diaz-Armas, 2010) although other terms such as Web 2.0 are also frequently used (Sigala, 2009). This fast growing segment includes social sharing of opinions (blogs), social photo and video sharing (e.g. Flickr, Youtube), social sharing of knowledge (Wiki), and social networking (e.g. Facebook, Friendster). These social media allow users to search, organize, and even contribute to content in mutual ways.

This study intended to contribute to the discourse of social media and travel consumption by examining the impacts of different social media usage in terms of how it relates to travel behavior. Examining how different social media platforms effect travel would yield significant interest in tourism marketing and would foster a better understanding of how social media mediate travel experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Therefore, the broad goal of this study is to examine the effects of different social media on travel information searching prior to the trip and the experience sharing following the trip. Specifically, two research questions guided this study: (1) Is there any effect of various social media usage in travel information search? and (2) Is there any effect of various social media usage in sharing travel experiences following the trips? It is argued that different social media may have different effects on travel information searching and travel experience sharing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent tourism research, the role social media plays in tourism consumption has gained significant interest (i.e. Dasgupta, Granger, & McGarry, 2002; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Prior research has found that people tend to use social media in travel consumption because of benefits sought. These benefits may include functional, social and physiological (Parra-Lopez et al, 2010). Functionally, social media allow potential travelers to remain current with the situation in their destinations and the activities they intend to engage in while in the destination (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). Socially, social media allows potential travelers to communicate with other potential travelers, and therefore exchange ideas, suggestions, and construct the experiences (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Sigala, 2009). In addition, psychologically, social media provides fun and personal enjoyment (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Bressler & Grantham, 2000). Further, Bressler and Grantham (2000) argued that the psychological benefits of social media become apparent when the potential tourists use the media to organize and plan their travel. Similarly, Parra-Lopez et al (2010) also noted that the psychological benefits also resulted when potential travelers continuously communicate their plans with others in the social networks, which in turn leads to increased social benefits from the social media.

Despite the benefits of social media, prior researchers also have found that this platform also creates some costs in organizing travel. Yoo, Lee, and Gretzel (2007) argued that social media demands personal effort both in time and monetary value in order to collaborate in the experience construction. Potential travelers may need to allocate resources to seek trustful online information with regard to the destination and the activities they intend to participate in. Additionally, while most social media are relatively easy to use, some travelers may find it

difficult as they have to learn how to navigate and collaborate in the online community (Yoo et al, 2007; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). The potential loss of personal privacy may also become a perceived “cost” and possible deterrent to using an online community, due to the public exposure of personal information (Govani & Pashley, 2005; Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

The data for this study were generated through a domestic online panel of respondents in September - October 2010. A total of 1048 completed surveys were achieved, with a margin of error 3.1% at the 95% CI. Out of 1,048 respondents, 543 identified themselves as regular users of social media and 505 identified themselves as non-regular users of social media. This paper will only use those who identified themselves as regular users. The demographic make up of the respondents were: 50% males, 52% married, 70% without children, with an annual income of 50,000 -74,999, with 31% having some university degree and 40% being employed full time.

Measurement

Dependent variable: The dependent variables of this study were: 1) Travel information search prior the trip and 2) Travel experiences shared after the trip. Information search prior to travel was measured using seven statements with a yes/no response: “I do research on 3rd party travel websites such as Orbitz.com, Expedia.com. or Travelocity.com,” “I go directly to the websites of the destination I am thinking of visiting,” “I read travel and travel related magazines,” “I read the travel section of my newspaper,” “I get recommendations from friends and family (word-of-mouth),” “I read user generated sources (Trip Advisor, Virtual Tourists, etc.) for the destination I am visiting,” and “I conduct a general web search, such as with Google or Yahoo.” The travel experiences shared after a trip were measured by utilizing ten methods of sharing travel experiences: “meet in person to talk about the trip,” “phone,” “text messaging,” “email,” “hosted a party,” “online social community (Facebook, MysSpace, etc),” “shared photographs via photo sharing sites (Kodak, Snapfish, etc),” “shared photographs via my email account,” “posted a review on a travel website (TripAdvisor, Expedia, etc), and “posted on a personal blog/website.”

Independent variable: The independent variable of this study was the usage of social media. It was measured by asking the respondents questions regarding their behavior in using social media ranging from 1= “I read this social media site” to 3= “I both read and post on this social media site.” There were 7 social media sites used for this study. They were Bebo, Facebook, Friendster, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, and Second Life. These social media sites were chosen based on their popularity.

Multiple logistic regressions with the stepwise procedure were employed to relate the social media usage and the two dependents variables. PASW Statistics 18.0 was utilized in analyzing the data.

Table 1
Multiple Logistic Regression Predicting Travel Information Search Prior to Travel

| <i>I do research on 3rd party travel websites such as Orbitz.com, Expedia.com. or Travelocity.com</i> | β | Wald | P value | Odd Ratio |
|--|---------|-------|---------|-----------|
| Facebook | .280 | 6.679 | .010 | 1.323 |
| LinkedIn | .290 | 4.831 | .039 | 1.336 |
| MySpace | -.235 | 4.831 | .028 | .791 |
| <i>I go directly to the websites of the destination I am thinking of visiting</i> | | | | |
| Facebook | .220 | 4.511 | .034 | 1.246 |
| <i>I read travel and travel related magazines</i> | | | | |
| MySpace | -.262 | 4.088 | .043 | .769 |
| <i>I read the travel section of my newspaper</i> | | | | |
| Bebo | .802 | 4.225 | .040 | 2.230 |
| MySpace | -.399 | 6.789 | .009 | .671 |
| Second life | -.883 | 3.861 | .002 | .414 |
| <i>I get recommendations from friends and family (word-of-mouth)</i> | | | | |
| Facebook | .204 | 3.945 | .047 | 1.226 |
| <i>I read user generated sources (TripAdvisor, VirtualTourists, etc.) for the destination I am visiting</i> | | | | |
| LinkedIn | .522 | .153 | .001 | 1.685 |
| <i>I read independently published reviews in magazines and newspaper of the destination I am thinking of visiting.</i> | | | | |
| LinkedIn | .362 | 4.686 | .030 | 1.436 |
| <i>I conduct a general web search, such as with Google or Yahoo</i> | | | | |
| LinkedIn | .298 | .143 | .037 | 1.347 |

**Only values that were significant at $p < 0.05$ are presented*

Table 2
Multiple Logistic Regression Predicting Travel Experience Shared After the Trip

| <i>Text messaging</i> | β | Wald | P value | Odd Ratio |
|--|---------|--------|---------|-----------|
| Bebo | .701 | 4.145 | .042 | 2.015 |
| MySpace | .395 | 12.233 | .000 | 1.484 |
| <i>Hosted a party</i> | | | | |
| Friendster | 2.271 | 7.757 | .005 | 9.688 |
| MySpace | -2.702 | 5.736 | .017 | .067 |
| Twitter | -1.903 | 3.869 | .049 | .149 |
| <i>Online social community (Facebook, MySpace etc),”</i> | | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|--------|--------|------|-------|
| Facebook | .410 | 12.432 | .000 | 1.506 |
| <i>Shared photographs via photo sharing sites (Kodak, Snapfish, etc)</i> | | | | |
| Friendster | .573 | 5.164 | .023 | 1.774 |
| Second Life | .693 | 3.974 | .046 | 1.999 |
| <i>Shared photographs via my email account</i> | | | | |
| Friendster | .665 | 7.258 | .007 | 1.944 |
| <i>Posted a review on a travel website (TripAdvisor, Expedia, etc)</i> | | | | |
| Bebo | -1.671 | 6.167 | .013 | .188 |
| Friendster | 1.052 | 6.619 | .010 | 2.862 |
| Second Life | 1.246 | 5.818 | .016 | 3.477 |
| <i>Posted on a personal blog/website</i> | | | | |
| Twitter | .647 | 12.534 | .000 | 1.911 |

**Only values that were significant at $p < 0.05$ are presented*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study yielded interesting findings. Table 1 outlined the results of multiple regressions predicting travel information search prior the trip. With regard to the information gathered prior to travel, three sites yielded significant effects: Facebook (coef = .280, $p = .010$), LinkedIn (coef = .290, $p = .039$), and MySpace (coef = -.235, $p = .028$) for the statement “I do research on 3rd party travel websites such as Orbitz.com, Expedia.com. or Travelocity.com.” Facebook (coef = .220, $p = .034$) users were more likely to go directly to the websites of the destination they considered visiting. MySpace (coef = -.262, $p = .043$) was the only site that was found to be influential for the statement “I read travel and travel related magazines.” This indicated that for those who used MySpace, the more they used it, the least likely they read travel and travel related magazines. While those who used Bebo (coef = .802, $p = .040$) were more likely to read the travel section of the newspaper, those who use MySpace (coef = -.399, $p = .009$) and Second Life (coef = -.883, $p = .002$) were less likely to read the travel section of the newspaper. It was also found that the more people used Facebook, the more likely they were to seek recommendations from friends and family members (coef = .204, $p = .047$). Similarly, the more people used LinkedIn, the more likely they were to read user generated sources regarding the destination (coef = .522, $p = .001$), read independently published reviews in magazines and newspapers of the destinations (coef = .362, $p = .030$), and conduct general web searches about the destinations (coef = .298, $p = .037$).

With regard to the second research question, there was no significant effect of social media usage on the likelihood that people shared their travel experiences by meeting in person to talk about their trip, the use of phones, and emails. Table 2 outlined significant effects of different social media in predicting travel experience shared after the trip. With regard to the use of text messaging, the more people used Bebo and MySpace, the more likely they were to share their experiences through texting (coef = .701, $p = .042$; coef = .395, $p = .000$ respectively). Interestingly, the more people used Friendster, the more likely they were to host a party in order to share their travel experiences (coef = 2.271, $p = .005$). However, the more people used MySpace

and Twitter, the less likely they were to host a party to share their travel experiences (coef=-2.702, p=0.17; coef = -1.903, p=.049 respectively). It was also found that the more people used Facebook, the more likely they shared their travel experience with on online communities (coef=.410, p=.000). Table 2 also indicated that the more people used Friendster (coef=.573, p=.023) and Second Life (coef=.693, p=.046), they more likely they shared photographs via photo sharing sites such as Kodak or Snapfish. The more people used Friendster and Twitter, the more likely they were to share photographs through email accounts (coef=.665, p= .007; coef=.369, p=.004 respectively). In addition, they more people used Friendster (coef= 1.052, p=.013) and Second Life (coef=1.246, p=.016), the more likely they posted reviews on travel websites. On the other hand, the more people used Bebo (coef=-1.671, p=.013), the less likely they posted reviews on a travel websites. Finally, the more people use Twitter (coef = .647, p=.000), the more likely they posted on personal blogs or websites.

The relationships between these social media sites and the pattern of post-trip sharing suggest there may be characteristics of the sites (usability features) and the users they attract, in terms of demographics, gender, race, or ethnicity, use of technology, that contribute to the variability in terms of trip sharing behaviors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study enhances the current understanding of the interplay between social media and travel consumption by evaluating the impacts of different social media on travel planning. Parallel with prior studies, this study found that social media has a significant affect on travel planning, especially in information search behavior and sharing experiences post travel. Nonetheless, the nature of social media has a multitude of impacts on travel planning and sharing experiences following travel. By comparing several popular social media sources, this study for instance found that with regard to travel planning, the more potential travelers used Facebook, the more likely they are to read a travel section in a newspaper and ask for recommendations with regard to their travel plans than those who utilize other social media. These individuals were also more likely to share their experiences in an online community. This might be explained by the platform of Facebook that easily allow users to collaborate, post photos, and give suggestions and recommendations for travel plans, as well as the popularity of the site.

While the study shows a relationship between the use of specific sites and the tendency to share post-trip experiences using different means, it suggests that additional work is needed to understand why these relationships occur. One hypothesis to be tested is whether there are specific characteristics of sites attract certain types of users (e.g. demographic, racial, ethnic, level of technology adaptation,) who tend to share their travel experiences in different ways.

The findings of this study highlight the different impacts of social media on the information gathering prior to the trip and how users share their travel experiences following the trip. With the growing interests in social media usage, further study needs to be conducted on how different social media platforms have different impacts on other aspects of tourism.

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