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The Impact of Self-Presentation Strategies and Social Support on Tourist Experience

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of how tourists' self-presentation is managed on Social Networking Sites (SNS). Specifically, the study investigated the effects of SNS use on social support and tourism experience and the moderating role of the different tourists' self-presentation strategies. The results emphasize the importance of SNS use for tourists to seek support from their social network while traveling. The study clarifies the importance of SNS use for tourism experience, in that the more engaged tourists are in social interaction facilitated with SNS while traveling, the more likely they are to have a positive tourism experience. Also, it is argued that social support does not always directly result from the intense SNS use, but rather moderated by tourists' self-presentation strategies.

Keywords: *positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation, social support, tourist experience.*

INTRODUCTION

In the age of the social web, we present ourselves to the world through various online channels. As Goffman (1959) pointed out, the way we present ourselves to others is considered a form of communication, in that we are communicating a message about who we are. Indeed, one's self is produced through the use of self-presentational performances that are either publicly validated or discredited by interested parties based upon the context the interaction that occurs within (Lemert and Branaman, 1997). Thus, feedback and support from others play a critical role in the formation of one's self.

In the context of travel, self-presentation and social support from others influence one's travel behavior (Axhausen, 2006). SNS provide tourists with additional opportunities to present themselves and exchange social support online (Walther and Boyd, 2002; Wright and Bell, 200). Using SNS, tourists can communicate with friends, family, colleagues, and even strangers for travel-related purposes without any time and space restraints (Huang, Basu and Hsu, 2010). As technological features of social networking sites (SNS) are more and more diverse, tourists use SNS for a variety of reasons from seeking travel-related information, maintaining social connections, finding travel companions, providing travel tips and suggestions, to simply having fun by sharing interesting travel experiences with each other (Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier, 2002).

As these processes occur while traveling, self-presentational performances on SNS can be considered an inseparable part of tourism. Hence, it is argued that the value chain of self-presentation within SNS would exert an influence on tourists' experience.

Social support is broadly defined as "the resources provided by another person" (Cohen and Syme, 1985, p. 4). Hence, tourists' use of SNS while traveling can be regarded as a part of social support seeking activities. Researchers have explored a possibility that SNS usage can serve as a new type of self-presentation and social support (Kim and Lee, 2011; Wright and Bell, 2003). However, existing studies have hardly discussed the effect of online social support in the context of travel, whereby tourists are communicating with their social network at home. To fill this gap, this study examines how self-presentation and social support in SNS influences tourist experience. Furthermore, based on a study by Kim and Lee (2011), it is argued people apply different strategies for their self-presentational activities. Some tourists may be more inclined to present themselves to others in a selective manner by highlighting the "favorable and appropriate images" of themselves, while others may prefer to present themselves in a true-to-self manner. Hence, an examination of how the different self-presentation strategies affect social support and tourist experience is of a great importance.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of how tourists' self-presentation is managed on SNS. Specifically, the study investigated the effects of SNS use on social support and tourism experience and the moderating role of the different tourists' self-presentation strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Networking Sites (SNS) and self-presentation

Web 2.0 has been a powerful means of expanding social relations online (Huang et al., 2011), and SNS have assumed its main role in connecting millions of people worldwide. SNS build and verify social networks for individuals and communities who share interests and activities with one another, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others (Kwon and Wen, 2010). Also, with the ubiquity of GPS-enabled mobile devices, such as smart phones, mobile-based sites for location sharing such as *twitter* and *foursquare* are getting popular. SNS can be regarded as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with those who share a connection, and view their list of connections and also those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

According to Goffman (1959), "the ways in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them" (p. 77) are considered self-presentation. Indeed, Lemert and Branaman (1997) also argue that one's self is produced through the use of self-presentational performances that are either publicly validated or discredited by interested parties based upon the context interaction that occurs within. Therefore, the ways people present themselves on SNS can be considered self-presentational performances to define and sustain their "self." Given the

differences between face-to-face and online interactions, alternate strategies are utilized online to convey information (Walther and Parks, 2002).

Social Support

Social support can be defined as "verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's experiences" (Albrecht and Adelman, 1987, p.19). Social support is often seen as critical in making social environments less stressful, healthier, and more conducive to effective adaptation to stress (House, 1981).

With the development of information and communication technology (ICT), the boundary of social support is expanding from traditional face-to-face communication context to computer-mediated communication context. SNS' characteristics make them an alternative to the traditional support networks within the face-to-face environment (Turner et al., 2001; Walther and Boyd, 2002). Furthermore, in terms of social support, SNS can eliminate barriers related to time and distance and draw more number of participants than the traditional face-to-face communication (Chen and Choi, 2011).

Some scholars point out the differences between perceived social support and received social support, and also that these two can be differently accessed (Bambina, 2007). Perceived social support can be defined as an individual's beliefs about the availability of various types of support from his/her network associates; whereas received social support is defined as the actual support received (Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010). On the other hand, received social support is the actual social support that he/she receives through SNS, such as comments, likes, and trackbacks. Most importantly, perceived social support can differ from received social support, which may cause a dissonance about the relationships involved on SNS.

In the travel context, social support is known to moderate the relationship between stressful travel experiences and psychological outcomes. Cross-cultural research has revealed that those with more avenues for support experience better physical and mental health (Chen and Choi, 2011; Ong and Ward, 2005). Social support for tourists can be provided by either weak ties, such as other tourists (Huang et al., 2009), or close ties, such as friends and family. Social support during the initial phase of travel can also be derived from those undergoing a similar experience. Close ties can provide tourists with a sense of place. On the other hand, weak ties may extend resources to information needed to reduce possible fears about the new environment or provide an advice in the preparation for the trip. Ong and Ward (2005) argue that instrumental social support (i.e., informational and tangible support) is particularly effective in fostering positive psychological outcomes for sojourners.

Selective self-presentation and Social support

On most SNS, users are not only looking to meet new people or to network, but rather to sustain contact with their existing group of friends and acquaintances (boyd and Ellison, 2008). In so doing, presenting a profile and posting and displaying connections with others publicly forms the basis for social interactions (boyd and Ellison, 2005). Thus, an individual can manage

the information about him/herself in order to earn the approval of others and to give positive impressions about him/her. Depending on his/her objective and goal, a tourist may actively search for further input from the audience in order to create a suitable performance.

Kim and Lee (2011) point to two types of selective self-presentation on SNS: positive and honest self-presentation. The high visibility of one's behavior to be identified by others easily may lead a SNS user to pursue a positive self-presentation (Kimmerle and Cress, 2008) by selectively revealing him/herself (Siibak, 2009). On the other hand, users anticipating long-term relationships with their SNS friends may choose to present themselves honestly without selectively putting their highly desirable images (Gibbs, Ellison and Hein, 2006; Kim et al., 2011). In summary, it can be suggested that a tourist may choose a certain level of positive or honest self-presentation strategies on SNS while traveling in order to achieve social support from their friends (Kim et al., 2001).

Tourism Experience

Since tourism experience has a direct impact on tourist's satisfaction and revisit intention, it is a critical issue for destination marketing organization to examine the main construct of tourist experience and how to enhance a positive tourism experience. Since the development in ICT has transformed tourism globally (Buhalis and O'Connor, 2005), the belief that tourism is an escape from the mundane of everyday life has been challenged (Uriely, 2005). In the current era of mass media, many touristic experiences, such as gazing at distant sights and engaging in the facets of other cultures, can be achieved without traveling to different destinations (Uriely, 2005; Urry, 1990). On the other hand, ICT also allow tourists to connect with their friends and family while physically away from them.

Drawing from the work of Giddens (1991), Desforges (2000) indicates that biographies, narratives, and story sharing are important for tourists because through sharing their experiences, tourists can probe experiences that (re)produce their sense of self. According to Giddens (1991), self-identity is not something that is just given as a result of the continuities of the individual action-system, but is something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. It is through narration that allows tourist to reflect on their travel experiences and form self-concept (Desforges, 2000). As tourists are expanding the space-time boundary through the use of ICT, the dynamics of ICT open a whole new set of experience for them. Hence, tourists' use of SNS and their self-presentation can generate an enjoyable tourism experience by stimulating the receiving of social support (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009). Indeed, this adds to the complexity of tourism experience, as it can occur in an infinite range of places and is not limited to one specific place or encounter (O'Dell, 2005).

Research Hypotheses

This research is aimed at examining the positive relationships among tourists' use of SNS, social support, and tourist experience. Further, this research also examines whether or not the relationship between SNS use and social support is moderated by self-presentation strategies. It is suggested that since users have the power to control the exchange of messages on SNS, SNS can facilitate social interactions and social support (Kim and Lee, 2011). Hence, SNS communication typically consists of interactions between users and their SNS friends (including

actions such as photo tagging), in which one friend directly identifies another. Wall posts and messages are strong predictors of and are associated with an increased social support as well as reduced loneliness (Burke et al, 2011; Kim et al., 2011). The present study focuses on two of these sub-constructs: received social support and perceived social support. Measures of received social support are designed to assess the specific supportive feedback that is provided to tourists by their SNS friends. And, measures of perceived social support assess tourists' general perception and belief towards their SNS friends. Hence, the following hypotheses are posited:

H1a: There is a positive relationship between tourists' SNS use and received social support

H1b: There is a positive relationship between tourists' SNS use and perceived social support

Vitak, Ellison and Steinfield (2011) found only partial support for the hypothesized relationship between SNS use and social support. They argued that an active SNS use is not enough for predicting social support, which contrasts previous studies showing a positive relationship between the two variables (Siibak, 2009; Valkenburg et al., 2006). One of the possible reasons for the failure to find consistent relationship between SNS use and social support may be the existing moderating factor. It is argued that a tourist's perceived social support does not always directly result from the intense self-presentation on SNS per se, but rather from one's self-presentation strategies. In other word, the tourist may choose some level of self-presentation strategies, which can be positive or honest self-presentation (Kim and Lee, 2011). Positive self-presentation may strengthen the relationship between tourists' SNS use and the social support. On the other hand, honest self-presentation may weaken the relationship between tourists' SNS use and social support. Therefore, the following hypotheses are posited:

H2a: Tourists' positive self-presentation strategies moderate the relationship between SNS use and received social support.

H2b: Tourists' honest self-presentation strategies moderate the relationship between SNS use and received social support

H3a: Tourists' positive self-presentation strategies moderate the relationship between SNS use and perceived social support

H3b: Tourists' honest self-presentation strategies moderate the relationship between SNS use and perceived social support.

Through various self-presentation activities, tourist may have a chance to reflect on their travels, share their own experience, and form their sense of self through social support. Traditionally, social support for tourist may be provided by another tourist within the same group tours through frequent face-to-face interactions (Huang et al., 2009) However, with ICT development and SNS use, tourists can seek social support not just from other tourists (i.e., weak ties), but also from friends and family (i.e., strong ties) back home. Further, Toma (2011) suggests that SNS users can emotionally benefit from self-affirmation through social support. That is, positive feedback and social support for their travel-related posting or photo sharing may generate an enjoyable tourism experience (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009). Hence, the following hypotheses are posited:

H4a: There is a positive relationship between received social support and tourism experience

H4b: There is a positive relationship between perceived social support and tourism experience

METHODOLOGY

Measurement Items

To test the hypotheses, measurement items were adapted from previous studies. The items measuring SNS use were originally developed by Ellison et al., (2007) to gauge user engagement in activities on *Facebook* based on the number of “friends,” the amount of time spent on the network on a typical day, and the level of agreement with several statements gauging users' emotional attachment to the site. Items measuring self-presentation were originally developed by Kim and Lee (2011). They categorized one's self-presentation into two groups: positive and honest self-presentation. For positive self-presentation, they tested six items to assess the extent to which participants selectively show positive aspects of themselves through *Facebook*. For honest self-presentation, they used four items to assess the extent to which participants honestly share their thoughts, feelings, and life events through *Facebook*. This study uses 12 measurement items that were modified for tourism context. Social support is conceptualized in two constructs: received social support (i.e, actual communication and feedback from SNS) and perceived social support. For received social support, directed communication scale originally developed by Burke et al., (2010) was used. The scale includes interactions between the focal user and another friend, which include text exchanges and non-text feedback. Due to the technical difficulty, this study used self-survey method by asking the extent to which users are getting various types of communication and feedback from their SNS friends. For perceived social support, items adapted from the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) scale developed by Kim and colleagues (2011) were reworded to specifically reflect the contexts of SNS use. Finally, items measuring tourism experience, which is defined as the evaluation of the overall travel in this study, were adapted from measurement items developed by Tussyadiah and Zach (in press) in their recent study on the impact of technology use on tourism experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey targeting young professionals in Korea who had travel experience within the past six months and are familiar with mobile and internet technology. The survey was conducted from December 18 to December 31, 2011 and from April 1 to April 10, 2012. At the first stage, respondents were recruited on a self-selection basis, whereby initial invitations to take part in the online survey were posted on the researcher's *Twitter* feed, blog and *Facebook* status updates. In order to increase the response rate, another invitation was posted on Korea Tourism Organization's *Facebook* status updates. The invitations included a shortened *bit.ly* URL pointing to the online survey. The URL received 252 responses, 217 of which were completed and used for further analysis.

In terms of demographics, 56.2% of the respondents were male and 43.8% were female. Most respondents were in their 30s (53.5%), followed by 20s (34.6%). About 82% of the

respondents hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Also, over 97% of respondents use the internet every day. These results reflect the typical characteristics of young professionals in Korea.

RESULTS

Reliability and Validity

First of all, the test of the factor structure of the study model included the examination of reliability for internal consistency. And Principal component analysis was adopted to proceed with construct validity. The overall internal consistent coefficients of the questionnaire ranged over 0.9, and each item's absolute value of factor loading had better be greater than 0.6 after an orthogonal rotation by using varimax method, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Results of Reliability and Validity Test

Factors	# of Items	Factor loadings	Eigenvalue	Explanatory Variance	Cronbach's α
SNS Use (KMO = 0.869; Bartlet's $\chi^2 = 1051.375$; $p=0.000$)	6	0.816 – 0.905	4.577	76.286	0.937
Positive Self-Presentation (KMO = 0.881; Bartlet's $\chi^2 = 1051.179$; $p=0.000$)	6	0.827-0.910	4.614	76.905	0.939
Honest Self-Presentation (KMO = 0.842; Bartlet's $\chi^2 = 860.256$; $p=0.000$)	6	0.680- 0.915	4.111	68.516	0.906
Social Support: Received (KMO = 0.923; Bartlet's $\chi^2 = 1228.397$; $p=0.000$)	6	0.898-0.922	4.960	82.665	0.958
Social Support: Perceived (KMO = 0.937; Bartlet's $\chi^2 = 1505.194$; $p=0.000$)	6	0.852-0.952	5.172	86.202	0.966
Tourist Experience(KMO = 0.761; Bartlet's $\chi^2 = 576.477$; $p=0.000$)	3	0.944-0.965	2.720	90.682	0.948
SNS Use (KMO = 0.869; Bartlet's $\chi^2 = 1051.375$; $p=0.000$)	6	0.816-0.905	4.577	76.286	0.937

Hypothesis Testing

To achieve the research goal, simple regression and hierarchical regression analyses were adopted utilizing SPSS. Hypothesis 1 predicted that a tourist who is strongly engaged in SNS use would be more likely to acquire social support. The results show that tourists' SNS use was significantly related to their received social support ($R^2=0.512$, $F=202.882$, $p<.001$) and perceived social support ($R^2=0.432$, $F=146.873$, $p<.001$). Thus, Hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported by

the data. This finding is consistent with some previous studies and lends credibility to the notion that tourists' SNS use does play an influential role in acquiring feedback and social support from their social network.

To test the moderating effects of positive and honest self-presentation on the linkages between SNS use and social support (Hypotheses 2 and 3), hierarchical multiple regression analyses were employed (Sheeran and Abraham, 2003). Significant main effects of the predictor and moderator on criterion variable also can be found, but these effects are not directly related to the testing of the moderation hypothesis (Baron and Kenny, 1986). To do so, the scales for positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation, and SNS use were centered at their means before computing the interactions and conducting the analyses (Aiken and West, 1991).

To test Hypotheses 2, the results of moderated regression analysis of both positive and honest self-presentation for received social support appear in Table 2. Step 3 on Table 2 indicates that the inclusion of the interaction between the moderator variable and SNS use was associated with a significant increment in the variance explained in received social support. It also shows that the interaction term of SNS use and both positive self-presentation ($\beta=.072$, $p<.01$) and honest self-presentation ($\beta=-.134$, $p<.01$) are significant. Significant positive coefficient reflects that the SNS Use – social support linkage becomes stronger as the positive self-presentation increases. On the other hand, the coefficient of the honest self-presentation and SNS use interaction effect was negative; indicating that as the honest self-presentation increases, the positive link between relationship SNS use and their received social support becomes weaker. Thus, Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported.

Table 2
Results of the moderating effects on SNS use and received social support

Variable	Positive Self Presentation (SP)			Honest Self-Presentation (SP)		
	Step1	Step2	Step3	Step1	Step2	Step3
SNS Use	0.644***	0.495***	0.531***	0.527***	0.516***	0.518***
SP		0.237***	0.031***		0.083	0.006
SNS* SP			0.072**			-0.134**
Δ	0.512***	0.553***	0.569*	0.512***	0.521	0.556***
F	202.881***	119.005***	89.913***	202.881***	104.230***	79.855***

Note: N=195. The coefficients are unstandardized β weights. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Hypotheses 3 also suggested that positive self-presentation and honest self-presentation would moderate the relationship between tourist SNS use and perceived social support. As shown in Table 3, the interaction term between SNS use and perceived social support was not significant. Apparently, neither positive self-presentation nor honest self-presentation showed interaction effects on tourists' perceived social support at $p \geq 0.10$. Thus, Hypotheses 3a and 3b were not supported.

Table 3
Results of the moderating effects on SNS use and perceived social support

Variable	Positive Self Presentation (SP)			Honest Self-Presentation (SP)		
	Step1	Step2	Step3	Step1	Step2	Step3
SNS Use	0.645***	0.456***	0.471***	0.645***	0.634***	0.636***
SP		0.301***	0.299***		-0.235**	-0.238**
SNS* SP			0.031			-0.087
Δ	0.432***	0.488***	0.490	0.432***	0.461**	0.471
F	146.873***	91.451***	61.222***	146.873***	82.176***	56.689***

Note: N=195. The coefficients are unstandardized β weights. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Finally, Hypotheses 4 predicted that a tourist who received social support would be more likely to have positive tourism experience. Results show that a tourist's SNS use was significantly related to both received ($R^2=0.549$, $F=234.706$, $p<.001$) and perceived social support ($R^2=0.640$, $F=343.855$, $p<.001$). That is, the higher social support through SNS has a positive effect on tourist's experience. Therefore, Hypotheses 4 were strongly supported.

In summary, the results show that there are positive relationships among tourists' use of SNS, social support, and tourism experience. The more tourists are engaged in social activities through SNS while traveling, the more social support they will get, which will contribute positively to their tourism experience. Considering the lack of research in this particular area, results such as these articulate more clearly the importance of SNS use for tourism experience. It is suggested in this study that tourists' interactions with their existing and supportive social network have a positive impact on their tourism experience. ICT has the capacity to allow tourists to maintain their everyday life whilst travelling (Bergami, 2008). As a result, their real-time travel-related posting or photo sharing and its consequential social support may generate a more enjoyable tourism experience.

CONCLUSIONS

This study tested the hypothesized relationships between tourists' use of SNS, social support and tourism experience and the moderating effects of self-presentation strategies on the relationships between SNS use and social support. The results contribute to the better understanding of the importance of SNS use for tourists to seek support from their social network while traveling. The study also clarifies the importance of SNS use for tourism experience, in that the more engaged tourists are in social interaction facilitated with SNS while traveling, the more likely they are to have a positive tourism experience.

Furthermore, as shown in this study, social support does not always directly result from the intense SNS use, but rather moderated by tourists' self-presentation strategies. Specifically, positive and honest self-presentation moderate the relationship between SNS use and received

social support in the opposite ways. Tourists' positive self-presentation reflects the use of SNS as a channel to highlight the positive aspects of their travel and these positive aspects generate stronger attention and feedback from their SNS friends. On the other hand, tourists' honest self-presentation weakens the relationship between SNS use and the visible social support. This may be explained by the tourists' different purposes of SNS use. Some tourists may use SNS to connect to their friends and maintain social relationships with them, while others may use it as a venue to relive their travel memories, hence perceive the need to present them as is on SNS.

However, it was identified that self-presentation strategies do not moderate tourists' perceived social support. Consistent with the findings from previous studies, tourists' received social support through SNS are often not exactly the same as what they believed it would be (Bambina, 2007; Eastin and LaRose, 2005). Since this study examined both the 'weak ties' and 'strong ties' of social support, the findings are, therefore, not conclusive to present the precise role of either of those ties. Future research is needed to investigate more about these discrepancies between received and perceived social support.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the different self-presentation strategies on SNS affect tourism experience. Today's postmodern tourists can use SNS and manage the information about him/herself by presenting a profile, posting, and displaying connections with others. Through various self-presentation activities, tourist may have a chance to reflect on their travels, share their own experience, and form their sense of self through social support from others. Thus, it should be of a great utility to a multitude of tourism providers to facilitate tourists' self presentation that may enhance their overall tourism experience.

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