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Social Media in Tourism Research: A Literature Review

Item Type	event;event
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Download date	2026-03-13 16:54:18
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49597

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Abstract

As “always-on” Internet use becomes very common and the popularity of social media has been growing over time, such huge and pervasive trend has significantly impacted the tourism industry. Therefore, the current study attempts to (1) identify what research subjects in social media have been examined, (2) assess what theories, research designs, and methods were employed by previous social media research in tourism, and (3) find significant new trends and directions for future tourism research. This study reviews and analyzes tourism research published in top tourism journals for the period of 2011 – 2014. Based on a content analysis, this article provides summaries of research topics, theories, and methods of study design and data analysis. Review findings and significant research trends in tourism are identified and discussed. The study concludes with general directions for future tourism research.

Key Words: social media, literature review, tourism research

Introduction

As “always-on” Internet use becomes very common and the popularity of social media (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) has been growing over time, firms view social media as an important communication tool for their marketing and strategic decisions in order to enhance customers’ engagement (Hoffman and Novak 2012). Such information technology (IT) progress also increases individuals’ online social networking and information sharing behaviors (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). While this huge and pervasive trend has attracted both practitioners’ and researchers’ attention, there has been surprisingly little scholarly effort devoted to integrating the

significant roles and effects of social media in the tourism literature. Only one study assessed the literature on social media applications in tourism and hospitality (Leung et al. 2013). They conducted a content analysis with extant articles published in academic journals in hospitality and tourism. However, their research findings seem to offer a relatively limited understanding of the role of social media in tourism research because only 8 articles published in top tourism journals were reviewed among 25 tourism articles. Therefore, this study aims to review and synthesize articles related to social media recently published in top tourism journals through content analysis. More specifically, the current study attempts to (1) identify what research topics have been examined, (2) assess what theories, research designs, and methods were employed by previous social media research in tourism, and (3) find significant new trends and directions for future tourism research.

Methodology

In October 2014, all full-length articles related to social media in tourism were identified and gathered from ABI/INFORM Complete, Web of Science, Hospitality & Tourism Complete Database, and Google Scholar. To achieve the goal of providing a comprehensive overview of social media research in tourism literature, the keywords of *social media*, *Web2.0*, *social networking sites*, *user generated contents (UGC)*, *travel*, and *tourism* were used to search for social media-related articles published from 2011 to 2014 in five tourism journals including *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Current Issues in Tourism*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Tourism Management*. Through a thorough review process, we finally included a total of 31 published studies¹. The selected articles were then analyzed using content analysis. Prior to the analysis, we developed a framework with consumer/traveler

¹ Due to space limitation, a complete list of the 31 articles is not provided in this study, but it is available from the authors upon request.

perspective, supplier perspective, and research perspectives based on previous review work (Leung et al. 2013; Oh, Kim, and Shin 2004). Details are shown in Table 1.

Review Findings and Social Media Research Trends in Tourism

A total of 31 social media-related articles were reviewed and classified into three research subjects for each journal and appear in Table 1. We found that more than a half of social media articles (54.8%) were published in *Tourism Management* while about 30% of articles were published in *Journal of Travel Research*. While Leung et al. (2013) reported that a majority of social media studies in hospitality and tourism were written from the suppliers' perspectives, this study reveals that most recent articles which were published in top tourism journals more focused on consumers' or travelers' perspectives (74.2%) rather than suppliers' perspectives (22.6%). Perhaps this finding indicates that current tourism researchers consider the consumer or traveler perspective more relevant for social media-related studies compared with hospitality researchers. This finding also indicates that there is ample room for further research effort in suppliers' social media use and practices. More specifically, a majority of social media articles (74.2%) dealt with consumer/traveler behavior, showing enormous growth of research on consumer/traveler behavior in the tourism literature when compared to 36.5% reported by Leung et al. (2013). Studies in this category mainly examined offline/online travel behavior and social media use, attitude and behavioral intentions, commitment/loyalty/engagement, and information search and adoption. A fifth of the reviewed studies were devoted to studying supplier's perspectives related to promotion and product distribution. Only one article presented how researchers can collect and analyze social media data for tourism. This was the last category, indicating that there is enough room for tourism researchers to pursue fundamental issues of theories, philosophies, and research methods related to social media in tourism.

In terms of theoretical review, social media-relevant studies in tourism did not put much effort into building upon any theories to explain or predict phenomena in social media. As shown in Table 2, the most frequently used theory is technology acceptance model (TAM) or TAM-relevant theories. Commitment theories and motivation theories which were often used by past tourism studies were also highly used in this research context. Interestingly, sociology-based theories such as social identity theory and social cognitive theory were recently used to explain or interpret phenomena that are very complex and socially or technically intertwined.

Methodologically, Table 3 shows that 58% of the selected studies are empirical while 42% of articles are qualitative or conceptual. These proportions appear fairly balanced in terms of research method and indicate that tourism researchers devoted more endeavors to qualitative or conceptual work than other fields, which seems ideal in terms of research paradigm as suggested in many other disciplines (Davis et al. 2013). The most frequently used study design was primary field survey, which was followed by secondary data and case study. Experiment, interviews, and grounded theory approach were less frequently employed. Furthermore, tourism researchers in social media most frequently used structural equation modeling or path analyses and content analysis. Regression analysis and methods of analysis of (co) variance were somewhat applied for this research context. Most recently, researchers began to use netnography (virtual ethnography) to understand socially-networked phenomena in tourism, which was not employed yet or infrequently used for social media research in other disciplines. This indicates that tourism is methodologically and epistemologically advanced in this research stream.

Conclusions and General Directions for Future Research

This study reviewed 31 social media-relevant research articles published in top tourism journals between 2011 and 2015 as part of an effort to summarize previous studies and identify important topical, theoretical, and methodological trends in social media research. Several major research topics and theories and methods employed in selected articles were thoroughly discussed. In addition, we presented how each tourism journal was inclined to publish social media research in tourism. While this study adapted and modified the existing review framework and processes that previous review studies (Leung et al. 2013; Oh, Kim, and Shin 2004) used, significant and interesting new trends are found and general directions for future research are discussed as follows:

- (1) *Consumers- or travelers-centric research*: Recent articles published in top tourism journals tend to examine more consumers- or travelers-centric issues. This finding indicates that there is still ample room for research about suppliers' perspective such as in communication, management, and market research.
- (2) *Lack of theory development*: The reviewed articles generally did not make a considerable effort to develop new theories or even apply relevant theories to explain focal phenomena in social media. In addition, several studies tended to be driven by data or methods or merely tried to connect constructs that were well established in other disciplines. Therefore, future studies need to put more effort in theory development or introducing new theories from other disciplines in order to build substantive knowledge accumulation in tourism.

- (3) *Beyond information search*: While past studies emphasized the important role of social media in information search in hospitality and tourism (Xiang and Gretzel 2010), recent studies seek out more diverse issues such as virtual destination behaviors, various social media uses, and eDestination marketing. Future studies can identify other considerable roles of social media in tourism or build a conceptual map integrating different research streams (Kim, Wang, and Mattila 2010).
- (4) *Fairly balanced quantitative and qualitative methods*: Social media research in tourism surprisingly presented that more than 40% of articles used qualitative methods, which are often used for knowledge generation. However, there has been no attempt to apply mixed paradigm or mixed methods; therefore, future studies can employ mixed approaches.
- (5) *Photography and more*: More than ten articles examined the direct or indirect effects of photography posted in social media. This trend seems to align with the recent movement of search paradigm from keywords-based search to image search (e.g., Facebook image search). Future research can examine the role of other UGCs such as video clips, virtual destination images, virtual tours, or sensory images.

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Table 1. Tourism Research on Social Media by subject²

Subject	AOT (N = 3)		CIT (N = 2)		JTR (N = 9)		TM (N=17)		Total (N=31)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	<i>Consumer/Traveler Behavior (Consumers' perspective)</i>									
Travel Behaviors / Virtual Destination Behavior / Social Media Use	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	35.3	6	19.4
Destination Image	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.9	1	3.2
Attitude / Behavioral Intentions	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	22.0	3	17.6	5	16.1
Membership / Commitment / Loyalty / Engagement	2	66.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	17.6	5	16.1
Motivations	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.9	1	3.2
Satisfaction	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.9	1	3.2
Information Search and Adoption	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	34.0	1	5.9	4	12.9
<i>Tourism Operations and Management (Suppliers' Perspective)</i>										
Promotion	0	0.0	1	50.0	2	22.0	1	5.9	4	12.9
Product Distribution	1	33.3	0	0.0	2	22.0	0	0.0	3	9.7
Communication	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Management	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Research	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>Tourism Research</i>										
Research Methodology	0	0.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	3.2

Note. AOT = Annals of Tourism; CIT = Current Issues in Tourism; JTR = Journal of Travel Research; TM = Tourism Management

Table 2. Tourism Research on Social Media by theory applied

Perspectives	Theory
Consumer/Traveler Perspective	Technology acceptance model (TAM) / Information adoption model / Technology adoption theory (12.9%); Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory / Protection motivation theory (6.4%); Organizational commitment theory / Commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (6.4%); Attitudinal model (3.2%); Expectation confirmation theory (3.2%); Theory of medial gaze (3.2%); Social cognitive theory (3.2%); Social identity theory (3.2%); Moral affordance (3.2%); No specific theories (35.4%)
Supplier Perspective	Convergence and culture paradigm (3.2%); Stakeholder network theory (3.2%); No specific theories (19.3%)
Research Perspective	No specific theories (3.2%)

² We could not find any articles directly related to the topic of social media from *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. Thus, this journal was excluded in data analysis.

Table 3. Tourism Research on Social Media by method employed

Method	Details (multiple counts of the same study allowed)
Type of study	Quantitative (58.0%); Qualitative (35.5%); Conceptual (6.5%)
Study design	Primary field survey (37.5%); Secondary data (25.0%); Experiment (6.3%); Case study (15.6%); Interviews (6.3%); Grounded theory approach (6.3%); Other (3.1%)
Main analysis methods	Descriptive (6.9%); Regression (13.8%); Analysis of (co)variance (ANOVA, ANCOVA, MANOVA) (10.3%); Structural equation modeling / Path (27.6%); Time series (6.9%); Content Analysis (24.1%); Data mining (3.4%); Ethnography / Netnography (Virtual ethnography) (6.9%)