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## Keep Exploring, Sharing, and Tweeting: Connecting Millennials, Social Media and Destination Canada's Brand

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## **Keep Exploring, Sharing, and Tweeting: Connecting Millennials, Social Media and Canada's Brand**

### **Introduction**

More than ever, social media is relied upon to sway customer purchase intentions, build brand equity, and to study consumers (Coursaris, van Osch, & Balogh, 2016). Not surprisingly, travel industry marketers are devoting greater portions of their marketing budgets towards harnessing the power of social media and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as a tool to influence consumer preferences. To accomplish this goal, marketers need to understand how people differ in their propensity and motivation to read and spread eWOM through social media. Individuals exhibit distinct reading, listening, and viewing patterns and vary in their desire to evaluate and recirculate corporate content created by industry. Moreover, a crucial and growing population of social media users adopt the role of DIY information creators, editors, and distributors of travel-related content (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Given the importance of social media, the goal of this research is to profile young travellers within the context of better understanding their social media behaviour. This will be done by examining patterns of travel behaviour and social media use through three connected lenses: (a) age/generational differences, with a focus on millennial travellers (age 18 to 24), (b) Explorer Quotient (EQ) profiles, reflecting travel experiential needs and desires, and (c) geography, examining domestic versus international travellers.

### **Literature Review**

The rise of e-commerce, digital and social media, and widespread use of technology and smartphones have fundamentally altered how consumers make decisions along the path to purchase. As new technologies emerge and consumers become more accepting of new forms of digital interaction, companies are presented with new opportunities to develop value creation and brand positioning strategy (Padgett & Mulvey, 2007). In terms of usage and rate of growth, young travelers are consistently ranked as the largest and highest growth group of social media users (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013). Since the relationship between social media usage and brand performance has been well documented (Razak & Latip, 2015), the comparison of these younger generation travelers to social media usage is of the greatest importance to destination marketers. Destination travel purchase decisions are often accompanied by feelings of anxiety or uncertainty because the quality of the experience cannot be judged until it is experienced. For this reason, travellers place considerable trust in the recommendations of others to inform their decisions. Given modern consumers' tendency to examine online sources for privately consumed goods or services that contain low trialability (You, Vadakkepatt, & Joshi, 2015), it is likely that millennial travellers will turn to third-party sources to enhance credibility of claims made by travel companies. Following You et al. (2015), the effectiveness of social media should also be examined for its capability to generate sales in a highly elastic environment. For instance, decisions made by young travellers may be influenced to a greater degree by eWOM than among older cohorts. This exploratory question is thus included here. Finally, past research has not clearly assessed the extent of similarity and differences among young travellers from different nations with respect to their tendency to use social media in the travel context. Such insights will help align strategies with media investments, and will inform the development of communication strategies that adopt the optimal positioning along the global-to-local continuum (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999).

## **Methodology**

Latent Class Analysis (LCA) is used to identify unobserved subgroups within the population whose usage of social media varies by traveler profile (combination of age, EQ, and geography). All markets are heterogeneous, and it is obvious that no brand holds universal appeal, that a purchase can be made for diverse reasons, and that individuals vary in their willingness-to-pay higher prices (Wind & Bell, 2007). Desarbo, Jedidi, and Sinha (2001) warn that approaches that fail to account for buyer heterogeneity (observed or unknown/latent) can produce biased estimates leading to incorrect or misleading conclusions. Fortunately, latent class models (also called finite mixture models) provide a powerful tool to estimate the composition and profile of market segments defined by how consumers respond to market stimuli. In this research, we aim to assess the impact of age, EQ profile, and geographic location on behaviorally-based indicators of social media usage using Destination Canada's robust Global Tourism Watch (GTW) database from 2014 to 2015 (CTC, 2017). Specifically, this research examines 2,986 participants' responses from 12 countries which have the greatest influence on travel to Canada: Brazil, France, India, Japan, Mexico, US, Australia, China, Germany, South Korea, UK, as well as within-country travel from Canadians themselves. Particular behaviors relating to this study's research question, including destination consideration and awareness, destination perceptions (as linked through the EQ profiles), past and future travel behaviors and intentions, and finally information sources are explored in depth to develop the unobserved subgroups as detailed in the results.

## **Results**

From this research, the main result indicates a much deeper understanding of the travel influences among the 18-24 millennial demographic. Specifically, where they are posting, why, and what impact posts have on travel behaviour is explained in great detail. For instance, results support accepted views that younger travellers are more likely to use social media during and after travel, while older cohorts rely more on email and simply talking about their trip. Regarding variability within the millennial cohort, the extent of sharing varies greatly by nation. Young travellers from India use more than twice the number of approaches to share than their Japanese counterparts, and curiously, in Canada, France and the USA the 18 to 24 year-old cohort share most, while in Japan, Mexico and India it is the 25 to 34 year-old cohort, suggesting the importance of culture. Finally, the EQ profiles give an incredibly detailed look at the various groups who travel within Canada's borders. By adapting, for example, the "Free Spirit" profile to include a more holistic lens of social media engagement, we can expect to see an enhancement of this profile EQ type and a more meaningful interpretation for Destination Canada to design future marketing strategies. This information will be invaluable to destination brands who crave insights into the unsolicited behaviours of those choosing to travel within their borders. Advertising campaigns, when effective, lead to relatively obvious increases in travel revenues. By understanding what motivates these millennial travelers, destinations can create an environment where their actions are better anticipated and encouraged.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The contribution of this original research is an empirically-informed view of how cohorts of travellers share their experiences via social media. Such insight is essential to develop strategy that targets consumers according to their disposition to maximize the effectiveness of marketing

programs, for example, informing the customization of social media campaigns by geographic market (a localization strategy) versus the adoption of a common strategy across markets (a global or pan-regional strategy).

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