Social Media Use and Impact during the Holiday Travel Planning Process

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Abstract

Through an empirical study among holiday travellers, residing in the Former Soviet Union Republics, this paper presents a comprehensive view of role and impact of social media on the whole holiday travel planning process: Before, during and after the trip, providing insights on usage levels, scope of use, level of influence and trust. Findings suggest that social media are predominantly used after holidays for experience sharing. It is also shown that there is a strong correlation between perceived level of influence from social media and changes made in holiday plans prior to final decisions. Moreover, it is revealed that user-generated content is perceived as more trustworthy when compared to official tourism websites, travel agents and mass media advertising.

Keywords: Social media; travel planning process; holidays

1 Introduction

As early as in 2006 it was argued that social media started replacing traditional sources of information (Jepsen, 2006). Later, it has been supported that social media might influence the buying behaviour process; at least as described in Inputs-Processing-Response models (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Moreover, De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga (2009) suggested that virtual communities are becoming important networks of consumer knowledge that influence consumer behaviour. Today, social media enjoy a phenomenal rise in their popularity among internet users: Facebook claims that its active users reached more than 750 million worldwide, spending more than 700 billion minutes per month (Facebook, 2011); Twitter hosts 175 million users who on an average week post one billion tweets (Twitter, 2011); YouTube users view daily over 3 billion videos (YouTube, 2011); and it is estimated that there are over 170 million blogs worldwide (BlogPulse, 2011).

In tourism, consumers’ behaviour has always been influenced by developments in Information Communication Technologies (Buhalis, 1998; Poon, 1993), and especially it is Web 2.0 that dramatically changed how consumers plan and consume travel related products (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Gretzel, Kang, & Lee (2008) predicted that social media impacts in travel will be tremendous. In 2008 it was found that 82\% of US online consumers have checked online reviews, blogs and other online feedback for their travel related purchasing decisions (eMarketer, 2008). Today, TripAdvisor, perhaps the leader among travel related consumer review websites (a
subset type of social media), serves more than 50 million users per month who seek advice about their travel plans and hosts more than 50 million travel reviews and opinions (TripAdvisor, 2011). Moreover, it is argued that social media “are taking an important role in travellers’ information search and decision-making behaviours” (Yoo, Gretzel, & Zach 2011, p. 526).

To further describe the impact of social media in holiday travel, this study attempts to measure social media usage levels and scope during the whole travel planning process (pre, during and post-trip). Furthermore it attempts to measure perceived level of social media influence on destination and accommodation choice, as well as perceived level of trust to social media content in relation to other sources of travel related information.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.61) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Although there are a number of approaches in terms of social media taxonomies (Constantinides, 2009; Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009) Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) proposed a taxonomy scheme that classifies social media types according to their (a) level of social presence / media richness, and (b) level of self presentation / self disclosure, identifying six types of social media: social networking websites (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn), blogs, content communities (i.e. YouTube, Flickr, Scribd, Slideshare, Delicious), collaborative projects (i.e. Wikipedia, Wikitravel), virtual social worlds (i.e. Second Life), and virtual game worlds (i.e. World of Warcraft). Still however, such a taxonomy neglects other types of social media such as microblogs (i.e. Twitter), consumer review & rating websites (i.e. TripAdvisor, Epinions) and internet fora (i.e. ThornTree, Fodor’s Travel Talk).

2.2 Social Media in Travel

Holiday travel related purchases are considered complex due to the composite and experiential nature of the holiday travel product, involve high risks and as a result require extensive information search (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Within such information search processes, consumers rely on other travellers’ experiences as a mean to increase the exchange utility and decrease uncertainty (Kotler, Bowen, & Maken, 2010; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Yoo, Lee, & Gretzel, 2007). Just after the creation of the first virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993) it became apparent that their online content was perceived similar to recommendations provided by friends, family and “like-minded souls” (Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). During the Web 2.0 era social media applications “exploded” in popularity, usage levels providing a plethora of characteristics enabling self expression and sharing of content. Ad-ology supports that 23% of US Internet users were “somewhat” or “significantly influenced” by social media for their travel / holiday related decisions (eMarketer, 2010). Social media are therefore becoming increasingly important in travel planning, primarily for their function as vital