

Social Media peer interaction and its impact on Travel Planning

Social networks

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.

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, Scrib, 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).

Social media in Travel

In travel and tourism context, social media has changed the way travellers search information and subsequent decision. It provides travellers with the tools to both produce and distribute information. Furthermore, it has become a vital component of tourism where it enables the sharing of visitor experiences. Meanwhile, social media offers businesses a great chance to use social networking and invest in social media marketing as an effective way to gain customers.

Making a decision to select destination and other related travel plans is complex in travel and tourism due to the need to extensive information search. This information includes other travellers' experiences, recommendations of others, ad reviews offered in virtual travel communities. Getting this information maximizes travellers' decision confidence and reduces risk of their selections. The main point agreed by researchers is that tourists produce information, circulate, ad share among themselves and this creates a kind of reliability of this information. Travellers use social media before travel as a source of ideas on travel, excursions, and accommodation selection . Social media is used during trips to find out information about attractions, and leisure activities, and to stay connected with friends and sharing experiences. Post-travel, travellers use social media to share reviews, experiences, and photos of their trips. Keeping travellers updated with tourist sites information, possibility of exchanging information about these sites, saving time in searching information, and searching for better prices are other benefits of using social media by travellers. Social media can also be used by customers help other even if to prevent others from using bad products. It is cited that social media supports user interaction, collaboration, and participation. Additionally, social media plays an important role in destination selection due to its interactivity, high quality visualization, and fast messaging and searching. Furthermore, the benefits of social network sites have been divided into three main categories: functional, social, and hedonic. Functional benefits imply the exchange of information, and social communications. Social benefits refer to communication, building relationships, and exchanging information with other members online. Hedonic benefits reflect the usage of social media for organizing and taking vacations. The

above-mentioned three types of benefits have been combined in what is called 'relational benefits'. Relational benefits are benefits that customers receive as a result of long-term relationship with a service provider. On the other hand, social media has become important in today's marketing for business. Businesses use social media to connect with the audiences instantaneously, advertising and selling products, creating and promoting brand awareness, promoting special offers, and reaching their target markets. The benefits of social media for business may include building customer relationships and loyalty, promoting brand awareness, learning from customers' opinions, and asking for ideas about products, services, and promotions that help businesses to innovate their products and services, in addition that social media helps businesses to lower feedback costs and creating ongoing dialogue with customer. Furthermore, using social media helps businesses to adopt cost effective, efficient, and active marketing practices. Posting experiences, comments, and reviews of customers via social media helps businesses to learn about their weakness, and consider customers' feedback. In addition, successful social media campaigns increase revenues and customer loyalty particularly via using social media by companies to reward customers with special deals. Social media helps to shape the reputation of enterprises and has an impact on the decision of booking a journey. Improving sales and growing business partnerships are other benefits that social media marketers agree. Perceived benefits are main antecedent of social media adoption in travel and tourism.

Phenomenon of peer interaction affecting Travel Planning

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 information sources providing access to other travellers' experiences (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Yoo et al., 2011). At the same time, apart from their function as information sources, social media enable storytelling, a usual post-travel activity, on a '24/7' basis to

large audiences, and also provide a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, & O'Leary, 2006). A number of studies focus on the impact and role of social media in travel related decisions: Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy (2007) found that online reviews posted in a travel related consumer review and rating website increase travellers' confidence during decision making, reduce risk, assist them in selecting accommodation and therefore facilitate decision making. Moreover, it was found that travellers read accommodation reviews throughout the various stages of the travel planning process: Before travel as a source of ideas, as a mean to narrow down choices, and post accommodation choice in order to confirm the choice made; during the trip; after the trip to compare and share experiences; but also as an ongoing process even if there is no trip ahead. Mack, Blose, & Pan (2008) studied the influence and credibility of travel blogs and found that traditional WOM is more trustworthy than blog posts, suggesting that WOM generated from sources with which travellers have strong social ties is more trustworthy than WOM from strangers. However, they found that those who post in blogs perceive the authoritativeness of blogs as similar to that of traditional WOM, leaving space for future improvement of blogs' credibility as the number of those who post to blogs increases over time (Technorati, 2010). Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier (2009) found that user generated content is perceived as more credible when posted to official tourism bureau sites rather than in review sites, travel blogs social networking sites and content communities. Vermeulen & Seegers (2009) studied consumer reviews' impacts on choice of accommodation and found that the consideration of a hotel is enhanced by exposure to both negative and positive consumer reviews. In their attempt to reveal the role of social media throughout the travel planning process, Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens (2009) found that social media are mostly used before the trip, while during and after the trip their use was very limited. More specifically, social media were primarily used after the holiday destination choice rather than during the evaluation of destination choices. Moreover, social media were perceived as less trustworthy than traditional sources of information (i.e. official tourism websites and travel agents). It may be argued however, that such a result may be attributed to the fact that the study's sample was derived from a mailing list of an official tourism website and therefore there may be a positive predisposition towards official sources of information. White (2010) suggests that travel related photos in Facebook generate interest to viewers and can very easily become part of the viewer's travel plans. Contrary to findings of Mack et al. (2008), and Yoo et al. (2009), Del Chiappa (2011) supports that trustworthiness of tourism related blogs is second only to consumers' reviews and ratings found in online travel agents' websites. In parallel with the argument made by Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas (2011), the above discussion also suggests that the majority of existing studies attempt to describe the role of social media either focusing on specific

types of social media and specific communities, or at a specific stage of the travel planning process, evidencing that there is no adequate academic research on the role and impact of social media as a whole throughout the holiday travel planning process.

The studies show that social media are used during all stages of the holiday planning process (before, during and after holidays) however, to a different extent and for a different purpose. In contrast to the findings of Cox et al. (2009) who found that social media are predominantly used during the information search stage of the travel planning process. Further, it is demonstrated that social media predominantly during the post-trip stage for sharing experiences and photos with friends and/or other travellers. It may be argued that such a finding is associated primarily with Russian's high level of engagement with social networking websites (comScore, 2010), although residents of the other F.S.U. Republics do not seem to differentiate. The second most popular use of social media was observed during holidays: as means to enable travellers to stay connected with friends. Both the first and the second most popular uses of social media observed in this study may be attributed to the very low individualist / very high collectivist nature of the Russian culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

Moreover, the study reveals a strong correlation between social media level of influence on destination and accommodation choice, and the changes made in holiday plans before final decisions were taken. More specifically, as the perceived level of influence from social media on destination choice increases, the more likely is that there were changes to holiday plans in terms of destination selection. Similarly, as perceived influence from social media on accommodation choice increases the more likely is that there were changes in the holiday plans in terms of accommodation selection.

Also, it has been observed that perceived level of trust among seven holiday related information sources: Official tourism websites, publicity and advertorials in mass media (i.e. TV or radio shows and documentaries, newspapers and magazines' articles), advertisements in mass media, travel agents, social media, friends and relatives, and information from other travellers in various websites. Among those, friends and relatives were rated as the most trustworthy source, followed by information from other travellers in various websites.

Research Questions

- What channels people use when looking for travel inspiration and information online?
- How reliable people think peer generated content is?
- Do people seek inspiration for travelling from social media sites such as Facebook?
- What kind of content is important in their travel planning?

- Does social media have influence on destination choice/travel planning?
- What are the key elements pertain to travel is being influenced by social media?
- Why people generally post on social media during travel?
- What are the key elements of the post on social media during the travel?
- What motivates people to post related to travel after travel?
- What are the key elements of the travel related post on social media after the travel?