

DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ACROSS TOURIST LIFECYCLE PHASES - AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF TOURIST MOTIVES

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Abstract

Social media has now emerged as an essential tool for tourists looking to not just plan their next vacation but also to use it during their vacation and beyond. This paper has brought to the fore, the motives behind the use of social media as a tool by tourists during the three phases of the tourist lifecycle; Pre-trip, In-Trip and Post-trip. From the primary data collected from domestic and international tourists, the motives that influenced their use of social media across the lifecycle phases have been identified using factor analysis and the relative importance of these factors have been analysed. Knowledge and understanding of these factors will enable destination marketing organizations and other tourism providers to utilize social media as a marketing tool to influence the tourists' travel planning.

Keywords: *Tourist Lifecycle, Social Media, Travel Planning, Tourist Decision Making*

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has been influenced by socio-technological changes such as the emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web (Buhalis and O'Connor, 2005; Beritelli Bieger and Laesser, 2007; Buhalis and Law, 2008; Law, Leung and Buhalis, 2009). The prominence of social media has become a game changer and has transformed the way in which people interact with others and influence the choice of others. Kaplan and Haenle in (2010) describe social media as a group of Internet-based applications that are built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC). Social media has allowed its users to communicate and also discover like-minded individuals and form communities based on mutual interests. This unique ability of social media has allowed it to garner multitudes of users who increasingly use it for connecting with others.

As cited by several industry reports, today's tourists are relying more than ever on online word of mouth. The tourism and hospitality industry is leveraging social media to promote its services and to engage travellers in a variety of ways. As social media continues its meteoric rise in its

reach and influence, tourism providers cannot depend on traditional media (print, radio, TV and so on) alone to craft consumer perception of their product.

Tourists utilize the diverse social media plat forms as tools to educate themselves about destinations and influence other travellers. Tourists' use of social media encompasses the entire journey, from pre-trip through in-trip to post-trip. Tourism marketers would be able to create strategies around social media if they better understood the motives behind social media use during each of the phases in the tourist lifecycle.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This article investigates the motives behind the use of social media by tourists in the three phases of the travellers' travel planning process (pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip) suggested by Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (1990). Dasgupta (2011) has classified the 'tourist lifecycle' into three phases; pre-trip, trip and post-trip.

Social media has drastically changed the way individuals plan and consume travel (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Hudson

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and Thal, 2013). Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008) suggested that potential tourists can rely on others' experiences for their decision-making, due to the experiential nature of tourism products. Social media tools are used throughout the travel planning process and after holidays for sharing experiences. Influence from social media, particularly in reputational areas, will strongly affect final decisions in holiday plans (Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2011). As tourism-related products and services are high-priced, high involvement, and well-differentiated in nature, travellers generally collect and review various forms of travel information early in the travel decision-making process in order to minimize the risk of making wrong decisions (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002).

With the rising popularity of websites that contain content that is generated by travellers, a number of scholars coined the paramount importance of social media in the research phase of the travel planning process (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, and Buultjens, 2009; Yoo and Gretzel, 2010; Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung and Law, 2011; Tussyadiah, Park and Fesenmaier, 2011). Huang, Baseu, and Hsu (2010) opined that obtaining travel information appeared to be the primary motivation driving the travellers' use of UGC and social media. During the planning stage "Looking at other consumers'" comments/materials on online travel review sites' was the most frequently used source of information (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008).

UGC, or so called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), is a new form of WOM that serves similar informational needs by offering non-commercial, detailed, and experiential information (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). It is therefore becoming a vital information source to potential tourists (Chung and Buhalis, 2008) and is seen as more trustworthy than information provided by the destination or tourism service provider; this can subsequently be considered as substitute for word of mouth (Yoo and Gretzel, 2009; Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2011). Yoo and Gretzel (2011) suggested that eWOM could provide information with an access beyond the boundaries of one's immediate social circle. Through searching the content on social media, consumers can not only collect travel information from friends and relatives who are within their social network, but also acquire more extensive information from Internet users around the world.

Thevenot (2007) added that the travel experiences and perspectives of previous consumers could be shared with others through many different formats including text, image, audio, and video. Given that the information available on social media consist of the collaborative knowledge of people from around the world in various formats, Schmallegger and Carson (2008), as well as Yoo and Gretzel (2011), noted that social media are more effective in equipping travellers with more comprehensive knowledge on a tourism product

or destination than other information sources. Consumers' proposition to use social media or UGC on social media is still determined by several characteristics of UGC and several socio-demographic characteristics of the consumers. Burgess, Sellitto, Cox and Buultjens (2009) suggested that UGC is trustworthy since they are the real experience revealed by real people.

UGC on social media is capable of providing unprecedentedly up-to-date and diversified formats of information to travel consumers. Cox, Burgess, Sellitto and Buultjens (2009) found that UGC on social media was mainly used at the information search stage of travel planning. Studies have suggested that during the trip, travellers engaged in more non-travel related pursuits on social media such as staying in contact with friends and to a lesser extent to obtain information related to their holiday (Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2011). Social media sites are no longer static but have become collaborative and interactive. All users can actively participate in the generation or enrichment of content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Likewise, travellers today can actively engage in consuming, producing, and diffusing travel information through the Internet (Pantelidis, 2010; Sparks and Browning, 2011). Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2011) revealed that social media are predominantly used after holidays for experience sharing. As the last stage of the travel planning process, some scholars investigated the motives of travellers in the post-purchase evaluation and the creation of UGC on social media. Previous research has found a number of reasons for posting travel-related UGC on social media. Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts (2007) found that sharing life experience and social interaction are two major factors motivating bloggers to generate UGC. The intention of consumers to participate in online community has positive effects on their intentions to use the firm products/services and their intentions to recommend the host firm to others (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalú, 2010). Social media is important for consumers to not only acquire information but also for generating their own content to communicate with others (Drews and Schemer, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted among the international and domestic inbound tourists at the international and domestic departure lounges of the international airport at Kochi, Kerala. For data collection, 600 respondents which included both domestic as well as international tourists were surveyed and complete responses were obtained from 412 respondents who fulfilled the inclusion criteria. The respondents were identified through a method of convenience sampling. Tourists were approached and given a questionnaire for self-completion upon obtaining consent. Randomization was incorporated into the times of the day and days of the

week to avoid bias in data collection. The sample inclusion criteria such as tourists who are non-residents of the state of Kerala and those who use social media tools in their travel planning were applied. A structured questionnaire was developed after an extensive review of the relevant literature. The data collection instrument had two sections. The first part of the questionnaire was designed to collect data pertaining to the demographic and travel characteristics of the respondents. The second part of the questionnaire was designed to understand the influence of social media during the three phases of the tourist lifecycle and had variables on which the respondent had to respond on a 5-point Likert scale with '5' indicating strong agreement, '1' indicating strong disagreement and '3' indicating neutrality. A 3-point scale would have given inadequate options, while a 7-point scale would have demanded a high level of sensitivity and discrimination. Hence a 5-point scale was sufficient and meaningful enough for this situation. The variables were identified from the literature review and expert opinion from tourism academics and professionals. Tables I and II describe the summarized demographic and travel characteristics of the respondents respectively.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Gender	Male	34.5
	Female	65.5
Age Group	20 – 30	54.4
	31 – 40	13.3
	41-50	17
	51+	15.3
Occupation	Government Sector	14.6
	Private Sector	30.8
	Self-Employed	19.7
	Student	35
Education	Schooling	4.1
	Under-graduation	45.1
	Graduate and above	50.7
Country of Residence	International	56.1
	India	43.9
Annual Family Income group (Domestic Tourists)	Below INR 5 lakhs	4.9
	INR 5–10 lakhs	29.9
	INR 10–15 lakhs	8.3
	Above INR 15 lakhs	1
Annual Family Income group (International Tourists)	< USD 30000	5.3
	USD 30000 – 60000	16
	USD 60000 – 100,000	22.1
	> USD 100,000	12.6

Table 2: Travel Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Purpose of Visit	Leisure/Recreation	76.7
	Business/Event	8.3
	Medical	1.7
	Health/Wellness	7.3
	Visit Friends and Relatives	6.1
Travelling with	Family with kids	9.5
	Friends	63.1
	Spouse (Partner)	21.1
	Solo	4.4
	Business Associates	1.9
Number of trips/holidays taken in the last two years	0-1	11.7
	2-3	48.3
	4-5	14.8
	More than 5	25.2
Visit status	First visit	80.6
	Repeat Visit	19.4
Type of traveler	Independent traveler	48.1
	On a package/group tour	51.9
Duration of Trip	3-5 days	33.7
	5-7 days	12.4
	1-2 weeks	23.1
	More than 2 weeks	30.8
Accommodation	Friends or Relatives	3.4
	Budget Hotels	52.7
	Star Hotels	22.3
	Home stays/B&B	21.6

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Factor analysis (using principal component analysis) was used to identify the factors influencing tourists' usage of social media during the pre-trip, in-trip and post-trip phases of the travel lifecycle. Data collected from the sample of respondents who had rated their level of agreement/disagreement with the variables in the questionnaire was subjected to Factor analysis.

The variables which made up the pre-trip, in-trip and post-trip components were factor analyzed using Principal Component analysis after ascertaining the appropriateness of Factor analysis (Malhotra, 2004) using the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (significant at the 0.05 level) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic (>0.6). Factors with eigen value greater than 1 and a loading of 0.5 and above were then rotated using varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization.

In order to summarize the information contained in the original variables, a smaller number of factors should be

extracted. In this research, approaches based on eigen values (that is, eigen value > 1) and Scree plot are used to determine the number of factors. To confirm the number of factors, a scree plot was drawn. To ensure that the variables for each of the factors were internally related, their Cronbach's coefficient alpha were measured and found to have acceptable internal consistency reliabilities, that is, greater than 0.6 (Nunnally, 1967).

Pre-trip Phase

The pre-trip component comprised of 9 variables which were factor analyzed using Principal Component analysis and three factors emerged explaining 64.8 per cent of the variance. The summary result of the factor analysis of all the elements and sub-elements is presented in Table III. The factor analysis yielded three dimensions which were labelled as Designing itinerary, Destination-specific information and Others' experiences.

Table 3: Pre-trip Motives: Final Factors, Items, Loadings, Communalities and Eigen Values

Factors	Significant Variables	Factor Loadings	Item Mean	Factor Mean	Eigen Values	% of Variance
F1: Designing Itinerary	Book Hotels/Flights	.804	2.53	3.09	3.21	35.63
	Confirm right choice of Destination	.770	3.29			
	Plan my Travel Itinerary	.655	2.88			
	Search for Reviews of Hotels, Attractions, Restaurants	.562	3.65			
F2: Destination Specific Information	Search for Specific Campaigns	.801	3.52	3.76	1.49	16.56
	Access Content	.732	3.98			
	Get more Information about leisure Activities	.573	3.76			
F3: Others Experiences	Read about Travel Experiences of Others	.873	3.05	2.63	1.14	12.62
	Connect with Travellers	.825	2.21			

The first factor identified is 'Designing itinerary' which consists of four items; Book hotels/flights, confirm right choice of destination, plan my travel itinerary and search for reviews of hotels, attractions, restaurants. This factor accounts for 35.63 per cent variance. It highlights the importance of social media as an avenue which provides reviews of hotels, attractions and restaurants at the destination. Tourists also try to confirm their choice of destination as a means to reduce the risk. The second factor identified is 'Destination-specific information' was made up of items such as search for specific campaigns, access content and get more information about leisure activities. This factor accounts for 16.56 per cent variance. It demonstrates how important it was for tourists to access a variety of content about their destination and also become more informed about leisure activities they can engage in. 'Others experiences' is the third factor and accounts for 12.62 per cent variance. It contains two items; read about travel experiences of others and connect with travellers. It shows how tourists desire to be acquainted with the experiences of other tourists in order to make an informed decision. An analysis of the factor means of the three factors that have been identified reveals that the

most important factor is 'Destination Specific Information' followed by 'Designing Itinerary' and 'Others Experiences'.

In-trip Phase

The in-trip component comprised of 9 variables which were factor analyzed using Principal Component analysis and two factors emerged explaining 68.7 per cent of the variance. The summary result of the factor analysis of all the elements and sub-elements is presented in Table IV. The factor analysis yielded two dimensions that were labelled as Information seeking and Sharing experiences.

The factor 'Information seeking' consisted of five items; get information about attractions and leisure activities, find out more information about cuisines and places to eat, read reviews, post reviews, obtain information about accommodation and arrange local Trips. This factor accounts for 53.71 per cent variance. This factor reveals that tourists seek more information about attractions, leisure activities and the cuisines while at the destination. The other factor that was extracted was Sharing Experiences which

accounted for 15 per cent variance and was comprised of three items; share my travel experiences, stay connected with friends and family and upload photos and videos. While tourists are on their holiday, a very pertinent need is the one

to stay connected as exemplified by this factor. An analysis of the factor means of these two factors reveals that the most important factor is ‘Sharing experiences’ followed by ‘Information seeking’.

Table 4: In-Trip Motives: Final Factors, Items, Loadings, Communalities and Eigen Values

Factors	Significant Variables	Factor Loadings	Item Mean	Factor Mean	Eigen Values	% of Variance
F1: Information Seeking	Get Information about Attractions and Leisure Activities	.879	2.56	2.37	4.83	53.71
	Find out More Information about Cuisines and Places to Eat	.853	2.79			
	Read Reviews	.800	2.54			
	Post Reviews	.798	2.4			
	Obtain Information about Accommodation	.792	2.07			
	Arrange local Trips	.746	1.84			
F2: Sharing Experiences	Share my Travel Experiences	.539	2.03	2.46	1.35	15
	Stay Connected with Friends and Family	.900	2.9			
	Upload Photos and Videos	.747	2.45			

Post-trip Phase

The Post-trip component comprised of 7 variables which were factor analyzed using Principal Component analysis and two factors emerged explaining 65 per cent of the

variance. The summary result of the factor analysis of all the elements and sub-elements is presented in Table V. The two factors which emerged were named as Sharing personal experiences and Sharing travel related information.

Table 5: Post-Trip Motives: Final Factors, Items, Loadings, Communalities and Eigen Values

Factors	Significant Variables	Factor Loadings	Item Mean	Factor Mean	Eigen Values	% of Variance
F1: Sharing Personal Experiences	Upload Photos and Videos	.829	3.51	2.84	3.119	44.56
	Let Family/Friends Know about Experiences	.763	3.25			
	Publish blog about Experiences	.723	1.76			
F2: Sharing Travel Related Information	Share Travel related Information	.484	2.31	2.44	1.43	20.39
	Suggest Improvements	.841	2.46			
	Recommend the Destination	.783	2.68			
	Inform other travellers about Experiences	.770	2.29			

The first factor identified was ‘Sharing Personal Experiences’ and contained three items; upload photos and videos, let family/friends know about experiences and publish blog about experiences. This factor accounts for 44.56 per cent variance. This factor demonstrates that tourists share their holiday experiences with their family and friends by uploading content such as photos and videos of their trip. The next factor identified was ‘Sharing Travel Related Information’ which accounts for 20.39 per cent variance. This factor contained items such as share travel related information, suggest improvements, recommend the

destination and inform other travellers about experiences. Tourists also feel the need to recommend the destination to others after the trip as illustrated by this factor. The factor means demonstrate that the more important factor is ‘Sharing personal experiences’ followed by ‘Sharing travel-related information’.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The overall results of this study support previous research conducted in this area. Previous studies (Wang, Yu and

Fesenmaier, 2002; Gretzel and Fesenmaier, 2009) have highlighted the use of Internet technologies in the pre-consumption phase to acquire information necessary for planning trips, formulate correct expectations, and evaluate, compare, and select alternatives, as well as to correspond with the providers of tourism products and services to prepare or execute transactions. The study has also shown the critical role played by social media in providing reassurance to tourists. This need for reassurance could be explained by the uncertainty involved in tourism where the purchase and consumption are at different points in time and hence tourists seek to minimise this perceived risk. The study reveals that tourists at the planning stage read about the experiences of other tourists at the destination. This online word-of-mouth provided by other travellers on social media goes a long way in allaying the fears of tourists.

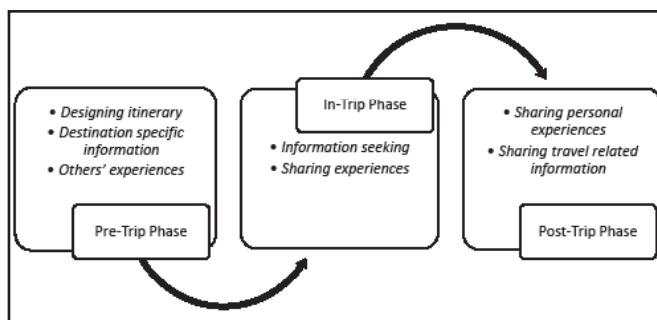


Fig. 1: Motives for using Social Media Across the Tourist Lifecycle

This study indicates that some of the fundamental concerns for tourists while planning to take a trip are identifying a destination and subsequently reassuring themselves that they are making the right decision. This has far reaching implications for tourism providers who will have to make sure that there is no dearth of information regarding the destination. They can ensure this by engaging potential tourists through the use of multimedia and ensuring an omni-channel presence. This argument is reinforced by the findings of this study that tourists access content about the destination during the pre-trip phase. During the in-trip phase tourists were primarily concerned with staying in touch with their family and friends and communicating their experiences with them. They also search for more information about the destination with respect to leisure activities, cuisine and also read reviews while they are on holiday. This social media usage behaviour of tourists is mirrored in other studies (Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2011). The post-trip stage points to the tourists desire to share their experiences with others especially family and friends. They also feel strongly about uploading photos and videos of their holiday on to social media platforms in addition to recommending the destination to other travellers. Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2011) revealed that social media are predominantly used after holidays for experience sharing. Sparks and Browning

(2011) noted that the reviews and stories written by tourists have the ability to enhance or detract from a firm's or destination's reputation.

This study analyzes the motives behind tourists' use of social media in the travel lifecycle (Figure 1) as it demonstrates how tourists attempt determine the suitability of the destination itself and the elements that make up the destination based on the reviews posted and content created and uploaded by tourists who have travelled before them. Tourists are constantly searching for the right place to take a vacation and it is imperative that tourism providers and destination marketers showcase their destinations in a positive light. The study demonstrates how social media is an influential tool for travellers looking to find the right destination to travel to. Social media can be a powerful ally to tourism providers who can use it to boost the attractiveness of their destinations and intensify the flow of tourists both domestic and international.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study present the motives behind the use of social media by tourists in the pre-trip, in-trip and post-trip phases of the tourist lifecycle. This study adds to the existing literature on the relative importance of the motives behind the use of social media during these three phases. Tourists primarily seek information on social media about potential destinations in an effort to become inspired and also reassure themselves by seeking out reviews and detailed information. They wish to stay connected with their friends and family even while on holiday. The emergence of social media as a relevant and trustworthy source of information to travellers and their perception of its utility is depicted in this study. This research provides insights for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO) and other tourism providers on how to connect with travellers on social media throughout the tourist lifecycle on various channels efficiently in order to inspire tourists to visit their destinations.

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