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Online User-Generated Content for Travel Planning – Different for different kinds of trips?

Travellers are increasingly turning to online user-generated content for vacation planning. Previous studies have looked at a variety of factors to explain differing levels of social media consumption between travellers. Previous research, however, has not examined the role of the role of trip characteristics (such as familiarity with a destination, location of a destination, trip length, travel planning lead time, and travel party composition) in this context. This study found that trip characteristics seem to play a key role when it comes to travellers' engagement with user-generated content for travel planning – a higher percentage of travellers turned to user-generated content when visiting a destination for the first time, as well as visiting an international destination; a lower percentage of those who travel on their own engaged with social media. This study did not find differences regarding trip length or travel planning lead times.

Key words: Social media; online user-generated content; travel planning; trip characteristics

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Background

It has been established that travellers take advantage of Web 2.0 and consult social media when planning their vacations (Gretzel, 2006; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Increasingly, travellers are turning to online user-generated content available through social media to obtain information prior to their vacations, particularly online travel reviews, believing them to be trustworthy and useful (Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2009; Dickinger, 2011).

When trying to explain differences in travellers' engagement with social media for vacation planning, studies have traditionally focused on traveller characteristics, such as demographics (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012; Ip, Lee & Law, 2012) and increasingly psychographics (Ross et al., 2009; Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, Díaz-Armas, 2011; Ayeh, Au & Law, 2012). A large number of studies have also focused on the impacts of social media consumption for travel planning and decision-making (Arsal, Backman & Baldwin, 2008; Ye, Law & Gu, 2009; Cox, Burgess, Sellito & Buultjens, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Ye, Law, Gu & Chen, 2011; Sidali, Fuchs & Spiller, 2012) and which types of online user-generated content travellers access (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Zhang, Pan, Smith & Li, 2009; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009).

What has received little attention previously in understanding travellers' consumption of social media for vacation planning is the role of trip characteristics (such as familiarity with a destination, location of a destination, trip length, travel planning lead time, and travel party composition). Gretzel, Hwang, and Fesenmaier (2006) argue that "situational needs", for example desired level of activity and mobility, trip length, travel party, or trip purpose shape travellers' vacation planning processes and therefore need to be considered. In their analysis of tourist information search, Fodness and Murray (1997) found that travellers differ in their planning behaviour based on trip characteristics, such as mode of transportation, length of

stay, number of destinations or attractions visited, accommodation, or expenditure patterns.

Fodness and Murray (1997) did not find a difference in tourist information search patterns related to travelling party composition. Based on these findings, it seems relevant to try and understand whether the trip-related differences or similarities that came up in general tourist information search patterns would carry over to the use of online user-generated content for vacation planning.

The sparse research that is available is limited in scope in so far as it does not make trip characteristics the focus of analysis, but rather regards it as a context for research into social media consumption for travel planning. The limited findings at present suggest that trip characteristics may factor into travellers' use of social media for vacation planning, such as familiarity with destinations (Tan & Chen, 2011), travel to mature, well-known destinations (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012), or specific types of travel styles (e.g. Fjelstul & Severt, 2011; Paris, 2011). No comprehensive study looking at a variety of trip characteristics as antecedents for social media consumption in travel planning could be located.

The question that arises is whether travellers turn to social media for all trips equally, or whether there are trip-related differences, and if so, how they factor into travellers' engagement with online user-generated content. This paper will first look at traveller demographics, travel experience, and Internet familiarity as antecedents for use of social media for travel planning to situate the paper within established research and show that the data obtained are in line with previous findings. Then, to expand previous knowledge, the paper will focus on the role of trip characteristics as antecedents for engagement with online user-generated content.

Methodology

Data for this article stem from the annual “The Use of Social Media by American Travelers” survey conducted in January 2011 by the National Laboratory for Tourism and eCommerce at Temple University. When appropriate, comparisons were made to the 2009 and 2010 surveys. The survey was administered by a professional market research company using an established consumer panel. Specifically, the online survey was sent to a general panel of online Americans who travel, that is, Americans who have used the Internet and taken at least one overnight pleasure trip at least 50 miles, one way away from home, between January 1, 2010 – December 31, 2010, yielding 3,095 usable responses. For the purpose of this article, the sample was further limited to American travellers who have used the Internet for at least part of their travel planning for their most recent overnight pleasure trip, that is, respondents who answered the question “How much of the planning for your most recent overnight pleasure trip was done using the Internet?” with “All or 100%”, “75% to 99%”, “50% to 74%”, “25% to 49%”, or “1% to 24%”. This resulted in a final sample of 2,526 for analysis. The major dependent variable was online user-generated content use for travel planning, which was measured using the following question: “Did you look at (read) comments or materials (e.g. photos and video) posted online by other travellers in the course of planning your most recent overnight pleasure trip?”.

The analysis included descriptive statistics (frequencies and cross-tabulations) to explain differences between travellers who have turned to user-generated content for travel planning and those who have not, as well as differences in trip characteristics. Differences were evaluated using Chi Square statistics and only those significant at or below the 0.05 level are reported.

Results

Over half (57.4%) of travellers turned to comments or materials (e.g. photos and video) posted online by other travellers when planning their most recent overnight pleasure trip. When asked about what specific types of comments/materials they had read, watched, or listened to while planning their most recent pleasure trip, the majority mentioned travel reviews and photos posted by other travellers.

As travellers are becoming more familiar and arguably more comfortable using the Internet for travel planning, the percentage of travellers turning to online user-generated content has been growing. Over the course of the survey, we witness a stable development first and then a recent increase in travellers' engagement with user-generated content, with numbers ranging from 50.3% in 2009, to 49.7% in 2010, and 57.4% in 2011 (Figure 1).

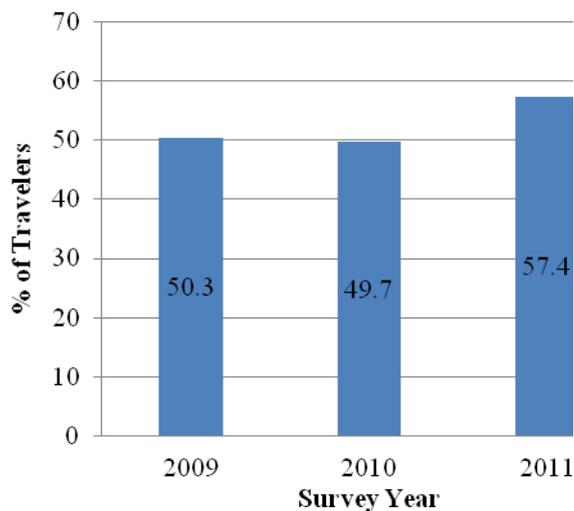


Figure 1. Travellers who turned to comments or materials (e.g. photos and videos) posted online by other travellers in the course of planning their most recent pleasure trip

There are some key demographic differences between travellers who engage with user-generated content for vacation planning purposes and those who do not. These are age, levels of income, and ethnicity. Not surprisingly, younger travellers are more likely to turn to online word-of-mouth—66.4% of travellers from Generations X&Y state that they did so for their most recent overnight pleasure trip, compared with 51.7% of Baby Boomers, and only 33.5%

of mature travellers. Travellers with higher levels of income are slightly more likely to turn to online user-generated content for travel planning. Looking at ethnicity, Asian or Pacific Islander respondents are the most likely to turn to online information from other travellers (76.0%), followed by Black/African American (71.8%); in contrast, White/Caucasian travellers are the least likely to do so (54.1%).

Consumption patterns, such as travel experience and computer use also play a role when it comes to whether travellers engage with user-generated content for travel planning. Frequent travellers are more likely to turn to user-generated content online than other travellers—61.2% of those who took three or more overnight pleasure trips per year compared with 52.0% of those who took one or two trips. Frequent travellers not only have a greater need for travel information but also may be more invested in online communities, as they are generally more likely to produce user-generated content that could aid other travellers in their vacation planning (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). Travellers who are more familiar and comfortable with using the Internet and those who are actively producing user-generated content, are, perhaps least surprisingly, much more likely to turn to user-generated content online for travel planning. More than three-fourths (76.1%) of travellers who have ever posted travel-related comments/materials online (e.g. written a review, shared photos, posted videos, contributed to a wiki, written a blog, commented on a blog, etc.) say they looked at (read) comments or materials posted online by other travellers in the course of planning their most recent overnight pleasure trip, compared with 44.8% who presumably only passively consume those materials.

Notably, travellers seem to indeed engage with user-generated content differently for different types of trips. Trip characteristics, such as first-time visit to a destination, visit to an international destination, and whether or not respondents travelled solo appear to play a major role for travellers' level of social media consumption. Differences in length of trip or travel

planning lead times, however, do not seem to produce statistically significant differences when it comes to engagement with online user-generated content. Travellers tend to engage to an even higher degree with user-generated content when visiting a destination for the first time and/or travelling outside the country. Presumably because of lower levels of familiarity with their vacation destinations, feedback and insights from fellow travellers may be regarded an even more valuable source of information. Close to three-quarters (74.1%) of those who were first-time visitors to a destination for their most recent overnight pleasure trip turned to materials posted online by fellow travellers for information, compared with only half (50.2%) of those who had previously visited. We are able to observe an interaction effect when travellers visited a destination for the first time and that destination is an international destination, with 82.1% of travellers turning to user-generated content online for planning purposes when both characteristics are present. Regarding travel party composition, those who travelled solo on their most recent vacation were much less likely to look at user-generated content for vacation planning; in fact, only 38.3% did so. This interesting finding could be understood in the context of risk mitigation, in so far as travellers are presumably only responsible for their own satisfaction with the travel experience and not for that of their travel partners as well, reducing the need to engage in extensive information search.

Discussion

This study looked at trip characteristics as a determinant for travellers' engagement with online user-generated content for vacation planning. It is interesting to note that trip characteristics seem to play a key role when it comes to travellers' engagement with user-generated content for travel planning – a higher percentage of travellers turned to user-generated content for travel planning when visiting a destination for the first time, as well as visiting a destination outside the United States; on the other hand, a lower percentage of those who travel on their own engage with social media. We could not find differences in

engagement with online user-generated content when it comes to length of trip or travel planning lead times.

Some of these findings appear to be contrary to the offline tourist information search patterns outlined by Fodness and Murray (1997), namely the observed differences in travellers' engagement with online user-generated content when it comes to travel party composition.

Therefore, it seems relevant to further explore the influence of a variety of trip characteristics on level of engagement with online user-generated content in future studies.

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