



Which group do you want to travel with? A study of rating differences among groups in online travel reviews



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we empirically investigate the effects of different traveling groups' experiences on travelers' satisfaction rating for hotels in which they stay. We analyze the rating data of 322 hotels located in New York City from Booking.com, a popular travel website, by using our web crawler. As a result, we find that satisfaction of traveler groups declines in order of couples, friends, family, solo, and business. Couple groups express the highest satisfaction with the hotel they choose while business groups show the lowest satisfaction. By conducting text analysis of 125,076 reviews, we find that such differences in satisfaction stem from travelers' preferences regarding features.

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1. Introduction

A convergence of social media and traveling is changing travelers' behavior and their traveling experiences dramatically. According to Lewis et al. (2010), travelers' behavior of sharing their experiences and travel information not only increases travelers' convenience, but also dramatically changes their behavior of looking for destinations and their traveling experiences. As a result, travel websites based on social media have increased customers' efficiency in information seeking and sharing Gretzel and Yoo (2008) and this has made travel websites grow as the most important communication channel for the travel industry.

Travel websites based on social media as a platform play an important role in sharing travelers' experiences and travel information. It is not surprising that the travel website market is growing faster than ever before since about 39% of Americans makes reservations through online travel websites (Barclays Capital, 2012). Moreover, in 2011, revenue for online travel reservation services reached approximately \$340 billion. More importantly,

Booking.com, which is the number one online travel website, had monthly unique visitors reaching 40 million in 2015 (Top 15 most popular, 2015).

Not many studies have been conducted on travel websites based on social media even though the importance of such studies have been recognized. Most of the studies have focused on consumer behavior (CB) studies related to factors affecting travelers' satisfaction, motivations, and decision making (Cohen et al., 2014). Moreover, secondary behavioral data of real users are not considered in past studies, which have mostly been conducted using experiment and survey methods. Thus, in this research, we conduct our study using real users' behavioral data based on social networking websites. In our research, we gather reviews and rating scores of each hotel from Booking.com by using our web crawler.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how different compositions of group members can influence people's traveling experiences. We develop a web crawler to collect both data open to the public and detailed data that are not openly available on the webpage. We argue that differences exist in travelers' ratings of hotels and traveling experiences depending on the group by performing econometric analysis and text analysis. Additionally, we identify detailed factors that travelers compliment or criticize depending

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on the travel group. We also conduct individual-level paired t-tests to eliminate any self-selection bias that might arise from performing only a simple regression analysis. Our study contributes to the growing literature on users' behavior in travel websites with a setting that is distinct from previous studies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Satisfaction

Satisfaction is regarded as a main CB construct since the extent to which consumers are satisfied can have an effect on future business performance in the form of, for instance, revenue, competitive advantage and market image (Anderson et al., 1994). By examining satisfaction and its systems, marketers can find useful information they can apply in order to increase customers' satisfaction, by developing strategic decisions such as segmentation, targeting, and marketing mix (Cohen et al., 2014).

Some studies examine more in details on tourist and staff relationships (Hutchinson et al., 2009; Nam et al., 2011; Tsang and Ap, 2007); there is much less research, however, on tourist-tourist interactions as a determinant of satisfaction (Getz et al., 2001; Huang and Hsu, 2010; Wu, 2007). While these studies can give insights into understanding how interactions between travelers affect satisfaction of them, as far as we know, there are few in-depth studies yet (Cohen et al., 2014).

Some researchers examine the relationship between tourists by adopting the concepts of personal involvement (Hwang et al., 2005; Prayag and Ryan, 2012). Recently, a self-congruence perspective is adopted in various studies (Bosnjak et al., 2011; Nam et al., 2011), while a few studies investigating travelers' psychological characteristics, such as novelty seeking, as determinants of satisfaction (Petrick, 2002; Williams and Soutar, 2009).

Perceiving the complication of tourist satisfaction, some studies look into the extent to which satisfaction varies depending on consumer types (Magnini et al., 2011; Petrick and Sirakaya, 2004).

Borges, et al. (2010) find out that, depending on who people are shopping with, the shoppers can feel the values of shopping differently. More interestingly, they discover the difference of shopping experiences depending on three different groups which are composed of friends, family, and alone respectively. This result is closely related to our research in that travelers feel satisfied with their hotel differently depending on who they are traveling with.

2.2. Rating

There are some past studies which examine factors which influence on travelers' opinions in reviews and scores of hotels that travelers reserved for their trip. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) show how prices and places have an effect on ratings and scores of hotels on the website. Sparks and Browning (2011) explain that hotel visitors can be influenced by early negative reviews. Bulchand-Gidumal et al. (2011) demonstrate that the early reviews of hotels tend to include negative comments. Also, if reviews are few, average ratings tend to be relatively low and these low ratings can affect potential customers' decision when searching for hotels.

Stringam and Gerdes (2010) examine which words are mostly used in online hotel reviews when reviewers evaluate ratings of hotels where they stayed for their trip. The most used words are as follows; "clean", "staff", "breakfast", "bed", "price", "restaurant", "pool", "bathroom", "airport", "downtown". Chaves et al. (2012) also conduct similar research and identified that the most frequently represented words in reviews are "room", "staff", "location", "cleanliness", "friendliness" and "helpfulness". Sridhar and Srinivasan (2012) explain that the reason why the ratings of

online hotel websites should be taken seriously in the e-business industry is that potential customers are considerably influenced by other opinion leaders' evaluations.

2.3. Social media and travel

Nowadays, it becomes almost impossible to live without technology since consumers use it in various ways ranging from looking for information, purchasing, sharing their thoughts and experiences to entertainment activities. Buhalis and Law (2008) argue that it is more obvious in the tourism industry because people tend to sell and purchase tour products online.

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) consider social media as an important platform for providing valuable information but for travelers' experiences. Social media already plays a significant role in all stages of the vacation cycle: before, during and after the trip (Fotis et al., 2011). Not surprisingly, a number of research began to examine how various social media are affecting tourism CB. In the study by Vermeulen and Seegers (2009), they focus on the impact of online hotel reviews on consumers' decision, Papathanassis and Knolle (2011) study the usage of online reviews and Zehrer et al. (2011) investigate on user responses to travel blog information and recommendations.

Recently, in several studies, it is shown that the reputation resulting from eWOM behavior influences organisational performance variables such as price (Yacouel and Fleischer, 2012). Also, Cantalops and Salvi (2014) examine how eWOM can influence on customers' intention of reserving hotels on the website. In addition, Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) identify purchase decision process of hotel customers. Thus, travel websites can better understand how social media is affecting the way consumers are perceived, and how such perceptions have an effect on tourists' decision making and behavior (Cohen et al., 2014).

Some recent studies also identify how technology changes the travelers' experience during the trip, explaining how smartphones affect their experience (Dickinson et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012).

2.4. Group decision making

When traveling, the difference of group members can change decision making process and its consequences. Our study focuses on the difference of average scores on hotels depending on the different compositions of group members. In this context, the past studies on group decision making become an important theoretical background in our study.

Past CB studies in tourism typically focus on individual-level analysis as opposed to households, groups of friends or work colleagues (Cohen et al., 2014). Some studies on tourism and CB (Dimanche and Havitz, 1995; Moutinho, 1993) require for a transition in scale to examine family decision-making processes. Campo-Martinez et al., (2010) regard group composition important mentioning that individual satisfaction can be different from that of a bigger travelling group. It is due to the fact that collective satisfaction of group members is more important to revisit the places than that of individuals.

Kozak (2010) finds out that different members of a household are engaged in travel decisions all together, with the specific dynamics dependent on power relations among family members. It is certainly true that families are a 'decision making unit', but each family member may seek information individually and, sometimes, may need to negotiate disagreements (Bronner and de Hoog, 2008). Thus, understanding how travel decisions are made within families, and how different family members may affect decision making processes is considered as an important factor for marketing strategies (Dimanche and Havitz, 1995; Litvin et al., 2004).

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