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Toward a holistic understanding of continued use of social networking tourism: A mixed-methods approach

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ABSTRACT

The trend of social networking tourism connects millions of tourists to others while traveling that may provide benefits such as information, tour guides, or alternative accommodations. Success of such networks depend on the continued use by its members. The current paper uses a mixed-methods approach to qualitatively identify motivations for participation and empirically test a causal model evaluating continued use intention. Motivations identified include networking and economic value that were used in the quantitative study that includes social capital, trust, attitude, and satisfaction as factors influencing continued use intention.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is de facto international in scope and one of the main economic drivers of many nations around the world today. Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been a key enabler to grow tourism globally as their applications have changed the ways information about leisure travel and its experiences are collected, shared, and used by tourists [32]. In recent years, the notion of smart tourism has emerged, and now well established, within the tourism practice and research communities. Boes et al. [11], Buhalis and Amaranggana [14], Gretzel et al. [21], Gretzel et al. [22], Koo et al. [31], and Werthner et al. [62] have been pioneers in developing conceptual, theoretical, and research foundations of smart tourism. The increasing rise of social networks and mobile devices in recent years has helped the creation of collaborative networks, which are associated with sharing resources while focusing on the economics of collaboration and the efficiencies of networks. Leisure tourists are a major participant in and beneficiary of social networking tourism (SNETT) sites. With this new trend of tourism mixed with social technologies, tourists are now directly sharing products and services with each other, bypassing traditional institutions. Through these networks, tourists can share a plethora of travel artifacts such as time, knowledge, responsibilities, objects, and spaces. Social platforms are providing alternatives to standard travel services such as lodging through sites like CouchSurfing (CS) and AirBnB or taxi services through Uber. Although users of these social tourism sites may benefit from low cost or even free services through a community of users, businesses and locations that rely on tourism spending are losing revenues. Soliciting services for lodging and travel from a community of users that are not verified has its economic benefits but also have risks due to the inherent dangers of accepting services from strangers. This phenomenon has implications to both academics studying human behaviors and practitioners working in the tourism industry.

Tourists use these niche social networking sites (SNSs), called SNETT, to meet and interact with other tourists for traveling. SNETT sites and mobile applications allow members to develop and maintain social and economic relationships, and to explore new opportunities [27]. The success of SNETT communities are pivoted on a deep understanding of their member participation and degree of participation in the community. As the presence and potential impact of SNETT communities continue to rise, it becomes critical to understand the motivations influencing participation and the factors that affect the continued use of SNETT communities. Although smart tourism and social tourism are gaining increasing attention in academic- and practitioner-oriented research, there is a lack of work committed to understanding the motivations and use of these niche communities.

The current research uses a mixed-methods approach to explore the motivations for participation and the antecedents to the continued use of SNETT sites. As such, this study combines qualitative and quantitative research methods to develop holistic insights into the factors that influence users' intentions for continued use of SNETT sites. With this sequential mixed-methods research approach [54,56], the qualitative method allowed us to

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extract potential key constructs, which were then applied to the quantitative study. Because of lack of research in this area and a plethora of possible motivations that could be applied, a qualitative study was necessary to identify the motivations relevant to the current research context. Interviews were conducted with current users of the popular SNETT site called CS to elicit motivations for participation that could then be applied in a quantitative study evaluating continued use. Drawing on the theory of planned behavior (TPB), self-determination theory (SDT), and social capital theory, we propose a research model in a bid to gain insights on the factors that influence the continued use of the members of SNETT sites. Social capital, an important construct reoccurring in social networking research, refers to the intangible benefits one gains through social interaction [18]. The current study is driven by three primary research questions: (1) What motivations influence the continued participation in SNETT sites? (2) What are the effects of social capital in the context of SNETT? (3) What influences people to continue to use these specialized or niche social networks?

This study's contributions include a deeper understanding of critical factors related to SNETT continued use; an example of benefits gained through mixed-method approaches combining exploratory and theoretical advancement; and actionable knowledge that can improve practitioner understanding of SNETT's continued usage. This paper serves as a foundation for future research in the context of SNETT. This research begins with a review of relevant literature to establish a theoretical foundation for developing a research model. Subsequently, a qualitative study is conducted to explore specific motivations that can be applied to a research model evaluating continued use intention of SNETT sites. Afterward, the research model is formulated with empirical analysis followed by an analysis of the results. The current research concludes with a discussion of the findings and the theoretical and practical implications of the research being conducted.

2. Theoretical background

It is important to point out the difference between SNSs such as Facebook and a niche SNS such as SNETT sites. An example of a SNETT site is CouchSurfing.org. SNETT sites and SNSs have many similar features, however, the goals and outcomes from these sites are different. Facebook users connect to friends and family to maintain relationships with strong ties, whereas SNETT site users seek to connect to other tourists whom they previously did not know at remote locations with the intention of traveling and meeting off-line. Therefore, niche SNSs such as SNETT sites connect tourists together, but with weak ties among them.

This study evaluates SNETT sites, such as CS, to explore antecedents to the continued use of these sites. An array of theoretical underpinnings including the TPB, social capital theory, and SDT have been applied to systematically formulate a research model explaining this phenomenon. The remainder of this section will describe these theories in terms of how they fit within the context of the study.

2.1. Theory of planned behavior

The TPB is a well-established theory in behavioral research used for explaining human behavior. It predicates that intention to perform an action and the perceived behavioral control amalgamate to influence the actual performance of said action [3]. The action of consequence in the current study is the continuous use of SNETT sites with the intention to perform said action being the variable of observation. According to TPB, the intention to perform an action significantly influences the likelihood of the action being performed. The intention to perform the action in question has been shown as the result of attitude toward the given behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Attitude refers to the favorable or unfavorable feelings toward the behavior being performed, resulting in a positive correlation with the intention to perform the given action [4,43]. There is an inherent risk when connecting to and meeting unknown individuals from the Internet while traveling to remote destinations. As a result, it can be postulated that individuals who possess an unfavorable attitude toward social tourism SNSs would likely have a low intention toward use of these networks. Behavioral control refers to the ability of the individual to control the environment and get the outcome they desire. Subjective norms refer to social pressures one might experience influencing their behavior to perform an action. Because of the voluntary nature of social tourism and the focus of weak tie connections between individuals, it is likely that behavior controls and subjective norms play an insignificant role in the intention to use them. To understand continued use, which is a postadoption behavior, the current research will incorporate social capital theory and SDT to understand social influences and user motivations.

2.2. Social Capital

Social capital refers to the intangible benefits gained through social interactions [18], and is embedded in the relationships among members of a group or community [52]. There are two facets of social capital that are referred to as bonding social capital and bridging social capital [48,64]. Bridging social capital involves the connection of individuals from different backgrounds, whereas bonding social capital revolves around building stronger relationships and providing emotional and substantive support between the connected individuals. As with other forms of capital, social capital results from the investments provided by the user leading to expected future benefits [1].

In essence, SNETT sites target individuals who like to travel and seek to meet others at their travel destination. These connections are typically between individuals who previously did not know each other with the intent of information or resource exchange. The expected benefits gained from SNETT sites may include friendship, information about the intended travel destination, or alternative lodging accommodations. Bridging and bonding social capital are likely to play a role in the connection and development of relationships among members. Bridging social capital is concerned with connecting individuals together, which would be the primary purpose of SNETT sites, while bonding social capital is concerned with creating a deeper connection between individuals and stronger ties between the connections made. Although both forms of social capital would be influential for continued use of the SNETT site, it is likely that the motivations influencing each are different. SDT will be used to understand motivations for connecting with others through SNETT sites.

2.3. Self-determination theory

SDT is an empirically based theory of human motivation that focuses on the degree to which an individual's behavior is self-motivated and self-determined. Motives act as a trigger that causes an individual to perform actions or behaviors voluntarily [49]. Based on an individual's personal values, motives can affect perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. This results in motivations, which serve as a source of inspiration that stimulates individuals to perform specific actions [51,66]. SDT identifies and explains motivations that result into actions being performed.

SDT has been used to differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations along with identifying motivations for specific behaviors such as information system (IS) use [66].

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