Research Paper

New trends in information search and their influence on destination loyalty: Digital destinations and relationship marketing

Arminda Almeida-Santana[a],[*], Sergio Moreno-Gil[b]

[a] Institute of Tourism Studies and Economic and Sustainable Development (Tides), University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC), Edificio Antiguo de Empresariales 0 Derecha, Campus Universitario de Tafira, Calle Saulo Torón, 4, 35017 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Las Palmas, Spain
[b] Institute of Tourism Studies and Economic and Sustainable Development (Tides), University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC), Edificio de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales, Campus Universitario de Tafira, Calle Saulo Torón, 4, 35017 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Las Palmas, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Increasingly destination management organizations are engaging with consumers through digital media, communicating with them in a long-term relationship. Numerous studies have shown that social media influence the intentions of travellers to visit one destination over another. However, the literature has paid little attention to the relationship between information-seeking behaviour and the development of destination loyalty. In that sense, this study analyses how tourists are consulting more digital information and using several different information sources, which influences the time tourists are sharing at a few destinations, becoming more loyal to multiple destinations at the same time (horizontal loyalty). However, this topic has not yet been stressed in the tourism context. This study therefore attempts to show that: (a) the difference in behaviour when it comes to the use of several information sources, depending on tourists' profiles (nationality and socio-demographic characteristics), and (b) although there are no significant differences regarding the use of the different social media in terms of destination-loyal and horizontal-loyal tourists, the impact of the different sources of information on loyalty (behavioural and attitudinal) is different. Social media has a greater impact on attitudinal loyalty. To achieve those goals, a wide survey with 6964 questionnaires was developed, considering tourists from 17 European countries. Those results are useful in making decisions concerning digital development strategies and loyalty programs to tourist destinations.

1. Introduction

Tourists search for information that helps them make better decisions when it comes to choosing a holiday destination, and they do so using different channels (Ho, Lin, & Chen, 2012) that have evolved over time. The start of the Internet and social media has altered the way tourist knowledge spreads, and it has turned into the most commonplace information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In addition, these global platforms allow travellers to share their experience (Gretzel, Lee, Tussyadiah, & Fesenmaier, 2009; Gupta & Kim, 2004) and the content generated by users in those platforms plays a key role in planning trips, including decisions regarding revisiting destinations and loyalty (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). Understanding how travellers have adapted to these changes is essential in order to identify and to develop effective communication strategies (Xiang, Wang, O'Leary, & Fesenmaier, 2014).

Not only have the search methods used by tourists changed, but also the relationship regarding loyalty towards tourist destinations.

Nowadays, tourists not only share their time with different sources of information and specific social media, but also share their holiday time within several destinations at the same time, staying loyal to several of them, which is known as horizontal loyalty (McKercher, Denizci-Guillet, & Ng, 2012).

On the one hand, understanding how tourists access information is important in order to make marketing choices (Bieger & Laesser, 2004), depending on the different tourists' profiles (Chiang, King, & Nguyen, 2012; Gursoy & Chen, 2000; Hyde, 2007; Jun, Vogt, & MacKay, 2007; Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2005; Xu, Morgan, & Song, 2009). On the other hand, numerous studies have shown that the information sources have an influence on the intentions tourists have of visiting a particular destination (Dey & Sarma, 2010), and it is the first step before planning a trip and making decisions. This process has become more complicated with the introduction of new sources of information (Xiang, Wang, O'Leary, & Fesenmaier, 2014). Nevertheless, the literature available has not focused specifically on how social media influences different kinds of loyalty (Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015). Therefore, it is

---

necessary to capture the key aspects of joint use of the different social media and traditional sources of information when planning a trip, and determine the existing relationship towards loyalty typologies to tourist destinations.

It is subsequently vital to examine the following in depth: (a) the difference in behaviour when it comes to the use of several information sources depending on tourists' profiles (nationality and socio-demographic characteristics), and (b) the relationship between the information sources used and loyalty towards destinations. In doing so, a better understanding of how tourists vary their behaviour between the different sources and different destinations is obtained.

2. Literature review

When tourists make the decision to travel, they find difficulties when assessing the quality provided if they have not visited these locations before (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). Information sources are used to reduce uncertainty during the decision-making process (Xiang et al., 2014). Furthermore, tourist behaviour regarding the use of social media differs depending on the segments analysed: nationalities and socio-demographic characteristics (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Bolton et al., 2013; Bonn et al., 2001; Kim, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2015), and information sources have been traditionally analysed considering their influence in explaining the next visit to a destination (Baloglu, 2000). However, the influence on repeating visits (loyalty), considering both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty, has been omitted in the literature. In this process, different variables must be included to explain this loyalty behaviour, such as motivations and image (Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014; Sun, Chi, & Xu, 2013).

2.1. Information sources

Social media use on the Internet by travellers has become a dominant way of searching for information (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), with several types of content generated by consumers (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014), such as wikis (i.e. Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (i.e. Twitter), social media (i.e. Facebook), communication exchange channels (i.e. Flickr, YouTube), and review channels (i.e. TripAdvisor). In this context it is crucial to identify what the most relevant new information sources are in order to consider them in this study.

According to Chan and Guillet (2011), Twitter and Facebook are the most widely used social media sites in the industry. Thus, Twitter is the most popular microblogging service (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009), and Facebook is the most-used social media platform among European tourists (Escobar-Rodríguez, Grávalos-Gastaminza, & Pérez-Calañas, 2016). Besides Twitter and Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and TripAdvisor are among other popularly used social media sites in the industry. Thus, YouTube is the second-largest worldwide search engine after Google (Welbourne & Grant, 2015), being the leader in the distribution of video content. Flickr is the most popular photo-sharing social media site (Zielstra & Hochmair, 2013), although new players (e.g. Instagram) are taking over this position. Finally, TripAdvisor is the largest community travel site in the world (TripAdvisor, 2016). Table 1 shows references that support the relevance of these social media sites and the importance of analysing them to pursue the goals of this study.

Previous studies have tried to understand how tourists use the Internet to gather information, as well as the best way for tourist suppliers to make the most out of those channels (Araña, León, Carballo, & Gil, 2015; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Chung & Buhalis, 2009; Ho et al., 2012; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Litvin et al., 2008; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Recently, there has been an advance in research related to social media and the Internet in the destination context and their use when establishing relationships with tourists and loyalty

(Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2010; Kim & Hardin, 2010; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and the impact it has when planning a holiday (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However, there is a need to keep enhancing knowledge regarding the differences among segments when using the social media (Kim et al., 2015). On the other hand, Stepchenkova, Shichkova, Kim, Pennington-Gray, and Rykhtik (2015) noted that for tourists with a loyal behaviour, the Internet seems to be the main source used when choosing a holiday destination. However, there has not yet been an in-depth study of the influence of the use of the Internet and the particular social media sites on the development of the different kinds of loyalties towards tourist destinations.

The analysis of information sources, on the one hand, and the analysis of loyalty, on the other, should take into account the different groups of tourists. In particular, information-seeking behaviour has a significant relationship with demographic characteristics (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Previous studies have tried to understand the existing differences in the information-seeking behaviour of different groups of tourists. Socio-demographic characteristics such as nationality, gender, and age have been used as segmentation criteria. For example, Gursoy and Chen (2000) examined the external information-seeking behaviour of travellers from Germany, the United Kingdom and France, and four distinct segments of information-seeking behaviour were identified. Gursoy and Umbreit (2004) ran a cross-cultural comparison of the information-seeking behaviour of travellers from the EU member countries where six market segments emerged. However, these studies have not paid particular attention to the use of social networks and online media as a source of tourist information. For example, Gursoy and Chen (2000) and Chen and Gursoy (2000) analysed social media as a general category, without considering the differences among them. Something similar happens in the work of Gursoy and Umbreit (2004): they ask about the use of Internet information and Minitel (a videotex service developed in France). Thus, it is necessary to try to better understand this phenomenon by studying the differences among the use of the specific social media and the different socio-demographic segments.

More recently Kim et al. (2015) examined various aspects of Internet use among four generational groups, including the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y, over a six-year period. Findings show a high adoption rate of the Internet among all generations, but there are important differences related to information search, trip planning activities, and Web sites used for online booking.

2.2. Antecedent factors of loyalty

Consumer loyalty is one of the most critical marketing constructs (Tasci, 2016). According to the literature, there are two elements of loyalty (Baloglu, 2002; Kumar, Shah, & Venkatesan, 2006): behavioural and attitudinal. From a behavioural point of view, loyalty can be understood as a current revisit to a holiday destination. An attitudinal approach represents the personal attitude and emotions that play a part in showing loyalty to a destination. The intention of revisiting a destination in the future is a manifestation of the latter.

Previous literature on loyalty has also shown that customers may be loyal to more than one brand (Brown, 1953; Cunningham, 1956; Dowling & Uncles, 1997; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Oliver, 1999; Olson & Jacoby, 1974; Sharp & Sharp, 1997; Yim & Kannan, 1999). This fact has not been thoroughly studied in the tourist sector, despite having proven its presence in other market environments, in which tourists can be loyal to several destinations at the same time, which has been referred to as horizontal loyalty in recent studies (McKercher et al., 2012).

Properly understanding tourist loyalty will help identify different segments of visitors (Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, & Araña, 2011;