Comparing the attributes of online tourism information sources

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Ongoing developments in information technology (IT), particularly with respect to the Internet, have led to changes in the way tourism-related information is distributed. These changes have affected the planning and consumption patterns of tourists before and during their trips. Since the majority of tourists retrieve information from multiple information sources on the web, it is essential to define the differences in these sources and identify the distinct characteristics or properties of each source in order to understand the needs and tendencies of tourists. This study classifies online tourism information sources into four types: blogs, public websites, company websites, and social media websites. Five website attributes are identified: accessibility, security, information–trust, interaction, and personalization. This study uses data from 61 participants. Each participant answered all of the questions for four different information sources. This study then conducts an analysis of variance (ANOVA) test and a multiple comparison Scheffé test to verify differences between groups. Based on these five attributes, the results of this multiple comparison show that the overall mean values are relatively high in personal blogs, while security is the dominant attribute for public websites. The mean values of all five attributes were relatively lower in SNSes compared to the other sources.

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1. Introduction

The remarkable growth that has taken place in information technology (IT), particularly with respect to the Internet, has essentially changed the way tourism-related information is distributed. It has also changed the way people plan for and make decisions about a trip (Beldona, 2005; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Weber & Roehl, 1999). The growth in the number of Internet users throughout the world is reported to have reached nearly 2.4 billion, and the Internet is one of the most influential technologies changing tourist behavior.

In general, tourism is considered as an intrinsically information-based phenomenon. In contrast to physical products or goods, tourism products and services cannot be directly seen, felt, or heard in advance, and production and consumption occur simultaneously in the same place (Ye, Zhang, Shen, & Goh, 2014). The prices for tourism products and services are also relatively high compared to the prices of other products and services. These characteristics become an obstacle when consumers make a decision associated with tourism. That is, for consumers, making a decision and converting it into action are separate events. This gap can only be overcome by using the available information about the products and services. This information can be gathered by the consumer prior to purchase or consumption (Werthner & Klein, 1999).

The Internet is a well-known means to acquire a wide range of information and allows customers to directly communicate with online tourism information sources to request information on destinations, accommodations, attractions, restaurants, shopping, and so on (Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014). Due to the huge amount of information available, searching has become an increasingly dominant tool for travelers using the Internet (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). For example, research suggest that six in 10 of those 15 years of age or older tend to search for travel information using the Internet. The utilization ratio of domestic tourism information through smartphones has also increased, and there has been a growing interest in tourism information acquisition through social networking service (SNS) channels such as Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, Pan and Fesenmaier (2006), Xiang, Kim, Hu, and Fesenmaier (2007) have argued that understanding the online tourism domain is essential in that it provides an important means for identifying new solutions to support the travel planning process.

Meeting current trends, tourism information on the web is provided in various forms, including via public websites (Kao, Louvieris, Powell-Perry, & Buhalis, 2005; Kaplanidou & Vogt,

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2006; Law & Hsu, 2006), company websites (Hyun, 2006; Law & Hsu, 2006; Rachman & Richins, 1997), and personal websites (personal travel blogs) (Cai & Jun, 2003; Hyun, 2006; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). There has also been a lot of tourism-related research on online information searches (Beldona, 2005; Hyun, 2006; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), website evaluation (Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 2000; McKinney, Yoon, & Zahedi, 2002; Mills & Morrison, 2003; Morrison, Taylor, & Douglas, 2004; Tierney, 2000), and website success factors (Cheung & Law, 2009; Park & Gretzel, 2007).

Do tourists have any particular sources on the web that they prefer when they make a travel-related decision? (E.g. What are the preferred sources when searching for tourism information, planning a trip, or comparing alternatives?) What are the characteristics of these sources? Are there differences in attributes according to the sources?

Most of the aforementioned research employed only one type of online information source to achieve the stated research purposes. In fact, there is a shortage of research focused on categorizing, comparing, and analyzing online information sources. However, since the majority of potential tourists retrieve information through various channels on the web (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Fodness & Murray, 1998), it is important to define the differences in online tourism information sources and identify the distinct characteristics or properties of each source in order to understand the needs and tendencies of travelers. This study, therefore, investigates the characteristics of online tourism information sources that have not yet been identified. Tourists integrate multiple online sources to meet their specific needs.

In this study, using a comparison of the online tourism information sources, we identify the characteristics of tourism information sources by using a common attribute, rather than only features specific to the tourism information. This is because the wish to be able to be applied to the different service areas with the properties derived from them.

2. Literature review regarding online tourism information sources

This study first categorized online tourism information sources and identified the meaning and characteristics of each source. Second, this study drew attributes of online information sources from reviews and then analyzed the literature on various tourism-related issues such as the e-success factor and the web evaluation factor. Finally, after deriving attributes from tourism-related websites, this study investigated the relationship between online tourism information sources and those attributes.

2.1. Online tourism information sources

Many of the existing studies associated with tourism information sources tend to be limited inasmuch as they conduct research using only one type of online tourism information source. There is little research on classifying a variety of online tourism information sources and then comparing and analyzing the attributes of those sources.

Hyun (2006) analyzed the usage of tourism information websites and classified the typology of websites into portal sites, travel agency websites, online community sites, public institution sites, and others (Hyun, 2006). Pan and Fesenmaier (2001) suggested a type of tourism-related website based on the information communicated between different users in the tourism field. Depending on the information flow, they divided tourism-related websites into two groups: travel websites and tourism websites. Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) divided tourism information sources

into groups defined as social websites, personal websites, marketing (corporate) websites, and editorial websites (see Fig. 1).

Previous research suggests that online tourism information sources should be classified into the following four types: (1) personal or travel blogs and Internet cafes containing reviews of items of interest such as travel itineraries, accommodations, and restaurants, (2) tourism-related public agency websites such as the Korea Tourism Organization, local governments, and the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), (3) tourism-related business or company websites such as travel agencies, airlines, and hotels, and (4) social media websites such as Twitter (see Fig. 2).

2.2. Personal blogs

Blogs are websites that provide diverse contents often published by individuals or a group (O'Leary, 2011). Weblogs or blogs can be characterized as journals on the web where the content is arranged in reversed chronological order (Walker, 2005). A blog is one of the principle platforms for the people in sharing information in accordance with their own interests (Chen, Lu, & Tsai, 2014). A blog may contain various types of information and be utilized for a variety of purposes. For example, some bloggers use a blog as an online diary comprised of their daily life, opinions, and self-reflection. Other bloggers publish a professional journalism likely to be as well edited, as newspaper or magazine text (Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011; O'Leary, 2011). In this study, a personal blog is defined as a website where useful information (travel schedules, photos, maps, etc.) about a variety of travel experiences is published by individuals.

Blogs have recently shown their market potential in the tourism industry, and travel advertisements on famous blog sites have gradually increased as a result. In addition, blogs are an important tool to identify the needs or interests of tourists. In light of this trend, Pan et al. (2007) qualitatively analyzed the opinions posted in leading travel blogs to gain an understanding of their relationship to a specific tourism destination. This analysis was done using the semantic network analysis and content analysis methods. The results revealed the strengths, weaknesses, and the competitive environment of Charleston as a tourist destination. While attractions such as historic sites and the seaside were found to be the main strengths of the destination, major weaknesses included the weather, infrastructure, and restaurants. The results also showed that the most frequently used keywords demonstrated that travelers were expressing many different aspects of their travel experiences in their travel blogs. These included attractions, accommodations, dining options, and transportation. From a marketing perspective, the results reveal that a travel blog is a useful and an economical way to gather customer opinions. The development of information technology and the growing number of travel blogs allow destination marketers to monitor their service quality in a cost-effective way and enhance travel experiences.

Huang, Chou, and Lin (2010) explored the degree of attention and concern that consumers showed toward travel bloggers. They hoped to use an involvement theory to understand the relationship between consumer involvement levels, the advertising effects of blog messages, and consumer purchase intentions toward travel products. The results showed the affirmative impact of the advertisement effect. It also revealed that these advertisement effects directly influenced purchase intention. It also indicated that the greater degree to which travel bloggers became involved in their trips, the more they formed good impressions regarding the advertisements on travel blogs. This study pointed out that travel blogs are a positive way to deliver advertisement messages. Brand attitude has a decisive effect on the influence of advertising on purchase intention, and so brand management plays an important role in marketing.