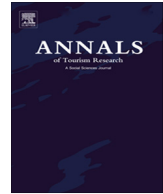




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Travelers' use of social media: A clustering approach



Suzanne Amaro^{a,*}, Paulo Duarte^b, Carla Henriques^a

^a Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, Portugal

^b Beira Interior University, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Research regarding the use of social media among travelers has mainly focused on its impact on travelers' travel planning process and there is consensus that travel decisions are highly influenced by social media. Yet, little attention has been paid to the differences among travelers regarding their use of social media for travel purposes. Based on the use of travel social media, cluster analysis was employed to identify different segments among travelers. Furthermore, the study profiles the clusters based on demographic and other travel related characteristics. The findings of this study are important to online marketers to better understand traveler's use of social media and their characteristics, in order to adapt online marketing strategies according to the profile of each segment.

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Introduction

In the past 15 years, the Internet has revolutionized the way travellers search for information (Arsal, Backman, & Baldwin, 2008). Because of the Internet's virtual capabilities, it can include many different physical sources of information, such as mass media, word-of-mouth communication and expert reports and opinions (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007) and it can provide timely and accurate information relevant to travellers. This information can be provided not only by pictures but also by videos and sounds, with the advantage of being more inexpensive than traditional means

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: samaro@estgv.ipv.pt (S. Amaro), pduarte@ubi.pt (P. Duarte), carlahenriq@estgv.ipv.pt (C. Henriques).

(Buhalis, 1998). The Internet provides nearly limitless amounts of information with relatively minimal expenditures of effort or money (Kim et al., 2007). These advantages paved the way for Social Media to become the most powerful force driving travel planning and decision making, playing a crucial role in travellers' overall travel experience. Travellers now have access to almost unlimited travel information created by other travellers. In fact, travel content created online is considered to be more credible and trustworthy than reviews from professionals or marketer information (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Travellers also have the opportunity to share their travel experiences with others.

Different sources evidence social media's importance in the travel context. For instance, in the United Kingdom, social media websites are the main resource when planning their holiday (World Travel Market, 2013) and in the Asia-Pacific region, 44% of leisure travelers use social media platforms for advice and inspiration regarding travel destinations (eMarketer, 2013). According to TripAdvisor's TripBarometer (2014b), 89% of global travellers are influenced by online travel reviews when choosing their accommodation. In fact, more than 50% of travellers actually change their original travel plans after using social media websites (Mediabistro, 2012).

On the supplier side, according to TripAdvisor (2014b), 96% of hoteliers say reviews are influential in generating bookings. Fifty per cent of travel companies claim that direct bookings have been generated from social media (Mediabistro, 2012). In terms of money, Compete Incorporated (2007) estimates that consumer generated content influences 10 billion dollars in online travel bookings.

Given Social Media's importance in the travel industry, it has been an emerging research topic. A recent literature review found 270 publications addressing the use of social media in the travel context, with the first four publications in 2007 (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Research has focused on social media's impact on travel decisions (e.g. Sparks & Browning, 2011; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009; Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011), factors that influence travellers to write online reviews (e.g. Ribeiro, Amaro, Seabra, & Abrantes, 2014; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008), motivations to use social media (e.g. Chung & Buhalis, 2008b; Parra-López, Gutiérrez-Taño, Díaz-Armas, & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2012) and social media's adoption and use by tourism and hospitality firms (e.g. Hotels) and destination marketing organizations (e.g. Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Hee, Lee, & Law, 2012). However, studies focusing on social media users' demographic characteristics and behaviors are scarce. Travellers have different behaviors regarding the use of social media for travel planning (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to identify different segments of social media users for travel purposes and identify the significant differences between the segments. While there may be many studies about individuals' use of social media in general, this paper specifically examines traveler's use of social media for travel purposes and relates this use with traveler's characteristics. Such knowledge is useful to hospitality and tourism managers, as well as travel social media marketers, in order to better understand the needs and characteristics of each segment and decide marketing strategies accordingly.

Literature review

Motivations to use social media

As many other products and services, travellers need to search for information to make decisions, such as which destination, airline company or hotel to choose. Furthermore, compared to other services or products, travel normally requires more information processing before making a decision, because the purchase of travel products is considered to be highly risky (Huang, Chou, & Lin, 2010). Indeed, to consume tourism products, individuals must leave their daily environment and move to a geographical different place (Werthner & Ricci, 2004) and when making travel decisions, only descriptions are available (Werthner & Klein, 1999). On the other hand, consumers cannot try travel products/services before purchasing, making it difficult to evaluate the value for money before the actual experience (Kim, Qu, & Kim, 2009). In this context, information search decreases uncertainty associated with travel, enhancing the quality of tourists' trips (Fodness & Murray, 1997).

Travellers find motivation to use social media for travel purposes in the perceived functional (informational) benefits that social media provide (e.g. "social media tools enable me to keep up to

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