Research Paper

The role of prior experience in the perception of a tourism destination in user-generated content

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a critical reflection on the effect of prior experience of a destination and the change in users' perceptions following exposure to user-generated content (UCG). Among a panel of 2505 American internet users, people who had and had not visited particular destinations were exposed to the same stimuli materials derived from UGC and the results compared. The findings show that having visited a destination does reduce the likelihood that users will change their opinions after being exposed to online social media content; the same can be said about people who are more educated. Meanwhile younger and less well-educated people, and those who have not visited a given destination, are more likely to change their opinion about it based on a brief exposure to UGC. The results of this study contribute to recent studies on social media and smart tourism, in that tourism providers can take advantage of online data to better design and deliver their products and services to tourists. This might include, for example, better directing specific UGC to relevant audiences. Moreover, this study provides evidence for future research on the role of UGC and its effects on end-users.

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1. Introduction

In the tourism domain, more and more information platforms are being based on online data continuously produced by people (Komninos, Pallot & Schaffers, 2013; Rihova, Buhalis, Moital & Gouthro, 2014). Tourists are at the same time co-creators and users of such online content throughout their entire tourism experience: before, during, and after their trip. This engagement in content co-creation may involve providers, consumers, and suppliers (Neuhofer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2013). One of the critical tasks for tourism suppliers in managing the online presence of a tourism destination is to understand the effect of user-generated content (UCG) on travelers' perceptions of a destination itself.

Online content, especially that produced by users on social media platforms, is one of the main sources of information for prospective travelers, who are the public interested in the destination, and such online content is also becoming a major source of information for intelligent information platforms. An analysis of the drivers affecting the perception change about a place following exposure to online content might therefore be able to provide theoretical evidence of the key variables in this communication/ decision-making process.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant to *smart* destinations, intended in this study as to denote those destinations that take advantage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to better provide their products and services to tourists. Buhalis and Amaranggana (2014) argue that by applying the *smart*ness concept to address travelers' needs before, during, and after their trip, destinations can increase their level of competitiveness. Indeed, from a supplier's perspective, *smart* tourism makes intensive use of the technological infrastructure in order to enhance the tourism experience of tourists and help local stakeholders to better manage their offers thanks to the data produced within the destination. Such (big) data are gathered, managed, and processed by means of the technology infrastructure. Thus, a critical aspect for tourism is understanding which online data are more effective and likely to change potential tourists' beliefs about a destination after their exposure to such online content (Lehto, Kim & Morrison, 2006; Li, Pan, Zhang & Smith, 2009). Therefore, understanding how to manage the online content produced by users represents a challenge for tourism players (Gretzel, 2011; Soteriades, 2012; Wang, Li & Li, 2013).

This study presents a critical reflection on the effect of experience of a given destination and the change in perception following exposure to online content, particularly content produced by other users. The results of this study contribute to the research on *smart* tourism, providing evidence for the need to better direct

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the content produced by users to relevant audiences, and to better understand which content can be more relevant in changing the perception of a destination by end-users exposed to it. For example, a *smart* tourism destination can take advantage by filtering the amount of information according to the experience with the destination that a user might have, or according to his/her age, country of origin, personal interests, etc. Another aim of this paper is to provide practical evidence with regard to which variables are important to be considered when designing intelligent systems for data interpretation and distribution.

In order to investigate such aspects, groups of people who had visited given destinations and others who had not visited them were exposed to the same online content (stimulus materials derived from social media content). Participants' perceptions before and after exposure to this online content were collected and analyzed. Changes in their perception toward the given destinations were measured by asking them the same questions before and after exposure to stimulus materials. After presenting relevant literature, methodology, and results of this study, theoretical and practical implications are discussed in the conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1. User-generated content and its role in smart tourism

On the one hand, ICT could help in generating value-added experiences for tourists and by improving the efficiency of the products and services offered by tourism organizations (Gretzel, 2011; Neuhofer et al., 2013). On the other hand, tourists are engaged in tourism destinations. They are well-connected and well-informed, active critics. They demand highly personalized services, engageing both socially and technologically, discussing dynamically through social media, co-creating experience, contributing to content, and utilizing their devices in multiple touch-points (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2014).

Moreover, several new tools and technological innovations have emerged in the tourism domain, enhancing communication exchange between tourism operators and tourists, such as the Internet of things, cloud computing, big data, and Social Local Mobile). Those new tools have already deeply affected the experience offered to tourists by both individual firms and tourist destinations (Lamsfus & Alzua-Sorzabal, 2013; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2014).

Tourism has therefore become more efficient thanks to ICTs, as a result of tools that are changing the way end-users access information. In this respect, the use of smartphones and social media are evidence of the potential for tourism destinations that make use of ICTs: being at the same time tools capable of accessing, recording, sharing, and publishing a huge amount of data (UGC and digital traces), and also capable of providing aggregated pieces of information to their users, just-in-time and just-in-place. Moreover, unlike other domains for which the role of mobile communication is just a benefit for the consumer, in the tourism domain smartphones and mobile devices have become part of the tourist experience (Kim Park, & Morrison, 2008) and represent key devices in the *smart* tourism domain.

Smart tourism is characterized by a broad range of features and facets, which are not yet fixed within the tourism research community. Being a *smart* tourism destination generally indicates the efficient management of several sectors within a destination through the use of ICTs (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2014). A conceptual contribution regarding the main components of *smart* tourism has been proposed by Germann Molz (2012): (i) *smart* tourism is related to connectivity considering web-based applications, geo-localized interfaces, and location capabilities such as GPS. These features allow tourists to orient themselves, and actively drive them to places otherwise unreachable or difficult to discover; *smart* tourism is also related to the (ii) concept of users as active co-producers of content (civic engagement); as well as to (iii) immersive experiences through new technologies, such as augmented reality; (iv) *smart* tourism also has a social component, as it may offer the opportunity to interact with the local population or with other tourists in the surrounding area; and finally, (v) *smart* tourism has the potential to improve the social and environmental sustainability. Therefore, ICTs can promote awareness towards the hosting culture and population by generating a shift from the perception of a tourist as merely an 'economic resource' to a 'knowledgeable resource' (Germann Molz, 2012).

In this context, the amount of data produced by social media is an integral part of *smart* tourism: online data continuously produced and numerous flows of information that can be analyzed in a quantitative way, e.g. open data in order to manage queues in museums (Groen, 2013), or with a qualitative approach, e.g. to better interpret the effects of such online content on other users accessing it (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012; Rihova et al., 2014). Thus, investigating the effect of the online information search behavior in understanding and learning about a destination by prospective travelers with different experiences with a destination is relevant in order to create efficient *smart* applications that can generate added-value to a territory and its community.

2.2. The effect of prior destination experience on online information search behavior

As reported by Bagozzi (1981), prior experience can be an important determinant of behavior change and can shape intentions toward an object. In the tourism domain, Kerstetter and Cho (2004) noted that prior knowledge might influence an individual's information search behavior and affect the credibility of sources used for information search processes. In the online context, Lehto et al. (2006) showed that prior experience and knowledge of a destination influenced both the types of content searched and the time spent during an online information search session while planning a trip. Moreover, according to Cheung, Luo, Ling Sia and Chen (2009, p. 17), users can "detect the level of confirmation/disconfirmation between the received information and their prior beliefs relating to the reviewed product/service through various direct or indirect experiences'.

Those contributions are particularly relevant for studies on the effect of online information on the mental representation of a tourism destination. In particular, Cheung et al. (2009) underlined how, in the online context, the message receiver is more likely to rely on information that confirms his or her prior beliefs but perceives this as a belief change. From a social psychology viewpoint, as anticipated by McGarty, Yzerbyt, and Spears (2002) with the concept of 'illusory correlation paradigm', people tend to associate other meanings than those contained in the data, hence creating a sense of illusion. This paradigm can emerge in situations where a person lacks experience of an object and uses inferences/associations/stereotypes to allow him/herself to make sense of the situation (Crocker & Weber, 1983). Thus, an association with a mental category might be guided by personal background and knowledge.

The information search literature in marketing and tourism has focused on investigating the effect of online content on image development, and such studies derived mainly from the tripartite model of tourism destination image (Gunn, 1972; Crompton, 1979; Gartner, 1989; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Moving from this theoretical background, Li et al. (2009) proposed the terms *baseline image* (mental representation derived from passive or ongoing information gathering), and *enhanced image* (mental