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ARTICLE

Perceived influence on behavior of user-generated content on social network sites: An empirical application in the hotel sector



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Abstract This study develops an integrative model to explain the influence on behavior, as perceived by users, of the content posted by other users on social network sites. In particular, empirical research was carried out in the hotel sector, where social network sites are widely used by individuals in the pre-purchase stage (i.e. information search and choice). The results, obtained from a sample of 776 social network users in Spain and Portugal, indicated that the influence on behavior, as perceived by the individuals, of the content about hotels published by other users on the main social network site used by those individuals, is determined by the information value, the source credibility, and the interaction between both variables, but not by the similarity between the user and the generators of content on the social network sites. © 2013 ESIC & AEMARK. Published by Elsevier España, S.L.U. All rights reserved.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Redes sociales;
Valor de la información;
Credibilidad de la fuente;
Similaridad

Influencia percibida sobre comportamiento del contenido generado en las redes sociales: una aplicación empírica en el sector hotelero

Resumen Este estudio desarrolla un modelo integrador para explicar la influencia sobre el comportamiento, tal y como la percibe el usuario, del contenido publicado por otros usuarios en las redes sociales. En particular, la investigación empírica se llevó a cabo en el sector hotelero, donde las redes sociales son ampliamente utilizadas por los individuos en la etapa de pre-compra (esto es, búsqueda de información y elección). Los resultados, obtenidos de

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una muestra de 776 usuarios de redes sociales en España y Portugal, indicaron que la influencia percibida sobre el comportamiento, tal y como la percibe el individuo, del contenido sobre hoteles publicados por otros usuarios en la principal red social utilizada por ese individuo, está determinada por el valor de la información, la credibilidad de la fuente y la interacción entre ambas variables, pero no por la similitud entre el usuario y los creadores de contenidos en las redes sociales.

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Introduction

Consumer psychology of tourism and hospitality is a field of knowledge that is receiving growing attention from psychologists, social scientists, and marketing scholars, among others (Crouch, Perdue, Timmermans, & Uysal, 2004; Uysal, Perdue, & Sirgy, 2012). In particular, a common way of approximating consumer psychology is to consider the three stages of the purchase process: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2002). The present study is focused on the first stage, where the information search and choice involve an important mental and physical effort for individuals. In line with Mullen and Johnson (1990), in this stage intentions and behaviors are influenced by different internal mechanisms of individuals such as beliefs and emotions, which are the result of the stimulus situation and the socio-cultural context. With this in mind, this paper aims to take a further step in research on consumer psychology of tourism and hospitality by investigating the influence of user-generated content in social media on user behavior in a new context characterized by the generalized use of the Internet (MacKay & Vogt, 2012).

In the industries of tourism and hospitality, the Internet has become an essential tool for users in their decision-making processes (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011; Law, Leung, & Buhalis, 2009), allowing them to search for information on products and services, compare and evaluate the alternatives, and finally make reservations online. Thus, the Internet promotes consumer centrality (Niininen, Buhalis, & March, 2007), allowing individuals to select and customize their products and, therefore, their experiences. More recently, the emergence of Web 2.0 has revolutionized the use of the Internet as a communication channel. The term "Web 2.0" includes a wide range of electronic applications, also called "social media" (e.g. social network sites, recommendation websites, blogs, and photo and video sharing platforms), that facilitate interactions among individuals as well as among users and companies.

The impact of social media has been especially important in the industries of tourism and hospitality (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), given the social dimension of behavior in this context (Law et al., 2009). More concretely, there is a tendency among individuals to share their experiences with other people through publishing their recommendations, opinions, photos, or videos (so called "user-generated content") about a tourist destination or a tourism service on the Internet (Buhalis & Law, 2008). In particular, the present study

focuses on the social network sites, the main social media used by the companies in the context under investigation (i.e. the hotel sector). According to a report by Fundetec (2013), in Spain the social network sites are the main social media used by hotels to manage, among other aspects, the brand image and customer relationships. In particular, the use of social network sites has significantly increased over the past year, varying from 24.4% in 2012 to 48.0% in 2013 in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises, and from 44.1% to 63.0% in the case of large firms.

Social network sites are web-based services that, through a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), allow individuals to publish comments and multimedia content, thereby making them available to their contacts. In relation to the penetration of the social network sites in society, a report published by Pew Research Center (2012) indicates that the world ranking is led by the United Kingdom (52.0% of the population uses social network sites), while Spain is the fifth ranking country (49.0% of the population). A paradigmatic example of a social network site is Facebook, the platform most used by individuals to post content (e.g. photos, videos, or comments) about their life experiences and, in particular, their encounters with products and services. For example, in the case of Spain, Facebook had 17 million users in 2012, while Tuenti and LinkedIn only had 9.7 and 2.7 million, respectively (Comscore, 2013). For its part, in the context of tourism, the study developed by Redshift Research (2013) emphasizes that 87.0% of international travelers less than 34 years old use Facebook to search for information about their trips.

From a marketing point of view, it is necessary to examine the impact of social network sites since these applications generate a particular form of electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, so-called e-WOM, which influences consumer behavior. More concretely, the content published by some users on the social network sites may affect other individuals' attitudes and intentions in a consumption context (Allsop, Basset, & Hoskins, 2007; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). However, in line with Leung et al. (2013), although the use of social network sites is generalized among users and firms in tourism, more research is needed so that scholars and practitioners better understand how to manage these media. With this in mind, the general objective of this study is to examine the factors determining the influence on behavior, as perceived by individuals, of the content about hotels published by other users on the main social network site used by those individuals. In this sense, the main contribution of this study is the development and empirically testing, in the specific context

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