



Online representation of Switzerland as a tourism destination: An exploratory research on a Chinese microblogging platform



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ABSTRACT

This research explores how tourism-related user-generated content is distributed by topics with reference to the online image of Switzerland as a tourism destination. Main goal of this study is to investigate online representation of Switzerland by Chinese travelers. Results show that the most mentioned topics in the Chinese microblogging platform are tourism related products and services. Chinese tourists express that the destination offers a pleasant atmosphere and a satisfying tourism experience. Moreover, people express their desire to visit Switzerland, discuss stories they heard from others about traveling to this country, and share information sources about Switzerland from third parties' blogs or websites.

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1. Introduction

Tourism communication is a strategic tool, which combines communication techniques, marketing concepts, available information about the place to visit (e.g. tourism destination) and the hospitality services this place is offering (Boyer & Viallon, 1994).

In the last decade, tourism industry has been facing an intensive shift in a global context due to the communication and marketing opportunities offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). For instance, tourism destinations were given an opportunity to use online communication channels for their promotional activities globally. Additionally, ICTs allowed the generation of electronic word-of-mouth, which in turn gathers countless online discourses. These discourses are becoming more influential than official sources in the decision making to visit destination by prospective travelers (Inversini, Cantoni, & Buhalis, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Such discourses can be found online in the form of user-generated contents (UGCs), such as travel blogs, travel review websites, and virtual communities, and might be analyzed as efficient sources of information for the investigation of the online representation of different objects, for instance tourism destinations.

Moreover, online discourses might contribute to the formation of the online representation of a tourism destination, leveraging what other people perceive and write about the destination in the online context (Govers & Go, 2009; Marchiori, Cantoni, & Fesenmaier, 2013). A pleasant travel experience, full of enjoyable images, which is reported in a blog or depicted in a photo album shared online might draw an attractive profile of a tourism destination. Vice versa, a post in a discussion forum talking about a negative encounter/experience at a destination might depict the destination a blemished portrayal. In this online communication environment, tourism managers in charge of promotion might receive an added value and an important input from the understanding of the online representation of their destination by the demand side—current or potential tourists. Indeed, the attractiveness of a destination and the way it is depicted in online discourses can affect the decision of a potential tourist to visit one or another touristic location. Tourism managers can gather factual data (e.g. reported experiences and opinions) of tourists' perceptions about their destinations, and infer strengths and limits, so to refine and enhance their marketing strategies.

In this research, one destination has been chosen as a case study for the investigation of online discourses' topics covered in online media. Switzerland, as a prospective place to be visited, and Chinese-speaking web users, as prospective visitors, will be analyzed in this study.

Mainland China has been remarked as a prospect market of outbound tourism with great potentialities as the Chinese population is getting affluent, and a growing number of them can afford to

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travel abroad (Li, Harrill, Uvsal, Burnett, & Zhan, 2010; Sparks & Pan, 2009). Meanwhile, the behavior of Chinese traveling to foreign places in general and Western Europe in particular has only recently started to be looked by tourism researchers (Cochrane, 2008; Prayag, Cohen, & Yan, 2013; Sparks & Pan, 2009).

According to a recent survey by Ctrip.com (Xinhua, 2012a, 2012b), in 2012 Switzerland tops the list as the most desirable European destinations among Chinese travelers. The results of the survey showed that 80% of respondents aged between 20 and 45 wanted to travel to Switzerland, as a top choice among other European countries including France, Greece, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. This trend has been found also in the report of Swiss authorities (FSO, 2011), which suggests that the overnight stay by Chinese visitors' (excluding Hong Kong) in Switzerland grew strongly in 2009 (+26.8%), with a prediction of strong continuation in the years to come. Moreover, Chinese travelers are very active online both in terms of searching travel-related information, and sharing travel experiences after their trips (Thraenhart, 2011). Recent reports released by China Travel Trends, China Outbound Tourism Research Institute, and Asia Pacific Travel Association state that Chinese travelers are more likely to get their information through social media, rather than visiting official websites. Among all types of social networks in Mainland China, microblog is gaining considerable popularity. More than a half of the Internet users, specifically 50.9% (274 million), use microblog, also known as Weibo in Chinese. The scale of overall microblog users had a burst of growing speed during 2011, and now steps into a high level utilization. It has been also highlighted that the utilization ratio of using mobile for microblogging keeps growing among mobile internet users, presenting the highest growth rate among all the mobile applications, and rises to 43.8% (CINIC, 2012).

Considering the abovementioned scenario, following mutual interests between Chinese tourists and their desired destination: Switzerland, also considering the popularity of the microblog in mainland China, as well as taking into consideration the research gap identified within this topic, an interesting convergence appears. Therefore, authors could define the following research question: *What are the covered topics about Switzerland as a tourism destination on a Chinese microblogging platform?*

Within this study, topics extracted from the microblog posts will be explored, together with the sentiment expressed through each microblog post.

2. Literature review

2.1. User-generated contents and tourism destinations

According to Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2006, p. 4), user-generated-content (UGC) is "a mixture of fact and opinion, impression and sentiment, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences, and even rumors". People express their opinions and narrate their experiences, these opinions are published in the online environment, then aggregated and indexed and could be seen by a number of people, thus providing mediated experiences to other users. Major part of tourism-related UGCs are representations of tourists' experiences, which present feelings and judgments about a certain tourism topic and might have an impact, being it positive or negative, onto how the destination is perceived by others. Tourism related UGCs can influence travel decision-making process of other potential tourists (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2014; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, and Backman (2010) pointed out that both potential and current travelers have more trust in peers

than in marketing organizations. They are eager to be engaged in online travel communities mainly as they want to get direct information from experienced travelers who have already been to the tourism destinations. Such information sources are the most influential and preferred ones during the preparation stage of the travel decision-making process. A report by UNWTO (2008) showed that travelers may trust user-generated reviews more than they trust travel agents' content: 20% of respondents said that the websites like TripAdvisor were the most reliable sources of information; only 12% declared that travel agents' own websites were the most reliable, followed by 11% of travelers who chose search engines as a preferred source on travel related information retrieval.

2.2. Destination image versus reputation

Destination image can be generally summarized as: "the perceptions of individual destination attributes . . . [and] the holistic impression made by the destination. [It] . . . consists of functional characteristics, concerning the more tangible aspects of the destination, and psychological characteristics, concerning the more intangible aspects. Furthermore, [it] . . . Can be arranged on a continuum ranging from traits which can be commonly used to compare all destinations to those which are unique to very few destinations" (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993, p. 8). According to Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), and Tasci, Gartner, and Cavusgil (2007), destination image studies find their main application in destination branding analysis, focusing on the way destination managers project destination narratives to customers, and on the way customers perceived those messages to enhance their personal travel experience. However, a standard definition of destination image is far from being established in the tourism research field, and might overlap with related concepts, such as branding and reputation.

Researchers agree that even if destination image is different from destination branding, branding is created through image(s) (Gartner, 1993; Govers & Go, 2009). Conversely, destination image differ from the concept of reputation. A helpful clarification comes from studies in corporate communication in which image and reputation are constructs well-defined as distinct from each other. Reputation is considered the overall attractiveness of the company to all of its constituents, a sort of meta-belief: a belief about belief and evaluations which might help in the absence of direct experience (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). From this perspective, image cannot overlap with the reputation of the company, as image is a mental representation of what an individual thinks about a company. On the contrary, reputation is what is narrated about a company among a group of stakeholders. Thus, reputation requires verbalization of the image, and the opinion expressed must be shared among a group of stakeholders (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2014). In this direction, an analysis of the factors influencing destination image formation reveals the basis for the analysis of reputation: studies on attitude determinants in tourism destination choice (Um & Crompton, 1990) argue that external (social stimuli), and internal inputs (personal belief) concur on the formulation of a tourism destination choice at different levels. In particular, reputation can be considered part of the external inputs/social stimuli (Howard & Sheth, 1969) (e.g. word-of-mouth), which can affect the information processing, and in turn the selection of a place to visit. Thus, as it has been underlined by Marchiori and Cantoni (2014), applying those aspects to the online domain it is possible to identify how social stimuli such as electronic word-of-mouth can be represented by online conversations published on social media, with the related research need to better understand their effect on the way a destination is represented online.

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