



The effects of perceived relevance of travel blogs' content on the behavioral intention to visit a tourist destination



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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is characterized by ever-increasing competition, causing destinations to seek new methods to attract tourists. Traditionally, a decision to visit a destination is interpreted, in part, as a rational calculation of the costs/benefits of a set of alternative destinations, which were derived from external information sources, including e-WOM (word-of-mouth) or travelers' blogs. There are numerous travel blogs available for people to share and learn about travel experiences. Evidence shows, however, that not every blog exerts the same degree of influence on tourists. Therefore, which characteristics of these travel blogs attract tourists' attention and influence their decisions, becomes an interesting research question. Based on the concept of information relevance, a model is proposed for interrelating various attributes specific to blog's content and perceived enjoyment, an intrinsic motivation of information systems usage, to mitigate the above-mentioned gap. Results show that novelty, understandability, and interest of blogs' content affect behavioral intention through blog usage enjoyment. Finally, theoretical and practical implications are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a popular activity in modern life and has contributed significantly to economic development for decades. However, competition in almost every sector of this industry has intensified during recent years (Horng, Liu, Chou, & Tsai, 2012; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008); tourism service providers are now finding it difficult to acquire and keep customers (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Ho, 2007). Therefore, methods of attracting tourists to a destination are receiving greater attention from researchers, policy makers, and marketers. Before choosing a destination, tourists may search for information to support their decision-making (Fodness & Murry, 1997; Grant, Clarke, & Kyriazis, 2008; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). By understanding the relationships between various information sources' characteristics and destination choice, tourism managers can improve their marketing efforts.

Recently, personal blogs have become an important source for acquiring travel information (Lin & Huang, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008; Scott, 2001; Singh, Veron-Jackson, & Cullinane, 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). With personal blogs, many tourists can share their travel experiences with others and potential tourists can search for and respond to others' experiences. Therefore, a blog can be seen as an asynchronous and many-to-many channel for conveying travel-related electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). By

using these forms of inter-personal influence media, companies in this industry can create a competitive advantage (Litvin et al., 2008; Singh et al., 2008).

Weblogs are now widely available; therefore, it is not surprising that the quantity of available e-WOM has increased (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) to an extent where information overload has become a pressing issue (Chen, Shang, & Kao, 2009; Frías, Rodríguez, & Castaneda, 2008; Grant et al., 2008; Park & Lee, 2008). Empirical evidence, however, indicates that people may not consult numerous blogs for advice; the degree of inter-personal influence varies from blog to blog (Zafropoulos, 2012). Determining which characteristics of these travel blogs attract tourists' attention and influence their travel decisions now becomes an interesting question. The concept of information relevance (Xu & Chen, 2006) is adapted to describe these blog characteristics and a research model is created to answer this question.

The effects of various information sources, including e-traveling service providers, have been examined extensively in recent literature (Frías et al., 2008). The effects of information from travelers' blogs, however, have received relatively little attention (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012); studies investigating the effects of information relevance in the context of information overload are particularly scant. The purpose of this study, therefore, is twofold. The first is to further our understanding of tourists' information search and destination choice behavior by including perceived relevance of travel blogs into the traditional paradigm of tourism decision-making. The second is

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to construct and test a model regarding the formation of behavioral intention to visit a destination, revealing how travel blogs may influence a tourist's future behavioral intention.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination choice and travelers' information searches

With highly involved products and services like travel, tourists are likely to spend a significant amount of time searching information before their trip (Fodness & Murry, 1997; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Tourists may rely on external information when choosing a destination and making onsite decisions, such as accommodations, transportation, attractions, and even shopping (Fodness & Murry, 1998; Hyde, 2008). An information search is defined as an expressed need in response to internal and external contingencies to consult various amounts and types of information sources prior to a purchase decision to facilitate trip planning (Fodness & Murry, 1997; Hyde, 2008).

In the past, travelers mainly found tourism information from commercial sources in order to form a destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Destination image affects the perceived quality of, satisfaction with, behavioral intention towards, and willingness to choose that destination (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001). Destinations with positive images have a higher probability of being included and chosen in the decision-making process (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bigné et al., 2001; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

A destination image is defined as a mental portrayal of the virtual experience, or what the experience might look like in a future trip (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007). It is composed of a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions about that destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Destination images, however, seem to develop over time from not only commercial sources, but also social stimuli, such as friends' and relatives' recommendations or word-of-mouth (Fodness & Murry, 1997). A handful of impressions are selected and elaborated in the individual's mind to form the mental construct (Reynolds, 1965).

Information can also be used to minimize the perceptions of risk and uncertainty involved with certain destinations (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Money & Crofts, 2003). Tourism is an experience product characterized by intangibility and uncertainty, both at the time of purchase and consumption. Therefore, higher risk is involved when selecting a destination. High perceived risk may lead consumers to rely on a certain mode of communication, such as personal sources or WOM (Jeong & Jang, 2011). Positive WOM was found to increase purchase intention by creating a favorable brand image and reducing risk perception (Jeong & Jang, 2011).

2.2. Travelers' blogs as the e-WOM platform

Weblog (blog) is one of the latest and most quickly expanding forms of media for Internet communication and publication (Scott, 2001; Singh et al., 2008). It differs from other types of web pages in both format and content. Tourists tend to store their travel experiences or destination images in story form (Govers et al., 2007), leading to blogs that normally consist of dated entries in a "story telling" format (Blood, 2004). Many blogs also allow readers to post comments to individual entries, much as they would in a thread on a discussion forum. The blog format, then, lends itself smoothly for use in various collaborative tasks, such as experience sharing. Advancement of media technologies has also allowed bloggers to include multimedia materials like photos, films and audio in their blogs.

Blog writing is characterized by a strong sense of the blogger's personality and point of view (Dave, 2003; Hollenbaugh, 2010).

Individuals can now use blogs to conveniently describe and share their personal subjective experiences or opinions with friends, or even strangers. People can write about their destination images and provide others with functional cues, such as better hotels or essential attractions, and can even use photos or films to illustrate the places they have been. Prospective tourists can search blogs for subjective travel experiences or respond to others' experiences (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). In this regard, a blog can be seen as a social medium that carries user generated content for WOM distribution (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), and blog posts may represent a type of written WOM (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). In short, a blog can be viewed as a many-to-many and asynchronous platform that provides a personal, interactive process for communication and e-WOM exchange (Litvin et al., 2008) and produces interpersonal influences (Sigala, 2012; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012).

2.3. External factors: information attributes

2.3.1. Value of external information

Information search can be viewed as a goal-oriented activity aimed at reaching valuable outcomes (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Consumers gain value from processing retrieved information in order to reach a better decision (Grant et al., 2008). Consumer value comes primarily from the information medium's characteristics such as availability of information (Frías et al., 2008). Information source characteristics that have been studied include, but are not limited to: (1) type and amount of external stimuli (information sources), such as movies, guidebooks, magazines, and the Internet (Fodness & Murry, 1998; Frías et al., 2008; Gartner, 1993); (2) quality and quantity of the information (Burgess, 1978; Grant et al., 2008); and (3) content and format of the information (Grant et al., 2008; Mercille, 2005).

Travel blogs represent one of the recent media for personal publication and interpersonal communication. Based on blogs' ownership including individual, business and government, a typology of travel blog was developed (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008); each type of travel blog has specific content, target audience and mode of communication. Among which, personal journal blog is the only one that possess almost user generated content. Other types including corporate blog and government blog may be created in-house or by external professional bloggers, and is more or less commercial, factual or political oriented. Therefore, travel blogs other than personal journal blog will be excluded from this study.

Among various blogs, personal journal type of blog accounts for 70% of all blogs, and is almost single authored (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). Hence, an author's characteristics, such as gender, age, personality, motivation, involvement, credibility, identity and anonymity, self disclosiveness, self-expression, ability etc., may have tremendous impacts on his/her production and/or readers' perceptions of the blog's content. For example, Armstrong and McAdams (2009) found that male authors were deemed more credible than female authors. These factors, however, have received relatively ample attention from literature (e.g., Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Chesney & Su, 2010; Hollenbaugh, 2010; Hsu & Tsou, 2011; Lin & Huang, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008; Para-López, Gutiérrez-Taño, Díaz-Armas, & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2012).

Information quality and quantity are two information attributes that influence the information processing strategies deployed by consumers (Grant et al., 2008), and may impact the relationship between information source and destination image (Frías et al., 2008). Travel product selection requires more abundant, higher quality information since the tourism product is complex and difficult to evaluate (Grant et al., 2008; Zafropoulos, 2012). The roles these two information attributes play deserve further investigation; however, this issue has attracted relatively little attention in the tourism field (Frías et al., 2008).

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