



## Intentions to use social media in organizing and taking vacation trips

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### ABSTRACT

This work proposes a theoretical model to explain the factors determining the intentions to use social media when organizing and taking vacation trips. Understanding the antecedents of the tourists' use of these technologies is considered to be crucial for organization managers and destination policy makers. This use of social media technologies determines which elements of the trip might be used by the tourist thus having a great impact on the market. The model and its hypotheses have been tested by means of an approach based on structural equations with the PLS technique. The study was conducted on a sample of 404 individuals who normally use the Internet and had traveled on vacation in the previous 12 months. The conclusions of the study reveal that the intentions to use social media are directly influenced by the perceived benefits of that use (functional, psychological and hedonic and social); however, the costs do not significantly affect the predisposition to use such technologies. It is also shown that there is a series of incentives such as altruism, availability, individual predisposition or trust in the contributions of others which facilitate and promote the use of this type of technology when organizing and taking tourist trips.

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### 1. Introduction

In the last few years, we have seen a huge growth of user-generated content on the Internet through the use of a series of tools that have generically been defined as online social media, although other terms such as Web 2.0 technologies have also been used (Sigala & Marinidis, 2009). This area is one of the fastest growing segments on the web, and it includes social sharing of opinions through blogs and microblogs (i.e. Blogger and Twitter), social photo and video sharing (i.e. Flickr and YouTube), social sharing of knowledge (i.e. Wikipedia), social bookmarking (i.e. Delicious) and many other forms of user-generated content. These social media tools allow users to search, organize, share, annotate and contribute to contents in a collaborative way.

It is of vital importance that tourism organization managers and destination policy makers understand the antecedents of the tourists' use and adoption of social media before, during and after their trips due to the impact of these collaborative behaviors on tourists' decisions about the choice of all the elements of the trip (destination, accommodation, activities, restaurants, ...).

In fact, virtual tourist communities in which tourists exchange opinions and experiences have been around for more than 10 years now, but lately we have seen an expansion of Web 2.0 technologies

into tourism. Thus, before and during vacation trips, tourists use the Internet to obtain information about the trips, share their experiences and compare services related to the trip. The use of tools to share photos and videos, to blog and to microblog, as well as the use of podcasts, customer ratings and evaluation systems, maps, etc. in order to organize trips or contribute experiences and recommendations, is becoming generalized (Chung & Buhalis, 2008) in what has been named as Travel 2.0 (Adam, Cobos, & Liu, 2007).

While the importance of the use of social media in the context of tourist experiences has been widely studied in recent years, most studies have been related to specific tools (i.e. blogs or photo sharing) or to relational environments of a single community (i.e. TripAdvisor), (Chung, 2008; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004a). However, the collaborative behaviors and the use of technologies that support them go beyond the context of a specific tool and even belonging, or not, to a particular community. Individuals access the Internet to seek information, to communicate, or simply to pass the time (Rodgers & Sheldon, 2002) and it is evident that tourists will increasingly use technologies to express their opinions and to share information. (O'Connor, 2008).

This work addresses the use of social media to organize and take vacation trips from an overall perspective and is not restricted to the use of a specific tool or to one community. That use is related not only to the different phases of the trip (before, during and after) but also to the different levels of use (consulting and/or contributing content).

The purpose and the importance of this work is to expand the existing models on the tourists' use of these technologies by

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testing a model based on previous concepts. This study has three objectives: to construct a theoretical model on the use of social media on vacation trips that contemplates, in a generalized fashion, the set of these tools; to test and refine the proposed theoretical model by means of structural equations, using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique; and to evaluate the strength and direction of the influence of those factors on their use.

## 2. Theoretical foundations and development hypotheses

In this study, we start from the models that Wang and Fesenmaier (2004a) proposed regarding the active participation of members of a travel community. The model has been generalized to consider the intentions to use social media in general and not only in participation in travel communities.

Our proposed model considers the intention to use social media in the process of organizing and taking vacation trips as dependent variable. It suggests that these intentions are influenced by the perceptions of the benefits (functional, social and hedonic benefits) of using them and by the costs entailed in their use (effort, difficulty of use and loss of privacy). The model also indicates that there is a series of variables that motivate, facilitate and promote their use (technological predisposition and skills, trust, altruism, availability of and access to the technology, and the socio-technological environment).

The following sections present a description of, and justification for, each of the intentions to use, benefits, costs and incentives considered in this study, including the items that will be tested in the model. The hypotheses to be tested are also put forward.

### 2.1. Intentions to use social media

The nature of the intentions to use has been analyzed by a series of elements suggested by previous relevant works (Dasgupta, Granger, & McGarry, 2002; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004a; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). The first element to be considered is the tourists' perception of how the travelers' contributions about their vacation experiences are going to evolve: commenting on social networks, uploading photos and videos and evaluating the trip. Similarly, the tourist's own intention to increase his/her use of the tools is also considered a variable of the intentions to use. The final element considered is the intention of recommending and encouraging friends and family to use these technologies. So, in order to verify these intentions, the following items will be tested in our questionnaire:

- (a) The perception on how contributions are going to evolve (variable INTENT1).
- (b) The own intention to increase his/her participation in social media (INTENT2).
- (c) The intentions of recommending the use to family and friends (INTENT3).

However, little is still known about the travelers' behavior and motivation to use social media and the types of benefits and values that they derive from their engagement in online trip planning processes. Exploring the perceived value that travelers gain from social media portals is very important, as it has been widely recognized that consumer behavior is better understood when analyzed through perceived value (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997; Jensen, 1996; Nilson, 1992). Specifically, perceived values are found to be one of the most influential factors of customer loyalty, satisfaction (e.g. Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), intentions to recommend and repurchase (e.g. Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2007; Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000) as well as the most widely ac-

cepted and all-encompassing theory of consumer behavior explaining new technology adoption (Pura, 2005; Kim, Chan, & Gupta, 2007; Lai, 2004). In other words, the identification of the types of customer value perceived by travelers using social media for trip planning purposes is very essential, because it can provide significant guidelines on how to design the information sources, the structure and the functionality of social media in order to enhance their web traffic, usage and competitiveness. Nevertheless, as the literature has solely focused on assessing the macroeconomic impacts of social media on the society (e.g. Crompvoets, Rajabifard, Bregt, & Williamson, 2004), research looking into the impact of social media portals on travelers' perceived values is warranted.

In light of the above, our objective is to find out how important the perception of benefits, costs and incentives are in the use of social media.

### 2.2. Benefits of using social media on vacation trips

Despite the broad consensus that the relationships must be mutually beneficial, scant attention has been paid to the client's motives and wishes regarding the relationship and his/her reasons to maintain the relationship in the long term (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2000). Only in recent years has the literature aimed to analyze what type of benefits the clients obtain from their long-term relationship with the tourist firms (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias, & Rivera-Torres, 2004; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999; Vázquez-Carrasco & Foxall, 2006; Yen & Gwinner, 2003). This represents a change of direction in the literature, with the focus moving from interorganizational relationships to the relationships between tourism firms and end consumers.

In this sense, many authors show that the predisposition to use social media in organizing and taking trips is directly related to the user's perception of the benefits they provide (Wang et al., 2002). The benefits of using the technologies on vacation trips are varied and dynamic, and the process of identifying them is complex due to the great variety of travelers and their contact with and skills in these technologies. However, it is thought that the advantages addressed below are fundamental for tourists to have positive prospects of using them (Hsu & Lin, 2008; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004a; Wang et al., 2002).

In that regard, the following hypothesis is proposed for analysis and testing by means of the explanatory model proposed in accordance with the literature review:

**Hypothesis H1.** There is a positive relationship between the perceived benefits of using social media and the intentions of using them in organizing and taking vacation trips.

Therefore, in order to test Hypothesis 1, three benefits will be used, in line with what previous works in the "E-literature" propose (Andersen, 2005; Chung, 2008; Jeong, 2008; Stepchenkova, Mills, & Jiang, 2007; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004a; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008): namely, functional, social, and psychological and hedonic. Those benefits are the ones that initially contribute e-value to the clients of social media tools.

#### 2.2.1. Functional benefits

The relationship between the functional benefits and participation is a key element to determine the use of social media when organizing and taking vacations, since previous works show that tourists are strongly motivated to obtain information for their trips. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) claim that these needs may include transactions in which members buy and sell products or services, so, for example, members with a strong interest in certain kinds of travel products and services can gather together online

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