



Effects of tourism information quality in social media on destination image formation: The case of Sina Weibo



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of content and noncontent cues of tourism information quality in forming users' destination image in social media. Empirical analysis based on data collected from Sina Weibo users suggests that several content cues and web page design as a noncontent cue are positively related with cognitive and affective images, which lead to a conative image. This study contributes to the body of knowledge on the role of tourism information quality in social media by providing empirical evidence on destination image formation. It also helps tourism managers build their marketing strategies to attract more tourists through social media.

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1. Introduction

Today, one of the major trends in the tourism industry is that personal or independent tours are getting popular compared to traditional group package tours. According to the Chinese International Travel Monitor [1], almost half (i.e., 49%) the Chinese travelers, who have been the world's top spenders in international tourism since 2012, prefer an independent tour rather than a package or a semi-package tour. These trends have given rise to a growing number of independent tourists who mostly book their travel online by themselves (not through travel agencies) and travel in small groups or as couples [2]. Moreover, more than half (53%) the Chinese and US tourists book their trips through digital means by using mobile applications [3]. As such, increasingly more number of independent travelers search for information about their trips and even book their trips online or through mobile applications [4].

According to the Tourism Highlights by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 2015, the number of international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) increased from 1.087 billion in 2013 to 1.122 billion in 2014 [5]. In addition,

UNWTO forecasted that the number of international tourists worldwide will reach 1.8 billion in 2030 on the basis of a 3.3% increase per year until then. The tourism industry accounts for 1 in 11 jobs and 30% of the world's service exports [5]. Therefore, not only many countries but also more cities and regions have been paying special attention to the tourism sector.

Along with the rapid growth of the individual travel over the world, social media has become a popular platform for people's daily lives [6]. According to wearesocial.com [7], as of January 2016, more than 2.3 billion people (approximately 31% of world population) have active social media accounts, and on average, they spend more than 2 h per day using social media. Moreover, Facebook alone, which is one of the leading social media, has 1.71 billion monthly active users as of June 30, 2016, and 1.03 billion daily active users on average access Facebook using their mobile devices [8]. In the tourism industry as well, social media has made a huge impact on the way people search and share information and even make a decision on their destinations. Therefore, social media is considered an important source of tourism information [6,9]. That is, it is changing the way how tourists search, find, read, and process information about tourism suppliers and their destinations. Tourists can share their travel stories through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Tripadvisor [10]. These user-generated contents (UGCs) in social media are

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playing an important role in all industries, particularly in the tourism sector [11,12].

Not surprisingly, social media is becoming a distinct tourism marketing and communication tool for marketers in various firms because they can directly interact with tourists and influence decision-making processes of their travel consumers [13,14]. Tourism organizations and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are aware of such ongoing trends and thus try to explore the opportunities to use tourist-generated contents for their own and their destination brand positioning purposes [15,16]. Therefore, a variety of national and regional tourism organizations manage various types of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Weibo, YouTube, and Flickr to improve their tourism destination images.

As suggested in the tourism literature, the destination image plays a significant role among tourists in their destination choice processes and future visiting behaviors [17–19]. In other words, tourists who have favorable destination image are more likely to intend to visit or recommend to others [20]. Moreover, a number of studies have discussed the role of UGCs and social media in forming tourists' destination image (e.g., [21,22]). Although the topics on tourism information in social media and its role for various beliefs and behaviors of tourists have received increasing attention from tourism researchers, very little empirical evidence has been found about the *relationship between the quality dimensions of tourism information in social media and the destination image formation*.

Thus, this study mainly aims to propose and examine relationships between tourism information quality (IQ) in social media and the three types of destination image formation. In other words, this study identifies factors of tourism IQ in social media that influence both cognitive and affective images, which eventually contribute to form behavioral (conative) image, based on the discussion of Wang and Strong's [23] conceptual framework of IQ, Chaiken's [24] heuristic-systematic model, and Gartner's [25] destination image formation theory. More specifically, this study answers the following research questions: (1) what are the factors (as contextual/representational dimensions or content/noncontent cues) consisting of tourism IQ in social media? and (2) what are the impacts of those IQ factors on various aspects of tourism destination image (cognitive, affective, and conative images) formation in social media?

To answer these research questions, the present study is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a theoretical background on social media in tourism, tourism IQ, destination image, and their relationships based on the literature review. Section 3 presents the research model, which explores the relationships between tourism IQ factors in social media and destination image formation. Section 4 explains the research methodology on data collection and measurement, and data are analyzed in Section 5. The results, theoretical and practical implications, and limitations of the study are discussed in Section 6, followed by the conclusion in Section 7.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social media in tourism

Before the Web 2.0 era, the Internet functioned mostly in one direction – a “reading-only” format – and interactions among users were very limited. However, since the advent of the Web 2.0 platform, users can read, write, and interact with other users more easily [26]. In other words, the Web 2.0 enabled people to collaborate and share their information over the Internet with others. Adopting the Web 2.0 technology, social media has become one of the most influential marketing tools for firms that want to enhance better communication with customers [27]. In fact, in

terms of communication media, social media is one of the important tools for many organizations. The majority of academic studies on social media have been conducted since 2008 [28], and those studies have defined social media in the following ways. Xiang and Gretzel [6][6,p. 180] defined social media as “*Internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content encompassing media impressions created by consumers.*” In a recent study, Chung and Koo [10,p. 219] summarized the definition of social media as “*a group of Internet-based applications that exist on the Web 2.0 platform and enable Internet users from all over the world to share ideas, thoughts, experiences, perspectives, information, and forge relationship.*” As such, social media is regarded as a group of Internet-based applications, built on the Web 2.0 platform, which enable anyone to produce UGCs and share them easily regardless of region or time.

Consumers now regard social media as a much more trustworthy source of information regarding products and services than corporate-sponsored marketing communication channels, which have traditionally served as the means of promoting goods and services [29]. Accordingly, across various industries, social media has recently been used as an important consumer communication tool that influences various aspects of consumer behavior including information acquisition, attitudes, purchase, post-purchase communication, and product/service evaluation [30,31]. For example, an empirical study found that corporates social media management activities influence public perception of firms [32]. In the case of Facebook, when users gain some information regarding products and services from their friends, they tend to become a consumer at a 15% higher rate than when they receive the information through other channels [33].

In particular, the role of social media is now important in the tourism sector as tourism is an information-intensive industry that strongly relies on electronic systems (i.e., Internet) to distribute its products in the marketplace and communicate with customers [34–37]. In addition, as tourism-related products and services are relatively expensive and are characterized as high-involvement products [38], travelers generally try to collect and review a lot of information related to their travel for their decision-making processes [39]. Traditionally, travelers have consulted travel TV programs and offline-based printed sources such as books, newspapers, and magazines to search for information they need. Over the past 15 years, however, these traditional tourism information sources have been substituted by Internet travel websites and social media feeds, which provide travel information to users and allow them to share their experiences in an interactive manner [10]. Therefore, many companies in the tourism industry (e.g., hotels) have been launching or participating in various social media channels to communicate with and provide various travel information to customers [40]. According to Dellarocas [41], social media provides companies with unprecedented opportunities to understand and react to their customers. More specifically in the context of the tourism industry, social media has become one of the most prominent components for DMO's marketing strategy [42]. By analyzing comments on online websites and social media, firms in the travel industry can better understand customers' preference regarding services and products provided by firms [39]. Further, social media is now changing the decision-making processes of tourism consumers [43].

In academia, many researchers have focused on the role of social media in the tourism industry as an emerging topic. Leung et al. [39] published a literature review study on social media in the tourism industry by focusing on 44 studies published in academic journals by 2011. The key findings of their study are that consumers usually use social media during the search phase of their travel planning process, so trustworthiness in social media as an information source is a crucial factor regarding their decision to

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