The relationship among tourists' persuasion, attachment and behavioral changes in social media

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, individual travelers are in a situation where they have to search through more information than ever before via diverse smart devices. Social media has become an important role in dispersing travel information. Unlike other types of communication media, social media not only provides users with information, but also allows them to identify who the source of the information is. Our study found that, firstly, argument quality affected neither the informational influence nor attachment, secondly, source credibility had statistically significant impacts on all the variables of informational influence, attachment, and normative influence, thirdly, network externality also had statistically significant impacts on all the variables of informational influence, attachment, and normative influence, and finally, informational influence, attachment, and social media normative influence were predictors of travelers' behavioural changes. This study formulated a theoretical framework and empirically analyzed the travelers' behaviors using social media using the elaboration likelihood model, reference group influence theory and attachment theory. Practically, social media platforms should promote source credibility and network externality. Tourism marketing organizations should build attachments with social media users and should utilize profile and reputational reviewers.

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1. Introduction

Aided by the development of the Internet, social media users are increasing. Nearly 2.3 billion people actively use social media and its number grew 10% year on year (Kemp, 2016). About one-fifth of leisure travelers worldwide have used social media to gather ideas and inspiration regarding travel destinations, hotels, vacation activities, attractions and restaurants (eMarketer, 2013b). The estimated number of social networking users was about 1.73 billion in 2013 and is expected to rise to 2.55 billion by 2017 (eMarketer, 2013a). In the Republic of Korea, an analysis revealed that 88.4% of total social media users used some profile-based services, and 40.7% used community (Korea Internet and Security Agency, 2015). According to an examination of the characteristics of such social media users, users valued 'information acquisition and exchange,' and 'communication' above other uses such as recreation, leisure, fellowship, etc. (National Information Society Agency, 2010). Such facilitation of online communities also substantially influences the facilitation of social media, which correlates with an increase in free independent travelers (FITs). Thus, prospective travelers use social media to search, share, and gather travel information from people's pre-travel, during-travel, and post-travel reviews (Parra-López et al., 2012).

Recently, social media have various types such as blogs, social networking sites (SNS), pictures or video sharing applications, and dictionary-type applications (Leung et al., 2013a; Parra-López et al., 2011). Social media also plays an increasingly important part in online information searching (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) and online reputation. Unlike other online behaviors regarding information, social media allows travelers to search, share, organize, integrate, forward, re-share travel information and engage in potential travel (Leung et al., 2013a). In this way, we could find a social media definition from the literature, which was "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Such travel information searches using social media are similar to the characteristics of travel products. In other words, because of the unique characteristics of travel products (high-involvement, experiential goods, intangibility, high purchase risk, etc.), the travel industry is an industry where information is highly important (Sheldon, 1997; Tan and Chen, 2012; Werthner and Klein, 1999). Therefore, potential tourists utilize various information sources because they recognize the importance of travel information, and, the majority of people obtained travel information from acquaintances, travel agencies, or travel books in the past. With the development of the Internet, however, today's travelers consider it more important to search for travel information on websites (Kim et al., 2007). Unlike past group travelers, individual

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travelers who potentially make overall decisions based on someone's reviews obtain a great deal of information necessary for travelling. Therefore, the social media become as not only an information source but also popular (Lee et al., 2011).

In social media communities such as Facebook, Twitter, cafés, and blogs, people build relationships while talking about various travel-related subjects (Lee et al., 2012). There have been many existing studies undertaken from various perspectives including participation benefits, loyalty, websites, advice and effects of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) (Arsal et al., 2008; Casaló et al., 2011; Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Kim et al., 2004; Ku, 2012; Lee et al., 2011; Leung et al., 2013b; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). Particularly, reviews on social media are cognitively and affectively important as a source of tourism information, which has been significantly dealt with. For example, studies in relation to information sharing through community identification (Lee et al., 2012; Qu and Lee, 2011), information search (Tan and Chen, 2012), and the intention to use information sharing (Ku, 2012) have been widely conducted.

Despite this, the existing studies show that they have not sufficiently reviewed the intrinsic characteristics of social media. Unlike other travel information media thus far, social media is characterized by providing not only specific review information, but also reputational information. Travelers who use travel information in social media are influenced not only by the personal quality of travel information, but also the reputation of the reviewers that have created, generated and forwarded the information. Compared to online search behaviors before the advent of social media, online travel information searches are currently more socially connected. Therefore, unlike traditional media, social media plays a role of the new highly persuasive media that changes travelers' behavior.

Furthermore, researchers should simultaneously identify the quality of information (argument quality) and the credibility of the information provider (source credibility) to ascertain the effects of social media related to travel information searches. In addition, researchers should also take into account the persuasive effects of social media. The present study intends to explain how social media changes traveler behavior during information searches. This study adopts a viewpoint that inclusively integrates the theories of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and reference group influence in explaining the behavior. Instead of reflecting on each particular characteristic of various social media types, the current study focuses on the general feature among social media types which is the: "creating and exchanging of user generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), and tries to understand behavioral changes among prospective travelers. To this end, the following research objectives are suggested. We develop a research model that combines the theories of the ELM, attachment theory and reference group influence. We empirically test the relevance, relationship between the above three theories identified by performing an analysis using data. The results of this study provide valuable information for both academics and practitioners investigating and developing social media strategies for travel information searches.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Elaboration likelihood model

The ELM theory offers a conceptual basis for investigating attitude and persuasion (Angst and Agarwal, 2009; Li, 2013). It is a dual process theory of attitude formation and change (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), suggesting that external information is the primary driver of attitude change, and the consequent behavioral change (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006). According to this theory, persuasion can act via a central or peripheral route, where personal attributes determine the relative effectiveness of central or peripheral processes (Petty et al., 1981). When elaboration is high, the recipient will trace a central route of persuasion; however, when elaboration is low, he or she will take a peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Central route processing represents the process of elaborating on an appeal by paying attention to the quality of an argument and then evaluating the argument. Argument quality refers to an individual's perception that an argument is strong, cogent as opposed to weak, and specious (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). In comparison, peripheral route processing describes the process of drawing conclusions from rules of thumb or reliance on heuristic cues (e.g., number of messages, number of message sources, source likeability, and source credibility) with little regard for the actual merits of an argument (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Individuals who use the peripheral route generally do not want to devote the necessary cognitive energy to elaboration, or they cannot expend the effort (Angst and Agarwal, 2009). The theoretical framework of the ELM is illustrated in Fig. 1 below.

The studies of ELM in the context of the Internet suggest that individual judgments of cognitive authority are affected by heuristic cues (Rieh and Belkin, 1998; Sussman and Siegal, 2003). Moreover, Tam and Ho (2005) and Li (2013) insist that one information cue is a good criterion, and recipients base their decision-making on inference. However, prospective travelers have a huge amount of travel information via social media. Thus, peripheral cues are considered as an important factor that can affect prospective travelers' judgment.

Previous studies consider argument quality related to central route processing and source credibility related to peripheral route processing by using the framework of ELM theory to explain individual attitude (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006; Chen and Ku, 2012; Li, 2013; Sussman and Siegal, 2003). Bhattacherjee and Sanford (2006) indicated that the number of users (i.e., network externality) and number of times an informational message is considered as alternative peripheral cues in the context of the information technology acceptance. Argument quality refers to arguments with sufficient persuasive information. Source credibility refers to a recipient's perception of an information source as believable, trustworthy, and reliable (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006; Petty et al., 1981; Sussman and Siegal, 2003) such as an online product review. In addition, network externality indicates that an increase of users will increase the value or effect of services or products (Lin and Lu, 2011; Katz and Shapiro, 1985).

Social media users encounter multitudes of travel information, and they try to gather personal but reliable information. In this context, the recipients are affected by whether the information is personally accurate, whether the informant is credible and by whether the information is from social media users. Overall, current research on prospective travelers using social media has considered argument quality as a factor related to the central route. In addition, source credibility and network externality are considered peripheral cues.

2.2. Reference group influence

Some existing studies considered social influences as an important factor in the formation of user behaviors. Behavioral research examples can be found in subjective norms in the theory of reasoned action (TRA), and social systems in the theory of innovation diffusion (Hsu and Lu, 2004). When social media—the present study's context—is considered, it is formed based on human relationships, and social reviews (Chu and Kim, 2011). Thus, the understanding of social influences in social media is of utmost importance in order to understand traveler behavior. Meanwhile, reference groups are defined as actual or imaginary individuals or groups that influence the standards for individual evaluations, aspirations, and behaviors (Park and Lessig, 1977). In searching travel information on social media, people exhibit certain behaviors in terms of purchasing travel products, information search methods, and product-purchasing methods under the influence of people connected with themselves: namely, reference groups.

Social influences are divided into informational social influence and normative social influence (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Firstly, informational social influence is the evidence about reality. Informational social