Older adults' parasocial interaction formation process in the context of travel websites: The moderating role of parent-child geographic proximity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study developed a conceptual model of older adults' parasocial interaction with travel websites.
- Older adults' subjective age identity and innovativeness influenced their PSI with travel websites.
- Moderating role of parent-children proximity was verified.
- The relationships among older adults' PSI, perceived well-being and WOM were identified.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the effects of age identity and innovativeness on parasocial interaction (PSI), and the moderating effect of parent-children proximity between age identity and PSI, and to examine the causal relationships between PSI, well-being and word-of-mouth (WOM). A sample of 271 U.S. residents aged 50 and older were recruited through an online survey company. The conceptual model was developed and tested using the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. The results found that psychological and physical age have positive effects on PSI, whereas social age has a negative one. Importantly, innovativeness had a negative impact on PSI regardless of the age identity. The psychological and social age induced PSI to a stronger extent when the children lived out of state. Finally, PSI was found to lead to well-being and WOM, whilst well-being itself had a positive effect on WOM. The managerial implications and future research directions are discussed.

1. Introduction

With the advent of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in tourism (Buhalis & Law, 2008), the travel and tourism management literature has focused attention not only on travel website quality and its effects on online users' perception toward the site, but also on the influence of online reviews on firm performance (Ho & Lee, 2007; Kim, Kim, & Han, 2007; Nguyen & Coudounaris, 2015). Likewise, prior research has shown that when visiting travel websites owned by online travel agencies and associated service providers such as TripAdvisor, website design is one of the important factors influencing consumers' online shopping experience. Furthermore, as interactive websites such as TripAdvisor embed a range of information, including user-generated contents such as online reviews to attract customers (Bussgang, 2012), factors affecting the online review process and their effect on behavioral intention have also been of considerable interest to recent tourism researchers (Liu & Zhang, 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

However, it was not until recently that several researchers began to focus on consumers' interaction with the website and other customers during the virtual service encounter (Kah, Lee, & Chung, 2010; Tsiotsou, 2016). It is noted that on a website, people may experience a one-sided interaction, that is, parasocial interaction (PSI), in part owing to material presented on the website in a variety of contents including textual, visual and multimedia information, as suggested by 'a flow experience' (Bilgihan, Nusair,

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Okumus, & Cobanoglu, 2015), and so-called 'transportation into narrative worlds' (Brown, 2015; Green, 2004). The recent literature highlighted that media viewers may interact with real or fictional characters who appeared in the media throughout the audience involvement process (Brown, 2015; Fu, Ye, & Xiang, 2016). In contrast, Hoerner (1999) suggested that whereas the website may be interpreted as a persona, the persons using commercial websites are likely to be influenced by a range of different parasocial signals such as tone of textual information, the developed character and e-mail interaction with the persona. Importantly, Novak, Hoffman, and Yung (2000) emphasized the importance of providing a compelling online experience for consumers, where the concept of the flow experience is at the center of their model rather than the functional experience.

Given the increase in the advent of interactive websites (Hoffman & Novak, 2009; Ngai, Moon, Lam, Chin, & Tao, 2015), some research highlighted that one of the important aspects of online consumers is the influence of parasocial behavior noticeable during the passive consumption (e.g., observation, listening/reading comments, etc.) on the sites, which in turn leads to consumers' social behavior such as group engagement (Tsiotsou, 2016). Although there has been some research into PSI in the context of a virtual environment (e.g., Keng & Ting, 2009; Keng, Ting, & Chen, 2011) and media-induced tourism (e.g., Fu et al., 2016), older adults are still one of the neglected segments for this research context (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005).

This paper argues that older adults may be more attuned to parasocial behavior on travel websites rather than reciprocal social interactions due to several restraints such as a decrease in their psychological and physical capabilities, along with a limited level of social relationship (Lim & Kim, 2011; Mathur & Moschis, 2005). However, there is limited academic research on older adults' online shopping experience in travel websites despite an increasing proportion of older adults using the internet (Pew Internet and American Life, 2014; Li & Liu, 2014) and the emergence of the so-called 'new-age elderly', one of whose characteristics is "pursuing experience-rich products and services—especially travel and cultural events" (Schiffman & Sherman, 1991, p. 190). Specifically, there is limited understanding of the antecedents of older adults' PSI with websites (PSI-Web) in the context of online travel shopping. More importantly, although older adults were found to show different behaviors and attitudes toward their lifestyles (e.g., Mathur, Sherman, & Schiffman, 1998), most studies adopted the chronological age, which does not consider the older adults' individual differences depending on their life-position situations, when attempting to understand elderly behavior. Hence, the present study adopts the concept of age identity in order to address the effects of perceived age, that is, psychological, physical and social age, based on an evaluation of individual differences and social influences (Mathur & Moschis, 2005).

In addition, some previous studies paid attention to older individuals' characteristics, including their innovativeness (e.g., Lee, Qu, & Kim, 2007). Research on innovativeness (Sikkel, 2013; Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001) pointed out the importance of individuals' attitude toward innovative activities (i.e., such as trying online travel-related products) among the elderly. Whilst Sikkel (2013) highlighted that older adults are subjected to a reduced level of hedonic innovativeness and future time perspective, which led to older adults' strong relationship with a brand, Szmigin and Carrigan (2001) concluded that their older adults sample showed sufficient innovativeness to lead to the consumption of related innovative products and services. However, the influence of innovativeness on PSI has rarely been studied in the context of online travel shopping.

Furthermore, there is convincing theoretical and empirical evidence that the level of older adults' PSI is likely to be influenced by the parent-children proximity, one of factors influencing their social context, given that the characteristics of their social environment facilitate their involvement in PSI (e.g., Ball-Rokeach, 1998; Chattaraman, Kwon, & Gilbert, 2012). Although the social environment is directly associated with social relations, parent-children proximity went beyond older adults' psychological impact on their PSI with travel websites because parent-children proximity is not social presence on the website. It is our study's contention that parent-children proximity becomes a boundary condition for explaining older adults' proclivity to research travel products. Thus, if parent-children proximity influences the relationship between age identity and the level of PSI with travel websites should be thoroughly examined to understand social behaviors on websites in the process of purchasing travel products.

Finally, previous research on PSI examined its effects not only on psychological (i.e., satisfaction and well-being) (Gatto & Tak, 2008), but also on behavioral outcomes (i.e., purchase and WOM) (Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Lim & Kim, 2011; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998). Although researchers have paid much attention to the relationship between tourism-related goods and services consumption and well-being issues (Uysal, Sirgy, Woo, & Kim, 2016), the effect of PSI-Web in older adults who have various constraints related to travel on their well-being and WOM is poorly understood. In addition, the current research attempts to identify the importance of the online experience in producing well-being and WOM, where older adults' needs are gratified prior to embarking on the journey for the destination(s) (Uysal et al., 2016). This is a unique addition to the existing knowledge about well-being experienced during the pre-trip stage (Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 1999; Uysal et al., 2016) and, in particular, about the relationship between internet use and well-being.

To this end, focusing on elderly online users who purchased package tour products/services on travel websites, the present study attempts to contribute to a body of knowledge on older travelers' PSI-Web induced in the process of purchasing travel products, in particular, to the tourism management literature. Specifically, the results of this research are expected to shed light on the influence of older travelers' age identity and innovativeness on PSI-Web in the domain of tourism. Furthermore, the findings will contribute to the psychological and behavioral outcomes of PSI-Web in the context of online travel shopping. From a managerial perspective, this research is likely to enhance awareness of purchase behaviors in travel websites for the silver market, since the traditional online marketing has primarily focused on younger counterparts. Therefore, the current paper consists of the following sections designed to identify the structural relationships between the antecedents and consequences of PSI-Web, focusing on: first, the relationship between age identity (i.e., psychological, physical and social age) and PSI-Web; second, the relationship between innovativeness and PSI-Web; third, the moderating effect of child(ren)-parent geographic proximity between age identity and PSI-Web; fourth, the relationships between PSI-Web, well-being and WOM.

2. Literature review

2.1. PSI-web

The concept of PSI has been in the spotlight in the media and communication literature over the past several decades, as highlighted in Table 1, since it was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215), who viewed it as a 'simulacrum of conversational give and take'. A range of seeming social relationships between a media viewer and a medium, initially coined by Horton and Wohl