



## Social return and intent to travel



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Scale developed to measure anticipated social return from social media posts.
- Social Return Scale (SRS) validated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis.
- Anticipated social return found to influence intent to visit Cuba.
- Social Return adds variance to the Theory of Planned Behavior.
- New tool for destination marketers to measure the symbolic value of the destination.

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### ABSTRACT

In recognition that not all travel experiences are evaluated equally, there is the opportunity for different travel experiences to generate varying levels of “Social Return.” “Social Return” is the amount of positive social feedback that one’s social media posts of travel generate. This paper develops the Social Return Scale (SRS) and uses the scale to predict 758 U.S. travelers’ intentions to visit the country of Cuba. The CFA of the SRS revealed strong construct validity based upon factor loadings above 0.85, an average variance explained estimate of 86%, and a construct reliability coefficient of 0.91. The SRS also had a positive and significant relationship with intention to visit Cuba across six structural equation models that varied by time horizon (1 year, 5 year and 10 years) and the inclusion of Theory of Planned Behavior constructs. Results suggest that “Social Return” is a salient symbolic factor in the destination selection process.

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## 1. Introduction

Travel has long been a conspicuous form of consumption, where travelers use their experiences as leverage within social relationships (Correia, Kozak, & Reis, 2016; Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994; Sirgy & Su, 2000). This is evident from tourism’s vibrant history of conspicuous experiences such as the Grand Tour of Europe, the Titanic’s maiden voyage, and early rail trips to visit America’s National Parks. More modern examples of tourism’s conspicuous

nature include the phenomenon of ‘gap years,’ destination weddings or extravagant honeymoons, and the cementing of travel experiences as core component of what is shared on social media (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Lo, McKercher, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Lyu, 2016).

While travel and social standing have a long history of interconnectedness, social media has fundamentally changed the nature of this form of conspicuous consumption (Lo & McKercher, 2015). No longer do peers have to take each other’s word on where they have traveled or wait for the slideshow upon returning from the trip; travelers are now able to receive instant gratification and recognition through posting pictures of their travels *in situ*. Travelers also now have the ability to broadcast their travel experiences to peer networks much larger than previously available (Munar &

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Jacobsen, 2014). Social media's rise has essentially taken an already conspicuous activity and elevated it to one of the most conspicuous forms of consumption. While social media helps to make travel more conspicuous, there is an element of sophistication with online picture sharing where the pictures are carefully selected and manicured to portray a desired social image (Lo & McKercher, 2015). This type of symbolic consumption falls under the umbrella of what Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson (2015) call "inconspicuous consumption." The motive to signal status to peer groups through consumption is the same as conspicuous consumption, but under inconspicuous consumption there is "increased desire for sophistication and subtlety ... to further distinguish oneself for a narrow group of peers" (Eckhardt et al., 2015, p. 807).

In recognition that the traveler is keenly aware of the social value of their travel and that not all travel experiences are evaluated equally (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Lyu, 2016), there is the opportunity for varying travel experiences to generate different levels of "Social Return." In the age of widespread social media use, particularly in the context of travel, "Social Return" can be conceptualized as the amount of positive social feedback that one's social media posts will generate (Deegan, 2015). The general idea is that the more well received the social media post, the more social media return the post will generate through increased 'likes,' 'comments,' and 'sharing.' This in turn leads to an enhanced social status of the poster among their social group. In essence, social media has provided a medium for peer groups to manicure their social images to demonstrate the "cultural capital" that Bourdieu (1984) states is needed to effectively climb the social ladder (Trigg, 2001).

While the conspicuous nature of tourism and the idea that travel destinations have different symbolic images is not new (Eckinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013), researchers within the tourism literature have yet to measure the anticipated 'Social Return' that sharing tourism experiences will provide social media users. This has important managerial and theoretical implications because the disparate levels of anticipated "Social Return" from different travel experiences could be a salient factor in the formation of tourists' destination selection set (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) and ultimately their decision to travel or not travel to a destination. This is especially important as narcissism becomes more normalized and the posting of travel experiences on social media becomes a more prominent primary motivation for travel (Canavan, 2017; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Munar and Jacobsen (2014) describe these self-centered motivations being related to the current technomercocratic system that we have entered where one's value is partly derived from the image they procure through digital platforms. This focus on "Social Return" is similar to other measures of the symbolic value of travel consumption such as "Self Concept/Self-Congruity" (Chon, 1992; Litvin & Goh, 2002; Sirgy & Su, 2000) and destination personality (Matzler, Strobl, Stokburger-Sauer, Bobovnick, & Bauer, 2016; Pan, Zhang, Gursoy, & Lu, 2017; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). However, with "Social Return" the attention is on the anticipated image enhancement through posting about travel experiences on social media sites.

With this gap in mind, this paper has two goals. The first is to develop and test the "Social Return Scale" (SRS) using Churchill's (1979) criteria for scale development. The SRS is designed to capture the anticipated social return from traveling to a destination. Scale items ask potential tourists to consider a peer who has posted a travel experience on social media and to evaluate the social value that the post provides the poster. After testing the construct validity of the SRS, the second goal is to assess the SRS' predictive validity. This test of predictive validity is important because if the scale is to be worthwhile, it needs to be able to explain a portion of variance in travelers' intent to visit a destination. Therefore, the SRS is

administered to a sample of U.S. travelers to see if their perceptions of others' social media posts about travel to Cuba (i.e. Social Return) significantly explain their own intentions to visit Cuba.

Cuba is considered a novel tourism destination for U.S. travelers as visitation is still restricted for most U.S. citizens despite recently restored diplomatic relationships between the U.S. and Cuba. It was chosen as the destination of interest in this study as the (in)conspicuous consumption of novel tourism destinations is likely to elicit greater social return or 'status' than the consumption of a mainstream tourism destination (Lepp & Gibson, 2008). It is of interest to see how much variance the SRS explains in American tourists' intentions to travel to Cuba within the next year, 5 years, and 10 years. The SRS predictive validity is tested in conjunction with other constructs from the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (e.g. attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) to see if the proposed SRS adds value to the previous research attempting to predict travelers' intention to visit a destination. Three time horizons are used to gauge tourists' intentions to travel to Cuba, because it is of interest to see how the SRS performs for those interested in traveling to Cuba sooner rather than later, as popular press articles speak of "seeing Cuba before it changes" (Fleischner 2015; Telegraph 2016). A literature review on conspicuous consumption and the emerging influence of social media over tourism follows before presenting how the scale was developed and tested within a TPB framework.

## 2. Literature review

Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class describes conspicuous consumption as people's tendency to "spend money on artifacts of consumption in order to give an indication of their wealth to other members of society" (Trigg, 2001, p. 101). It is a powerful critique of the neoclassical understanding of consumer behavior where all consumer purchases were previously theorized to be independent of other consumers and conducted with the maximization of functional utility in mind (Leibenstein, 1950; Trigg, 2001). Under the idea of conspicuous consumption there is simultaneous evaluation of the product or service's functional and symbolic utility. This results in both a functional demand for a product where the inherent qualities that the product possess or provides is sought by the consumer, and a symbolic demand for the product which stems from all of the factors not associated with the inherent qualities of the product such as the status or image that consumption of the product provides (Leibenstein, 1950). Hamilton and Tilman (1983, p. 793) writes that "Veblen argues quite clearly that goods are used simultaneously as instruments to achieve some end-in-view as well as symbols of status" and that "both aspects of consumption are present and determinative at all times." It is the symbolic nature of consumption which provides consumers with leverage over their peers. Hamilton (1981, p. 792) attributes the need for this type of symbolic consumption as the need "to dispose of the mass production associated with affluent societies" and thus signify aesthetic tastes with the focus on impressing other elites (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

Despite the popularity of Veblen's original Theory of the Leisure Class and the idea of conspicuous consumption, the understanding of the symbolic nature of consumption patterns among consumers has evolved to include multiple facets beyond the pure purchase of luxury products to signal wealth. Leibenstein (1950) breaks away from this unidimensional view of conspicuous consumption by adding two different motivations for conspicuous consumption. The first is the 'Bandwagon Effect,' which Leibenstein (1950, p. 189) describes as

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