

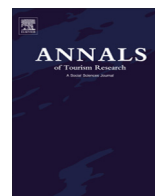


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Travel websites: Changing visits, evaluations and posts

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ABSTRACT

Many studies concerning the role of web-based information in tourism measure one-time interactions. This paper presents results of a longitudinal study. Data collected in 2014 about website visits, evaluations and posts, are compared with data from 2007. The main finding is the advance of sites having a commercial interest in the information provided and the stagnation of consumer review sites without such an interest, the latter losing ground in visits and perceived reliability. The perceived quality of the information improved significantly in terms of extensiveness, novelty and usefulness for both site types. Posting behavior is rare and still limited to a small segment. Implications are outlined related to different forms of perceived credibility. Ways to attract more posters are sketched.

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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a growing interest in scientific research into the role of web-based information in the tourism domain (Aye, Au, & Law, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), because the Internet became an important source of information for the traveler (Zehrer, Crotts, & Magnini, 2011). Even as far back as 2003 (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003), the importance of research into reviews that are posted by consumers was being stressed, and from that time on this phenomenon is known as eWOM (=electronic Word-Of-Mouth) (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Sparks & Browning,

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2011). In contrast to classical offline WOM where opinions ‘disappear in the air’, eWOM provides a persistent public record (Yang, Mai, & Ben-Ur, 2012). An important conclusion from this line of research is that these eWOM sources exert a significant influence upon buying behavior. Ye, Law, Gu, and Chen (2011) use hotel data and show that positive online reviews contribute significantly to an increase in hotel bookings. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) also found that online hotel reviews improve the probability of considering booking a room in the hotel reviewed. These authors (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009) conclude that “changes in hotel consideration are actually due to exposure to reviews” (p. 127).

During these 10 years of investigating web-based travel information search, substantial changes took place in this field which could have effected changes in visits to, evaluations of and posting on web-based travel sites. Four types of changes can be discerned.¹

Technological changes

The access to websites became much easier and more flexible because of technology improvements like the development of smartphones and tablets. In parallel with this development, easy-to-use apps are available for the smartphone and tablet user. Also, the rise of WiFi and roaming makes travel-related information accessible at many more spots, especially during the holiday itself. For example, in The Netherlands statistics collected by the CBS (CBS, 2015a) show that access to the Internet rose from 83% in 2005 to 97% in 2013, while for devices used, mobile phones rose from 11% in 2005 to 72% in 2013 and other devices (mainly tablets) rose from 4% in 2005 to 64% in 2013.

Changes in the supply of information

On the web, the diversity of available channels is growing. Originally, the playing field was relatively simple: sites maintained by organizations having a commercial interest in the information provided and sites which did not have such a commercial interest. In the meantime, new types of sites emerged with all kinds of intermediary functions. Some having only booking facilities, others only offering information, but most are now mixed. In addition, the scope and quality of the available information has increased considerably, mainly due to the competition between the different types of websites (see, for example, Korfiatis, Garcia-Bariocanal, & Sanchez-Alonso, 2012).

Changes in users and user behavior

The ubiquity of the Internet has attracted steadily more users of web information as Ye et al. (2011, p. 634) state: “Results of large surveys have shown that searching for travel-related information is one of the most popular online activities”. In The Netherlands, concerning information sought on the Internet, the share of travel related information rose from 34% in 2005 to 54% in 2013, being the second highest increase of all information types sought (CBS, 2015a).

As a consequence, the user population has probably changed in terms of composition as well as motivations for using and contributing to travel-related websites. In The Netherlands the use of the Internet by people older than 65 was 78%, a likely increase from 2005 for which no data are available (CBS, 2015b). Also, the evaluation of these sites could have changed over time.

Increased maturity of consumer visions on eWOM

During the last decade a better understanding of the advantages and limitations of social media by consumers—including review sites—developed, as these sites grew from the starting phase to a more advanced phase. Greater understanding of other users’ and posters’ motivations arose. In the initial period, consumers compared information provided by review sites with advertising, which developed

¹ This paragraph was inspired by the session “Talking about brands”, 13e International Conference on Research in Advertising (ICORIA), Amsterdam, The Netherlands, June 2014.

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