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Research Paper

A TAM-based approach to explore the effect of online experience on destination image: A smartphone user's perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study employs an integrated approach based on the technology acceptance model (TAM) to examine online experience by combining design features and social factors. It also explores the interrelationships between online experience and smartphone users' destination image. A pretest was conducted to examine the internal construct structure through exploratory factor analysis. In the main field test, a survey company distributed online questionnaires to recruited smartphone users. Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to confirm reliability and validity, and a structural equation modeling test with maximum likelihood estimation was performed to identify the relationships among the constructs. The results suggest that perceived usefulness and ease of use are important factors that enhanced users' online experience with smartphone applications. Positive relationships exist between users' online experiences and cognitive and affective image. Furthermore, both of these factors positively contribute to overall destination image. This study contributes to the extant literature by identifying the momentous impact of mobile technology on destination image formation, and a new perspective of extending the TAM by measuring users' online experience of smartphone applications is provided for the future studies. Marketing implications and limitations are discussed.

1. Introduction

Destination image is a concept that has been focused on continuously by numerous researchers (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kim & Morrison, 2005; Kim, Holland, & Han, 2013), and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have put much effort into creating a positive destination image (Jeong, Holland, Jun, & Gibson, 2012). Tourists' perceptions of destination image is the key determinant in predicting tourist satisfaction and future behaviors pertaining to revisit activities (Lee, 2009). Over the past decades, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have completely changed the way people live, with the burgeoning of Internet websites. The tourism industry is an ICT-driven business (Buhalis & Law, 2008), and tourism destination marketing faces new challenges under the influence of developed ICTs. Therefore, marketing the online experience of tourism-related ICTs has been raised as an important issue in building a positive destination image before, during, and after tourists' travels (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013).

Currently, organizations use online applications (apps) on smartphones as marketing tools, and these apps have attracted much attention from both users and academicians with regard to technological

innovations (Brown & Chalmers, 2003). Smartphone apps created by official tourism organizations for certain destinations are acknowledged as another representation of official destination websites that may influence tourists' impressions of destinations (Castelltort, Mora, Navarro, Pernas, & Zapata, 2000; Douglas & Mills, 2004; Jeong et al., 2012; No & Kim, 2014). Compared to web-based destination-marketing systems, official destination smartphone apps offer reliable and convenient Internet access as well as powerful location awareness (Want, 2009). As a bidirectional interactive platform between tourists and tourism product providers, travel-related smartphones apps in China are widely used as a channel to obtain or update tourism information, and to either promote or purchase products. According to the data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2013), 133 million travelers have booked travel-related services via online mediums, and 20.3% (26.99 million) of these travelers have engaged in smartphone-based reservation activities. Although numerous DMO websites have been established in China, most of them concentrate on basic information provision, while marketing perspectives are neglected (Li & Wang, 2010), as well as the potentiality of mobile-based apps in destination marketing. Therefore, exploring the online experience of official destination smartphone apps in China is valuable for both

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academicians and practitioners that focus on destination management.

As essentially new information technology, smartphone apps have been widely analyzed via the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989) with the perspective of measuring users' attitudes or adoption behaviors (Kim, Park & Morrison, 2008; Peres, Correia, & Moital, 2011). However, the research stream that measures the adoption of mobile technology seems to provide 'a narrow assessment of the nature and impact of the smartphone in travel' (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014; p. 13). Online experience is now perceived as an important issue for e-marketing, and it represents a psychological state manifested as a subjective response to online websites (No & Kim, 2014; Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012). However, few researchers have noted the impact of the perceived variables of the TAM on the online experience of information systems, such as the significant relationship between perceived usefulness and the online experience of a brand website (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Destination image is evidently influenced by website information and content (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Jeong et al., 2012), while the research that concentrates on the relationship between online experience and destination image formation from the usage of smartphone apps is overlooked. Although smartphone apps may be perceived to be a manifestation of websites on the mobile platform, there are significant differences between computer-based websites and smartphone apps, such as page design and information structure, which implies that DMOs should utilize a more effective navigation design if apps are to be used for destination promotion. Furthermore, a gap exists between the theoretical level and the practical level because of a shortage of academic attention to smartphone apps, despite their popularity in the tourism industry. Therefore, to bridge the gaps between the TAM, online experience, and destination image in tourism literature, this study offers an integrated approach to investigate online experience based on the TAM by combining design features and social factors, as No and Kim (2014) suggested that the theories and models that describe the phenomena of computer-based technologies may also be appropriate to analyze usage behavior of smartphone apps. In addition, the impact of online experience of official destination smartphone apps on user-perceived destination images are also explored using a structural equation model (SEM) approach.

In this study, the target smartphone app is the official destination smartphone app owned by the Macau government tourist office (MGTO), 'Experience Macau'. Experience Macau has been developed and serves as an integrated, multi-language tourism-related smartphone app that includes information provision, trip planning, navigation and entertainment functions. This study utilized perceived effectiveness (PEF) to illustrate the ability to meet pre-specified objectives that could be measured by tangible outcomes based on DMOs' website effectiveness (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2004). Social influence (SI) represents the impact from social circles that influences individuals' decisions (López-Nicolás, Molina-Castillo, & Bouwman, 2008; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). Both of them have been employed as external variables to determine users' cognitive beliefs, specifically, perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease-of-use (PEOU) (Davis, 1986). Furthermore, both PU and PEOU are significant factors that influence users' online experience (OLEX) (Constantinides, 2004; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Destination image is explained by the following three components: cognitive image (CI), affective image (AI), and overall image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gil & Ritchie, 2009).

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1. TAM model

The TAM is one of the most influential theoretical models that is used to explain users' acceptance of information technologies (Davis et al., 1989; Kim, Mirusmonov, & Lee, 2010), and it demonstrates a pathway of describing technology acceptance from external variables to

beliefs, attitudes, and system usage (Burton-Jones & Hubona, 2006). In the last several decades, the TAM has been widely employed in various technical contexts such as online shopping websites (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003) and mobile technologies (Kim, Park, & Morrison, 2008). According to the TAM, users' intention is determined by two cognitive beliefs: perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use. In addition, system design features are employed as external variables that directly influenced perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use (Davis, 1986). Prior research has validated various external variables that directly influence perceived usefulness and ease-of-use of computer systems, such as system design features (Kim, Suh, Lee, & Choi, 2010) and prior adoption behavior (Kim, Park, & Morrison, 2008). These validated external variables may be classified into three categories: individual difference, system characteristics, and organization features (Kim & Qu, 2014; Kim, Suh, Lee, & Choi, 2010). In this study, the construct of perceived effectiveness integrated system design characteristics (navigation, content, and accessibility). Social influence is correlated with the impact of social circles which results in individual differences related to the ability and confidence to adopt mobile technologies (López-Nicolás et al., 2008). Furthermore, Kim, Mirusmonov, and Lee (2010) suggested that the integration of individual differences and system design features is critically important and useful for exploring the interactions between humans and mobile devices. Therefore, this study employed perceived effectiveness and social influence as external variables that influenced users' cognitive beliefs regarding official destination smartphone apps.

2.2. Perceived usefulness/ease-of-use and extended TAM

The constructs of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use were adopted from the TAM, and both of them have been noted as the cognitive beliefs that influence attitudes related to the usage behavior of information technologies (Davis, 1989). Perceived usefulness reflects the usefulness of information systems to enhance job performance, and perceived ease-of-use represents user beliefs that using these systems will be free of effort. In the last several decades, prior studies have widely employed the TAM model to measure the adoption of information systems, and various external variables have been validated and extended based on different circumstances, such as integrating trust into TAM to illustrate consumers' intentions to use online shopping websites (Gefen et al., 2003) and introducing prior experience into TAM to measure the intention to use online learning systems (Liu, Chen, Sun, Wible, & Kuo, 2010).

Recently, the marketing conditions of the tourism industry have dramatically changed owing to the flourishing of information technologies, and modern ICTs have been noted as the new tools for tourism marketing and management (Buhalis & Law, 2008), such as online reservation systems and destination management systems. Under these circumstances, users' acceptance of ICTs has drawn much attention from both academicians and practitioners in the tourism domain. Kim Lee and Law (2008) extended the TAM by adding external variables of information system quality and perceived variables to measure users' acceptance of hotel front office systems. Furthermore, the relationships between consumers' perceptions and usage intention of hotel information systems were measured by extending the TAM model with motivation factors (Kim, Suh, Lee, & Choi, 2010), and task-technology fit and self-efficacy were noted as extrinsic and intrinsic motivation respectively. Kim and Qu (2014) argued that prior research recognized external variables as determining factors for examining users' acceptance of new ICTs, and a large number of external variables have been verified and extended to the TAM, while focusing on the central constructs of the TAM (perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use).

With the expeditious development of mobile technology, smartphone apps not only offer a wide range of possibilities to support travelers, but also become an important commercial channel for tourism organizations (Kim, Park, & Morrison, 2008). Accordingly, studies that

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