



The hidden risk in user-generated content: An investigation of ski tourers' revealed risk-taking behavior on an online outdoor sports platform

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The accuracy of user-generated content on outdoor sports activities is limited.
- A substantial fraction of tours reported on an online outdoor sports platform is relatively dangerous.
- Users need to double check user-generated content and re-assess the respective risks before imitating a specific outdoor sports activity.
- Providers should analyze their platforms and mark tours that are relatively dangerous.
- This paper proposes that UGC increases risk taking if users see that fellow users already completed dangerous tours.

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates risk-taking behavior in the context of an online outdoor sports platform. Analyzing a unique behavioral dataset of 6242 ski tours completed over a time period of eight winter seasons, this paper shows that the accuracy of user-generated content on ski tours is limited and that more than one third of ski tours accessible on the respective online platform was relatively dangerous on the particular days according to a common avalanche risk assessment method. The quantitative analysis furthermore reveals that at avalanche danger level “considerable” more than sixty percent of ski tours were relatively dangerous. Overall, this paper provides novel insights into risks that come with user-generated content in the adventure tourism and adventure recreation domain and derives important implications for online platform users, online platform providers, public institutions, and tourism destinations.

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1. Introduction

The Internet is an important channel for travelers' and tourists' information search (Curry & McLeary, 2004; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Consumers increasingly rely on user-generated content (UGC) such as online travel reviews to plan their trips with regard to destinations, accommodation, attractions, activities, and experiences (Akehurst, 2009; Dickinger, 2011; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013). UGC is also an important source of information for consumers interested in

adventure tourism and adventure recreation activities. That is, consumers use specific online platforms to share information on outdoor sports activities such as mountaineering, climbing, or ski touring (e.g., www.alpine-auskunft.at in Austria, www.mountainproject.com in the US). On these platforms, users report on tours they have recently completed and provide specific information such as directions, current conditions, or the difficulty of a specific tour (Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, & Strobl, 2015). Most important for this paper is the fact that members implicitly provide information about their risk-taking behavior (i.e. revealed preferences) and communicate this behavior to other members and visitors of these online platforms. These users access the available information to get inspired and plan their own outdoor sports activities. The appropriate

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destination choice (i.e. the choice of the mountain peak and the approximate route) for a tour, however, is a crucial risk management task (Haegeli, Haider, Longland, & Beardmore, 2010). Users who simply copycat a tour without assessing the entailed risks could face serious consequences. Hence, an investigation into the risk properties of UGC, provided on online outdoor sports platforms, is justified. While prior research has investigated risks that come with adventure tourism and adventure recreation activities (e.g., Bentley & Page, 2008; Cater, 2006; Furman, Shooter, & Schumann, 2010; Ryan, 2003), to the best of the author's knowledge to date, no study has investigated the risk-taking behavior that users communicate on online outdoor sports platforms, even though both, residents and tourists, may use the respective information to get inspired and plan their outdoor sports activities. This paper conceptualizes UGC as an underexplored risk environment (Giddens, 1999) and aims to fill this gap by investigating user-generated tour entries on an online outdoor sports platform and answering the following research questions (RQ). RQ 1: How accurate is user-generated content on outdoor sports activities? RQ 2: What is the relative riskiness of user-generated content on outdoor sports activities?

The question, whether user-generated content is trustworthy, is still on the agenda of tourism researchers. On the one hand, prior research has shown that consumers perceive user-generated content to be highly trustworthy (e.g., Dickinger, 2011), on the other hand, media reports and prior research have highlighted that fake and paid posts pose a limit to the trustworthiness and usefulness of online reviews (e.g., Dellarocas, 2003; *The New York Times*, 2011). That is, consumers are at risk to be adversely affected in their decision-making by content that has been manipulated by hotel managers or other staff (Filiari, 2015). The present paper adds to the literature by showing that there is an additional hidden risk in user-generated content since users themselves provide content that might put fellow users at risk. Employing an exploratory study in the context of an online outdoor sports platform hosted by a major European Alpine club, this paper shows that the accuracy (i.e. “the degree to which a Web site is free from errors, whether the information can be verified offline, and the reliability of the information on the site” Metzger, 2007, p. 2079) of user-generated content on ski tours is limited. Furthermore, this paper shows that a substantial share of user entries on ski tours is relatively dangerous if these ski tours are assessed by means of a common avalanche risk assessment method (i.e. “Stop or Go”; Larcher, 2001).

Owing to the outdoor sports context and the unit of analysis (i.e. user entries on ski tours), this paper is located at the intersection of two literature streams relevant for tourism and leisure research and provides novel insights to both, research on user-generated content (e.g., Filiari, 2015) as well as research on risks associated with adventure tourism and adventure recreation (e.g., Cater, 2006; Furman et al., 2010). The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical background briefly reviews literature on user-generated content in the tourism domain as well as literature on risks, associated with adventure tourism and adventure recreation. Next, the empirical part presents the study's context, data, data analysis and findings. Finally, the author discusses the findings and provides implications for users, managers, public institutions and tourism destinations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. User-generated content

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has resulted in various UGC websites such as online social networks and online

communities, where consumers can share their experiences with products and services (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In the hospitality and tourism domain, especially online travel communities and review sites, have sparked researchers' interests (e.g., Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Sparks et al., 2013). Consumers increasingly use UGC to retrieve information on destinations, accommodation, attractions, activities, and experiences (Akehurst, 2009; Dickinger, 2011; Litvin et al., 2008; Sparks et al., 2013). Prior research has shown that online consumer reviews influence consumer destination and accommodation choice (e.g., Arsal, Backman, & Baldwin, 2008; Filiari & McLeay, 2014) as well as hotel room sales (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). Prior research has also shown that UGC influences consumer decision making because consumers consider UGC to be informative and more trustworthy than company-generated information (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Furthermore, researchers have argued that UGC is well-suited to convey experiential attributes (Dickinger, 2011; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009), which is an important aspect in supporting the trustworthiness of online information (Alba et al., 1997). Overall, prior research has found that consumers perceive user-generated content to be trustworthy (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011; Dickinger, 2011; Sparks et al., 2013). Still, media reports on fake and paid posts (e.g., *The New York Times*, 2011) question the trustworthiness of UGC. Trustworthiness concerns are related to the subjective nature of UGC (Litvin et al., 2008), the circumstance that contributors are a mix of amateurs, semi-professionals, and experts (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2011), and the threat of manipulated content facilitated by fake online identities (Dellarocas, 2003; Ibrahim, 2008). On the one hand, UGC empowers consumers to plan their leisure activities more easily (Litvin et al., 2008), on the other hand, manipulated or inaccurate content can adversely affect consumers (Filiari, 2015). Therefore, the trustworthiness of UGC still deserves increased scholarly attention (Ayeh et al., 2013). Building on the notion of risk society (Beck, 1992), this paper investigates the phenomenon UGC applying Giddens's (1999) concept of manufactured risk. Manufactured risk is “risk created by the very progression of human development, especially by the progression of science and technology” (Giddens, 1999, p. 4). In this respect, this paper conceptualizes UGC as a specific risk environment “for which history provides us with very little previous experience” (Giddens, 1999, p. 4) and seeks to contribute to research on risks that come with the digital revolution.

2.2. Risks associated with adventure tourism and adventure recreation

Adventure tourism is an increasingly popular form of tourism (Ewert & Jamieson, 2003; Pomfret, 2006) and the phenomenon has become an important topic in tourism and leisure research (e.g., Buckley, 2006; Carnicelli-Filho, Schwartz, & Tahara, 2010; Cater, 2006). Adventure tourism provides tourists with high levels of sensory stimulation through challenging experiential components (Muller & Cleaver, 2000). Typical adventure offerings include outdoor sports activities such as climbing, caving, rafting, diving, skiing or surfing (Buckley, 2007). While much of the prior research on adventure tourism has investigated commercial adventure tours (e.g., Buckley, 2007), this paper in line with Pomfret (2006) acknowledges that both, organized commercial tours and self-organized trips in which individuals pursue their favorite outdoor sports activities in specific tourist destinations (e.g., Bali for surfing; Yosemite Valley for rock climbing; the Alps for skiing and ski touring), constitute the adventure tourism domain. Prior research has investigated the risks involved in adventure tourism (e.g., Bentley & Page, 2008; Cater, 2006; Ryan, 2003) and adventure

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