The Role of User Generated Content (UGC) in Social Media for Tourism Sector

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Abstract
The existence of social media has marked a substantial milestone in the way both business enterprises and government agencies communicate and engage with their demographic markets. Social media has essentially revolutionized our communication patterns and behavior through the Internet, thus creating a new medium in which we consume and disseminate information. This paper will disclose and describe how social media can help the tourism industry leverage on User-Generated Content (UGC) generated by social media services to strategically position tourism based products and services. This paper focuses on the role of social media and its relation to the hospitality and tourism industry. This paper examines the perspective of travelers who search for online information via social media channels and make well-informed decisions of their travel based on user-generated content (UGC). The authenticity and credibility of user-generated content is also explored and discussed in this paper. This paper highlights both the benefits and issues encountered during the process of UGC to make travel decisions. The recommendation suggest that although social media channels are popular, they are not yet considered to be as a credible or trustworthy as incumbent sources of travel information. UGC plays the role as an additional source of information that travelers consider as part of their search information process, rather than as the only source of information. Some of the information available through social media can be relied on but some may not be credible.
Keywords: Social Media, User Generated Content, Tourism Sector, Information, Experience, Credibility, Benefits, Motivation To Share.
Paper type: Conceptual paper

Introduction

In the tourism industry, websites and social media provide a wealth of information with regards to experiences and review of the destination, property, facilities and restaurants (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012). What was recorded in traditional form is now digitalized and shared globally (Munar, 2012). Trusov et al. (2009) define social media as a medium that can provide sites for consumers to share their experiences and opinions with others who own the specific social media where from the usage of social media it can be positive or negative influence for other consumers.

Based on the past literature review, Kaplan & Haenlein (2010: 61) define social media as media 'that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content'. Social media marketing signals the move from passive consumption of marketing messages to facilitating interaction with messages. Rust & Oliver (1994) propose that the emergence of new technologies have caused traditional advertising to become increasingly obsolete. The users can posting videos and digitalizing experiences developed a new paradigm of information sharing (Ruzic & Biloz, 2010) which is now referred to as electronic word of mouth (Sparks & Browning, 2010). Social media websites allow consumers to spread their experiences (Yu, 2012), and interconnectivity and density of networks facilitate positive or negative reviews to travel quickly (Bruyn & Lilien, 2008).

Most travelers nowadays often use the Internet for destination information seeking to decision-making (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002). Travelers often use the Internet for destination research prior to decision-making. Online web applications and social media websites are the critical element in the travel planning process (Ruzic & Biloz 2010). According to Litvin et al. (2008), reviews on Internet or social media websites are playing an increasingly important role in the consumer decision-making process. The Internet are being used by the travelers in more than 75% off all

journeys (Hock, 2007). Online reviews of a destination or property not only possess the ability to attract or detract a traveler, but also develop consumer expectations (Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Consumers are more influenced by people's recommendations associated with products that had been experienced than a search product, therefore it is expected that this would also apply to tourism industry. The recent source of online information for consumers is user generated content, where the travelers are able to identify and examine text, videos, graphics, and photo that have been posted via online by other users or experienced travelers. Social networks are online communities of people who share common interests and activities. They provide users with collections of various interaction possibilities, ranging from communication on chats, to multiple video conferences, and from the exchange of plain email messages to the participation in blogs and discussion groups. Social media tools facilitate the creation and sharing of knowledge, information, media, ideas, opinions and insights, and allow people to actively participate in the media itself (Campbell, 2010).

D.Buhalis (1998) pointed out that tourism is one of the sectors with a very close relationship with a new information and communication technologies. It is deemed that a good understanding of the quality and quantity of the mechanisms for spreading information online can facilitate hotel or any other tourisms related company to market effectively their own organization online. Tourism has long been known as one of most important components of the online commerce world, which the impact has profoundly changed the structure of the industry. Online travel has anticipated ever since and continues to the development of new market dynamics and consumer behaviors (Werthner & Klein, 1999; Werthner & Ricci, 2004).

The Usage of Tourism Social Media in Malaysia

In Malaysia, local airlines such as Malaysia Airlines (MAS) and Air Asia have implemented their own strategy to use social media to interact with their customers and potential clients. For instance, MAS has managed to generate great interest with their 'lunch hour' sales on Facebook where the fans are able to give their feedbacks about what they want from MAS. Meanwhile Air Asia has successfully attracted 50,086 followers on their Twitter page. This shows the tremendous impact and influence of social media. It is a powerful platform to get the online community involved and to a greater extent, motivate them to share their comments, views and photos, while they travel. Those airlines also take the social media as a way to build and foster engagement with their fans, followers, and loyal customers. The Tourism Ministry has implemented social media for their promotional campaigns and has spent RM 18 million on social media to promoting Malaysia aggressively (The Staronline.com.my, February 2013). Malaysia has also organized the Malaysian International Tourism Bloggers Conference & Awards (MITBCA 2012) in 2012 to encourage Malaysian bloggers to discuss the current issues of social media in relation to tourism (NSTonline.com.my, February, 2013).

Text100's Digital Index: Travel and Tourism study finds that Malaysians consider travel columns (34%) and websites with holiday maker reviews (38%) more trustworthy than professional travel guides (22%). This trend is consistent with findings from Malaysia where social media has a deeper influence in shaping travel decisions. Almost one out of two Malaysian respondents (46%) regards Facebook as important to help inspire and reaffirm their travel decisions. Compared with the global average (26%), Malaysians display greater propensity to using Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to get ideas and inspiration for travel destinations, vacation activities and attractions, hotels and restaurants (Text100 Digital Index , 2011). The use of social media is often seen as the easiest way to connect with others who have common interest (Dye, 2007). As an increasing number of organizations begin to utilize the social media as a corporate communication tool, organizations will need a guideline to help them in order to use social media effectively. The successful implementation of social media can lead to a general increase in traffic to a site, which in turn can lead the conversation into sales. In Malaysia, most of the users depend a lot on social media to make their travel decision (Text100 Digital Index, 2011). Mostly the consumers rely on peer experiences and digital comments posted in social media as their main source of information for decision.

Literature Review of User Generated Content in Social Media

In the tourism context, Internet is an important source of information for travelers. Fernando (2007) suggests that UGC is the opposite to traditional forms of media and marketing since content is generated by the consumer rather than by the marketer. Tools such as blogs and social networking sites (such as Facebook) have meant that consumers are better informed than ever before – not only being able to add their own comments, but also being able to find other information and articles and 'tag' them with their own keywords for search purposes (Buhler, 2006). Social networking sites typically operate by inviting people to join and contribute to a network. As this process snowballs, the networks can grow. These communities rely upon UGC for their ongoing operation (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels,

2008). Dwyer (2007) suggests that websites containing these new media (such as message boards, chat rooms and blogs) provide two types of networks – social networks and informational networks.

Akehurst (2009) defines user generated contents (UGCs) as having an importance role especially in the tourism industry. Another common term to describe the user generated content in various formats is social networking (Reactive, 2007). Their positive effects have recognized repercussions on quantifiable phenomena such as e-commerce, but also on intangible matters such as those related to the image or the informational side of specific products or services. (Blackshaw & Nazzaro 2006, 4) defines user-generated content (UGC) is the online comments, profiles, and photographs produced by consumers, particularly travelers, and it is also "a mixture of fact and opinion, impression and sentiments, founded and unfounded tidbits, experiences, and even rumor".

Blackshaw & Nazzaro (2006) describes social media as an Internet which is''… increasingly influenced by intelligent websites that enable users to contribute to develop, rate, collaborate and distribute Internet content " (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007:7). User generated content also can be defined as the aggregation and leveraging of users' content on the Internet. It is related to the digital transformation of objects: written sounds, text, and images (Poster, 2005). Content is neither the graphical user interface nor the commands and text given by the administrators of the site. Rather, it is created and uploaded by users of the platform, and users can be either organizations or individuals. UGC is the foundation of social media and knowledge related to posts in the form of who, why, where, and what is increasingly relevant to tourism firms (Bronner & De Hoog, 2011). Social media can also function as a new source for tourism-related information and can be seen as a major competitor especially for traditional gatekeepers like the classic media, tourism companies and news agencies. The diversification of information providers and the user-generated content (UGC) play a key role in the tourist decision making (Molz, 2006).

At this moment, social media website of choice for many is Facebook (although the social media landscape, and Facebook itself, is always evolving). On Facebook, users continuously produce and consume a variety of information: profiles, status updates, photos, "likes" and other clicks, streaming media, wall and direct conversations, and so on. Interestingly enough, many businesses and organizations still do not consider social media and the content it generates as a "commodity" even though the information it collects and to a greater extent user generated content that is produced by its users are invaluable (Jurgenson & Rey, 2010).

It is clear that many motivations for posting content depend on the person and the context. Munar's study in 2012 shows the most popular use of social media initiatives to be advertising. Destination Marketing Organisation's, airline and hotel operators have established basic social media websites in Facebook and Twitter to publish news, advertisements, promotional campaign and videos. Creating company-based media content by integrating offline and online branding techniques (Hede & Kellet, 2012) is traditional (Mansson, 2011). These forms of social media strategy still lack of dynamism and effectiveness as it only represents an online transformation of traditional marketing techniques. DMO's, airline and hotel operators need to employ a more strategic approach in understanding social media features with viral marketing goals, success measures and target market diversification (Yu, 2012). UGC and consumer-to-consumer communication instills trust towards a product or destination (Qiang Ye et al., 2011). Yoo & Gretzel (2011) describes UGC are able to gives product ratings and short explanations about travel given by part travelers.

Another social media strategy that is common to have higher success is viral marketing. Viral Marketing is short but catchy (Yu, 2012) marketing message (Swanepoel et al., 2009) that is easily transferrable from emails to forums to promote UGC communication and positive promotional effects (Ruzic & Biloz, 2010). When translated into UGC, consumers turn into promoters of a product or destination through intentional viral marketing (Bruyn & Lilien, 2008); and disguise the company intentions by leveraging on a user's credibility (Swanepoel et al., 2009) as well as a consumer's interpersonal network (Bruyn & Lilien , 2008). UGC is changing the structure of travel information, the accessibility of travel information, travelers' knowledge and perception of many travel products (Litvin et al., 2011). Online discount offers and cheap deals such as (Groupon, Living Social, etc.) are a new form of viral marketing that accounts to 15% of travel planning and decision-making (European Travel Commission, 2012). Although success through viral marketing can be measured through monitoring lead generation, this form of social media strategy is used amongst airlines and hotel operators, and rarely a DMO due to the type of product they are marketing.

Motivation to Share and Post in Social Media

There is a general assumption of that what you read on social media sites are true, and that all of the comments, postings, shared images and video are offered by sincere people who readily share their opinions and experiences with the intention of helping others in making well informed decisions. Such honestly is the underlying and persuasive power of word of mouth marketing. Critical to the success of word of mouth is the belief that the communicator is not perceived to be commercially motivated. Precourt (2009) found that individuals often perceive honesty from social media, review sites and biased views from corporate or branded sites. Despite the assumption of sincere honesty, readers know little about web communicators and their motivations. Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster (1998) propose specific motivations for sending either positive by helping the user, product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company and negative word of mouth, anxiety reduction, vengeance, and advice seeking. Some of the most recent research studies propose such motivations for posting online comments as narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), pursuit of personal identity as a gratification (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), status seeking (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Leung, 2009), and internal self-concept motivation (Yang & Lai , 2010). Grace-Farfaglia et al. (2006) also identify social support, fame, and respect as motivations, and Hess, Rohrmeier, & Stoeckl (2007) found in a study comparing text with video content that video bloggers are mostly "having fun and passing time," while text bloggers are keen to "spread the information".

Other research reveals reasons for not posting or not participating, including a desire to remain anonymous because of privacy, security time constraints, and anxiety (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), whereas other explanations for not posting are time, laziness, and shyness over public, no need to post, vengeance, and anxiety (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001; Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). Leung (2009) proposes that web posting involves a "complex mixture of social, cognitive, and entertainment needs that motivate users" who essentially seeks "gratification". Yang & Lai (2010) decribes that "internal self concept-based motivation is a better predictor of individual knowledge sharing behavior," whereas Parra-López et al. (2011) suggest social and hedonic factors as strong motivations. Wang & Fesenmaier (2004) put forward a desire for recognition and selflessness contributions as motivations, whereas Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright (2008) emphasize ego-defensive and social motivations.

The Future of Social Media in the Tourism Sector in Malaysia

It is proven that social media is here to stay and will be around for the foreseeable future. Its impact will shape the way industries in the tourism field engage and communicate with their customers and demographic audience. But what is the future for social media especially in the tourism industry? Many observers and industry experts all agree that mobile technology will lead the way. With the popularity of smartphones and easy access to mobile broadband services like 3G and Wi-Fi, more and more travelers are able to bring with them their mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. With constant connectivity, visitors will be able to interact with a brand of service in an even more personal and interactive way. Imagine international tourists visiting a historic location in Malaysia. With their mobile devices, they could take photos of the location that they are visiting, and the photos would immediately be posted on their personal social media accounts. Their mobile devices would show their GPS co-ordinates and all of their family and friends would be able to see in real-time what they are doing, and where they are located. They would then be able to interact with their family and friends, either in text based chat or real-time video based chat over the social media network. In addition to this, the social media network would be able to automatically recommend to the visitors other places of interest to visit in that area based on their GPS location.

Conclusion

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that UGC through social media channels help promote awareness and creates interest towards a product and destination (Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). However, Destination Marketing Organizations, airport and hotel operators still lack the solid strategy of mastering social media and implement it in the tourism industry. The challenge is to choose a right tool as different markets require different strategies (Hede & Kellet, 2012). Nevertheless, social media websites publishing UGC on travel advice is likely to become increasingly popular on this current decade (Sparks & Browning, 2011) and should therefore be recognized as an official marketing strategy (Hays et al., 2012). Strategic plans recommended by different scientific literature above still lack a solid and unified strategy that can be implemented across industries due to different market challenges and demographic situations. Further research and market analysis, in which UGC appeals to, is required before a solid step and conclusion can be drawn to a successful social media strategy. User generated content can help to inform tourist, educate tourism consumers, facilitate tourism transactions and more than that. The value of UGC perhaps has been under-valued but there is no deny that rich and varied stream of travel and tourism information is available online provided the information can be extracted, summarized, re-presented and relevant form to the decision makers who need it.

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