Planning a vacation using social media: Influences of demographic, psychographic, and trip-related characteristics

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Abstract

Previous studies have looked at a variety of factors to explain differing levels of social media consumption among travellers but have neglected trip-related characteristics. This study therefore examined the influence of demographic, psychographic, and trip-related characteristics as predictors for travellers' engagement with online user-generated content for vacation planning. Discriminant analysis found that travellers' opinion-seeking behaviour seems to be the highest predictor and that first-time visit to a destination, high level of involvement with vacation planning, and visiting an international destination are also positively related to social media use, while solo travel is inversely related to relying on social media sources for trip planning.

Key words: Social media; online user-generated content; travel planning; trip characteristics

1 Introduction and Theoretical Background

It has been established that travellers consult social media when planning their vacations (Gretzel, 2006; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Increasingly, travellers are turning to online user-generated content available through social media to obtain information prior to their vacations, particularly online travel reviews, believing them to be trustworthy and useful (Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2009; Dickinger, 2011). When trying to explain differences in travellers' engagement with social media for vacation planning, studies have traditionally focused on traveller characteristics, such as demographics (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Yoo & Gretzel, 2012; Ip, Lee & Law, 2012) and increasingly psychographics (Ross et al., 2009; Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, Díaz-Armas, 2011; Ayeh, Au & Law, 2012). A large number of studies have also focused on the impacts of social media consumption for travel planning and decision-making (Arsal, Backman & Baldwin, 2008; Ye, Law & Gu, 2009; Cox, Burgess, Sellito & Buultjens, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Ye, Law, Gu & Chen, 2011; Sidali, Fuchs & Spiller, 2012) and which types of online user-generated content travellers access (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Zhang, Pan, Smith & Li, 2009; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). What has received very little attention is the role of trip characteristics. In their analysis of offline tourist information search, Fodness and Murray (1997) found that travellers differ in their planning behaviour based on trip characteristics, such as mode of transportation, length of stay, number of destinations or attractions visited, accommodation, or expenditure patterns. Fodness and Murray (1997) did not find a difference in tourist information search patterns related to travelling party composition. For online tourist information search, Gretzel, Hwang, and Fesenmaier (2006) argue that "situational needs", for example desired level of activity and mobility, trip length, travel party, or trip purpose shape travellers'

vacation planning processes and therefore need to be considered. The sparse research that is available on trip characteristics suggests that trip characteristics, such as familiarity with destinations (Tan & Chen, 2011), travel to mature, well-known destinations (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012), or specific types of travel styles (e.g. Fjelstul & Severt, 2011; Cody, 2011) may factor into travellers' use of social media for vacation planning. Based on these findings and the lack of research in the area, it seemed relevant to try and understand the role of trip characteristics as antecedents for social media use for vacation planning. A previous paper found that trip-related characteristics, such as first-time visit to a destination, visit to an international destination, and whether or not respondents travelled solo mattered for travellers' level of engagement with social media (Simms, 2012). This paper aims to advance current research by looking at travellers' inclination or tendency to use social media for vacation planning as a connected interplay of psychographics, trip characteristics, and demographics.

2 Methodology

Data for this research note stem from the "Use of Social Media by American Travelers" survey conducted in January 2012 by the National Laboratory for Tourism and eCommerce at Temple University. The survey was administered by a professional market research company using an established consumer panel. Respondents were filtered to only include Americans who have used the Internet and taken at least one overnight pleasure trip of at least 50 miles, one way away from home, between January 1, 2011 – December 31, 2011, yielding 3,095 usable responses. The sample was further limited to American travellers who have used the Internet for at least part of their travel planning for their most recent overnight pleasure trip. This resulted in a final sample of 2,526 for analysis. The majority of respondents (57.4%) had turned to online user-generated content for planning their most recent vacation. The analysis conducted for this research note was Stepwise Discriminant Analysis in order to identify characteristics that would predict engagement with onliner user-generated content for vacation planning. Specifically, the roles of trip characteristics in comparison with demographics, as well a limited selection of psychographic variables and familiarity with the Internet were looked at. The variables are listed in Table 1. Generation was based on year of birth and categorization into generational cohorts followed categories established by Strauss and Howe (1991).

Table 1. Proposed Discriminating Variables

Trip-Related	Demographic	Psychographic	Internet Familiarity
First-time Visit	Generation	Opinion-seeking	Familiarity with Internet
Planning Involvement	Gender	Trust in UGC	
Travelled Solo	Ethnicitiy		
International Destination	Annual Household Income		
Trip Length	Marital Status		
Planning Lead Time	Education		

3 Results

Out of the 15 independent variables proposed for the analysis, seven were included as a result of the stepwise procedure: four from the set of trip characteristics, two from demographics, and one psychographic variable. These seven variables allowed for the correct classification of 66.4% of all cases. The chi-square value of 378.510 is highly significant (p < .0001). With a low eigenvalue of 0.180 and low canonical correlation (r = 0.390), 100% of the variation was explained because only one classified function was available. Table 2 presents the results for the canonical discriminant functions.

Table 2. Summary of Discriminant Analysis Results

| % of Variance | | | | | | |
Function	Cumulative	Eigenvalue	Canonical Correlation	Wilks Lambda	Chi-square	Sig. Level
100.0	100.0	0.180	0.390	0.848	378.510	0.000

The results in Table 3 indicate that psychographic and trip characteristics seem to play a larger role in predicting travellers' engagement with online user-generated content than demographics. The psychographic characteristic opinion-seeking behaviour seems to be the single largest predictor for engaging with online user-generated content for travel information search. Visiting a destination for the first time and involvement with trip planning are positively correlated with social media use, while solo travel seems to be inversely related to social media use for vacation planning. Travel to an international destination also has a positive association with social media use. The most important demographic predictor is generation with Gen Y, that is, travellers born in or after 1983, being more likely to use social media, followed by gender, with males exhibiting higher incidents of social media-supported planning.

Table 3. Discriminant Function Coefficients

Variable	Standardized Coefficient
Opinion-seeking Behaviour	.514
First-Time Visit	.461
Travelled Solo	-.393
Generation	-.348
Level of Involvement with Vacation Planning	.319
International Destination	.213
Gender	.143

4 Conclusion and Implications

This study looked at demographics, psychographics, and trip characteristics as predictors for whether a trip would be planned using social media. The results generated from this study suggest that travellers' opinion-seeking tendency is the highest indicator. Further, the often overlooked trip characteristics seem to play a larger role in predicting travellers' engagement with online user-generated content for

trip planning than demographics. Four of six proposed independent variables from the trip characteristics category remained in the analysis after stepwise exclusion: First-time visit to a destination, level of involvement with vacation planning, travel party composition, and domestic or international vacation destination. Therefore, it seems relevant to explore the role of trip characteristics further in future studies.

The study has important theoretical and practical implications. The results advance the theoretical knowledge regarding online travel information search to include trip characteristics as an important factor in describing traveller's engagement with social media when planning a vacation. The findings confirm Fodness and Murray's (1997) results from offline tourist information search for online tourist information search and offer travelling solo as an additional factor. The findings also offer evidence for Gretzel, Hwang and Fesenmaier's (2006) statements that situational needs shape travellers' vacation planning needs. The study's practical implications are that important factors for understanding the use of online user-generated content for trip planning depends on the situational context of a specific vacation. In other words, the same consumer may very well turn to the Internet to obtain other travellers' accounts of their vacation experience for one vacation, but not for another. It may be important to look at future customers in terms of their travel style, and more particularly, in terms of their experience with a specific destination and shift the focus away from the more established segmentation principles grounded in demographic differences.

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