Views of Future Travel and Tourism Experts on Social Media in Tourism

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Abstract: Social media have become important in a wide range of areas, including tourism. There are several classifications of social media. The main objective of the present paper is to determine the way future experts in the area of travel and tourism assess and use travel-related social media. Specifically, what they like and/or dislike about various features of popular travel-related social network sites, which social network sites are popular among them, what kind of information they usually look for, how active they are in creating user-generated content, what patterns of behaviour they display before, during and after the trip. Respondents were divided into two groups. The first one analysed and assessed travel-related social media or network sites, whereas the second one participated in a questionnaire survey looking into their utilization of travel-related social media. The results suggest that future experts favour travel-related blogs and reviews, travel advice and tips, accommodation and tickets, maps and GPS (Global Positioning System) services.

Keywords: social media; social networking; travel; tourism

JEL Classification: O330; Z320; Z390

1. Introduction

Social media in tourism is an emerging research topic (Zeng and Gerritsen 2014). Social media in general have been enjoying a dramatic rise in their popularity of late, e.g. Fotis et al. (2012). Some authors, like Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) insist that there is very limited understanding of the term social media and aim to clarify how it differs from the terms Web 2.0 and user-generated content. To them, Web 2.0 represents the ideological and technological foundation, and user-generated content is the sum of ways in which people make use of social media. With this in mind, the definition of social media is as follows: "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User-generated Content." (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61)

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) make a six-category classification of social media: blogs, social networking sites (for instance, Facebook), virtual social worlds (Second Life), collaborative projects (Wikipedia and social bookmarking apps like Delicious), content communities (YouTube), and virtual game worlds (World of Warcraft). Nonetheless, e.g. Fotis et al. (2012) mention that Kaplan's and Haenlein's social media taxonomy is not the only one and that it neglects certain types of social media such as microblogs or Internet forums. The latter authors propose the following taxonomy: blogs, photo and video sharing websites, microblogs, wikis, social networking sites and travel review sites.

Other authors distinguish between social media and social networking. For instance, Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) maintain that whereas social media are tools or means of communication, social network is the use of these tools. The same authors count among the former, i.e. social media, social networking sites, consumer review sites, content community sites, wikis, Internet forums and location-based social media and add that social media have become an important tool for promoting tourism industry in a lot of countries. Sahin and Sengün (2015) claim that social media users are influenced by other users' comments and draw a conclusion that tourism enterprises should be present at social media sites, create their own official accounts and hire staff to maintain them. Others, like Liburd and Christensen (2013) even strive to integrate social media in tourism education as they believe that discussion forums, blogs and wikis facilitate learning activities.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) describe social networking sites as web-based services allowing individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and view their list of connections. The rise of social media and social networking coincide with the advent of Web 2.0 (e.g., Liburd and Christensen 2013; Ali and Frew 2013), which enables almost unlimited sharing and accessing information in the form of texts, pictures and video recordings. As Jansson (2018) states, social media make it possible to instantly follow, share, rate and discuss various content. There is a wide range of social networks. For instance, (White 2012) suggests that there are seven main types of social networks, i.e. social connections, multimedia sharing, professional, informational, educational, hobbies and academic. In the field of tourism, Werthner and Ricci (2004) emphasize that whereas other industries remain traditional, the travel and tourism industry has embraced e-commerce and online transactions in this area are continuously increasing. Sahin and Sengün (2015) advise that the tourism sector should utilize social media and their development in marketing and point out that potential tourists usually search the Internet for travel information in order to make their travel plans. The same authors add that tourists' decisions are strongly affected by other users' comments on social media, in particular those who travel to a destination for the first time. Fotis et al. (2012) emphasize the impact of social media on holiday travel planning and discuss how it works before, during and after the trip. They contend that social media are used in particular after holidays for experience sharing and add that user-generated content is perceived as more trustworthy than official travel information. Sahin and Sengün (2015) as well as Kiráľová and Pavlíček (2015) claim that social media have also become significant in developing destination marketing and communication strategies. Moreover, tourists and travellers, particularly young adults, often search for and use social networking sites when planning their holidays and travels (Lange-Faria and Elliot 2012). Travel information search is dominated by Facebook and Twitter, which are not primarily travel-related social networking sites. Nevertheless, our experience with teaching students of Management of Travel and Tourism at Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic, shows that future travel and tourism experts are aware of the fact that there are platforms specialized in this area and they use a variety of websites in their search for relevant travel information.

There are a lot of authors who assess various Web 2.0 sites, often travel-related ones. For example, Ali and Frew (2013) made a list of the most widely used Web 2.0 sites. Its leaders Facebook and YouTube (with 800 million users each) are trailed by Qzone (480 million), followed by Twitter (300 million), next comes Renden (160 million), then there is a business-oriented site LinkedIn (120 million), followed by Vkontakte, or VK (111 million), which is an equivalent to Facebook in post-Soviet countries. The above-mentioned list (Ali and Frew, 2013) includes several social networking sites specialized in travel and tourism. Among others, WAYN (10 million), Couchsurfing (2.9 million), Travelbuddy (1.6 million), and Travellerspoint (0.3 million). Another ranking makes a list of the top five travel and tourism sites (The Five Best Social Networking Sites for Travel, 2018), namely Facebook, Twitter, WAYN, Airbnb.com and TripAdvisor. (Sahin andSengün 2015) declare that as of 2014 the most popular social media sites were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn. They also provide a ranking of the top ten social media platforms based on the statistics of active users: "Facebook (1.184 billion), QQ (Tencent) (816 million), Qzone (632 million), WhatsApp (400 million), Google+ (300 million), WeChat (272 million), LinkedIn (259 million), Twitter (232 million), Tumblr (230 million), Tencent Weibo (220 million)" (Sahin and Sengün 2015, 776). Jansson (2018) counts among mainstream platforms used also for tourism purposes Facebook, Flickr and Instagram, whereas Fotis et al. (2012) mention TripAdvisor as the leader among travel-related consumer review sites.

Apple tree communications (2019) found out that the overall most popular platform among tourists is Facebook but there is an interesting category, namely influencers, where the most popular platform for tourists is Instagram with visually attractive feeds. Instagram users are usually young people, which partly explains why this platform is becoming remarkably successful.

The aim of the present paper is to show the way social network sites are used by future travel and tourism experts, which social network sites are popular among them, what kind of information they usually look for, and how active they are in creating user-generated content. It also suggests some patterns of their behaviour before, during and after the trip.

2. Methodology

There were two parts of research. In the first one, a group of 40 Management of Travel and Tourism students was to write a seminar paper on a selected travel-related social network site. This was meant as a qualitative pilot research, which aimed at finding and assessing the existing options for those who want to gather travel-related information from social network sites. The list of the sites was based on the aforementioned rankings in expert literature.

The other part of research aimed at finding out how another group of 62 Management of Travel and Tourism students use the Internet, in particular travel-related social network sites, for traveling purposes.

Of course, the number of respondents is limited by the number of students of Management of Travel and Tourism at Faculty of Informatics and Management. On the other hand, both groups of respondents are tourism experts-to-be and, at the same time, they belong to the generation using the Internet from an early age.

In the first part of research, forty Students of Management of Travel and Tourism at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove analysed and assessed social network sites with an emphasis on their travel-related content. The qualitative analysis approach was employed. The main objective was to find out what various popular travel-related platforms have to offer and how they do it.

The instructions were as follows. Forty respondents were asked to select a social network site from a list prepared by their teacher who based it on expert literature. Each respondent was to analyse and assess only one platform. As the respondents attended two different study groups, they presented their findings in front of about half of the other respondents. The assignment was to describe the selected social network site in the following way. First, the respondents selected the site from the list provided by the teacher. Then, they were to describe the homepage in detail and find out whether or not there are any cross-references to other similar sites. Another task was to list features like photo-sharing, communication with other users, etc., that the site offers to its users. They also were to determine what information filters, if any, the site uses, and list what kind of user-generated content there is, i.e., text, pictures, other. There was a subjective part as well, namely, whether or not the site is user-friendly. The respondents were also asked to contact a representative of the site and ask them for further information about the number of users and the mission of the platform, and other more detailed information. Last but not least, the respondents were to make a SWOT analysis of the site, and assess it. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to make a list of platforms they personally use. Last but not least, they were to summarize what they had found out and present it in class.

On completing the first part of research, the attention moved to the actual ways in which future travel and tourism experts use various platforms. The second part of research was quantitative. Sixty-two respondents answered six open questions in a questionnaire aiming at determining the ways they use the Internet in connection with traveling; what they consider the most valuable travel-related content; their utilization of the Internet before, during and after the trip; and what social network sites they see as most helpful. The respondents could provide more than one answer to all questions.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis and assessment of travel-related platforms

The first part of research was the qualitative pilot research analysing and assessing travel-related social media or network sites. It brought the following results. In general, most of the assessed platforms provide similar services. Namely, they offer reviews, advice, accommodation, tickets, and more. The content is often user-generated and some of the platforms declare that travellers are the best source of information, which is the credo of World66 (http://www.world66.com/). This part of research aimed at making an overview of options that travellers have on travel-related platforms and to make future experts in tourism aware of their potential.

The respondents first presented the way that individual platforms look like and work. Later, all students in class discussed the presented site. These debates resulted in determining the most interesting

platforms from the point of view of students of Management of Travel and Tourism. Their favourites are Foursquare, TripAdvisor, and Wikitravel.

Of course, the best way to find out more about platforms is to use them on one's own. On the other hand, it is useful to mention some basic features of the most highly esteemed platforms. Basically, Foursquare and TripAdvisor provide their users with information about places and activities in a selected destination. The Foursquare user can save their favourite places, find other interesting ones, and plan their trips. The user's list of places can be shared with other users. Trip Advisor enables their users to be either active or passive. Both platforms enable their users to write reviews and share photographs. Wikitravel provides its users with information about destinations, flight tickets, accommodation as well as tickets to enter local attractions.

In general, platforms providing information about destinations were viewed positively, whereas platforms like Couchsurfing or Stay4free generate clearly differing opinions. Some students find such platforms extremely useful as they help them save money, others are aware and afraid of potential dangers. The feedback from the respondents suggests, however, that Couchsurfing belongs to the most popular platforms.

The respondents also listed travel-related social network sites and other similar platforms they use most frequently. They could name more than one site. As Tab. 1 shows, the most frequently used platform is, rather unsurprisingly, Facebook. It is followed by TripAdvisor, Instagram, Couchsurfing, Booking.com, and Airbnb. Other ones mentioned by more than one student include Twitter, Google Maps, YouTube, Foursquare, Pinterest, and hostelworld. Even though some of the above-mentioned platforms may not necessarily be considered proper travel-related social network sites, they all provide some kind of travel information and are therefore relevant.

Table 1. Popularity of travel-related social network sites among the respondents.

The respondents' favourite travel-related sites (N=40)		%
Facebook	15	37.5
TripAdvisor	9	22.5
Instagram	7	17.5
Couchsurfing	6	15
Booking.com	5	12.5
Airbnb	4	10

It is interesting to compare these results with the figures for the world as well as the Czech Republic. According to Vincosblog (2018), as of January 2018, the most popular platform in the Americas, Africa, Europe, and India was Facebook, whereas in Russia it was VKontakte and the Chinese preferred QZone. The map of runner-ups is more varied. It features Instagram (parts of South America, India, parts of Europe), Odnoklassniki (Russia), Twitter (the U.S., France, Spain, Argentina, South Africa), or Reddit (Canada, Australia).

The figures for the Czech Republic as of April 2017 were published by Lorenc (2017). He maintains that the most widely used social network is Facebook, followed by YouTube, which is expected to surpass Facebook sooner or later. Then comes Instagram, the most progressive platform, which introduced new functions, including Insta Stories, and have gained most new users recently. The fourth place is occupied by LinkedIn and Twitter and Snapchat share the fifth place.

3.2. Future travel experts' utilization of travel-related platforms

The second part of research was meant to determine actual practices that future travel and tourism experts employ before, during, and after their trips. It also looked into the type of content that is of interest to them, as well as most frequently used and visited websites with travel-related content.

Tab. 2 shows that the respondents tend to browse the Internet for travel-related purposes particularly when booking their holidays – e.g. flight tickets and accommodation, then when looking for travel tips, searching for travel information and maps of places they plan to visit.

Table 2. How do you personally use the Internet in connection with traveling?

Way of using the Internet (N=62)		%
Bookings (flight tickets/accommodation)	40	64.5
Travel tips/search for destination	25	40.3
Search for information	21	33.8
Maps	12	19.4
Advice/tips/reviews	9	14.5
Prices	9	14.5
Timetables	8	12.9

Tab. 3 indicates that future travel and tourism experts really appreciate authentic travel information provided by other travellers in travel blogs and reviews of various places and facilities.

Table 3. What kind of travel-related content do you personally consider the most valuable and why?

Useful travel-related content (N=62)		%
Travel blogs and reviews	21	33.8
Maps	6	9.7
Bookings	6	9.7
Destination information	5	8
YouTube videos	3	4.8

As seen in Tab. 4, a lot of respondents search the Internet before they set out for a trip. Most of them look for and book suitable accommodation and transport tickets and search for travel information or plan the trip. Only a small fragment of respondents does not utilize the Internet before they start their journey.

Table 4. Do you use the Internet before the trip? If so, in what way(s)?

Internet utilization before the trip (N=62)		%
Search for accommodation	32	51.6
Research/destination information	26	41.9
Flight/other transport tickets	20	32.2
Planning the trip	17	27.4
Timetables	9	14.5
NO	2	3.2

Tab. 5 demonstrates that during the trip the respondents want to know their way around the destination. Therefore, both maps and GPS information are often searched for. Next comes information needed in order to plan one's travel activities in more detail, in particular, on where to eat or drink, what to visit and see, how to get there by public transport, and what weather to expect.

Table 5. Do you use the Internet during the trip? If so, in what way(s)?

Internet utilization during the trip (N=62)		%
Maps/GPS	35	56.4
Search for restaurants/cafés	13	21
Travel tips/advice	13	21
Public transport timetables	11	17.7
Weather forecast	10	16.1
Connect with family/friends	4	6.5
Dictionary	4	6.5
NO	1	1.6

Tab. 6 illustrates whether and in what way(s) the Internet is used on coming back home. Most respondents admit they write reviews and recommendations and share their experience and pictures on the Internet, which justifies their responses to question two (see Tab. 2), where they acknowledge the importance of authentic travel information. Nevertheless, a considerable number of them do not use the Internet after the trip (in connection with it) at all.

Table 6. Do you use the Internet after the trip? If so, in what way(s)?

Internet utilization after the trip (N=62)		%
Post reviews/recommendations/share experience	28	45.1
Post/share pictures	17	27.4
NO	17	27.4

From Tab. 7 we can see that the most widely used social network sites among this group of respondents are Instagram, TripAdvisor and Facebook, which correlates with the results generated from the first part of research, where the top three social network sites are the same, only in the reverse order.

Table 7. What social network sites do you find most helpful and why?

Useful social network sites (N=62)		%
Instagram	20	32.3
TripAdvisor	19	30.6
Facebook	17	27.4
Google chrome/Google maps	11	17.7
Airbnb.com	6	9.7
YouTube	6	9.7
Booking.com	5	8.1

4. Discussion

Prior studies on the utilization of social network sites in the tourism industry have shown the increasing importance of social media, e.g. Fotis et al. (2012) and well as their success in the tourism industry, e.g. Sahin and Sengün (2015). Nevertheless, these studies have not asked about the user-friendliness of social media. Moreover, the present study looks into the way tourism experts-to-be who study Management of Travel and Tourism at the Faculty of Informatics and Management utilise travel-related social network sites. Although the results were in concord with our expectations, it should be born in mind that this study is limited to certain extent by the fact that the research sample was not very large, forty and sixty-two respondents, respectively.

5. Conclusions

The respondents use social media on everyday basis, most frequently Facebook, TripAdvisor and Instagram but they are also aware of advantages offered by platforms like Booking.com and appreciate other sites, like Foursquare or Wikitravel. The most divisive kind of platforms include Couchsurfing and Airbnb as there are those who like to use them as frequently as possible whereas other ones are too scared to get involved at all. Social media and network sites are currently offering in particular reviews, advice, accommodation, tickets and respondents like to use them to make bookings, look for travel tips, read travel blogs and reviews, search for accommodation and other travel-related information, including the use of maps and GPS services. This knowledge opens space for further improvements as well as finding other ways of social media and social network sites utilization for travel-related purposes. The present study thus shows the utilization of travel-related social network sites among young people from the Czech Republic who at the same time study Management of Travel and Tourism and are expected to pursue a career in the tourism industry. It seems that young Czech students are fully aware of the potential hidden in social media utilization in travel-related business

and other activities, in particular for booking and planning as well as getting up-to-date information. This can be seen as a sign of further development of social media in the field of travel and tourism. Moreover, there can be seen a potentially wide range of opportunities for Management of Travel and Tourism students at the faculty focusing on ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) education, including developing ways for social media utilization in their future tourism-oriented career.

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