

Credibility of Online User- Generated Content as a Source of Information for Tourists

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Abstract

This study explores whether the online user-generated content (UGC) are credible or not and if travelers are dependent on user-generated content for decision making. It also tries to understand the importance of the credibility of user-generated content to gain a better understanding of its impact on the online users, specially as a source of information for the tourism industry. The study aims to determine the extent of advice sought online based on age and gender. It also compares the credibility of travel related information of word of mouth, print media, websites and user-generated content.

Keywords Tourism, User-generated content (UGC), Credibility

Introduction

The past few decades have seen a tectonic shift in the media landscape, which has progressed into an elaborate and dynamic cluster of traditional and interactive media that responds to the needs of today's lifestyle. The interactive environment adds to exploiting on the already fragmented market by contributing niche media platforms that are giving it's audiences a voice in the middle of information overload.

With the outburst of Web 2.0 technologies, user-generated content generates an abundance of niche markets within the media landscape that attracts more than 69 million users and creates more than 450 million dollar in advertising revenue (Verna

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2007). Due to this, the digital information market continues to move towards a consumer centric model and away from the traditional media model, which is publisher centric. This shift in power challenges media theorist to modify the traditional way of identifying audiences with lesser focus on understanding the theoretical media effects and a greater understanding of why and how media audiences use media (Severin and Tankard 1992). As an ever expanding number of consumers direct their attention away from television, radio and print publications, and move their attention towards interactive media, marketers encounter the challenge of blending their offerings with those created by consumers themselves. There is a steady decline over the past several decades in newspaper readership and magazine circulation, and though the television market advances in terms of overall viewership, it suffers a penetration of program offerings, leading to fragmented audiences and declining program ratings (Anderson 2005).

Amid a probable mass media meltdown, the Internet has “arrived”, as an outlet in which traditional forms of media entertainment can converge and pitch consumers’ content at the time and place most conducive for them. Media scholars like Perry (2002) in his book, *Theory and Research in Mass Communication: Contexts and Consequences*, endorse that traditional media models of communication may no longer satisfactorily represent digital media, for which “convergence” may deliver as a progressively more accurate representation.

User-generated content

User- generated content refers to media content created by the audience rather than professionals and mainly distributed on the internet. Although the creation and circulation of content has been a regular for many years, the potential for a simple consumer to interact with and influence a wide audience was possible with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. Examples of some sites that support content creation and consumption of user-generated content include YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, Flickr, Blogs, Instagram among many others. In the wired world, these niche media markets are driven less by the fourth estate and more by user- generated content (UGC). This tendency of user-generated content has deep impact on online information that is provided, altered or shared. Online media scene has evolved into a powerful information space that provides both marketers and consumers with an outlet for competent, timely communication.

Web2.0 encourages greater online users who have no face-to-face interaction to engage in online communities (Wang,Yu,& Fesenmaier,2002) Online content is no longer the privilege of the product or service providers. Consumers can also be active content providers and “assert their need for information that is framed within their personal context rather than that of the promoter” (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006,p.826).

The proliferation of the social media platforms has dramatically increased the amount of user-generated content available online. Recent data shows that 35% of Internet users in the U.S. have created content and have posted it online. 26-36% have shared online

content, which are self-created that others can see, and 8% have blogs which are read by 39% of U.S. internet users (Lenhart 2006). Also the fact that over 70% of all adults in the U.S. are regularly online (Harris Interactive 2007; Lenhart 2006), these figures suggest that a large number of people in the U.S. are in some meaningful way creating their own information environment.

There is always concern regarding quality, reliability and value to user-generated content. Assessing credibility inaccurately can have serious social and personal consequences. As a result, determining the credibility of user-generated content become critical as people and audiences process user-generated content gleaned from digital media. It is therefore important for researchers to understand the impact of User Generated Content and its credibility.

Tourism and user- generated content

Tourism industry has been influenced by accelerated growth of Web2.0 applications as the two-way information exchange for travel and tourism, has generated an enormous number of online user-generated content on hotels, travel destinations and travel services (Sigala, 2008). The fact that tourism is an experience worth communicating, may logically be the main reason why travel reviews today flourish on the internet. A number of studies confirm the growing importance of social media and the online tourism domain, especially for travel planning (Xiang and Gretzel 2009). Travel surveys, posts in travel fora and extensively published contents which are appreciated online by tourists on social networks is known as user-generated content (UGC), and can be likened to electronic word-of-mouth. User-generated content performs as an incubator for the stature or prestige of a destination. In fact there are written record of people's narrative about their travel experience and if, from one point, they can be used to authenticate the actual prestige of a destination, from another point, they contribute fixing such a reputation. In fact, whether it is awesome or harrowing, a travel experience is generally shared speaking to others.

For the tourism industry experience shared by the tourists, through the journey, behavior of concerned people, perception, cognition and emotions either expressed or implied sets of a chain. The internet has become a major source of information for travelers and a platform for tourism business transactions (Werthner and Ricci 2004). The internet provides different and innovative ways for individuals to know about tourist destinations and the specialty services associated with the place directly from people who have visited. This new platform of communication empowers consumers and is similar to word-of mouth. Research has shown that interpersonal influence arising from opinion exchange between consumers is an important factor influencing consumers' purchase decisions. Word-of-mouth or advice from friends and relatives often ranks as the most influential source of pre-purchase information (Crofts 1999).

Tourism is an information-intense industry (Werthner & Klein, 1999). The characteristics of their product and services are difficult to perceive in advance and it is experience that ascertains its value. The image of a destination is built by the information that a tourist

shares. Destination image is what tourists “see” and “feel” when they think of the destination (Ahmed, 1991) and is a subjective concept (Leisen, 2001).

Focus on user-generated content may contribute crucial outcomes about travelers’ assumptions, demands and passion. All these facets are worth to be taken into account for the design of information systems to improve travel planning and for promoting effective blueprint for online tourism marketing. Studies on tourism associated user-generated content adopt a quantitative approach, focusing for example , on the ranking obtained by specific destination on social media websites (Dowling 2008), or on the frequency of keyword and their relationship (Pan, MacLaurin, and Crofts, 2007). So, it is not sufficient to review a certain destination positively or negatively as reported, but it is worth inspecting what is specifically said about it. Since potential tourists must deliberate about their trip (in terms of location and activities to do), they are mainly interested in the analysis why it is or it is not beneficial to visit a certain destination. Having knowhow about these reasons and being able to study them carries a lot of ramifications at the practical level. As an important factor, it means understanding which characteristics of a certain destination are appreciated by tourists themselves and on this basis, it means to improve the destination promotion.

Background and Hypotheses

The relevance of word-of –mouth on trade has been extensively discussed and researched, especially since the worldwide acceptance of Internet technologies, which have remodeled the dissemination and domination of word-of-mouth (Zhu & Zhang,2006).Through the internet, audiences can make their ideas and impressions more conveniently available to other internet user (Dellarocas, 2003).Till 2004, 44 percent of U.S. internet customers had shared their thoughts on the internet, and maximum of the consumers announced that they relied on the opinions which were posted online by other consumers (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

Networked user-generated content analyses travel locations, hotels and tourism business have become a decisive source of information for travelers (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crofts, 2007), with reports revealing that each year hundreds of millions of probable visitors consider online reviews (Tripadvisor.com, 2006). Goldenberg et al, (2001) emphasized those consumer selections processes are firmly determined by word-of mouth from different consumers. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) added that reviews contributed by other travelers are generally recognized by readers to be completely updated, recognized and reliable than data shared by travel service providers.

The use of Internet in the in dissemination of tourist information revolutionized the way of planning for tourist activity for a modern man (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Eftekhari et al. (2010) state that 70 percent of travelers use websites as the main data source. Concurrently, Jacobsen and Munar (2012) suggest that the internet information sources are very influential in the tourist decision making process.

The user-generated content (UGC) consists of information echoing the users' individual experiences, as well as, the experiences of the tourist activity, which are shared with other users (Blackshaw, 2006). Gretzel (2007) recommends that in seeking for information about tourist locations, the internet customers more often use and exchange in the network the proprietary content associated to their tourist activity than the content produced by professional providers of tourist services. Hence, the UGC can be a crucial source of information about the tourists' awareness of the travel destination image.

The appearance of the travel destination is an amalgamation of beliefs, impressions, perception and individual experiences associated to the area, deriving from the accumulation of information from different sources (Lee & Lockshin, 2011; Qu et al., 2011). It is thus a mental depiction of individual views about a definitive spot, being the resultant of various factors and has the maximum impact on tourist loyalty (Zhang et al., 2014).

This paper explores the hypotheses that, user-generated content are credible and travelers are dependent on online user-generated content in decision making.

It is important for researchers to understand the credibility of user-generated content as a source of information for the tourism industry and to gain a better understanding of the impact of user-generated content on the online users.

Objective

Tourists base their travel decisions on various sources of information which includes word of mouth, print (books , brochures etc), media (newspapers, magazines, travel programmes on television) , websites and user generated content (blogs, travel reviews, comments, content on social networking sites) The aim of the study was to understand how user- generated content available on the internet is perceived by the travelers viz a viz other sources of information like magazines, print media and word of mouth and to what extent it (user- generated content) influences their travel decisions. In more specific terms the study attempts to

- determine the extent of seeking travel advice online based on age group
- determine the credibility of user-generated content amongst various user groups based on gender and age group.
- compare usage and credibility of word of mouth, print, media, websites and user generated content sources of information on travel .

For the purpose of the study a questionnaire was designed which was administered online to 500 respondents. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of a single question- “ On an average how many times do you travel outstation in a year”. Only those respondents who travelled for 4 or more than 4 times a year constituted the

sample of the study and were administered the second section of the questionnaire which consisted of 16 questions related to the objective of the study.

Results and discussion

Out of 500 respondents, 207 respondents qualified as the sample (N= 207). In terms of gender the sample had an almost equal distribution of male and female respondents (50.7% male and 49.3% female respondents). The respondents belonged to 21 states of India covering all the regions viz North, South, East, West and Central. In terms of age group the distribution of respondents is given in Table 1

Table 1- Age groupwise distribution of respondents

Age group	N	Percent
< =30 years	77	37.2
30-40 years	50	24.2
40- 50 years	45	21.7
>50 years	35	16.9
Total	207	100.0

Table 2 gives a comparison of the various sources of information used by travelers. Online sources which included websites and user generated content emerged as the most popular source of information.

Table 2- Sources of information

Source of information	Number of responses	Percentage of respondents
Word of mouth	104	50.2%
Print	88	42.5%
Websites	160	77.2%
Media	120	57.9
User generated content	158	76.3%
Total	630 responses*	

*The total number of responses is 630 while the number of respondents is 207 as respondents were given the choice of choosing more than one response.

The weighted mean was calculated for the extent to which the different age groups sought online travel advice (Table 3). Here it is important to clarify that online sources of information included websites, blogs, reviews, pictures and comments posted online i.e both user generated content and other information available on internet. The mean was the highest for the respondents in the <= 30 years category (M= 3.74, SD =.965)

and lowest for the >50 years age group (M=2.97, SD=1.071). A chi square test was run to find out whether the difference amongst various age groups was significant. Results of chi square test(Table 4) indicated that there is a significant correlation between the different age groups and extent to which they sought travel advice online. In other words the respondents were not equally distributed amongst the four age groups regarding the extent to which they sought travel advice online , χ^2 (12, N=207)= 41.946,, p=.000.

Table 3- Descriptive statistics of the extent of seeking online advice

Age	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
<= 30	3.74	77	.965
30-40 years	3.66	50	.823
40-50 years	3.29	45	1.058
>50	2.97	35	1.071
Total	3.49	207	1.009

Table 4- Chi-Square Test- Extent of seeking for travel advice online between various age groups

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	41.946 ^a	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	41.957	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	16.134	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	207		

a. 6 cells (30.0%) have expected count less than 5.
The minimum expected count is 1.52.

Further, to check the robustness of the results , a one way ANOVA was conducted which compared the effect of age on extent to which respondents seek travel advice from online sources (Table 5). The results showed that the effect of age on extent to which respondents seek travel advice from online sources was significant , F (3,203)=6.159, p= .001. Studies in the past have also highlighted the digital generational divide between digitally literate users and the elderly. (Hawthorn, 2000; Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Nathan, Berman and Kelyy, 2006; Heim and Brandtzaeg 2007). However a look at the more recent studies shows that this gap is fast decreasing

and more and more people in the higher age groups are using information available on the internet (Karahasanovic', A., et al. 2008)

Table 5- Analysis of Variance - Extent of seeking travel advice online between various age groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	17.498	3	5.833	6.159	.001
Within Groups	192.241	203	.947		
Total	209.739	206			

The next objective of the study was to throw light on the credibility of user generated content amongst the various user groups. Results of the weighted mean (Table 6) showed that the credibility of user generated content was highest for the respondents in the ≤ 30 years category ($M= 3.99$, $SD =.896$) suggesting that the millennials not only were using user generated content for their travel decisions but also found the information credible. For higher age groups the credibility decreased being the lowest for the >50 years age group. The difference in terms of credibility of user generated content was significant as is evident from the chi square results $\chi^2 (12, N=207)= 82.224$, $p=.000$. indicating that the respondents from different age groups differed significantly in terms of their opinion regarding credibility of user generated content (Table 7). Further, results of a one way ANOVA (Table 8) confirmed that age has a significant effect on the travelers view regarding credibility of user generated content, ($F (3,203)=20.003$ $p= .000$).

Table 6- Descriptive statistics of the credibility of user generated content amongst various age groups

Age	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
≤ 30	3.99	77	.896
30-40 years	3.68	50	.683
40-50 years	3.31	45	.874
>50	2.63	35	1.140
Total	3.54	207	1.008

Table 7- Chi-Square Test- Credibility of user generated content amongst various age groups

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	82.224 ^a	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	81.067	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	45.292	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	207		

a. 7 cells (35.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.69.

Table 8 Analysis of Variance – Credibility of user generated content based on different age groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	47.795	3	15.932	20.003	.000
Within Groups	161.683	203	.796		
Total	209.478	206			

Conclusion

The internet has promoted new ways of communication amongst netizens. Online reviews and discussion forums acknowledge and allow exchange of ideas and deliberation amongst total strangers. Travel related information disseminated through internet has an influence on tourists' decision making process. User-generated content is a crucial source of information about tourists' knowledge regarding the image of travel destination. The study shows that the effect of age on extent to which respondents seek travel advice from online sources is significant. Also millennials rely on user-generated content for travel decisions and also find user-generated content credible. This study suggests that there are still many unanswered questions about the role of user-generated content and it will be addressed in our next study.

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