



The roles of social media in tourists' choices of travel components

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Abstract

Social media are acknowledged as an important information source that influences tourists' travel choices. However, qualitative studies that take an inductive approach to identify the roles of social media by investigating how social media affect travel choices are limited. By interviewing 21 tourists who had recently taken trips, this article aimed to identify the roles that social media played in the tourists' choices of six travel components (destination, transportation, accommodation, food and dining activities, attractions, as well as shopping and leisure activities). Four roles have been identified: *Need Generator*, *Supporter*, *Guider* and *Approver*. Theoretical and practical implications along with future research suggestions are discussed.

Keywords

China, choice of travel, social media, tourism marketing, travel decision-making

Introduction

The rise of web 2.0 technologies has contributed significantly to the importance of social media in day-to-day life (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Social media have emerged as a powerful information and communication channel. They have significantly changed the

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practice of marketing communication for many companies, including those in the tourism and hospitality industry (Song and Yoo, 2016). The reliability of the content shared on these channels contributes to the power of social media (Leung et al., 2013). Such content may provide solid knowledge to travellers about destinations and tourism products (Yoo and Gretzel, 2011). As social media have developed into one of the most important sources of information, it is suggested that academia investigates their effects as they relate to tourism (Cohen et al., 2014; Leung et al., 2013).

The influence of social media on travel decision-making has attracted much attention from tourism scholars. A recent literature analysis has suggested that most of such studies have focused on the impact of social media on behavioural intention with very limited studies on actual behaviour (Leung et al., 2019). Furthermore, relatively little insight has been put on the roles of social media in tourism decision-making except by a few studies typically taking a deductive approach (e.g. Cox et al., 2009; Schroeder and Pennington-Gray, 2015; Tse, 2013). Research by Cox et al. (2009) pioneered the topic on the roles of social media. Their research took a deductive approach using an online survey that explored only the roles of social media outlined in the existing literature without offering much enlightenment on new roles or an extended discussion of the existing ones. Likewise, Schroeder and Pennington-Gray (2015) followed a deductive approach to investigate social media's role in international tourists' decision-making especially during a crisis, while Tse (2013) employed a case-study method to explore the marketing role of social media in the hotel industry with an emphasis on online communication and distribution. Although these studies have highlighted the importance of social media in tourists' decision-making as well as in tourism management and marketing, research with an inductive approach focussing on the identification of the different roles played by social media has been limited.

Notably, most of the previous research on the impact and roles of social media in tourism has focused only on particular aspects of the issue, such as word-of-mouth (Litvin et al., 2008), tourists' hotel-booking intentions (Sparks and Browning, 2011) and destination risk perceptions (Schroeder and Pennington-Gray, 2014). However, given that tourists consult different social media sites for various travel choices (e.g. destination choice, hotel choice), it is crucial to investigate all essential components of a journey to identify the roles that social media play in tourism decision-making (Schuckert et al., 2016). To the best of the authors' knowledge, no empirical study to date has investigated how tourists' choices regarding travel components ranging from destination, accommodation and transportation to on-site activities are affected by social media, which is an area that merits investigation.

The primary objective of this research, therefore, is to provide a holistic and integrated picture of the roles that social media play in tourists' choices regarding a broad range of travel components during the travel decision-making process. Specifically, this research systematically investigates the question of how social media are actually used by tourists and how their social media use affects their choices of six travel components: destination, transportation, accommodation, food and dining activities, attractions, and shopping and leisure activities. To answer the research question, a qualitative inquiry seems necessary. As an exploratory empirical study, the results provide a comprehensive understanding and can serve as the groundwork for future research.

Past research and literature analysis

Tourists' decision-making process and social media use

As widely pointed out in tourism literature, the choice and purchase of travel products involve multiple, interrelated and sequential decisions over an extended period of time (Stewart and Vogt, 1999). Tourists' decision-making is a sequencing process based on a series of well-defined stages. It includes recognition of problem, generation of goals and objectives, formulation of a set of alternative objects, search for information about the alternatives under consideration, evaluation of a range of alternatives, final conclusion and choice among alternatives, action upon the decision as well as provision of feedback for future decision (Crompton, 1992; Um and Crompton, 1990). This process is influenced by not only internal inputs such as sociopsychological factors (e.g. motives, attitudes, values, personal traits, lifecycle stage) and affective variables (e.g. state of mood and feelings during the trip) but also external variables (e.g. situational constraints, destination pull factors, marketing mix, environmental stimuli, social inputs) and the nature of trip (e.g. party size, travel distance, duration of trip) (Moutinho, 1987; Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005; Um and Crompton, 1990; Van Raaij and Francken, 1984; Woodside and MacDonald, 1994).

Given the distinctive characteristics of various tourism products and services, bundles of sub-decisions comprehending core decisions (i.e. choices of destination, travel date, composition of travel party, accommodation, route and travel budget), secondary decisions (i.e. choices of secondary destination, activities and attractions) and tertiary decisions (i.e. choices of gifts/souvenirs, dining, rest stops and shopping) follow different processes that vary in decision timing and flexibility. There is a hierarchy of multiple travel-related decisions ranging from relatively planned early decisions to looser sets of spontaneous or even totally unplanned decisions (Fesenmaier and Jeng, 2000). Furthermore, Hyde (2004) as well as Decrop and Snelders (2005) noted a duality in vacation decision-making. Pre-trip decision-making is characterized as a deliberated, purposed and reasoned process involving extensive information search, while on-site decision-making is depicted as a free-hearted, hedonistic and rather a simplistic process (Fesenmaier and Jeng, 2000).

Recent developments on the Internet in general and the proliferation of social media in particular are changing the lifestyles and behaviours of the public including their decision-making (Goldenberg et al., 2001). Increasingly, individuals obtain information from diversified online channels including social media (Cox et al., 2009; Schuckert et al., 2016). Social media channel allow individuals and businesses to disseminate information and to reach and to influence people widely and therefore are used frequently by consumers and organizations (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). In the context of tourism, social media are one of the most commonly used information sources (Simms, 2012). It has been suggested that people's daily use of social media regarding habits and skills has 'spilled over' into the travel industry (Wang et al., 2016: 52). In addition, the increasing adoption of smartphone and ubiquitous access to the mobile Internet has a profound impact on tourists' information search and decision-making, playing an essential role along the overall travel process (Amaro et al., 2016). Tourists tend to postpone many

decisions they used to make prior to departure to the on-site phase based on the ad hoc availability of information provided by related technology (ICT; Xiang et al., 2015). Abundant information shared on social media channels has a large influence not only on trip planning but also on the final decisions in making travel plans (Fotis et al., 2011). Furthermore, the widespread use of social media may exert not only positive influences but also negative ones on travel and hospitality businesses and the wider industry (Thevenot, 2007). Given the influential power and complex effect of social media channels, it is essential to understand when and how tourists use these channels at various stages of their travel decision-making processes. Paris (2011, 2012a, 2012b) revealed that ‘flashpackers’ count heavily upon social media for their travel before, during and after their trip. The interesting question, however, in this context becomes what specific roles users assign to social media intentionally or unintentionally by engaging in these platforms, and the extent to which these roles eventually affect final decisions.

Research on the role of social media in tourist’ decision-making process

The impact of social media on consumer behaviour has been extensively discussed in the tourism and travel sector given the intangible nature of travel services and the perceived risk during the travel decision-making process (Minazzi, 2015). Several studies have analysed tourists’ intentions to use social media (Ayeh et al., 2013; Casaló et al., 2011; Filieri and McLeay, 2014; Parra-López et al., 2011), the use and impact of social media with respect to travel information searches (Jacobsen and Munar, 2012; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), attitudes and purchase intentions (Sparks et al., 2013; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009) and travel decisions (Arsal et al., 2008; Sidali et al., 2009; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). The proliferation and significance of social media for various aspects of tourists’ decision-making imply the need for a deep, holistic understanding of the role that social media sites play in tourists’ information search and decision-making processes (Cox et al., 2009; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Although few in number, studies using qualitative methods have been applied in the investigation of social media impact on tourists’ decision-making processes. The studies mainly focused on exploration of tourists’ adoption and information processing of online reviews (Filieri, 2016; Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011). Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017) conducted a qualitative in-depth query on the impact of social media on consumers’ hotel decision-making process, particularly focussing on the ‘evaluation stage’ in which information search and selection through social media occur. Ayeh et al. (2012) inductively explored social media strategies that have been applied by hospitality and tourism practitioners. Although social media’s potential for influencing the five-stage tourists’ decision-making process (i.e. need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, postpurchase behaviour) has been highlighted, the study aids little in understanding the tourist’ actual usage of social media and its influence on each stage of the decision-making process.

The study by Cox et al. (2009) was the first to introduce the topic of the role of social media, which examined the role of user-generated content (UGC) sites in travel-planning processes compared to other information sources. This study found that social media are used mainly after the destination has been chosen, especially for information searches regarding accommodation and where to go within the destination. Research generally

supports the claim that UGC is perceived as similar to offline recommendations or word-of-mouth (Buttle, 1998) and offers more authentic, updated, enjoyable and credible information than other marketer-controlled sources or marketer-generated content (Fotis et al., 2011; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Liang et al., 2020; Yoo et al., 2011; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). However, Cox et al. (2009) noticed that information obtained from social media is not necessarily perceived as trustworthy and reliable compared to more traditional sources, such as official and governmental tourism websites. This suggests that social media act as supplementary to traditional sources of travel information rather than as substitutes for them. Tourists now are seeking and synthesizing information from a variety of channels and sources to make a comprehensive judgement of travel products (Xiang et al., 2015).

Tse (2013) employed a case-study method to explore the marketing role of social media in the hotel industry with an emphasis on online communication and distribution based on marketer-generated content. Schroeder and Pennington-Gray (2015) examined options for crisis management and social media's role in international tourists' decision-making when a crisis unfolds while travelling. Their study found that the likelihood that international tourists will turn to social media to search for crisis-related information is related to their past travel experience and risk perceptions. Chen et al. (2015) explored the role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) across the UK consumers' online holiday purchase decision-making stages: information search, evaluation, and purchase. Analysis of data revealed the variations of the eWOM's role and impact in relation to three eWOM dimensions: motivation, source and content.

The study by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) indicated the significant role of social media in the online tourism domain as a ubiquitous and popular information source when tourists are searching for destination-related information. Sparks and Browning (2011) looked at the role of social media in hotel-booking intention as well as trust perception towards hotels. Findings revealed complicated framing effects of social media content such as valence, ratings targeting consumers' booking intentions and trust of a considered hotel. Filieri (2016) revealed which cues consumers use to assess the trustworthiness of UGC: review extremity and valence, and message content and style. From the perspective of beneficial factors related to social media, Song and Yoo (2016) demonstrated that social media play a crucial role in tourists' purchase decisions during the pre-purchase stage. Functional and monetary benefits of using social media were found to have a positive effect on tourists' purchase decisions in terms of purchase willingness, purchase intention and decision-making.

In line with the argument made by Fotis et al. (2011), the above discussion reveals that existing research mainly describes the role of social media focussing on specific communities, on specific contexts or at specific stages of the travel decision-making process. As suggested by Hudson and Thal (2013), social media play an influential and valuable role during all stages of the travel process (pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip stages) as well as along the entire consumers' decision-making journey like, that is, the consideration, evaluation, purchase and postpurchase stages (Hudson and Thal, 2013; Öz, 2015). Researchers indicated that a relatively significant amount of attention from tourism companies has been put on the consideration and purchase stages. However, consumers can be largely influenced by social media at the evaluation and postpurchase stages as well. Previous research has highlighted the importance of the role of social media in tourists'

attitudes and behavioural intentions within a travel-planning context, however, very little is currently known regarding the impact and role of social media throughout the entire decision-making process in a real and live experienced travel context rather than a hypothetical (what-if) travel context.

Furthermore, the majority of previous studies on social media have focused attention on a certain aspect of a travel component, such as restaurants (Jeong and Jang, 2011; Mkono, 2012; Zhang et al., 2010), hotels (Lu et al., 2014; Sparks and Browning, 2011; Varkaris and Neuhofer, 2017; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009; Ye et al., 2009, 2011), and destination choices (Di Pietro et al., 2012; Tham et al., 2013). As noted by Xiang and Gretzel (2010), information searches regarding certain travel components (e.g. nightlife activities and restaurants) are more closely related to social media than other components are (e.g. attractions). Cox et al. (2009) found that social media sites are generally used during the information search and the evaluation of alternatives phases of travel planning to assist in destination, accommodation and attraction choices. In contrast, these resources are rarely used during the trip to find out about specific attractions. Similarly, Chen et al. (2015) confirmed that consumers appear to have different information search patterns depending on the relevant travel components as well as the stages of the holiday decision-making process. In particular, social media play a larger role in the pre-stage of the decision-making process. However, conflicting results were reported by Fotis et al. (2011), who found that social media are predominantly used during the post-trip stage for reflecting and sharing travel experiences. Moreover, the researchers noticed that social media were perceived as most influential on destinations and accommodation choices. The findings also suggested that there are differences in social media adoption and usage patterns among national markets with cultural differences potentially contributing to such a difference (Fotis et al., 2011; Gretzel et al., 2008).

Overall, studies imply different roles played by social media over the tourists' decision-making process in regard to various travel components. Despite the prevalent use of social media in the early decision-making stage (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002), previous studies often start with the information search stage (Chung and Koo, 2015). There is a need for tourism research to examine the extent to which social media play different roles across the stages during the process. Lin and Huang (2006) explored the marketing effect of Internet blog on gaining attention, holding interest, arousing desire and eliciting action (the AIDA model). The research proves the role of social media in attracting intention and resulting in immediate or future action, however, the scope of this article was limited to a case study of a single blog website. Kane et al.'s (2012) research suggested that social media seem to enhance awareness and influence tourists' perceptions and attitude in the long term rather than to lead to direct and immediate behavioural change.

In this study, the authors focus on the pre-trip and during-trip phases of tourist decision-making, as well as various travel components including destination, transportation to and within a destination, accommodation, food and dining activities, attractions, shopping and leisure activities. Thus, this study fills an important gap by taking a holistic view to inductively explore the different roles of social media in tourists' decision-making process.

Travel components

Tourist behaviour involves decisions, activities and experiences regarding obtaining and consuming products and services to satisfy certain needs (Engel et al., 1990). It is concerned with a set of interrelated choices made at different time points, beginning with the choice of destination and extending all the way to choices of activities at the destination, which should not be analysed separately (Cohen et al., 2014; Dellaert et al., 1998). From a travel behavioural perspective, tourism domain is usually segmented to different travel components from different approaches. Starting with Clawson and Knetsch (1966), for example, concepts and influences in the broad context of tourist behaviour can be examined for specific phases of travel including anticipation or pre-purchase, travel to the destination, on-site experience, return home, and extended recall and recollection. Woodside and MacDonald (1994) acknowledged later that leisure tourist choices and behaviour processes are related to eight subdomains as follows: destination, accommodation, activities, attractions, travel modes/routes, dining options, destination areas and routes, and purchases. Furthermore, the choices for each component may be spread out over a long period and occur at different stages. Some of the most frequently used frameworks in tourism concerning travel components are highlighted in Table 1.

Although these frameworks focus on different facets of the travel experience, most of them fall into six categories of the framework provided by Sun (1990), namely, transportation, accommodation, food, attraction, shopping and entertainment, as well as destination. The advantage of Sun's (1990) framework is that it is broad in nature and includes the most important elements of the entire travel process. Similarly, Xiang and Gretzel (2010: 182) suggested that travellers usually use 'accommodation', 'hotel', 'activities', 'attractions', 'park', 'events', 'tourism', 'restaurant', 'shopping' and 'nightlife' as search terms when planning their trip. Based on these actual search terms used by travellers,

Table 1. Tourists' choices of travel components in relation to the use of online information.

Author (Year)	Travel behaviour framework
Sun (1990)	Transportation, accommodation, food, attraction, shopping, entertainment
Woodside and MacDonald (1994)	Destination, accommodation, activities, attractions, travel modes/routes, dining options, destination areas and routes, purchases
Jeng and Fesenmaier (2002)	Destination, travel party, attractions, activities, timing, route
Pan and Fesenmaier (2006)	Travel partners, destinations, expenditure, activities, travel dates, attractions, transportation providers, length of trip, rest stops, food stops
Xiang et al. (2008)	Accommodation, activities, areas, attractions, events, information, places, restaurants, shopping
Xiang and Gretzel (2010)	Accommodation, hotel, activities, attractions, park, events, tourism, restaurant, shopping, nightlife
Plank (2016)	Destinations, accommodation, attractions, activities, experiences

industry classification schemes and prior literature, a slightly adjusted version of Sun's (1990) categorization is taken as the research framework to represent tourists' choices of travel components, namely, (1) destination, (2) transportation to and within the destination, (3) accommodation, (4) attractions, (5) food and dining as well as (6) shopping and leisure activities. Such a category comprehensively reflects the tourism from a travel behavioural perspective and allows our study to thoroughly and deeply explore the role of social media in tourism regarding tourists' decision-making process (Xiang et al., 2008).

Methodology

Study design

Considering the complexity of life, human actions and experiences, the process of how an individual's thoughts and choices are shaped cannot be conceptualized by a logic-deductive scientific method. Compared to a deductive approach, which is usually highly structured, an inductive approach that embraces the richness and depth of qualitative interpretive methods allows the researcher to reveal unexpected outcomes or information (Ryan, 2006). Through the use of a qualitative research approach, the research objectives of this study can be met.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were identified as appropriate means of data collection and subsequently conducted to identify the roles of social media in travel choices. This, on the one hand, affirms that all predetermined questions essential for the study are fully covered (Krishnaswami and Satyaprasad, 2010) and, on the other hand, gives the interviewees an opportunity to change the direction of the interview (Saunders et al., 2009; Wilson, 2010). A convenience sampling approach was utilized because it can facilitate plentiful data generation within a short period (Yin, 2003). Although this approach raises questions regarding the issues of bias, it is a widely used approach, especially for exploratory studies (Saunders et al., 2009). A series of open-ended questions were designed based on the research framework for assisting interviewees in recalling respondents' use of social media before and during their last trip. Specifically, interviewees were asked about which sources of information they used in their decision-making regarding six travel components and the extent to which these sources contributed to their final choices. A first pair of researchers developed the interview questions, while the second pair evaluated them for clarity and relevance to the study, as suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Slight adjustments were further made to the questions after pilot-testing interviews have been performed and analysed.

Data collection and analysis

A total of 21 face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted. The participant selection criterion was to have travelled within the last two months before the interview took place, and the sample included subjects with various demographic and occupational backgrounds. This ensures that all the interviewees were able to recall their travel experiences and choices during the last trip. Detailed information about the profiles of the respondents is presented in Table 2. Interviewees are from diverse age, gender, country,

marital status and occupational groups. This diversity serves as an indication that the triangulation was well done, securing the validity and reliability of this study (Willis, 2007).

As shown, of 21 respondents, 14 are Chinese, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. The interviews took up to 60 minutes each. Twelve respondents preferred to be interviewed in Chinese, while the other nine were comfortable answering questions in English. Two of the researchers are native Chinese speakers; they translated the interview questions to Chinese and also conducted the interviews in the respondents' native language. A re-translation procedure has been in place to ensure that the content and understanding of the interviews conducted in Chinese are transferred correctly into English and that no translation errors occur.

All interviews were conducted in person, as this increases the strength of communication (Gillham, 2000). With the respondents' approval, all interviews were recorded, as this facilitates the researcher's ability to give his or her complete attention to the respondent and the answers he or she gives and elicits questions emerging from the communication (Gillham, 2000). Moreover, recording interviews enable researchers to collect accurate data and use direct quotes (Saunders et al., 2009). The recorded interviews were then transcribed. Those interviews conducted in Chinese were subsequently translated into English by the Chinese researchers and partially retranslated into Chinese to ensure the consistency of key information. For the content analysis, researchers analysed all transcripts individually and separately. Emerging codes proposed by each researcher were then carefully assessed, discussed together and aggregated later at the end of the process. Although the respondents mentioned a number of factors that affected their choices, only those related to social media were analysed.

Results and discussion

Roles of social media in tourists' choices in regard to each travel component

Choosing a destination. Respondents were first asked about the reasons they chose the specific destination for their last trip. The results show that social media did not exert a direct impact on their destination choices. Instead, perceived destination images and personal recommendations appeared to play a greater role. However, two roles of social media that appeared to have an indirect impact on destination choice can be identified. This may partially explain and support Fotis et al.'s (2011) findings that influence of social media on destination choices affects travel plans. That is, how this process occurs is revealed. Although respondents indicated that their destination choices were largely driven by a number of destination attributes such as beautiful scenery, the culture, atmosphere, and other aspects of attractiveness, during daily browsing of social media sites, they got to see certain pictures or posts about the destination's attributes that they liked. This created awareness about the place *generating need* and interest for future visit.

When I don't have a lot of things to do . . . I sit in the office and read the user-generated content . . . I read and 'oooh' . . . It is good, it is good, it is good. And when I have a holiday and enough money, then, this image will jump, appear in my mind. (Interviewee 10)

Table 2. Profile of respondents.

Case	Age	Gender	Nationality	Marital status	Occupation	Travel companion	Trip arrangement	International vs domestic travel	Total trip duration (days)	First time or repeat visitors
1	28	Female	Chinese	Married	College teacher	Spouse	Independent	Domestic	11	First time
2	27	Male	Chinese	Married	Officer	Spouse	Independent and packaged**	Domestic	8	First time
3	25	Female	Chinese	Single	Tax consultant	Friend	Independent and packaged**	International	15	First time
4	24	Female	Chinese	Single	Accountant	Parents	Independent	Domestic	7	First time
5	23	Female	Chinese	Single	PhD student	Friend	Independent	International	6	Repeat
6	29	Male	Chinese	Single	Family business	Alone	Independent	International	7	First time
7	31	Male	Romanian	Single	Travel agent	Alone	Independent	International	7	Repeat
8	30	Male	Danish	Married	Research assistant	Alone	Independent	International	10	First time
9	26	Male	Azerbaijani	Married	Translator	Spouse	Independent	International	17–18	Mixed*
10	29	Female	Chinese	Married	Business consultant	Family member	Independent	International	9	First time
11	30	Male	Chinese	Single	PhD student	Partner	Independent	International	8	First time
12	25	Female	Chinese	Single	Teaching assistant	Family member	Independent	Domestic	8	First time
13	31	Female	South Korean	Married	Business owner	Family member	Independent	International	7	Mixed*
14	27	Female	Chinese	Single	Analyst	Partner	Independent	International	6	Repeat
15	27	Female	Macanese	Single	Research assistant	Family members	Independent	International	7	Repeat
16	38	Male	Chinese	Married	Professional manager	Spouse and student	Independent	Domestic	3	First time
17	54	Male	Chinese	Married	Professor	Alone	Independent and packaged**	Domestic	2	First time
18	47	Male	Chinese	Married	Professor	Students	Independent	International	5	First time
19	35	Male	Chinese	Single	English teacher	Alone	Independent	International	7	First time
20	44	Male	Bangladeshi	Married	PhD student	Family member	Independent	Domestic	3	Repeat
21	34	Male	Hungarians	Single	PhD student	Partner	Independent and packaged**	International	2	First time

*The interviewee went to more than one destination. He or she was the first-time visitor of some of the destinations but visited the other repeatedly.

**The trip was independent, but with packaged components.

Moreover, social media can play a *supporting role* by influencing people to finally travel to a destination that has been on their ‘bucket list’ for some time. In the case of one respondent who travelled to Japan with her family, when asked about the reasons they chose Japan as the destination, she mentioned,

Because my mom and dad have never been there. They really wanted to go. So, Japan was always on their list . . . Their friends and relatives have recently been there. So, they saw pictures of their friends on WeChat and said, ‘oh . . . it looks so nice’. So, they feel like they have to be there. (Interviewee 15)

Choosing the mode of transport. Except for two respondents who took self-driving tours, all respondents booked flights through either online travel agency (OTA) websites or the official airline websites. Not surprisingly, price and time were the primary considerations for purchasing airline tickets. It appears that social media did not have a significant impact on flight choice. Only one respondent had seen the budget airline that she chose being mentioned in travel blogs. This also reveals the potential indirect influence of social media in the long run.

Regarding on-site transportation and transportation from one sub-destination to another, social media helped people to not only obtain route information but also choose convenient transportation modes. For example, one respondent downloaded local transportation apps he had read about on Weibo and online forums. Another respondent mentioned that since public transportation at his destination was not convenient, he and a friend rented a car as suggested by social media sites. This signifies that tourists refer to social media for *guiding* them on how to get around in an unfamiliar destination.

Choosing the right accommodation. In this study, all respondents booked their accommodations from the Internet before the trip. Most of them used online channels with reviews and rating features. Fotis et al.’s (2011) also suggested that influence of social media on accommodation choices also affect travel plans. The current study identified the *guide* role of social media sites while choosing accommodation. The influence of social media on accommodation choice occurs in a specific way. That is, in addition to location and price, certain features of review sites such as TripAdvisor or OTAs (e.g. ratings, content of reviews) seemed to work as search-filtering criteria.

You have [a] hundred options. Then I put price. Then you have 50 options. Then I put location. Then you have twenty. Then I put buffer rating up to 4–5. Then I have 10. And then I look at reviews and then I choose. (Interviewee 8)

After eliminating certain alternative options, reviews from other users helped to finalize the choice. Respondents often had their own review criteria. They did not simply read reviews but ‘looked for specific information’ they were interested in to eliminate or stick to choices. Some looked for cleanliness, ignoring the size of the accommodation, while for others, room size was very important. This adds on the findings of Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017) who also observed that customers tend to look for specific information rather than carefully examining all review contents.

Choosing attractions. Attractions or places to visit within a destination were roughly planned before the trip doing intensive information-search on a variety of social media sites and on official information channels. After arriving at the destination, tourists investigated online forums and review sites to explore further as well as to search for attractions near the pre-planned ‘must-see’ sites. Exploring social media for attractions before and during the trip once again emphasizes the role of social media as a (tour) guide. In addition, it was found that social media were used to approve or reject travellers’ final choices of which attractions to visit. One respondent at the destination changed his plans after reading reviews from other tourists. Positive comments about the place ‘approved’ his choice among a list of options:

In guidebooks, they were showing me all places to visit. And for deciding, for each sightseeing I was searching for information, reviews of other travellers and I was deciding. Otherwise I couldn’t . . . For example . . . , I went to [the] aquarium centre. I didn’t want to go there. But from the reviews I saw that the opinions of others were like ‘it was a miracle. It was very good’. So, I decided to go there. (Interviewee 9)

Choosing restaurants and other ways of dining. People made decisions about restaurants both before and during the trip. Especially first-time travellers looked at information about local food and dining options from various social media sites for example TripAdvisor, Facebook, WeChat and Weibo, but made their final choices based on their preferences, time availability and convenience. In particular, TripAdvisor and other review apps with GPS functionality as well as Google/Baidu maps were used to look for restaurants nearby. Both, reviews and scores were used to segment and decide on restaurants from long lists:

I used only [the] TripAdvisor application. You say what you want to eat, and they help you. I was in [the] city centre mainly. I activated the location service, went to TripAdvisor, and chose what I wanted to eat, and they showed me the list of restaurants. And by [looking at the] reviews of others, I decided where to eat. (Interviewee 9)

Simply walking into a restaurant that looked appealing was also a prevalent practice. Some respondents mentioned that, before they walked into a restaurant, they checked its ratings at the spot as well. This highlights the *guide* and *approver* roles that tourists assign to social media.

Choosing other destination-related activities such as shopping. Travelling is usually accompanied by shopping activities. Tourists go shopping at travel destinations as a leisure activity or to buy souvenirs. Most of the respondents had prior knowledge about which products a particular place was famous for. Those who had little prior knowledge about the destination appeared to collect shopping-related information from social media. The findings show that in shopping-related activities, tourists assign guide role to social media sites and look for information about what kinds of items to buy instead of where exactly to purchase them. The role of social media as an approver was evident in leisure activities as well. For example, one respondent mentioned having found a massage place when passing by it. Before going in, the respondent searched it directly on TripAdvisor and then made a booking after seeing that its rating and review numbers are high.

Towards a conceptualization of the role of social media

Based on the analysis, four different roles of social media in regard to tourists' decision-making can be categorized as having direct or indirect impact on travel choices (Figure 1). Indirect impact happens during tourists' regular involvement in social media when they do not intend to look for travel and tourism-related information. Two roles within this category are labeled: (1) need generator and (2) supporter. Direct impact happens when tourists intentionally use social media to either *guide* them to make choices or to *approve or reject* their preliminary choices. Respectively, these are labeled: (3) guide and (4) approver roles of social media.

Social media as need generator. The use of social media has become a habitual behaviour in people's every day's life (Wang et al., 2016). When users browse social media platforms, they are exposed to vast numbers of images and posts describing various characteristics, attributes or other aspects of a particular place. These contents might inspire them to add a specific destination or venue to their 'bucket list' for future trips. Later, when users are thinking about where to go for their next vacation or trip, these contents may 'pop up' and influence their travel choices. This role of social media is labelled a need generator since it can create an initial awareness about the place as well as generate an interest or need that lures users to travel. The impact is indirect because social media only initiate the need to visit there, while a number of other factors such as available money and time, and a lack of better choices may affect travellers' final choices. Furthermore, this role does not exert an immediate effect on travel choice. It can be a number of years before the user actually visits the destination. In the present study, this role of social media affects travel choices at the level of destination component. However, it might also be a picture of a specific attraction that may induce tourists to visit a destination and subsequently the attraction. According to Fodness and Murray (1999), pre-purchase and ongoing information search can be distinguished as different information search strategies used by tourists; the former focuses on a current decision task, while the latter aims at 'building up a knowledge base for unspecified future purchase decisions' (p. 221). It is important to note here that previous studies on the roles of social media on tourism decision-making (e.g. Cox et al., 2009) have focused on pre-purchase information search. Need generator role identified in this study illustrates that social media sites play a crucial role in tourists' ongoing information search as well.

Social media as supporter. Regardless of what adds a specific destination to an individual's 'bucket list', the contents shared on social media can remind the viewer about a destination and support his/her need and desire to travel there finally. This can happen any time users are browsing social media for a variety of reasons, and it cannot be considered purposive involvement. As earlier presented, one respondent mentioned that her parents always wanted to visit Japan. However, seeing pictures of Japan posted by their friends and relatives reminded her and supported her desire to travel to Japan. The impact here is still not considered direct since, for many people, travelling in the near future is not an option considering many other factors such as time and money. However, if those factors permit, the person would end up visiting the destination, which was the case for

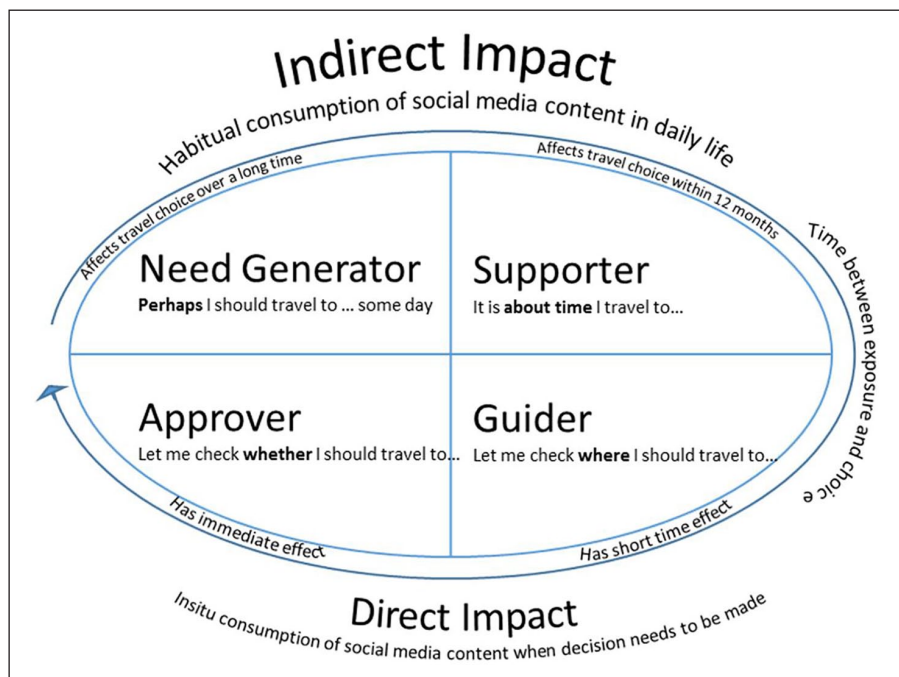


Figure 1. Roles of social media in tourists' choices.

this respondent. The supporting effect of such exposure is not immediate but does not take a great amount of time to occur. It may ultimately fade after a year or two. Similar to the before-mentioned role, the supporter role of social media can affect travel choices at the destination level. This role occurs before information search stage as well and is similarly related to need recognition stage of tourist' decision-making.

Social media as guide. Social media can also work as a guide for tourists with a purpose of finding places to visit and things to do at the destination. This role occurs in information search and evaluation stages of tourist' decision-making. In this context, social media have a direct impact on their choices as all other conditions are met to visit the attraction or restaurant if they like it. This article does not find evidence regarding this role of social media in affecting choices above destination level. However, choices in regard to the other five travel components, especially within a destination, are affected by the role of social media as a guide to a certain extent. Moreover, the effect of exposure to social media content occurs in a rather short period or for a limited amount of time. Certain features of social media are rather important in this context. For example, the filtering feature is used as a guide that supports tourists to make accommodation choices. Regarding attractions and restaurants, GPS functions are used as a guide to find places nearby.

Social media as approver. Finally, findings suggest that social media play the role of approver before final travel choices are made. This role takes place above the destination

level and affects choices within a destination as well. Regardless of where tourists get ideas about where to go, they tend to double-check them on social media to confirm their preliminary ideas. This role of social media has a direct and an immediate effect since, in this context, tourists 'get approval' from social media right before the choice is made. Usually it happens during the trip and, at times, right in front of the product/service they are about to choose. Social media then either approves this choice or rejects it by suggesting that tourists not to proceed or to consider other options. This role takes place right before the final stage of tourists' decision-making process, namely, before the choice or purchase decision.

Implications and conclusions

The article is the first empirical study to qualitatively analyse the roles that social media play in tourist' decision-making including the choice of six travel components. It has been suggested that limited number of social media studies focus on actual behaviour (Leung et al., 2019). Similarly, studies focusing on both pre-trip and during-trip activities are also rare (Lu et al., 2018). A number of theoretical contributions can be highlighted. To begin with, four roles of social media are revealed; two have direct and two have indirect impacts on tourists' choices. Generally, social media play indirect roles in the choice of travel destination, namely, as a need generator and a supporter. First, by introducing destinations to viewers, social media inspire users to add them to their 'bucket list' for further consideration. Second, social media can remind users about destinations they previously added to a 'bucket list', and users' desires to travel, as a result, can be supported and strengthened. These are indirect impacts and occur when users are engaged in social media on a daily basis. The findings support Schindler and Bickart's (2005) observation that sometimes individuals search for information with no serious intention to purchase – just for fun. Or as the authors put it, even such an apparent passive approach to information search can influence future purchase decisions. Need generator and supporter roles explain how such an influence occurs. Fotis et al. (2011) argued that social media may influence holiday destination selections. Papathanassis and Knolle (2011), however, suggested that social media play a secondary, or as they put it, complementary role in such a selection. The findings of the current study can confirm the latter and highlight two specific indirect roles social media play in choosing a holiday destination in addition. The findings also contribute to the existing literature by showing that the roles of social media start before the information search stage of tourist' decision-making, or as Fodness and Murray (1999: 221) pointed out, an 'ongoing information search' stage.

Within the destination, in comparison, social media have a direct impact on travel choices. These roles of social media are labelled guide and approver. Users purposively use social media to explore and get information before or during the trip, and therefore, social media are given the role of guide. It is suggested that new and mobile information technologies are replacing traditional guidebooks, and social media play an important part in this process. Unlike traditional guides, however, social media are more advanced with web 2.0 features such as location-based recommendations and services. Moreover, social media were found to play the role of a final approver. The approver role is introduced with the development of new information technologies, while traditional information sources

do not and cannot play such a role in tourist' decision-making based on the timing, ad-hoc accessibility and actuality. Specifically, the rating features of social media sites have given rise to the approver role. The approver role takes place right before a choice is made. Schindler and Bickart (2005) saw that consumers use online reviews to confirm a previously made decision before its final purchase, implicitly referring to an approver role of social media. The current study contributes that this occurs also during travelling. In contrast, previous studies (Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2011; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008) have shown that the role of social media influencing travel decisions is substantially less during the trip (compared to pre-trip travel decisions). In particular, in Cox et al. (2009) only 6 percent, whereas in Fotis et al. (2011), 30 percent of participants used social media in pre-trip phase. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) have emphasized that social media platforms are used to inform accommodation decisions but are not used much for en-route travel planning. The question then becomes important, whether such differences have to do with study settings or the time that they were conducted. Arguably, both may influence findings. Social media platforms increasingly develop and introduce more advanced and useful features, which tourists like to adopt. A good example is location-based services (LBS) such as those provided by TripAdvisor, Yelp, Yapp or others. LBS gives tourists more flexibility in finding and identifying not only good but also nearby restaurants and/or attractions as it was the case with post-trip respondents in this study. Arguably, with advancements in more easy-to-use and consumer-centric tech features, tourists are likely to increase the use of social media applications during the trip. Another factor can be the consistently increasing availability and accessibility of the (mobile) Internet (compared to previous years). With an increasing popularity of smart tourism applications, many destinations and businesses provide free and fast Internet access to travellers.

In practical terms, this study provides valuable knowledge for various tourism sectors by understanding decision-making in terms of tourists' choice processes and the roles of social media in those processes. Our study finds that social media do not play an important role in travellers' choices regarding airlines to use. In most cases, tickets will be purchased as long as the prices are reasonable. Social media, however, play an important role in choosing the right mode of on-site transportation. Buses, trains and other suppliers that provide transportation to get from one city to another, or from one attraction to another should pay more attention to social media channels to raise awareness and improve their reputations about their services on these channels. Since social media play specifically important roles in accommodation and restaurant choices, practitioners of the respective sectors should actively engage in social media platforms and encourage current guests to provide detailed reviews on social media in order to attract new customers. This could be achieved by offering free coupons or discounts to author(s) of the most-liked reviews, bloggers or other key opinion leaders (KOLs). Implications are also provided for destination-management organizations and governmental institutions in charge of tourism. It has been demonstrated that social media can play an indirect role as a need generator and/or supporter in tourists' destination choices. Therefore, strategies should be developed to provide opportunities to share photos and videos of beautiful scenery and places of interest that may result in interest among potential tourists. In addition, free and fast Wi-Fi should be available at least at specific locations to encourage tourists to share contents of the destination or a business, which will, in turn, result in

more people adding it to their ‘bucket list’ or reminding them about the destination as one they have previously considered visiting. However, based on the importance of Internet access for travellers, free and fast Internet access should be provided as much as possible.

Limitations and future research

The majority of respondents in this study are of Asian origin. The relatively small sample of Western tourists is not sufficient to perform a reliable cross-cultural analysis. Future cross-cultural research is suggested to provide a better understanding on possible differences. It is valid to suggest that the increase in the use of social media during trips can be observed for Western tourists as well.

It is intriguing that in contrast to previous literature, the current study found that social media play two important roles in on-site decisions: guider and approver. This finding requires further research. Technologies in general and social media technologies in particular are developing fast. It should not be surprising to see that the technologies not available or available but not popular in late 2000s are popular for today’s tourists in many countries – a statement to be tested.

Moreover, future studies are suggested to further explore the identified roles of social media in the current study. A ‘role-centric’ approach can also be taken where the effects of one of the roles can be explored in detail. For example, in terms of ‘need generator’, it would be interesting to see empirical evidence on the extent to which a need generated by social media turns into an actual trip (conversion rate), and under which conditions it does or does not. A similar line of questions may be investigated for the ‘supporting’ role of social media.

Furthermore, the effect of social media on on-site decision-making has largely been ignored in tourism literature. Other than cross-cultural studies mentioned above, research can focus on further, updated technology adoption studies, for example, which specific technological features (e.g. location-based services) make social media platforms useful for tourists during the trip.

Finally, scale development studies may be conducted to propose measurement items associated with each of the four roles suggested by the current study. Consequently, the effects of social media roles in travel choices can be tested in quantitative studies.

Despite the limitations, as an exploratory study, the article provides a holistic picture of the different roles played by social media in tourist’ decision-making concerning the choices of six travel components and reveals important directions for future research.

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