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Jianwei Ding

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Social Media Utilisation in Tourism Industry: An Updated Review

Jianwei Ding

Department of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: dylanding1995@gmail.com

Abstract

In the era of internet and communication technologies, tourism marketers have communicated with potential leads, know their target customers better, and generate revenue thanks to social media platforms. However, the previous research on a particular social media utilisation in tourism continues to be fragmented and focuses on isolated topics. It inspires the author to provide comprehensive and updated reviews on this subject. This paper reviews five major types of social media utilisation in recent tourism campaigns, including electronic word of mouth, social networking sites, image and video sharing networks, microblogging and review sites. The findings provide readers with a thorough understanding of the characteristics and functions of the social media mentioned above and how they are used in various aspects of the tourism industry. Furthermore, the findings recognise some significant research gaps that previous studies have highlighted.

Keywords: Social Media, Tourism Industry, Tourism Marketing, Tourism Development

Introduction

Social media is an essential component of contemporary business. The emergence and fast iterations of social media have empowered marketers to connect, interact and exert their influence on their customers. Previous studies mainly focus on a particular issue of social media utilisation in business activities, including consumers' purchasing behaviours (Janavi et al., 2021); brand image and loyalty (Bilgin, 2018); service or product improvements (Bornkessel et al., 2014; Lagu et al., 2016; Nascimento & Da Silveira, 2017); customer relationship management (Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Elena, 2016; Guha et al., 2018). These studies mainly stressed social media utilisation in fragmented marketing contexts, and they cannot provide a holistic understanding of a particular social media platform's usage in the specialised domains. This knowledge gap universally exists because both academics and industry practitioners realise the new changes and complexities brought by the advancements in social media utilisation and industry practices. It is suggested that social media marketing studies must be continually reviewed and developed.

Social media platforms facilitate interactions among tourists and destination suppliers in the tourism context. Meanwhile, they are emphasised as the mediating technology to reshape the tourism business worldwide. For tourists, it might contribute to the whole

process of their trip along with credible and trustworthy travel content. At the same time, this creates many possibilities for travellers and tourism departments to share, communicate and construct their collective travelling experiences in the form of appropriate social media content. Previous social media tourism studies mainly focused on the following themes: tourism planning and decision-making process (Duffy & Kline, 2018; Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019; ZAjAdAcZ & Minkwitz, 2020), tourism promotion and marketing activities (Alghizzawi et al., 2018; Christou & Chatzigeorgiou, 2020), destination brand and image (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020), destination management and development (Hays et al., 2013; Yang & Wang, 2015). These prior studies prove the positive roles of social media utilisation in tourism development. However, the critical issues are that academics and practitioners mostly focus on a particular social media in tourism activities, which leads to a fragmented and neglected standpoint. This paper aims to critically review the previous studies on five main types of social media usage in tourism to achieve the following three objectives: 1. To recognise a consistent understanding of the five types of social media characteristics and functions. 2. To examine the five types of social media utilisation in the tourism industry from tourists' and tourism suppliers' perspectives. 3. To analyse the research gaps among previous studies on social media tourism to offer significant insights for future academics.

Electronic Word of Mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) is a socially constructed networking phenomenon (Harris, 2015), where information is shared directly between two or more participants, either in person or online. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) can be described as any informal communications addressed to customers through internet-based technology about the use or attributes of certain products, services, and providers (Litvin et al., 2008). It involves any positive or negative comments generated by prospective, existing, or previous customers, indicating that electronic word of mouth functions as a virtual space for the diffusion of consumers' opinions. Consumer reviews, which are available in various media formats, websites, and mobile applications, are one of the most accessible and prominent forms of eWOM. Zhu and Zhang (2010) argued that online reviews significantly influence the popularity and sales of certain products.

Moreover, consumers generally rate online reviews as more trustworthy and beneficial than their own opinions, which motivates their increased purchasing intentions (Xia & Bechwati, 2008). That is to say, positive or negative reviews will undoubtedly influence consumers' attitudes and perceptions of some products or services (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Therefore, it is worth reviewing the previous studies and practical works on this topic.

Litvin et al. (2008) argued that eWOM would profoundly alter the structure of travel information, its accessibility, and tourists' knowledge and perceptions of diverse tourism products. eWOM is highly emphasised as a powerful marketing tool due to its effects on customers' decision-making. Online travel reviews may provide information about products and recommendations (Park et al., 2007). According to TIA (2005), 67% of American travellers depend on eWOM for travel information, such as checking prices or schedules for a destination, and 41% have booked specific trips using social media. Similarly, Chu et al. (2019) discovered that Chinese travellers primarily rely on eWOM on WeChat to make travel decisions, and their eWOM intention may result in actual actions. China's Route 66, a typical case influenced by eWOM, has become one of China's most famous tourist attractions due to travel photographs shared on WeChat. Consumers' reviews affect the whole process of consumers' consumption behaviours.

EWOM is a potentially cost-effective method for marketing the hospitality and tourism industry to tourism departments and suppliers. Zhu and Lai (2009) revealed that the amount of online reviews is highly connected with the actual tourist reception community, while the comments' ratings and volume of travel consultations are not. An experimental study conducted by Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) indicated that frequent exposure to eWOM could strengthen the awareness of hotels, particularly the positive eWOM could improve the tourists' attitudes towards the hospitality industry. Likewise, Chaffey et al. (2009) found that positive eWOM could significantly contribute to the increased number of hotel bookings. While most consumers see eWOM as trustworthy as brand websites, it may provide both opportunities and threats to businesses. Tourism suppliers should engage online communities with patience rather than as online advertisements.

In terms of managing eWOM, many new techniques have been identified as coming into two broad categories: informative and revenue-generating. Thus, diffusing positive eWOM could help potential tourists seek information by providing a unique projected destination image for tourism departments and suppliers. Meanwhile, the detailed management of this diffusing process would also aid the destination suppliers in generating more profits. Carefully, tourism stakeholders should avoid possible abundant abuse and ethical issues. It is foreseeable that eWOM will continue to play an essential factor in travellers' decision-making process and sustainable destination development. I argue that future studies on eWOM in the tourism sector should emphasise practical difficulties and measure the real influence on tourists' behaviours and the potential risk management.

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNS) are another internet-based platform that assists individuals in building their social networks online, which mainly contribute to users' experience and expansions towards social media connections. Shen et al. (2015) refer to SNSs as generally comprehensive platforms that integrate various network applications to construct social relationships through online social activities. In 2020, over 3.6 billion people were using social networking sites worldwide, estimated to increase to around 4.41 billion in 2025, equating to 53% of the global population (Statistas, 2022). The latest figures suggest that people spend around 15% of their waking time using SNS, most of whom are young generations (Datareportal, 2022). However, I argue that the purposes of individuals using SNSs other than socialising, such as marketing, branding, information seeking, and business activities.

In the tourism context, SNSs enable tourists to share and communicate travel-related details, personal experiences, and opinions in texts, photographs, and audio-visual content throughout their travelling process (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Narangajavana et al. (2017) agreed that sharing travelling experiences on SNSs could motivate tourists' awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. For instance, Association (2016) found that the destinations selected by 20% of American tourists were affected by their friends and family's postings on Facebook and Instagram. It could be explained that social networking sites stimulate individuals to diffuse self-presentation and self-comparisons in peer-to-peer communication (Vogel et al., 2014). Furthermore, user-generated contents are the main contents generated and diffused by general consumers and influencers on SNSs. They are generally recognised as more authentic and trustworthy to travellers. Although some tourism departments also set SNS accounts and create official-generated content to promote the destination image of a place. In an empirical study conducted by Shen et al. (2015), the results indicated that official SNS contents seem insufficient compared to the attention to the

individual- and influencers-generated content. In contrast, tourists may post their content on social media to influence a destination's image and attract more potential consumers.

On the other hand, other consumers might easily be affected by the content produced by tourist departments. Individuals have an essential role in developing destination image, which tourism companies and organisations must recognise. For instance, attractive scenic spots and delicious cuisine could add to the appeal of prospective tourists through official SNS sites. At the same time, local culture and a welcoming atmosphere also contribute to the positive destination image. Additionally, I argue that individual users, influencers, and tourism authorities should be integrated collaboratively to customise prospective visitors' demands and preferences while compensating for the official sides' rigidity and inadequacy. However, allowing everyone to voice their opinions on SNSs freely also presents a danger to the tourism destination because some individuals might damage the image through eWOM.

Image and Video Sharing Networks

Tourism as a kind of sightseeing is inextricably linked to image-making media (Beeton, 2004). Munar and Jacobsen (2014) detailed that travel experience sharing is usually related to textual and narrative communication practices. The sharing and diffusion regarding their images of destinations, especially prefer to create and share visual content, when photographs or short videos originate from intelligent mobile phones act increasingly as the hot buzz. Hanan and Putit (2013) even described that "a picture is worth a thousand words." Indeed, visual content creators would instead generate, and present information triggered by the passing of time. With the development of image and video-sharing social media platforms, a transformation in how information is organised and displayed has emerged. Image-based content such as images, illustrations, GIFs and infographics has grown popularly. Compared to traditional text-based social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, image-based social networks such as Pinterest, Instagram, and Vine have an advantage in visual online marketing. They are, nevertheless, becoming loaded with visualised content. According to Multilingual (2014), photographs now account for 93% of the most engaging posts on Facebook, up from 83% in 2012.

In the tourism context, Beeton (2004) discovered that visual content sharing was extremely popular with tourists, although narrative storytelling using texts or blogs was relatively scarce. Additionally, tourists who share photographs or videos with their friends on social media are more likely to have community-related motivations than those who upload information to the Internet. Bærenholdt et al (2017) suggested that photographs play a critical role in assisting tourists in constructing their trip memories about their destinations by transferring intangible experiences into concrete objects. Besides, photo sharing helps individuals capture social relationships with others, places, and cultures (Edensor, 2000).

Lo et al (2011) described this social relationship on two levels. On the one hand, travel sharing experiences may help travellers form strong bonds. On the other hand, this kind of experience shared with the non-travel party might strengthen the connection between visitors and the audience. The author argued that this social relationship is a two-way communication as tourists upload pictures on social media and want to obtain travel information from others who show similar habits. For any participants in the tourism industry, social media allows them to potentially join online networks and gain valuable market intelligence about places visited (Pan et al., 2007). Indeed, it will continually affect the destination image, marketing, and promotion of destinations. Even though those key opinion leaders provide potential tourists with a wealth of tourism knowledge when they visit a

destination. Interestingly, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) indicated that social media users generally believe in user-generated content from peers and influencers than official content from tourism departments or commercial suppliers. Akehurst (2009) also discovered that non-commercial content directly impacted tourists' decision-making behaviours.

Some previous case studies also support this idea. During the journey to the Aegean Sea, a Chinese tourist called "Justin" shared holiday photos on a famous website. Consequently, it received over 60,000 daily views, and this website unintentionally assisted in marketing the company's travel to Chinese markets for the first time (Hsu & Lin, 2006). Meanwhile, Boley et al. (2013) detailedly examined the themes of tourism photo sharing that there are more related to specific arts, local crafts, and other local products than non-travel content. However, these studies generally described the importance of image-based sharing sites in tourists' behaviours. It is still in its infancy due to the lack of a more comprehensive exploration of tourism suppliers' perspectives.

The emergence of video-based social media networks and applications has forced many traditional businesses to adapt while also providing a new marketing channel for market providers and e-commerce enterprises. Video content might be more competitive in generating social media impressions, engagement, and traffic, leading to indirect or direct revenue generation and sales. According to Vidyard (2021), online videos have accounted for more than 82% of consumer internet traffic, and 90% of customers feel that videos assist them in making shopping choices since viewing video content may boost their desire to purchase. Lindquist (2020) found that video is shared at 1,200% more than links and text-based content. A page or post with a video may entice users to stay longer than those without videos like some famous video-based platforms Tik Tok, DouYin and Instagram.

In the tourism context, Huertas et al. (2017) argued that videos are another crucial channel for communicating a destination and its brand from both emotional and experiential aspects. To some extent, Huang et al. (2010) agreed that video content force tourists construct a positive attitude, a good image, and a solid intention to visit the destination. Therefore, video content is a crucial promoter of a tourism destination's image and brand construction (Míguez et al., 2016). Mainly, those travel-related videos could serve as experience mediators, provide entertainment for prospective users, and increase their desire to visit, allowing for interpretation of another individual's experiences. In addition, Lim et al. (2012) discovered that comments, likes, and reposts about the videos are crucial elements in generating users' involvement and brand image. As a result, some potential users will achieve their real travelling intentions.

The short video platform features its short time to capture users' attention. For instance, the most popular short video platform named Tik Tok achieved 689 million monthly active users worldwide only within five years (Mohsin, 2021). It allows users to search video content about a specific destination via keywords, travel-oriented influencers, and trending hashtags. It has displayed its influential role in sharing and constructing destination images, transforming tourists' behaviours. In 2019, Xi'an Grand Tang Dynasty Ever-Bright City received over 230 million views, making it the most popular tourist destination in China, both on Tik Tok and offline destinations (Massive, 2019). With the widespread distribution of the Tik Tok short video, the original interpretation of indigenous cultures and characteristics has attracted millions of visitors to the destination and re-create content and repost a similar video on Tik Tok. I argued that short video content could generate "Tourists' Fandom" for a destination, and its popularity has also reshaped current tourists' experiences. In addition, this process is an automatic process to stimulate previous, existing and potential tourists to

contribute to the travel content as well as increase their attachments and dissemination regarding a destination.

For tourism marketers, social media videos are practical tools for observing and understanding tourists' preferences. Users mention something unique or memorable in the video content to differentiate their attractions from others and attract potential tourists. In this regard, Lim et al (2012) encouraged tourism authorities to monitor tourist-generated videos and effectively use these content to establish strong brand and image management. In addition, innovations and upgrading in short video platforms, like short video live-streaming and instant stories, should be noticed. In an empirical study, Huertas (2018) suggested that live-streaming videos and instant stories are more successful than standardised travel videos in generating closeness, creating tourist experiences, attracting travellers, and creating a good image. However, among the various video-sharing sites available, tourism departments remain puzzled about how to apply their previous traditional campaigns to these new channels. They fail to understand that the market environment has shifted dramatically, and repurposing existing content from television and websites on image and short video platforms is not prudent. Similarly, the abundance of tourism user-generated content on various video-sharing platforms makes it impossible for tourists to discern between "genuine" and "fake." Thus, tourists often criticise the excessive packaging and beautification of tourist destinations.

In summary, prior studies have focused on video sharing networks in shaping tourists' involvement in destination image construction, tourism experience creation, product design, distribution etc. However, this is insufficient owing to the various dynamics affecting tourism organisations and travellers. Future studies could examine certain individual situations in greater detail, considering age, gender, culture, travel or places, and different types of video-sharing platforms or length.

Microblogging

Microblogging is a free, real-time, brief messaging service that enables users to send and receive messages using microblogging websites, mobile apps, or other desktop applications (Liu et al., 2016). The messages are in images, links, infographics, videos, and audio clips. The prominent feature of microblogging is that users can post information about any topic with limited characters. It addresses frequent postings and is widely used in business, politics, cultural events etc. microblogging platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, and Sina Weibo are well-known among individuals worldwide. During the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns, Barack Obama utilised Twitter to communicate his opinions to the American people. Among the messages he shared on Twitter, a picture of himself hugging his wife after winning the 2012 Presidential Election received more than 816,954 retweets and 299,235 likes (Liu et al., 2016). It demonstrates how effective social media has been as a critical communication tool in political campaigns. In the business field, Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) discovered that numerous businesses have already effectively used Twitter to market their goods and services, communicate with their consumers, and offer online customer care. To some extent, I argued that these social networking platforms have some similar motivations in general. For example, they sustain social ties and relationships with friends, strangers, or an extensive network; promote interesting things; acquire helpful knowledge; seek advice and views; relieve emotional tension and elicit praise or empathy from others.

Regarding tourism interactions, travellers could instantly create some comments or brief content about their trip to inform their social circle via microblogging. In an empirical study

on the analysis of “travel-related microblogging on Hong Kong as a destination,” Tse and Zhang (2013) confirmed that opinions displayed on microblogs could assist tourism departments in seeking opportunities for using social media in online destination communication and marketing. Significantly, this user-generated content on microblogging could help tourism departments and stakeholders identify tourists’ underlying preferences and construct a clear destination image. Veasna et al (2013) evaluated 440 microblogs user-generated content connected to the image of Tourism Switzerland created by Chinese tourists on Sina Weibo and determined that a mountain with a city or village, a lake with a city or village, and the Swiss flag were the most often portrayed and objectified destinations. I agree that this is an efficient technique for tourism stakeholders to maintain a direct relationship with prospective customers while including positive content from existing users who have visited a destination. But some knowledge gaps still exist in microblogging studies. And empirical evidence about microblogging in the tourism industry is still relatively limited due to new changes on both sides. Future studies should be explored in a specific geographical, cultural, and social context, especially examining the online performance of tourism destinations from structured and unstructured methods.

Review Sites

Similar to other types of social media, review sites could be regarded as a mediator in many fields. It is a significant information source for both marketers and consumers. Businesses are often advised to increase their review count on review sites to continue attracting new customers. Additionally, customers are urged to provide a good evaluation for practically every transaction. According to Abramyk (2020), more than 93% of consumers make their purchasing decisions by considering online reviews. Online reviews could provide business organisations with valuable feedback and constructive advice regarding business performance evaluation. It has become the driving factor in overall travel experiences, tourists’ travelling plans, and decision-making in the tourism business. Indeed, professional tourists may be able to provide more legitimate and trustworthy information, opening up several potentials for tourists and related tourism organisations to exchange collective experiences.

In various tourism subindustries, online review sites allow users to create reviews about hotels, gourmet, transportation, attractions, and cultural backgrounds. Some significant tourism review sites, like TravBuddy.com, Travellerspoint, and TripAdvisor.com, rely on great traveller-generated content and function as substantial sources for managing tourism eWOM. According to Nick (2022) Signpost Statistics, TripAdvisor has 702 million reviews of the world’s leading hotels, 160 million traveller images, 7 million attractions relating to 136,000 destinations, and 2600 new daily themes until 2021. Among them, 72% of consumers frequently consume these reviews before deciding on a place to visit, eat or stay. Anderson (2012) firmly believed that online review sites would continue to play a crucial role in hotel room booking and hotel marketing strategies.

Likewise, tourism departments might seek insights and reflections on destination marketing and development performance from these reviews. In an empirical study, OO’connor (2010) proposed that tourism managers could use reviews to manage their reputations by identifying common causes of traveller satisfaction and dissatisfaction and collaborating with travellers to co-create a positive brand image. Besides, the significance of handling negative reviews should not be underestimated. Litvin and Hoffman (2012) believed that effective management of negative reviews could stimulate more positive comments to

improve the image. I argue that fake and purposive designed positive reviews are the recent issues that disturb consumers and marketers. It should be an underlying topic that needs to be explored later.

Conclusions

In this study, the author has introduced the main features and characteristics of five major types of social media and provided a comprehensive perspective by examining their utilisation in the tourism industry from both academics and industrial standpoints. In the tourism context, the main contribution of this study is to review and conclude the previous studies on the emergence, utilisation and iterations of social media in business and individual information-seeking processes. Next, this study enriches the readers' understanding of every specific social media utilisation from consumers' and marketers' views. From theoretical and practical points, It also enriches the consistent understanding of recent social media marketing studies and tourists' behaviours studies, avoiding the previous isolated and single view on this domain.

Next, this study also recognises some significant insights for future academics. Social media significantly influences the tourism industry through various social media events and content. Furthermore, it is projected that social media will play a more prominent role in marketing destinations and the tourism sector. Specifically, social media fundamentally alters the way travellers seek, locate, read, and trust information and jointly contribute user-generated content about all aspects of tourism providers and destinations. Additionally, social media fosters evolutions in current customer service, marketing, and communication processes throughout the tourism and hospitality industries.

For destination sustainable development, they provide new techniques for destination authorities to redesign and execute more competitive business strategies. However, several critical problems about social media utilisation in the tourism business should be studied carefully. For example, there is a lack of solid data demonstrating its direct impact on product distribution or tourist increase (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Social media effect measures in tourism primarily focus on positive econometric contributions, such as increasing the number of tourists and duration of trips, tourist happiness, and frequency of visits. It is vital to encourage extensive examinations of social media's perceived effects on all facets of the tourism business, such as visitor re-visitation, travel patterns, purchasing habits, supplier perspectives, destination inhabitants' perspectives, destination images, and economic return on investments.

The effectiveness of social media in marketing and management is also a subject of extensive research. However, social media cannot be seen as a tool or strategy in isolation. As a result, we cannot figure out why social media usage has not contributed to the immediate increase in visitation. Therefore, social media should be incorporated into an integrated marketing plan aimed at specific tourism niche markets rather than at all social media users. According to Matloka and Buhalis (2010), the ideal technique is probably to include social media in a holistic marketing plan for a given location. In the future study, a macro-approach should be encouraged to investigate the overall effects of social media, concentrating equally on each step of the trip planning process and referring to all phases of the visitors' decision-making process. Last, effective use of social media as part of integrated marketing plans that span the whole trip cycle will become increasingly vital.

Guideline for Future Research

In future studies, community participation, complete marketing methods, diversified destination management, and social, moral, or ethical concerns might be the crucial topics arising from social media tourism. Now the content is “the Times of King” for marketing any industry. Some attention should be paid to the comparative analysis of numerous social media content from individuals, influencers and official or commercial aspects to provide a comprehensive understanding of the tourism business. Meanwhile, the risk management among this content cannot be ignored.

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