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Travel blogs and perceived destination image: theoretical background

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ABSTRACT

Destination Image (DI) is a concept that has interested researchers in the field of tourism for many years. Using many tools to study this concept, researchers have realized that Travel Blogs (TB) can be an excellent means to get a detailed description about the perceptions of tourists, their motivations and their expectations. The present paper, built on a review of literature, links the two concepts of perceived destination image and Travel Blogs and puts in evidence the importance, characteristics and advantages of these important concepts. In the present work, we cite the main postulates made by researchers both on perceived destination image and travel blogs. The main advantage of this paper, is its ability to give an overall picture that can be used for further theoretical model development of the relationship between Travel Blogs and Perceived destination image.

Keywords: Travel Blogs, Perceived destination Image, Internet, Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Destination Image (DI) is a concept that has interested researchers in the field of tourism for many years. Indeed, the concept always presents new challenges related to its study and analysis. The proliferation of internet in general, and the User-Generated Content (UGC) in a specific way, allow the analysis of DI and above all, the study of perceived

destination image, and open up new perspectives allowing the latest concept to be explored and understood from new angles. In the present paper, we explain how, in general, Internet has changed the landscape of business sector and especially tourism sector. After a brief historical review of the “old” way of functioning of tourism sector, we describe how developments of Internet, and particularly those related to UGC have changed both tourists’ behaviors and managerial practices. Later on, we evoke the importance of the UGC as an electronic word of mouth, its characteristics and its advantages for tourists. As blogs are one of the forms of the UGC, we take a deeper look at the concept of Travel Blogs (TB) for their importance, by defining them and citing their characteristics. In addition, we detail the benefits of TB for both tourism managers and tourists.

In the final part of this literature review, we study the relationship between TB and the perceived destination image. To do so, we begin by quoting the importance of the DI then by giving a definition. The distinction between the projected destination image and the perceived destination image is later discussed. Finally, we explain the importance of TB in the study of perceived destination image and we enumerate the characteristics that make them so relevant to the study of perceived destination image.

2. INTERNET AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE TOURISM SECTOR

According to Buhalis [1], Internet allows tourism industry to offer broader, deeper and more personalized offers to more customers, all with greater interactivity at lower prices, and without significantly impairing the quality of the information delivered. The Web 2.0 brings a second generation of opportunities for collaboration and information sharing based on online communities and hosted services. For tourism, the benefits include increased information sharing between consumers and between businesses and consumers [2].

Before the introduction of the Internet, the tourism industry was organized on a linear basis with three main components: suppliers, intermediaries and final consumers. Suppliers (airlines, hotels, railways, car rental companies, etc.) used intermediaries such as Tour Operators (TO) and travel agencies (TA) to reach the final consumer [3]. TOs were mainly responsible for “packaging” and services such as transport, accommodation, transfers, etc... and offering low prices. The TAs, on their part, sold these packages or the products of suppliers to final consumers using Computer Reservation Systems and Global Distribution Systems [4,5] As a result, suppliers had to pay fees and commissions to both intermediaries and technology providers [6]. Consumers demanded greater value and service from suppliers of tourism products and the Internet provided dynamic means of obtaining information and knowledge of offers as well as purchasing products and services instantly, less costly and interactively [7].

With the proliferation of Web 2.0 applications, both offer and demand sides of tourism sector has changed.

On the demand side of the tourism market, a growing number of people use Internet to search for information because the World Wide Web provides more in-depth content that is richer than traditional promotional agents [8,9].

On the supply side of the tourism market, Internet became a channel actively used by hotels, airlines, travel agencies and other Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) [10]

as it is relatively inexpensive compared to other promotional medias [11] and other distribution channels [12].

Internet has proven to be effective in advertising, marketing, distribution of goods and information services [13]. The nature of the information-intensive tourism sector suggests an important role for Internet and Web technology in the promotion and commercialization of destinations [12].

The advent of Internet as a communication tool for the tourism and travel sector presents challenges for DMOs and tourism businesses. An abundant academic literature on tourism and the Internet has emerged since the late 1990s, dealing not only with issues of marketing and distribution of tourism products, but also with how the Internet can be used to improve collaboration and efficiency in business management (including government relations) ... Carson [14] summarizes the potential applications of Internet for tourism organizations and businesses in an 'on-line architecture'. The author proposes that the Internet can be used for five key functions: Promotion, Distribution of products, Communication, Management and Research [14].

To make the best use of Internet, companies would need to learn about the various applications available, connect with appropriate partners to access these applications, and develop trust over time using applications [15]. Carson [14] identified a number of barriers to effective use of Internet: technical competence, differences in technology adoption among firms, government, consumers, and resistance to innovation especially by small tourism companies with low profit margins. These barriers are additional to adoption costs, access to adequate infrastructure, and policy approaches that encourage or discourage the use of specific applications [15].

Actually, the most notable developments in Internet applications have been in the area of UGC and Peer-to-Peer applications collectively known as Web 2.0 [16]. The difference of these types of sites reside, first, in the content that is relatively unorganized and, second, the content development that is not managed by the host organizations. Instead, content is loaded directly onto websites by users, with varying (usually minimal) moderation levels. The trend of the UGC has not only involved consumers, but also businesses and government agencies that have also begun to reconsider how to manage online content.

As with previous generations of Internet-based applications, tourism has been influenced by Web 2.0 and UGC.

Actually, consumers imitate others by following a social learning paradigm, but perhaps more importantly, they also talk to each other. This process is described as word-of-mouth communication (WOM). This process allows consumers to share information and opinions about specific products, brands and services [17].

Earlier, WOM was defined as face-to-face communication about products or companies between people who are not commercial entities [18,19]. Later, Westbrook [20] describes WOM more broadly to include "all informal communications directed to other consumers on the ownership, use, or characteristics of particular goods or services or their sellers". While Westbrook has not specifically defined what constitutes "informal communications", his work has clearly indicated that it is the communication of interpersonal relationships, as opposed to those made through the Mass Media that pass knowledge of products from producers and suppliers to consumers [20]. Recently, Buttle [21] argued that WOM can be done through electronic means. Based on Westbrook's definition of WOM, electronic word-of-mouth can be defined as: "All informal communications directed to consumers through Internet-based

technology, relating to the use, characteristics of particular products and services, and / or their sellers" [20].

In that extent, many types of electronic media have an impact on interpersonal relationships. Each has different characteristics. Some are synchronous, such as instant messaging; while others are asynchronous, such as e-mails and Blogs. Some communications link one consumer to another, such as e-mails, while others connect a single consumer with many others, such as Web pages [22]. Still, others are flowing into a new marketing paradigm, the "Many-to-many communication", such as discussion forums [13].

Cox et al. [23] summarize the advantages of the UGC for tourists by adapting a model of Gretzel et Yoo. The authors stipulate that UGC allows tourists to: Know the destination and what it has to offer; Evaluate alternatives and avoid places where they will not appreciate; Get ideas (on what to see and do while they are on site); Increase their confidence in the travel decisions they make; Imagine what a place would look like; Reduce the risk and uncertainty associated with travel planning; Take travel decisions easily and Improve efficiency when planning travel.

Sites like Travelpod.com and Tripadvisor.com allow consumers to exchange advice and opinions on different tourist destinations and products. In some cases, the UGC takes the form of diaries or "blogs" about travel experiences, while others are relatively short "star" entries for a hotel or a particular tour [15].

3. TRAVEL BLOGS

Before discussing the topic of travel blogs, we believe that a definition of these is necessary. TB can be defined as individual entries that relate to a planned, current or past trip. T-Blogs (as in Travel Blogs) are the equivalent of online personal journals and consist of one or more individual entries linked by a common theme (for example, a travel itinerary, purchase of a World tour ticket...). They are usually written by tourists to report to their friends and families about their activities and experiences during their travels. TB are hosted on site providers, that a growing number of which are specific to tourism, such as virtualltourist.com and tripadvisor.com [2]. TB can also be defined as "virtual consumer-to-consumer or peer-to-peer colonies" [24] that UGC host produced by travelers, and which take the form of online diaries to which everyone can have access and which deal with travel stories and experiences, as well as product recommendations and evaluations [15,25].

Like blogs in general, TB are frequently updated, messages are ranked in chronological order and their nature is interactive. These virtual interactive spaces allow users to post information such as texts, images and videos on their travel experiences and add comments [26]. Authors such as Gomis [27] argue that their design as multimedia editing tools is their main characteristic. Although they contain mainly textual information, downloading audio and video files is becoming more and more popular [15]. Basically, TB are multimedia spaces combining texts, images, audiovisual documents and links, etc., in a space used by travelers [26].

Although social media offer different channels of information dissemination, all comments generated by consumers are not considered blogs. What differentiates the "blog" from other social media sites such as virtual communities (for example, Facebook) and review sites (for example, TripAdvisor.com), is the extent of communication [28].

As such, virtual communities are described as groups of people exchanging information, ideas and advices [29], while travel advisory sites allow consumers to provide qualitative and quantitative comments tourism products such as hotels, attractions and other travel experiences [30]. In contrast, TB are online journals and stories intended to provide information and engage the reader in travel experiences. Although the distinction between different social media is clear, some researchers refer to data collected from TripAdvisor.com and other review sites as if it were data collected from TB [31,32].

That being said, we can stipulate that TB provide tourism practitioners with new ways of disseminating information and communicating with consumers, as they also provide travelers with a platform for the exchange of information and Tourism experiences [33].

Blogs as a means of promotion are often considered a less expensive marketing activity than traditional advertising. Actually, many researchers have suggested that tourism blogs are a new and non-traditional way to help define the image of a destination or a company [15,34,35]. However, the main issue repeatedly raised among tourism marketers seems to be how this new media can be used to their advantage without compromising the reputation of the destination or the credibility of the website [15].

As one of the most popular online activities, TB can be used to get a better understanding of tourists and places they visit as the blog content reveals detailed experiences on specific destinations [36]. Today, the existence of Internet, social media and blogs can serve as a proxy test of a place before buying it, and it is this "credibility" of the author that gives blogs their influence [37,38]. In the same way, they represent useful sources for DMOs allowing them to monitor the "health" of tourism activity of their destination. Because of the interactive nature of blogging, many researchers have stressed the importance of blogs as a promotional marketing destination. Thus, the target image formation strategy should be redesigned to include new communication technologies and methods [39].

Regarding the perspective of tourists, blogs are a source of information allowing the exchange of opinions and recommendations on which travel decisions can be based. While blogs can be useful as a source of information for consumers, for those who attempt to control their content, challenges are important [38]. The content and themes on TB can be very variable, even through discrete entries made by an individual user. In addition, linguistic content and cultural nuances may obscure meaning and interpretation, and there may be questions about the reliability of some entries [2]. Similarly, Price and Starkov [40] argue that blogs can be extremely useful as part of a defensive strategy in the tourism and hospitality industry. This includes generating positive publicity and limiting damage by providing answers and counter arguments to negative comments. Reputation Management and Customer Relationship Management seem to require special attention in the area of UGC.

While making a decision, the consumer must act on impressions about attributes of a product gathered often from imperfect sources of information. Since a tourism product is in essence an experiment [41], the emergence of travel blogs inevitably influences the structure of links and the content of the visitor information space, and will induce content information when a visitor searches for specific information to a destination on Internet.

TB express visitor experiences in a specific destination, and given the increasing number of Internet users, digital communications or virtual word-of-mouth will inevitably become more preferred as information source [42]. For this reason, tourism marketers need to understand blogs as a new technological phenomenon that has important implications for marketing and promoting a destination [43].

To conclude we can say that, either way, travel blogs have opened up new avenues for travel stories, and this phenomenon deserves special attention. They offer a new way of sharing tourism experiences with an international audience [44]. Blogs allow travelers to quickly disseminate and search for large amounts of information, looking for the factual, reality, and truth [45]. Anyone, anywhere, can consult and express their ideas on a tourist destination and share them with the rest of the world through blogs, opening the door to others to contribute with new information giving rise to a collaborative platform for knowledge sharing and creation in the form of a social network [27]. Indeed, one of the main characteristics of travel blogs is their function of new WOM communication spaces concerning tourism and travel. Regardless of the degree of representativeness of bloggers for the tourist public of a destination, their messages become the visible image online of this place, generated by the user [26]. This image deserves a precise study.

4. PERCEIVED DESTINATION IMAGE ON TRAVEL BLOGS

The importance of the destination image is universally recognized, as it affects the perception of the destination by tourists, their behavior, their choice and their satisfaction with the tourist experience. The image of a destination is also associated with its competitive and strategic position towards other tourist destinations. It is thus one of the key factors that can explain the competitiveness of tourist destinations.

Several researchers have given DI different meanings. Hunt [46] defined DI as the set of visitor perceptions of a destination. Some researchers have defined the target image based on cognitive aspects such as beliefs and affective aspects such as feelings [47].

The image of a destination is defined as the sum of the beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of a place [48]. In other words, the image is the set of mental structures (visual or otherwise) that integrate elements, impressions and values that people have in a specific place and is based on a series of additional or less material knowledge of these people, and a series of perceptions of an emotional and affective nature [49].

In the literature, there has been a distinction between perceived and projected image. The first is defined as the overall picture of a destination held in the minds of tourists. It is both a subjective and social construction that a person has. The second is linked to all elements or aspects of the destination that the different agents project in their images and representations of a destination [26].

The perceived tourism image of destinations has been studied by several researchers such as Bandyopadhyay and Morais [50], Kim & Richardson [51], Mackay & Fesenmaier [52], Beerli and Martin [53]... Nevertheless, most authors seem to agree that the perceived image is an object of study that is difficult to approach and consequently an object little studied and less known in comparison with the notion of "Projected image" [26]. The analysis of DI was of great interest to researchers and tourism practitioners [54], [55]. A precise evaluation of the image constitutes a key to the design of an elective strategy of marketing and positioning [56] likely to enhance the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

In addition, a growing number of studies aim to analyze and study the images perceived by tourists, and the fact that the tourist image is less studied because of its relative inaccessibility in the era of Internet and the expansion of UGC spaces such as TB, as new 2.0 platforms, the study of the perceived tourist image becomes possible and accessible [26].

Internet opens new perspectives to the study of the perceived image of tourist destinations and it is more than urgent to seize this opportunity and to give the DMOs the possibility to improve the competitiveness of their destinations.

More precisely, many authors acknowledge the importance of travel blogs as rich and meaningful data sources, giving insight into the phenomenon of tourism and especially the perceptions, thoughts and opinions of tourists, with great potential for researchers, managers, Traders, etc... [2,25,28,43,57-59].

It has been argued by many researchers in the field that blog analysis is a promising way to assess the image of a particular destination among a group of travelers that is otherwise difficult to reach or to reveal the strengths and the potential weaknesses of a tourist destination [15,24,43,60].

TB, as rich travel stories that contain detailed information about the experiences, feelings and thoughts of tourists related to a particular place, allow observation of personal experiences, specific to a specific place and time [61], information that has often been unavailable. This spatial aspect of blogs, as well as the fact that they are entirely created by the users (UGC) makes it a key object to understand the tourist, the way he sees things, his perception of the destination and his identity [26]. Travel blogs allow the extraction of the authors' experience over a specific period of time. Tourism experiences, linked to a specific place and time, can be obtained by extracting geographic keywords (blog geocoding) from the articles [61]. Moreover, in the sites that host TB, they often ask tourists to specify the duration and the exact days of their trip and when they create a new blog, they must necessarily link their blogs to a specific destination. The fact that blogs are both spatially and temporally related is particularly relevant for destination image studies because it opens the doors to the analysis of specific perceptions of place and it would also allow the tracking of the evolution of this image through time [26].

Indeed, what tourists write or post on their TB reflects their built perception of the trip. The information that we see has gone through a process of conscious selection and elaboration. It is a representation in which certain things have been envisaged, others avoided, certain places have been mentioned, others not, events were explained as to how the tourist lived them, or even how he would have liked to live them [26].

TB have lots of positive features that make them fit, or advantageous compared to other sources for the study of the perceived tourist image.

One of the main advantages of extracting the perceived image from TB seems to be the authenticity of their content. Experiences are written while memories are still fresh and with an honesty that is often lacking in the written pieces in the trade, although all that is written in blog articles do not always describe the experiences of real life [61]. Writing on subjects is obstinate and often unbiased, as bloggers are free to express their own views without waiting for tangible consequences. In addition, as the need for introspection is one of the motivating factors in blogging, personal accounts in blogs are generally sincere and genuine, providing valuable information about problems present in the minds of individuals [58].

Moreover, information in TB is not only stored and easily accessible, but is also easily and frequently updated [15]. As a result, it can be said that if other means could be "outdated" after a certain time, travel blogs provide access to both "old" information and new data [26]. An additional positive aspect for blog analysis is the richness and depth of information available [58]. The richness is caused by the longitudinal nature of the blog, the connectivity between the subjects discussed, and the depth of information that is the result of the free

choice of bloggers who write on issues related to interest or expertise [26]. As some authors point out, there is a need to better understand not only TB as a phenomenon but also the information they contain. This will allow DMOs to understand the tourism experience, direct policies, marketing strategies, etc. [25,26]. They also need to be better understood as means of communication [26].

5. CONCLUSION

There have been very few research publications on the influence that Web 2.0 has had, or could have, on tourism marketing [62]. The relationship between DI and TB is in the early stages of exploration and needs special attention from the scientific community. It is in this sense that we tried, through this theoretical background, to make a connection between two concepts that we describe as very important in tourism management. This theoretical background could be used by any researcher interested in studying these two concepts or working on the development of a theoretical model which schematizes the relationship between TB and Perceived Destination Image.

Biography

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