

## STUDENTS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE TRAVEL PROCESS

*Preliminary communication*

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of the study is to explore how students as an important travel segment are involved in social media during the travel process and explore the underlying dimensions of social media use by students during the travel process.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The quantitative research focuses on the students' use of social media in the three phases of the travel process – before travel, during travel and after travel separately. Survey instrument was a structured questionnaire. Data were collected through online survey using Google Drive. Descriptive statistics and principal component analysis are performed in the study to comprehend the students' use of social media during the travel process.

**Findings** – The findings of the study give an insight into the use of social media among students. They use mostly Facebook during the travel process, but traditional sources of information remain still relevant. Study findings reveal that social media are mostly used before travel begins and less during and after travel. There are identified two dimensions – “search for opinions” and “information and comparison” – that drive students to use social media before travel and two dimensions – “sociability” and “information” – that drive students to use social media during travel. Just one dimension labelled “sociability” emerged in relation to the use of social media after travel.

**Originality of the paper** – The paper enhances the slim body of research on the use of social media among students during the travel process and raises awareness on social media use during the three phases of the travel process.

**Keywords** social media, travel process, students, principal component analysis

### **INTRODUCTION**

The intangibility of tourism products and travel to many times unknown destinations deepen the importance of social media making tourism products closer to consumers. Ip et al. (2012) state that electronic word-of-mouth plays a very important role in tourism because of intangibility of tourism products. Besides, social media are important for travel planning, travel *per se* and travel evaluation, such as exposure and easier comparison of tourism products and destinations, share of tourist experiences, storytelling about destinations and tourism products and development of emotional bonds between social media participants. Xiang and Gretzel (2010, p. 186) state that “social media websites are “ubiquitous” in online travel information search in that they occur... and are likely to evolve into primary online travel information sources”.

Although several studies investigated the use of social media among tourism suppliers and destination management organizations (for instance, Michaelidou et al. 2011; Kietzmann et al. 2011; Hamill et al. 2012; Hays et al. 2013), we are not aware of any research on social media use among students during the travel process. Following the previous research on the use of social media during the travel process (Cox et al. 2009; Fotis et al. 2012), the present study focuses on students' use of social media during the travel process. Students represent an important segment in tourism that is usually overlooked as tourism companies and destination organizations put their marketing efforts towards broader leisure market in general.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the students' use of social media before, during and after travel and highlight the dimensions that drive the students' use of social media in each of these phases.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media transformed the traditional ways of communication in tourism. Following Kaplan and Haenlein (2010 p. 61), social media represent »a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content«. New channels of communication emerged with social media and changed the nature of consumption (Aramenida-Muneta 2012). Indeed, social media are used "to build direct relationships with customers, increase traffic to the website, identify new business opportunities, create communities, distribute content, collect feedback from customers, and generally to support the brand" (Breslauer and Smith 2009 and e-Marketer 2010 in Michaelidou et al. 2011, p. 1155). Moreover, social media enable the creation of user generated content and electronic word-of-mouth in the field of travel and tourism (Litvin et al. 2008) altering the interactivity of communication.

Social media have been inevitably transforming the travel behaviour. Since social media represent a relatively recent phenomenon with the start in 2004 (Baekdal 2009), previous travel behaviour research and models (for instance, Fodness and Murray 1997; Bieger and Laesser 2004) need to be adapted to social capital which is incorporated in social media. Information sharing and social media interactivity intensified travel behaviour change putting travel behaviour into a new context. Therefore, tourists' information search behaviour model has been later extended to include the use of the Internet (Gursoy and McCleary 2004; Jani et al. 2014). Similarly, Gretzel et al. (2006) argue that behaviour of tourists has been changed with social media. They became an important information source for travellers and the majority of travellers trust social media contents (Yoo and Gretzel 2011).

Tourism is well ahead of other sectors in the field of social media (Lichenberg 2007). From the supply-side, Ayeh et al. (2012) identified three key capabilities of social media for tourism companies - promotion channel, tool for connecting and building relationships and tool for reputation management. From the demand-side, several studies have been conducted confirming a strong penetration of social media into the travel planning. Yoo and Gretzel (2012) argue that social media have an impact on

travel planning and travel decision-making, mostly on the choice of accommodation facilities, followed by activity and restaurant choice; the impacts were found to be higher in 2010 than in 2008. Besides, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) confirmed the growing importance of social media for travel information search. The impact of social media on the travel process was already proved by studies of specific social media, such as blogs (Lin and Huang 2006; Huang, Chou and Lin 2010) and Facebook (White 2010).

The tourism industry as an information-intensive industry (Zhang et al. 2009) leads to a complex search of information about travel on the Internet (Pan 2006). Social media have a large impact on travellers' search of information, consumption of tourism products and share of tourism experiences transforming the traveller behaviour (Gretzel et al. 2006). Application of consumer decision-making model (Engel et al. 1990) to the use of social media during the travel process can be used to design the tourists' decision-making process dividing it into three phases: before travel behaviour, during travel behaviour and after travel evaluation (Cox et al. 2009; Ayeh et al. 2012). After travel behaviour in relation to social media plays an increasing role in travel related decisions of potential travellers (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). The use of social media in this phase of travel process includes also self-presentation (Bosangit et al. 2012).

Gretzel et al. (2007) found that TripAdvisor users (mostly from the USA) predominantly use social media at the beginning of the travel process to get ideas and afterwards to narrow down the choices; on the other hand, they use social media the least during travel. Similarly, Cox et al. (2009) evidenced in the study oriented towards Australians that social media are used predominantly before travel. On the contrary, Fotis et al. (2012) who researched the use of social media during the travel process among residents in 12 Former Soviet Union Republics found that social media are predominantly used after travel. Fotis et al. (2012, p. 21) state that differences like that between findings of Cox et al. (2009) and Fotis et al. (2012) are "more evident when comparing distant national cultures". Besides, the role of social media in different phases of the travel decision-making process was investigated also in specific cases, such as during crisis (Schroeder and Pennington-Gray 2014).

Drawing on the previous research in the field, there arises a question how students, as usually an over-looked segment of tourists, use social media and what drives students to use social media during the travel process. So far, there is a lack of research concerning the students' use of social media in regard to the travel process. Students from different cultural environments have similar motives for using social media, but there was found that the US college students seek more entertainment in social media while Korean students seek more social support and information while using social media (Kim et al. 2011). However, the study didn't include social media use in relation to travel. Ayeh et al. (2013) state that young people engage in social media for travel planning and they are, according to Gretzel et al. (2007), most likely the authors of online travel reviews. The study on Hong Kong travellers suggests that young travellers with higher education are both online information receivers and producers (Ip et al. 2012). However, Pempek et al. (2009) argue that students spend more time observing content than posting it. This indicates that students use social media more before travel than after it.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A structured online questionnaire was designed to collect information on the use of social media among students. The study population consisted of undergraduate students in Opatija, Croatia. About 250 students were invited via e-mail to anonymously complete the online questionnaire hosted by Google Drive website. Internet-based survey is very easy to administrate, low cost and fast to respond, but coverage error might be present in self-selected Internet-based sample. Thus, such research "requires substantial caution when generalizing the findings to a population that includes nonusers and self-selected nonparticipants" (Hwang and Fesenmaier 2004, p. 297). Data were collected during May 2014. Afterwards, the survey data were downloaded from Google Drive into SPSS.

Questionnaire items were derived from literature review on the use of social media during the travel process (Cox et al. 2009; Treer, 2010; Fotis et al. 2012). Questionnaire included socio-demographic questions on respondents, general questions on social media usage and a set of twenty-two statements on social media use during the travel process. The latter were split into three phases of the travel process: nine statements were related to the use of social media before travel, seven statements addressed to the use of social media during travel and six statements addressed to the use of social media after travel. They were measured on four-point Likert-type scale asking how often respondents use social media for specific travel item (1= never, 2 = seldom; 3 = usually, 4 = always). Descriptive statistics with mean values and standard deviation was used to describe the use of social media during the travel process. Further, principal component analysis with varimax rotation was employed to identify underlying factors of social media use by students for each phase of the travel process. Additional open-end question "what do you think about the use of social media for travel purposes?" was posed to get more in-depth information about social media.

## 3. RESULTS

A total of 86 usable questionnaires were completed and used for the analysis. Regarding age distribution of respondents, 24 (27.9 %) were 19- to 20-years old, 47 (54.6 %) were 21- to 22-years old, 11 (12.8 %) were 23- to 24-years old and 4 (4.7 %) were 25- to 34- years old. Respondents' intensity of travel shows that 26 (30.2 %) of respondents engage yearly in one trip with at least one overnight stay on average, 22 (25.6 %) of respondents engage yearly in two trips with at least one overnight stay on average and 35 (40.7 %) of them engage yearly in more than two trips with at least one overnight stay on average. Only 3 of them (3.5 %) don't engage usually in a trip with at least one overnight stay.

Facebook was identified as the preferred social media. It is used by 74 (86.0 %) respondents. The second most preferred social media among respondents is YouTube since 61 or 70.1 % of respondents use it. On the other hand, only 21 or 24.4 % of respondents use TripAdvisor, followed by Flickr/Pinterest/Instagram social media which are used by 16 (18.6 %) respondents. Only 2 respondents (2.3 %) use Twitter. Use of no other social media was mentioned by respondents.

Among the main reason to use social media during the travel process, the respondents mostly cited “to get opinions of other people” (40 or 46.5 %). It is followed by motives related to “simple use” of social media (13 or 15.1 %) and to “get up-to-date information” (13 or 15.1 %). Only 9 (10.5 %) of respondents stated “to get reliable information” and 4 (4.7 %) stated “otherwise I don’t get enough information” as the main reason to use social media. Next, 7 (8.1 %) students don’t use social media in relation to travel. Hence, 79 students who use social media for travel were taken for further research.

In regard to the travel process, only 10 (12.7 %) respondents said that social media have much greater impact than other sources of information. Most of 79 respondents (29 or 36.7 %) declared that social media have greater impact on them than other sources of information. 26 respondents (or 32.9 %) answered that social media have the same impact on their travel behaviour as other sources of information. Social media have lower impact than other sources of information on 12 (15.2 %) respondents. Moreover, social media have no impact on 2 (2.5 %) of respondents.

Table 1 presents frequency distribution, mean value and standard deviation of twenty-two statements on social media use during the travel process. According to the mean values, students use social media before travel mostly to search information about destinations (mean = 3.07) and to search comments and reviews about destinations (mean = 3.04). No item has a mean score below the average<sup>1</sup>.

Table 1: **Means and standard deviations of variables measuring social media use during the travel process**

Item	N	Frequency				Mean	SD
		Never	Seldom	Often	Always		
<i>Before travel</i>							
Search for ideas about travel	76	6 (7.9%)	25 (32.9%)	26 (34.2%)	19 (25.0%)	2.76	0.922
Search for information about destinations	75	1 (1.3%)	15 (20.0%)	37 (49.3%)	22 (29.3%)	3.07	0.741
Search for information about tourism supply	75	4 (5.3%)	18 (24.0%)	32 (40.5%)	21 (26.6%)	2.97	0.859
Search for comments and reviews about destinations	75	2 (2.7%)	17 (22.7%)	32 (42.7%)	24 (32.0%)	3.04	0.813
Search for comments and reviews about tourism supply	76	2 (2.6%)	22 (28.9%)	31 (40.8%)	21 (27.6%)	2.93	0.822
Comparison of destinations	74	9 (12.2%)	26 (35.1%)	30 (40.5%)	9 (12.2%)	2.53	0.864
Comparison of tourism suppliers	75	6 (8.0%)	29 (38.7%)	28 (37.3%)	12 (16.0%)	2.61	0.853
Search for price affordable tourism supply	76	4 (5.3%)	17 (22.4%)	30 (39.5%)	25 (32.9%)	3.00	0.879
Search for opinions about specific tourism supply or travel	75	4 (5.3%)	19 (25.3%)	32 (42.7%)	20 (26.7%)	2.91	0.857

<sup>1</sup> Average value on the four-point Likert-type scale is 2.5.

Item	N	Frequency				Mean	SD
		Never	Seldom	Often	Always		
<i>During travel</i>							
Exchange of information about travel	76	15 (19.7%)	29 (38.2%)	16 (20.3%)	16 (20.3%)	2.43	1.037
Get additional information about travel	77	6 (7.8%)	29 (37.7%)	24 (31.2%)	18 (23.4%)	2.70	0.919
Stay in touch with friends and acquaintances	76	4 (5.3%)	18 (23.7%)	27 (35.5%)	27 (35.5%)	3.01	0.902
Leisure purposes	77	9 (11.7%)	23 (29.9%)	23 (29.9%)	22 (28.6%)	2.75	1.002
Share photos and videos about travel	76	10 (13.2%)	24 (31.6%)	17 (22.4%)	25 (32.9%)	2.75	1.060
Share opinions and impressions	77	14 (18.2%)	31 (40.3%)	19 (24.7%)	13 (16.9%)	2.40	0.977
Personal promotion	76	35 (46.1%)	22 (28.9%)	9 (11.8%)	10 (13.2%)	1.92	1.055
<i>After travel</i>							
Share photos or videos about travel	78	4 (5.1%)	16 (20.5%)	24 (30.8%)	34 (43.6%)	3.13	0.917
Share opinion and impressions about travel	77	30 (3.9%)	27 (35.1%)	28 (36.4%)	19 (24.7%)	2.82	0.854
Compare opinions and impressions about travel	77	15 (19.5%)	29 (37.7%)	26 (33.8%)	7 (9.1%)	2.32	0.895
Evaluate suppliers or destinations	76	13 (17.1%)	37 (48.7%)	19 (25.0%)	7 (9.2%)	2.26	0.854
Develop relationship with other travellers	76	26 (34.2%)	32 (42.1%)	12 (15.8%)	6 (7.9%)	1.97	0.909
Personal promotion	75	36 (48.0%)	21 (28.0%)	9 (12.0%)	9 (12.0%)	1.88	1.039

During travel, social media are used by students mostly to stay in touch with friends and acquaintances (mean = 3.01). On the other hand, personal promotion with the mean score 1.92 seems to be the least important for students during travel. Less important for students are also exchange of information about travel (mean = 2.43) and share opinion and impressions (mean = 2.40). Students use social media after travel mostly to share photos or videos (mean = 3.13). Further, development of relationships with other tourists (mean = 1.97) and personal promotion (mean = 1.88) are the least important for students after travel.

Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was performed to identify the driving forces of the students' use of social media during the travel process. It was performed for each phase of the travel process: firstly, on nine items referring to the use of social media before travel; secondly, on the seven items referring to the use of social media during travel; thirdly, on six items referring to use of social media after travel. Factor loadings, Eigenvalues and percentage of variance explained are presented for each factor and Cronbach's alpha is computed to test the reliability and internal consistency of each factor (Table 2-4).

Principal component analysis produced a two factor structure with relatively high loadings on factors for the first phase of the travel process (Table 2). The two factors accounted for 61.499% of the total variance across the nine variables. The first factor identified is labelled »search for opinions« and consists of three items (Eigenvalue = 2.832; variance explained = 31.463%). »Information and comparison« is the second factor and encompasses six items referring to the use of social media before travel (Eigenvalue = 2.703; variance explained = 30.035%).

Table 2: **Factor analysis results of the first phase of the travel process**

Factors and items	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Alpha
<i>Factor 1: Search for opinions</i>		2.832	31.463	0.823
Search comments and reviews about tourism supply in general	0.868			
Search comments and reviews about destinations	0.855			
Search for opinions about specific tourism supply or travel	0.738			
<i>Factor 2: Information and comparison</i>		2.703	30.035	0.803
Search information about destinations	0.772			
Search for price affordable tourism supply	0.666			
Comparison of destinations	0.651			
Search information about tourism supply	0.645			
Comparison of tourism suppliers	0.613			
Search for ideas about travel	0.599			

KMO = 0.751, Bartlett's test of sphericity = 297.624 at d.f. 36 with a significance of p = 0.000

Examining factors of social media use during travel, two factors emerged from principal component analysis explaining 68.493% of the total variance. The first factor is labelled "sociability" (Eigenvalue = 3.077; variance explained = 43.964%); it reflects social issues of using social media and includes five items (Table 3). The second factor is named "information" and consists of two items related to getting and exchange information about travel (Eigenvalue = 1.717; variance explained = 24.529).

**Table 3: Factor analysis results of the second phase of the travel process**

Factors and items	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Alpha
<i>Factor 1: Sociability</i>		3.077	43.964	0.613
Personal promotion	0.845			
Leisure purposes	0.831			
Share opinions and impressions about travel	0.791			
Photo and video share about travel	0.688			
Stay in touch with friends and acquaintances	0.623			
<i>Factor 2: Information</i>		1.717	24.529	0.859
Get additional information about travel	0.903			
Exchange of information about travel	0.686			

KMO = 0.835, Bartlett's test of sphericity = 212.867 at d.f. 21 with a significance of p = 0.000

All variables of the third phase loaded highly onto one factor (Table 4). It explains 59.436% of the total variance. The factor is labelled "sociability" and it expresses similar use of social media like factor "sociability" identified in the second phase of the travel process.

**Table 4: Factor analysis results of the third phase of the travel process**

Factor and items	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Alpha
<i>Factor 1: Sociability</i>		3.566	59.436	0.861
Compare opinions and impressions about travel	0.838			
Develop relationship with other travellers	0.819			
Share opinion and impressions about travel	0.785			
Personal promotion	0.767			
Evaluate suppliers or destinations	0.711			
Shares photos and videos about travel	0.695			

KMO = 0.811, Bartlett's test of sphericity = 204.386 at d.f. 15 with a significance of p = 0.000

Answers to an open-ended question "what do you think about social media use for travel purposes?" show that students are well aware of social media. One respondent stated that "social media are important because of their "originality"; however, additional sources of information about travel are welcome". Another student argued that "two pieces of information on social media are not equal and such uniqueness requires careful interpretation of information." Similarly, one student commented that "some information in social media can be untrustworthy, so additional sources of information are needed to get the whole picture". It shows that students recognize the



relevance of using different sources of information about travel and at the same time caution over the use social media for travel purposes is expressed.

## CONCLUSION

The study introduces into the academic debate the students' use of social media during the travel process. The researchers attempt to capture the attention and interest in social media research during the travel process in relation to students.

The students' use of social media in the present study is concentrated to Facebook; it is different from the previous study of Barnes and Lescault (2011) who found that 100% of US college students use Facebook, 84% of them use Twitter and 66% of them have a blog. Further, findings of the present study are more similar to the study of Zehrer and Grabmüller (2012) who found that 98% of Austrian students use Facebook and less than 30% of them use YouTube or other social media. It confirms that closely related cultural environment plays an important role in determining the use of specific social media as already found by Kim et al. (2011); indeed, Austria and Croatia are both central European countries with similar cultural background.

Students use social media mostly to get information before travel. Sharing information, opinions and impressions, building relationships with other tourists, personal promotion with creation of personal and future business networks are less present among students according to mean values. It is contrary to our expectations that students use social media actively during the whole travel process. Indeed, the findings are consistent with the prior study of Pampek et al. (2009) that students use social media more to get information than posting content. After travel behaviour in regard to social media has several implications for marketing strategies and destination image (Bosangit et al. 2012); consequently, it shouldn't be underestimated or over-looked. Besides, it seems that students understand well the subjectivity of social media information that requires careful interpretation. An important implication of the present study findings is that sociability is an important dimension of students' use of social media during and after travel but not before travel. Also, there are not identified other dimensions of social media use after travel. Quan-Hasse and Young (2010) similarly found that dimension "sociability" is a driving force of students' use of social media. Thus, bridging relationships with other people during the travel process is becoming extremely important for social media and the travel industry.

There are some limitations of the study that have to be addressed. Firstly, the analysis was undertaken in Croatia and it can't be generalized to other countries. Gursoy and Umbreit (2004) found that national culture of travellers from the EU member states influences the information search behaviour. Notwithstanding, the present study delineates the underlying dimensions of social media use during the travel process among students. Secondly, regarding sampling, self-selected Internet-based sample represents a study limitation. Moreover, because of limited sample size, future studies are recommended to include larger sample and investigate whether there exist different segments of students in regard to the use social media during the travel process.

Thirdly, limited socio-demographic characteristics of students are used in the study restricting the study findings.

Finally, due to cultural differences regarding the use social media (Kim et al. 2011), further research among students in other countries would uncover whether cultural differences exist among students using social media during the travel process.

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