Chapter 14

Social Media as Information Sources and Their Influence on the Destination Image: Opportunities for Sustainability Perception

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ABSTRACT

Tourists use social media to share their experiences and obtain information about travel and tourism destinations. Information shared by tourists is different than information published by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in the sense that it does not include formal messages and photographs. Some researchers have proven that user-generated content (UGC) through social media exerts an influence on the perceived image of a tourist destination and the motivations for visiting it. Tourists and travelers tend to use a combination of official and unofficial information to make travel decisions. Nowadays, there are still plenty of opportunities to advance destination image research using social media. With these ideas in mind, this chapter aims to review different types of Web 2.0 platforms and discuss their influence on destination image formation and sustainability perception.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourists use Web 2.0 tools, including social media, to share their travel experiences and obtain information about potential travels and tourism destinations. The digital content provided by these tourists has increasingly influenced destination awareness and image creation (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). The proliferation of social media and social networks makes it possible for anyone to publish information about a destination that other tourists may consult. Today, consumers generate content, collaboration, and commentary through social networks, and this information exerts an influence on the image formation of a tourist destination (Llodrá-Riera et al., 2015a).

Content provided by tourists through social media can be manually accessed and analyzed. According to Munar (2011), who analyzed the use of destination brands in Tourist Created Content (TCC), tourists do not incorporate the formal elements of the brands in their narrative recounting of destinations. For example, certain elements such as logos, slogans or taglines—the normal fare of DMO marketing—are virtually non-existent as part of TCC. However, tourists are active in destination image formation through their narrative, visual, and audio contributions. These results underscore that user contribution systems and TCC are embedded in Internet cultures with strong anti-commercial backgrounds. On this point, Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012) showed how consumer-generated content does not seem to carry the same destination brand that marketer-generated content creates, because there were differences on consumer perceptions of consumer-generated content and marketer-generated content. This might be an indication of how consumers may have different priorities than marketers, thus emphasizing different things in their content.

Researchers can analyze how the content shared by tourists influences tourist behavior and decisions about travel. For example, traditional advertisements have less trustfulness than opinions by peers to consumers, so that it seems that consumer-generated content attracts more people than marketer-generated content. With this regard, major findings from Lim et al. (2012) indicate that the online consumer review is a comparatively effective information source for changing tourists’ attitudes when compared with traditional media. In the case of a negative review, empathetic persuasiveness is the most influential aspect behind attitude changes, and its impact is especially prominent for online consumer review.

Social media represent a large segment on the spectrum of Web 2.0 tools, and each form of social media has its own advantages and norms of use. UGC that exerts an influence on image formation were classified by Llodrá-Riera et al. (2015a) taking into account the following tools: tourism blogs, general social networks (i.e., Facebook or Twitter), tourism social networks (i.e., Travellerspoint), house swapping.
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