Chapter 8

Virtual Travel Community: Bridging Travellers and Locals

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of Web 2.0 influence in tourism, this chapter aims to examine the current state of virtual travel community (VTC) studies, and to offer an additional perspective of VTC, beyond the conventional research trends. The notion of virtual community includes a group of people who tend to build relationships with one another via computer-mediated communication, regardless of geographical distances (Rheingold, 1991). However, current VTC knowledge has primarily focused on consumer behaviour from the travellers' side (e.g., information search, decision-making process, sharing experience with other travellers), and little attempt has been made to examine the use of VTC for connecting travellers in the generating region to the locals in the destination region. Emerging information communication technologies (ICTs) and the use of technology in tourism e-tourism- make it much easier to communicate between people in both regions. This chapter brings empirical evidence from one virtual community – CouchSurfing.com – and demonstrates that the opportunity to build relationships between potential travellers and locals has increased dramatically through innovative technology services. Further research is recommended through the use of alternative methodologies, such as netnography or social network analysis. This chapter provides both policy and managerial implications by exploring how technology and VTC can support the bridging the gap between locals and prospective visitors.

E-TOURISM DEVELOPMENTS AND WEB 2.0

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been transforming tourism globally. ICTs have been revolutionising the world of Tourism (Buhalis, 2003). This is already evident in a wide range of examples and cases around the world (Egger & Buhalis, 2008). ICTs empower consumers to identify, customise, and purchase tourism products, and support the globalisation of...
the industry by providing tools for developing, managing and distributing offerings worldwide. Increasingly, ICTs play a critical role for the competitiveness of tourism organisations and destinations (Buhalis, 2003). ICTs are a key determinant of organisational competitiveness, and a wide range of technological developments propel the evolution observed. In addition, ICTs enable travellers to access reliable and accurate information as well as to undertake reservations in a fraction of time, cost and inconvenience required by conventional methods.

Buhalis and Law (2008) demonstrated that developments in ICTs have undoubtedly changed business practices and strategies as well as industry structures. If the past 20 years have seen an emphasis on technology per se, then since the Year 2000 we have been witnessing the truly transformational effect of the communications technologies. This has given scope for the development of a wide range of new tools and services that facilitate global interaction between players around the world. Increasingly, ICTs play a critical role for the competitiveness of tourism organisations and destinations as well as for the entire industry as a whole. Developments in search engines, carrying capacity and speed of networks have influenced the number of travellers around the world that use technologies for planning and experiencing their travels. ICTs have also radically changed the efficiency and effectiveness of tourism organisations, the way that businesses are conducted in the marketplace, as well as how consumers interact with organisations. The ICT-driven business processes re-engineering observed in the industry gradually generates a new paradigm shift. This alters the structure of the entire industry and develops a whole range of opportunities and threats for all stakeholders. Not only ICTs empower consumers to identify, customise and purchase tourism products but they also support the globalisation of the industry by providing effective tools for suppliers to develop, manage and distribute their offerings worldwide.

Since 2007, Web 2.0 has been developed to represent the wide range of peer-to-peer interactions between individuals online. The emergence of Web 2.0 or Travel 2.0 brings together the concept of social networking/virtual communities and applies it to the tourism industry. The integration of information processing, multimedia and communications created the ‘World Wide Web’ (WWW) to enable the near instant distribution of media-rich documents and to revolutionise the interactivity between computer users and servers. Perhaps one of the most interesting current developments is the development of Web 2.0, a phrase coined by O’Reilly (2005) that refers to a second generation of web-based services based on citizen/consumer generated content—such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, communication tools, and folksonomies—that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users. A Web 2.0 website may feature a number of the following techniques including: Rich Internet application techniques, optionally Ajax-based; Cascading Style Sheets (CSS); Semantically valid XHTML markup and the use of Microformats; Syndication and aggregation of data in Really Simple Syndication (RSS/Atom); Clean and meaningful URLs; Extensive use of folksonomies (in the form of tags or tagclouds, for example); Use of wiki software; Weblog publishing; Mashups and REST or XML Webservice APIs. Increasingly, the Internet is becoming a platform of data/views/knowledge creation and sharing which harness the network to get better information to all users (See Table 1)(O’Reilly, 2005).

Based on the mainstream of online community research in social science disciplines, online community research is increasingly influential in tourism informatics literature as one of the emerging agendas. The terms online community, virtual community, or online virtual community have been interchangeably used. Virtual travel communities (VTCs) have become popular as credible information sources since they provide potential tourists with up to date, personalised,
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