Exploring the extent of and motivations for using social media across the travel planning process.

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the extent of and motivations for searching and sharing travel-related content on social media across the travel process.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected through convenience sampling, asking all undergraduate students in a quantitative data analysis class at the University of Southern Denmark to share a link to the online survey via mail and social media platforms. A total of 208 usable cases are included in the present study.

Findings: The results confirm that tourists search and share travel-related content on social media sites, females being the most likely to do so. The results also show that the amount of search, sharing, and motivations for this varies across the three phases in the travel process.

Practical Implication: The results show that tourism marketers need to pay attention to tourists' use of social media in their planning and creation of their travel experience.

Originality/Value: To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies investigating both the search and sharing of travel-related content across the travel experience phases.

Keywords: Social media; motivations for search and sharing; travel experience phases

Paper Type: Research Paper

1. Introduction

Information technologies - and not least, social media - have reshaped the way tourists plan and enjoy their travel (Choe et al., 2017). Tourists search and share travel-related content on social media before, during, and after their trip. Social media may facilitate tourists to share travel-related content before, during, and after their trip and thereby providing potential tourists easy access to substantial information concerning tourism products and services. Prior research (Arica et al,2022) shows that tourists place importance on content on social media when planning their trip, and often perceive this content as more reliable and trustworthy compared with marketing-induced travel information. Therefore, identifying and understanding tourists' motivations for searching and sharing travel-related content across the travel process is a central area of interest for academics and practitioners. To reach this end, this paper seeks to investigate tourists' search for and sharing of travel-related content on social media during the travel process.

2. Literature review, research questions, and hypotheses.

Social media content is likely to be important for tourists' travel planning due to travel's intangibility and high perceived risk (Gretzel, 2017). Prior research shows that tourists place importance on content on social media when planning their trip, and often perceive this content as more reliable and trustworthy compared with marketing-induced travel information

(Arica et al, 2022). Tourists use social media to seek *information/inspiration* for prospective travel and to *reduce risk and uncertainty* of their travel choices. Yet, tourists may also read travel-related content on social media to provide *entertainment and enjoyment* and as a mean of *social interaction*, i.e., keep in touch with family and friends and meet new friends. (Munar and Jacobsen (2014); Tandon et al., 2020). Pérez et al. (2018) showed that tourists are more likely to search for travel-related content when planning their trips compared to their sharing of travel-related content after their trip.

Research suggests that tourists share travel-related content on social media for a variety of reasons (Kho et al, 2005; Chen et al, 2013; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Plume et al, 2018; Arica et al, 2021). Among the most dominant motivations are social interaction, entertainment, status/self-expression, altruism, and travel memory creations. *Social interaction* refers to the motivation to meet people with the same interests or keep up with what is going on. *Entertainment* refers to the way in which social media sharing allows individuals to pass the time and engage in behaviour they find enjoyable and entertaining. *Status/self-impression* relates to individuals' need to strengthen their sense of identity and achieve social status within their network. *Altruism motivation* reflects an individual's desire to help others by providing them inspiration and important information for their future trips or warning them about possible bad holiday experiences. *Travel memory creation* reflects that individuals may post travel-related content on social media to store their travel memories and to 'refresh' and extend their enjoyment of their travel experience.

Fotis et al. (2012) and Choe et al (2017) found that tourists' motivation for sharing travel-related content varies throughout the three phases of the travel process (before, during, and after the trip). This leads us to suggest hypotheses H2b and H3b.

Prior research on information sharing on social media reveals that gender and age are significantly associated with the related amount of social media sharing and the motivations for doing this (Choudhary and Gangotia, 2017; Karatsoli and Nathanail, 2020). This leads us to suggest hypotheses H1b, H2a, and H3a.

Based on the above we suggest the following research questions and corresponding hypotheses.

RQ1 To what extent do tourists search and share travel-related content on social media before, during, and after their trip?

H1a: Tourists' search for travel-related content on social media is more prevalent when compared to the amount of sharing of travel-related content.

H1b: Gender and age are significantly associated with the amount of searching and sharing of travel-related content before, during, and after the trip.

RQ2: What are the most important motivations for tourists' search for travel-related content before, during, and after the trip?

H2a: Gender and age are significantly associated with tourists' motivations for searching travel-related content on social media.

H2b: Motivations for searching travel-related content on social media vary across the three stages in the travel process (pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip).

RQ3 Which motivations for tourists' search and sharing determine tourists' search and sharing og travel-related content before, during and after the trip?

H3a: Gender and age are significantly associated with tourists' motivations for sharing travelrelated content on social media.

H3b: Motivations for sharing travel-related content on social media varies across the three stages in the travel process (pre-trip, on-trip, and post-trip)

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey instrument

The questionnaire consists of three major sections, where section one recorded the demographic profile of the respondents such as gender, age, education level, travel experience, and social media usage in relation hereto. Section two dealt with respondents' motivations for searching and sharing, respectively, of travel-related content on social media. A pool of motivational items for searching and sharing, respectively, of travel content on social media were selected from our literature review (e.g. Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Nine items were selected to represent the four above-mentioned motivational themes for searching (socialise, information/inspiration, entertainment and reduce risk/uncertainty). Nineteen items were selected to measure the five motivational themes for sharing (socialise, status/self-impression, altruism, entertainment, and storing memories). The respondents were asked, on a five-point scale ranging from 1=not at all to 5=to a very high degree), to indicate to what degree they perceived each of the items as a motive/reason for searching and posting travel-related content on social media. Table 1 displays each of the themes and corresponding items. In the third section, respondents were asked questions about their latest travel and their search for and sharing of travel-related content on social media during the travel process.

3.2 Data collection and sample

Data was collected through convenience sampling. Invitations to participate in the study were disseminated by asking all undergraduate students in a media research class at the University of Southern Denmark to share a link to the online survey via mail and through their social media platforms. After eliminating non-completed questionnaires total of 208 cases were available for further analysis. The sample is skewed toward women respondents (71.6% of the total sample). Most of our participants are students (65.6%). Regarding age, 50% were 18-24, and 50% per cent 25 or older.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Extent of searching and sharing

To answer RQ1, Table 1 displays respondents' ratings of their degree of search and sharing of travel-related content on social media across the travel stages. It is seen that around 40% of the tourist have searched travel-related content on social media to least some degree before, during, and after their trip, with the first two stages being the most prevalent. 12.5%, 48,1%,

Table 1: Extend search and sharing across travel stages in % (N=208)

Searched for travel related content	Not at all	To a minor extent	To some extent	To a high extent	To a very high extent
Before the trip	32.7	26.9	23.1	13.9	3.4
During the trip	30.3	25.5	29.3	12.0	2.9
After the trip	37.0	26.9	26.4	7.2	2.4
Shared/posted					
travel related content					
Before the trip	74.0	13.5	8.2	3.8	.5
During the trip	34.1	17.8	27.4	14.9	5.8
After the trip	53.8	24.0	13.9	5.3	2.9

and 22,1% of the tourists shared travel-related content on social media before, during, and after their trip, respectively.

Overall, Table 1 supports H1a stating that search is more prevalent than sharing, yet it is noteworthy that sharing is at its highest during the trip, and at that stage, even at the same occurrence as searching.

Crosstabs and chi-square were used to examine the potential association between search and sharing of travel-related content on social media and gender and age, respectively (H1b). Females were significantly more likely to search travel-related content on social media before (p=.003) and during (p=.018) their trip and share travel-related content during (p=.008) and after (.038) their trip when compared to their male counterparts.

4.2. Motivations for searching travel-related content on social media

Table 2 details the nine items representing the four themes suggested as gratification for searching travel-related content on social media. 'Information and inspiration' and 'reducing risk and uncertainty' were represented by five items and two items, respectively. To support scale reliability and convergent validity, we made Cronbach alpha and CFA analysis. Cronbach's alpha's of .83 and .79, respectively, suggest good reliability for both scales (refer to Table 2). Also construct reliability (CR) assessments are above the threshold value of 0.70 as required (Bogozzi and Yi, 1988). Finally, the average of variance extracted (AVE) variance values are above or close to the 0.50 threshold (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Hence, the convergent validity of all model constructs was established.

The other two themes ('Social interaction' and 'Entertainment and enjoyment') were only represented by one item each. To enhance reliability and simplify further analyses, 'summated scales' was employed by calculating the average score of the items captured in the two first-mentioned themes. Mean scores and standard deviations for each theme and the nine items are displayed in Table 2. 'Information and inspiration' is by far the most important motive for searching travel-related content on social media (mean = 3.05, SD = .93), followed by 'entertainment and enjoyment' (mean=2.73, SD=1.26) and 'reducing risk and uncertainty' (mean = 2.69, SD = 1.05). 'Social interaction' by finding travel partners is by far the least stated motive for searching (mean=1.29, SD.658).

Table 2: Motives/reasons for searching travel-related content on social media.

Themes and items	Mean	SD
Information/inspiration (alpha = .83; CR = .80; AVE = .45)	3.05	.93
Looking for inspiration/information about the destination	3.42	1.2
(accommodation. places to eat. activities. etc.)		
See what other people have experienced with the destination	3.21	1.18
See if others have experience with my chosen travel agency	2.60	1.25
Refine the resort by seeing/hearing about other people's	3.11	1.14
experiences		
Get ideas to save money on your trip	2.92	1.27
Entertainment and enjoyment (alpha n.a.)		1.26
I find it entertaining to search for travel related information on	2.73	1.26
social media		
Reduce risk and uncertainty (alpha=.79;CR =.79; AVE=.65)	2.69	1.05
Be confirmed in my own choices/plans	2.78	1.17
Reduce my uncertainty/doubt about my holiday choice	2.59	1.15
Social interaction (alpha n.a.)		.658
Find travel partners	1.29	.658

To examine the role of gender and age, we ran two series of independent t-tests with the four themes as dependent variables and gender and age, respectively, as independent variables. The results confirm H2b. As seen in Table 3, females rate the motivations 'information and inspiration', 'entertainment and enjoyment' and 'reduce risk and uncertainty' significantly higher than their male counterparts. The age group og 25-44 rates 'entertainment and enjoyment' significantly higher than the younger segment, whereas the younger segment rate 'reduce risk and uncertainty' significantly higher than the 25-44 segment. Thus, H2a is supported.

Table 3: Motives for searching travel-related content across gender and age

Motives for searching travel related content	Male		Female		
	Meana	SD	Mean	SD	t-value
Information and inspiration	2.57	1.01	3.23	.82	4.47***
Entertainment and enjoyment	2.20	.82	2.96	.98	2.80**
Reduce risk and uncertainty	2.33	1.15	2.81	1.21	4.08***
Social interaction	1.26	.73	1.32	.62	60
	18-24 years		25-44 years		
	Meana	SD	Mean	SD	t-value
Information and inspiration	3.32	.78	3.86	1.02	2.87**
Entertainment and enjoyment	2.80	.95	2.55	1.14	1.71
Reduce risk and uncertainty	2.97	1.20	2.53	1.27	2.53*
Social interaction	1.29	.62	1.27	.68	27

a) Means calculated on a scale ranged from 1=not al all to 5= to a very high extent * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 4: Motives/reasons for sharing travel-related content on social media.

Themes and items	Mean	SD
Social interaction (alpha = .81; CR = .79; EV = .45)	2.00	.88
Update friends/family that I will be traveling soon	2.05	1.22
Sharing my vacation experiences with others is a great way	2.14	1.17
to keep in touch with those back home while I'm away		
Sharing my holiday experiences on social media helps	2.19	1.23
build/strengthen social community		
Give friends/family a sense of what kind of travel experience	1.92	1.13
awaits me	1.54	0.0
Share the joy of anticipation with others	1.74	.98
Entertainment/ enjoyment (alpha .82; CR=82; EV=70)	2.50	1.09
I find it entertaining to post/share my holiday experiences	2.90	1.37
I think it's fun to post/share my holiday experiences with	2.67	1.36
others		
Status and self impression (alpha = .82; CR=80; EV=58)	2.30	1.05
Probably also do it to 'brag' a little and make others a little	2.12	1.24
envious		1.2 .
I somehow feel it gives me status	1.99	1.08
Receive recognitions/likes	2.82	1.39
Alternione (alaba = 01, CD=01, EV= (2)	2.19	1.05
Altruism (alpha = .91; CR=.91; EV= 62)		1.05 1.22
I have a perception that my social circle is interested in hearing about my holiday experiences	2.54	1.22
I would like to give others inspiration for future holiday	2.06	1.14
plans	2.00	1.14
I would like to encourage others to choose the same/similar	2.03	1.12
holiday experiences	2.00	1112
I would like to give other people good advice for their	2.06	1.17
upcoming holidays		
I would like to warn others about possible bad holiday	1.95	1.14
experiences, so they don't end up in the same situation		
I would like to share my positive holiday experiences with	2.34	1.24
others so that they have the opportunity to experience the		
same		
Travel memory creation (alpha = .89; CR=.78; EV=:56)	2.54	1.29
By posting/sharing holiday related content on my social	2.83	1.48
media, I create a kind of holiday album	2.03	1.10
By posting/sharing holiday related content on social media, I	2.47	1.33
somehow 'extend' my enjoyment of the holiday trip		
The holiday related content I share on social media helps to	2.61	1.39
'refresh' my holiday experiences		-

4.3. Motivations/reasons for sharing travel-related content on social media.

Table 4 details the nineteen items representing the five themes suggested as gratification for sharing travel-related content on social media. To support scale reliability and convergent validity, we made Cronbach alpha and CFA analysis. Cronbach's alphas between .81 and .91 suggest good reliability for the five scales (refer to Table 4). Also construct reliability (CR) assessments are above the threshold value of 0.70 as required (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). And finally, the average of variance extracted (AVE) variance values are above or close to the 0.50 threshold (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Hence, the convergent validity of all model constructs was established.

Cronbach's alphas suggest good reliability for the five scales (refer to Table 4). To enhance reliability and simplify further analyses, 'summated scales' were employed by calculating the average score of the items captured in the five motivation themes. Mean scores and standard deviations for each theme and the nine items are displayed in Table 4.

'Entertainment and enjoyment' and 'memory creation' are the highest rated motives/reasons for sharing travel-related content on social media (mean = 2.50, SD = 1.09 and mean=2.54, SD=1.29, respectively) followed by, in descending order, 'status and self-impression' (mean = 2.30, SD = 1.05), 'altruism' (mean=2.19, SD=1.05) and 'social interaction' (mean = 2.00 SD = .88).

To examine the role of gender and age, we ran two series of independent t-tests with the five themes as dependent variables and gender and age, respectively, as independent variables. The results confirm H2b. As seen in Table 5, females rate all the motivations significantly higher than their male counterparts. The age group of 18-24 rates 'Entertainment and enjoyment' significantly higher than the elder segment. Thus, H3a is supported.

Table 5: Motives for sharing travel-related content across gender and age groups

Motives for sharing of travel related content	Ma	Female			
	Meana	SD	Mean	SD	t-value
Social interaction	1.70	.82	2.11	.88	3.11**
Entertainment and enjoyment	2.05	.90	2.68	1.05	3.81***
Status and self-impression	1.91	1.02	2.43	1.03	3.27***
Altruism	1.90	1.21	2.29	.92	2.78**
Travel memory creation	1.96	1.21	2.76	1.25	4.17***
	18-24 years		25-44 years		
	Meana	SD	Mean	SD	t-value
Social interaction	2.05	.86	1.93	.90	.97
Entertainment and enjoyment	2.66	1.04	2.35	.88	2.09*
Status and self-impression	2.39	1.02	2.17	1.07	1.49
Altruism	2.27	.88	2.09	.96	1.37
Travel memory creation	2.67	1.25	2.40	1.32	1.50

a) Means calculated on a scale ranged from 1=not al all to 5= to a very high extent *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

4.4. Predictors for search and sharing of travel-related content.

To examine which motivations that determine tourists' search and sharing of travel-related content before, during and after the trip, we ran two series of regression analyses with the motivations as independent variables and extent of search and sharing, respectively, as dependent variables. Adj R² in Table 6 shows that the four motivation themes explain 14,4%, 17.9% and 14.9%, respectively of the extend of searching travel related content on social media before, during and after the trip. 'Social interaction' and 'information and inspiration' are significant predictors (β = .294, p < .01 and β = .215, p < .05, respectively) for tourists search of travel-related information before the trip. 'Social interaction' and 'entertainment and enjoyment' are significant predictors for searching during the trip (β = .239, p < .01 and β = .179, p < .05, respectively). 'Social interaction is the only significant predictor for searching after the trip (β = .321, p < .01). Thus H2b is confirmed.

Regarding sharing of travel-related content, Adj R^2 in Table 7 shows that the five motivation themes explain 13.3%, 45.9% and 27.8%, respectively, of the extent of sharing travel-related content on social media before, during and after the trip. 'Social interaction' is the only significant predictor for sharing travel-related content before the trip (β = 359, p < .01). 'Status and self-impression' and 'entertainment and enjoyment' are significant predictors during the trip (β = .249, p < .05 and β = .347, p < .001, respectively), and 'altruism' and 'travel memory creation' are significant predictors of sharing after the trip (β = .294, p < .01 and β = .215, p < .05, respectively). H3b is supported.

Table 6: Regression result for the four motivation themes' influence on amount of searching travel related content

	Before		During		After	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Social interaction	.215*	.115	.239*	.134	.321**	.064
Information and inspiration	.294**	.123	.160	.115	.243	.112
Reduce risk and uncertainty	.066	.103	.143	.096	.020	.094
Entertainment and enjoyment	.114	.070	.179**	.065	.120	.064
	Adj $R^2 = .144***$		Adj R ² =.179***		Adj R ² =.149***	

^{*} p <.05; ** p < .01; *** p< .001

Table 7: Regression results for the five motivation themes' influence on amount of sharing travel related content

	Before		During		After	
	β	SE	В	SE	β	SE
Social interaction	.359**	,118	,208	,135	-,083	,133
Entertainment and enjoyment	-,053	,077	,347***	,088	,072	,086
Status and self- impression	-,058	,095	,249**	,109	,057	,107
Altruism	,138	,106	-057	,121	,318**	,119
Travel memory creation	,003	,074	,101	,084	,205*	,083
	Adj R ² = .130***		Adj R ² =.459***		Adj R ² =.278***	

^{*} p <.05; ** p < .01; *** p< .001

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1 Key findings and implications

Our study has both academic and practical implications. We investigated the extent to which tourists search and share travel-related content on social media during the travel process and identified their motivations for doing so. To the best of the authors' knowledge, research capturing search and sharing across three travel phases is limited or non-existent.

Around 40% of the tourists have searched travel-related content on social media to at least some degree before, during, and after their trip, with the first two mentioned being the most prevalent. Information and inspiration for upcoming travel plans are the most important motivation. In other words, tourists are likely to search on social media before making travel decisions.

Our results also show that tourists share travel-related content on social media to help other tourists to plan their upcoming trips. Thus, tourist establishments may benefit from facilitating tourists to share their positive travel experiences on social media. The results also show that females are more likely to search and share travel-related content on social media. Tourist establishments, therefore should target this segment. 'Entertainment and enjoyment' and memory creation' are the highest-rated motivations/reasons for sharing travel-related content on social media. Thus, tourist establishments may encourage social media sharing by making it enjoyable and eventually make photo platforms for memory creation.

5.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite its contribution, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the sample size and data collection method may question the generalisability of the results. Future research may collect larger samples, using a random sampling method. Some of our motivational themes were represented by only one item and, therefore, were not as reliable as if we included more items. Future research may ensure more multi-item scales. The relatively low predictive power (Most Adj. R squares around 15%) suggests that other motivational themes may be added as predictors.

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