Social Content Search in Tourism Purchase Decisions
Social Content Search in Tourism Purchase Decisions

The seminal social media work of Tim O’Reilly what sought to define and contextualise what was dubbed as ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly, 2005) has changed the face of communication exchange, information search and marketing forever. Broadly define as ‘a collection of open-sourced, interactive and user controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes’ (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008) Web 2.0 has catalysed an information revolution. Self-publication on blogs, social networks, wikis, online question and answers, media sharing sites, and opinion and review forums, more commonly regarded by practitioners and internet users as ‘social media’ (Gillin, 2007) has diluted the influence of marketing communication.

Service purchases, particularly tourism purchases have been widely affected by the addition of social media as an information source. During a purchase decision, the role of consumer networks, group and community influence has increasing significance (Cova and Cova, 2002; Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Muinz and O’Guinn, 2001). The attraction to social media during a purchase decision is mainly due to the new form of word of mouth (WOM) communication published and exchanged by consumers. Researched as eWOM (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008), user generated content (Cox et al, 2008), and user created media (UCM), this new form of WOM is very influential. We introduce the term ‘social content’ which can be published as consumer generated content (CGC), expert generated content (EGC) and brand generated content (BGC). Current research does not delineate between these three streams of publication or their respective influence. WOM theory can help to explain the draw to CGC and EGC. However marketers’ progressively complex social media marketing strategies has created BGC in the form of branded social space, social advertising and viral marketing. Social media marketing (Kozinets et al, 2010) spend is set to reach over $3 billion in 2011 (eMarketer, 2011). Little is known about the influence of such social media marketing strategies.

While marketers are seeking to use their own content and strategies, researchers are concerned with the influence of CGC, particularly reviews on sales (Li and Hitt, 2010), loyalty (Forman et al, 2008) and trust (Ba and Pavlou 2002; Pavlou and Gefen, 2004), and less so EGC (with the exception of Chen and Xie, 2005). Social media research and practice is not collaborative. Research must examine the whole social media landscape, including CGC, EGC, and BGC on commercial and non-commercial sites. One are of interest that remains under-researched is what consumers seek from social content. Research has examined, the narrative of the comment (Cox et al, 2008), why consumer search reviews (Burton et al, 2010) and the reviewer characteristics (Forman et al, 2008), but never asked what consumers want from social content. We ask the question, what do consumers seek from social content search? The study explores the trip search process, the sources used, the type of content sought for all trip elements (destination, transportation and accommodation) and the relative influence of social content.

In doing so, the study adopts a qualitative methodology. Interviews were selected as an appropriate method as the research aims to develop a depth of understanding which is associated with the interview method (Gillham, 2005). Twelve semi-structures interviews were completed to allow the interviewee maximum opportunity to express their own opinions and provide a rich context to the meaning (Punch, 2005). Moreover, a part structured approach allows analysis in terms of commonality between the interviews (Gillham, 2005).
A convenience sample of twelve consumers who were in the process of planning a trip or had purchased and planned a trip within the previous three months was taken. While self-recall relies on consumers memory and the actual observations of search are not seen by the researcher, the short timeline between planning/purchase and interview may allow for increased recall and result validity. The research questions were generated using research objectives to frame topic areas and then analysed to form a logical sequence of questioning (Gillham, 2005). The key topic areas were the respondents usual trip planning and decision making process, internet sources usually utilised, information need, source importance and personal characteristics.

The preliminary results of the study indicate that each trip element, destination, accommodation and transportation has varying social content needs. Destination choice, is rarely intentionally searched, consumers already have a destination in mind. However destination choice has been inspired by viewing ‘holiday snaps’ on friends’ social network profiles. All respondents regularly travel, with a least one to two trips per year, short city breaks and longer multi-stop trips were of importance to the respondent base. Search of transportation and accommodation is predominantly through travel specific search engines systems with access to multiple providers, such as Expedia.com, or travelsupermarket.com, popular hotels sites include, hotels.com and flights on skyscanner.com. Travel specific search engines systems are important in early search strategies; however the level of consumer technology acceptance moderates the effect of consumer reviews within such sites. Technology acceptance is also seen to moderate the breadth and depth of social content search.

The transport element is very price sensitive, where limited social content information is sought. BGC in the form of social advertisements were popular in this area, however adverts were not sought during active search. Repetitive exposure through social media demonstrates have a clear link to traditional advertising. Transportation, particularly flights were seen to need little search of social content. Respondents want to best price deal at this stage, there was a consensus that the best accommodation possible and money to spend in resort were more important. However, previous service knowledge and experience, low supplier choice, and homogenous groupings of suppliers were also linked to low need for social content search.

The accommodation element was viewed as the most important social content search. All respondents searched social content when planning an accommodation purchase. Again technology acceptance moderated the types of sites used and the depth of search. The most popular sites were TripAdvisor and online travel specific search engines systems. Travel specific search engines systems were used to form a total set of choices, reviews are then predominantly used to form the choice set into to consideration, inert and inept. Supplier websites are also explored, other reviews, questions asked to online social networks and blogs are used depending on the level of technology acceptance. During accommodation search BGC is not influential nor is the friending of brands over social media. Influence is on CGC and with increasing technology acceptance EGC. Consumers are looking for opinions of the location, cleanliness and friendliness of staff of accommodation. Although BGC is not influential, service failures, rants and narratives which are not objective are also not overly influential. This has particular consequences for volume and valance studies which highlighted a purchase conformity effect on the reviews with the highest valance (Dellarocas, 2003).
While destination choice is not affected by social content, those consumers with high technology acceptance are seen to search social content for titbits of the best things to do, see and eat. There is a strong emphasis of searching for social content published by locals. Many travellers do not wish to follow the well-travelled route; this is particularly relevant with bars and restaurants. However, offline information from travel and destination guides and friends and family remain important and influential sources. All respondents heavily planned destination activities, restaurants and bars. Given that short city breaks and costly multiple stop destinations were the main travel trends of the respondent group the level of advanced planning is unsurprising. Nevertheless, the respondents formed a general consensus that there was not enough destination attraction, activity, bar and restaurant social content available. It was concluded that a media platform to allow for more local insights to destination areas would be of great influence at this stage of search. The influence of BGC at this stage was relatively low, and no respondent had friended any suppliers online. However, those with higher levels of technology acceptance may in future use other social media channels to friend tourism suppliers or ask questions directly to supplier.

The research demonstrates that travel specific search engines are an important source of trip information. The search for social content is a consequence of the consideration set formed on travel specific search engines. Online consumer reviews are the most influential social content source. However not all consumer groups stop with the reviews found on the travel specific search engine, there is a need to search a non-commercial review site such as TripAdvisor. Other social media are utilised but not as influential as consumer reviews. BGC in the form of social advertising have an affect similar to traditional advertising on recall of supplier however will not influence purchase decision. Social branded spaces on site such as Facebook and Twitter have not been utilised during search of social content. Branded social space is a relatively new concept in social media marketing, currently in the growth stage. This may account for the low adoption rate of consumers.

Overall, consumers are increasingly using social content to make trip purchase decision. There is a strong emphasis on price and value for money, consequently branded space, including websites are not a search priority for consumers. Consumers are reliant on information from other consumers and less so experts. BGC is regarded as advertising where exposure rates increase supplier awareness. This study has confirmed thoughts from previous online search and social content studies. However while volume and valance studies highlight a purchase conformity effect with the highest valance (positive or negative) this study demonstrates that reviews are not always taken as a whole, consumers will disregard some narratives.

The implication for marketers is to reconsider the use of social media. There is a higher need to monitor and respond to CGC and EGC. Advertising can be effective on awareness but it is essential to ensure that the brand is available on travel specific search engines. Branded social space is not influential on purchase but may be used during the period between purchase and consumption, suggesting that branded social space is a form of social customer relationship management (CRM) and not purely marketing. Future research should seek to investigate the cues that lead to adoption or non-adoption of social content. It is also argued that more research should examine the role of the three streams of social content and the role and value of branded social space.
References


