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Role of user-generated content (UGC) in travel planning behaviour of university students

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to consider, from the perspective of university students, the relevance of user-generated content on web pages. This area is not yet explored properly, while the use of UGC is expanding on many web sites and its importance is rapidly growing.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is undertaken amongst university students who have been asked to judge the importance and quality of UGC sites while making their travelling plan.

Findings – The findings of the research show that consumers mainly uses UGC sites at pre trip stage only i.e. for searching information or accommodation options. Furthermore, the findings indicate that non-UGC sources are in fact substantially more trusting than UGC sources for potential travellers.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the small number of respondents this research is limited and can be defined as explorative. The outcomes can be used for further research on user generated content.

Originality/value – This research is original, and it will certainly stimulate more research because of the importance UGC has in a world of expanding internet usage. The outcomes of the study non-UGC sources are in fact substantially more trusting than UGC sources for potential travellers will make it possible to develop broader quantitative research on UGC on web sites.

Keywords: websites; user-generated content; Trust; Travel planning

Introduction

Social media has become the modus operandi of the 21st century. Social media applications have facilitated incomparable growth in human interaction in modern era of competitive scenario. The past decade has witnessed remarkable interest in the application of social media to the hospitality and tourism domain. This interest has resulted in numerous User-Generated Content (UGC) websites such as social networking, online travel communities, and review sites. To illustrate, Facebook boasted over 175 million users in 2009; fast forward to 2011 and that number is now estimated to be over 500 million active users, 250 million of whom access the application through mobile devices (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) (facebook 2011). Photo and video sharing have also become the norm – “every minute, 10 hours of content were uploaded to the video sharing platform YouTube.

In the context of, UGC websites are actually a customer to customer marketing. They reflect word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing in which someone exchanges his or her opinions, experiences and behaviors of a product or service with another person (Ahuja, et al. 2007). Consumers are more likely to purchase those products for which they had consulted a product recommendation, than those who did not (Senecal and Nantel 2004). However, consumers conducted even more searches for information of the products in the absence of recommendations (Smith, Menon and Sivakumar 2005)

This paper seeks to analyze the role played by User-Generated Content (UGC) in travel plans of X-Generation Students. This paper reports whether the students use the UGC sites before, during and after their travel planning. It will also report whether the respondents trust this type of information as compared to the traditional sources of the information.

The Travel Planning Process and Information Search

In view of the opportunities offered by emerging web technologies, travelers' behavior vis-a-vis information search and travel planning are changing. Research into the process of selecting a venue or planning a holiday usually follows the generic decision-making model

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for consumers that includes five important phases (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard 1990) (Woodside and Lyonski 1989).

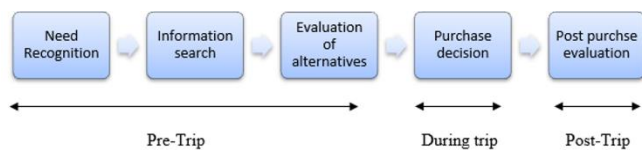


Fig 1: The travel planning process

Note: Adapted From Engel, Backwell, and Miniard (1990) ^[8] and Woodside and Lyonski (1989) ^[19]

Travellers are becoming more independent, searching for their own information and making their own decisions about destinations and services with less or no involvement of travel intermediaries. In the past, such travellers often relied on the websites of service providers, destination marketers, and intermediaries for travel information. It was noted that travellers typically gather and review diverse types of information on their trip in order to reduce the possibility of an incorrect destination decision.

Trustworthiness of UGC

Apart from recognising UGC's involvement in the travel planning process, one of the main issues not to be ignored is how much people trust the information displayed on these websites. It is not always easy to identify and assess the profile of people who post information on blogs and other social networking sites, the reader cannot easily measure the credibility of the information provided. Chen (2006) ^[5] brings out three dimensions of trust: "the level of competence, the level of benevolence and the level of integrity." This view, however, relates to the connection between the customer and the company. In this case when we examine the confidentiality of UGC, we consider the trust of the party who provides a feedback to the UGC. One potential drawback of UGC is that, while conventional types of wom generally come from individuals like associates, collaborators etc., online review is usually carried out by unfamiliar individuals, which gives rise to some doubt about the legitimacy of the review source (Park, Lee and Han 2007; Litvina, Goldsmithb and Pan 2007) ^[15, 13]. A number of scholars conjecture that since non commercial information is perceived to be more objective and credible, consumers tend to regard information from their peers as more trustworthy (Litvina, Goldsmithb and Pan 2007) (Chung and Buhalis 2008).

The information produced and published by product and service providers are often seen to be more confidential and reliable, as has previously been pointed out (Park, Lee and Han 2007). Consumers prefer websites that are independent, third-party type sites as compared to those that are clearly operated by a business with a vested interest (Senecal and Nantel 2004). It was noted that many consumers are sceptical about any form of information that is perceived to be skewed towards promoting the interests of the creator of that information. Independent third-party websites appear to be seen as acceptable to customers compared to those that are specifically run by a vested company (Senecal and Nantel 2004). How convincing these sites are in affecting the final travel plans, will be determined by the level of reliance by travellers on UGC platforms in their preparation of travel plans. So, this research will be explored in this paper through a structured questionnaire.

Literature Review

Burgess, *et al.*, (UGC) in tourism: benefits and concerns of online consumers (2009) ^[2] reports research that inspected the usage of UGC by online travel clients, sourced Forman Australian tourism organisation's online subscriber database. Data was collected over a two-week period from 13,281 people. The findings of the study show that the most significant of these are the confidence and authenticity of posts – they may be trustworthy as they are actual experiences of real travellers – but also unconfidential because the information that is shared can be counterfeited by anyone with a vested interest.

Chiappa and Del (2011) ^[6] administered research on a group of Italian tourists to assess the degree of confidence in various potential applications for Travel 2.0 as well as their effect on the reactions of tourists to company photos and choices. A sample of 823 respondents was taken for a two-week survey period for statistical analysis. It was found that Italian UGC users are highly educated and use the Internet extensively both for general purposes and for choosing their holiday accommodation. Gender differences were there in attitude about posting reviews, videos and photos online, with female respondents doing so more frequently than male respondents. Involvement in the community was found to be an important factor in affecting their decision to use Travel 2.0 applications for female users than male users.

Carmen Cox, *et al.* (2009) ^[4] conducted the online survey which represented opinions of over 12,000 consumers of hospitality and tourism. Even if these web sites are successful, it has been found and they're not as reliable or trustworthy as it is the only source of information as part of their quest for information.

Qiang, *et al.* (2011) ^[16] performed empirical study to identify the effect on company results of online user feedback. For which total of 40,424 user reviews were extracted from a major online travel agency in China. It was found that traveller reviews significantly impact the online sales, with a 10 percent increase in traveller review ratings boosting and online bookings by more than five percent. Their results highlight the role online user-generated reviews plays in business performance in tourism.

Liu-Thompkins and Rogerson (2012) ^[14] in their paper, network analysis and the diffusion literature were combined to study the spreading of user-generated videos online. The diffusion of a sample of videos on YouTube was analysed using a proportional rates model. It was found that UGC author's subscriber base as well as his/her past experience (in terms of total videos posted and average views of past videos) has a positive impact on the success of the new video. It was also found that the connectivity among existing subscribers has an inverted-U shaped effect on the diffusion of a new video. Diffusion rate at first increases with network connectivity, and when it passes a certain threshold it starts decreasing.

K. Ayeh, Au and Law (2013) ^[11] conducted research on the samples of 535 respondents examined the purpose for use of consumption-generated means (CGM) to plan travel via the introduction in the traditional TAM of new factors and an estimate of the "partial least squares." The study establishes the theoretical validity and the empirical pertinence of the TAM model to the framework of CGM usage for travel planning and confirms the important roles of distinguishing factors like the expectations of travellers that interest, confidence and enjoyment are identical.

Burgess, Sellitto, *et al.*, “Trust perceptions of online travel information by different content creators: Some social and legal implications” (2011) [3] conducted research to scrutinise the level of trustworthiness of online travel data from diverse sources. Data was collected from 12000 Australian travellers and it was found that there are differences in the level of trust for online travel information from different sources. The most reliable information on online travel was produced by independent experts, accompanied by sellers and consumers. The lowest levels of trust were placed in comments made by travellers on social networking websites, such as Facebook.

Research Objectives

1. To study the role do UGC travel sites have in the consumers travel planning process.
2. To study trustworthiness of UGC as compared to more traditional sources of travel information.

Research Hypothesis

1. The usage of UGC site by the consumers is more in the “information search stage” as compare to other stages.
2. UGC information is not as reliable as other sources of travel information.

Research Methodology

In order to analyse the role of User Generated Content (UGC) sites while travel planning of the consumers we used a qualitative approach. We gather the data from the students studying in Punjab and Chandigarh tricity and those who were using internet services for making their decisions pertaining to their traveling plans. The questionnaire was distribute to 468 respondents out of which 119 respondents respond to the questionnaire and out of which 21 questionnaires were discarded as these respondents don’t meet our basis requirement of internet usage while making their final decision for a traveling plan. IT means that we have a response rate of 25.42 percent which is a good response rate. After discarding the useless questionnaires, we were left out with 98 useable questionnaires for final analysis. In order to measure what role UGC sites plays in affecting the traveling plans of the consumers and how much trust consumers has on UGC sites versus other sources of travelling information, a standardized questionnaire was used developed by Cox, Burgess, Settitto & Bultjens (2009) [4]. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. Section-A measure the demographic profile of the respondents. Section-B was intended to measure the extent of UGC sites usage that consumer made while plaining their trips was measure on a dichotomous scale with seven items. Whereas section-C measures how much consumes have trust in UGC versus other sources of travel information was measured with seven items anchoring from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Out of this seven questions four statement belongs to Non UGC sources and three were related with UGC sources. The data for the present study was collected with a two-way approach, that is, online and off-line methods. This method was adopted in order to avoid the common method biasness of the respondents.

**Results and Discussions
Respondents Profile**

The results of the Table 1 depicts that majority of the respondents falls under the age

Table 1: Shows the Profile of the Respondents

Variables	Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Response
Age	Less than 19 years	12	12.24
	19 to 22 years	27	27.55
	23 to 26 years	33	33.67
	Moe than 26 years	26	26.53
Gender	Male	56	57.14
	Female	42	42.86
Household Income Per Year	Less than 2 Lakhs	23	23.47
	2 to 4 Lakhs	37	37.75
	More than 4 Lakhs	48	48.98

category of 23 year of age to 26 years of the age followed by 19 years of age to 22 years of age, more than 26 years of age and finally the least number of respondents were in the age group of less than 19 years of age. Next, majority of the respondents were males with a share of 57.14 percentage of the total sampling population whereas the share of the females was 42.86 percentage of the total sample. Apart from this, majority of the respondents have an annual income of more than 4 Lakhs, followed by 2 lakhs to 4 lakhs category with a share percentage of 37.75 and lastly 23 respondents have annual income of less than 2 lakhs per year.

The Role of UGC Sites in Travel Planning

From the review of literature it is very much vivid that UGC is oftenly visited by consumer. So, in order to know the extent to which these site affects the travelling plans of the consumer we asked two additional questions to the respondents.

1. How likely are you to make a final decision relating to booking a trip or travel product because of the influence of UGC?
2. How likely are you to change your existing travel plans because of the influence of UGC?

Both of these questions were asked on four point scale ranging from Not at all to definitely.

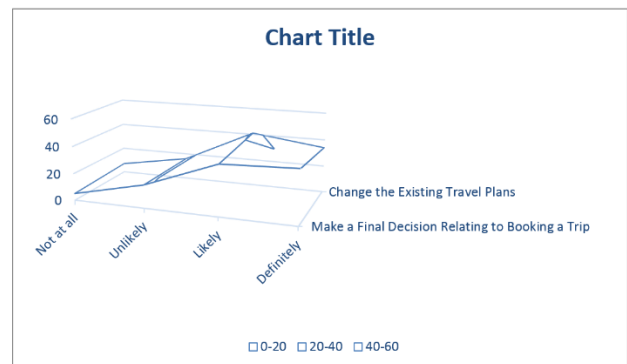


Fig 2: Shows the impact of UGC sites on consumer’s actual travelling decisions.

Results of the figure 2 showed that 39.80% of the respondent’s final decision will be definitely affected by the influence of the UGC sites whereas 37.75% final decision regarding their trip would likely be affected by the UGC site. Furthermore, 22.45% respondent’s final decision in respect of their trip is not affected by the UGC sites. Apart from this, 41.84% of the respondents would likely to be changing their existing traveling plans due to the influence of the UGC sites and 34.70% respondents would surely change their existing plans with the information rendered by UGC sites. Whereas, 23.47% of the respondents would not change their existing traveling plans because of the information provided by UGC sites.

On the basis of review of literature, we hypothesized that UGC sites are generally used by the consumers during the information search stage of travel planning rather than during the purchase or post purchase stages. In order to achieve this objective the research asked the respondents whether UGC Sites were used in planning their tour or trip.

The results of the Table 2 depicted that consumers mainly uses UGC sites for checking the accommodation options (34%) when they had already selected the destination that where to go for tour. Furthermore, consumers also utilizes UGC sites for searching the ideas of where to gofor tour (29%). Both of these statements are part of information stage of travel planning. Apart from this, 18% of the respondents uses UGC for narrowing down their choice of destinations. Which is a part of evaluation of alternative stage. Moreover, only 8% of the respondents showed that they used UGC sites during their actual trip to find out about specific attractions. These finding are similar to the findings which were observed during review of literature and from literature review it was very much clear that consumers usually search UGC site during the information search phase of travel planning process. Our results are also quite similar with the findings of the Cox, Burgess, Settitto & Bultjens (2009) ^[4] study. We also observed in our analysis that very few respondents utilises the UGC site during post purchase evaluation or during their trip. Therefore, from these observations we can accept our hypothesis 1 that the usage of UGC site by the consumers is more in the “information search stage” as compare to other stages.

Table 2: Trip Planning Process Stages Using UGC sites

Statement	Stage of travel planning process	% of Respondents
When I had already chosen the destination, but was seeking information on accommodation options	Information search	34
When beginning to search for ideas on where to go	Information search	29
When trying to narrow down my choice of destinations	Evaluation of alternatives	12
When I was looking to confirm I had made a good destination choice	Purchase decision	9
During my actual trip when I was trying to find out about specific attractions	Purchase (during trip)	8
After my trip to allow me to share my experiences with other traveller	Post purchase evaluation	5
After my trip to compare my experiences with those of other travellers	Post purchase evaluation	3

Trust in UGC Versus Other Sources of Travel Information

In order to test the hypothesis 2, we ask questions to the respondents related to how much consumers trusted the various types of traditional sources of information such as State tourism websites, travel agents, commercial operators or information obtained through e-mail travel promotions as compare to information available through UGC site while planning their travel. Respondent were asked seven questions in order to measure their level of trust for UGC site as compare to Non UGC sites. All of these seven items anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Out of this seven questions four statement belongs to Non UGC sources and three were related with UGC sources. Table 3 depicted that traditional” sources of travel information” seem to be the most reliable in contrast to novel sources such as UGC by the respondents.

State tourism websites are the utmost reliable source of information (92.86% of respondents agreed that these could be trusted), followed by commercial operators or accommodation sites (63.26% agreed they trusted them). Further, 62.24% respondents showed trust on travel agent. In Non-UGC dimension the least trusted information for a

respondent is through e-mail traveller (57.14%). On the other hand, promotions Social networking sites (e.g. MySpace, FaceBook etc) are the least trusted, with only 39.86% of respondents indicating they trusted them. Comments made by travellers on other blog sites were trusted by45.92% of the all respondents. To test Hypothesis 2, that UGC forms of information are not as trusted as other forms of travel information, t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores of the trustworthiness between the various sources. This analysis was conducted by comparing the average score (mean = 4.87) on trust agreement between the four types of other forms of travel information (i.e. state tourism websites; travel agents; commercial operators; and e-mail travel promotions) against the average score (mean = 4.25) across the three types of UGC (comments by travellers on third party sites; comments by travellers on pure weblogs; and comments by travellers on social networking sites). The t-test results show that non-UGC sources are in fact significantly more trusted by prospective travellers than UGC sources (t = 2.99, sig = .003). Therefore, we accept our hypothesis 2, that is, UGC information is not as trustworthy as other sources of travel information.

Table 3: Trust in UGC versus Other Sources of Travel Information

Type of information source	Statements	Mean score	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Tend to disagree	Not sure	Tend to agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Non-UGC information sources (mean trust score = 4.87)	I trust information provided on state tourism websites	5.65	0	0	0	7	32	47	12
	I trust information provided by travel agents	4.62	2	4	11	20	41	15	5
	I trust information from commercial operators and/or accommodation sites	4.66	2	2	11	21	44	15	3
	I trust information received through e-mail travel promotions	4.57	1	2	12	27	40	13	3
UGC Travel Sources (mean trust score = 4.25)	I trust comments made by travellers on third party sites (e.g. Trip Advisor)	4.33	2	4	13	31	39	6	3
	I trust comments made by travellers on pure weblogs	4.23	3	5	14	31	37	5	3
	I trust comments made by travellers on social network sites	4.20	2	7	15	35	25	12	2

Conclusion

This study indicates that several questions about the position of UGC have yet to be addressed. The literature outlined a number of aspects which were seen as strengths and issues in using UGC to help customer in travel decision making. This study contributes to the tourism literature by revealing the influence of UGC sites on travel planning behaviour of the university students. The findings also indicate that non-UGC sources are often more accepted than UGC sources by future travellers. There are some limitations in this study related to both methodology and data. As sample is small so results can't be generalised and this study does not cover respondents who does not use UGC sites for travel planning decisions.

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