

INTENTION TO USE ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR TRAVEL PURPOSES: A CASE STUDY AT THREE BANGKOK-BASED UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This study aims to identify how differences in terms of college students' characteristics affect these students' perception of the use of Online Social Networks (OSNs) and intention to use OSNs for travel purposes. The conceptual framework and its hypotheses have been tested by means of three approaches based on Independent Sample T-test, One-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation. A research survey was conducted on a sample of 383 students at three Bangkok-based universities, who are members of OSNs and have taken a trip in the previous 12 month. The findings reveal that females perceived higher benefits (functional and social) using OSNs for travel purposes than their male counterparts. And differences in the respondents' nationalities, gender and disposable money result in perceived differences with regard to trust incentives to use OSNs for travel purposes. Moreover, the intention to use OSNs for travel purposes are directly influenced by the perceived benefits of that use (functional, social and hedonic); it was also determined that incentives such as trust, altruism and the socio-technical environment facilitate and promote the use of OSNs when organizing and taking vacation trips.

Key Words: *Online Social Network (OSN), User Generated Content (UGC), Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Travel 2.0, Travel Planning, Information Sharing, Perception*

Introduction

Online Social Networks (OSNs) have gained significant popularity on the Internet landscape in recent years. Unlike the Web, largely organized around content, OSNs are organized around users (Alan et al. 2007). Since the introduction of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter in the early 2000s, millions of people have taken to them as SNSs' users can introduce themselves, set their own social networks and establish or maintain connections with others.

In tourism, OSNs are also referred to as "Travel 2.0." They have introduced a wide range of new advanced technology applications which include, among other, media, content syndication, tagging, customer ratings and podcasting (Xiang & Gretzel 2009). These OSNs applications allow travelers or potential ones to search, update, organize, comment or share

travel information with friends, family, colleagues - or even strangers - in a collaborative way. The use of OSNs among travelers has been growing fast, prompting a number of tourism businesses and organizations to start using OSNs as part of their online advertising or promotional activities to take advantage of this "electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)," get feedback from tourists and increase their loyalty.

OSNs have been recognized as an important information source for consumers and as such are more and more influencing the trip planning of travelers nowadays (Gretzel & Yoo 2008). It is therefore critical for tourism organization marketers or business owners to understand travelers' use and adoption of OSNs for travel purposes; all the more as these collaborative behaviors on SNSs are more likely than not to influence travelers' decision making with regard to every element of a trip (destination, hotel, accommodation, activities, restaurants, etc.).

Unsurprisingly, social networking has become a large part of college students' lives today. A 2009 Community College Survey of Student

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