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Reviewer as A Blogger: Complimentary or Exclusive between the Performance of Blogs and User-generated Travel Portal Sites

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Trip planning has become one of the major online activities in recent years due to the popularity of travel. People could search information about the destinations easily on the travel portal sites by filtering, sorting, searching, and reading the reviews. However, as one of the major sources of the reviewers, the blogger has faced another issue that people prefer to use the travel portal sites instead of reading their long stories to find out their trip solution. The study is expected to help the managers of the travel portal sites improve their performance by identifying the blogger as the reviewer and to help the bloggers know the importance of their reviews on attracting visitors to their own personal travel blogs.

Keywords: blogger, value co-creation, travel portal sites, user-generated content.

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Introduction

The emergence of portal sites on travel, such as Expedia and TripAdvisor, has changed people's customs on trip planning (Yoo et al., 2011). Instead of reading long stories from guidebooks or travel blogs, the travel portal sites could offer various choices to the users so that they can customize their own trip by the advices. To the users, the user-generated collaborative ratings and reviews on the travel sites give much assistance on their planning (Gretzel et al., 2007; Aarsal et al., 2008). However, the quality of reviews is not always the same. Even though the manager of websites has proposed the awarding systems or online reputation systems to encourage detailed reflections as well as to make the upper bound constraints on the number of words of the reviews, it is still tough to make most of the reviews valuable to the users.

Attracting the helpful reviewers to the websites is a solution to deal with the problem of quality stability for the comments. The past literature has concluded that the helpful reviewer on the travel portal sites has identical characteristics such as the one crazy about traveling and the one enthusiastic about sharing (Lee et al., 2011) which are analogous to the nature of the travel blogger, the person who owns and writes at least one weblog on the topic of traveling. As a travel blogger, leaving useful reviews on the portal sites could bring people back to their own blogs so that they can rescue the decreasing page view due to the decline of the world of the blog. Nevertheless, leading the online users to go to the blogs means people will leave the portal sites immediately. Does it matter to the travel portal sites that the user is seduced to the blogs? Can the blogger's review help the portal sites earn more loyalty and satisfaction? Is the bloggers' contribution to the portal sites the salvation to the travel blogs? The main purpose of this paper is to discuss how the blogger's reviews have impact on the performance of the travel sites as well as the travel blogs.

Literature Review

To examine the impact of the reviews on the portals and weblogs, this section contains two main topics. We firstly discuss the nature of the bloggers as reviewers in the travel-related field, and we review past literature on travel portal sites as well as travel blogs to delineate essential dimensions that should be examined.

The traits of travel blogger as reviewer

The blog has become a popular way to make immediate publication online (Sorapure, 2003) and has lost many active users since the other social networks such as microblogs and facebook grew up. The motivation of writing a blog has been examined in numerous literatures: Nardi et al. (2004) highlighted the bloggers' desire to document their daily life; Herring et al. (2005) found that the blogger may like to express their ideas or feelings on external topics of interest through their own places; Trammel et al. (2006) argued that social interaction and self-expression are the main purpose that people write articles in blogs. It is also common that the companies build their official corporate blogs to have better communication with customers (Kelleher and Miller, 2006). To continuity get notice by the public, the blogs need to update and provide new content often with regular maintenance or the blogs could become quietly stagnated or even disappeared in the ocean of information on the Internet (Price and Starkov, 2006; Akehurst, 2009).

Travel bloggers write and share where they have visited to the public not only because they hope to keep the articles as a travel journal to document the trips as well as share with friends (Pan et al., 2007) but also because they wish to help other visitors plan better with more accurate information. Douglas and

Mills (2006) suggested that the travel blogs could provide deep information about normal visitor's attitudes to the destinations therefore the blogs were popular platforms and virtual communities of interest for online word-of-mouth communication on the topics about travel (Chaffey et al., 2000; Eigner et al., 2003; Hitz et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the importance of the travel blogs has declined when the travel portal sites with more functional content and more popular virtual communities emerged. Travel bloggers, who are originally willing to share their experience (Lee et al., 2011), are forced to use the portal sites to connect with more people. Because the bloggers are fulfilled with abundant experience on travel destinations, they may have become the main role of the reviewer on the websites naturally.

The reason why the tourists participate in the travel portal sites has been discussed and concluded in several ways. Wang et al. (2001) posited that people are motivated by functional, social, and psychological needs to participate in online travel communities. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) suggested eight possible motivations for online content creation such as platform assistance, concern for other consumers, positive self-enhancement, social benefits, economics incentives, venting negative feeling, helping the company, and advice seeking. Moral obligation (Constant et al., 1996) and self-interest (Wasko and Faraj, 2000) are also common reasons why people contribute content to the portal sites.

To the best of our knowledge, the motivation that the blogger post reviews on the travel portal sites is not commonly discussed in the past few years. Less concern has been paid to distinguishing blogger from the reviewer. Bronner and de Hoog (2011) addressed self-directed, helping vacationers, social benefits, consumer empowerment, and helping companies as five main factors to make people leave comments on the websites. Because the members of the travel portal sites have the sense of belonging in the virtual communities of travel information sharing, they may also forget their original identities such as bloggers to share travel interests with others (Stockdale and Borovicka, 2006). By building social identification in the portal websites, the bloggers would increase their intention on sharing their experiences with other members (Qu and Lee, 2011). However, the bloggers still need to maintain their own weblogs therefore they may wish the users would visit the blogs to know more information by posting limited words and pictures in the communities. Based on the discussion above, we can briefly summarize the three major dimensions of the traits of bloggers as reviewers that should be considered: openness, willingness to interact with people, and desire to invite people to visit their blogs.

- Openness. The blogger as a reviewer usually has the personality that love to share information with others and open to accept new knowledge.
- Willingness to interact with people. The blogger as a reviewer always enjoys meeting people who are also interested in traveling online.
- Desire to invite people to visit their blogs. The blogger as a reviewer has incentives on attracting readers of their comments on the portal sites to visit their own blogs.

Value co-creation on the user-generated travel portal sites

Searching for travel related information for trip planning is one of the major activities online nowadays. Except the travel blogs, the main source of the information on destinations online is usually on the travel portal sites. However, some travel portal sites are maintained by travel agencies and are therefore less credible than the sites where users volunteer to post reviews (Gretzel et al., 2007). The travel portal sites with user-generated content are hence to be considered relatively a reliable information source when searching for destinations (Harwood, 2007; Sarks, 2007). It is widely accepted and discussed by past literature that the reviews and recommendations on the portal sites are useful digital form of word of mouth (Dellarocas, 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004).

The review and rating mechanism on the travel portal sites could be view as an online platform of value co-creation. The service-dominant (S-D) logic is often introduced in the tourism context to highlight the interaction between the customers and the websites (Grönroos, 1997; Etgar, 2008). The strategy of value co-creation can make the users actively participate in shaping the value proposition of the website (Doligalski, 2011). It can also help the managers of the portal sites identify users' true needs on searching (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Payne et al., 2008) to improve or change the strategy of the website and hence to create a unique experience on travel planning for the users (Johnston and Kong, 2009).

Development of Research Framework

Based on the discussion in the literature review session, we suggest that the bloggers may have impact on the value co-creation process of the user-generated travel portal sites. In this session, we will begin to derive the hypotheses by the two main streams. First, we would start from the characteristics of the bloggers as the reviewers. Then we would focus on the relationships among the value co-creation process, the performance of the travel portal sites, and the page views of the traveler's personal weblogs. Our research model could be integrated and shown in Figure 1.

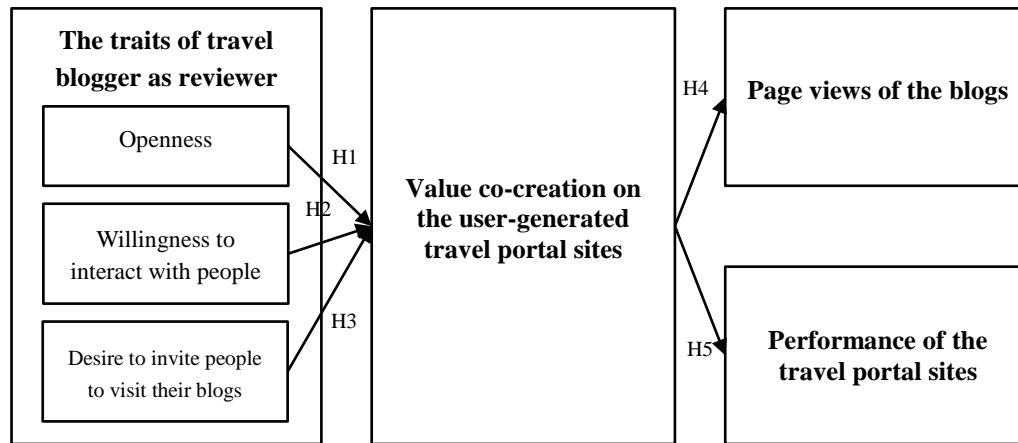


Figure 1. Research Framework

The traits of travel blogger as reviewer

Bronner and de Hoog (2011) suggested that the different reviewers would go to different travel portal sites to post different kinds of comments. They identified that people who are more inclined to express themselves prefer the user-generated travel portal sites instead of marketer-generated sites and give numerous contributions on the websites. Although some scholars argued that the travel blogs do not have a huge impact on tourism businesses or destinations because they usually contain general descriptions about the attractions in the form of personal diaries (Schmallegger and Carson, 2007), the blogger who actively plays the role of reviewer online owns high credibility within the travel communities and writes detailed comments rather than general words to share with people (Doyle et al., 2012). To consider each trait of the blogger as a reviewer specifically, we then develop our first three hypotheses as:

Hypothesis 1: The degree of openness of bloggers has a positive effect on value co-creation process on the user-generated travel portal sites.

Hypothesis 2: The degree of willingness to interact with people by bloggers has a positive effect on value co-creation process on the user-generated travel portal sites.

Hypothesis 3: The degree of desire to invite people to visit their blogs by bloggers has a positive or negative effect on value co-creation process on the user-generated travel portal sites.

It should be discussed more on the bloggers' desire to invite people to visit their blogs because there may be positive or negative effect on the value co-creation process. Even though the bloggers could be motivated by the desire to contribute in the content on the travel portal sites, they could also limit their words on sites to make people interested in figuring out their complete comments leave for blogs. The incomplete reviews as well as the possible stealing of users may decrease the value collaboration.

Value co-creation on user-generated travel portal sites

The contribution on the comments, ratings, or recommendations for the travel destinations, attractions, accommodations, or restaurants requires the investment in terms of skills, time, money, or psychological efforts (Hoyer et al., 2010); therefore, the users usually take the potential benefits and costs of co-creation

activities into account (Etgar, 2008). To the bloggers as the reviewers, the potential benefits would be enhancing their credibility and attracting more visitors on their blogs. Thus, we propose our next hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 4: The degree of value co-creation on user-generated travel portal sites has a positive effect on the page views of travel blogs.

Generally, scholars have proposed financial measures as dimensions of organizational performance (Sink, 1985; Hudson et al, 2001). However, it is not adequate to look at the financial situation of the user-generated travel portal sites to examine its success because the sites are usually non-profitable or opaque in the financial status. Hence, we focus on another popular measurable stream in this study: customer satisfaction and loyalty to the travel portal websites. The user satisfaction is usually derived from the comparison of expectations with performance (Oliver, 1977). Through the co-creation process, the users could be considered a partial employee of the websites (Bowers et al., 1990; Xie et al., 2008) and therefore could lead to positive market and financial performances (Homburg et al., 2009). Also, it is reasonable to assume that users are more likely to re-visit the websites to search for information on destinations when they feel helpful or make others feel helpful from the last experience of trip planning on the sites (Homburg and Giering, 2001). The loyalty to the travel portal sites could be built by the improvement of the users' credibility or rating because of the connectivity of the social network in traveling and by the increasing useful information on the website. Consequently, the last hypothesis of our research model could be developed as follows:

Hypothesis 5: The degree of value co-creation on user-generated travel portal sites has a positive effect on the performance of travel portal sites.

Data Collection

To test the hypotheses, we planned to collect data from the user-generated travel portal sites. We picked TripAdvisor as our main user-generated travel portal sites because it is the most popular platform based on the idea that travelers rely on other people's comments to plan their own trips (O'Connor, 2008). To find out the bloggers as the reviewer on the websites, we will randomly pick up 50-100 reviewers who leave their links of personal travel blogs to ask them for doing our survey. We will also try to ask the person who is a blogger as well as an active reviewer in other popular virtual communities or forums related to trip planning or travel experience sharing. Another survey of user satisfaction would be conducted to the public who has experience to use the travel portal sites. The possible past survey of user satisfaction on Tripadvisor would also be considered.

Expected Contribution

In term of expected contribution, our findings would provide a clear view on the characteristics of the bloggers who actively play the role of reviewers on the user-generated travel portal sites. The results of our research are also expected to help the travel portal sites improve their performance by identifying the blogger as the reviewer and to help the bloggers know the importance of their reviews on attracting visitors to their own blogs.

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