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Abstract

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Keywords

Antecedents, impacts, trust, travel, related, consumer, generated, media

Disciplines

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Trust in Travel-Related Consumer Generated Media

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Abstract

This study investigated the factors influencing trust in travel-related CGM and, in turn, the degree to which trust affects the benefits and impacts of using CGM in the course of planning pleasure trips. An online survey of US Internet users was conducted with a total of 1170 individuals responding to questions regarding their perceptions and use of CGM for travel planning. The findings show that CGM use is widespread and that trust depends on the type of Website on which the CGM is posted and perceptions of other CGM creators. Also, those who have greater trust in CGM report greater impacts and derive greater benefits from their CGM use.

Keywords: online trust; consumer generated media (CGM); trip planning; impacts of trust

1 Introduction

Online consumer-generated media (CGM) have become an important information source for Internet users. The estimated number of CGM users was about 94 million in 2007 and is expected to grow to 130 million by 2012 (eMarketer, 2008a). Further, more than 70 percent of US Internet users use CGM when they buy a new product or service (eMarketer, 2008b). For travel-related decisions, CGM is especially important since trip planners often rely on others' experiences for their decision making due to the experiential nature of tourism products (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Yoo, Lee & Gretzel, 2007). Indeed, eMarketer (2008c) found that 82 percent of US online consumers have checked online reviews, blogs and other online forms of feedback for their travel-related purchasing decisions.

Even though rising numbers of online travelers use CGM for their decision making, consumers often perceive online CGM as less trustworthy than traditional word-of-mouth. A number of studies (Smith, Menon & Sivakumar, 2005; Jin, Bloch & Cameron, 2002) suggest that a main reason for these perceptions is the difficulty of identifying the message source, as CGM is often created anonymously. In addition,

Mack, Blose & Pan (2007) noted that the quality of the information and the expertise of these sources vary tremendously.

Several studies have examined the topic of online trust (e.g. Fogg, Lee & Marshall, 2002; Fogg, 2003; Flavián, Guinalíu & Gurrea, 2006; Briggs et al., 2002). However, most previous studies focused on investigating trust in websites (e.g. Fogg et al., 2002; Flavián, Guinalíu & Gurrea, 2006) or e-commerce vendors (e.g. Bart et al., 2005; Ba, Whinston & Zhang, 1999; Hoffman, Novak & Peralta, 1999; Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky & Vitale, 2000) and little attention has been paid to trust concerns regarding CGM, although interest in the topic is growing (Mack et al., 2007). Given the important role of CGM in travel information search and decision-making (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008), understanding the nature and role of trust in CGM is definitely needed. Consequently, this study investigated the factors that drive online trust in travel-related CGM and examined the extent to which these trust perceptions influence the perceived impacts and benefits of CGM use.

2 Background

2.1 CGM in Travel

According to a Pew Internet & American life project study (2006), one of the most popular online activities is to search for travel-related information. Many people use online travel referrals for their travel planning (Bonn, Furr & Susskind, 1999; Mackay, McVetty & Vogt, 2005; Litvin et al., 2008). For example, more than 5 million travellers regularly visit Virtualtourist.com to search for travel reviews and tips (Lee & Gretzel, 2006) and about 20 million people visit Tripadvisor to utilize other travellers' reviews every month (Ricci & Wietsma, 2006; Yoo et al., 2007). Recommendations of other consumers who have prior experience with a tourism product are not only the most preferred sources, but also the most influential sources for travel decision making (Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007).

2.2 Online Trust

Many researchers have investigated the issue of online trust (e.g., Bart et al., 2005; Jarvenpaa et al., 2000; Gefen, 2000; Egger, 2001; Wang & Emurian, 2004; McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Mishra, 1996). Egger's model (2001) and the Cheskin/Sapient Report (1999) have been repeatedly cited and considered foundational (Wang & Emurian, 2005). While Egger's Model of Trust covers the consumer-vendor interaction in e-commerce settings, the Cheskin/Sapient Report focused on Web site interface cues that influence online trust. Other online trust studies provide important insights regarding trust in digital environments and stress its importance. For example, McKnight and Chervany (2001) defined trust as an individual's belief regarding various attributes of the other party involved in an e-commerce relationship and could measured through the attributes of fairness, goodness, strength, ability, benevolence, honesty and predictability. Similarly, Jarvenpaa et al. (2000) conceptualized trust as a

belief in integrity, benevolence, and ability while Gefen (2002) suggests beliefs of integrity, ability and benevolence should be seen as components of overall trust.

2.3 Factors Affecting Online Trust

A number of studies have identified several factors that influence online trust. Bart et al. (2005) argued that both website and consumer characteristics are important antecedents of online trust. Their study found that privacy and order fulfilment were the most influential website characteristics that determine trust for travel websites while prior online shopping experience, familiarity with the sites, online skills and online entertainment experiences were identified as important consumer characteristics. Similarly, Corbitt, Thanasankit and Yi (2003) argued that customers' trust levels are likely to be influenced by the level of perceived market orientation, site quality, technical trustworthiness, and the web experience of the user. Hoffman et al. (1999) also found that web users' online skills are an important factor that determines consumers' trust in website security. In addition, some studies found influences of brand image on website trust (Yoon, 2002).

Consistent with the findings of studies of traditional media, perceived source credibility was also found to be a very influential factor for trust in online advice (Briggs et al., 2002). Menon et al. (2002) found that trust in information from traditional media sources transferred to trust in information online. Further, the influence of information seekers' demographic characteristics was also reported. There is some evidence indicating that females assess news and political websites as more credible than males (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). Flanagin and Metzger (2003) found that males rated personal websites as more credible. Age differences were also found in a number of studies. Younger internet users rate online news to be more trustworthy than older users (Johnson & Kaye, 2002; Online News Association, 2001) and older users are generally more sceptical of the Internet as a whole (Metzger et al., 2003). The GomdaWeb survey (1998) found that education and income negatively influence people's trust in online information, but many other studies found no significant relationship (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; 2000; 2002; Menon et al., 2002). Further, Walczuch and Lundgren (2004) found that experience and product knowledge are important consumer characteristics that can influence online trust. As indicated by these previous studies, online advice seekers' characteristics and perceptions are important drivers of trust in online advice.

2.4 Impacts of Online Trust

Online trust has been shown to significantly influence web user behaviors (e.g. Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky, 1999; Gefen, Rao & Tractinsky, 2003). More recently, Bart et al. (2005) found online trust to impact web shoppers' behavioral intentions to purchase. A number of other studies also pointed out that online trust is a critical factor in stimulating purchase (Quelch & Klein, 1996; Jarvenpaa et al., 2000). Similarly, Corbitt et al. (2003) found that trust in e-commerce websites is positively associated with e-commerce participation, and it has also been found that greater website trust leads to greater consumer loyalty to that website (Flavián, Guinalíu &

Gurrea, 2006). In addition, Menon et al., (2002) found that trust in online information influences online information search behaviors. Clearly, these findings demonstrate that online trust plays an important role in that increased trust leads to greater use and benefits derived from the website. Thus, it is posited in this study that this relationship also holds for CGM.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study examined the factors affecting trust and its influence on the perceived impacts and the benefits of CGM use within the context of trip planning. An online survey was conducted in July 2008 using an online consumer panel. The survey invitation was sent to 59,186 panelists residing in the United States, with the goal to receive at least 1000 qualified responses to ensure that all data cells would have a sufficient number of responses. A total of 3109 panelists responded to the survey invitation but only 2671 indicated they were active Internet users. Further, 1682 had travelled for pleasure within the 12 months prior to the study. Of those, 1235 had used the Internet for their pleasure travel planning. However, only 1170 individuals responded to the question about trust in CGM and, thus, form the actual sample for this study.

3.2 Measures

Trust in travel-related CGM was measured using a single question: "In general, how much do you trust comments/materials posted by other travellers?" where responses ranged from 1 (I do not trust at all) to 5 (I trust very much). Perceived trustworthiness and expertise of travel-related CGM creators were measured using 7 and 3 item scales, respectively. Factor analyses were conducted to evaluate the uni-dimensionality of the scales while the internal consistency of the scales was measured using Cronbach's coefficient alpha. As can be seen in Table 1, the results of the analyses confirm uni-dimensionality and the alpha values are above the recommended level of 0.7 (trustworthiness=.89 and expertise=.76).

The dimensionality and reliability of the scales used to measure the perceived impacts of CGM use were also evaluated using factor analyses and Cronbach's alpha. While the generally agreed upon lower limit of Cronbach's alpha is .70, Hair et al. (1998) suggest that "it may decrease to .60 in exploratory research" (p.118). Thus, the results confirmed the uni-dimensionality of the scales as well as their reliability (Table 2). No scale was created for perceived benefits of CGM use in order to be able to look at specific benefits.

Table 1. Scales for Perceived Credibility of Travel-related CGM Creators

Construct Name & Items	Mean	Factor Loadings	Eigen Value	% of Variance	α
Perceived trustworthiness	**3.25**		**4.27**	**61.0**	**.89**
- Are honest	3.43	.83			
- Are sincere	3.50	.82			
- Have the intention to help others	3.62	.80			
- Do not make false statements	3.03	.78			
- Provide unbiased product recommendations	3.02	.78			
- Consider others interests when posting	3.20	.76			
- Would not post anything intentionally that would prejudice others	2.98	.71			
Perceived expertise	**3.27**		**2.02**	**67.3**	**.76**
- Have the necessary expertise to evaluate travel-related products	3.09	.85			
- Know the travel-related products better than a marketer/business owner would	3.10	.83			
- Provide valuable information about travel-related products	3.61	.78			

Table 2. Impacts of CGM Use

Construct Name & Items	Mean	Factor Loading	Eigen Value	% of Variance	α
Other info sources used	**3.02**		**3.00**	**60.0**	**.83**
Number of travel brochures ordered	2.92	.84			
Buying travel guidebooks/maps	2.98	.84			
Stops at visitor information centers	3.05	.79			
Amount of print-outs taken on trips	3.19	.72			
Use of ads in TV; radio or press	2.97	.68			
Extent of advance planning	**3.30**		**4.27**	**61.0**	**.77**
Number of info. sources used for planning	3.39	.87			
Amount of time spent on advance planning	3.28	.85			
Number of places/destinations considered	3.22	.76			
Actual travel behaviours	**3.14**		**1.53**	**76.3**	**.68**
Number of places/destinations visited	3.17	.87			
Amount of money spent on travel	3.10	.87			

3.3 Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted to describe the participant profile as well as their general internet use and social media use behaviours. Multiple regression analysis was then used to assess the influence of consumer characteristics and perceptions on trust in travel-related CGM. Last, a series of linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the influence of trust in travel-related CGM on trip planners' perceived impacts and benefits of CGM use for their trip planning.

4 Results

4.1 Profile of Sample

An almost equal number of females (50.3%) and males (49.7%) participated in the survey. More than half of the respondents (51.1%) reported being married while about 69 percent of respondents said they do not have children under 18 living in their household. The largest age group was comprised of those who are between 35 and 54 years old (42.9%). Over 61.6 percent of the respondents reported that they completed a college (27.9%) or had some college experience (33.7%). All income groups were almost equally represented.

Internet familiarity was measured by asking respondents to rate their use skills. About 38 percent of respondents reported being an intermediate Internet user, 35.7 percent advanced user, 12.7 percent novice, and 13.4 percent expert user. About 67 percent of respondents reported that they look at photographs posted by others, with 22.2 percent saying that they do so once a month or less frequently and 44.8 percent at least several times a month. The second most frequent online activity that respondents engage in is reading reviews posted by other consumers (64.5%), with 26.3 percent reporting that they do so once a month or less and 38.3 percent reading reviews more often. 56.7 percent of respondents reported that they watch or download videos, 49.6 percent read blogs, 49.5% rate products or post reviews, 48 percent post photographs, and 37.8 percent use a social networking site. Over half (52.8%) indicated that they had used the Internet for planning their most recent pleasure trip.

4.2 Social Media Use Behaviours and Perceptions in the Context of Travel

More than half (50.5%) of respondents indicated that they read online comments or materials posted by other travellers when planning their most recent overnight pleasure trip. Of these travel-related CGM users, the majority (80.5%) reported that they looked at travel reviews, half (50.6%) looked at photos, 21.8 percent read blogs, 23.6 percent read comments on blogs, 22.4 percent read postings in discussion forums, 4.2 percent viewed videos, and only 3.8 percent listened to audio files. The most frequently used travel-related CGM website was Yahoo! Travel (visited by

40.8% of travel CGM users), followed by TripAdvisor (29%). Also, 16 percent of travel CGM users reported that they visited Citysearch to find travel-related CGM.

Travel-related CGM users indicated that CGM is most credible when posted on official tourism bureau websites (41.2% think CGM posted on tourism bureau websites is very or extremely credible), followed by travel agency websites (36.8%), thirdparty websites such as TripAdvisor (33.5%), travel company sites (31.2%), personal blogs (18.1%), and personal websites (16.1%), social networking sites (13.2%) and sharing sites such as YouTube (10.7%). Most respondents reported no changes in current travel planning behaviours due to their use of CGM. However, about a third reported that CGM use has led to more information sources being used (36.1%), more time spent planning (30.3%) and more print-outs taken on trips (28.2%). Last, 2.7 percent indicated that they do not trust CGM at all, while 15.6 percent of the respondents do not trust it very much, 56.3 percent trust it somewhat, 21.7 percent trust it, and 3.6 percent trust it very much.

4.3 Determinants of Trust in Travel-Related CGM

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between trust in travel-related CGM (the dependent variable) and the socio-demographic characteristics and perceptions of CGM readers (age, gender, education, travel frequency, familiarity with the Internet, and perceived expertise & trustworthiness of travel-related CGM creators).

Table 3. Factors of Trust in Travel-related CGM

Independent Variables	Beta	P value
Perceived expertise of travellers who post materials online	.267	.000
Perceived trustworthiness of travellers who post materials online	.347	.000
Gender	-.025	.320
Age	-.075	.005
Education Level	.022	.398
Travel Frequency	.056	.029
Knowledge & Familiarity with Internet	.039	.134

R Square = 0.386; Adjusted R Square = 0.382; $F_{(7, 1010)} = 90.16$ ($p<0.000$)

The regression model (Table 3) was statistically significant and explained almost 40 % of the variance of trust in travel-related CGM. The results indicate that perceived expertise and trustworthiness (source credibility) of travel-related CGM creators are significant predictors of trust in travel-related CGM with high beta values (.27 and .35 respectively). Travel frequency (beta=.06) and age (beta=-.08) were also found to be significant predictors of trust in travel-related CGM but the relationships are rather weak. However, in contrast to the results of previous studies, familiarity with the

Internet, gender and education level did not significantly influence trust in travel-related CGM.

4.4 Impacts of Trust in Travel-Related CGM

A series of linear regression analyses were conducted to investigate whether trust in travel-related CGM plays a significant role in determining trip planners' perceived benefits and impacts of CGM use. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5 and show that the trip planners with greater trust in travel-related CGM are more likely to perceive impacts of CGM. In particular, the more they trust travel-related CGM, the more impacts they perceive in terms of their actual travel behaviours (number of places visited and amount of money spent on travel), extent of advance trip planning, as well as other information sources used (see Table 4).

Table 4. Influence of Trust on Perceived Impacts of CGM Use

Impacts of CGM Use	Beta	P value
Change in actual travel behaviours	.251	.000
Change in extent of advance trip planning	.288	.000
Change in other information sources used	.137	.000

Table 5. Influence of Trust on Perceived Benefits of CGM Use

Benefits of CGM Use	Beta	P value
By using travel -related CGM, …		
I can find more information about a destination	.371	.000
I can get more involved in planning my trip	.333	.000
I can better evaluate where to go and what to do	.353	.000
I can better imagine what the destination is like	.378	.000
I can save time planning my trip	.329	.000
I am more confident that my trip will be successful	.374	.000
I get a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction	.353	.000
I can more easily share the information I find	.348	.000
I have a clearer idea of what to expect from the trip	.362	.000
I can get better value for my money	.341	.000
I do not have to waste time looking for information during the trip/at the destination	.299	.000

Similarly, the trip planners with greater trust in travel-related CGM were more likely to perceive benefits. Specifically, the more they trust online travel-related materials, the more they agree that those materials help them to find more information, get

involved in trip planning, better evaluate alternatives, better imagine the places, save planning time, have more confidence in the success of their trips, have feelings of accomplishment, share information, have clear expectation for the trip and get better value for money (Table 5).

5 Conclusions

The results suggest that travel-related CGM, particularly travel reviews and photographs posted by other travellers, are used extensively in the course of planning pleasure trips. Most respondents indicated that they trust the comments/materials posted by other travellers, especially when posted on official tourism bureau websites. Believing in the good intentions and honesty of travel-related CGM creators, and believing that they know what they are writing about, fosters trust in CGM. Trust in travel CGM is important as it increases the benefits travellers derive from its use in the course of planning pleasure trips and has real behavioural implications.

The study findings clearly demonstrate that it is important to increase trust in travel-related CGM. Since source credibility is a very important factor, CGM creators should be encouraged to provide enough information about themselves to make it easy for others to assess their expertise and trustworthiness. The descriptive results also suggest that the type of website on which the CGM is posted matters. Destination websites in the US are typically non-commercial and thus might win the trust of users. While many tourism bureaus still shy away from offering CGM on their websites, the study findings show that they would benefit greatly by supporting a venue for such contents. Also, travellers should be encouraged to post CGM on official tourism bureau, travel agency, company or third party websites rather than their personal blogs or social networking sites in order to make this information most useful for others. Thus, the study provides some important insights into the drivers as well as impacts of trust in travel-related CGM. However, more research is needed to determine other cues that travel planners use when evaluating such contents. In addition, it would be interesting to examine if impacts of trust in CGM vary depending on different types of travel-related decisions.

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