Social media influence on the holiday decision-making process in the UK

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Abstract: This study investigated the influence of social media on Generation Y travellers throughout the holiday decision-making process. The researchers examined the use of social media websites before, during and after holiday, evaluated the level of trust in user-generated content and identified how Generation Y shared their holiday experiences on social media. This study adopted the quantitative/deductive methodology using online questionnaire. The findings suggested that social media platforms were mostly used prior to the holiday as a source of gathering information such as destination, accommodation. However, findings showed although people used social media to search for information, it was less trusted compared to official state tourism websites and word-of-mouth. But the findings showed that social media was also considerably used during the holiday only as medium for posting photos and searching for local entertainment. On the other hand, the results showed that there is a trend of changes toward social media as a source of travel information which indicated respondents' willingness to use social media for their travel in near future.

Keywords: *Social media, holiday decision making process, generation Y, word of mouth, electronic word of mouth, UK.*

Introduction

The internet has become ubiquitous and consistent part of consumers' daily routine and has changed the consumer purchasing patterns worldwide. Consumer behaviour has been completely transformed by the introduction of the Web 2.0 internet technologies, allowing the users to interact with one another online. The way people plan and consume travel-related products has also been profoundly influenced by these technological developments.

Due to the expansion of the Web 2.0, last few years have seen an intense growth of the so-called social media. The term is no officially defined, in general it referred to web-based applications that allowed the creation and exchange of UGC [User-generated content] (Cox *et a.l,* 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Mintel, 2013). Kaplan and Haelein (2010) have arranged social media websites in 6 groups: blogs, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), content communities (e.g. YouTube) and virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft). Mintel (2013) considered social media as the following websites: social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube etc.), travel review sites (TripAdvisor, Holiday Watchdog, Holiday Check etc.), social travel sites (WAYN, Gogobot etc.), travel blogs, platforms and app, built from any travel organization, that allowed users to create content.

The aim of this paper was to study the role of the social media throughout the holiday decision-making process of Generation Y travellers. Aiming to find what were the impacts of

USM (Use of Social Media) and TSM (Trust of Social Media) on the holiday decision making.

Generation Y travellers spend more than other tourists, stay longer and because of their young age, they are most likely to return to the destination (UWTO, 2011). They are the heaviest social media users and early technology adopters. Therefore, they are most likely to share their travel experiences online: 25% of the holidaymakers aged below 25 post pictures and reviews during their holiday compared to only 9% of travellers aged above 40 (Fotis *et al.,* 2011). Understanding the role of social media on Generation Y decisions would help the companies to adjust their communication patterns and to effectively market their products and services to these travellers.

To further understand more about USM and TSM on the HDMP (holiday decision making process) the researchers have considered the following hypothesises:

- H1: There is a strong relationship between USM and TSM.

- H2: There is a strong relationship between USM and HDMP.

- H3: There is a strong relationship between TSM and HDMP.

Social media and Tourism

Reasons for using social media as travel information source

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) have investigated the role of social media as a travel information source. They point out that Web 2.0 is also referred to as "Travel 2.0" because of the numerous technological applications that enabled travellers to get to know a destination or accommodation without even going out of their homes. Tourism and hospitality industry has become extremely dependent on the digital world after the emergence of the technologies enabling travellers to share online their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with countless number of prospective customers. An opinion expressed online is easily accessible by other travellers and immediately affects the company's image (Lee, 2013).

Litvin *et al.* (2008) noted that because of the highly experiential nature of the travel industry, tourists tend to use social media in order to find out more information of the journey they were planning to take. The quality of the experiential products and services is known only after the service has been performed (Lovelock and Writz, 2010). Hence, when purchasing a holiday, consumers could not know what exactly they will receive in return of their money. This is usually valid for all tourism and hospitality products and follows from the main services characteristics outlined by Kotler *et al.* (2010): intangibility (could not be seen, tasted or smelled), variability (quality depends on various factors), perishability (could not be stored) and inseparability (could not be separated from their providers or location). Furthermore, East *et al.* (2013) concluded that when it comes to services that could not be tested beforehand, consumers have to rely mostly on the various forms of word-of-mouth (WOM). Another form of WOM is in the digital word known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) that is considered as another sources of information.

WOM, eWOM and UGC

Litvin *et al.* (2008) defined WOM as communication between consumers about a product, service or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence. The authors had also summarized the main characteristics of WOM: face-to-face communication, informal nature and no commercial involvement. They have highlighted that receivers of WOM recommendations were likely to trust because of the lack of any self-interest by the person initiating the WOM. Consequently, WOM was one of the most

influential information sources amongst prospective travellers. They often relied on advice from family or friends who have previously visited the destination or have more travel experience.

Cox *et al.* (2009) pointed out that when customers shared online their own views and experience of a product or service they created electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The eWOM was likely to be much more powerful than WOM because it could reach unlimited number of receivers. However, while WOM was an interaction between the consumers themselves, eWOM included communication between producers and consumers. Investigating eWOM, Cox *et al.* (2009) concluded that it sets many possibilities and challenges not only for the tourism industry: it was easy and cheap to spread online and could be accessed at any time. Litvin *et al.* (2008) emphasized on one essential characteristic of the eWOM: it came from unknown individuals, therefore the information credibility was not guaranteed. The anonymity of the communicators, irrelevant content or fake reviews were some of the problems that both the companies and the information seekers might come upon in the online "space".

Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012) explained that the term user-generated content (UGC) was generally related to the means by which consumers used web applications that allowed them to create online content. Examples of UGC included: photos, videos, blogs, microblogs, forums, social networking and reviews that consumers created online and made available to the general public or specific group of people. Ahuja *et al.* (2007) considered that UGC equaled eWOM and served as a powerful form of consumer-to-consumer marketing whereby somebody shared their opinion and experience with other people via an online platform.

Litvin *et al.* (2008) concluded that most people enjoyed sharing their travel experiences and accepted it as normal post-trip behaviour. On the other hand, Gretzel and Yoo (2011) had found that only 17% of the people who used travel websites actually posted reviews, photos or contributed to a discussion. They suggested that people who created UGC were motivated by enjoyment, self-enhancement, helping other people or just venting.

According to Mack *et al.* (2008), traditional WOM was more trustworthy than user-generated reviews. Consumers sought WOM from their family, friends and acquaintances. They were likely to believe traditional WOM because it came from people they knew. However, the situation was different when the consumers were seeking advice online where the eWOM was passed on by strangers.

Hyung-Park (2007) suggested that online consumer reviews were often considered more credible than information provided by products and services suppliers because consumers were expected to give more truthful information. Nevertheless, the identity of users posting on social networking sites or blogs was not always easy to be discovered. Therefore, the opinion seekers could not assess the credibility of the information provided.

A major study conducted by the research agency FreshMinds (2011) for the British Tourist Authority (Visit Britain), suggested that traditional WOM was the most trusted information source. Throughout the holiday decision-making process people continued to be highly influenced by opinions of their family, colleagues and friends rather than strangers' experiences. Review sites and blogs were considered with ambivalence – some travellers trusted them completely while others felt that the reviews might be biased or even posted by companies' employees.

These findings were supported by a study carried out by Fotis *et al.* (2011) who also noticed that WOM from friends and relatives was the most trusted source of travel information, followed by other travellers' opinions available on different websites, social media and official tourism websites. According to this research, advertisements were the least

trustworthy sources of information together with the travel agents. However, this research was conducted in Russia and F.S.U. Republics and was valid for these travel markets only. However, Mintel (2013) reported 85% of worldwide travellers' stated that their travel plans were influenced by comments, videos and photographs on social media.
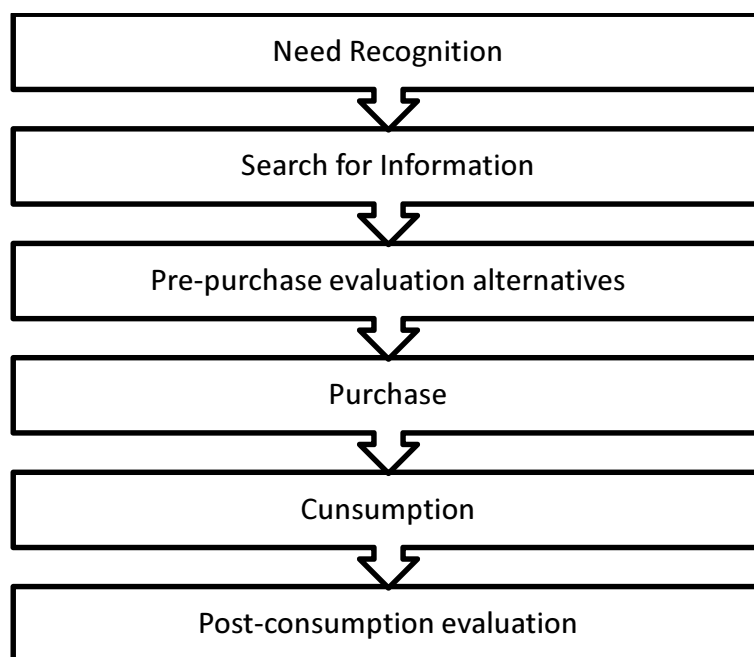
The holiday decision-making process and social media

Model of the holiday decision-making process (HDPM)

The holiday decision-making process described the stages customers go through whenever making holiday-related purchases such as package holidays, short excursions, accommodation, destination tours, flight tickets, and car hire (Pizam and Mansfield, 2009). It relied on the general model of customer purchase decision-making process – the process by which customers chose, purchased and evaluated a product or service (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007). Consumer behaviour aimed to understand how consumers acted as buyers and the reasons for their purchases by examining their demographic, social, cultural and psychological characteristics that influenced their buying behaviour (Vaughn, 2012).

For the purpose of this paper, the researchers made an in-depth analysis of the HDMP following the stages of the consumer decision model suggested by Blackwell *et al.* (2006) and used by Morison (2010) to describe the decision-making process in hospitality and tourism. The framework shown on Figure 1. The model contained a Divestment Stage, which Morrison (2010) considered irrelevant to intangible products and services such as hospitality and travel. The researchers did not focus on this stage as it was not related to the aim of this paper.

Figure 1: Consumer decision-making process

Source: Morrison el al. (2010)

Stages of the holiday decision-making process

Need Recognition:

Morrison (2010) discussed that the need to travel could be triggered from internal stimuli, e.g. desire to escape from the everyday routine, dreamed holiday or destination, or external stimuli – destination advertisement, friends' holiday experience, and holiday pictures shared on Facebook etc. At this point also consumers form their wants and demands.

Information search:

At this stage customers start searching for information in order to find the best affordable option that will satisfy their need. According to Morrison (2010) customers used 3 categories of information sources: internal, marketer-dominated and non-marketer-dominated.

Pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives:

Hospitality products and services were difficult to evaluate before consumption (Kotler *et al.*, 2010). Lovelock and Writz (2011) suggested that the process of evaluating a service prior to consumption was a function of the three types of services attributes.

Purchase:

Often purchase decisions were delayed by unexpected factors. For instance, a purchase intention may not be followed by purchase decision because unexpected situations change in circumstances or unpredicted costs (Morrison, 2010).

Consumption:

Customers subconsciously compared their expectations with the service they were actually receiving which will influence their satisfaction at the following stage (Pizam and Mansfield, 2007).
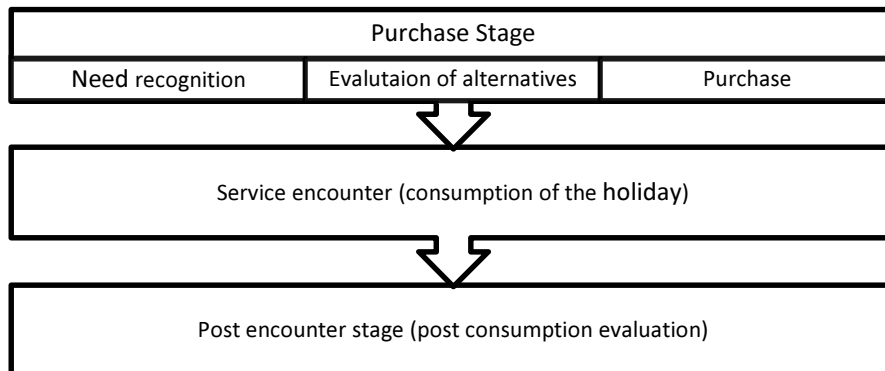
Post-consumption evaluation:

Kotler *et al.* (2010) stated that customers form their expectations on the basis of previous experience and messages they receive from the sellers and other information sources. If the sellers promised more than they could actually deliver, they were likely to help consumers form unreal expectations. Dissatisfied customers may complain and ask for refund or free upgrade, may initiate a lawsuit or file a complaint in an organization protecting consumers' rights or simply never purchased again from the same provider and spread negative WOM and eWOM (Taegoo *et al.*, 2009). Satisfaction occurred when the perceived service performance meets or exceeds customers' expectations. Then customers were more likely to repeat the purchase and recommend the company to other people (Lovelock and Writz, 2011).

Evaluating their holiday, customers would gain more experience and the next time they travel this would be part of their internal information sources (East *et al.*, 2013). To describe the social media use during the HDMP, the researchers relied on the Three-stage Model of Service Consumption of Lovelock and Wirtz (2011), shown on Figure 2.

The internet and mobile applications helped people to obtain travel-related information while randomly searching for inspiration. Customers might initiate a search to find an inspiration and eventually start evaluating a few alternatives or find a new inspiration or a better deal for a different holiday (Cox *et al.*, 2009).

The Three-stage Model of Service Consumption

Figure 2: The three-stage model of service consumption

Purchase Stage		
Need recognition	Evalutaion of alternatives	Purchase

⬇

Service encounter (consumption of the holiday)

⬇

Post encounter stage (post consumption evaluation)

Source: Lovelock and Writz (2011)

Travel planning:

A study by Google (2012) reported that 70% of travellers started planning a trip without knowing their destination. Therefore, many prospective travellers used social media for inspiration. Some social media platforms had special tools that help with inspiration and generating new travel ideas. Fotis *et al.* (2011) found that 45% of prospective travellers checked social media websites when searching for destination and some 42% sought ideas on excursions and other leisure activities. Mintel (2013) revealed that customers started reviewing videos photos and comments from other people when planning their holiday. Customers might conduct large number of searches via OTAs to find their destination, best price and entertainment. They also visited a number of social networks, forums, blogs, accommodation and travel agents' websites (Amadeus, 2012). According to Cox *et al.* (2009) the UGC was mostly used during the information search followed by the evaluation of alternatives stage. It appeared that the role of social media during the travel planning stage was only limited to being an information source (Hays *et al.,* 2012).

Consumption of the holiday

Travellers used smartphones and other mobile devices to stay connected to the social media during the consumption phase. Mintel (2013) noted that the role of mobile phones, as part of the travel experience, was constantly growing. Travellers used them to post updates on social networks, share pictures, videos, find information about local activities or flights etc. About 43% of the tourists shared photos or videos while on holiday. According to Text100 (2012) research, the primary reason for using social media while on holiday was to keep in touch with family and friends followed by sharing photos and videos. Fotis *et al.,* (2011) revealed similar findings for the use of social media during the holiday: 50% of holidaymakers used social media to stay connected with friends and 30% to find holiday-related information. These trends are supported by TrirAdvisor's report, TripBarometer(2012), revealed the top 3 uses of mobile devices by UK travellers: access to the internet (47%), updating social media status (34%), uploading photos to social networks (33%).

Post-consumption evaluation

The study by Text100 (2012) revealed that over half of the world travellers submitted photo and video contents on social media after their trip, 25% shared a blog post about their travel experience and just 20% would write a travel review to provide help to prospective travellers.

On the other hand, TripAdvisor's research conducted by Gretzel *et al.* (2007) suggested that 51% of the travellers worldwide wrote accommodation review after the trip. However, the respondents in that research were people actively using the review platform.

The Text100 research (2012) showed that people shared their travel experience mainly because they believed it will be of interest to friend and family, but some were motivated by loyalty or discount incentives, 28% of travellers stated that nothing could stimulate them to create holiday-related content or be more active on social media. 25% of travellers would "like" on Facebook the location they had visited and just 10% would send a "tweet" about their holiday.

Generation Y– the social tourists

Generation Y

Marketers and other social science researchers used generation cohorts to describe a group of people who have come of age together but there were many factors, such as occupation, education, religion or culture, that contribute to the variety inside the cohorts (Littrell, 2005). Benckendorff *et al.* (2010) explained the term "generation" as group of people with common attitudes and behaviour different from the previous age group. The most common generational cohorts that marketers used are Baby Boomers (1943 – 1960), Generation X (1961 – 1981), and Generation Y.

There was no agreement on the time range when Generation Y were born. Estimates of when Gen Y begins vary between 1977 and 1983, the year when it ends also vary from 1999 to 2009 (Benckendorff *et al.*, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the researchers accepted the suggestion offered by Bolton *et al.* (2013) that Gen Y was born between 1981 and 1999. Gen Y are also referred to as Generation Y, Echo Baby Boomers, Net Generation and Digital Natives.

Generation Y have certain characteristics that differentiate them from the other generation cohorts. They were living longer in their parents' homes and attaining higher education levels in comparison to the other generations; they were postponing marriage focusing on their career. They were attached to their family and reference groups. They were also very positive towards diversity and flexibility (Marketing to Generation X and Generation Y, 2011).

A key characteristic of Gen Y was the exposure to technology. They have grown up with the computer and the Internet, hence, their perception of the world was very different from the previous generations. They tend to use digital tools for entertainment and communication. They have taken advantage of the rapid development of the communication technologies, social networking and globalization (Nusair *et al.*, 2011).

As consumers, they have enjoyed customized products and services. However, they have witnessed the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and have suffered its consequences – global recession, unemployment and economic uncertainty (Bolton *et al.*, 2013). As a result of the GFC, they have become considerate spenders who require substantial value in return of their money. They were also aware of being targeted by the marketers and would be happy to get involved in any campaign but only in case they would benefit from their contribution. Generation Y were demanding customers and require attention and acknowledgement from the brand in exchange of support and involvement (Marketing to Generation X and Generation Y, 2011).

Bolton *et al.* (2013) explained that social media had existed approximately since 1981 but was widely adopted only in 2003. The Gen Y used social media for the same reasons as other cohorts: information, socializing and entertainment. Mintel (2013) highlighted that the 18-24-

year-olds in USA spent more than 10 hours per week online. This was partly due to their higher-than-average ownership of smartphones which helped them to stay online longer.

Generation Y employed a wide range of information sources when planning their trip. WOM from family and friends' essential information source but the role of review and destination websites was significantly growing due to the expansion of the mobile devices that provided constant internet access (Lee, 2013).

The social tourists

Many studies reported that social media plays significant role for Gen Y travellers. Mintel (2013) emphasized that 80% of the Generation Y were influenced by destination travel reviews and 40% would not book accommodation without referring to online reviews first. Gretzel *et al.* (2007) concluded that over 90% of this age group used Facebook when planning a trip, and 29% referred to Twitter for travel planning purposes.

The WYSETC (2013) research revealed that Generation Y thought social media was an important tool to keep in touch with family and friends while on trip. It was the main form of communication for the travellers aged 20 to 22 and almost 40% of them used social media every day of their trip compared to 20% from the travellers over 35. Similar trends were noticeable in the research of Fotis *et al.* (2011) who found that 25% of the travellers younger than 25 posted travel reviews during their trip, compared to just 9% of those aged over 40.

As the review showed the use of social media in different stages of the HDMP it did verify the research question to find the impact of USM and TSM on HDMP on Generation Y. With the aim to find there was a relationship among the three factors USM, TSM and HDMP.

Method and Data

This research adopted quantitative/ deductive methodology and adopting the positivistic paradigm using online questionnaire. Quantifiable data was collected using a self-completion questionnaire designed on the online survey platform survemonkey.com. The researchers chosen to use convenience sampling. As this study was concentrated on Generation Y, the researcher assumed students would be suitable to investigate.

The sample consisted of students from different London universities whose email addresses were available to the researchers from previous interaction with them. Questionnaires answered by people aged over 35 were disregarded as they do not belong to Generation Y. A web link to the questionnaire was e-mailed to 100 people together with a cover letter. The cover letter included was aiming to explain the purpose of the research and clarify key terms such as social media and holiday as the researcher wanted to ensure that all the respondents understand the key terms in the same way. The survey was closed with response rate of 86%and the raw data was downloaded on entered into SPSS for analysis.

The data collected (Table 1) showed that the majority of respondent 63.9 percent were in age 23-28. Moreover, the result indicated that the majority of respondents use social media several times a day with 82.9 percent. In addition to that the majority of respondent travel more than twice a year with 34.9 percent. However, for the source of information it did show the respondents relied equally on social media and word-of-mouth with 25.1 percent.

Table 1- Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Percentage
Age	
17-22	10,8
23-28	63,9
29-34	25,3
Frequency of social Media use	
Several times a day	81,9
Once a day	13,3
A few times a week	2,4
Once a week	2,4
Several times a day	81,9
Travel frequency	
Once a year	24,1
Twice a year	41,0
More than twice a year	34,9
Travel information source	
Social media websites	25,1
Word-of-mouth	25,1
Official stated or destination websites	16,2
Travel guides, TV programmes,newspaper \ magazine	15,0
Advertisements	8,5
Travel agents or tour operators	10,1

Findings

As the researchers were interested in Generation Y consumers, questionnaires answered by respondents older than 34 were not analysed. Table 2 presented the correlation between the USM, TSM and USM. In order to measure the reliability of questionnaire, the researchers measured the internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha as it was widely used to measure reliability scale. De Vaus (2002) proposed that 0.6 scale was considered as acceptable reliability. Also, according to Sekaran (2003) the reliability increases as alpha approaches 1.0. The reliability decreases when reaches 0.6 which was considered low with 0.7 considered acceptable and 0.8 or above as high.

Table 2-Correlation and reliability test analysis

Variables	USM	TSM	HDMP	M	SD	Cronbach α
USM	1			3.25	.629	.723
TSM	.563**	1		2.95	.724	.752
DM	.653**	.524**	1	3.12	.549	.702

(**p<0.01, *P<0.05)

The multiple regression was used (Table 3) to test the hypothesis. According to Heir (Heir *et al.*, 2010) the method was widely used and accepted to measure the relationship among variables. To test for hypothesis 1 (USM and TSM) a series of regressions were used and the result (β =0.402, p<0.01) showed there was a positive relationship between USM and TSM. Moreover, the value R square of 39.2 percent proved and supported the positive relationship between TSM and USM. Same method was used to test for the hypothesis 2 and the results (β=0.521, p<0.01) also showed that there was a positive relationship between TSM and

HDMP. The R square of 48.5 percent for the hypothesis 2 was an indicator and a proof for the positive relationship. Finally, the hypothesis 3 showed a result of (β=0.471, $p<0.01$) the existence of positive relationship between USM and HDPM. The hypothesis 3 had an R square of 42.2 percent which has proved and supported that there was a positive relationship between USM and HDMP.

Table 3-Regression and hypotheses testing

Relationship	R^2	F-statistics	T-statistics	β	Support / Not
USM→HDMP	.422	98.0.18**	9.096**	.471**	Supported
TSM→HDMP	.485	99.918**	9.999**	.521**	Supported
USM→TSM	.392	97.919**	8.956**	.402**	Supported

*(**$p<0.01$, *$P<0.05$)*

Limitations and Future Research

The sampling method used for this research was not random and the findings could not be generalized to the whole Generation Y. The sample consisted of university students only and did not take into account the influence of social media on travellers who were not pursuing higher education. The research did not investigate the cultural differences of the students as there might be international students among the respondents.

Studies focused on specific social media platforms might contribute to the consumer behaviour knowledge, e.g. a separate study on the influence of the photos posted on Facebook, or a research on the role of the videos submitted on YouTube. A longitudinal research design might be applied as it will allow the use of social media to be measured in the time when it is happening.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper aimed to explore the influence of social media on holiday decision making process on generation Y. Social media is not yet a clearly defined concept but it is obviously affecting Generation Y holiday purchase behaviour. Gen Y heavily relied on social media to plan their trip especially when they were looking for a travel inspiration and more detailed information on a destination, accommodation, airline etc. Travel review websites and social networks were the most used platforms by travel advice seekers. Travel blogs and social travel platforms were used by considerably fewer Generation Y.

Social media was also widely employed during and after the holiday. Generation Y have adopted social media as a tool that allowed them to show their friends how they enjoyed their holiday in real time. Generation Y travellers saw social media as a channel that enabled them to present their feedback to the service providers by expressing impressions from the holiday, commenting on the service, reviewing the accommodation or sharing a blog post or story on a social travel platform in order to help other travellers. Social media has not been employed as a travel booking tool yet. The study showed there was a trend to start using social media and

also the results indicated that people were willing to use social medial as source for travel related information or advice.

The results from this research suggested that social media was an influential source of travel information used by Generation Y. In order to be successful, the companies from the tourism industry would need to adapt their marketing strategies to the new trends on the travel market. Companies need to stimulate the dissemination on WOM and eWOM. As noted in the Generation Y were more likely to engage with the service providers if they are offered a discount or included in a loyalty programme. Therefore, companies might incentivize social media engagement by offering small gifts, discounted dinner, drinks etc. to the customers who engage with the brand online. For example to stimulate customer engagement on Facebook, a hotel might offer free cocktails to the guests who "check-in" at the hotel or "like" the hotel's account on the social network.

Hospitality and tourism companies should monitor what was being said about them online and try to interact with the customers especially if they have expressed negative opinion. UGC could not be controlled but monitoring and responding to the comments on travel review websites and company's account on social media would make prospective customers aware that the company was dedicated to its customers and value their views.

As official stated and destination websites were highly trusted by the Generation Y, the businesses should strive to be featured on such websites or on a blog hosted by a stated/destination website. The business could be promoted by being mentioned in an article on an official website.

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